

Cardinal Bessarion and the transmission and interpretation of Plato in the fifteenth century

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Cardinal Bessarion came from his native Byzantium and settled in Rome in the mid fifteenth century. He was a Basilian monk and, at the time, a Greek Archbishop. His cultural background was in the rationalist tradition of Greek theology. As the Byzantine Empire succumbed to the invading Turks he made it his mission to preserve as much of Greek cultural heritage as possible. Part of this mission was to set out for the Italians (or Latins as he called them) the teachings of Plato of which they had only scanty knowledge. His work *in Calumniatorem Platonis* was intended as a defence of Plato's teachings against the criticisms of the militant Aristotelian George of Trebizond. This thesis examines Bessarion's exposition of Plato's teachings in that work on a range of philosophical questions that were litmus tests of theological orthodoxy at the time. It argues that Bessarion's exposition of Plato is heavily interpreted through a prism of later commentaries and thinkers particularly the Neo-Platonists. It shows how these interpretations and Bessarion's use of his sources is determined by his aim of showing that Plato's philosophy was closer to Christian orthodoxy than Aristotle's and, therefore, provided a firmer philosophical base than the prevailing Aristotelianism.

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Introduction

The fall of his native Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks on 29 May 1453 and the final collapse of its empire struck Cardinal Bessarion with a terrible blow. He poured out his grief from Bologna, where he was serving as Papal Legate, in a letter to his friend Michael Apostoles. In the letter he asked Apostoles' help in his mission to preserve Greek culture. 'Now that the city has fallen,' he wrote, 'I am seized with a great desire to acquire the writings of our masters. Not for my sake as I have already acquired sufficient for my own need, but so that if there are any Greeks now left and if in the future their fortune will get better they will somewhere have the whole of their cultural heritage as it now exists; they will find it in a safe place and, having found it, copy it many times.'¹ This thesis is about one aspect of Bessarion's cultural mission, his desire to bring knowledge of the philosophy of Plato from the ruins of the Byzantine empire to the Latin West.

Apart from the many manuscripts of Plato which he collected and bequeathed to the Republic of Venice, his great contribution to the study and knowledge of Plato was his work *in Calumniatorem Platonis* (hereafter *ICP*) published in 1469; this is the main subject of the thesis, which will explore two questions:

- What was new to his Latin readers in Cardinal Bessarion's work?
- In presenting the philosophy of Plato how was Bessarion using the Platonic texts?
How far was he aiming to present an accurate account of Plato's thinking or tailoring his interpretation to meet Christian orthodoxy?

¹ Mohler (1942) 478-9.

I shall argue that Bessarion was presenting to his Latin readers Platonic texts and insights that were new to them at the time. He was writing about eighteen hundred years after the death of Plato. The Platonic texts and teaching, much of which was obscure, had been filtered through many different interpreters. These included the Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian commentators and the Greek Fathers of the Church. This history of interpretation heavily influenced how Bessarion understood and interpreted Plato. I shall argue that he carefully selected his texts and interpretations to present Plato's teaching as conforming as closely as he could to Christian orthodoxy with the aim of showing Plato as a firmer philosophical platform for Christian teaching than Aristotle. So although he gave a full account of Plato's proofs for the immortality of the soul he omitted all mention of the two proofs that would lead to the transmigration of souls (see page 181 below).

During his lifetime Bessarion was a Basilian monk, Archbishop of Nicaea and adviser to the Emperor John VIII Palaeologus, an influential participant in the proceedings of the Council of Florence, Archbishop successively of Siponto and Sabina and Frascati, papal diplomat, Cardinal and Dean of the College of Cardinals, papal legate in Bologna, and a scholar. His influence was perhaps only equalled by that of Nicholas Cusanus across the culture, politics, ecclesiastical history and scholarship of the mid-fifteenth century. There are references to him in any serious study of fifteenth century European history. These references are often concerned with his collection of manuscripts and his part in the foundation of the Marciana Library in Venice. His collection of Greek manuscripts was second only to that of the Vatican at the time.² Yet he has not attracted individual attention. There are substantial references to Bessarion in a number of English works including Reynolds and Wilson (2013), Wilson (1992) and Harris (1995), but there is no

² See Monfasani (2011b) 1-3.

full English biography or study of him. His significance has been more appreciated in continental Europe. There were a number of books published on Bessarion between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries.³ The major work on Bessarion is Ludwig Mohler's three volume work in German published between 1923 and 1942.⁴ There are studies and monographs in Italian including a biography in the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* by L. Labowsky and a biography relating many of Bessarion's surviving manuscripts to his life by E. Mioni.⁵ Labowsky has also produced a study on his library and the establishment of the Marciana Library in Venice.⁶

Bessarion was born in Trebizond, most probably in 1403, and died in Ravenna in 1472. The extent and diversity of his activities make it difficult to place him in the silos of modern scholarship and this may partly explain the absence of any full study in English. He was not a philosopher but wrote two philosophical works and translated Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* into Latin.⁷ He was not a theologian but played an influential part in the Council of Florence and wrote on the Eucharist as well as on the contentious *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed. He was a friend of the humanists and

³ Henri Vast (Vast (1878) xiv) in his biography of Bessarion lists the following works on his life: Aubéry, A. (1642) *Histoire général des cardinaux* (Paris). Ciacconus, (1677) *Vitae pontificum Romanorum* (Rome). Hody, H. et al. (1742) *De Graecis illustribus linguae graecae litterarum humanarum instauratoribus* (London). Boerner, C. F. (1751) *De Doctis hominibus graecis litterarum Graecarum in Italia instauratoribus* (Leipzig). Bandini, L. (1777) *De vita et rebus gestis Bessarionis, cardinalis Nicaeni* (Rome). Schioppalaba, G.B. (1767) *Dissertatio in tabulam graecam a Bessarione dono datum S. Mariae Caritatis sodalitia* (Venice). Hacke, (1840) *De Bessarionis vita et scriptis* (Harlem). Raggi, O. (1844) *Commentario sulla vita del cardinale Bessarione* (Rome). von Göthe, W. (1871) *Studien und Forschungen über des Leben und die Zeit des cardinals Bessarion* (Jena). Valentinelli, G. (1868) *Bibliotheca manuscripta ad Sancti Marci Venetiarum* (Venice).
⁴ Mohler, L. (1923-1942) *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann* (Aarlen and Paderborn).
⁵ Mioni, E. (1991) *Vita del Cardinale Bessarione* in *Miscellanea Marciana Vol VI* (Venice).
⁶ Labowsky, L. (1979) *Bessarion's Library and the Biblioteca Marciana* (Rome).
⁷ The translation of the *Metaphysics* was still in use by William Harvey (1578-1657) in the seventeenth century.

assembled round him a circle of humanist scholars;⁸ yet he was not a humanist but a Greek who had inherited a living tradition of Greek culture stretching back to Homer. He was a monk with a reputation for piety who as a Cardinal wrote a rule based on the rule of Basil for his community in Rome but the greater part of his life was spent in service to the Byzantine emperor or the Popes. Despite his years in Italy, his service to the Popes and his close circle of humanist scholars he always remained by temperament and preference a Greek, as Monfasani has shown.⁹ The Italian humanist and scholar Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) referred to him as *inter Graecos Latinissimus, inter Latinos Graecissimus*.¹⁰ To-day Bessarion is possibly most remembered among scholars for his donation of Greek and Latin manuscripts and incunabula to the Republic of Venice which formed the basis of the Marciana Library. At his death he had bequeathed his collection of 482 Greek manuscripts and a further 264 in Latin to the Venetian Republic. The occurrences of the Marciana's shelf mark in the apparatus of editions of ancient Greek texts testify to the importance to classical scholarship of Bessarion's manuscript collection.¹¹

Monfasani sums up the breadth of his influence: 'In his own time, Bessarion cut a large swathe... as the greatest representative of the union of the Greek and Latin churches, as the Curia's most consistent proponent of a crusade against the Turks, as the focal point of the most important intellectual circle in Italy outside of Florence, as a translator from the Greek of Aristotle and Xenophon, and, of course, as the author of the most important Platonic text in the Renaissance before Marsilio Ficino's *Theologia Platonica*, namely, the

⁸ For Bessarion's circle see Mercati (1925) 77-80.

⁹ This in an unpublished paper 'Cardinal Bessarion and the Latins' delivered to the 2014 Venice conference on 'Bessarion's Treasure'.

¹⁰ The *bon mot* is from Valla's preface to his translation of Thucydides of 1452.

¹¹ For instance Burnet's edition of *Platonis opera* and Bessarion's manuscript (Ambrosianus gr. 159) cited in Steel's edition of Proclus' *Commentarium in Platonis Parmenidem* (2007) (see Steel ed. I xii-xiii).

In Calumniatorem Platonis.¹² He describes Bessarion as ‘a virtual one-man Renaissance Foundation for Greek Culture in Italy’.¹³

Scholars are divided in their assessment of Bessarion’s significance in the reception and interpretation of Plato. Hankins says: ‘By allowing the ancient commentators to guide his reading of Plato, Bessarion was opening up a new stage in the interpretation of the Platonic dialogues in the Latin West,’ and: ‘Ultimately [*ICP*] became one of the most important texts in the history of Platonism.’¹⁴ This is the view of Copenhaver and Schmitt: ‘The Cardinal’s most important contribution to Platonic philosophy was to revive the Neoplatonic view of the dialogues, seeing them not as profane texts to be understood literally but as sacred mysteries to be deciphered.’¹⁵ But Kristeller gives no significant place to Bessarion in the revival of Platonism. According to him Renaissance Platonism: ‘was a deep and important and even influential current of thought’ which worked on a slender institutional and professional basis compared with Aristotelianism.’ But he makes no mention of Bessarion alongside Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94) in the revival of Platonism.¹⁶

This implied obscurity is at variance with the opinions of at least some of Bessarion’s contemporaries. Ficino was impressed by Bessarion’s Platonic scholarship. In his letter thanking Bessarion for the receipt of his great work on Plato he praised him for exposing the gold within Plato like a light to blind eyes: *Sed tu, Bessario, academiae lumen medicamentum confestim saluberrimum hebetibus et caligantibus oculis adhibuisti, ut iam*

¹² Monfasani (2008) 2.

¹³ Monfasani (2011b) 61.

¹⁴ Hankins (1990a) 247 and 215. But he also says: ‘It was Ficino who first made Platonism into a serious movement of theological reform directed against the corrupt philosophy of the schools’ (Hankins (2005) 391).

¹⁵ Copenhaver and Schmitt (1992) 142.

¹⁶ Kristeller (1974).

*aurum illud Platoni divinitus datum non modo defaecatum ac mundum sit, sed tractabile manibus et oculis innoxium. Hoc vaticinatus aliquando Plato fore tempus Dionysio inquit post multa saecula, quo theologiae mysteria exactissima discussione velut igne aurum purificarentur.*¹⁷ There has been no systematic study of Bessarion's influence on Ficino himself but there is evidence that Ficino read and studied *ICP*. As Hankins points out, Ficino's *Platonic Theology* appears to owe much to the treatment of a number of theological problems in book two of *ICP*.¹⁸ It is certain that Ficino studied *ICP* sufficiently carefully to use some of Bessarion's translations of Plato in his own translations; Hankins has shown that Ficino used Bessarion's translation of passages of the *Phaedrus* from *ICP*.¹⁹

Panegyrics are dangerous as a source of evidence since they so easily descend into exaggerated eulogy. But they usually have some basis in fact. The funeral oration delivered by Niccolò Capranica (c.1420-1473), bishop of Fermo, on 3rd December 1472 at the solemn obsequies for Bessarion spoke in detail of his public service and his spirituality but only made passing reference to his scholarship.²⁰ Bessarion's friend, Michael Apostoles (c.1422-c.1480), also wrote a panegyric but he made no particular reference to Bessarion's scholarship.²¹ But Bartolomeo Platina (1421-1481), who was to become papal librarian in 1475, delivered a eulogy of Bessarion in Rome in his presence. In it he compared him to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle among the Greeks and Numa, Varro, Brutus, Sulpicius and Cato among the Romans. He spoke about the way in which he had

¹⁷ Mohler (1942) 544-5.

¹⁸ See Hankins (1990) 249.

¹⁹ Hankins (1990) 473. For a full account of Ficino's possible debt to Bessarion see Hankins (2004) II 424-9. There is also evidence from the publication and distribution of *ICP* that it made impact. To-day seventy libraries have copies of the 1469 edition of *ICP* and the Aldine press having published it in 1503 thought it worthwhile to republish it in 1516. See Monfasani (2008) 5.

²⁰ Mohler (1942) 404-414.

²¹ The text is printed in Migne *P.G.* 161 cxxvii-cxl.

opened Plato to those who had long been ignorant of him: *extollit Aristotelem, Platonem philosophorum principem facit, quocum plura Christianis ostendit convenire quam cum aliquo philosophorum.....Doctrinam et mentem Platonis, a nemine fere juniorum cognitam, explicat et aperit, ut perfacile appareat, omnes sectas quae sanum aliquid sapere videntur, ab ipso Platone tamquam perenni et uberrimo fonte manare.*²²

Platina signalled Bessarion's view of Plato's preeminence as a philosopher particularly in relation to Christianity and his role in making Plato better understood. This thesis concentrates on this aspect of Bessarion's activities and contribution as a scholar. His importance in the transmission of manuscripts is widely accepted. In addition to his manuscript collection and translations into Latin of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* Bessarion wrote his large work on Plato. My thesis focuses on book two of the four books which make up the published *ICP*. Book two is devoted to the exposition of Plato's thinking on a number of philosophical questions. The full text is found in volume 2 of Mohler, L. (1927) *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann* (Paderborn).

Bessarion had completed a first draft in 1459. His final Greek text, printed opposite the published Latin text in Mohler, is the final redaction of the text which he had been working over since 1459. In the process he prepared three redactions in Greek before publishing the final text in Latin.²³ He had had help from a number of scholars including Theodore Gaza

²² The eulogy is printed in Migne *P.G.* 161 ciii-cxvi.

²³ The Greek text is available in five manuscripts (See Mohler (1927) vii-viii): Cod. Marc. Gr. 199 (15th century); Cod. Vat. Gr. 1435 (15th century); Cod. Marc. Gr. 198 (15th century); Cod. Mon. Gr. 80 (16th century); and Cod. Barb. Gr. 183 (17th century). Book three is only found in Cod. Marc. Gr. 198; the others contain books one, two and four. Cod. Marc. Gr. 198 also includes a hexameter verse in honour of Bessarion by Andronicos Callistos, Bessarion's critique of Trebizond's translation of the *Laws*, and a Greek redaction of Bessarion's *De Natura et Arte*. Cod. Marc. Gr. 199 is in several hands, one possibly Bessarion's own hand, and includes some biographical notes (see Mioni (1991) 22). The Latin version which is printed by Mohler does not correspond to the Greek version printed opposite which is an earlier redaction. In many cases the

(c.1398-c.1475), Niccolò Perotti (1429-80) and Giovanni Antonio Campano (1429-77).²⁴

The Latin text was published in 1469 and is a free translation of the Greek probably made by Bessarion's secretary, Perotti.²⁵ Perotti omitted some passages from the Greek version.

I shall quote from both texts depending on the context. The published Latin text is the canonical text. The translation is not always consistent with the Greek text and Chapter 11 of *ICP* 2 is arranged into different chapters in the Greek text. As most of his readers will have used the published Latin text, I shall quote the Latin text except in cases where the link with Bessarion's sources is easier to see in his Greek text or the Greek text is clearer. Where I have quoted the Greek text I note, if necessary, any significant divergences from the Latin. I have given page and line references in Mohler's edition for quotations from or references to Bessarion's text.

If Bessarion's stated purpose was to make the Latins more aware of Plato's teaching, one might ask: 'Why did he not concentrate on translations of the dialogues or on commentaries in the tradition of Proclus?' The Latins were well used to commentaries on the model of Aquinas' commentaries on texts of Aristotle. Ficino after Bessarion used the

changes seem to be made on stylistic grounds. See note [2525](#) below. See also Hankins (1990a) 218 n.136 for the history of the text.

²⁴ See Monfasani (1976) 220. For the relationship between the Latin and Greek versions see Hankins (1990a) 218 n.136 and Monfasani (1981).

²⁵ There is uncertainty about who exactly was responsible for the Latin text. It appears from a letter of Theodore Gaza to Francisco Filelfo, which Monfasani dates to 1468, that Bessarion had help with the Latin for his works (see Mohler (1942) 576.12-13). Monfasani argues that Perotti produced the final Latin version of *ICP* (Monfasani (1981)167-168). According to Hankins: 'Perotti seems to have worked both from the *dossier* containing various redactions of the Greek text and materials supplied by other members of the Bessarion circle as well as from Bessarion's earlier Latin version of the first redaction, but in many cases shortens, misunderstands, or otherwise departs significantly from the latest Greek redaction of the *Calumniator* as printed in Mohler (Hankins (1990a) 218 n.136).' But according to a manuscript note by Robert Ridley in the margin of his copy of the 1503 edition of *ICP* the work was a collaborative effort of a varied group united in their hatred of Trebizond: *narravit mihi, dum Parrhisii essem, Jacobus Stapulensis, gravissimus ille omnium doctrinarum et censor et interpres, hec infrascripta neutiquam Bessarionis cardinalis fuisse opera, sed in odium Trapezonzii a diversis et nullo auctore composita, quod satis indicat varietas et difformitas stili in hoc opere.* Guillaume Budé, however, suggested a single unnamed collaborator in *Annotationes in pandectas: Plato igitur autore Bessarione (aut eo potius viro Latine doctissimo qui auspiciis ejus Latinum illum librum fecit) etc. (Opera omnia (1557, Basle) III p.70 cited by del Soldato (2010) 341-2).* Del Soldato argues that George Hermonymus was the common source of the story about the authorship. He held Trebizond in high esteem. See del Soldato (2010) 341-342 and Monfasani (2008) pp.6-7.

form of commentary on Plato. But the genre of *ICP* was dictated by the fact that it was a polemical work written as a reply to the anti-Platonic work of George of Trebizond (1395-1484). There may have been another reason. Bessarion's purpose was to show that Plato was more consistent with Christian orthodoxy than Aristotle. To do this he needed wider scope than was offered by a translation or a commentary on a specific text. Nevertheless book two of *ICP*, although it does not have the formal structure of a commentary, has much in common with a commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* on the model of Proclus.

In chapter one of this thesis I set out Bessarion's intellectual background, the cultural environment in Italy and Northern Europe in the middle of the fifteenth century and the circumstances leading to the publication of *ICP*. Chapter two sets book two of *ICP* in the overall framework of Bessarion's work. Chapters three to six focus on the main themes of the book. These chapters are followed by a conclusion in chapter seven.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors Dr. Stephen Heyworth, Dr. Sebastian Gertz and Mr. Nigel Wilson, who have guided me with their wisdom and scholarship in the preparation of this thesis. I have also been helped by discussions with Professor James Hankins and Dr. Eva del Soldato.

Chapter one

Bessarion's Intellectual and Cultural Background and the context of *ICP*

Summary

This chapter will examine the influence of Bessarion's literary, theological and philosophical background and education on his interpretation and presentation of Plato. It addresses two questions. What was the understanding and approach to the interpretation of Plato which Bessarion brought with him to the West? What was the understanding of and attitude to Plato in Italy against which Bessarion's work on Plato would have been measured? I shall argue that Platonism was regarded with suspicion by some powerful individuals.

The chapter will consider in particular the influence on Bessarion of his teacher, Gemistus Plethon (1355-1452/4). It seeks to demonstrate that he came to Italy with a philosophical and theological perspective distinct from the contemporary perspective in Italy; his perspective was Byzantine rather than the humanistic tradition of the Latins. It will then consider aspects of the contemporary culture in Italy and, in particular, knowledge of and attitudes to Plato and Aristotle. Finally it will examine the circumstances leading to publication of *ICP* and their influence on Bessarion's presentation of Plato. It will conclude that, although Bessarion was provoked by Trebizond's extreme Aristotelianism and his attack on Plato, his purpose was not to diminish Aristotle but to promote Plato in a way that would show how Platonic doctrine could underpin Christian teaching. In doing so he had to tread carefully to be faithful to Plato without putting in question his own

orthodoxy or impugning Aristotle. He held Plato and Aristotle in equal regard but their philosophical perspectives were different. Aristotle had been a pupil of Plato. It was legitimate, therefore, according to the tradition which Bessarion followed, to interpret Aristotle in the light of Plato. But Aristotle could illuminate the meaning of the text of Plato. Equally he regarded the Neo-Platonic commentators and some Christian Fathers as authoritative interpreters of Plato.

Bessarion's Intellectual and Cultural Background

The sources for Bessarion's early life are Platina's panegyric, his funeral oration preached by Capranica, and the *Laudatio Funebris Bessarionis* by his friend, Michael Apostoles.²⁶ Bessarion himself left a few biographical details on the flyleaf of his personal breviary.²⁷

He was born in Trebizond. Bessarion is the name by which he is known but his first name was Basil.²⁸ When he became a monk he took the name Bessarion after an Egyptian hermit of that name.²⁹ Although the year is uncertain, 2nd January 1403 is generally accepted as the most likely date of his birth. For his education his parents entrusted him to Dositheus,

²⁶ Platina's and Apostoles' orations are printed in Migne *P.G.* 161 ciii-cxvi and cxxvii-cxxxix. Capranica's oration is printed in Mohler (1942) 404-414. Useful sources for the life of Bessarion are Gill, J's article on 'Bessarion' in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* V (1980) 725-30; Labowsky, L's entry on *Bessarione* in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* IX (1967) 686-97; Mioni, E. (1968) 'Bessarione bibliofilo e filologo' in *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* n.s. 5 (XV) (Rome) 61-83; Mohler, L. (1923) *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann* (Aarlen); Talbot, A.-M's entry on 'Bessarion' in Kazhdan et al. edd. (1991) *the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*; Todt, K-P. (2006) 'In Calumniatorem Platonis: Kardinal Johannes Bessarion (ca. 1403-1472) als Vermittler und Verteidiger der Philosophie Platons' in *Philhellenische Studien* 12 (Frankfurt).

²⁷ Saffrey (1964) 266-72 gives a transcription and translation.

²⁸ There is confusion about Bessarion's first name. It is given as John in the *DBI*. Basil is attested as the correct name by Andrea Barbazza, a friend of Bessarion in later life: *dum in saeculo agens hoc splendido nomine Basilius dicebaris*. Mioni (1991) 21 believes that the name John derives from a manuscript error in an *ex libris*.

²⁹ See Joannou (1947) 107-138.

the Metropolitan of Trebizond.³⁰ Michael Apostoles says that Dositheus treated Bessarion like a son.³¹ When Dositheus moved to Constantinople in 1416 he took Bessarion with him to continue his education.³² There Bessarion continued his studies under John Chortasmenos, the Metropolitan of Selymbria, and George Chrysokokkes, the teacher of rhetoric.³³ According to Platina Bessarion followed the traditional course of studies comprising rhetoric and philosophy.³⁴ He took the monastic habit in 1423 when he was probably aged twenty. It is not known which monastery in Constantinople he entered. He was ordained deacon in 1425, priest in 1430 and bishop in 1437 and he was created cardinal in 1439.³⁵ He remained faithful to his monastic calling throughout his life. This is clear from the portrait of him by Bellini which is in the National Gallery; even as a cardinal he is depicted in his monastic habit with the beard of a Basilian monk.³⁶ In the

³⁰ Dositheos (ob.c.1452) was nominated in 1437 by Joseph II, Patriarch of Constantinople, as a delegate to the Council of Ferrara and then Florence. The Patriarch sent him first to Venice as ambassador. Despite his strong orthodox standpoint he signed the decree of union in Florence in 1439 (see Trapp (1976) III.62-3).

³¹ Migne *P.G.* 161 cxxxiii.

³² In this thesis I use 'Constantinople' to refer to the capital city of the Eastern Empire but I use 'Byzantium' to refer to the Empire and its culture.

³³ Chortasmenos' (c.1370-c.1436) works included works on logic, moral philosophy and excerpts from Aristotle (see Trapp (1990) XII.249).

³⁴ Migne *P.G.* 161 cv.

³⁵ Bessarion set out the dates in his personal breviary. Mioni (1991 p.21) thinks he entered the monastery as a postulant in 1416 because at the Council of Ferrara in 1438 he said that he had been under obedience to a superior for twenty one years. Mioni's source is Sylvester Syropoulos. Sylvester Syropoulos was Patriarch of Constantinople 1463-1464. He had been a member of the Greek party at the Council of Ferrara and Florence in 1437-1439. He later wrote a history of the Council which is published in Syropoulos Laurent ed. (1971). In it he quoted a letter which Bessarion wrote in 1438 to the Emperor asking for financial help in making the journey to Ferrara (Syropoulos p.276) and said he had been under obedience to a superior for twenty one years. Bessarion's biographical note does not record his entry into the monastery as a postulant but entry to a monastery as early as 1416 seems unlikely. A period of postulancy between 1416 and 1423 would be excessively long. See also Mohler (1923) 43 and Laurent (1956). For Syropoulos see Trapp (1990) XI.146-7.

³⁶ The beard was a source of later criticism. At the papal consistory of 1455 following the death of Nicholas V Bessarion received eight votes which was a majority of those cardinals present. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405-64), the future Pope Pius II, recounted that over the following twenty four hours the Venetian Cardinal Trevisan and the French Cardinal de Coëtivy persuaded their fellow cardinals to reverse the vote. De Coëtivy is reported as saying: 'Shall we select for Pope a Greek? Shall we make a neophyte the guardian of religion? Is Bessarion who still wears his beard to be our leader? How do we know his conversion is sincere?How poor must be the Latin Church, if we can find no man worthy of the Apostolic See, but must resort to a Greek.' See Mioni (1991) 191 and Pastor (ed. Antrobus 1891) vol. II.322-4. Platina in his panegyric (*P.G.* 161 ciii-cxvi) condemned the politics of the consistory: *quantum vero adsit maximis imperii provinciis et civitatibus livor atque invidia, comprehendi certe hoc loco potest. Quidam enim statim suborti sunt leves et voluptuosi qui, Bessarionis integritatem et modestiam veriti, dicerent suffragia vitio inita denuo repetenda esse.* The story may indicate a seam of anti-Greek feeling in ecclesiastical circles. There is evidence that this extended to literary chauvinism on both sides. Petrarch wrote: *sumus non Graeci, non barbari, sed Itali et Latini.* This attitude was deplored by the Byzantine scholar and statesman,

period 1423-1430 he must have devoted himself to the study of theology. Unfortunately we have no details of the content of these studies but there is evidence that he was already interested in bridging the theological differences between the Eastern and Western Christian churches.³⁷ It is reasonable to assume that he would have studied the Greek Fathers of the Church such as Basil, Gregory Nazianzenus, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. From early on in his life he is likely to have become accustomed to reading theologians steeped in Platonism and finding connections between the philosophy of Plato and the Platonists and Christian teaching.³⁸

In his panegyric of Bessarion Platina listed the authors whom Bessarion studied as a young man in Trebizond: Diogenes Laertius, Timotheus, the poet Deiphilus, Thales of Miletus, Anaximander of Miletus, Anaximenes of Miletus, Hecataeus of Miletus, Aeschines, Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Demosthenes.³⁹ The list suggests an early interest in philosophy and rhetoric and also in writings on science, cosmology and geography. In Constantinople

Demetrius Cydones (See Kianka (1995)). In a speech in 1366 in Constantinople, in which Cydones urged the Byzantines to accept aid from Italy, he argued that Rome was the mother city of Constantinople (Migne *P.G.* 154 col. 977C-D). There is a hint of ancient superiority in Bessarion's pastoral letter of 1463 to the Greeks when he wrote: Οἱ ἡμετεροὶ γὰρ πάσης σοφίας καὶ πάσης ἐπιστήμης οὐχ εὕρεται μόνον ὑπῆρξαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰς τέλος αὐτὰ ἤγαγον (*P.G.* 161 col. 452B). This was not the only occasion when Bessarion was considered a possible candidate for the papacy. In 1447 he was a contender when Tommaso Parentucelli was elected as Nicholas V (see Pastor *loc. cit.* 487-8) and again in 1471 when Francesco della Rovere was elected as Sixtus IV (see Pastor *ed* Antrobus (1894) IV 201-2).

³⁷ In 1463 Bessarion wrote a letter on his appointment by Pope Pius II as Patriarch of Constantinople (*in absentia*) 'to the bishops, monks and priests and all people under the Patriarchate of Constantinople'. The letter was a call to submit to the Roman church and the decrees of the Council of Florence. In writing about the supremacy of the Roman church he claimed to have espoused it from his days as a student: Οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδ' ἀγνοία τε καὶ ἀμαθία φαίητ' ἂν ἡμᾶς τῆς ἀληθείας ἀποτυχεῖν, εἰδότες ἐκ παιδῶν τε καὶ διὰ λόγων ἠγγμένους καὶ τό γε παρ' ἡμῖν τοῦτο τὸ μέρος οὐδενὸς ὄντας δευτέρους, πολλήν τε περὶ τοῦτο τὸ δόγμα καταβαλλομένους σπουδῆν, καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν, ὡς ἐνὸν, ἀνιχνεύσαντας (Migne *P.G.* 161 col. 461A). The letter (*ibid.* cols.450-490) is not the most diplomatic of letters since there was already a Patriarch in Constantinople, George Scholarius (Genaddios II), in post at the time.

³⁸ See Arnou (1933) cols. 2287-2290.

³⁹ Migne *P.G.* 161 civ. Capranica (Mohler (1942) III.406) gives a similar though slightly shorter list. Both lists also conclude *illum qui in Pompeium invectus est* apparently qualifying *Aeschinem*. Mioni (1991) 22 n.26 thinks that *in Pompeium* must be an error for *in Demosthenem*. The list must owe something to Platina's imagination because the writings of the fifth century B.C. Milesians (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Hecataeus) had not survived so Bessarion must have read about them in Diogenes Laertius or other fragments. It is also uncertain who Timotheus and Deiphilus were. Deiphilus might be the poet of new comedy, Diphilus. But his work only survives in fragments. Timotheus cannot be the dythyrambic poet Timotheus of Miletus whose work was not available at the time but could be Timotheus of Gaza who wrote on zoology and grammar about the end of the fifth century A.D.

he followed the usual course of grammar, philosophy and rhetoric.⁴⁰ He was a precocious student. In his letter of 1463 as Patriarch of Constantinople to the clergy and people of Byzantium he boasted of the esteem in which he was held as a young man by the leaders of the Greek world: γνώριμον ἦν τοῦμὸν ὄνομα πᾶσι τοῖς ὀπηδήποτε φωνῆς Ἑλληνικῆς ἐπαίουσι· καὶ μήπω τέτταρα καὶ εἴκοσιν ἔτη γενόμενος, αἰδοῖος ἡγεμόσι καὶ ἄρχουσι καὶ πᾶσιν ὑμῖν ὑπῆρχον. ποθεινότατος βασιλεῦσιν, οἱ οὐ τῶν ἡλικιωτῶν μόνον, καὶ τῶν προβεβηκότων, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἀξιώματα περιβέβλημενων ἡμᾶς προετίθουν, καὶ ἀξιώμασι τε καὶ ἀρχαῖς, ταῖς ὑπερ τὴν ἡλικίαν (οὐ δι' ἐμὴν ἀρετὴν, ἀλλὰ δι' ἰδίαν καλοκάγαθίαν) ἐκόσμουν.⁴¹

These are extravagant claims for a young deacon of twenty four. But Bessarion must have made a mark at an early age with his learning. This is apparent from his early preferment as a bishop before the Council of Florence. Gennadios Scholarios (1400-1473) was blunt about the inadequacies of the theological scholarship among Greeks at the Council.⁴² The Greeks were no match for the Latins. According to Scholarios their leaders knew enough theology and philosophy so as not to appear totally ignorant.⁴³ Syropoulus was also critical

⁴⁰ See Platina (Migne *P.G.* 161 cv), Apostoles (Migne *P.G.* 161 cxxxiv) and Capranica (Mohler (1942) 406).

⁴¹ Migne *P.G.* 161 col. 461D.

⁴² Scholarios had attended the Council of Florence as a layman where he had supported Greek and Roman church union. He had had an interest in Latin Scholasticism since youth. He had studied not only Aristotle but also the commentators including Averroes and Aquinas. On his return to Constantinople in 1440 from the Council he changed sides in the political and theological controversy, and became leader of the anti-union faction. He became a monk in 1450. In 1454, after the fall of Byzantium to the Turks, he was elected Patriarch against his will. He remained an ardent Aristotelian and follower of Thomas Aquinas. His prolific works are published in Petit et al. edd. (1928-1936). See Trapp (1990) XI.156-7 and Gill (1964) 79-94.

⁴³ Scholarios wrote: Καὶ ταῦτα περὶ θεολογίας τε καὶ φιλοσοφίας οὐ σφόδρα δυναμένους ἀμιλλᾶσθαι Λατίνοις, τοῦτο τῆς ἐν ἡμῖν δυστυχίας τῶν πραγμάτων πεποηκίας, δι' ἣν οἱ παρ' ἡμῖν ἄκροισι τοσοῦτον θεολογίας τε καὶ φιλοσοφίας ἄπτονται, ὥστε μόνον μὴ δοκεῖν καθάπαξ ἀπαιδέυτοι, ἐκλελειπόμενοι μὲν παιδευτηρίων, σβεσθείσης δὲ τῆς περὶ μαθήματα καὶ λόγους φιλοτιμίας καὶ πάντων τῆς χρείας μόνης καὶ τῆς ἀνάγκης γεγενημένων (Petit et al. edd. I.299.24-29). Referring to some of these prelates the Emperor is recorded as saying how unequal they were to the task of the Council: ἀλλὰ καὶ, εἴπερ ἤρχοντο, ὀλίγον ἂν συμβέβαλλον εἰς τὴν παροῦσαν χρεῖαν· οἶδαμεν γὰρ τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ λόγου ἐκείνων (Syropoulos pp.570-2). He even apologised to the Latins for their lack of learning. He told Cardinal Julian Cesarini, the Papal legate, that they spoke like ignorant laymen: εἰ καὶ οὐ λέγουσι καθαρῶς διὰ τὴν ἀμαθίαν τῶν ἰδιωτῶν (*Acta Graeca Concilii Florentini* 418). Bessarion referred to the inability of the Greeks to respond to the Latins in his *De processione Spiritus Sancti* (Migne *P.G.* 161 cols. 416D, 422B, and 424C).

of some of the prelates.⁴⁴ But Syropoulos recorded that Bessarion, Mark Eugenicus and Dionysius of Sardis were consecrated bishops on the eve of the Council ‘to be present as champions in the synod’; in other words their learning was rated superior to that of the rest of the hierarchy.⁴⁵

The theological and philosophical culture in Byzantium

Bessarion arrived at the Council with a theological perspective grounded in the theology of the Greek Fathers and Platonism. His understanding of Plato and Aristotle needs to be seen in the context of the philosophical and theological culture which he must have absorbed as a student. In the following paragraphs I set out some significant developments in Byzantine thought which influenced Bessarion’s own development.

He represented a philosophical tradition that was widely considered controversial in Byzantium. There were two tensions in the Byzantine tradition. One tension was between a rationalist tradition of philosophical enquiry and, on the other hand, a suspicion of pagan philosophy that ran deep in the orthodox church and is epitomised by monks who ‘immediately on hearing the name of Plato would bless themselves and murmur anathemas against the Hellenic Satan’.⁴⁶ The Byzantine monastic communities were traditionally hostile to philosophy. The Church itself condemned Platonism as a system. The anathemas pronounced against Origen at the Synod of Constantinople (543) and the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) implied condemnation of Platonism. There were further anathemas in 1082 (see page 20 below). Another tension was between the devotees of Plato and those of

⁴⁴ See Gill (1959) 228-9.

⁴⁵ Syropoulos p.184.

⁴⁶ Prologue to Psellus’ *Chronographia* Sathras ed. (1874) p.lxviii.

Aristotle. Both these tensions surfaced in the lives of Michael Psellus (1018-70) and his pupil John Italos (c.1025-*ob.* post 1082) in the eleventh century.

Psellus was an influential professor of philosophy in Constantinople, a civil servant and monk.⁴⁷ According to Anna Comnena, the daughter of the Emperor Alexius I, Psellus ‘attained the perfection of all learning, having an accurate understanding of both Hellenic and Chaldaean science’.⁴⁸ In his *Chronographia* Psellus described how he revitalised philosophical studies single handedly. Having discovered Plato and Aristotle he turned to Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus before ascending to Proclus where he halted as in a meadow and plucked all knowledge: ὡς ἐπὶ λιμένα μέγιστον κατασχών, πᾶσαν ἐκεῖθεν ἐπιστήμην τε καὶ νοήσεων ἀκρίβειαν ἔσπασα.⁴⁹ He acknowledged a debt to Aristotle but ranked Plato above him. Plato’s ideas anticipated the teaching of Christ.⁵⁰ He prescribed a curriculum in which the student proceeded from Aristotle’s logic to the study of Plato. But he did not think Aristotle a suitable philosophical base for theology.⁵¹ He said that Plato rejected the view that all philosophic truth was discoverable by syllogistic reasoning alone. The mind can be lifted beyond comprehension to the One.⁵²

He was careful to state his view of the relation between philosophy and Christianity. He told his pupils: ‘We must take from the Greeks the science of these things, and by means of our own philosophy, seek to understand form and truth. We must discard the profane

⁴⁷ For accounts of the life and influence of Psellus see Tatakis (2003) 129-169, Wilson (1983) 156-166 and Reynolds and Wilson (2013) 68-9.

⁴⁸ *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena* V.viii translated by Sewter E.R.A. (Harmondsworth 1969) 175.

⁴⁹ *Chronographia* 6.37-8 ed. Renauld 1 pp.135-136.

⁵⁰ ὅς οὐδεμίαν ἐκείνου δόξαν ἀνήρηκας, ἐγὼ δὲ μικροῦ δεῖν ἀπάσας, ἐπεὶ μὴ δὲ πᾶσαι φαῦλαι· οἱ γὰρ περὶ δικαιοσύνης λόγοι καὶ περὶ ἀθανασίας ψυχῶν, ἀρχαὶ καὶ τοῖς ἡμετέροις τῶν ὁμοίων δογμάτων ἐγένοντο (*Letter to Xiphilinos* Sathas ed. (1876) V.444-5).

⁵¹ See Tatakis (2003) 131, 134 and 150-1.

⁵² οἱ [Cleanthes and Zeno] πάντα δόντες συλλογισμοῖς, οὐδὲν ἀσυλλόγιστον ᾠήθησαν καὶ ὑπὲρ ἀπόδειξιν. Πλάτων δὲ καὶ τοῦτο ἐφεῦρεν, εἰς νοῦν ἀναβάς, καὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ νοῦν εἶδεν εἰς τὸ ἐν καταπαύσας, οὗ πάντα κατηγορεῖς, ᾧ μισοπλάτων καὶ μισολόγε, ἵνα μὴ λέγω μισοφιλόσοφε (*Letter to Xiphilinos* Sathas ed. (1976) V.445).

covering and exhume the spirit that is hidden within and radiates like a pearl. Do not think that only what Moses has said is absolute truth, and do not neglect what the Greeks had to say about theology.⁵³ He said that the doctrine of the Hellenists should be judged by its own standards and not simply as an enemy of Christian teaching. Their arguments are powerful in their own right. He referred to the example of Gregory Nazianzus' use of the Hellenists.⁵⁴

Psellus in philosophical mode must be distinguished from what he said in theological mode. He protested that despite the range of his philosophical reading and his admiration for what he read he remained true to the teaching of the gospel.⁵⁵ Nevertheless he did not escape censure. Despite his powerful position he thought it prudent to retire from court and the University to a monastery for a time. This may have been because of his philosophical interests or it may have been more political. John Xiphilinos was a friend and fellow University professor but he opposed some of Psellus' views. He admired Aristotle and disdained the mystic elements in Plato. For Xiphilinos there was no place for philosophy in theology.⁵⁶ Psellus replied to the charge that Xiphilinos had levelled against him that he wanted to upset the church with his Hellenism and revive idolatry.⁵⁷ He called Xiphilinos ὦ μισοπλάτων καὶ μισολόγε, ἵνα μὴ λέγω μισοφιλόσοφε. He argued in his own defense

⁵³ *De operatione daemonum* 151 translation Moutafakis in Tatakis (2003).

⁵⁴ Ἀλλ' ὡς κάκεινων ἰσχὴν ἐπὶ τοῖς λόγοις ἐχόντων καὶ πολλὴν μοῖραν συνεισενεγκόντων τῇ τέχνῃ ἢ παρὰ τὴν τέχνην ταῖς τοῦ λόγου δυνάμεσιν, οὕτω δὴ τὸν ἀγῶνα ποιήσας καὶ τὰ πρὸς ἄλληλα εὖ θέμενος, ἐξοίσω τὴν ψῆφον, τοσοῦτον ὑπειπὼν, ὅτι ὄπερ ἐστὶ Δημοσθένους τῆ ἑτέρα μερίδι, φημί τῇ ἐλληνικῇ, τοῦτο τῇ καθ' ἡμᾶς ὁ θεολόγος Γρηγόριος (*De operatione daemonum* 125).

⁵⁵ εἴ τι δὲ παρὰ τὸν ἡμέτερον τεθεώρηκα λόγον, κἂν μετὰ τῆς ἀκριβοῦς ἐξεικόνισται ἀποδείξεως, κἂν πᾶσαν εἶχε περικεχυμένην σοφίαν καὶ χάριν, ὡς λήρου παντὸς ἢ πάντῃ ἀτόπου καταπεφρόνηκα, ὅς γε οὐδὲ τοῖς κρείττοσιν αὐτῶν πρόσεχω τὸν νοῦν, ἀλλὰ μοι τὸ φιλότιμον τῆς ψυχῆς μέχρι τῆς τῶν δογμάτων αὐτῶν κεκίνηται γνώσεως. Εἰσὶ γὰρ καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν θησαυροὶ σοφίας ἀνέκλειπτοι (*Psellus' encomium of his mother Sathas* ed. (1876) V.58). In his letter to Xiphilinos he wrote that he had read extensively the books of philosophy and rhetoric, including Plato, but he found them all debased by comparison with sacred Scripture: πάντα πρὸς τὴν θεόληπτον ἡμῶν σύγκρινας Γραφῆν, τὴν καθαρὰν τε καὶ στίλβουσαν, καὶ τῷ ὄντι δόκιμον, ὑπόχαλκα καὶ κιβδηλείας εὔρον μεστά (ed. Sathas (1876) V.444).

⁵⁶ Xiphilinos' works have not survived. Our knowledge of his views depends on Psellus' critique of them (see *Psellus' epitaph of Xiphilinos* Sathas ed. (1874) IV.421-62).

⁵⁷ *Psellus' letter to Xiphilinos* is in Sathas ed. (1876) V.444-51.

that by using syllogisms to combat heresy he was following the example of Gregory and Basil.⁵⁸ He admired Plato's philosophy and strength of argument in the same way as the Fathers of the Church had done. Syllogistic reasoning is not alien to the Church or the sole preserve of philosophy; it is the only way to truth.⁵⁹

His pupil, John Italos, was less fortunate.⁶⁰ According to Anna Comnena, who was no admirer of Italos, he 'devoted his energies to the exegesis of Aristotle and Plato,' and 'he elucidated the works of Proclus and Plato, the teachings of the two philosophers Porphyry and Iamblichus, and above all the technical treatises of Aristotle.'⁶¹ After two trials he was forced to give up his teaching post and sent off to a monastery. In 1082 the Orthodox Church added an anathema to the *Syndikon of Orthodoxy* read out annually on the first Sunday of Lent. It included: 'Cursed be those who go through a course of Hellenic studies and are taught not simply for the sake of education but follow these empty notions and believe in them as the truth, upholding them as a firm foundation to such an extent that they lead others to them, sometimes secretly, sometimes openly, and teach them without hesitation'.⁶² The Greek philosophers were tolerated for their style but the philosophical content was condemned. The charge against Italos was that he treated philosophical texts not as literary works but as the repository of truth; he taught a pagan Platonic philosophy

⁵⁸ Gregory and Basil used the arguments of Plato to combat Eunomianism and Apollinarianism: εἰ μὲν γὰρ προσονειδίζεις, ὅτι θαμὰ ποτε προσωμίλουν τῷ ἀνδρὶ [Plato] ἐν τοῖς διαλόγοις αὐτοῦ, καὶ τοῦ τε χαρακτήρος τῆς ἐρμηνείας ἐθαύμαζον καὶ τὴν ἐν ταῖς ἀποδείξεσιν ἐθειάζον δύναμιν, τί μὴ καὶ τοῖς μεγάλοις τοῦτο πατράσιν ἐπιρριπτεῖς, ἀφ' ὧν ἐκεῖνοι τοῖς Εὐνομοῖς καὶ Ἀπολιναρίοις τὰς αἰρέσεις ἀνέτρεψαν, βάλλοντες ἀκρβεΐαις συλλογισμῶν; (*Letter to Xiphilinos* Sathas ed. (1876) V.444).

⁵⁹ He combined the ideas of Plato and others with sacred scripture as the Fathers had done: Πλάτωνας δὲ οὖς λέγεις καὶ Χρυσίππους, ἠγάπησα μὲν, πῶς γὰρ οὐ; ἀλλ' ἄχρι τοῦ τέλους καὶ τῆς ἐπιφαινόμενης λειότητος τῶν δὲ παρ' ἐκείνοις δογμάτων, ἃ μὲν εὐθὺς παρεώρακα, τινὰ δὲ ὡς πρὸς ἡμεδαπὰς συνεργὰ ὑποθέσεις, εὖ μάλα λαβῶν τοῖς ἱεροῖς λόγοις συνέμιξα, ὥς που δὴ καὶ Γρηγόριος καὶ Βασίλειος οἱ μεγάλοι τῆς ἐκκλησίας φωστῆρες πεπράχασι· τὰ δὲ τῶν συλλογισμῶν, εἶδους νῦν μὲν οὐπω καταπεφρόνηκα, γένοιτο δὲ μοι καταφρονῆσαι, ὡς τε ἐν εἶδει ὄρᾶν, ἀλλὰ μὴ δι' αἰνιγμάτων τὸν Κύριον· τὸ γὰρ συλλογίζεσθαι, ἀδελφέ, οὔτε δόγμα ἐστὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἀλλότριον, οὔτε θέσις τις τῶν κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν παράδοξος, ἀλλ' ἢ μόνον ὄργανον ἀληθείας καὶ ζητούμενου πράγματος εὔρεσις (*Letter to Xiphilinos* Sathas ed. (1876) V.447).

⁶⁰ For an account of the life of Italos see Tatakis (2003) 169-75 and Wilson (1996) 153-6.

⁶¹ *The Alexiad* V.viii-ix translation Sewter (1969) 176 and 177-8.

⁶² Text on Gouillard (1976) 59 Quoted in Parry (2006) 229 and Wilson (1996) 154. Those who accepted Plato's doctrine of the forms were also condemned.

including metempsychosis, the eternity of matter and pagan errors about the human soul, the sky, the earth, and all creatures.⁶³ In fact he treated philosophy as autonomous of theology within its own framework of thought.⁶⁴ The alternative view is exemplified by Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), who rejected all secular studies. Writing to Stephen of Nicomedia he said that the Spirit did not speak to the rhetoricians and philosophers but to the poor in spirit: ἃ ἐλάλησεν ἐκπορευθὲν τὸ Πνεῦμα...οὐ τοῖς ῥήτορσιν, οὐδὲ τοῖς φιλοσόφοις, οὐ τοῖς μαθοῦσι συγγραφᾶς τῶν Ἑλλήνων...ἀλλὰ τοῖς πτωχοῖς πνεύματι καὶ τῷ βίῳ...καὶ ἀπλουστέραν κεκτημένοις τὴν γνώμην.⁶⁵

Psellus and Italos framed the terms of a debate that was to last into the Renaissance. Four centuries later Bessarion addressed many of the same criticisms of Plato which were itemised in the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*. Themes in the thought of Psellus and Italos emerge again in Bessarion's work: the pre-eminence of Plato over Aristotle as a philosophical underpinning for Christianity; the tradition of the Fathers in using philosophy as a tool to interpret scripture; the independence of philosophy; the significance of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus (but without theurgy) and the way in which Plato transcended the constraints of syllogistic reasoning.⁶⁶

Despite opposition from the Church, interest in Plato and the Neo-Platonists continued during the intervening centuries. The so-called Hesychast controversy in the fourteenth century was a significant stage in debates about philosophy whose ripples lasted into the

⁶³ See Tatakis (2003) 172. A resumé of the charges is given by Stephanou (1933) 413f.

⁶⁴ See Tatakis (2003) 172-3.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Meyendorff (1974) I.88 n.3.

⁶⁶ The number of manuscripts of works by Psellus and Italos in the Marciana Library suggests Bessarion's interest. But annotations provide little evidence that Bessarion worked on them. In one case (Marc. Gr. 202) the manuscript contains a transcription of Psellus' *paraphrasis in libro De interpretatione* in Bessarion's hand (see Mioni (1985) vol. 1 315-6) and the most significant manuscript of Italos (Marc. Gr. 265) has an *incipit* in his hand (see Mioni *ibid.* 381-2).

following century and affected Bessarion.⁶⁷ Gregory Palamas (c.1296-1359) and Barlaam of Calabria (c.1290-1348) were protagonists in this controversy. The Greek church was divided by the dispute over Palamism.⁶⁸ The Byzantine ‘humanists’ like Psellos, Theodore Metochites (1270-1332) and Nikephoros Gregoras (c.1292-c.1358) were committed students of Plato but did not attempt to synthesise Plato with theology and so avoided ecclesiastical strictures. But Barlaam resorted to philosophical tools in his conflict with Palamas who criticised the use of profane wisdom in this way. For him the Gospel was the source of true wisdom.⁶⁹ The heart of the conflict between Barlaam and Palamas was the conflict between an irrational mysticism and philosophy (in the case of Barlaam Aristotelian rationalism filtered through the Latin Scholastics). The controversy was a stage in the dispute that had been going on since the ninth century between the champions of secular philosophy and those who regarded it as paganism. There were two issues; one related to the knowability of God and the other to the Hesychast belief in the experience of grace in the human body through contemplative prayer. Gill summarises the main teaching of Palamas as follows: ‘Gregory Palamas in his theological defence of the practice of Hesychastic prayer taught that, since the divine essence is utterly unattainable by man yet man is deified, deification is accomplished by the divine energies that act upon the soul, and that these divine energies, which he also calls “divinities”, are indivisible from the divine essence and yet are really distinct from it.’⁷⁰

⁶⁷ The term ‘hesychasm’ derives from the Greek ήσυχία. The reputed founder of the movement, the monk Gregory of Sinai, taught τήρησιν νοός και ήσυχίας ακρίβειαν (see Migne *P.G.* 150 col.1237A).

⁶⁸ An account of Palamism and the controversy may be found in Gill (1975), von Lilienfeld (1986), Meyendorff (1964), (1974) 87-120 and (1984), Padadakis and Kazhdan (1991), Tatakis (2003) 217-234 and Sinioglou (2011) 265-72.

⁶⁹ See Meyendorff (1984) cols. 91-2. Palamas contrasted the wisdom of God spoken of by Paul with the wisdom of the Greeks: ό Παύλος διττων ήμιν ένταυθοϊ δεικνύς τò τής σοφίας είδος, “έν σοφία” φησϊ “Θεοϋ, διά τής σοφίας ούκ έγνω ό κόσμος τόν Θεόν”. όρᾷς ότι τήν μέν σοφίαν είπε τοϋ Θεοϋ, τήν δε υιλήν σοφίαν και αίτίαν τοϋ μη γνώναι τόν Θεόν; αύτη δε έστιν ή τοις Έλλησιν έξευρημένη, παρά τήν τοϋ Θεοϋ έτέρα (*Triads* I.1.17 ed. Meyendorff pp.49-50).

⁷⁰ Gill (1975) p.380 n.5.

Palamas was hostile to the philosophy of Aristotle, Plato and the other Greek philosophers although he accepted the value of Aristotle's *Logic* and *Physics*. The wisdom of the Hellenes, according to him, had been 'turned to folly' (*Romans* 1.21); true wisdom was 'wisdom of the Spirit'.⁷¹ Greek philosophy was 'an illusory image of true wisdom and the negation of wisdom'.⁷² He argued that the unknowable God revealed himself to the Areopagite and to the Fathers and could still do so.⁷³ Communion with God became possible through grace. His teaching was rooted in the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa and other Greek Fathers and the relation of humans to God brought about by the incarnation. The idea of communion with God was based on a distinction between God's οὐσία which remains always transcendent and his uncreated ἐνεργεία communicating the divine life to humans. Palamas' teaching was adopted by the Orthodox Church at the synods of 1347 and 1351 and his opponents were condemned and added to the list of heresiarchs anathematized on the Sunday of Orthodoxy.⁷⁴

Barlaam, Gregory Akindynos (c.1300-1348) and Nikephoros Gregoras opposed Palamas and all suffered ecclesiastical condemnation. Barlaam was a rationalist and a theological agnostic who believed philosophy was the path to wisdom and truth. 'It is only by knowledge of Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Plato that one can attain knowledge of God himself.'⁷⁵ He also argued that Palamas' distinction between God's οὐσία and his uncreated ἐνεργεία by which the created soul was united to God eliminated the distinction between creator and created. Palamas' 'uncreated ἐνεργεία' must, in fact, be created and such ἐνεργεία could not attain God who is beyond all knowing.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Palamas *Triads* II.1.23 ed. Meyendorff pp.272-3. See Meyendorff (1964) 45 and 128-131.

⁷² Palamas *Triads* I.1.17 ed. Meyendorff p.49 .

⁷³ Meyendorff (1964) 43-47.

⁷⁴ See Pacho (1984).

⁷⁵ Migne *P.G.* 151 col. 664B.

⁷⁶ See Meyendorff (1974) V 54-5.

The controversy was significant for the sharp conflict between philosophy and Christian faith. In the second half of the fourteenth century a group of Thomists emerged who opposed the teachings of Palamas.⁷⁷ Demetrios Cydones (c.1324-1397/8) translated Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa contra Gentiles* into Greek. He and like-minded scholars admired Latin Scholasticism and attempted to adapt it to the needs of their own culture. Bessarion was influenced by this movement. He studied Aquinas in Cydones' translations. Among his manuscripts (Marc. Gr. 148) is a copy of Cydones' translation of the *Summa Theologiae* Ia and of the *Contra Gentiles* 1, 2 and 4. There are marginalia in Bessarion's hand including Latin equivalents of Cydones' Greek where sometimes Bessarion corrected Cydones' translation. The manuscript also contains an epitome in Greek of the *Summa Theologiae* Ia IIa as far as q.7 a3 in Bessarion's hand and notes in Latin of differences between Scotus' commentary on the *Sentences* 1 and 2 and Aquinas.⁷⁸ Bessarion, as I shall argue, was heavily influenced by his deep study of Aquinas.

There is evidence of Bessarion's anti-Palamism in a letter which he wrote to Archbishop Andrew Chrysoberges before the Council of Florence. The letter demonstrates the lasting influence of Palamism and the attention which Bessarion had been giving to Aquinas. Bessarion's letter has been lost but Chrysoberges' reply survives.⁷⁹ In it he repeated Bessarion's words: 'The root of our difficulty is the question of divine essence and operation about which Your Reverence knows that in our Church a variety of answers have been put forward, and it was stated and decreed that the divine essence should be held to be distinct from its operation.' But Aquinas did not accept the distinction, so Bessarion

⁷⁷ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (1984 Paris) XII (1) 102-3. Demetrios Cydones taught Plethon, Bessarion's teacher. See Trapp (1983) VI.78-9. For Demetrius' passion for Latin see Tatakis (2003) 222 and Ryder (2010) *passim*.

⁷⁸ See Mioni (1985) I pp.208-10 and Mioni (1991) 61 and 110-1.

⁷⁹ See Candal (1938).

asked questions about Aquinas' arguments. He asked Chrysoberges: 'How can that body of Christians be and be called the catholic and apostolic Church which on the foremost article of the faith has contradicted itself and has patently determined that everyone should express it in the same way? How can such a Church urge and direct in the name of the Author of truth, when it has itself taught falsehood about him? ...There was a time when our church used to say that there was nothing uncreated except only the divinity in three Persons; all its perfections were identical with that. Afterwards, and not very much later...it decreed the opposite and imposed a belief as it were the pillar of faith by declaring that not only the divinity is uncreated but also a host of other divinities.'⁸⁰ Chrysoberges replied in a lengthy letter defending the teaching of Aquinas.⁸¹ It is plain from the context that Bessarion was doubtful about Palamism and those doubts were, at least in part, due to his reading of Aquinas.⁸² Further evidence of Bessarion's anti-Palamism is the tract which he brought with him to the Council: Πρὸς τὰς τοῦ Παλαμᾶ κατὰ τοῦ Βέκκου ἀντιρρήσεις.⁸³ Beccus had been Patriarch from 1275 to 1282 and after studying the Greek Fathers became an advocate of unity between the Greek and Latin Church. Bessarion's tract is a defence of Beccus against Palamas. Bessarion's study of Aquinas also led him to adopt the position of the Latin Church on the question of the *filioque* clause.⁸⁴ Cydones had been led in the same

⁸⁰ Translation Gill (1975) adapted. For Bessarion's words see Candal ed. (1938) 349.

⁸¹ According to Aquinas God's power is his substance: *Deus autem est actus ipse, non autem est ens actu per aliquem actum qui non sit quod est ipse: cum in illo nulla sit potentialitas....In rebus quarum potentiae non sunt earum substantiae, ipsae potentiae sunt accidentia. In Deo autem non potest esse aliquod accidens* (C.G. 2.8). God's potency and his action are one: *Actio alicuius rei est complementum quoddam potentiae eius: comparatur enim ad potentiam sicut actus secundus ad primum. Divina autem potentia non completur alio quam seipso: cum sit ipsa essentia....Actio quae est substantia agentis inest ei sicut accidens subiecto: unde et actio unum inter novem praedicamenta accidentis computatur. In Deo autem non potest esse aliquid per modum accidentis* (C.G. 2.9).

⁸² See Gill ((1975) 377-92) thinks that Bessarion had rejected Palamism at the time of his studies in Mistra. Monfasani (Monfasani (2011b) 31, citing de Halleux (1989), takes a different view. He says: 'When Bessarion arrived in Italy in 1438, he was not only a proponent of the Greek position on the procession of the Holy Spirit, but also of hesychasm.' He later rejected the Palamist distinction between divine essence and energies. See Rigo (2001) 58.

⁸³ In Mohler's view the tract was composed in the period 1437-1439. See Mohler (1922) 213-218 and Gill (1959) 224-5.

⁸⁴The question of the *filioque* clause was a dispute over Trinitarian theology which was a cause of deep division between the Latin and Eastern churches. The Latin Church had added the words *filioque* to the

way to the same view. To this day Bessarion is accused in certain quarters of sacrificing his conscience either to ambition or to expediency in order to save Byzantium from the Turks.⁸⁵

Bessarion's intellectual development must be set in this maelstrom of debate. I have argued that his education and monastic training led him in the direction of the traditions of Psellus and Barlaam. He had learnt to see in Plato a philosophical base for understanding and supporting Christian orthodoxy and he rejected the anti-Hellenist traditions of Greek monasticism. But he also had studied Aristotle and the Scholastics, particularly Aquinas. But his culture was unlike that of the Latin West where there were Universities and scholasticism in the form the use of philosophical method to support theological arguments was the tradition.

His Platonist sympathies must have been strengthened in the 1430s when he went to Mistra in the Morea to study under Gemistus Plethon (c.1355-1452).⁸⁶ Plethon, whose original name was George Gemistus, assumed the name Plethon probably out of admiration for Plato.⁸⁷ He was a controversial figure. He was exiled by the Emperor Manuel for his teaching and settled in Mistra in about 1407 where he taught philosophy,

formula of the Nicene Creed: *et in Spiritum Sanctum, Dominum et vivificantem, qui ex Patre procedit*. The addition was based on an Augustinian view of the equality of persons in the Trinity. It spread from local churches and became standard from the eleventh century in the Latin Church. The addition, without consultation, to a central formulary of the Church was bitterly opposed by the Eastern Church. The dispute was partly a verbal one about the respective senses of *procedere* and ἐκπορεύεσθαι. See Southern (1970) pp.65-7 and MacCulloch (2009) pp.310-11.

⁸⁵ See Gill (1975) 379-80. Gill quotes a 1968 paper by Prof. Tomadakis, chair of Byzantine history, University of Athens: 'Plethon was a real unbeliever and his pupil, Bessarion, dressed in the habit of the Greek clergy, was a humanist and at bottom was no more a believer than his master. He was great as a politician admittedly, an ecclesiastic certainly, but not a true believer. Bessarion is a humanist in the sense that, faced with the choice between faith and learning, he chose the philosophy of the Greeks'. Gill also quotes a statement by the Archimandrite Parthenius: '[Bessarion] is the symbol of the patriot who for the sake of his country denies everything, even his faith'.

⁸⁶ See Capranica in Mohler (1942) 406. For Bessarion's sojourn in Mistra see Mioni (1991) 47-56. Mohler ((1923) 45) puts the dates of Bessarion's sojourn at Mistra as 1431-6.

⁸⁷ Woodhouse (1986) 186-8.

astronomy and other subjects.⁸⁸ Two questions need to be disentangled. The first is the extent of Plethon's reputed heterodoxy and the second is his influence on Bessarion. I shall argue that Plethon was a major influence on how Bessarion understood Plato but that Bessarion was not affected, at least to any significant degree, by Plethon's more heterodox teachings.

Plethon had been an ardent Platonist from his youth; he preferred the study of Greek philosophy to Christianity. His interpretation of Plato was based on Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus.⁸⁹ Scholarios told the Exarch Joseph in a letter that under the tuition of Elissaeus, a polytheistic Jew, Plethon had drawn on a range of legendary figures starting with Zoroaster and then from Pythagoras, Plato, Plutarch, Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus. He said that Plethon disguised his debt to Proclus but anybody who knew the writings of Proclus would know that he was the chief source of Plethon's writings.⁹⁰ Plethon believed that Plato derived his philosophy from Zoroaster through the Pythagoreans.⁹¹ He edited the Chaldaean oracles, which he attributed to Zoroaster and wrote a *Commentary on the Magian texts of Zoroaster*.⁹² In the commentary he claimed that the doctrines of the oracles were common to the Zoroastrians, Pythagoreans, Platonists

⁸⁸ Scholarius Petit et al. edd. I.152-3 and 162, Masai (1956) 55-60, Woodhouse (1986) 24-9, Burns ed. (1988) 76-8.

⁸⁹ See Scholarius' *Letter to the Princess of the Peloponnese* Petit et al. edd. IV.152-3. Scholarius was hostile to Plethon but also admired him. He said that if Plethon had any skill in philosophy, it was not for the discovery of truth but he was the slave of prejudice (*ibid.* IV.152.23-4) and that he was unable to judge between truth and falsehood (*Against the Atheists and Polytheists* ed. Petit et al. IV.180.27-8) but he addressed Plethon in a letter as 'the best and wisest of friends' (*ibid.* 118).

⁹⁰ Scholarius *Letter to the Exarch Joseph* Petit et al. edd. IV.162. Bessarion in a letter to Plethon (Mohler (1942) 455-8) added Hermias, Damascius, Syrianus, Ammonius and Olympiodorus.

⁹¹ παραδίδωσι μὲν οὖν καὶ Πλάτων ὑπομνήματα ἅττα ἀρχῶν μόνον καὶ λογικῆς καὶ φυσικῆς καὶ ἠθικῆς καὶ θεολογίας, ἐφιλοσόφησέ τε οὐκ ἰδίαν ἑαυτοῦ σοφίαν τεμῶν, ἀλλὰ τὴν τῶν ἀπὸ Ζωροάστρου διὰ Πυθαγορείων ἐς ἑαυτὸν κατεληλυθυῖαν (*Contra Scholarii objectiones* 5.3 ed. Maltese p.4.30-4). Trebizond in *Comparatio* had a counter genealogy. He traced a trajectory of Greek decadence from Plato through Epicurus and Mohammed to Plethon and an unnamed 'fourth Plato'. See page 33 and note [129129](#) below.

⁹² Opsopoeus J. ed. (1599) *Oracula magica Zoroastris cum scholiis Plethonis et Pselli nunc primi edita* (Paris) 24-51. See Woodhouse (1986) 48-50 and 54-59 for a summary of Plethon's commentary.

and many others.⁹³ He seems to have been the first to attribute the oracles to Zoroaster; in doing so he distanced Plato from contamination by Hebrew sources by avoiding any suggestion that Moses or Jeremiah or the Hebrew prophets played a part in the tradition as the Greek Fathers had suggested.⁹⁴

Plethon's interest in the Chaldaean oracles was in the tradition of Psellus in the eleventh century and of Metochites and Gregoras in the fourteenth century.⁹⁵ Psellus in his allegorical treatises made Zeus the symbol of reason; in a similar way Plethon saw him as the transcendent deity whose thought generated the universe.⁹⁶ Plethon's admiration for Plato contrasted with his criticism of Aristotle. In his funeral speech celebrating Plethon his disciple Hieronymos Charitonos said that Plethon exposed Aristotle's philosophy, which some had praised as divine, as 'παιδιάν'.⁹⁷ Plethon said that although Aristotle had learnt from Plato's own mouth he misrepresented him.⁹⁸ Plato was closer to Christianity than Aristotle who was even 'inclined to atheism'.⁹⁹ He accused Aristotle of being either polemical or a sophist in covering up his use of arguments drawn from other philosophers.¹⁰⁰ In his writings he maintained a strict separation between philosophy and Christian theology.¹⁰¹ It was his contention that Aristotelianism and Christianity were not

⁹³ Opsopoeus (1599) 50-1 and Woodhouse (1986) 58.

⁹⁴ Plethon's theory was subsequently taken up and elaborated by Ficino into his theory of *prisca theologia*.

⁹⁵ See Woodhouse (1986) 50.

⁹⁶ See Tatakis (2003) 160-1 and Woodhouse (1986) 70.

⁹⁷ *Encomium Plethonis* Migne P.G. 160 col. 808A.

⁹⁸ *Contra Scholarii objectiones* 5.5 ed. Maltese p.5.19-20.

⁹⁹ Καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης θεοὺς μὲν τινὰς τῶδε τῷ οὐρανῷ ἐφίστησιν, ἐν μέντοι τῶν λόγων αὐτοῦ τοῖς πλείστοις οὐ πᾶν τοι τῷ θεῖῳ χρώμενος φαίνεται, ἀλλ' ἐς ἀθεότητα μᾶλλον καθ' ὅσον οἷος τέ ἐστιν ἀποκλίνων. ἀλλ' οὐχὶ Πλάτων οὕτω (*De differentiis* ed. Lagarde p.332.14-18). Plethon did not explain why he made the charge of atheism, but see *De differentiis* ed. Lagarde p. 321.25-p.322.4 where he said that Aristotle nowhere claimed God to be creator. He only made God the end of movement and change and not of existence or essence. See also Plethon *Contra Scholarii objectiones* 4.5 ed. Maltese p.3.25-p.4 3. Scholarius took the opposite view about Aristotle (see Γεωργίου τοῦ Σχολαρίου κατὰ τῶν Πλήθωνος ἀποριῶν ἐπ' Ἀριστοτέλει ed. Petit IV.4.34-5).

¹⁰⁰ *De differentiis* ed. Lagarde p.342.36-40.

¹⁰¹ See Kristeller (1972) 86-109.

compatible; in this he ran counter to the accepted wisdom of the Greek and Latin churches.¹⁰²

The record of Bessarion's studies in Mistra is sparse.¹⁰³ Capranica said that he made a particular study of mathematics.¹⁰⁴ This would have included astronomy and geography. It would also have included Pythagorean number mysticism, Plato's cosmological geometry and Neo-Platonic arithmetic, which related the physical world to the Platonic forms.¹⁰⁵ Despite the lack of concrete information about this period in Bessarion's life it is possible to detect Plethon's influence in his later work. Plethon probably introduced Bessarion to the Neo-Platonist commentators on Plato, especially Proclus. In a letter to Plethon he used the language of the Eleusinian mysteries and addressed Plethon as 'the only guide and initiate to the Platonic mysteries' which suggests that he was introduced to Plato or Platonism by Plethon.¹⁰⁶ This is confirmed by a letter to Nicholas Secundinos, a friend of both Plethon and Bessarion, in which Bessarion alluded to the broad scope of Plethon's mathematical teaching as well as the theology of Plato and, presumably, the Neo-Platonists.¹⁰⁷ The significance of the Neo-Platonists for Bessarion was that they interpreted

¹⁰² See Woodhouse (1986) 68.

¹⁰³ Mioni (1991.52-4) cannot attribute any of Bessarion's manuscripts with certainty to this period except some leaves of Marc. Gr. 523. It is a collection of opuscula brought together by Bessarion after 1469. It contains passages of Simplicius, Synesius, Cyril of Alexandria, Plutarch and a translation into Greek by Bessarion of Peter Lombard on the *Sentences* 1.1-23. Mioni considers that with the exception of Cyril these works were copied while Bessarion was at Mistra. The philosophical interest is in Neo-Platonic commentators but also Scholastic philosophy.

¹⁰⁴ Mohler (1942) 406-7.

¹⁰⁵ See Woodhouse (1986) 33 and Bessarion's letter to Secundinos (Mohler (1942) 470) quoted in note ~~107~~ below.

¹⁰⁶ σὸν ἂν εἶη, σοφώτατ' ἀνδρῶν, τοῦ μόνου τανῦν τῆς Πλατωνικῆς ἐποπτείας μυσταγωγοῦ τε καὶ μύστου, ἰκανῶς διαλύσασθαι καὶ τινα περὶ τούτων ἡμῖν ἐκθεῖναι διδασκαλίαν, ὡς ἔμοιγε σφόδρα προσίσταται (Mohler (1942) 456-7).

¹⁰⁷ ἀνὴρ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος [Plethon] φιλοσοφίας τῶ ὄντι καὶ παντοδαπῆς σοφίας εἰκὼν γέγονεν, οὐ τῆς ἐν λόγοις μόνον, καὶ ὅση περὶ τὴν τῶν ἄστρον φορὰν καὶ τοὺς ἀρμονικοὺς λόγους, τάς τε γεωμετρικὰς ἀναλογίας καὶ ἀριθμητικὰς μεσότητας καταγίνεται, οὐδ' ὅση μόνον Πλατωνικὴ τε καὶ τῶν τὰ θεῖα ἐρευνησαμένων ἐκείνων ἀνδρῶν, ὅση τε περὶ τὴν τῶν φυσικῶν ἔρευναν καὶ τὰς τούτων αἰτίας τε καὶ ἀρχὰς τὴν πραγματείαν ποιεῖται...ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅση περὶ πρᾶξις σχολάζουσα, τὰ ἦθη καὶ τοὺς τρόπους ἐκάστου κοσμεῖ (Mohler (1942) 470).

Plato as a theologian rather than an Aristotelian logician.¹⁰⁸ In his *Oratio Dogmatica* of 1439 Bessarion argued that the theological differences between Greeks and Latins were not real but, as with apparent contradictions in scripture, due to a failure of understanding (ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς ἔδει μᾶλλον προσάπτειν ἀγνοίας αἰτίαν ἢ διαφωνίαν ἐκείνοις).¹⁰⁹ The *Oratio* was addressed to the Eastern Synod and argued the case for union with the Latins. The argument was mainly based on an exegetical analysis of the Greek Fathers but Bessarion used a Neo-Platonic epistemology. The Neo-Platonists held the fundamental unity of philosophy; the diversity was only superficial.¹¹⁰ They argued that contradictions between Plato and Aristotle were the results of uncritical focus on the letter and not the real spirit of the texts.¹¹¹ Bessarion used a similar argument in *ICP* where he said that Aristotle's critique of Parmenides and Melissus was based on a superficial interpretation of their words rather than the underlying meaning.¹¹² Bessarion learnt to interpret Plato allegorically in the same way as the Fathers had interpreted scripture.

The Neo-Platonists saw the *Parmenides* as the peak of Plato's theology. Plethon advised Bessarion to study the *Parmenides* on the grounds that he would find there Plato's doctrine of the highest cause and the meaning of the term 'participation'. Bessarion Christianised this interpretation as is clear in *ICP* (*ICP* 2.4) where he deals with the *Parmenides* (see pages 115-120- below).¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ This is clear in Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.1-12.

¹⁰⁹ For the text of the *Oratio Dogmatica* see Migne *P.G.* 160 cols. 543-614.

¹¹⁰ Tatakis (2003) 159-60.

¹¹¹ See Simplicius *In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium* 6.7-18 and 7.23-32 and *In Aristotelis De caelo Commentaria* 454.23-4 and 640.27-32, Philoponus *In Aristotelis de Anima Libros* 10.8-12.12, Olympiodorus *In Aristotelis Meteora Commentaria* 7.21-30 and *Prolegomena et in Categorias Commentarium* 4.3-15.

¹¹² *ICP* 2.11.2.

¹¹³ Ὑπὲρ δὲ τοῦ μεθεκτοῦ ὡς πλεοναχῆ λέγεται τὸ μεθεκτὸν, ἀνάγνωθι τὸν Πλάτωνος μὲν Παρμενίδην· εὐρήσεις γὰρ ἐκεῖ ἀμφοτέρας τὰς μεθεξέεις ἐν τῇ τῶν τῆδε πρὸς τὰ νοητὰ εἶδη κοινωνία, καὶ τὴν μὲν, ὡς μάλιστα ἀποδοκιμαζομένην, τὴν δ' ὡς ἥκιστα, τὴν κατ' αἰτίαν διὲν οἷς φησι, τὰ μὲν εἶδη ταῦτα ὡσπερ παραδείγματα ἐστάναι ἐν τῇ φύσει, τὰ δ' ἄλλα τούτοις εὐοικένας καὶ εἶναι ὁμοιώματα (Migne *P.G.* 161 col.721C). See Klibansky (1981) 311.

Plethon was undoubtedly controversial. Scholarios is not a reliable witness because he was so prejudiced by his rabid anti-Platonism but he made plain his suspicion of the heterodox sources of Plethon's doctrines, namely his teacher the Jew Elissaeus, Zoroaster, Averroes and Proclus.¹¹⁴ The Chaldaean oracles would have been included in Scholarios' charge sheet because Plethon attributed the oracles to Zoroaster. Plethon's Platonism was thought to be at least tinged with paganism. His *Commentary on the Laws* was his most controversial work and source of his perceived heretical views. We have only fragments of this posthumous work. After Plethon's death the manuscript came into the hands of Theodora, wife of Demetrios Palaiologos, Despot of Morea, who gave it to Scholarios, by this time Patriarch of Constantinople. He had it publicly burnt as heretical. The suspicion is that the surviving fragments were saved as anti-Plethonian propaganda.¹¹⁵ In this commentary Plethon advocated the restoration of the ancient pattern of Hellenic government based on Plato's *Republic* and a deist religion. He spoke of the Olympian gods 'who are everything in Nature that is greater and more blessed than human nature.....Supreme among them is Zeus'.¹¹⁶ He set out prayers to Zeus and the other gods and precise instructions for the daily round of a liturgy.¹¹⁷ This at least gives rise to the suspicion that he was advocating the replacement of Christian theology with some kind of Hellenic pagan religion.¹¹⁸ In his work *Comparatio phylosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis* (hereafter *Comparatio*) Trebizond recounted a conversation which he claimed to have had with Plethon during the Council of Florence.¹¹⁹ During this conversation Plethon had predicted that the distinction between Christ and Muhammed would disappear to be

¹¹⁴ See Scholarius' *Letter to the Princess of the Peloponnese* Petit et al. edd. IV.152-3. See also Scholarius' *letter to the Exarch Joseph* *ibid* IV.162.

¹¹⁵ For the text see Alexandre, C. ed. (1858) *Pléthon: Traité des Lois* (Paris) reproduced 1966 (Amsterdam) and an English translation in Woodhouse (1986) 322-356. See also Monfasani (1992) 49-52.

¹¹⁶ See Woodhouse (1986) 329.

¹¹⁷ See Woodhouse (1986) 345-342, Alexandre (1858) 168-240.

¹¹⁸ See Siniosoglou (2011) 18.

¹¹⁹ For details of *Comparatio* see page 56-7 and n.~~221~~²²⁴ below.

replaced by paganism, *non a gentilitate differentem*.¹²⁰ But it is hard to believe that Plethon would have been included as a member of the Greek delegation to the Council or to have written on the *filioque* clause if he had been a professed pagan. Plethon's commentary is a late work and it is difficult to tell to what extent it represented the teaching of Plethon at Mistra in the time of Bessarion. Whatever the truth, Trebizond, Scholarios and others believed Plethon was a pagan. To Scholarios he was a heresiarch.¹²¹ He believed that Plethon followed the philosophy of Proclus and Proclus was a pagan. That, in Scholarios' estimation, made Plethon a pagan.¹²²

Scholars differ about Plethon's heterodoxy. Many agree with Trebizond and Scholarios.¹²³ According to Woodhouse he 'was not a Christian Neo-Platonist, as Pseudo-Dionysius had been, but a reactionary anti-Christian Neo-Platonist, as much a pagan at heart as Proclus. He did not wish to reconcile Christianity and Neo-Platonism but to abolish Christianity and replace it by Neo-Platonism.'¹²⁴ Hankins concludes: 'His true position would seem to be analogous to those syncretistic ancient pagans or early modern Deists who were willing to accept the "wisdom of Christianity" so long as they were not obliged to give up other forms of religious wisdom, not subjected to the moral and doctrinal tyranny of the clergy.'¹²⁵ For Siniosoglou: 'Plethon was a pagan in so far as the existential position resulting from maintaining [his] doctrines was radically incompatible with Christian Orthodoxy as understood from late antiquity until his time.'¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Quoted in Manfasani (1976) 39 n.46.

¹²¹ See *Letter to the Exarch Joseph* ed. Petit IV.159-60. Scholarios' suspicion of Plato (and Platonism) as the father of heresy placed him in a long line of previous thinkers like Epiphanius and Photios. See Siniosoglou (2011) 16-17.

¹²² See Woodhouse (1986) 73.

¹²³ See Alexandre (1858) ii-iii, li-liii, Mohler (1923) 349, Masai (1956) 306-14, Garin (1958) 153-219 and Anastos (1948).

¹²⁴ Woodhouse (1986) 78.

¹²⁵ Hankins (1990a) 204.

¹²⁶ Siniosoglou (2011) 18.

The question remains about the extent of the influence that Plethon had on Bessarion. Did he become a crypto-pagan as Professor Tomadakis claimed (see note [8585](#) above)?

Sinioossoglou puts Bessarion into the unorthodox camp when he writes: ‘One of the common characteristics shared by almost all major Byzantine dissenters from Psellos and Theodore Metochites to Gregoras, Plethon and Bessarion, is their sympathy for Plato. Byzantine humanists were Hellenes, not because they revived the religion of the ancients, but because they deviated from Orthodoxy by experimenting in varying degrees with “pagan” philosophy and especially Platonism.’¹²⁷ There is some contemporary evidence for such a reading. Trebizond in his *Comparatio* described Plethon as ‘the apostle of a revived paganism’ and the third Plato, who will corrupt Latin Christianity. He then added darkly that if the spread of Plethon’s ideas was not checked ‘a fourth Plato will come and overpass all previous “Platos” in spreading the creed of *voluptas*’.¹²⁸ Trebizond’s Platos are Plato himself, Mohammed, Plethon and the ‘fourth Plato’ is thought to be a covert reference to Bessarion.¹²⁹ In the opening chapter of *Comparatio* Trebizond wrote that those who had been brought up in the Greek East had been seduced by Plato’s *lenocinium verborum*. This was a veiled attack on Bessarion and his circle.¹³⁰

The differences between scholars about Plethon are to an extent influenced by their cultural background like the views of Professor Tomadakis on Bessarion. Two questions need to be distinguished: (a) the extent of Plethon’s heterodoxy, and (b) the extent of his influence on

¹²⁷ Sinioossoglou (2011) 26.

¹²⁸ Translation Monfasani (1976) 158-9.

¹²⁹ See Hankins (1976) 159 and Garin (1973). Trebizond considered Epicurean hedonism a continuation of Platonic *voluptas*. Mohammed had imbued his Platonist hedonism from a Syrian monk whom he encountered in Ethiopia. See Hankins *loc. cit.* pp.158-9 nn.119 and 121.

¹³⁰ Trebizond had developed a personal enmity for Bessarion. In 1452, in response to a request from Pope Nicholas V, Trebizond had produced a translation of and commentary on Ptolemy’s *Almagest*. The Pope had asked the Augustinian canon and scholar, Jacobus Cremonensis, to review the work and had received several pages of vigorous criticism of it. It is probable that Bessarion had supported Cremonensis’ criticisms. Trebizond lost favour with the Pope as a result of this incident and it poisoned his relations with Bessarion. See Monfasani (1976) 105-8 and Hankins (1990a) 210-11.

Bessarion. The atheist Masai (1956) holds that Plethon and his disciple Bessarion were crypto-pagans joined in a conspiracy to spread Platonic paganism from Mistra to Italy. Masai's evidence for a secret sect (two letters from John Argyropoulos to Apostoles) is thin (see Monfasani (1976) p.160 n.124). Kristeller (1959) in a review of Masai's work expresses scepticism about the case for Plethon's paganism. He points out that Masai makes much use of innuendo and the charges of Plethon's opponents and dismisses contrary evidence as hypocrisy. The fragments of the Plethon's *Laws* preserved by Scholarios may well not have presented the full picture of the rest of the work.

Sinossioglou (2011) follows Masai in arguing the existence of a secret tradition of Byzantine paganism lasting for centuries. He believes that Plethon 'was a pagan in so far as the existential position resulting from maintaining [his] doctrines was radically incompatible with Christian Orthodoxy as understood from late antiquity until his time (p.18).' He tars Bessarion with the same brush of paganism as Plethon (see Siniosoglou (p.26). Woodhouse, while accepting that Plethon is hard to categorise, leans towards attributing a carefully disguised paganism to Plethon on the basis of the fragments of his *Laws* (Woodhouse (1986) 378-9).

Kristeller (1972, 97-8) argues that Plethon maintained strict separation of philosophy and Christian theology and never tried to harmonise them. 'The part Plethon took in the Council of Florence, his theological opposition to the Union of the Greek and Latin Churches, and, finally, the unqualified admiration shown for Plethon by his pupil, Cardinal Bessarion, tend to cast some doubt on the paganism of Plethon.'

A more recent work on Plethon's position is Hladký (2014). He comments: 'There is not much difference between an intellectual pagan who culturally, socially or nationally

affiliates himself with an Orthodox stand and a Byzantine Christian who has a big interest in ancient culture, religion and philosophy which is his main professional subject (p.272).’ He suggests that Plethon’s *Laws* need not be read as an expression of Plethon’s personal views but a reworking of Platonic themes within a Platonic and Neo-Platonic non-Christian idiom. He quotes the examples of Cyriac of Ancona and the Renaissance humanists who wrote in a polytheistic idiom although he accepts that Plethon pushed the boundaries further than any other examples.

The difficulty is that the evidence regarding Plethon is ambiguous. His *Laws* remain a problem. It has led Mamalakis to suggest that he experienced some kind of pagan conversion following the Council of Florence which is surely a not very compelling *deus ex machina* to explain the problem (Mamalakis (1939) 176). Kristeller’s arguments about Plethon referred to above are powerful. Plethon’s personal beliefs remain a puzzle but the most likely explanation of his position is that was a Christian of unusual views who syncretised different traditions.

Bessarion, on the other hand, was a devout Christian who had imbibed a Platonic and Neo-Platonic idiom. The argument is bedevilled by a tendency to stick labels on Plethon and Bessarion which presuppose the clear distinctions of a later age when in the Renaissance the distinctions were more porous. Sinossioglou’s sharp distinction between Hellenism and Christianity is overstated. It is difficult to believe that Bessarion’s piety and his position at the Council of Florence and subsequently in the Catholic Church was anything else than that of a committed and devout Christian. He was close to Plethon whom he admired. But no doubt at a time when an overt relationship with Plethon may have been a cause for

suspicion Bessarion, who was *papaibile*, had to step warily in the intellectual politics of Rome.

It seems clear that Bessarion was influenced by Plethon and held him in respect for the rest of his life. Demetrius Kabakes, a student of Plethon, recorded a conversation with Bessarion in which Bessarion said of Plethon that there had been no wiser man in Greece since the time of Plotinus.¹³¹ Plethon gave his autograph copy of his work *De differentiis*, now lodged in the Marciana Library, to Bessarion.¹³² In another manuscript containing a collection of excerpts from various authors made by Plethon, Bessarion wrote αὐτόχειρ καὶ τὸ πᾶν γέγραφεν ὁ μέγιστος κατὰ σοφίαν.¹³³ Bessarion wrote a laudatory letter of condolence to Plethon's sons after his death. He referred to him as 'our common father and master'. The letter is written in the style of Plethon's mythology and contained two epitaphs suggestive of classical apotheosis. In the letter Bessarion imagined, in the language of Plato's *Timaeus*, that Plethon was the reincarnation of the soul of Plato: ὥστε εἴ τις τὸν περὶ τῆς ἐντακτικῆς περιόδου, τῶν γε ψυχῶν ἀνόδου τε καὶ καθόδου, Πυθαγορείων τε καὶ τοῦ Πλάτωνος ἀπεδέχετο λόγον, οὐκ ἂν ὄκνησε καὶ τοῦτο προσθεῖναι, ὡς ἄρα Πλάτωνος τὴν ψυχὴν, τοῖς τῆς ἀδραστείας ἀρρήκτοις θεσμοῖς δεῖσαν δουλεῦσαι καὶ τὴν ἀναγκαίαν ἀποδοῦναι περίοδον, ἐπὶ γῆς κατιοῦσαν τὸ Γεμιστοῦ σκῆνος καὶ τὸν σὺν ἐκείνῳ βίον ἐλέσθαι· ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν, ὅπερ ἔφην, ἀγάλλομαι κάμοί τι προσήκειν δόξαν οἰόμενος. The letter with its suggestion of reincarnation and Platonic determinism has led some historians like Masai to suspect Bessarion of being a crypto-pagan but it seems more likely, as Wind

¹³¹ Quoted in Masai (1956) 385-6. See Woodhouse (1986) 34.

¹³² Marc. Gr. 517 ff. 13-28. See Diller (1956) 29 and 39-40. For *De differentiis* see page 49-50 and n. [187187](#) below.

¹³³ Marc. Gr. 406. See Mioni (1985) vol 2 157.

has suggested, that Bessarion was using a Neo-Platonic idiom and his words need to be interpreted figuratively.¹³⁴

On the other hand Bessarion hardly referred to Plethon at all after his death in 1452 and after the letter which he wrote to his sons. He only referred to him once in *ICP* and made no attempt to defend him against the charges brought against him by Trebizond in *Comparatio*.¹³⁵ Monfasani argues in an as yet unpublished conference paper of 2014 that Bessarion's reticence is a mark of his loyalty. He saw Plethon as a pagan and rejected many of his views. Although he had in his library almost all of Plethon's works, he did not have his overtly pagan work on the *Laws*. Monfasani's view is that 'Bessarion put Plethon into a special category of pagan sages' and in doing so exempted his revered teacher, although a pagan, from public criticism. His silence was loyal discretion. The argument rests on the tacit acceptance that Bessarion had to be careful about any perceived association with Plethon.

Despite the lack of clear evidence and the differences between Plethon and Bessarion in their interpretation of Plato and Aristotle the years studying with Plethon cannot have failed to influence Bessarion's attraction to Plato and Neo-Platonism, but there is little evidence of this in Bessarion's writings. He may have been influenced by Plethon's belief that the reintroduction of Plato's *Laws* into Greece would revive ancient virtues and have the greatest effect in defeating the Turk. Bessarion countered Trebizond's idea that Plato's

¹³⁴ The letter and epitaphs are printed in Mohler (1942) 468-9. See Wind (1967) 256-8. Masai (1956) 306-14 believes that the letter is evidence of Bessarion's membership of a secret neo-pagan sect. He argues that the style of the letter indicates sympathy with Plethon's pagan ideas. Bessarion's letter is an echo of Plethon's nightly pagan rituals and is evidence of Bessarion's intimate knowledge of Plethon's '*secte*'. Masai's whole argument is that Bessarion and his set, in contrast to Scholarius and Trebizond, were over-sympathetic to the 'hellenic' paganism of Plethon. '*A la vérité Bessarion, comme son collègue Nicolas de Cues et bien d'autres de leur génération, voulurent plutôt de concilier les traditions helléniques et chrétiennes* (Masai (1956) 312 n.1).'

¹³⁵ *ICP* 3.11.10 p.273.16.

teachings were responsible for the fall of the Byzantine Empire by arguing that the Greeks would have been saved if they had observed the ancient precepts and practices which had been taught by Plato.¹³⁶ But he took a radically different view from Plethon of Aristotle, whom he presented as Plato's pupil and conforming to Plato's philosophy; he had no difficulty with using philosophy as a tool of theology and ignored any suggestion of a Zoroastrian origin for Plato's thought.¹³⁷ He rejected Plato's determinism. But he almost certainly owed to Plethon his knowledge of and interest in the Neo-Platonists.

The reception of Plato in Italy and Northern Europe in the mid-fifteenth century

The Council of Florence in 1439 can be seen as a defining moment in the meeting of the cultures of the Greek East and the Latin West. Their different perspectives on the inheritance of Plato and Aristotle are the backdrop to Bessarion's *ICP*. In the following paragraphs I shall explore the environment in Italy at the time for the reception of Plato and Bessarion's *ICP*.

Bessarion returned repeatedly to the ignorance of Plato among the Latins. At the beginning of *ICP* he said that the Latins: *aut Platonis opera non habent, aut si qua habent in linguam Latinam conversa, perraro ea legere consueverunt.*¹³⁸ There was little direct knowledge of the Platonic dialogues and the Neo-Platonist commentators among the Latins at the beginning of the fifteenth century; there was suspicion of Plato among many; there was,

¹³⁶ *ICP* 4.15 (*ICP* 4.16 in the Greek text). See Hankins (1990a) 218-20 and n.136. A difficulty with this possible link with Plethon is that Bessarion does not seem to have had a copy of Plethon's *Laws* and may never have read it. But this would not have prevented him being aware of Plethon's thesis through other channels.

¹³⁷ Bessarion referred to the Chaldaeans twice in *ICP*. In *ICP* 2.8.18 (p.157.33-8) he cited the *Chaldaei* along with the Pythagoreans, Jews, the prophets and the Christian Fathers who used stories, analogies or symbols to talk about divine matters. In *ICP* 2.10.4 (p.185.9-12) he said that the Chaldaeans and Egyptians thought that fate was dictated by the disposition of the stars.

¹³⁸ *ICP* 1.1.5 p.9 21-3.

however, an indirect stream of Platonic thought going back to the time of Cicero. Plato's *Timaeus* exercised a particular influence among the Latins. Bessarion perhaps acknowledged this hidden stream in *ICP* when he wrote about the way in which earlier knowledge of Plato had been neglected with the passage of time: *Haec enim etsi Graecis hominibus cognita atque explorata sunt, a Latinis tamen nostrae aetatis ignorantur. Nam licet maiores eorum, tam exteri quam ecclesiae doctores, Platonem ceteris omnibus in quovis doctrinae genere longe praeferendum anteponendumque censuerint, obscuravit haec nihilo minus seu vetustas seu incuria et negligentia hominum, ita ut in paucissimorum notitiam venerint.*¹³⁹

In his 1397 work *Commentarius rerum suo tempore gestarum* the Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni (c.1370-1444) wrote: 'For seven hundred years now no one in Italy has been able to read Greek'.¹⁴⁰ Even allowing for hyperbole this suggests little knowledge of Greek literature. Such knowledge as there was came from Latin translations. At the beginning of the fifteenth century only the *Phaedo* and *Meno* of Plato's dialogues were available in Latin translation. There were also partial translations of the *Timaeus* and of the *Parmenides*. Henricus Aristippus had translated the *Phaedo* and *Meno* in the twelfth century.¹⁴¹ Cicero had translated the *Timaeus* as far as 47b and his translation was used by Augustine.¹⁴² Chalcidius translated the *Timaeus* as far as 53c and wrote a hugely influential commentary in the fourth century.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ *ICP* 1.1.5 p.9 28-33.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Hankins (1990a) 29.

¹⁴¹ Kordeuter, V. and Labowsky, C. edd. (1940) *Meno interprete Henrico Aristippo* (London). Minio-Palluelo, L. ed. (1950) *Phaedo interprete Henrico Aristippo* (London).

¹⁴² See Gersh ed. (2002) 5. Trebizond quoted from the translation in his *Adversus Theodorum Gazam in Perversionem Problematum Aristotelis* (Mohler (1942) 333 28). He referred to the *Timaeus* as *liber de caelo et mundo*.

¹⁴³ Waszink, J.H. ed. (1962) *Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus* (London and Leiden). From the period 1120 to 1240 about thirty-five copies of Chalcidius' *Timaeus* translation survive with substantial glosses. There are more glossed manuscripts of the *Timaeus* from the twelfth century than of any single work of Aristotle. Aquinas had access to Chalcidius' text and referred to the *Timaeus* in *S.T. Ia*

The Neo-Platonist commentators on Plato were also little known. William of Moerbeke in the thirteenth century had translated Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides*.¹⁴⁴ He included a translation of the text of the *Parmenides* up to the end of the first hypothesis (142a). A complete translation of the *Parmenides* was not available until Trebizond's version in 1459. The fact that only the first hypothesis was available for so long coloured the interpretation of the text. This can be seen from the annotation on the title page of a copy of William's work by an English scholar in the fourteenth century: *mystica theoria Platonis in Parmenide*.¹⁴⁵ Moerbeke also translated Proclus' *Elementatio Theologica*.¹⁴⁶ Aquinas had a copy of Moerbeke's translation of Proclus' *Elementatio Theologica* and wrote a commentary on the *Liber de Causis* as did Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon. It was also known to Nicholas of Cusa.¹⁴⁷ Kristeller points out that until the twelfth century Platonic ideas were rather better known in Italy than Aristotle.¹⁴⁸

q47 a3 ad1 (*Timaeus* 31a), Ia q66 a2 (*Timaeus* 41a) and Ia IIae q105 a1 (*Timaeus* 29a and 29e). But after 1240 serious study of the *Timaeus* seems to have waned until the 1360s. Over a dozen surviving early Renaissance manuscripts contain notes and glosses including some by Petrarch. See Hankins (2003-4) II 29. Hankins demonstrates the widespread availability and interest in Chalcidius' translation among scholars in the fifteenth century (*ibid* 93-136). See Dutton (2002) for evidence of waning interest in Chalcidius' commentary as opposed to the translation and preface from the twelfth century. Bessarion possessed a fourteenth century commentary (Marc Ms. Lat. 469) with some glosses. For the importance of Chalcidius' work in the transmission of Plato see Mensching (1965).

¹⁴⁴ Kiblansky, R. and Labowsky, C. edd. (1953) *Parmenides nec non Procli Commentarium in Parmenidem* (London). For medieval translations and the availability of Proclus see Kristeller (1996) 115-37.

¹⁴⁵ Ms. Oxford Bodleian Digby 236 fol. 1 r. quoted in Klibansky (1981) 4.

¹⁴⁶ See Dodds ed. (1963) xlii-xliii.

¹⁴⁷ Saffrey, H. D. ed. (1954) *Sancti Thomae de Aquino super Librum de Causis Expositio* (Freiburg and Louvain). The *Liber de causis* was translated into Latin from Arabic by Gerhard of Cremona between 1167 and 1187. It was attributed to Aristotle and was widely referred to by theologians. There are more than one hundred manuscripts, mostly from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Aquinas recognised that the *Liber de Causis* was a translation from Arabic of excerpts from Proclus' *Elementatio Theologica*. He wrote in the proemium of his commentary: *Et in greco quidem invenitur sic traditus liber Procli Platonici, continens cxxi propositiones qui intitulatur Elementatio theologica; in arabico vero invenitur hic liber qui apud Latinos De causis dicitur, quem constat de arabico esse translatum et in graeco penitus non haberi; unde videtur ab aliquo philosophorum Arabum ex praedicto libro Proculi excerptus, praesertim quia omnia quae in hoc libro continentur, multo plenius et diffusius continentur in illo (Liber de causis 1 ed. Saffrey)*. William of Moerbeke translated the text of Proclus *Elementatio theologica* into literal Latin in 1268. See Saffrey ed. (1954) xv-xxv and Dodds ed. (1963) xxxi-xxxii who says that this translation and others 'played a decisive part in shaping the later medieval notion of "Platonism"'.
¹⁴⁸ Kristeller (1972) 89-90.

Apart from translations by Moerbeke references to the Neo-Platonists are few in Latin authors after Augustine. As well as the *Platonicorum libros ex graeca lingua in latinam versos* and *quosdam libros Platonicorum, quos Victorinus quondam in latinam linguam transtulisset* which were so influential in his conversion Augustine cited Plotinus and Porphyry and even made a detailed comparison of the two on the first three principles of the purification of the soul.¹⁴⁹ But by the fifteenth century the stream of Platonism had been submerged under the currents of Aristotelian Scholasticism.

Interest in Plato was stimulated after Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) translated Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* into Latin in 1430.¹⁵⁰ It was the first comprehensive summary of Platonic philosophy in the West.¹⁵¹ Translations into Latin of more Platonic dialogues had begun to become available from the end of the fourteenth century. These translations were an important way of transmitting Greek culture at a time when few Italians could read Greek. The humanist Chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), encouraged Leonardo Bruni to translate Plato's dialogues into Latin. But the first of Bruni's translations from Greek into Latin in 1403 was Basil's *de Studiis Secularibus*. It was written by Basil for his nephews to encourage them in the study of pagan Greek literature. Salutati wanted to use the authority of Basil to legitimise the study of pagan literature.¹⁵² In the preface of his translation Bruni said that his purpose was to invoke the authority of a Father of the Church against those who reject humanistic studies. Bruni translated the *Phaedo* (1405), *Gorgias* (1409), *Apology* (1424-7), *Crito* (1424-7) and

¹⁴⁹ *Confessions* VII.9 and VIII.2 and *C. D.* X.23.

¹⁵⁰ See Schmitt (1976) 93 and Lackner (2002) 18.

¹⁵¹ For Ambrogio Traversari and his influence in the spread and understanding of Platonism see Lackner (2002).

¹⁵² The text is printed in Wilson, N.G. ed. (1975) *St Basil on the value of Greek Literature* (London) and see Botley (2004) 7.

Phaedrus (1424).¹⁵³ His reasons for fixing on the *Phaedo* and *Gorgias* throw light on the climate for the reception of Plato. In dedicating the translation of the *Gorgias* to the anti-pope John XXIII he carefully emphasised Plato's conformity with Christianity against critics like Cardinal Dominici (1356-1420): 'In moral matters [Plato's] doctrine is so complete that often when I read his books, I almost believe that I am listening to Peter and Paul'.¹⁵⁴ The same reasoning was behind his translation of the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* contained a powerful argument for human immortality to which Bruni drew attention in his dedicatory preface to Innocent VII saying: 'It will bring no small increase in true faith [to Christians] if they see that the most subtle and wise of pagan philosophers held the same belief about the soul as we hold...Not that Plato agreed with the correct and true faith only in this matter: he agreed in many other things as well'.¹⁵⁵ After Bruni more translations were made but by the time of the Council of Florence in 1439 there were still only a limited number of texts of Plato in Latin translation.¹⁵⁶ A Latin translation of the complete works had to wait for Ficino's translations in 1484.

In fact the stream of Plato and Platonism ran more strongly in the Latin tradition than may appear from the availability of the Platonic texts. In the fourteenth century Demetrius Cydones had discovered that the Latin West was not the land of darkness which he had thought; in fact ancient Greek philosophy was more prized there than in Greece itself.¹⁵⁷ Gersh has shown that Plato and Platonic ideas had a long, if unacknowledged, tradition

¹⁵³ See Copenhaver and Schmitt edd. (1992) 132-3. Bruni's translations were widely dispersed. There are over two hundred and fifty codices but there are many more codices of his translations of Aristotle which is an indicator of relative interest in Plato and Aristotle.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Hankins (1990a) 54.

¹⁵⁵ Quoted by Hankins (1990a) 50. See Hankins *ibid* 40-51 for a full account of Bruni's translation of the *Phaedo*. For the interest in Bruni's translations of Plato among the senior clergy prior to the Council of Florence see Hankins (2004) II.419-420.

¹⁵⁶ See Schmitt (1976) for the progress of Platonism in the Renaissance and Hankins (2004) II 400-1.

¹⁵⁷ See *Apologia della propria fede* in Mercati, G. *Notizie di Procoro e Demetrio Cidone (Studi e testi, 56* (Vatican) 1931 pp.365-6 quoted in Meyendorff (1971) 60.

among the Latins.¹⁵⁸ There were numerous citations or quotations from Plato in Latin authors from Cicero to Boethius. The most frequently cited dialogue was the *Timaeus*. Apart from Chalcidius Augustine exercised the most significant influence on the transmission of Plato's ideas in the Latin West. In the *De Civitate Dei* he frequently referred to Plato, particularly the *Timaeus* which he had plainly studied in detail.¹⁵⁹ Although he conceded Plato was not easy to understand he regarded his thought as having affinity with Christianity. He said of Plato and the Platonists: *Nulli nobis quam isti propius accesserunt* (C.D. VIII.5).¹⁶⁰

A current of anti-Platonism, however, flowed from such different quarters as Cardinal Dominici, Trebizond, Pietro Barbo (Pope Paul II), the Florentine politician and historian Bartolomeo Scala (1430-97), the professor at the Florentine *studio* Domenico da Fiandra (c.1425-1479) and Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98).¹⁶¹ The objections to Plato were that he was obscure and unsystematic; his teaching on the transmigration of souls, polytheism and his rejection of creation *ex nihilo* were contrary to Christian beliefs and his support for homosexuality and advocacy of wives held in common were morally offensive. Opposition to humanistic interest in Plato had come from the religious orders and particularly from Dominici. As Salutati was the leading humanist in Florence Dominici was the leader of the

¹⁵⁸ See Gersh (2002) for citations of Plato in Latin writers from Cicero onwards.

¹⁵⁹ See C. D. 8.11: the elements of earth and fire (*Timaeus* 31b) and the hierarchy of the elements (*Timaeus* 32b); 9.23, the highest God makes the lower gods (*Timaeus* 41a); 10.31, the world and lower gods have a beginning but no end (*Timaeus* 41); 12.27, the highest God makes the immortal soul but the lower gods make the mortal part of soul and the perfection of the world which contains every kind of living thing (*Timaeus* 41c).

¹⁶⁰ See note [289289](#) below.

¹⁶¹ For a summary of objections to Plato in the fifteenth century see Hankins (1990a) 27-44 and Hankins (2004) II 36-39. Hankins (1990a 620-1) cites the preface addressed by Nicolò Palmieri to Paul II on a work by Fernando of Cordoba, *De laudibus Platonis*. He concluded of Fernando's defence of Plato: *venenum quod intus, ut hamus latet in escha, in his que scripta*. Hankins comments (*ibid* p.211): 'It is an important document as showing the seriousness with which Paul II regarded the charges of heresy against the Platonists in Bessarion's circle.'

opponents of humanism.¹⁶² In response to Salutati he attacked humanism in general and what he regarded as the pagan learning of the humanists in his *Lucula noctis* (1405).¹⁶³ He criticised Plato and Origen for holding the transmigration of souls, for rejecting bodily resurrection, and for denying God's universal creation.¹⁶⁴ The title of Chapter XLV made plain his position: *Verba philosophorum tenebris plena non solum superflua sunt pro veritatibus virtutibusque assequendis, sed mortalibus periculosa ad omnem errorem atque quolibet vicium aperit multiplices calles.*

In this atmosphere translators of Plato had to tread warily. In his translation of the *Republic* Pier Candido Decembrio shrouded potentially offensive passages in ambiguity. Bruni had already rejected the idea of translating the *Republic* because of some of its dangerous moral teaching.¹⁶⁵ In his translation of the *Phaedo* (*Phaedo* 73d6-10) he bowdlerised a passage on homosexual love.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² See Coulon ed. (1908) xi-lxxvii.

¹⁶³ *O utinam nostri quoque, qui dyalectica, phisica, poesia et fonte rodolent tulliano, mixturam quoque non confecerint opinionum multarum! Scio, prochdolor! Scio que proferant in secretis, quid loquantur, cum arbiter extraneus non apparet, exterius inquam multis. Solo nomine tamen viget religio Xpisti in quorum mentibus non est Xpistus per fidem, et per gratiam minus (Lucula XX.6).* The text is published in Coulon, R. ed. (1908) *Beati Johannis Dominici, Cardinalis S. Sixti, Lucula Noctis* (Paris). The word *lucula* is not known in common Latin usage but Dominici made clear in his prologue that it was a play on *lux* (Prologus 1.1). He said that the title referred to a glow worm shining in the night (Prologus 5) (see Coulon ed. (1908) lxxxiv-lxxxv). His target was secular literature: *Quoniam in penetralibus mentis cuiusdam lucis, ut credo, aculeum sencio vel stimulum, me ad dampnandum secularium literarum studium, a pluribus non solummodo commendatum, sed eciam a vi spiritus obnixae protectum, frequencius impellentem* (Prologus 4). He was encouraged to undertake the work by Giovanni de Samniato, a Camaldonese monk of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence, who was intimate with Salutati and who feared for Salutati's soul because of his taste for classical and pagan poetry. De Samniato and Salutati conducted a protracted correspondence on the subject. Finally on receipt of a long and closely argued letter from Salutati he enlisted the help of the powerful Dominici (see Coulon *loc. cit.* lii-lxxxix).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibi est Plato, fovens Originem, quo anime simul fuerint create, necnon quod postquam felicem vitam fuerint adeptae, iterum ad corpora incipere velle reverti, et illius vite felicitate finita, miseris huius adhuc peregrinationis involvi (Lucula XXII.8). In hiis gymnasiis, dicam an animarum lupanaribus, garriunt Plato et platonici, stoyci, achademici priores et novi, Porphirius et Cycero, de Republica scribens: cum corporibus animas beatificari non posse, quasi Deus, qui celestem animam corporum ergastulis detrusit in terris, corpora mundata et restituta animabus beatis super ethera locare non possit (Lucula XL.3). Non fuit Plato primus fitor Deum non cuncta creasse, sed prescise que durant omne per evum, quum in libris multis seculis ante Platonem legit: "Didici quod omnia opera, que fecit Deus perseverent per in aeternum; non possumus eis quidquam addere, nec auferre, que fecit Deus, ut timeatur (cf. Ecclesiastes III.14)" (Lucula XLV.9).*

¹⁶⁵ See Hankins (1990a) 126-130 and 136-8.

¹⁶⁶ See Hankins (1990a) 47.

Objections to the revival of Platonism persisted through the century. Johannes Pannonius in a letter of 1484 or 1485 to Ficino objected to Ficino's claim that the revival of ancient philosophy was God's providence: '*Primo non video equidem ad quid serviat providentiae renovatio antiquorum. Deinde non est Christiana illa antiquorum theologia...Equidem te amice moneo caveas ne forte curiositas quaedam sit isthaec renovatio antiquorum potius quam religio.*'¹⁶⁷ Bessarion also had to be careful particularly from 1464 to 1471 with a Pope hostile to ancient literature.

But from the late fourteenth century, despite limited knowledge, there was growing interest in Plato among some Italian humanists such as Petrarch (1304-1374), Niccolò Niccoli (1364-1437) and Salutati. Petrarch, although he could not read Greek, expressed a preference for Plato over Aristotle.¹⁶⁸ He wrote that Plato was 'praised by greater people, Aristotle by a larger number...[because] Plato and the Platonists ascended higher in matters of divinity; although neither could go where he wanted...Plato came closer'.¹⁶⁹ His attraction to Plato arose partly from hostility to the contemporary Averroistic interpretation of Aristotle.¹⁷⁰ These humanists were reacting against the narrow sophistries of Scholasticism. Before the time of the Council of Florence interest in Plato was largely in moral, literary and apologetic questions; after the Council the focus was more metaphysical. Garin distinguishes two phases in the resurgence of interest in Plato. The

¹⁶⁷Quoted in Allen (1998) 6 n.11.

¹⁶⁸ '*Dicono che Platone è maggior filosofo che Aristotile allegando Sant' Agostino dicente Aristotile principe de' filosofi, eccetto sempre Platone. Non dicono perché Sant' Agostino il premette: perché in sua opinione dell' anima è più conforme alla fede cattolica, ma nelle cose naturali ch' hanno bisogno di dimostrazioni e di pruove Aristotile è il maestro di color che sanno. Perché perdendo il tempo in fievoli disputazioni non sanno che sieno i precipi naturali* (quoted in Garin (1969) 159).' See Schmitt (1976). Petrarch annotated Chalcidius' Latin translation of the *Timaeus* and had Aristippus' translation of the *Phaedo*. See Pfeiffer (1976) 14 and Sandys II (1908)9.

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Copenhaver (1992) 128.

¹⁷⁰ See Sandys (1908) II 9-11 and Pfeiffer (1976) 14-15. Ficino, lamenting the spread of Averroism and secularist tendencies in philosophy, wrote: 'Learning has been largely handed over to the profane, whence it becomes the greatest instrument of iniquity and moral licence (quoted in Hankins (2004) II 34).'

first focused on Plato's moral teaching and the influence of Socrates and was represented by Petrarch. The second focused on the theological tradition stemming from Plotinus and Proclus when 'a Scholastic Platonism stood in contrast to a Scholastic Aristotelianism'. This strand was represented by Plethon, Bessarion and John Argyropoulos (c.1415-1487).¹⁷¹

Knowledge of Aristotle

Bessarion was sympathetic to Aristotle but was rowing against the prevailing tide in defending Plato as a better basis for theological discourse. He was in the tradition that held Plato and Aristotle were convergent. But their respective merits were hotly contested in the fifteenth century. The Greeks had a different perspective on Aristotle from the Latins. Syropoulos recorded the reaction of a Georgian cleric to the Italian Dominican, John of Montenero: 'Why always Aristotle, Aristotle? To hell with Aristotle. Nothing about St. Peter, St. Paul, St Basil, Gregory the theologian or Chrysostom but just Aristotle, Aristotle.'¹⁷² There were two challenges that Bessarion had to address in presenting Plato. The first was Aristotle's place in the educational establishments of the West; the second was the polarity between defenders of Aristotle and defenders of Plato.

The patchy knowledge in Italy of Plato's dialogues in the first half of the fifteenth century contrasted with knowledge of Aristotle. Aristotle enjoyed an entrenched position in the teaching of theology and philosophy.¹⁷³ Hankins argues that the reason Aristotle superseded Plato in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was because university students

¹⁷¹ See Garin (1969) 275-6 and 280-1.

¹⁷² Syropoulos ed. Laurent IX.28 p.464. See Gill (1959) 227f.

¹⁷³ See the revealing comment in the Greek text of *ICP* 2.11.1 p.198.33-6: τὰ μὲν τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους κατὰ ταύτης τῆς ὑπολήψεως ἐν τῷ τρίτῳ τῶν περὶ Οὐρανοῦ εἰρημένα σοφώτατα ἐπαναλαβεῖν οὐ χρή, γνῶριμα πᾶσιν ὄντα καὶ μάλιστα Λατῖνοις σοφώτατοις οὓσιν ἀνδράσι καὶ Ἀριστοτέλην πνέουσι.

required text books drawing out logical argument from *sententiae*. The logical and systematic approach of Aristotle met this requirement much better than the discursive texts of Plato. It was also easier to bowdlerise Aristotle than Plato by selecting particular texts. It was not just the availability of translations but educational practice that privileged Aristotle.¹⁷⁴

Aquinas had put Aristotle at the service of Christian theology. In the preface to his *De differentiis* Plethon wrote that at that time in the West, contrary to ancient times, Aristotle was held in greater esteem than Plato because of the influence of Averroes who claimed that only Aristotle had achieved a complete philosophy of nature.¹⁷⁵ Aristotelianism formed the intellectual foundation for the Scholastic teaching and study within the educational institutions of Europe from Padua to Oxford.¹⁷⁶ Evidence of the preponderance of Aristotle can be seen in the availability of texts. At a rough estimate between three and four thousand editions of Aristotelica were published between the invention of printing and 1600. This compares with fewer than five hundred relevant editions of Plato.¹⁷⁷

Bessarion wrote: *fere omnes nostrae aetatis sapientes Latini Peripateticae sectae aemuli sint*.¹⁷⁸ Whereas the Scholastic system had focused on works of logic and metaphysics, the interest in Aristotle among humanists was broader and extended to other works such as the *Ethics* and *Poetics*, which had newly come to light.

There were different interpretations of Aristotelianism and different approaches. In the University of Padua there were separate chairs of Thomist and Scotist philosophy and

¹⁷⁴ See Hankins (2004) II 27-44.

¹⁷⁵ *De differentiis* ed. Lagarde p.321.3-8.

¹⁷⁶ See Schmitt (1973). For Latin Aristotelianism see Monfasani (1993b).

¹⁷⁷ See Schmitt (1983) 14.

¹⁷⁸ *ICP* 2.3.2 p.85.26-7.

theology. Averroism exercised a strong influence in Italian universities.¹⁷⁹ Averroists maintained the unicity of the intellect and consequently denied the immortality of the soul as philosophically demonstrable. They denied creation and maintained a distinction between philosophical discourse and the tenets of faith. The defence of the Averroists against charges of heterodoxy was that philosophy could not prove personal immortality but this did not preclude personal belief in immortality. The controversial teachings of the Averroists may be gleaned from a letter of Pietro Barozzi, Bishop of Padua, in 1504: ‘the Scotist chair of theology [in Padua] is like a medicine for the errors on the eternity of the world, the unicity of the intellect, on nothing coming from nothing, and so forth, which abound among the philosophers.’¹⁸⁰ In *De differentiis* Plethon dismissed Averroes saying that he could not take seriously the opinion of somebody who held the soul to be mortal; not even Aristotle was capable of such ignorance.¹⁸¹ Bessarion described him as *commentator quo diligentiore neminem Aristotelis opinionum fuisse omnes*

¹⁷⁹ Schmitt (1979, 121) defines “Averroism” as follows: ‘Traditionally “Averroism” has been understood to mean a particular interpretation of Aristotle in which a secular, non-theological slant is given to several key issues in which Aristotelian philosophy seems to be in opposition to dogmas of revealed religion.’ In the preface to his translation of Plotinus Ficino condemned the contemporary Aristotelians who had been misled by Averroes and Alexander of Aphrodisias and diverged from Aristotle whom Plethon had interpreted as agreeing with Plato on the immortality of the soul (see Monfasani (2002) 191-2). In fact as long as one asserted one’s own belief in the immortality of the soul there was no heresy in rejecting the possibility of proving its immortality; this was the position of Scotus and Ockham (see Monfasani (1993a) 259). Averroistic interpretations of Aristotle had been introduced to Italy in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Siger of Brabant (c.1240-c.1284) and Boethius of Sweden (fl. 1270s) of the arts faculty in Paris had favoured these interpretations. Against them Aquinas and Albert the Great, both champions of the primacy of theology, advanced their own solutions to the philosophical problems posed by the Averroists. In 1270 Étienne Tempier (c.1210-1279), bishop of Paris, condemned two hundred and nineteen propositions thought to derive from Averroes. The Averroistic interpreters of Aristotle enjoyed a new breath of life in the Renaissance and were ranged against Thomists like Thomas Cajetan (1469-1534) and Sylvester of Ferrara (c.1474-1528). The Averroists drew a distinction between what could be learnt by reason and the revelations of the theology. See ‘Aristotelianism’ in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (2003, Washington) vol. I pp.674-5 and Chollet (1899). Schmitt (1979) has shown that editions of Aquinas’ and Averroes’ commentaries were routinely used alongside the text of Aristotle in the Renaissance. Averroism was particularly strong in the North Italian universities of Bologna, Pisa and Padua. See Grendler (2002) 281-5 and 290-1. For Averroism in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries generally see Schmitt *loc. cit.*

¹⁸⁰ Quoted in Monfasani (1993) 265.

¹⁸¹ *De differentiis* ed. Lagarde p.321.9-14.

arbitrantur.¹⁸² He did not accept the Averroistic view of the independence of philosophy and theology. Throughout book two of *ICP* he treated philosophy as a basis for theology but when they conflict orthodox teaching must prevail. There is only one reference to Averroes in book two of *ICP* where Bessarion rejected the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotle regarding personal immortality (*ICP* 2.8.8 p.147.20-6). He rejected Averroes' view that Aristotle held the unicity of intellect (*ICP* 3.22.5 p.371 9-14).¹⁸³ But he quoted or referred to Averroes frequently in book three as an authoritative interpreter of Aristotle or even as of equal standing with Aristotle.¹⁸⁴ This was, no doubt, due to the influence of the Dominican philosopher Gatti (see page 62 and note [237237](#) below).

Formatte

The circumstances leading to publication of *ICP*

When Bessarion came to publish *ICP* it was the culmination of a controversy which had its origins in lectures and an *opusculum* by Plethon during the Council of Florence.¹⁸⁵ The subsequent controversy between Aristotelians and Platonists divided the Greek exile community. The controversy was fractious and centred on the respective merits of Aristotle and Plato as philosophers.¹⁸⁶ It became transformed into a Latin controversy by a polemical work in Latin by Trebizond. Bessarion's work needs to be seen against the background of this controversy.

¹⁸² *ICP* 3.20.6 p.327.33-4. The Marciana Library holds a number of manuscripts of Latin translations of Averroes including his commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *Metaphysica* and *Physica*.

¹⁸³ See also *ICP* 3.22.8 p.377 5-7 where he said that Themistius, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroes all thought Aristotle held one intellect.

¹⁸⁴ For instance see *ICP* 3.15.9 p. 291.9-16 where Averroes' commentary on the *Metaphysics* (XII ch. 39) is quoted as evidence against a trinitarian view in Aristotle. In *ICP* 3.29.1 p.415.19-27 Averroes is cited as evidence that Aristotle did not hold that providence extended to individual earthly beings.

¹⁸⁵ The history of the controversy is tortuous and there is little literature on the subject. There is a convenient account in Monfasani (1976) 201-29. See pages 51-53 below. See also Mohler (1923) 346-98.

¹⁸⁶ The controversy had a long history in the Byzantine tradition. See Tatakis (2003) and Kristeller (1972).

Plethon had been in the Greek delegation to the Council of Florence. It is not clear what role he was intended to play as a lay teacher of philosophy. He had time to give lectures on Plato and Neo-Platonism to the intelligentsia of Florence, which he turned into a small treatise, *De differentiis Aristotelis et Platonis*.¹⁸⁷ Scholarios recorded that Plethon attracted flocks of eager Italians to his lectures on Plato who, in his words, knew as much about philosophy as Plethon did about dancing.¹⁸⁸ According to Ficino, Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) attended Plethon's lectures and was so inspired by what he heard that he founded an Academy in Florence.¹⁸⁹ In the light of these comments some scholars have maintained that Plethon's lectures fired up a resurgence of interest in Plato in the West. But there are difficulties with this. Plethon spoke and wrote in Greek so the impact of his lectures was likely to have been diminished by having to speak through an interpreter. His exposition was philosophically difficult and, as Scholarios acknowledged, the interests of the audience were literary rather than philosophical. But Scholarios, who was no admirer of Plethon and who was in Florence at the time, is explicit in his account. Plethon did make an impact with his treatise but not, it appears, among the Latins. There is neither mention of *De differentiis* in any Latin author before a mention by Ficino in his *Theologia platonica* twenty years later nor is there evidence of widespread knowledge of Plethon's other works among the Latins.¹⁹⁰ The Greek text with Latin translation was not available until it was published in Venice in 1540.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ For the text see Lagarde, B. 'Le "De Differentiis" de Pléthon d'après l'autographe de la Marcienne' in *Byzantion* 43 (1973 Brussels) 321-43. There is an English translation in Woodhouse (1986) 192-214. The work was in Greek as was Scholarios' reply. This suggests that it was written with a Greek readership in mind but Masai (1956) 330-331 calls this into question. He argues that Plethon was writing for Latin Platonists because the references to Averroes would have been lost on Greeks and he notes that Scholarios in his reply says: 'I know those in Italy who are under the sway of Plato and for whom [Plethon] says he conceived this work' (Petit et al. edd. IV.4.2-4). It is, nevertheless, odd that a work in Greek should be addressed to people who were unlikely to be able to read it.

¹⁸⁸ Scholarios Petit et al. edd. IV.4.4-6.

¹⁸⁹ Preface to Marsilio Ficino's translation of Plotinus' *Enneads*, *Opera Omnia* (Basel 1576) 1537. Hankins (2004) II 219-272 and 351-386 casts doubt on the accuracy of Ficino's story about Cosimo's's foundation.

¹⁹⁰ See Hankins (1990a) 436-40 and Monfasani (1976) 202-5.

¹⁹¹ See Hankins (1990a) 438 and n.8.

De differentiis effectively set the terms of a debate which was to last thirty years. The work attempted to discredit Aristotle by comparing him to Plato. Plethon took Plato as the standard of truth.¹⁹² He proposed to show the inferiority of Aristotle to Plato (*De differentiis* ed. Lagarde p.321.20). The treatise was mainly a critique of the scholastic use of Aristotle. A third of the work is devoted to expounding Plato's theory of Forms against the criticisms of Aristotle; at the time many in the Latin West would have derived their knowledge of Plato's doctrine from Aristotle. Plethon also argued in the course of his treatise that in the *Ethics* Aristotle denied the immortality of the soul (*loc. cit.* p.327.31-34) and the creation of the world *ex nihilo*; he was a determinist (*loc. cit.* p.333.33-p.334.4); he claimed God was only the motive force of the universe and not its creator (*loc. cit.* p.321.26- p.322.1), he inclined to atheism (*loc. cit.* p.332.12-14) and he effectively conceded the pre-existence of souls (*loc. cit.* p.327.19-27). These views would have been controversial because they undermined Aristotle's position as the main philosophical support of Christianity. The burden of Plethon's charge against Aristotle was that Plato was nearer to Christianity and, therefore, where Aristotle disagreed with him he must be against Christianity.¹⁹³ There was nothing new in this line of argument; Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen and Eusebius had all argued that Plato had intimations of Christian truth. Eusebius discredited Aristotle (*Praep. Ev.* 15.1-13) and held that Plato came closest to truth (*Praep. Ev.* 11.1.3) either because he had been in contact with Hebrew wisdom or he had independent access to the truth (*Praep. Ev.* 11.8.1).

¹⁹² This view had a long tradition. It is found in Numenius (ap. Eusebius *Praep. Ev.* IX.7.1), Diogenes Laertius 3.56 and Atticus (ap. Eusebius *Praep. Ev.* XI.1.2).

¹⁹³ Elsewhere he invoked Cyril of Alexandria as an authority that Plato is compatible with Christianity: καὶ ἔῴ λέγειν ὅτι καὶ ἐν πλείοσι καὶ μείζοσι Πλάτωνα τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ συνωδὸν προϊόντων σοι τῶν λόγων ἀποφαίνεις, σαυτῷ ἀτεχνῶς ὑπ' ἀβελτηρίας περιπίπτων. ὁ μέντοι ἐν τοῖς δοκιμωτάτοις τῶν τῆς ἐκκλησίας προστατῶν Κύριλλος, βουλόμενος τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τῇ καθ' Ἑλληνας φιλοσοφίᾳ συνωδὸν πῆ ἀποφῆναι, οὐκ Ἀριστοτέλη ἀλλὰ Πλάτωνά τε καὶ τὴν Πλάτωνος φιλοσοφίαν προελόμενος τοῦτο ποιεῖ (*Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele objectiones* ed. Maltese 4.6 p.3.31- p.4.3).

The publication of *De differentiis* in 1439 proved a time bomb which ticked away until 1443 or 1444 when Scholarios published a response in defence of Aristotle under the title Γεωργίου τοῦ Σχολαρίου κατὰ τῶν Πλήθωνος ἀποριῶν ἐπ’ Ἀριστοτέλει.¹⁹⁴ He accused Plethon of writing a book of ‘blasphemies against Aristotle’. He claimed Aristotle was closer to Christianity than Plato (Petit et al. edd. IV.4.32-4). Scholarios wrote in Greek, largely for a Greek readership. He added to the title page of his manuscript copy preserved in Mount Athos: ‘and against Hellenes and Polytheists’. In his view ‘Hellenes’ (i.e. Platonists) were equivalent to ‘pagans’. He saw his work as a treatise defending theological orthodoxy against Plethon’s paganism.¹⁹⁵ There was nothing that could easily be construed as pagan in Plethon’s *De differentiis* in contrast to his later work on Plato’s *Laws*. But Scholarios believed that, because Aristotle was the basis of much Christian theology, Plethon was using his attacks on Aristotle as a stalking horse to attack Christian orthodoxy.¹⁹⁶ He was attacking not only Aristotle but orthodox Christians: ἅμα δὲ καὶ οὐχ ὑπὲρ Ἀριστοτέλους μόνον καὶ ἀληθείας, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ὁ πόλεμος ἔσται (*ibid.* p. 5.36-p.6.1). In a *letter to the Exarch Joseph* he wrote that his quarrel was not with Plato and Aristotle but with Plethon in defence of the faith: καὶ ἡμεῖς, οὐ Πλάτωνι φιλονεικοῦντες, οὐκ Ἀριστοτέλους τι πεφροντικότες ἰδίᾳ, τῷ δὲ σκοπῷ τοῦ Γεμιστοῦ χαλεπαίνοντες, ζήλω τῆς πίστεως περιττὸν ἄλλως ἡμῖν εἰλόμεθα πόνον (*ibid.* p.156.4-7).¹⁹⁷ In Scholarios’ view Plethon was inspired by Proclus from whose books he got everything he wrote: Πρόκλον δὲ τὸν αἰτιώτατον αὐτῷ τῆς τοιαύτης φρονήσεως σιωπᾶ, οὐδ’ ἀνέχεται δεικνόναι, ὅτι ἐκ τῶν ἐκείνου βιβλίων μᾶλλον πάντα συνήγαγεν (*Letter to Princess of the*

¹⁹⁴ Scholarius’ text is printed in Petit, L., Siderilès, M. and Jugie, M. edd. (1928-1936) *Georges Scholarius, Œuvres complètes de Georges Scholarius* (Paris) IV.1-116 and partially translated in Woodhouse (1986) 240-66. Plethon’s reply to Scholarius is in Maltese, E. V. ed. (1988) *Georgii Gemisti Plethonis contra Scholarii pro Aristotele objectiones* (Leipzig) and is translated in Woodhouse *ibid.* 283-307.

¹⁹⁵ Woodhouse (1986) 238.

¹⁹⁶ Masai (1956) 326 argues that Plethon’s aim was to separate Christianity from its philosophical base.

¹⁹⁷ His suggestion of equal esteem for Plato and Aristotle needs to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Peloponnese ibid. p.153.24-7)) and Proclus held all kinds of pernicious views such as multiplicity of gods. Scholarios said elsewhere that Platonists poisoned Christianity leading Arius and Eunomius into heresy.¹⁹⁸ Plethon then replied to Scholarios (see note [194194](#) above).

The scene had now been set for the subsequent debate.¹⁹⁹ At the root of the debate was a polarity between the orthodox Latin view of Aristotelianism as the foundation of Christian theology and the less systematised and more intuitive philosophy of Plato, and compounding this but at another level there was the tension between Christianity and what some regarded as pagan Hellenism.

It took even longer for the time bomb to detonate in the West.²⁰⁰ In Italy Theodore Gaza, a member of Bessarion's circle and translator of Aristotle, produced in the 1450s a short treatise in the form of a dialogue between Plethon and himself in which he refuted Plato's position on first substance.²⁰¹ Another close associate of Bessarion, Michael Apostoles, responded with a refutation of Gaza in support of Plato.²⁰² This work was so bitter in its polemic that it elicited a letter of rebuke from Bessarion.²⁰³ Andronicus Callistos, another follower of Bessarion, came to the defence of Aristotle in support of Gaza for which he received a letter of commendation from Bessarion.²⁰⁴ A striking feature of the controversy is the uncompromising positions taken by the protagonists. Bessarion alone seems to have taken a more nuanced view either out of eirenic diplomacy or from deeper philosophical

¹⁹⁸ *Epitome of Aquinas Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.6 Petit et al. edd. V.248.13-14.

¹⁹⁹ See Karamanolis (2002).

²⁰⁰ See note [185185](#) above regarding the debate.

²⁰¹ Mohler (1942) 151-8.

²⁰² Mohler (1942) 159-69. Masai (1956) 312-314 argues that Apostoles was not only an ardent follower of Bessarion but a Neo-Pagan follower of Plethon. He quotes the opening of a letter to Argyropoulos from Apostoles in which he invoked the Olympian gods in gratitude for the discovery of certain Platonic manuscripts.

²⁰³ Mohler (1942) 511-3.

²⁰⁴ Mohler (1942) 170-203 and 511-3.

understanding. In a letter to Callistos he wrote that he held Plato and Aristotle in equal regard and he was not impressed by attacks on Aristotle: ἐμὲ δέ.....φιλοῦντα μὲν ἴσθι Πλάτωνα, φιλοῦντα δ' Ἀριστοτέλη, καὶ ὡς σοφωτάτῳ σεβόμενον ἑκατέρῳ, Πλάτωνά τε τῆς μεγαλονοίας καὶ εὐφυΐας ἀγάμενον, τῆς τοσαύτης πρὸς Ἀριστοτέλη μάχης τε καὶ δυσνοίας μὴ ἐπαινεῖν (Mohler (1942) 511-3).

Bessarion held that generally Aristotle agreed with Plato and emphasised the fact that Aristotle was a student of Plato.²⁰⁵ He was sometimes quixotic in defence of his belief in this conformity as will be seen later in this thesis. But he was drawing on a long tradition.²⁰⁶ Clement of Alexandria said that many Platonists wrote books to show that the Stoics and Aristotle took most of their most important teachings from Plato.²⁰⁷ The view of most Platonists in the period of so-called Middle-Platonism was that Aristotle and Plato were compatible if Aristotle was interpreted correctly.²⁰⁸ Any contradictions were the result of putting too much faith on the literal wording of texts rather than the spirit. So Simplicius wrote that a thorough understanding of Aristotle's usage was needed. An unbiased judgement was required to avoid malicious interpretation of his words or an ill considered preference for his philosophy. It was necessary not just to have regard to his words criticising Plato but to look at the intention behind the words to see the agreement of

²⁰⁵ ICP 2.11.2 p.201.20-2.

²⁰⁶ Karamanolis (2006) gives an account of the tradition in the period of Middle Platonism. He points out (p.3) that the majority of the Platonist commentators in late antiquity studied Aristotle. They maintained that Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies were compatible and complementary. See also Sorabji ed. (1990) 1-5.

²⁰⁷ *Stromata* 6.2 at Migne *P.G.* 9 col. 244A.

²⁰⁸ Bessarion commented: *Fuerunt etiam, qui convenire inter sese duos philosophos summo ingenio nixi sunt ostendere, ut apud Graecos in plerisque Simplicius fecit, apud Latinos facturum se pollicitus est Boëthius* (ICP 1.1.1 p.3.32-p.5.20). Boethius aimed to refute the opinion that Plato and Aristotle were opposed in the essentials of their thinking. See *In librum de interpretatione* II c.3 ed. Meiser p.79.16-p.80.9 and Liebeschütz (1967) 540. For Simplicius see Simplicius *In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium* 6.7-18 and 7.23-32 and *In Aristotelis De caelo Commentaria* 454.23-4 and 640.27-32. Karamanolis ((2006) 21) cites Plutarch in *de Fato* (572a11-b4) where he attributed to Plato a definition of chance which is in fact taken from Aristotle (*Physics* 197^a5-6) as an example of the way in which Platonists regarded Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy as the voice of Plato.

the two philosophers in most matters.²⁰⁹ Bessarion advanced the same argument in defence of Aristotle's congruence with Plato.²¹⁰ These Platonists had a conviction that Plato's philosophy was perfect and a source to be followed by Aristotle and later philosophers.²¹¹ But, as a student of Plato, Aristotle was a good source for interpreting his master.²¹² Platonists did not study Aristotle for his own sake but as a preparation for the study of Plato. When Proclus attended the Academy as a student he read Aristotle first and then the dialogues of Plato.²¹³

Initially the debate about Plato and Aristotle was all conducted in Greek. The argument was intense but essentially limited to a few Greek exiles in Italy who had close associations with Bessarion. Bessarion himself intervened in this Greek phase of the debate at two points. Plethon had said in *De differentiis* that Aristotle held that art does not act with deliberation and, by implication, that God does not direct the cosmos.²¹⁴ On the other hand he argued that nothing 'could be carried through to any kind of end without mind exercising prior deliberation' so nature acts with deliberation. 'If one observes,' he wrote, 'something irrational in nature, then nature which effectively produces the result does not lie therein; for nature is instituted by God, and God's institution cannot be

²⁰⁹ δεῖ δὲ καὶ τῶν πανταχοῦ τῷ φιλοσόφῳ γεγραμμένων ἔμπειρον εἶναι καὶ τῆς Ἀριστοτελικῆς συνηθείας ἐπιστήμονα. δεῖ δὲ καὶ κρίσιν ἀδέκαστον ἔχειν, ὡς μηδὲ τὰ καλῶς λεγόμενα κακοσχόλως ἐνδεχόμενον ἀδόκιμα δεικνύουσι μηδὲ εἴ τι δέοιτο ἐπιστάσεως, πάντη πάντως ἄπταιστον φιλονεικεῖν ἀποδείξει, ὡς εἰς τὴν αἴρεσιν ἑαυτὸν ἐγγράψαντα τοῦ φιλοσόφου. δεῖ δὲ οἶμαι καὶ τῶν πρὸς Πλάτωνα λεγομένων αὐτῷ μὴ πρὸς τὴν λέξιν ἀποβλέποντα μόνον διαφωνίαν τῶν φιλοσόφων κατακηφίζεσθαι, ἀλλ' εἰς τὸν νοῦν ἀφορῶντα τὴν ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις συμφωνίαν αὐτῶν ἀνιχνεύειν (in *Categorias* 7.24-32). Blumenthal (1986) argues that the Neo-Platonist commentators interpreted Aristotle by imposing on him their own (Platonist) positions.

²¹⁰ ICP 2.11.2. Francisco Filelfo (1398-1481) maintained that Aristotle appeared to disagree with Plato but really he was of the same mind (*verbo sane a Platone magistro Aristoteles pluribus in locis videtur dissentire, cum re ipsa maxime omnium cum illo conveniat*). The reason that Aristotle appeared to refute Plato was, according to Filelfo, out of jealousy for Xenocrates who had been preferred to him in the leadership of the Academy on the death of Plato. See Garin (2012) p.156 quoting from Filelfo *Epistulae* (1502) c.150.

²¹¹ See Atticus fr. 1.19-23 ed. des Places, Albinus' *Isagoge* ed. Hermann p.149, Diogenes Laertius 3.56. See Karamanolis (2002) 260-1.

²¹² Karamanolis (2006) 16.

²¹³ See Marinus *Vita Procli* 13 ed. Masullo p.69.

²¹⁴ See *Physics* II.199^b26-30.

irrational.²¹⁵ Bessarion produced a short essay ‘ὅτι ἡ φύσις βουλευέται’ in which he argued that despite a statement by Aristotle in *Physics* II he and Plato both held that art and nature reflect βουλή.²¹⁶ Trebizond replied to Bessarion’s essay with a work ‘*in perversionem problematum Aristotelis*’ in which he argued that Aristotle held the purposefulness of nature but without deliberation.²¹⁷ Bessarion then replied with a longer work entitled ‘εἰ ἡ φύσις καὶ ἡ τέχνη βουλεύονται ἢ οὐ’.²¹⁸ The significant thing about this spat is the sharp divisions between the Platonists and the Aristotelians and Bessarion’s attempt to find common ground. He also engaged in private correspondence with Plethon regarding particular points in *De differentiis*.²¹⁹ He put a series of questions about the correct interpretation of Plato by the Neo-Platonists on self-subsistence, the unicity of being, participation and fate, and about the Demiurge, to which Plethon replied.²²⁰

The debate was broadened out in 1458 when Trebizond produced a Latin response to Plethon entitled *Comparatio Philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis*.²²¹ It was a virulently anti-Platonic polemic. The work was in three sections. In the first Trebizond argued the superiority of Aristotle over Plato on a range of subjects including metaphysics, rhetoric, mathematics and moral philosophy. In the second section Trebizond compared Plato with

²¹⁵ *De differentiis* ed. Lagarde p.331.33-p.332.23 translation Woodhouse (1986).

²¹⁶ Mohler (1942) 89-90. οὐ τῆς φύσεως μὲν δὴ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς τέχνης βουλήν τίθενται προηγεῖσθαι. καὶ βουλευομένην εἴτε λογιζομένην αὐτὴν ἔνεκα τέλους ποιεῖν φασιν (p.89.21-3).

²¹⁷ Mohler (1942) 277-342.

²¹⁸ Mohler (1942) 92-147. Bessarion’s Greek was translated into Latin and published under its Latin title, *de Natura et Arte*, with *ICP* in 1469. See Monfasani (1976) 209-211.

²¹⁹ Mohler (1942) 455-68.

²²⁰ See Woodhouse (1986) 233-37.

²²¹ See Monfasani (1976) 156-162 for a summary account of the work. There are eleven surviving manuscripts of the work including Bessarion’s own copy (Marc. Lat. VI 76). This is not a large number but suggests wide distribution. It was printed by Iacobus Pentius de Leuco in Venice in 1523 (repr. Frankfurt a. M., 1965). The edition has a preface addressed to Francesco II Sforza of Milan by the Augustinian theologian Benedictus Moncettus who said that he wished both sides of the Plato-Aristotle debate to get a hearing since hitherto only Bessarion’s *ICP* had been available in print. See Monfasani (1984) 600-2 for a full account of Trebizond’s text. Garin (1969) 288 argues that it was a profoundly conservative work which is a failed attempt to construct a philosophical-theological defence against the decline of western Christian civilisation represented by Plethon. After its publication several Italians entered the debate. See Monfasani (1976) 214-9.

Aristotle against the standard of Christian revelation. Plato's belief in the pre-existence of souls, in the existence of lesser gods and in creation from pre-existent matter condemned him. The third section was an apocalyptic vision of the subversion of Latin Christianity by the advance of Platonism. Platonic hedonism brought about the ruin of the Roman Empire. Platonists were at the root of heresy. A succession of Platos had corrupted civilisation.²²²

The controversy turned both personal and political. In 1465 Trebizond went to Constantinople with the purpose of converting the Sultan, Mehmed II, to Christianity and to get his support in his war against Platonism. Bessarion used some correspondence between Mehmed and Trebizond to attack Trebizond as treasonous and succeeded in having him consigned to prison for four months (see note ~~130130~~ above). Then in 1468 the conspiracy of the Roman Academy set Rome in turmoil. A group of young humanists, who had been meeting in the house of Pomponio Leto, had been airing mildly seditious ideas and writing homosexual poetry. They were accused of plotting against the life of the anti-Platonist Pope Paul II. There is no evidence that either Bessarion or his circle had any connection with Leto's group but conservative voices close to the Pope tried to tar him with the same brush.²²³ This put Bessarion on the defensive.

Trebizond's *Comparatio* was written in Latin and must have had greater impact than earlier Greek works in the controversy. Bessarion plainly thought that his target audience was the Latins. He suggested that Trebizond, whom he did not name but described as

²²² See page 33 and n. ~~129129~~ above for the succession of Platos. Trebizond's virulent attack on Plato must have had some traction. He was widely read and quoted by influential figures such as Melanchthon and Savonarola up until the end of the sixteenth century (see Hankins (2004) II 39).

²²³ Hankins (1990a) 210-13.

homuncio, was out to deceive the Latins.²²⁴ He was now forced to enter the debate publicly to defend his own honour, to save the reputation of Plato and to do so without impugning Aristotle. His initial response to Trebizond was immediate and vigorous but he must have thought better of it and took ten years to produce his considered response in *ICP*. The history of the evolution of the response is set out in the next chapter of this thesis.²²⁵

In his mission to refute Trebizond and present Plato to the Latins Bessarion brought a perspective and understanding of Plato which goes back to Psellus and which contrasted with much of the Greek ecclesiastical establishment of which he had been a member as a monk and Archbishop. His perspective and understanding also contrasted with other eminent Greek scholars like Trebizond and Scholarios. In the next chapter I set out Bessarion's three purposes in writing *ICP* and the place of book two in Bessarion's exposition of Plato and its application to contemporary controversies in the West.

²²⁴ *An forte Latinos homines fallere se posse adversarius censuit? At ne Latini quidem auctoritatem tanti philosophi unius humuncionis verbis deicere animis potuissent, et Graecos facile erat veritatem rei detegere et falsam atque iniustam criminationem confutare et refellere (ICP 4.1.13 p.439.5-9)*

²²⁵ Sometime after reading Trebizond's *Comparatio* and after he had started on a reply Bessarion wrote to Theodore Gaza asking for his help on some of the philosophical issues. In his letter he said that he was concerned by the effect which Trebizond's work might have on the Latins who had little knowledge of Plato: ἐπεὶ δὲ λατινιστὶ καὶ πρὸς Λατίνους γέγραπται ταῦτα μὴ πάνυ τοι εἰδότας τὰ Πλάτωνος, σφόδρα δυσχερᾶνας ἐγὼ καὶ μισήσας τὴν τοῦ ἀμαθοῦς καὶ βδελυροῦ ἀνθρώπου τούτου προαίρεσιν (Mohler (1942) p.488.30-2). See Labowsky (1968) 175-6.

Chapter two

The nature and place of book two in *ICP*.

Summary

In this chapter I set out the overall purpose and structure of *ICP*. I then give more detail about the structure, content and purpose of book two of *ICP*. This will set later chapters of the thesis into their context. I shall argue that book two is the central theological chapter of *ICP*. Its shape and content were determined by Trebizond's attack in *Comparatio* but more by Bessarion's desire to demonstrate the conformity of Plato with Christian orthodoxy.

The structure of *ICP*

In the first and second chapters of *ICP* book one Bessarion gives a vivid account of how he received an unnamed work which promised a comparison of Plato and Aristotle. He put aside everything he was doing to read this work. But he was bitterly disappointed in his expectations. Instead of a treasure trove of learning he found nothing but abuse of Plato which he likened to lumps of coal. He was outraged because an attack on Plato was an attack on the Fathers of the Church who admired Plato and used him in defence of sacred doctrine.²²⁶ So he was provoked to reply. His reply was to have three purposes. It was a

²²⁶ *Eo autem molestius illius iniuriam tuli, quod non modo Platoni, cuius cura haud me usque adeo sollicitasset, sed etiam sanctissimis nostrae religionis viris, qui Platonem semper magnificerunt et cum doctrinam eius et mores tum eam, quam in opinionibus cum nostra fide habet similitudinem, admirati sunt, non parum dedecoris afferre videtur....Profecto qui haec a nobis auxilia tollit, hic plane favere illorum parti videtur, qui religionem nostram oppugnant, et quasi aditum aperire hostibus, ut impetu facto eam depopulentur atque devastent (ICP 1.1.4 p.7.21-5 and p.9.11-14).*

response to the calumnies which he had read.²²⁷ Secondly in order to do this he intended to set out the teachings of Plato for the Latins who were ignorant of them.²²⁸ His third purpose was to demonstrate that Plato was more in conformity with Christian doctrine than Aristotle.²²⁹

The unnamed book and author were George of Trebizond and his work *Comparatio*. Bessarion in his response to Trebizond never referred to him by name. He simply referred to him as *adversarius* or ὁ κατήγορος. *ICP* was published in Latin in Rome in 1469 along with Bessarion's *opusculum* entitled *de Arte et Natura* and his critique of Trebizond's translation of Plato's *Laws*.²³⁰ The original version of *ICP* had three books which closely matched Trebizond's *Comparatio* in order and content.²³¹ The first book dealt with the

²²⁷ *Haec igitur cum legissem, non potui tam iniquam hominis mentem non exsecrari... Quapropter favendum imprimis censui auctoritati sanctorum virorum elaborandumque mihi summo studio, ut religionem, cuius membrum divina pietas me esse voluit, pro mea virili tuear atque defendam, tum etiam Platoni succurrendum* (*ICP* 1.1. 4 p.7.19-20 and 5 p.9.15-18).

²²⁸ *Perabsurdum tum et periniquum iudicarem legi haec sine contradictione, ab hominibus praesertim Latinis, qui aut Platonis opera non habent, aut si qua habent in Latinam linguam conversa, perraro ea legere consueverunt. Atqui Platonis doctrinam variam atque multiplicem tum diversis rationibus et auctoritate historiae communique omnium sententia tum ipsius operum testimonio demonstrabimus* (*ICP* 1.1.5 p.9.20-25). Hankins argues that by appealing to *communis omnium sententia* Bessarion was diverging from the practice of the high Scholastic period and resorting to an ancient practice of Christian apologists found in Tertullian, Eusebius, Irenaeus and Vincent of Lérins. Bessarion had adopted the appeal to a consensus at the Council of Florence but this was an essentially theological tool which Bessarion was now applying to Trebizond's critique of Plato. He used the ancient authority of *studiosi philosophiae ac bonarum artium peritissimi viri* (*ICP* 2.2 p.83.15). In doing so he confused doctrinal *auctoritas* with historical *testimonium* and failed to respond to Trebizond's argument in *Comparatio* 2.1 that religious authority is irrelevant to establishing historical truth (see Hankins (1990a) 249-53). See also De Ghellinck (1935). Bessarion's argument that in criticising Plato Trebizond was attacking the Fathers of the Church confused *auctoritas* with *testimonium*.

²²⁹ *Ostendemus et doctrinam Platonis magis quam Aristotelis nostrae religioni consentaneam esse demonstrabimus* (*ICP* 2.1.1 p.81.16-17).

²³⁰ Published in Rome by Conradus Suneynheym and Arnoldus Pannartz and republished in Venice 1503 and in 1516 by Aldus Manutius and his father-in-law Andreas. It appears from Payne and Foss (1840) that *ICP* was the only book, apart from classical and patristic texts, to have a reprint in the early years of the Aldine press.

²³¹ Bessarion summarised the contents of Trebizond's *Comparatio* and the order and content of his reply thus: *Quae omnia tribus libris complexus [adversarius], in primo doctrinae comparationem facit nullis prorsus rationibus innixus, nisi quod Aristoteles artium praecepta conscripserit, Plato minime, propter quod Platonem eiusque studiosos inconstantia absurda, inepta, contraria, sibi invicem repugnantia, levia, ridicula, puerilia scripsisse ac dissevuisse commemorat, nullis omnino rationibus, nullo ratiocinandi genere usos opinatur; secundo libro opiniones Aristotelis nostrae religionis verissimis optimisque sententiis consentaneas esse conatur ostendere ac proinde veriores, Platonis autem dissentire a nostris, ideoque falsas esse et a veritate prorsus alienas; tertio vero atque postremo vitam Platonis contentissimam,*

respective philosophical, literary and rhetorical merits of Plato and Aristotle. The second book was the most philosophical and concerned Plato's treatment of a series of philosophical issues. The original book three addressed Plato's position on moral questions. Bessarion later added another book which became book three while the original book three was renumbered book four.²³² The new book three was a supplement to book two and used mainly Scholastic Latin sources to challenge Trebizond's case that Aristotle rather than Plato anticipated Christianity. Its purpose was to demonstrate the distortions of Trebizond rather than to criticise Aristotle.²³³

Bessarion had acquired a copy of Trebizond's *Comparatio* at the end of 1458 or early 1459. He lost no time in distributing it among a number of copyists so that he could have his own copy on the following day.²³⁴ He dashed off an immediate response in Greek during 1459 which he called Ἐλεγκοὶ τῶν κατὰ Πλάτωνος βλασφημιῶν. He made his own Latin translation of this entitled *Liber defensionum contra objectiones in Platonem*.²³⁵ This original version passed through a number of drafts over a period of ten years before final publication.²³⁶

innocentissimam integerrimamque accusat ac pro sua consuetudine iurgiis et contumeliis insectatur (ICP 1.1.3 p.5.35-p.7.2).

²³² Book three is only found in one of the five extant manuscripts (Marc. Gr.198). Bessarion seems to have added it in a later redaction. The Latin *incipit* suggests that it may have originally been intended for separate publication. It is the fruit of work by the Dominican Giovanni Gatti with advice from Theodore Gaza (see Del Soldato (2010) 321, and Monfasani (1981) and (1983)).

²³³ *Idcirco repetam argumenta illa, ut frivolis adversarii rationibus alias responsum utile pro viribus reddam syllogismosque eius colligam ex medio tumultu verborum, quibus, cum Platonem reprehendere studeat, se ipsum decipi labique per summos errores declarat, quamquam colligi eos atque in aliquam redigi speciem ratiocinandi longe difficilium quam solvere est (ICP 3.1.1 p.221.16-21).*

²³⁴ Marc. Lat. VI 76. Monfasani (1984) 72 notes as many as ten hands in the manuscript with headings of the chapters added by Bessarion.

²³⁵ The original 1459 text contains few Latin quotations except for some classical references, a generic reference to Aquinas and a citation from Jerome (*ICP* 2.5.1 p.92.24-5 and 4.1.14 p.438.35-6). Quotations from Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and *De Anima*, Boethius and Augustine were added in the following redaction.

²³⁶ For the history of the text see pages 9-10 and notes [2323](#) and [2525](#) above. See also Monfasani (2012) and (2013), Mohler (1923) 361-5, (1927) vii-viii and (1942) 641-2.

At the time of his original Greek draft Bessarion was conscious that he needed a more detailed response to Trebizond. His immediate response lacked the type of argument that would have been familiar to his Latin readers educated in the Scholastic tradition. He had assistance in this from the Dominican, Giovanni Gatti. Gatti supplied him with arguments and references from Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Duns Scotus, Averroes and others. With Gatti's help Bessarion wrote the additional book which he inserted into the final Greek redaction of *ICP*.²³⁷ The book is a detailed response to Trebizond's case that Aristotle rather than Plato anticipated Christianity, in which he drew on mainly Scholastic Latin sources. When the final text was published it had a new Latin title, *In Calumniatorem Platonis*. The speed of Bessarion's initial response, although not published, and the language which he used in referring to his adversary suggests that he was nettled and possibly that he felt threatened by Trebizond's attack. There was personal enmity between Bessarion and Trebizond which Bessarion acknowledged when he wrote of Trebizond *qui mecum familiaritate conjunctus aliquando fuisset*.²³⁸ This may account for some of the intemperate comments in *ICP*. In a marginal note in his copy of *ICP* the Cambridge theologian, Robert Ridley (d. 1536?), who was a supporter of Trebizond, commented that Bessarion hated Trebizond from the time of the election of Francesco della Rovere as Sixtus IV as Pope in preference to himself because, as an apostolic secretary, Trebizond had supported Sixtus.²³⁹

²³⁷ Gatti was a Thomist and according to S. Giordano in the *DBI* Bessarion owed much of his knowledge of Western Scholasticism to him. For Gatti see Monfasani (1997).

²³⁸ *ICP* 1.1.4 p.7.20-1. See also note ~~130+30~~ above.

²³⁹ The note is cited in Monfasani (2008) 6 n.33: *Fuerat Bessario omnium litteratorum refugium et patronus maximus; et Grecus homo Latinitatem non nisi tenuiter callebat. Verum quia in electione summi pontificis dum aliqui pro Bessarione, alii pro Xisto Quarto starent, Trpaezuntius, quia tunc apostolicus scriba fuerat, Bessarioni adversarius Xisto favit, idque ei successit, semper postea a Bessarione odio habitus est*. Rovere was elected Pope the year before Bessarion's death and two years after the publication of *ICP*. See note ~~130+30~~ above for the enmity between Bessarion and Trebizond.

Book two of ICP

Monfasani says of book two that it gives: ‘an account of Neo-Platonic metaphysics and methods of proof, drawn mainly from Greek sources, while demonstrating at the same time that while Aristotle was no Christian *avant la lettre*, Plato’s doctrines in fact offer comfort to Christianity... It is easy to show to-day how much Bessarion relied in book II on Simplicius’ Aristotelian commentaries and on Proclus’ commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* for much of his substantive argument’.²⁴⁰ The style of book two is discursive whereas book three, perhaps under the influence of the Dominican Gatti, is much closer to the style of a Scholastic *quaestio*.

In the following paragraphs I shall describe the structure and purpose of book two and why it is the focus of this thesis. Book two provides evidence of how Bessarion presented and interpreted Plato’s philosophy. Bessarion’s primary purpose in book two was to present Plato’s thought as close to Christian doctrine as possible and as a better philosophical base for Christianity than Aristotle. In the following chapters of this thesis I examine how Bessarion attempted this in dealing with a series of contentious philosophical issues.

According to Hankins: ‘It was Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* together with book two of Bessarion’s *Calumniator* which codified the high Renaissance practice of finding behind the text of Plato a systematic theology like that of Proclus and the Neoplatonic commentators’.²⁴¹ The book addresses a limited number of philosophical questions

²⁴⁰ Monfasani (2013) 356.

²⁴¹ Hankins (2004) II 422. Bessarion’s personal copy of Proclus’ *Theologia Platonica* is in Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek MS graec. 547). The many marginalia in Bessarion’s own hand are evidence of close personal study. See Labowsky (1979) 487, Saffrey (1955) and Saffrey and Westerink edd. (1968) I. cxx and cxxiv.

dictated by Trebizond's attack. Lohr's view is that books two and three were the most significant in the context of debates at the time.²⁴²

Bessarion insisted on the fundamental agreement between Plato and Aristotle and emphasised the continuity between classical and patristic thought.²⁴³ In the course of book two he frequently drew parallels between Plato and Aristotle; sometimes his arguments are forced. He was at pains not to do as Trebizond did and to heap praise on one and obloquy on the other.²⁴⁴ I have argued in chapter one above that he was in a tradition which held the essential conformity of Plato and Aristotle. He claimed that Trebizond's biased attack on Plato forced him against his will to counter it by favouring Plato before Aristotle and so appearing to condemn the latter.²⁴⁵ There is at least an apparent contradiction between his insistence on the agreement between Plato and Aristotle and his claim that Plato is closer to Christianity than Aristotle; if they agreed they should be equally close. I argue in the following chapter that the differences, according to Bessarion, are mainly of language rather than substance. As will be seen he acknowledged differences between Plato and Aristotle where they were irrefutable, for instance on questions regarding fate, but went to great lengths to gloss over some differences (see pages 178-9 and 187-9 below).

²⁴² See Lohr (1988) 566. I deal in Chapter seven below with the contemporary and later influence of *ICP*.

²⁴³ See Lohr (1988) especially 566-70. Lohr also argues that by contrast Ficino's translation of the Platonic corpus was made in opposition to the Aristotelianism of the schools and without explicit reference to Greek ecclesiastical writers. For Bessarion the agreement of Plato, Neo-Platonism and revelation was important but Ficino almost seemed to place Platonism before the gospels. Unlike Ficino Bessarion had no interest in questions about man's place in the universe, his experience of the contemplative life and the theory of love.

²⁴⁴ *Nos enim de Aristotele quoque semper honestissime loquimur, absitque a nobis tam prava atque insolens cogitatio, ut dum Platonem tuemur, detrudere illi velimus. Utrumque sapientissimum fuisse arbitramur et gratias utrique pro beneficiis, quae in genus humanum contulerunt, agendas existimamus* (*ICP* 2.3.1 p.85.8-10). He quoted Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (993^b11-19) to the effect that philosophers owe a debt of gratitude to previous thinkers, even those whose ideas were rather superficial.

²⁴⁵ *Verum id mihi molestum hoc loco accidit, quod ea cogor scribere, quae minime vellem. Facit enim adversarii iniquitas adversus Platonem, ut qui non minus Aristotelem quam ipsum soleo laudare, fungi officio meo minus videar* (*ICP* 2.3.1 p.83.29-32). *Uter eorum [Plato and Aristotle] melius senserit et religioni nostrae convenientius, operae pretium erit declarare, praesertim cum nullam Aristoteteli iniuriam illaturus sim, si praeferre ei Platonem videbor, siquidem non ultro ad hanc comparisonem accessi, sed iniquitate adversarii coactus, qui eos adeo turpiter et ignominiose conferre invicem non erubuit. Nam mea quidem sententia Aristoteles laudandus est et doctrina, qua plurimum claruit, et studio, quo bene de hominum genere meritis est* (*ICP* 2.3.3 p.87.21-28).

The purpose of book two: Plato and Christian belief

In the first chapter of book two Bessarion stated that his purpose was ‘to show that Plato’s teaching is more consistent with our religion than Aristotle’s’.²⁴⁶ Book two focusses on three philosophical/theological issues which were litmus tests of Christian orthodoxy- the divine creation of the cosmos *ex nihilo*, personal immortality and God’s providence and human free will. Bessarion aimed to set out Plato’s opinions carefully since they were unknown to most Latins: *Platonis vero opiniones summo studio conabimur exponere, quoniam omnibus fere Latinis ignotae sunt, partim quia libri eius in Romanam conversi linguam non habentur, partim quod, si qui habentur, interpretum vitio minus recte sententiam sui exprimunt auctoris.*²⁴⁷ He was careful to say in several places that neither Plato nor Aristotle were Christians but pagans.²⁴⁸ He frankly admitted that he did not agree with Plato in everything and stipulated some of the points on which he differed- the pre-existence of souls, multiplicity of gods, ensouled cosmos and stars and some other matters *quibus gentiles ab ecclesia damnantur.*²⁴⁹ He gave a clue to what he meant when he said that Plato was consistent with Christianity when he said that he wanted to demonstrate to anybody looking for corroboration of Christianity in the pagan philosophers that they were more likely to find it in Plato than Aristotle.²⁵⁰ He implied that the truths of faith did not depend on proofs drawn from Plato or other pagan philosophers but they might be corroborated by them. On the other hand when Plato’s philosophical arguments, however

²⁴⁶ ICP 2.1 p.82.16-17.

²⁴⁷ ICP 2.3.2 p.85.36-p.87.3.

²⁴⁸ *Alienus enim uterque a nostra fide tam Plato quam Aristotelis fuit et ut nomine sic religione gentilis uterque* (ICP 2.1.1 p.81.18-20). *Fuerunt nimirum et ipse [Aristotle] et Plato gentiles et plures uterque divinitates superiores atque inferiores opinatus est* (ICP 2.5.13 p.109.17-19).

²⁴⁹ ICP 2.3.3 p.87.17-19.

²⁵⁰ *Itaque non est consilium laborare, ut Platonem Christianum fuisse ostendamus, quem ad modum de Aristotele facit adversarius, sed ita hunc locum conabimur tractare, ut si quis ex auctoritate quoque gentilium philosophorum veritatem nostrae religionis corroborare voluerit, Platonis potius libris quam Aristotelis id effici posse demonstramus* (ICP 2.1 p.81.23-7).

compelling, conflicted with revelation Bessarion made clear the primacy of revelation as in questions about the eternity of creation and the transmigration of souls.²⁵¹

He articulated his view of the relationship between Plato's philosophy and Christian teaching in a chapter entitled *Quod inepte interpretetur adversarius verba Aristotelis in principio de Caelo et Mundo*.²⁵² It was ostensibly a response to Trebizond's claim that Aristotle had known of the one and triune God and Plato had no knowledge of such matters.²⁵³ In a chapter entitled *De vestigio unius ac trini dei corporibus impresso in quantum corpora sunt (Comparatio 2.5)* Trebizond had interpreted Aristotle's words in *de Caelo* about the Pythagorean view that the universe and all within it were determined by the number three as a reference to the Trinity.²⁵⁴ Bessarion dismissed Trebizond's claim as rubbish (*pueriliter*). If Aristotle's words were truly a reference to the Trinity, it was extraordinary, he argued, that the Fathers had made no mention of Aristotle's reference. In any case, Aristotle was writing about the principles of physical nature not of the immaterial nature of God. Bessarion went on to use Trebizond's claim as a peg to explore in detail in what way Plato is nearer to Christianity than Aristotle.

²⁵¹ *Nos ex fide religionis nostrae omnia rite tuemur, cum principium finemque universi statuamus. At gentiles, qui mundum aeternum posuere, fieri non potest, ut hanc Platonis opinionem aspernentur (ICP 2.8.8 p.147.26-8).*

²⁵² *ICP 2.5.*

²⁵³ *Ostendere polliciti sumus Aristotelem ...aperte a vestigio rebus impresso subintellexisse deum unum ac trinum esse....Qua de re Plato nihil penitus somniavit, nisi quod in legibus verbum, verbum dixit patris, et quasi furore concitatus, statim obmutuit, nec quicquam aliud ultra ad rem tantam pertinens adjecit (Trebizond Comparatio 2.4).*

²⁵⁴ καθάπερ γὰρ φασὶ καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι, τὸ πᾶν καὶ τὰ πάντα τοῖς τρισὶν ὄρισται· τελευτὴ γὰρ καὶ μέσον καὶ ἀρχὴ τὸν ἀριθμὸν ἔχει τὸν τοῦ παντός, ταῦτα δὲ τὸν τῆς τριάδος (*de Caelo* 268^a11-13). Trebizond wrote at the end of *Comparatio 2.4: dico Aristotelem unius dei trinitatem intellexisse, idque in primo de caelo et mundo ex vestigio corporibus impresso enodasse*. Bessarion devoted five chapters of book three of *ICP* (15-19) to demonstrating the perversity of Trebizond's interpretation of Aristotle. He began chapter seventeen: *Pergit in asserendo vestigium satis esse ad trinitatis cognitionem, affertque non item argumentum, sed conclusionem sine ulla probatione*.

His argument was that knowledge of the Trinity is only revealed through faith and divine teaching but Plato adumbrates it in some of his language.²⁵⁵ He quoted the enigma from Plato's letter to Dionysius: 'All things relate to the king of all and everything is for his sake and he is the source of all that is beautiful; the Second relates to secondary things and the third to third things.'²⁵⁶ Plato described this statement as an enigma to be used as a means of keeping secret truths from the uninitiated. Being an enigma it attracted much interest and many interpretations.²⁵⁷ Some Christian writers thought it was a reference to the Trinity of God e.g. Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 5.14 in Migne *P.G.* 9. col.156B). Justin Martyr (*Apology* I.60) believed Plato derived it from the Hebrew scriptures. Eusebius (*Praep. Ev.* XI.20) quoted the same passage from Plato's letter and said that Plato was expressing an idea similar to the Trinity. He said that those trying to interpret Plato's words apply them to the first God, to the second cause and to the third which is the soul of the world: ταῦτα ἐπὶ τὸν πρῶτον θεὸν ἀνάγουσιν ἐπὶ τε τὸ δεύτερον αἴτιον καὶ τρίτον τὴν τοῦ κόσμου ψυχὴν, θεὸν τρίτον καὶ αὐτὴν εἶναι ὀριζόμενοι. The interpretation, to which Eusebius does not appear to commit himself, is based on the Neo-Platonic procession τὸ ἕν καὶ τὰγαθὸν, νοῦς, ψυχὴ.²⁵⁸ Bessarion had this interpretation in mind when he wrote: *dum gradus divinitatis [Plato] statueret, primum omnium entium principium ponit* (τὴν πρωτίστην τῶν ὄντων ἀρχὴν), *ingeneratum, aeternum...a nulla causa dependens, quod et unum et summum bonum* (τὸ ἕν καὶ τὰγαθὸν) *appellat....Mox vero primum ens statuit, quod et mentem primam et formam primam* (τὸ πρότιστον ὄν καὶ νοῦν καὶ πρότιστον εἶδος) *vult esse....Post haec tertium ordine et dignitate universi animam* (τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ παντός) *ponit... qua se mobile est a se ipsa productam. Et*

²⁵⁵ *Non est divinarum rerum quaerenda ratio, sed sola fide et divina institutione recipienda sunt, quae credimus....Plato vero multa certe de trinitate locutus est, sed longe aliter, quam nostra religio doceat* (ICP 2.5.3 p.95.27-34).

²⁵⁶ *περὶ τὸν πάντων βασιλέα πάντ' ἐστὶ καὶ ἐκεῖνου ἕνεκα πάντα, καὶ ἐκεῖνο αἴτιον ἀπάντων τῶν καλῶν· δεύτερον δὲ περὶ τὰ δεύτερα, καὶ τρίτον περὶ τὰ τρίτα* (*Epistolae* 312e1-4).

²⁵⁷ See Novotný ed. (1930) 73-80.

²⁵⁸ Proclus *Plat. theol.* edd. Saffrey and Westerink I.3.14.5-16.18.

hucusque processisse divinitatem existimavit (*ICP* 2.5.3 p.95.34-97 1). But he conceded that this was very different from the Christian belief.

To support his case that Plato's language adumbrated the Trinity Bessarion quoted passages from Plato's *Republic* and other texts where he believed Plato was using a language that adumbrated the second person of the Trinity and the Word of God.²⁵⁹ He supplemented the quotes from Plato by quoting from Plotinus, Porphyry and Numenius, who, he believed, used Trinitarian language.²⁶⁰ He took the quotations of the Platonists from Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* XI 17-19 where Eusebius was presenting Greek philosophy as a preparation for the gospel. In chapters eighteen to nineteen Eusebius compared passages from Numenius and Amelius with texts in the Old and New Testaments. He wrote regarding a perceived parallel between a text from Numenius' (*De Bono* fr. 18) and John 5.19 that Numenius was elaborating ideas of Plato and these ideas first came from Hebrew sages (*Praep. Ev.* XI.18.25-26). Eusebius' point was that the language of Plato and the Platonists was derived from the Hebrew scriptures and therefore could be truly said to adumbrate Christianity.²⁶¹ Bessarion's point was not so obvious since he does not state it explicitly. In a later passage of *ICP* he referred, but without committing himself, to the belief in the Hebrew source of the *Timaeus*.²⁶² But in *ICP* 2.5.9 his purpose was to demonstrate that in Plato there was 'a certain reflection of our religion'. This is an irony since he appeared to be doing just what he denounced in Trebizond's case as *pueriliter*. He illustrated with these citations from Plato and others his claim that Plato

²⁵⁹ In *ICP* 2.5.4-5 he quoted from *Republic* 506d-e, 508a-c, 509b, *Epinomis* 986c-d and *Epistolae* 6.323c-d.

²⁶⁰ At *ICP* 2.5.6-7 he quoted from Plotinus *Enneads* V.1.6.38-45, Porphyry *apud Cyril Contra Julianum* (Migne *P.G.* 76 col. 553B) and Numenius frs. 11 and 12 ed. Des Places.

²⁶¹ Eusebius stated his thesis in the preamble to book XI of *Praep. Ev.*: τοὺς Ἕλληνας μηδὲν οἰκοθεν σοφὸν ἐπενηγεμένους...τὰ πάντα δὲ παρὰ βαρβάρων ἐσκευωρημένους, μηδὲ τὰ Ἑβραίων ἀγνοῆσαι λόγια καὶ τούτων δὲ ἐν μέρει καθάψασθαι.

²⁶² *ICP* 3.8.2 p.245.15-20.

spoke of the Trinity ‘but in a very different way from our religion’.²⁶³ His use of Plotinus, Porphyry and Numenius as authorities is an indication that he regarded the *Platonici* as authentic interpreters of Plato although his readers would have had little acquaintance with them at the time, except from quotations, as they were not available in Latin translation.

Having been explicit that neither Plato nor Aristotle nor any other pagan philosopher spoke of the Trinity in the way Christians understood revelation, Bessarion was in danger of contradicting himself with his claim that Plato and the Platonists use Trinitarian language.²⁶⁴ He makes an important statement about the relationship of Plato to Christianity when he wrote that there was a reflection of Christianity in Plato which he attained by natural reason and this reflection could be an aid in advancing to a complete understanding of Christianity. Some of the principles of true theology seem to leap off the pages of Plato: *Speciem quandam nostrae religionis in Platone fuisse non diffitemur luce naturae illustratam, quam eius creator et princeps divina filii sui doctrina postea plenius aperuit et sua beneficentia manifestius revelavit. Qua specie non mediocriter iuvare posse hominem arbitramur, qui ex Platonis doctrina ad nostrae religionis perfectionem se contulerit. Ita principia quaedam verae theologiae e Platonis scriptis surgere et quasi scaturire videntur.*²⁶⁵ This statement picks up a theme from the very first chapter of *ICP* where Bessarion said that the doctors of the Church used the writings of Plato against

²⁶³ *ICP* 2.5.3 p.95.33-4. See note ~~255~~ above.

²⁶⁴ *ICP* 2.5.3 p.95.23-25. He wrote that if there were any references to the Trinity in pagan authors they were found far more in Plato than Aristotle: *si quid tamen significationis et cuiusdam suspectionis tantae rei [the Trinity] vel in exteris auctoribus quaerenda sit et notanda, longe plura expressioraque indicia comperiri apud Platonem quam apud Aristotelem possunt* (*ICP* 3.15.1 p.283.29-32). The precise significance of the conditional clause is puzzling. Bessarion did not think Plato adumbrated the Trinity. Perhaps it just expressed Bessarion’s conviction that Plato was closer to Christianity than Aristotle and implied: ‘If any ancient pagan philosopher was going to adumbrate the Trinity, it was most likely to be Plato’. See the title of Chapter *ICP* 3.15: *Quod mysterium trinitatis nec ad Platonem nec ad Aristotelem referendum est, quamvis apud Platonem aliqua huius rei significatio est.*

²⁶⁵ *ICP* 2.5.9 p.103.14-20.

those who attacked the church.²⁶⁶ An attack on Plato is, therefore, an attack on the doctors of the Church and on the Church itself.²⁶⁷ The implication is that Bessarion thought that faith has a base in reason and that Plato offered the most rational philosophical basis for Christian truth. In Bessarion's view an attack on Plato could be seen as taking an axe to the truths of faith.

Bessarion found support for his belief in the place of faith in theology in Plato and the Neo-Platonists. He wrote that the main point of convergence between Plato and Christianity was his belief that faith was the principal virtue through which we reach divine matters.²⁶⁸ He contrasted Plato with Aristotle. Aristotle insisted that rational demonstration was always essential.²⁶⁹ Bessarion's point was that theological knowledge transcends νοῦς as he had made clear: *Non est divina rerum quaerenda ratio, sed sola fide et divina institutione recipienda, alioquin nulla fidei merces nobis deberetur.*²⁷⁰ The claim that Plato placed such a high value on *fides* is difficult to sustain. In the *Timaeus* Plato contrasted knowledge of the model (which is unchanging and the sphere of truth) with knowledge of the changing copy (which is the sphere of belief). He wrote that truth is to

²⁶⁶ *Quippe doctores nostri sanctissimi viri adversus eos, qui rectae fidei fundamenta deicere et religionem christianam pravis rationibus pessumdare voluerunt, eam imprimis defensionem rati sunt optimam esse, si verbis auctorum, quos ipsi tamquam sapientes sectabantur, quasi quibusdam telis eorum tela retunderent fidemque nostram illorum praesidio roborarent. Itaque Platonem mihi imprimis quasi optimum testem citarunt et dictis ipsius, quantum peregrino testimonio fieri potuit, fidem nobis divinitus traditam confirmavere (ICP 1.1.4 p.7.31-p.9.3).*

²⁶⁷ See note ~~226226~~ above.

²⁶⁸ *Plato vero in hoc praecipue cum nostra religione convenire videtur, quod nullam quaerit demonstrationis rationem, sed primam praecipuamque omnium virtutum fidem constituit, per quam res divinas merito colendas existimat (ICP 2.5.11 p.105.15-18).* Platonic 'faith' is very different from Christian faith.(see page 75).

²⁶⁹ *Demonstrationis enim necessitatem ubique sectatus est [sc.Aristotle] nec versari in rebus voluit, quae probari manifesta ratione non possent (ICP 2.5.10 p.105.9-10).* He went on to say that Aristotle had nothing to say about supernatural theological matters. *Fidem autem de supernis ac divinis rebus, quibus nihil est prius, unde sumi demonstrationis medium possit, cum omnium rerum primae et universorum causae sint, praeteriit omnino, ita ut non modo nihil de his scripserit, sed etiam quid senserit, obscurum omnibus reliquerit (ibid. p.105.10-14).*

²⁷⁰ ICP 2.5.3 p.95.27-29.

faith as being is to becoming: ὅτιπερ πρὸς γένεσιν οὐσία, τοῦτο πρὸς πίστιν ἀλήθεια.²⁷¹ He also claimed that any human account of the gods and generation of the universe could only be likely accounts (εἰκότας). To support his case about Plato's belief in *fides* Bessarion quoted from *Timaeus* 40, *Laws* 630a-c, 926e-927a, *Gorgias* 523, 524a, and 526d. This selection of citations of Plato is largely paralleled in Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* but Bessarion used them differently.

In the *Timaeus* (40d6-e4) Plato said that we cannot know about the other gods but must rely (πειστέον) on the testimony of the descendents of the gods from former times. He was referring to the theogonies attributed to Orpheus, Musaeus and other descendants of the gods. According to Plato we cannot disbelieve the children of gods although their accounts did not include probable or necessary proofs (ἄνευ τε εἰκότων καὶ ἀναγκαίων ἀποδείξεων λέγουσιν). He treated *fides* as belief in the authority of the ancients as guarantors of truth. Eusebius quoted this passage from the *Timaeus* three times in the *Praeparatio Evangelica* but he took the phrase ἄνευ τε εἰκότων καὶ ἀναγκαίων as evidence of Plato's rejection of the authority of the ancients contrasting it with the faith that Christians can have in the Hebrew scriptures.²⁷² Bessarion, on the other hand, cited the same text to suggest an analogy between Plato's πίστις and Christian faith.²⁷³

In *Laws* 630a5-6 Plato quoted the poet Theognis' use of πιστός :

πιστὸς ἀνὴρ χρυσοῦ τε καὶ ἀργύρου ἀντερύσασθαι

ἄξιός ἐν χαλεπῇ, Κύρνε, διχοστασίῃ.

Plato was arguing that the bravest warriors were those who were loyal in civil strife. They combined in themselves justice, prudence, wisdom and courage (630a8-b2). Bessarion

²⁷¹ *Timaeus* 29b1-d2.

²⁷² *Praep. Ev.* XIII.14.1-5.

²⁷³ *ICP* 2.5.11 p.105.18-24.

quoted this passage to support his argument that Plato regarded *fides* as the *prima praecipuaque omnium virtutum* (ICP 2.5.11 p.105.15-18 and 24-35). In doing so he drew on Proclus as well as Eusebius.²⁷⁴ Eusebius (*Praep. Ev.* XII.2) quoted the same passage from the *Laws* in a chapter entitled ὅτι μέγιστη τῶν ἀρετῶν καὶ κατὰ Πλάτωνα ἡ πίστις τυγχάνει. He noted the same link between faith and reason (πίστις καὶ φρόνησις) as in the New Testament. He argued that it was not irrational faith but a faith which brings union with the highest virtues.²⁷⁵ Proclus also cited the text in *Platonic Theology* (I.25 ed. Saffrey and Westerink p.112.15-20) when he wrote: ‘Plato declared faith (πιστότητα) to be the virtue that reconciles different parties and the resolution of the greatest wars (I refer to civil strife) for it is apparent that faith (πίστις) is the cause of unity, community and peace’. The context of Proclus’ citation, as will be seen below, is that πίστις leads to ἔνωσις with the good.

In *Laws* XI (926d8-927d4) the Athenian stranger enjoined trust in lawgivers (πιστεύειν τοῖς νομοθετοῦσι) when they tell tales of the power of the dead to care for human affairs. Bessarion made a comparison between this passage and II Maccabees 15.14 where Jeremiah appears in a dream to Maccabaeus and prays for his people as if caring for those still on earth. He was drawing on Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica* XII.3 where Eusebius quoted the same passage from the *Laws* and drew the parallel with Maccabees. Bessarion’s conclusion that Plato enjoined trust in the lawgivers: οἷς (i.e. the words of the lawgivers) καὶ Πλάτων ἐνταῦθα πιστεύειν φησί (ICP 2.5.11 p.106.10) was the same as Eusebius’: δεῖν δέ φησι καὶ ὁ Πλάτων τούτοις πιστεύειν (*Praep. Ev.* XII.3.2).

²⁷⁴ Clement of Alexandria used the same passage from the *Laws* to demonstrate that ἐκ δὴ τούτων καταφαίνεται μέγιστη μὲν εὐχὴ, τὸ εἰρήνην ἔχειν, κατὰ Πλάτωνα· μέγιστη δὲ ἀρετῶν μήτηρ, ἡ πίστις (*Stromata* II.5 in Migne *P.G.* 8 col. 957A).

²⁷⁵ [ὁ Πλάτων] σαφῶς γοῦν ἐν τούτοις οὐ τὴν ἄλογον πίστιν ἀποδέχεσθαι παρίστησιν, ἀλλὰ τὴν ταῖς μέγισταις ἀρεταῖς συνεζευγμένην, εἰ δὴ τοιαῦτα φρόνησις καὶ ἀγαθωσύνη (*Praep. Ev.* XII.2.5).

Gorgias 523a1- 527a4 is Socrates' account taken from Homer (*Iliad* XV.187 sqq.) of the judgement of the dead after death by Minos, Rhadamanthys and Aeacus and their dispatch to the Isles of the Blest or Tartarus. Bessarion quoted two sentences from Plato's text in which Socrates professed his firm belief in the story: ταῦτ' ἔστιν, ὃ Καλλίκλεις, ἃ ἐγὼ ἀκηκοὼς πιστεύω ἀληθῆ εἶναι (524a7-8) and ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν, ὦ Καλλίκλεις, ὑπὸ τούτων τῶν λόγων πέπεισμαι (526d3-4). Bessarion's point must be that Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, accepted that belief in the words of Homer could provide a guarantee of truth. Socrates' opening words that what he had to say was an account rather than a tale and therefore, in his view, true are not quoted by Bessarion but were quoted by Eusebius at the start of *Praeparatio Evangelica* XII.6.²⁷⁶ In that chapter Eusebius argued that: 'Plato does not only accept faith in words but his whole mind believes in these things and agrees with what we (Christians) believe as Plato demonstrated in the *Gorgias*.' He quoted *in extenso* *Gorgias* 523a-527b. But Eusebius' point was not about the certainty that faith gives but that Plato's account of judgement after death was parallel to the Christian belief in judgement after death (XII.6.23).

In these citations from Plato Bessarion was demonstrating that Plato placed a high value on πίστις particularly on trust in established authority. He was following the lead of Eusebius in showing the closeness of Plato to Christianity. Eusebius' interest lay in demonstrating the parallels with Christianity whereas Bessarion was interested in the nature of πίστις. In his argument that Plato believed in πίστις Bessarion also quoted from Proclus' *Platonic Theology* where Proclus says that the faith of the gods unites all things to the good. We find the good by abandoning ourselves to the divine light. This faith is superior to knowledge: πρὸς δὲ αὐτὸ ἀγαθὸν οὐ γνώσεως ἔτι καὶ συνεργείας δεῖ τοῖς

²⁷⁶ ἄκουε δὴ μάλα καλοῦ λόγου, ὃν σὺ μὲν ἠγήσει μῦθον, ὡς ἐγὼ οἶμαι, ἐγὼ δὲ λόγον· ὡς ἀληθῆ γὰρ ὄντα σοὶ λέξω ἃ μέλλω λέγειν (*Gorgias* 523a1-3).

συναφθῆναι σπεύδουσιν, ἀλλ' ἰδρύσεως καὶ μονίμου καταστάσεως καὶ ἡρεμίας....ὡς μὲν
 τὸ ὄλον εἶπεῖν, τῶν θεῶν πίστις ἐστὶν ἢ πρὸς τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἀρρήτως ἐνίζουσα τά τε τῶν θεῶν
 γένη σύμπαντα καὶ δαιμόνων καὶ ψυχῶν τὰς εὐδαιμονας. δεῖ γὰρ οὐ γνωστικῶς οὐδὲ
 ἀτελῶς τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἐπιζητεῖν, ἀλλ' ἐπιδόντας ἑαυτοὺς τῷ θεῷ φωτὶ καὶ μύσαντας οὕτως
 ἐνιδρῦεσθαι τῇ ἀγνώστῳ καὶ κρυφίῳ τῶν ὄντων ἐνάδι. τὸ γὰρ τοιοῦτον τῆς πίστεως γένος
 πρεσβύτερόν ἐστι τῆς γνωστικῆς ἐνεργείας.²⁷⁷ Since Bessarion was giving an account of
 Plato's belief in πίστις it suggests that he regarded Proclus as an authoritative voice of
 Plato. He said of Proclus, in quoting him: *quem ex eadem Platonis disciplina fluxisse
 constat.*²⁷⁸ In *Platonic Theology* 1.25 Proclus gave a full account of the nature of the faith
 by which the soul is united in love with God. He said that union with the One is called
 πίστις by the theologians. He cited the authority of Plato's *Laws* for the link between
 'faith' and truth and love.²⁷⁹ It is not clear what passage in the *Laws* Proclus had in mind
 but he drew the triad of faith, truth and love from the theurgic virtues (πίστις, ἀληθεία,
 ἔρωσ) in the *Chaldaean Oracles*.²⁸⁰ In the *Republic* (511d6-e4) Plato placed πίστις, which
 operates in the realm of changeable sensible perceptions, on a level below νόησις and
 διάνοια. Proclus in *Platonic Theology* 1.25 distinguished his use of πίστις from Plato's
 sense.²⁸¹ For Proclus πίστις is not an activity of the intellect (μηδὲ τὴν κατὰ νοῦν ἐνέργειαν
 τῇ τοιαύτῃ πίστει τὴν αὐτὴν εἶναι λέγωμεν) but is intuitive above the level of intellect (δι'

²⁷⁷ *Plat. theol.* I.25 ed. Saffrey and Westerink pp.109.24-110.13. Bessarion's text in *ICP* 2.5.11 p.106. 17-24 is slightly different from Saffrey and Westerink. In particular he uses ἐνῶθηναι rather than συναφθῆναι.

²⁷⁸ *ICP* 2.5.11 p.107.17.

²⁷⁹ Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.25 ed Saffrey and Westerink p.112.1-24. For Bessarion's debt to Proclus' *Plat. theol.* in book two of *ICP* see Hankins (1990) 441-44.

²⁸⁰ See fr. 46 in Des Places ed. (1971) p78. Compare Proclus: καὶ [δεῖ] τὴν τάξιν τῶν θείων ἔργων ἀσάλευτον φυλάττειν ἀρετάς τε ἀπὸ τῆς γενέσεως καθαρτικὰς καὶ ἀναγωγὸς προβεβλησθαι καὶ πίστιν καὶ ἀλήθειαν καὶ ἔρωτα, ταύτην ἐκείνην τὴν τριάδα, καὶ ἐλπίδα τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀτρεπτόν τε ὑποδοχὴν τοῦ θείου φωτὸς καὶ ἔκστασιν ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν ἄλλων ἐπιτηδευμάτων, ἵνα μόνος τις τῷ θεῷ μόνῳ συνῆ καὶ μὴ μετὰ πλήθους τῷ ἐνὶ συνάπτειν ἑαυτὸν ἐγχειρῆῖ (*in Tim.* 1.212.19-25). See also *in Alcibiadem* 51-2 ed. Segonds I pp.42-3. For the background to the triad see Wallis (1995) 153-5. On Neo-Platonic faith see Rist (1967) 231-46.

²⁸¹ εἰ δὲ δεῖ καὶ καθ' ἕκαστον ἀφορίζεσθαι, μή μοι τὴν τοιαύτην πίστιν τῇ περὶ τὰ αἰσθητὰ πλάνη τὴν αὐτὴν ὑπολάβησ'· αὕτη μὲν γὰρ ἐπιστήμης ἀπολείπεται καὶ πολλῶ μᾶλλον τῆς τῶν ὄντων ἀληθείας, ἡ δὲ γε τῶν θεῶν πίστις ἅπασαν ὑπεραίρει γνῶσιν καὶ κατ' αὐτὴν ἄκραν τὴν ἔνωσιν συνάπτει τὰ δευτέρα τοῖς πρώτοις (*Plat. theol.* I.25 ed. Saffrey and Westerink p.110.17-22).

ἐτερότητος χωριζομένη τῶν νοουμένων).²⁸² Bessarion did not point out the difference between Christian πίστις in Christ and Platonic πίστις as interpreted by Proclus based on the Chaldaean oracles. What was important for Bessarion was that Plato or at least the Platonists accepted πίστις as a necessary condition for union with the One and that it was beyond reason. Bessarion was selecting his sources to present Plato in a way to suit his thesis that Plato adumbrated Christian teaching.

According to Majercik: ‘It may well be that [Proclus’] emphasis on Faith...was prompted by rivalry with Christianity...Proclan Faith is not, then, the same as Christian Faith nor even traditional Platonic Faith. Christian Faith is first and foremost faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord; traditional Platonic Faith is based on *doxa* and conviction from sense data...Proclan Faith, on the other hand, is a ‘theurgic power’ which unifies the soul and unites it with God.’²⁸³ Bessarion may have had in mind the view, which he shared with Plato, that when it came to theological discourse reason alone was inadequate. I deal with this question in the next chapter of this thesis.

The Structure of ICP 2

The logic of the ordering of Bessarion’s chapters is not always easy to see. Individual chapters are long and the order of thought is sometimes opaque. There are twelve chapters in book two plus a brief epilogue.²⁸⁴ For convenience I group them as follows:

- Chapters 1, 2 and 3: introductory chapters on the relationship of Plato and Christian doctrine and on the relation of Plato and Aristotle.

²⁸² *Plat. theol.* I.25 ed. Saffrey and Westerink p.111.

²⁸³ Majercik (1989) 12.

²⁸⁴ I am following the order of chapters in the Latin edition. The order and numbering of chapters in the Greek is slightly different.

- Chapters 4, 6, 7 and 11: on the origin of being, the creation of the cosmos and the nature of matter.
- Chapter 8 on the soul.
- Chapters 9 and 10 on providence, fate and free will.

In the next chapter of this thesis I shall consider Bessarion's view on the nature of philosophical discourse and differences between Plato and Aristotle. I shall draw mainly on the material in chapter 12 of *ICP 2* and from chapters 4 and 8. I shall then devote a chapter to Bessarion's treatment of being, the creation of the cosmos and the nature of matter, drawing on chapters 4, 6, 7 and 11 of *ICP 2*. Then I shall devote a chapter to the soul, drawing on chapter 5 of *ICP 2*. I shall follow with a chapter on providence, fate and free will, drawing on chapters 9 and 10. I have included material from Bessarion's chapter 5 earlier in the current chapter two and I incorporate material from Bessarion's chapter 12 in my chapter three on the nature of philosophical discourse.

Chapter three

The nature of philosophical discourse

Summary

Contrary to the prevailing view at the time Bessarion regarded the form of Plato's philosophical discourse as superior to that of Aristotle as a tool of theological reasoning. Bessarion regarded Aristotle as a follower of Plato and, therefore, an authoritative interpreter of his master but he saw a big difference in their use of philosophic language. This chapter will examine Bessarion's approach to the text of Plato and his understanding of the nature of philosophical discourse. His explanations of Aristotle's critique of Plato carry implied critiques of Aristotle's metaphysics as a theological tool. He was mounting a critique of contemporary modes of fifteenth-century philosophical discourse. His opinions have to be distilled from his defence of Plato's form of philosophic discourse against its critics and his critique of Aristotle. At the heart of his thinking is the problem of framing in language arguments about matters that transcend the physical world and our experience of it. He said: 'As there is no reasoning or discourse that can be applied to divine and intelligible matters so there is no appropriate language or vocabulary.'²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ *Etenim substantiarum huiusmodi ut nullus sermo est, ita nulla vocabulorum haberi proprietates potest (ICP 2.8.17 p.157 15-16)*. An example of the way Bessarion saw the difficulty of expressing in human language divine or supra sensual ideas is his interpretation of Plato's account of creation. See page 137-8 and note ~~515515~~ below.

I begin by setting out the intellectual climate in the fifteenth century within which Bessarion was writing and showing how it was divided by debate over the nature of philosophical and theological discourse. I then argue that Bessarion's justification of Plato's apparent obscurity was a vindication of the use of analogical language in theology and rendered Plato closer in this respect to Christianity than Aristotle. I consider Bessarion's views about the use of myth and symbol in theological language. Finally I deal with Bessarion's critique of Aristotle's mode of philosophical argument as a tool of theology. In his view any treatment of theological matters must inevitably be obscure, partly because of the difficulties of those who had no education in the nature of theology and its language and partly because theology of its nature required the use of analogical language and metaphor which did not easily fit into the constraints of logic.²⁸⁶

The cultural climate

The nature of philosophical discourse was hotly debated in the fifteenth century. Battle lines were drawn between those who advocated the traditional Aristotelian approach which by that time had been articulated into a discipline of sophisticated logic and those who supported a more intuitive language and argument deriving from Plato. Aristotelian Scholasticism had been dominant in Italy and Northern Europe since the thirteenth century. Kristeller defines the Scholastic method as the type of logical argument represented by the *quaestio*.²⁸⁷ This was not the method of Plato or the tradition of Bessarion. The argument was summed up by Ficino who found in the revelations of the

²⁸⁶ The use of the word 'theology' in this context may be confusing. It would not have meant the same thing to a Christian theologian as it did to Plato, Aristotle and their non-Christian commentators. Theology, for Aristotle, was the science of first principles or metaphysics in contrast to physics, which was concerned with the changes in the sublunary world and to ethics. Aristotle described theology as the primary science distinct from physics and mathematics which concerned things such as first causes that are both separable from matter and immutable (*Metaphysics* 1026^a6-22).

²⁸⁷ Kristeller (1961) 112.

Neo-Platonist commentators on Plato the light of true theology which had been obscured by the propaganda of the Peripatetics.²⁸⁸

A major objection levelled at Plato was that he was obscure. Augustine, who admired Plato, conceded in *De Civitate Dei* that he dealt with lofty matters but he followed his teacher, Socrates, in the practice of hiding his opinions and was not easy to understand, so his philosophical views were difficult to determine.²⁸⁹ This objection was persistent. Even in the sixteenth century Melanchthon, although sympathetic to Plato, thought that his works were too difficult for young people to understand and that they should concentrate on Aristotle.²⁹⁰ He criticised Plato for being ambiguous and unsystematic.²⁹¹ The perceived problem with Plato is well illustrated by Francesco Verino who was professor of logic and philosophy in Pisa 1559-1590. In contravention of the University statutes he lectured on Plato until forced to stop because of protests by colleagues. He described the objections to

²⁸⁸ In a letter to Janus Pannonius Ficino wrote: *Tandem vero a divo Platone [pia philosophia] consummaretur Athenis. Vetus autem theologorum mos erat divina mysteria tum mathematicis numeris et figuris, tum poeticis figmentis obtegere. Plotinus tandem his theologiam velaminibus enudavit; primusque et solus, ut Porphyrius Proculusque testantur, arcana veterum divinitus penetravit. Sed ob incredibilem tum verborum breviter et sententiarum copiam sensusque profunditatem, non translatione tantum linguae sed comentariis indiget. Nos ergo in theologis superioribus traducendis et explicandis hactenus laboravimus, nunc vero quotidie in Plotini libris similiter laboramus, huic operi nos sicut et illi suo divinitus destinati, ut, hac theologia in lucem prodeunte, et poetae desinant gesta mysteriaque pietatis impie fabulis annumerare, et Peripatetici, id est, philosophi omnes admoneantur non esse de religione tanquam de anilibus fabulis sentiendum. Totus enim terrarum orbis a Peripateticis occupatus in duas plurimum divisus est sectas, Alexandrinam et Averroicam* (quoted at Allen (1998) 16 n.27). Ficino associated the Aristotelians, particularly the Averroists, with the Sophists as in his *Epitome of Gorgias* (*Opera* pp.1315, 1318 etc) and in his letter to Giovanni Piero of Padua (*Opera* p.655). See Allen (1998) 22 n.35. For the relationship between humanism and Scholasticism see Kristeller (1961) 111-17. He downplays the conflict but has little to say about Platonic methodology as such. 'Everybody knows the eloquent attacks launched by Petrarch and Bruni against the logicians of their time and it is generally believed that these attacks represent a vigorous new movement rebelling against the old entrenched habit of thought. Yet actually the English method of dialectic was quite as novel in the Italian schools at that time as were the humanistic studies advocated by Petrarch and Bruni, and the humanistic attack was as much a matter of departmental rivalry as it was a clash of opposite ideas on philosophies...Such controversies, interesting as they are, were mere episodes in a long period of peaceful coexistence between humanism and Scholasticism (113)'.

²⁸⁹ *Cum enim magistri sui Socratis, quem facit in suis voluminibus disputantem, notissimum morem dissimulandae scientiae vel opinionis suae servare adfectat, quia et illi ipse mos placuit, factum est ut ipsius Platonis de rebus magnis sententiae non facile perspicui possint* (C.D. VIII.4).

²⁹⁰ *Maxima pars operum ironica est, quae figura ad deridendum accomodatior est quam ad docendum....Utile est igitur adolescentes ad Aristotelicam consuetudinem assuefieri.* Quoted in Schmitt (1976) 102 n.6.

²⁹¹ See Tigerstedt (1973) 35.

Plato of students and professors in his work *Vere conclusioni di Platone conformi alla doctrina christiana et a quella d'Aristotile* (Florence 1589). They said that Plato should not be taught in Universities. His writing was not methodical in a way which was an aid to memory. His arguments were 'topical' and probable, and not as demonstrative and productive as were those of Aristotle.²⁹²

In *ICP* Bessarion was responding to the attack on Plato by Trebizond in his *Comparatio*. Although his language may have been extreme, Trebizond was no doubt giving pen to criticisms of Plato which were common in his day. In making his objections he placed himself firmly on one side of a debate regarding philosophical discourse. Bessarion said that he was responding to Trebizond's claim that, unlike Aristotle, Plato wrote no *artium praecepta* for the common benefit and that he would explain why Plato thought that divine truths were not for common consumption.²⁹³ Trebizond in his *Comparatio* had said that Plato was no philosopher, wrote like *rusticus ex crapula se recipiens* (*Comparatio* 1.5), had no use for logic or syllogistic argument without which it was not possible to explore the secrets of nature but he mixed up theology and mathematics and then confused his readers by talking in enigmas and myths.²⁹⁴ Trebizond's criticisms of Plato were little different from the complaints of Verino's students in Pisa a hundred years later.

²⁹² *Altri dicono che Platone non merita di esser pubblicamente esposto per gli Studii si perché non procede con Methodo o vero ordine, che conferisce alla Memoria, si ancora perché le sue ragioni son topiche et probabili et non come quelle di Aristotile demonstrative ed produtrici negli animi nostri di scienza.* Quoted by Grendler (2002) 308. 'Topical' (*topiche*) referred to a particular form of dialectical argument which was a matter of controversy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries between the strict Aristotelian logicians and the humanists like Valla. It was a form of logic which was case based (*topoi*) and was plausible rather than rigorous. Grendler gives an example of a different view of the pedagogical dangers of Plato from a 1631 biography of Cardinal Bellarmine who is said to have advised Clement VIII against the teaching of Plato on the grounds that he was so close to Christianity that he could more easily seduce minds into error than other pagan philosophers (*loc. cit.* 306). He thereby vindicated Bessarion's view of Plato. See del Soldato (2010) 337.

²⁹³ *ICP* 1.2.1 p.11.17-24. *Praecepta artium* translated *περὶ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν* in the Greek text.

²⁹⁴ *Ad differendi autem studia, quae logicae nomine vulgo appellantur, quid unquam attulit Plato, aut quo usu ipsum partiendi, distinguendique recte, non dico facultatem, sed qualemcunque cognitionem habuisse percipiemus. Ubi syllogismo commode uno usus est? Ubi rem tantam, tam utilem, tam necessariam, et si non aperuit praecipiendo, saltem tetigit summis, ut dicitur, digitis? Atque sine ipsa nec reconditae rimari naturae*

He admired the subtleties of logicians but acknowledged that in his day the subtleties of the Peripatetics had become excessive, even *confusa*.²⁹⁵ Logic played a large part in University teaching at the time.²⁹⁶ The so-called *logica vetus* and *logica nova* had become part of the University syllabus by 1300. These comprised commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories*, *de Interpretatione*, *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, *Sophistici Elenchi* and the *Isagoge* of Porphyry. In the following centuries there was a proliferation of commentaries on Aristotle's works and treatises on individual subjects and among these were works by a number of logicians at Oxford who were regarded as particularly influential.²⁹⁷ Universities prescribed logical texts.²⁹⁸ But logical subtlety was a topic of controversy. The logicians and their works did not receive universal approval and the Oxford logicians came in for special criticism. Leonardo Bruni wrote that the ancient art of argument had

secreta possumus, nec de inventis, qualia sint, iudicare, nec si demonstratur, nec si verisimiliter ac logice dicitur, cognoscere (Comparatio 1.4). Plato autem dum universa simul quasi coetus amplecti conatur, omnia sicut gallina spargit at nihil, ut trito proverbio dicitur, comprehendit. De naturalibus locuturus, theologiam aggreditur mathematicam immiscet, numeros quasi testes citare solet, nec aliquid horum explicat, sed ad enigmata versus, ad fabulas plerumque labitur, quae omnia ignorantiae suae, ut puto conscius, lectoribus ut lateat, quasi sepia piscatoribus, atramentum effundit (Comparatio 1.5).

²⁹⁵ *Infinita sunt dialecticorum volumina, subtiliora et spinosiora precepta, sed tamen assidua disputatione adipiscuntur ut et expedite et caute disserant (Rhetoricorum libri V f.64v quoted by Monfasani (1976) 300 n.1). Ne...dura illa et aspera Peripateticorum ac pene infinita et confusa perspicere cogaris, omnia que ad dicendum faciunt et ad inspiciendum rationem topicam necessario sunt...ad hoc opusculum breviter contuli (The preface of *Isagoge* quoted by Monfasani *ibid.* 304 n.14).*

²⁹⁶ See Ashworth (2008) on the nature and significance of logic throughout the medieval period into the fifteenth century and beyond.

²⁹⁷ Ralph Strode (fl. 1350-1400), fellow of Merton College Oxford, wrote on syllogisms and obligations; Marsilius of Inghen, who taught in Paris 1362-1378 and Heidelberg 1386-1396, wrote on consequences, obligations and insolubles; John of Holland, who may have studied in Oxford and went to Prague, wrote four treatises on logic; Richard Billingham (1344-1356), fellow of Merton College Oxford, wrote on resolvable terms; Paul of Pergola, who died in Venice in 1455, wrote logical works and William of Heytesbury (c.1313-1372/3), fellow of Merton College Oxford, wrote on problematic statements (*sophismata*). See Ashworth (1988) 148-9.

²⁹⁸ The University of Padua prescribed Paul of Venice's *Parva Logica*, Strode, Heytesbury and Paul of Pergola. The University of Vienna prescribed John of Holland, Marsilius of Inghen, Billingham and Heytesbury. At Erfurt the syllabus included Billingham, John of Holland, Heytesbury and Marsilius of Inghen. See Ashworth (1988) 150.

been reduced to absurdity by British sophistry.²⁹⁹ Petrarch considered the logic chopping of the Scholastics barbaric and incomprehensible.³⁰⁰

The humanists, of whom Bruni was one, took a different view of philosophical discourse from the traditional Aristotelian Scholastics.³⁰¹ They were less interested in the logical validity of an argument than whether it was persuasive. Dialectic, that is the process of reasoning between two or more interlocutors, carried greater weight than formal logic. Petrarch was contemptuous of formal logic; he dismissed it as a propaedeutic to knowledge rather than an end in itself. It was ‘for early morning but not far into the evening’.³⁰² Under the influence of the humanists dialogue came to be seen as a legitimate vehicle of logical argument. Rudolph Agricola in his *de Inventione dialectica* (completed 1480) gave an example of dialogical argument between two opposing views leading to resolution but not by conventional logic.³⁰³ These humanists were often not considered as proper philosophers by the standards of the time since their dialogic form of argument was not truly logical but led to conclusions that were only probable.³⁰⁴ Bessarion, whose roots were in a Greek rather than humanistic culture, would have felt comfortable in this humanistic perspective. But he was not impervious to the benefits of syllogistic logic. He

²⁹⁹ *Et quid est in dialectica quod non britannicis sophismatibus conturbatum sit? Quid quod non ab illa vetere et vera disputandi vice separatum et ad ineptias levitatesque traductum?* Quoted in Jardine (1988) 178 n.23.

³⁰⁰ *Ergo nec Scylla nec Caribdis obstiterit, quominus hec pestis in Trinacriam transnataret? Imo vero iam insularum peculiare malum est, si dyalecticorum agmini britannico ethnea nunc novorum Cyclosum acies accesserit. Hocce est quod in Cosmographia Pomponii legeram, Sicilie maxime simile esse Britanniam?* (Petrarch, *Le Familiari*, quoted by Garin (1969) 150). See Parkinson (1993) 17-18.

³⁰¹ On humanistic logic see Jardine (1988) 173-198. For the relationship of humanism and Scholasticism see Kristeller (1961) 111-117.

³⁰² Translation Jardine (1988). *Respice et hos qui in altercationibus et cavillationibus dyalecticis totum vite tempus expendunt seque inanibus semper questiunculis exagitant; et persagium meum de omnibus habeto: omnium nempe cum ipsis fama corruet unumque sepulchrum ossibus sufficiet ac nomini. Cum enim mors frigidam linguam stare coergit, non modo ut sileant necesse est, sed ut de his etiam sileatur* (Petrarch *La familiari* quoted by Jardine (1988) 176 n.18). *Dyalectica pars esse potest, utique terminus non est; et potest pars esse matutina, non serotina* (*ibid.* 177 n.19). See note ~~300~~ above and Jardine (1988) 176-7, Garin (1969) 141-177, Vasoli (1968) 9-15 and 35-8.

³⁰³ See Jardine (1988) 183-4.

³⁰⁴ See Jardine (1988) 187.

had a chapter *Disserendi ratione excelluisse Platonem* (ICP 1.5) in which he tried to show in reply to Trebizond's charge that Plato displayed no powers of logical argument that, on the contrary, Plato was a master of argument.³⁰⁵ He argued that Plato used all three forms of syllogistic argument i.e. demonstrative (arguments whose conclusions follow from true and necessary propositions), dialectic (arguments whose conclusions derive from probable propositions which are generally accepted), and sophistic (arguments deriving from propositions which are not probable but appear so).³⁰⁶ He even claimed that in the *Parmenides* Plato anticipated Aristotle's work on logic in the *Analytics*.³⁰⁷

Greek scepticism about Latin reliance on syllogistic argument had emerged at the Council of Florence in 1439.³⁰⁸ Scholarios forcefully expressed this scepticism: 'I know that you, O Greeks, in matters of this sort have no confidence in proofs from reason but consider them suspect and misleading; much more then will you keep clear of the necessary syllogism and be on your guard against those who resort to them'.³⁰⁹ I have already referred to the contemptuous reference to Aristotle by the Georgian cleric at the Council.³¹⁰ In his tract *De processione Spiritus Sancti* Bessarion wrote: 'The words [of the Fathers] by themselves alone are enough to solve every doubt and to persuade every soul. It is not syllogisms or

³⁰⁵ *Videatur [Plato] non modo secutus, sed perfectissime assecutus omnium optimarum artium disciplinarumque rationem, deinceps ostendemus. Quamquam pudet me eam rem tueri, quam nemo unquam praeter hunc homuncionem [Trebizond] in dubium vocavit; verumtamen ita agere necesse est, cum affirmare impudenter ausus fuerit Platonem ne figuram quidem aut modum aliquem syllogisimi tenuisse nec prorsus aliquid scripsisse, quod vim demonstrationis haberet* (ICP 1.5.1 p.57.22-8).

³⁰⁶ ICP 1.5.2 p.56.31-41. *Legat, qui id cupit intellegere, Platonis libros. Facile enim prospiciet omne syllogismorum genus aptissime rebus, de quibus agitur, accommodari. Tractatur scilicet pro rei opportunitate modo demonstrative modo dialectice, hoc est probabili quadam ratione, interdum etiam captiose (σοφιστικῶς). Nam etsi crebrior est usus dialecticae propositionis, tamen hoc etiam captionis genus adhibitum est, ut in Euthydemo patet, ubi omnes fere cavillationum (τῶν σοφιστικῶν ἐλέγχων) modos attigit* (ICP 1.5.5 p.63.14-21).

³⁰⁷ ICP 1.5.7 p.65.28-32.

³⁰⁸ See Gill (1959) 227.

³⁰⁹ *Discourses at Florence on the religious question* III.9 Petit et al. edd. I.355.4-8 translation Gill (1959).

³¹⁰ See page 46 and n. ~~172~~ above.

probabilities or arguments that convinced me, but the bare words [of the Fathers]'.³¹¹

These observations were made in the theological context of the Council of Florence but they are indicators of Greek suspicion of Western logic. In a letter to Archbishop Mark Eugenikos (1394-1445) Scholarios commented on Plethon's lack of knowledge of the dialectic method but this, he said, was a common weakness among Greeks at the time.³¹²

In summary Bessarion was writing at a time of heated controversy about philosophical language. Plato was reckoned by some to be obscure compared with Aristotle. He did not use what were regarded as conventional forms of logical argument. But there was a reaction among humanists to the narrowness of the syllogistic argument of Scholastic Aristotelians in favour of dialogical argument. This scepticism about the value of syllogistic argument as applied to theology was shared by Greek theologians attending the Council of Florence. I shall show how Bessarion placed himself in the framework of humanist criticism of the aridities of Aristotelian scholasticism.³¹³

Bessarion's response to Trebizond on Plato's philosophical discourse and on the language of theology

In his response to Trebizond's criticism of Plato Bessarion accepted that Plato was obscure but that it was his intention. He argues that some obscurity was right and proper, and

³¹¹ Translation Gill (1959). αὐτὰ μὲν οὖν τὰ ῥητὰ καθ' αὐτὰ μόνα ἰκανά εἰσι πᾶσαν ἀμφιβολίαν λῦσαι, καὶ πᾶσαν πεῖσαι ψυχὴν. Ἐπεὶ κάμει οὐ συλλογισμοὶ, οὐδὲ πιθανολογίαι καὶ ἀποδείξεις, ἀλλ' αὐτὸ γυμνὰ τὰ ῥητὰ ἔπεισαν (Migne *P.G.* 161 col. 360B).

³¹² Εἰ δὲ διαλεκτικῶν μεθόδων ἥκιστα πάντων αὐτῷ μέτεστιν, ὃ δὴ καὶ τῆς πλάνης αἴτιον αὐτῷ καὶ πολλοῖς ἄλλοις ἐγένετο, ἀλλὰ τούτων ἐκ πολλοῦ χρόνου σπάνις ἐν ταῖς τῆδε διατριβαῖς γενομένη καὶ ἄγνοια, οὐκ αὐτοῦ μᾶλλον ἢ κοινόν ἐστι τοῦ γένους ἀρρώστημα (Petit et al. edd. IV.117.25-29).

³¹³ Proclus *in Parmenidem* (653.4-654.10) argued that the method of dialectic in the *Parmenides* consisting of an investigation of the consequences that follow and do not follow from the existence and non-existence of the 'One' and the 'others', corresponded to the highest form of dialectic that brings the initiate to the contemplation of the Truth. Later (*in Parmenidem* 1007.4-26) he argued for the superiority of the Platonic dialectic over Aristotelian syllogisms.

quotes from the Gospel of Matthew: ‘Do not give what is sacred to dogs or throw pearls before swine’.³¹⁴ He refers to the Pythagorean doctrine that the *secreta divinarum rerum* (τὰ μυστικώτερα ἐκεῖνα τῆς θεολογίας) were only to be entrusted to disciples who had gone through five years of cleansing and been found worthy; even then, as a measure of security, the secrets were not to be committed to writing. But it was not just a matter of security; memory was a better way of retaining knowledge than writing, as the Egyptian god Thamus said to Theuth, the inventor of letters, according to Plato’s account in the *Phaedrus*: ‘This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practise their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory but of reminding.’³¹⁵ Bessarion was following closely the argument which his former teacher, Plethon, had used in reply to an attack by Scholarios on Plato’s obscurity. He even used some of Plethon’s phrases in his Greek text.³¹⁶ Scholarios had written *Against the Difficulties of Plethon concerning Aristotle* as a polemic against Plethon in 1443 or 1444.³¹⁷ Scholarios acknowledged that Aristotle was difficult and needed interpretation. But Plato hid his teaching under metaphors and images. The obscurity of Aristotle was that of a philosopher; in Plato it was that of a poet.³¹⁸

³¹⁴ Mt 7.6. In fourteenth century Byzantium Theodore Metochites had cultivated ἀσάφεια and defended his practice against Nicephorus Chumnus by citing the condemnation of Hermogenes of excessive clarity. See Kustas (1970) 70-1.

³¹⁵ *Phaedrus* 275a2-6 translation Fowler (1953). *ICP* 1.2.1-2 p.11.17-p.13.17.

³¹⁶ ὡς δὴ καὶ ἀσφελέστερον οὕτως τὰ θειότερα τῶν δογμάτων φυλλατόμενα ἂν μὴ ἐν βιβλίοις ἀλλ’ ἐν ψυχαῖς κείμενα, τοὺς τε ἐταίρους σοφωτέρους ἂν ἐσόμενους ἐν ψυχῇ παρακαταθέμενους τὰς ἐπιστήμας καὶ μὴ γράμμασι θαρροῦντας ἀμελεῖν τῆς ἐνδελεχοῦς ἐν ψυχαῖς ἕξεως (*ICP* 1.2.2 p.10.38-41). Compare with Plethon: Πλάτων οὐχ ὡς οὐκ εἰδῶς τὰς ἐπιστήμας οὐ συνέγραψεν, ἀλλ’ οὕτω Πλάτωνί τε καὶ πρὸ αὐτοῦ τοῖς Πυθαγορείοις δοκοῦν, μὴ συγγράφειν τὰ τοιαῦτα, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἐταίροις ἀπὸ φωνῆς παραδιδόναι ὡς σοφωτέροις ἂν ἐσομένοις, ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς, ἀλλὰ μὴ ἐν βιβλίοις ἔχουσι τὰς ἐπιστήμας· ἀμελεῖν γὰρ ἂν τῆς ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἐνδελεχοῦς ἕξεως τοὺς ἐν τοῖς βιβλίοις οἰομένους ἔχειν (*Contra Scholarii objectiones* 5.2 ed. Maltese p.4.21-26).

³¹⁷ For texts see note [194194](#) above.

³¹⁸ See *Against Plethon* Petit et al. edd. IV.8.13-38 especially 22-29: ἢ καὶ Πλάτωνα αἰτιῶτό τις ἂν ἐν πολλοῖς, μεταφοραῖς τισι καὶ τύποις τὰ δόγματα ἐπικαλύπτοντα, εἰ βούλοιο ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον ἀκούειν, καὶ οὐ μόνον ἐς ἐπιστήμην, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐς ἀρετὴν καὶ φύσιν παρανομεῖν τῷ δόξειεν ἂν τῆδέ πη σκοπούμενῳ...καίτοι τὸ μὲν ἀσαφὲς Ἀριστοτέλους, σοφῶ, τὸ δὲ Πλάτωνος ἐπικεχρωσμένον, ποιητῆ μάλιστα, ὡς ἂν μὴ λέγω χεῖροني ἐπιτηδεύματι, πρέπον ἔστιν εἰπεῖν.

Plethon in his response to this work considered why philosophers, who ought to make their thought as clear as possible for the benefit of their followers, were obscure. No philosopher wants to be obscure, he argues, unless his Greek is poor or he is not confident in what he is saying or else by being obscure he hopes to attract clients. Myths are a way of communicating profound ideas. Through myth the common crowd can touch the divine.³¹⁹ ‘Plato, like the Pythagoreans before him, preferred not to write on such subjects but to communicate them orally to his students because they would be wiser if they had the knowledge in their souls rather than in books’.³²⁰

In explanation of the Pythagorean teaching Bessarion quotes the whole of a letter from the Pythagorean Lysis rebuking Hipparchos who had divulged Pythagorean teaching to people who were not yet fully initiated.³²¹ Lysias argues that only disciples whose souls had been purified from passion could receive the divine truths. ‘It is right to commit to memory Pythagoras’ commands on divine and human matters, and not to share the goods of wisdom with people whose souls are not remotely purified.’³²² Plato, says Bessarion, followed Pythagoras’ example. His teaching was oral rather than literary. What he wrote

³¹⁹ καὶ πῶς σοφῶ πρόπερον τὸ τῆς λέξεώς ἐστιν ἀσαφές, οὐ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀνδραπόδῳ οὐπω τρανῶς φωνὴν τὴν Ἑλλάδα περιειληφότι, ἢ σοφιστῆ οὐ πάνυ τοι θαρροῦντι ὑπὲρ τῶν λεγομένων καὶ λέξεως αὐτὰ ἀσαφεία συγκαλύπτοντι, ἢ καὶ φθονερῶ πόνον τιθέντι τοῖς ἀναγνωσομένοις, ἵνα ἴσως αὐτοῦ δέοιντο τὴν γε διάνοιαν ἀναπτύξοντος; σοφῶ δὲ πῶς, ὃν χρὴ ὑπὸ φιλανθρωπίας τὸ τῶν νοημάτων βαθὺ εὐληπτον ἐς δύναμιν σαφηνεία λέξεως τιθέναι; τὸ μὲν γὰρ μυθῶδες ἔχει ἅν τινα λόγον· εἰ γὰρ μὴ οἱ μῦθοι κατὰ τοὺς ποιητῶν φλυαρίας εἶεν ἀνάμεστοι, παρέχουσί τι τοῖς πολλοῖς καὶ βάθους νοήματων οὐ δυναμένοις ἐφικέσθαι νοεῖν πρόχειρον. ὃ καὶ Πλάτων πρὸς καὶ ἄλλοις θεολόγοις ἐπετήδευσεν ὑπὸ φιλανθρωπίας· ἀπάγων γὰρ τὸ τῶν πολλῶν φιλόμυθον τῆς τῶν ποιητικῶν μύθων μοχθηρίας, αὐτὸς ἐτέροις μύθοις εὐαγέσι τισὶν ἔδωκε τι ἐννοεῖν καὶ τούτοις τῶν θείων οὐ πάνυ τοι ἀλλότριον, ἵν’ οἱ τε σοφοὶ ὁμοῦ καὶ οἱ πολλοὶ ἀπόναιντό τι αὐτοῦ (Plethon *Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele Objectiones* 6 Maltese ed. p.6.11-24).

³²⁰ *Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele Objectiones* Petit et al. edd. V.4.22-5 translation Woodhouse (1986).

³²¹ *ICP* 1.2.3 p.13.23- p.14.29 quoting Iamblichus *De vita Pythagorica* XVII.75-78. The letter was recorded by Iamblichus in his life of Pythagoras. Bessarion’s version of the letter is longer than the version in the text printed in Nauck. He has included in his version a passage recorded by Diogenes Laertius in his *Life of Pythagoras* (8.42) about the refusal of Pythagoras’ daughter Damo to surrender the memoirs of her father. Bessarion has then added a further story which is not in Nauck’s version of the text of the letter in Iamblichus or in Diogenes Laertius’ version of the letter but taken from later in *De vita Pythagorica* (XXVIII.146) that Damo at her death gave Pythagoras’ notes to her daughter Vitale. φαντι δ’ ὡς τὰν αὐτὰν ἐπιστολὰν ἀπέστειλε καὶ Δαμῶ θνάσκουσα Βιταλία τῆ ἑαυτῆς θυγατρὶ (*ICP ibid.* p.14.26-27).

³²² *ICP* 1.2.3 p.13.26-29 quoting *De vita Pythagorica* XVII.75 ed. Nauck p.54.6-9.

were the teachings of Socrates not his own. When he wrote about sacred matters his writings were dense and obscure so as not to be easily understood by the reader.³²³ As proof of Plato's views Bessarion quotes passages from Plato's second and seventh letters.³²⁴ In the second letter, addressed to Dionysius, tyrant of Sicily, concerning the nature of the first being, Plato says that he was writing in enigmas in case his writing fell into the wrong hands. He tells Dionysius to make sure his letters do not fall into the hands of the uninitiated. But, he writes, 'the best precaution was not to write down these teachings but to commit them to memory; for it is impossible that things written down should not become known to others. That is why I have never written on these subjects. There is no writing of Plato's, nor will there ever be; those that are now called so come from an idealised and youthful Socrates.'³²⁵ Plato makes a similar claim in the seventh letter which was addressed to Dion, Dionysius' son-in-law.³²⁶ Bessarion's conclusion was that both Pythagoras and Plato thought that such things should not be written down or conveyed to the common people.³²⁷

He regarded the letters as authentically Platonic. The claim, which he repeated in *ICP* 1.2.4 (p.15.38), that Plato's writings speak in the voice of Socrates rather than Plato suggests that the voices in the dialogues cannot be construed as the opinion of Plato himself. But its meaning has been intensely debated by scholars without reaching consensus.³²⁸ The claim that the dialogues were not the true voice of Plato is one of the

³²³ *Hic idem mos usque ad Platonis tempora servatus est per omnes eius sectae successores. Plato quoque hoc ipsum semper diligentissime custodivit. Neque enim libris, sed voce docuit de his. Si quid scripsit, Socratis esse, non suum fatetur. Ita praeteria de divinis rebus breviter, implicite atque obscure praecepta tradidit, ut non facile a legentibus possit intelligi* (*ICP* 1.2.4 p.15.35-40).

³²⁴ *ICP* 1.2.4 -5 p.14.37-p.18.6 quoting Plato *Epistles* 2.312d7-e4, 313e3-314a2, 314b6-c4 and *Epistles* 7.341b7-c6, 341d2-342a1, 344d4-345a1.

³²⁵ *Epistles* 2.314b6-c4 translation Morrow (1962).

³²⁶ οὐκ οὐκ ἐμὸν γε περὶ αὐτῶν ἔστι σύγγραμμα οὐδὲ μήποτε γένηται. ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα (*Epistles* 341c4-6).

³²⁷ *ICP* 1.2.5 p.19 5-7.

³²⁸ See Morrow (1962) 111-8 and Novotný (1930) 91-94.

arguments advanced by scholars against the Platonic authorship of the second letter.

Bessarion himself expressed a more nuanced view later in *ICP* about the dialogues when he said that only Socrates, Timaeus, Parmenides, the Athenian stranger and the Eleatic stranger spoke with the authorial voice of Plato while all other characters in the Platonic writings spoke in their own voice.³²⁹ He took this view from Diogenes Laertius (*Vita Platonis* 3.52) who said that Plato only spoke with an authorial voice in the dialogues through the mouths of Socrates, Timaeus, the Athenian stranger in the *Laws* and the Eleatic stranger in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.

He sums up his understanding of Plato's writings: 'Plato did not write anything about the first and highest principles or, if at all, he wrote very little and that obscurely because such things are not to be shared with the common crowd. It is far more holy to hold and reverence such things in one's heart. But in other matters he did not lay down hard and fast precepts like other teachers, for instance how to speak in public or engage in debate or other things of this kind. But he included in the dialogues, in which he conveyed his teaching with great subtlety, many of the most useful precepts for all the good skills and practice although these are more securely committed to memory than to writing since it is better to hear the precepts of the master and to meditate on them earnestly.'³³⁰

³²⁹ *Quinque autem sunt personae illae, quibus tribuere Plato suam sententiam solet: Socrates, Timaeus, Parmenides, hospes Atheniensis et hospes Velinus. Ceteri omnes, qui apud eum disputant, suis opinionibus agunt et ab aliquo eorum, quos supra memoravi, vel probantur vel arguuntur (ICP 4.2.22 p.479.34-8).*

Bessarion added Parmenides to the list of the authentic voices of Plato drawn from Diogenes Laertius.

³³⁰ *Plato igitur nihil de primis supremisque rebus aut quam paucissima et ea perobscure hac causa scripsit, quod rem totam multitudini communem facere non liceret, longeque sanctius esset haec toto animo colere et venerari. Nam de ceteris quidem rebus, etsi more paedagogorum certas regulas non tradiderit, quo pacto scilicet vel orandum sit vel disputandum vel huiusmodi aliquid agendum, in dialogis tamen, quos summo artificio singularique doctrina conscripsit, plurima atque utilissima omnium fere bonarum artium ac disciplinarum praecepta inseruit, quamquam haec quoque tutius memoriae mandari quam litteris possunt, praestatque si praeceptoris ore praecepta assidua meditatione animo revolvantur (ICP 1.2.6 p.19.21-31).* 'The most useful precepts for all the good skills and practice' is a literal translation of the Latin *utilissima omnium fere bonarum artium ac disciplinarum praecepta*. The Greek is πλήρεις καὶ πάσης μεθόδου σοφίας καὶ τέχνης. Bessarion is probably referring to skills in the practice of philosophical enquiry.

Since he was defending Plato against Trebizond's charge of obscurity, he must have regarded his exposition of Plato and quotations from Plato's text as a reasonable defence. He thought, therefore, that 'divine matters' were either so sacred or so far beyond normal understanding that they could not be easily communicated. He argued that Plato, like Pythagoras, thought that theological matters should be communicated to his followers only and not in writing. If any were put into writing it should be δι' αἰνιγμάτων. Later in *ICP* Bessarion explored the nature of αἰνίγματα. He argued that Plato's theology can and had been gradually revealed for the learned and sometimes through analogies because there was no other suitable language. The use of stories and myths by Plato was for the benefit of those who could not reach understanding of profound ideas. For Bessarion analogy was unavoidable in theological discourse and, therefore, had to be used to convey Christian teaching. Not only Plato and other pagan philosophers but the Christian fathers and sacred scripture hid their messages in images.³³¹

Bessarion did not overtly address the apparent inconsistency between the view that Plato's teachings were wrapped in mystery only to be communicated to a chosen few and his professed mission of explaining Plato's teaching to the Latins. But he saw himself as an interpreter of these mysteries standing within an ancient tradition. Proclus in the *Platonic Theology* said that the philosophy of Plato had revealed the intellect and truth hidden in God. But Plato hid his revelation in a sanctuary until in the fullness of time it was brought to light by a chosen few philosophers including Plotinus, Amelius, Porphyry, Iamblichus

³³¹ *Etenim substantiarum huiusmodi ut nullus sermo est, ita nulla vocabulorum haberi proprietates potest....Accedit ad haec rerum divinarum decens occultatio, quas Plato verbis mathematicis adumbrare pulcherrime conatur, quem ad modum alios quoque gentiles theologos, fabulis alios, alios aenigmatibus sive allegoriis videmus fecisse. Quos quis non vidit, quantis verborum velaminibus divinarum rerum praecepta contexerint? Pleni sunt huiusmodi arcanis libri prophetarum, plena vetus omnis scriptura sacra, allegoriis scilicet, suspectionibus, relationibus, translationibus, et tamen nemo hanc nisi impius reprehendit (ICP 2.8.17-18 p.157.15-30).*

and Theodore of Asine.³³² He used the vocabulary of revelation (ἐκλάμψαι, ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς κεκρυμμένον νοῦν, ἐκφαίνουσιν, τοὺς τῆς Πλατωνικῆς ἐποπτείας ἐξηγητὰς). This is an important text for understanding how Bessarion saw the Platonic texts and the commentators. He placed himself in this tradition of interpreting the hidden philosophy of Plato. Having set out the arguments for the creation of matter by God, he wrote: ‘This is the opinion of Plotinus, Porphyry, Amelius, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus and all followers of Plato’.³³³ This is almost the same list as Proclus gave at the beginning of his *Platonic Theology* except Bessarion had now added Proclus to it. Ficino recognised Bessarion’s place in this tradition. In a letter to Bessarion he wrote of the gold within Plato which had been elucidated by Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus and now Bessarion himself.³³⁴ In a letter to Janus Pannonius Ficino wrote: ‘The ancient practice of the theologians [sc. Plato and the Pythagoreans] was to wrap the divine mysteries in mathematics, figures and poetic images. Eventually Plotinus uncovered the theology. He was the first and only person, as Porphyry and Proclus attest, to penetrate the secrets of the ancients’.³³⁵ This tradition of revealing some hidden truth legitimised Bessarion’s practice of using the Neo-Platonic commentators, particularly Proclus, as authorities for the exposition of Plato even to the extent of quoting them verbatim. For example he attributed to Plato a proposition to the effect that matter is eternal and ungenerated because

³³² Ἄπασαν τὴν Πλάτωνος φιλοσοφίαν...καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐκλάμψαι νομίζω κατὰ τὴν τῶν κρειττόνων ἀγαθοειδῆ βούλησιν, τὸν ἐν αὐτοῖς κεκρυμμένον νοῦν καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν ὁμοῦ τοῖς οὖσι συνυφεστῶσαν ταῖς περὶ γένεσιν στρεφόμεναις ψυχαῖς...ἐκφαίνουσιν, καὶ πάλιν ὕστερον τελειωθῆναι καὶ ὡς εἰς ἑαυτὴν ἀναχωρήσασαν.... οὕτως δὲ σεμνῶς καὶ ἀπορρήτως ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ τὴν πρώτην ἐκλάμψασαν οἷον ἀγίοις ἱεροῖς καὶ τῶν ἀδυνάτων ἐντὸς ἰδρυθεῖσαν ἀσφαλῶς καὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν εἰσιόντων ἀγνοηθεῖσαν, ἐν τακταῖς χρόνων περιόδοις ὑπὸ δὴ τινῶν ἱερέων ἀληθινῶν καὶ τὸν προσήκοντα τῇ μυσταγωγίᾳ βίον ἀνελομένων προελθεῖν μὲν ἐφ’ ὅσον ἦν αὐτῇ δυνατόν, ἅπαντα δὲ καταλάμψαι τὸν τόπον καὶ πανταχοῦ τὰς τῶν θεῶν φασμάτων ἐλλάμψεις καταστήσασθαι. τούτους δὴ τοὺς τῆς Πλατωνικῆς ἐποπτείας ἐξηγητὰς...εἶναι θεῖον ἂν ἔγωγε Πλωτίνον τε τὸν Αἰγύπτιον καὶ τοὺς ἀπὸ τούτου παραδεξαμένους τὴν θεωρίαν, Ἀμέλιον τε καὶ Πορφύριον, καὶ τρίτους οἶμαι τοὺς ἀπὸ τούτων...Ἰάμβλιχόν τε καὶ Θεόδωρον (*Plat. theol.* I.1 Saffrey and Westerink edd. p.5.6-p.6.23).

³³³ *ICP* 2.6.17 p.127.35-37.

³³⁴ *Sed tandem in Plotini primo, deinde Porphyrii et Iamblichi, postremo Procli officinam aurum illud deportatum exquisitissimo ignis examine excussis arenis emicuit usque adeo, ut omnem terrarum orbem miro quodam splendore illustraverit* (Ficino to Bessarion in Mohler (1942) 544-5).

³³⁵ See note [288288](#) above.

everything generated by an unmoved cause has an unchanging substance; it is not, however, wholly ungenerated because it has a cause; nor is it wholly generated since it is ungenerated in time. But he took the proposition not from Plato but from Proclus.³³⁶

Garin argues that Bessarion inaugurated a change from a moral to a theological understanding of Plato.³³⁷ Hankins presents Bessarion's position as follows: 'There is no doubt that from the point of view of making Plato safe for Christianity the most important set of exegetical techniques Bessarion uses are those he draws from the Neoplatonic commentary tradition of Plato and from Plato himself. The fundamental move made by ancient interpreters of Plato at least from the time of Plotinus was to regard the dialogues not as literary accounts of some philosophical discussionsbut rather as a kind of Holy Writ, as a mysterious epiphany of a theological system whose true meaning could only be understood by initiates...Plato's dialogues, discussing as they do things beyond the power of sensible signs to represent, cannot and should not be reduced to the literal meaning, as the doctrinal and imitative criticism of earlier humanists.....tended to do'.³³⁸

When Hankins refers to Plato's dialogues discussing 'things beyond the power of sensible signs to represent' he touched on a problem for theological discourse in finding a way of talking about divine matters. Language has no way of expressing the incorporeal and infinite because such essences are beyond sense experience. Plotinus stressed the intrinsic impossibility of talking about the One. We do not have any knowledge or idea of the One so how can we talk about it (V.3.14.1-8)? The One is above reason or intellect but apprehended by a superior knowledge (κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα) (VI.9.4.1-

³³⁶ See page 134 below and note ~~501501~~ below.

³³⁷ See pages 45-6 and note ~~171+71~~ above.

³³⁸ Hankins (1990a) 253-254. See also Coulter (1976).

12).³³⁹ Bessarion acknowledged that there was not an appropriate language for divine matters because they are beyond reason or discourse. We have to use a language drawn from our natural common discourse, such as mathematics, which is grasped by abstraction.³⁴⁰ In other words although we use common words when we speak about divine matters they carry a hidden deeper meaning or they are sign posts to higher things.

Bessarion's *ut nullus sermo est, ita nulla vocabulorum haberi proprietates potest* or ὡςπερ οὐκ ἔστι λόγου καὶ διαλέξεως χρῆσις, οὕτως οὐδὲ ῥῆμα οὐδέν is perhaps an echo of the *Parmenides*: οὐδ' ἄρα ὄνομα ἔστιν αὐτῶ οὐδὲ λόγος οὐδέ τις ἐπιστήμη (142a3-4) and the Areopagite's: ἄρρητόν τε λόγῳ παντὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ λόγον ἀγαθόν which Bessarion quoted.³⁴¹ Moerbeke's translation of the *Parmenides* is: *neque ergo nomen est ipsi neque sermo neque aliqua scientia* (Proclus, *In Parmenidem* 505).

Bessarion applied the Proclan distinction between nature and intelligibles to language.³⁴² He drew a distinction between the language of physicists, which concerned the principles of nature (*de principiis, causis et de elementis naturalibus*; περὶ φυσικῶν ἀρχῶν καὶ στοιχείων) and was the language of Aristotle, from the language of theologians, who spoke of intelligible being and the first principle (*de ente intelligibili ac primo principio*; περὶ τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος καὶ τῆς νοητῆς καὶ πρώτης ἀρχῆς).³⁴³ This was the language of Plato and his followers. The implication must be that Plato's method of philosophical discourse was

³³⁹ The problem was expressed by Aquinas: *Supposito quod substantiae immateriales sint omnino alterius rationis a quidditatibus materialium rerum; quantumque intellectus noster abstrahat quidditatem rei materialis a materia, nunquam perveniet ad aliquid simile substantiae immateriali. Et ideo per substantias materiales non possumus perfecte substantias immateriales intellegere* (S.T. Ia q88 a2).

³⁴⁰ *Etenim substantiarum huiusmodi ut nullus sermo est, ita nulla vocabulorum haberi proprietates potest. Sed si nos loqui de illis aliquid conamur, a rebus nostris, hoc est naturae vernaculis verba mutuemur oportet, purioribus tamen, quoad eius fieri potest, quales mathematicae sunt, quae a materia prorsus abstrahuntur* (ICP 2.8.17 p.157.15-19).

³⁴¹ *De divinis nominibus* I.1 ed. Suchla p.109 13-14 and quoted in ICP 2.4.2 p.88.25.

³⁴² See Proclus in *Tim.* I.13.1-8.

³⁴³ ICP 2.12.2 p. 201.3-6.

more appropriate for theology than Aristotle's.³⁴⁴ He explained that Plato had to use common words which carry a more profound meaning when he used them to speak about intelligibles and their causes because there was no other appropriate language. We have to draw a language from our own experience which is as pure as possible, as is the language of mathematics.³⁴⁵

ICP 2.12 is a digression in Bessarion's presentation of Plato; in it he argues that Aristotle misrepresented the pre-Socratic philosophers, Melissus and Parmenides, because he interpreted their use of language about 'the One' as if it were the language of physicists rather than the language of theologians. He sums up his point by saying Aristotle criticised Melissus and Parmenides as if they had been entirely wrong and he refuted what they said about divine matters as if they had been talking about nature.³⁴⁶ Although they may have used the language of nature drawn from mathematics they were not philosophers of nature but were speaking about intelligible being and the first principle.³⁴⁷ He argues that when Plato said in the *Timaeus* (30a) that disordered matter existed before the creation of the world it was a way of conveying the providence of God. He was using human language to explain divine matters.³⁴⁸ 'Who does not know,' writes Bessarion, 'that when we say God was before time and the universe became we are speaking inappropriately. But we have to accept it because we do not have adequate words. What is said in the *Timaeus* is not dissimilar: "Even as "was" and "shall be" are generated forms of Time, although we apply

³⁴⁴ In Hankins' view Bessarion rejected Scholastic dialectic in theology and implied the possibility of replacing Scholastic natural theology with an intuitive wisdom or νόησις (Hankins (1990a) 224-6).

³⁴⁵ *ICP* 2.8.17 p.157 15-19. See note ~~340~~340 above. See Vastenberghe (1974) 280 and Vasoli (1988) 66-7 regarding the gap between the possibilities of language and knowledge of absolute reality.

³⁴⁶ *Verum tamen ab Aristotele, quasi nihil recte vel senserint vel scripserint, reprehenduntur, et quae illi de divinis rebus locuti sunt, quasi de naturalibus dicta essent, a physica ratione propulsantur* (*ICP* 2.12.8 p.217 15-17).

³⁴⁷ *Non illi naturalis disciplinae sese professores faciebant nec de principiis elementisque naturae eo loco docere proposuerant, sed de vere ente intelligibili et primo principio sciscitabantur* (*ICP* 2.12.2 p.209.24-27).

³⁴⁸ *ICP* 2.6.10 p.119.16-30 and: *verum haec quidem non ita accipienda sunt, ut humano sermone proferuntur et sonant. Quippe rem intellegibilem ac divinam per verba humanis auribus familiaria Plato exponit* (*ICP* 2.9.9 p.117 2.24-7).

them wrongly, without noticing, to Eternal Being. For we say that it “is” or “was” or “will be”, whereas in truth of speech, “is” alone is the appropriate term.”³⁴⁹ Plato gave the reason for this inappropriate speech: ‘As for us men, even as we ourselves partake largely of the accidental and casual, so do our words’.³⁵⁰

In summary Bessarion saw Plato’s use of stories and analogy and his obscurity of language as necessary and inevitable. He accepted that Plato wrote in a way that obscured his message. This was partly intentional but partly inevitable when giving an account of divine matters not just for Plato but for Christian theologians.

Bessarion on μῦθοι, εἰκόνες and σύμβολα

Bessarion follows Proclus closely on the way in which Plato and other theologians spoke about theological matters. Like Proclus, he says Plato used mathematics; some Greek philosophers used μῦθοι and others used σύμβολα to hide their theology.³⁵¹ According to Bessarion Plato followed the Pythagoreans in communicating teachings in images and mathematics through which they reached the intellectual sphere that lay between the immaterial and material: ἴσμεν γὰρ τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν μάλιστα ἴδιον εἶναι, οἷς καὶ Πλάτων ἐφέσπετο, τὸ δι’ εἰκόνων τὰ θεῖα παραδιδόναι καὶ τοῖς μαθήμασι πρὸς τὴν τῶν νοητῶν ἀνάμνησιν χρῆσθαι καὶ δια τούτων ὡς εἰκόνων ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνα διαβαίνειν ἐπιχειρεῖν μέσσην τῶν

³⁴⁹ *ICP* 2.6.8 p.117.7-14 quoting *Timaeus* 37e3-38a1 translation Bury (1951).

³⁵⁰ *ICP* 2.6.8 p.117.13-14 quoting *Timaeus* 34c2-4 translation Bury (1951). Compare this with Proclus: ἄνθρωποι γὰρ ἐσμεν καὶ ἐν σώματι κατατετάγμεθα καὶ μερικὸν εἶδος ζωῆς προβεβλήμεθα καὶ αὐτοῦ πολλοῦ τοῦ εἰκότος ἀναπεπλήσμεθα, ὥστε εἰκότως καὶ μῦθοις εἰκότως ἐροῦμεν λόγους (*in Tim.* I.353.24-27).

³⁵¹ ὣν δ’ ἐπὶ κρυπνῶν τοῖς μαθηματικοῖς ὀνόμασιν ὡς παραπετάσμασιν ἐχρήσατο Πλάτων, ὡς μῦθοις ἄλλοι τῶν παρ’ Ἑλληνιστῶν θεολόγων καὶ συμβόλοις ἕτεροι τὴν αὐτῶν ἐπεκρύψαντο θεολογίαν (*ICP* 2.8.18 p.156.22-25). Compare Proclus: ὁ δὲ γε Πλάτων δι’ ἐπὶ κρυπνῶν τοῖς μαθηματικοῖς τῶν πραγμάτων οἷον παραπετάσμασιν ἐχρήσατο τῆς τῶν πραγμάτων ἀληθείας, ὥσπερ οἱ μὲν θεολόγοι τοῖς μῦθοις, οἱ δὲ Πυθαγόρειοι τοῖς συμβόλοις· ἔστι γὰρ καὶ ἐν ταῖς εἰκόσι τὰ παραδείγματα θεωρεῖν καὶ διὰ τούτων ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνα μεταβαίνειν (*in Tim.* II.246.4-9).

ἀύλων καὶ ὑλικῶν τάξιν ἔχόντων.³⁵² Numbers could be εἰκόνες when they were used, as by the Pythagoreans, as sign posts to hidden truths. In the *Platonic Theology* Proclus distinguished four modes of theological discourse in Plato: inspiration (ἐνθουαστικῶς), dialectic (διαλεκτικῶς), symbolic (συμβολικῶς) and imagery (ἀπὸ τῶν εἰκόνων).³⁵³ The difference in Proclus between a σύμβολον and an εἰκὼν seems to be that the former is mythical and requires an interpreter who is an initiate while the latter is to be understood as an ἀναλογία which provides a pathway to its paradigm which is the way Bessarion used εἰκόνων in the passage cited immediately above.³⁵⁴ As examples of discourses proceeding συμβολικῶς Proclus cited the stories from the *Gorgias* (523a1-524a7) of how Zeus appointed Minos, Rhadamanthys and Aeacus to be judges of souls, of the distribution by Epimetheus and Prometheus of the different capacities between creatures and human beings in the *Protagoras* (320c8-322d5) and the story of the birth of Eros from the *Symposium* (203b1-204a7). In these cases Proclus used συμβολικῶς to refer to what are μῦθοι; he wrote οὐ μῦθον ὄντα μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ λόγον (not only a myth but a rational argument).³⁵⁵ So a myth with a hidden meaning is a σύμβολον. These stories are examples of how symbolism is used to conceal truth about the gods to be revealed only to genuine followers by interpreters.³⁵⁶ As examples of εἰκόνες which make known divine things Proclus cited two examples. The first was the account by the Stranger in the *Statesman* who in explaining the myth of the age of Cronos told how God first guided the revolutions of the cosmos but, when God released his guiding hand, the circular motion of the heavenly sphere was reversed (269c4-274e2). The second example was the account in the

³⁵² *ICP* 2.8.21 p. 160.20-3.

³⁵³ *Plat. theol.* I.4.

³⁵⁴ See Proclus: ἐν ἅπασιν δὲ τὸ σαφές καὶ διηρθρωμένον καὶ ἀπλοῦν προθήσομεν τῶν ἐναντίων, τὰ μὲν διὰ συμβόλων παραδεδομένα μεταβιβάζοντες εἰς τὴν ἐναργῆ περὶ αὐτῶν διδασκαλίαν, τὰ δὲ δι' εἰκόνων ἀναπέμποντες ἐπὶ τὰ σφέτερα παρδείγματα (*Plat. theol.* I.2. edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.9.20-24). See Beierwaltes (1965) 171 n.23 for the distinctions.

³⁵⁵ *Plat. theol.* I.4 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.18.25-p.19.5.

³⁵⁶ τὸν συμβολικὸν τρόπον κατακρύπτει τὴν περὶ τῶν θεῶν ἀλήθειαν καὶ μέχρι ψιλλῆς ἐνδείξεως ἐκφαίνει τὴν ἑαυτοῦ βούλησιν τοῖς γνησιωτάτοις τῶν ἀκούοντων (Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.4. edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.19.3-5).

Timaeus (53c4-55c6 and 34b10-36d7) of the mathematical proportions in the construction of the four primary bodies and the mixing of the components of world soul in accord with harmonic intervals.³⁵⁷ He explained that ὁ πολιτικός in the *Statesman* represented the Demiurge in the myth and the five elementary bodies (τὰ τῶν πέντε στοιχείων ἐν λόγοις γεωμετρικοῖς ἀποδεδομένα σχήματα *Timaeus* 53c4-55c6) represented the properties of the gods distributed in the cosmos; the distribution of the substance of the soul (αἱ τῆς ψυχικῆς οὐσίας διαιρέσεις *Timaeus* 35b4-c2) represented the whole order of the gods.³⁵⁸ He bracketed συμβολικῶς with μυθικῶς and contrasted them with δι' εἰκόνων.³⁵⁹

Bessarion writes that when Plato wished to explain the immortality and eternity of the soul he did so συμβολικῶς with the account of the charioteer and the unequally matched horses in *Phaedrus* (246a3-248e3).³⁶⁰ The chariot image is a myth which Plato interpreted.

Bessarion defends vigorously Plato's use of myths and mathematical symbols in writing about theology. He says that Plato conveyed holy and elegant theories by means of enigmas when he used mathematics and shapes. In doing so he followed the Pythagoreans who used mathematics to convey divine matters and to reach things that are midway between the immaterial and the material. This is all close to Proclus.³⁶¹ He argues that

³⁵⁷ ἐνταῦθα δῆπου σοι καὶ ὁ διὰ τῶν εἰκόνων τὰ θεῖα γινώσκειν ἐφιέμενος τρόπος ἔσται καταφανής (*Plat. theol.* 1.4.edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.19.10-12). Of the texts cited by Proclus Bessarion made frequent use of passages from *Timaeus* 34b-36d (*ICP* 2.4. 6, 2.6.8,2.8.14,4.15.1) and from the *Statesman* 269c-332d (*ICP* 2.8.15, 2.10.2, 3 and 4, 4.10.4).

³⁵⁸ *Plat. theol.* I.4 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.19.13-17.

³⁵⁹ οἱ μὲν γὰρ δι' ἐνδείξεως περὶ τῶν θείων λέγοντες ἢ συμβολικῶς καὶ μυθικῶς ἢ δι' εἰκόνων λέγουσιν... ἔστι δὲ ὁ μὲν διὰ τῶν συμβόλων τὰ θεῖα μηνύειν ἐφιέμενος Ὀρφικὸς καὶ ὅλως τοῖς τὰς θεομυθίας γράφουσιν οἰκειός. ὁ δὲ διὰ τῶν εἰκόνων Πυθαγόρειος, ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῖς Πυθαγορείοις τὰ μαθήματα πρὸς τὴν τῶν θείων ἀνάμνησιν ἐξηγήρητο καὶ διὰ τούτων ὡς εἰκόνων ἐπ' ἐκεῖνα διαβαίνειν ἐπεχείρουσιν (*Plat. theol.* I.4.edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.20.1-10).

³⁶⁰ *Tum ad ipsius animi formam venit ac occultis quibusdam profundisque sentiētiis* (συμβολικῶς) *indicat, ut mos eius est, dum de divinis et intelligibilibus loquitur, quippe bigarum alatarum aurigaeque specie animum repraesentat, videlicet rationem eius aurigae, iram et cupiditatem equis comparans, sed iram equo probro et pulchro, cupiditatem contra* (*ICP* 4.2.12 p.463.14-18).

³⁶¹ *Ergo quod divini illi prophetae rectissime sanctissimeque fecerunt, id a Platone factum non modo improbandum non est, sed potius summopere laudandum* (*ICP* 2.8.19 p.159.1-3). Πλάτων ἀλλαχῆ τε κἀνταῦθα πολλὰ διὰ τῶν αἰνιγμῶν τούτων σεμνά τε καὶ χαρίεντα παραδίδωσι θεωρήματα. ἀριθμοῖς τε γὰρ ἐνταῦθα καὶ σχήμασι χρῆται (*ICP* 2.8.19 p.158.5-7). ἴσμεν γὰρ τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν μάλιστα ἴδιον εἶναι, οἷς

Plato was following in the steps of the Hebrew prophets, the Chaldaeans and Pythagoras and that the practice was continued among the Christian fathers. He spells it out clearly thus: ‘Plato hides sacred matters behind mathematical terms like a screen. In a similar way some Greek theologians used myth and others used symbols to hide their theology. Everybody knows that the prophets of our own faith inspired by the Holy Spirit and the earliest theologians made use of such symbolic language as a screen to conceal the first truth and other more divine teachings. They hardly revealed divine truths to the more devout. Ancient sacred writing is full of such language as are all the books of the prophets. They convey all their teaching through allegory and the covert meaning of analogy and metaphor...The exegetes of sacred writing prior to Christ and the holy teachers of the Church after Christ laboured hard to explain these things. For not only the Pythagoreans but long before them the holy prophets were accustomed to convey their teachings on divine matters secretly and in many symbols. Plato did not follow Pythagoras only but he also had dealings with the Chaldaeans and Jews and had contact with some of our own prophets. He owed much to them if our teachers who assert this are to be believed. Along with others he strove to disguise divine matters. This was the practice which was accepted and prevailed at the time.’³⁶²

καὶ Πλάτων ἐφίεσπετο, τὸ δι’ εἰκόνων τὰ θεῖα παραδίδοναι καὶ τοῖς μαθήμασι πρὸς τὴν τῶν νοητῶν ἀνάμνησιν χρῆσθαι καὶ διὰ τούτων ὡς εἰκόνων ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνα διαβαίνειν μέσσην τῶν αὐτῶν καὶ ὑλικῶν τάξιν ἐχόντων (*ICP* 2.8.21 p.160.20-23). Compare with Proclus: ὁ δὲ διὰ τῶν εἰκόνων Πυθαγόρειος, ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῖς Πυθαγορείοις τὰ μαθήματα πρὸς τὴν τῶν θεῶν ἀνάμνησιν ἐξήρρητο καὶ διὰ τούτων ὡς εἰκόνων ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνα διαβαίνειν ἐπεχείρουν (*Plat. theol.* I.4 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.20.8-10). Proclus made the connection between the Pythagoreans and Plato in the use of mathematics to talk about the ineffable: καὶ δὴ καὶ περὶ ὀνομάτων ἀρρήτων τε καὶ ῥητῶν ἐνδειξάμενος [*sc.* Plato] ὄντως κατὰ τὸν τῶν Πυθαγορείων λόγον, ὅς φησι σοφώτατον μὲν εἶναι τὸν ἀριθμὸν (*in Tim.* I.276.14-17). He placed mathematics at the mean between intelligibles and sensibles: καὶ γὰρ ὅλως εἰ μέσσην ἔταπτον οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι τὴν μαθηματικὴν οὐσίαν τῶν τε νοητῶν καὶ τῶν αἰσθητῶν, ὡς ἀνελιττομένην μὲν τῶν νοητῶν μᾶλλον, καθολικωτέραν δὲ τῶν αἰσθητῶν οὔσαν (*in Tim.* II.23.16-19) as did Bessarion (see pages 100-111 and note [376376](#) below).

³⁶² ὧν δ’ ἐπὶ κρυψίν τοῖς μαθηματικοῖς ὀνόμασιν ὡς παραπετάσμασιν ἐχρήσατο Πλάτων, ὡς μύθοις ἄλλοι τῶν παρ’ Ἑλλήσι θεολόγων καὶ συμβόλοις ἕτεροι τὴν αὐτῶν ἐπεκρύναντο θεολογίαν. οἱ γὰρ μὴν ἡμέτεροι καθηγεμόνες τῆς πίστεως πνεύματι θεῷ κεινημένοι προφηταὶ καὶ πρῶτιστοι θεολόγοι, τίς οὐκ οἶδεν, ὅσοις τοιοῦτοις παραπετάσμασι λόγων συμβολικοῖς πρὸς ἐπὶ κρυψίν τῆς πρώτης ἀληθείας καὶ τῶν ἄλλων θειοτέρων δογμάτων κέχρηται, μόλις τὰ θεῖα τοῖς σπουδαιοτέροις ἐνδεικνύμενοι; πλήρης γὰρ ἐστὶ τῶν γε τοιοῦτων ἡ θεῖα γραφή, ἢ γε ἀρχαιότερα, πλήρεις αἱ τῶν προφητῶν βίβλοι πᾶσαι, πάντα δι’ ἀλληγορίας καὶ ὑπονοίας καὶ ἀναγωγικῶν τε καὶ μεταφορικῶν διδάσκουσαι λόγων....καὶ πολλοὺς οἱ τε πρὸ Χριστοῦ τῆς

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He seems ambivalent whether Plato and his predecessors used the language of myth and symbol because of the intrinsic ineffability of the subject matter of theology or as a way of restricting knowledge of such things to their followers. Phrases like ‘hardly revealing divine matters to the more devout ‘ (μόλις τὰ θεῖα τοῖς σπουδαιοτέροις ἐνδεικνύμενοι) and ‘along with others he also strove to disguise divine matters’ (μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ τὴν ἐπίκρυψιν τῶν θειοτέρων δογμάτων ἐζήλωσε) suggest an intention to restrict knowledge.

The phrase ‘if our teachers who assert this are to be believed’ indicates that he was not committing himself to the belief that Plato and Pythagoras visited Egypt where they learnt about the Hebrew scriptures and the mysteries of the Chaldaeans.³⁶³ There were a number of sources for this belief including Proclus, Augustine and Plethon. Proclus traced the origin of Plato’s theology to Orpheus and Pythagoras.³⁶⁴ Bessarion referred to Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria and Eusebius as his authorities for the belief that Plato visited Egypt where he learnt about the Hebrew Scriptures.³⁶⁵ He cited Augustine for the belief that on his visit to Egypt Plato learnt of the book of Genesis which became a source for the account of creation in the *Timaeus*.³⁶⁶ He also cited Eusebius to the effect that Plato

θείας γραφῆς ἐξηγηταὶ οἱ τε μετὰ Χριστὸν ἱεροὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας διδάσκαλοι κατεβάλλοντο πόνους περὶ τὴν ἐκείνων ἀνάπτυξιν. οὐ γὰρ Πυθαγόρειοι μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πολλῶ πρὸ αὐτῶν οἱ θεῖοι προφηταὶ παραπετάσμασι καὶ συμβόλοις τὴν τῶν θεῶν διδασκαλίαν τοῖς πολλοῖς παραδιδόναι εἰώθασι. καὶ Πλάτων οὖν οὐ Πυθαγόρα μόνον ἐπόμενος, ἀλλὰ καὶ Χαλδαίοις καὶ Ἰουδαίοις συμμίξας καὶ τισὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων προφητῶν συγγενόμενος, οὐκ ὀλίγα τε παρ’ αὐτῶν ὠφεληθεὶς καὶ παραδεξάμενος, εἶπερ τοῖς διδασκάλοις ἡμῶν οὕτω διῖσχυριζόμενοις πιστευτέον, μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ τὴν ἐπίκρυψιν τῶν θειοτέρων δογμάτων ἐζήλωσε, τούτου τότε καὶ οὐκ ἀποτρόπου τοῦ ἔθους ἐπικρατοῦντος (*ICP* 2.8.18 p.156.22–p.158.1). I have quoted the Greek text rather than the Latin at this point because it gives a fuller account. In the Latin version there is no equivalent of μόλις τὰ θεῖα τοῖς σπουδαιοτέροις ἐνδεικνύμενοι.

³⁶³ According to Ficino (*de Christiana Religione* Opera 1.25) when the Platonists interpreted Plato’s philosophy they were dependent on the Christians’ divine light. In this and other passages Ficino used this dependency theory to justify his synthesis of paganism and Christianity. See Ridings (1995) pp.9-10.

³⁶⁴ ‘All Greek theology derives from Orpheus. Pythagoras received the mysteries (τὰ περὶ θεῶν ὄργια) of the gods from Aglaophemus. Plato then got the complete knowledge concerning them from the Orphic and Pythagorean texts (Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.5 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.25.24- p.26.3).’

³⁶⁵ *ICP* 3.8.2 p.245.15-31.

³⁶⁶ In *de doctrina Christiana* (II.28.43 ed. Green p.106) Augustine rebutted the belief that the teachings of Jesus derived from Plato. Instead he said he had learnt from Ambrose that Plato went to Egypt and had learnt

derived nearly all his theology from sacred scripture.³⁶⁷ He quoted from Cyril of Alexandria the view that Pythagoras and Plato visited Egypt where Moses was held in high regard and there they learnt τὸν περὶ θεοῦ λόγον.³⁶⁸ These references demonstrated for Bessarion that Plato's practice of veiling theological matters in obscurity had the sanction of ancient tradition including the Hebrew scriptures.³⁶⁹

Plato's use of myth

According to Bessarion Plato did not use myths in the same way as the poets, whom he criticised in the *Republic*, but as a way of encouraging virtue and indicating the nature of the divine as well as those things which should be hidden by a veil.³⁷⁰ The phrase *quae palam pronuntiare non decet, quasi subtilioribus velis obtecta ostendit* (ICP 2.8.22 p.161.22-3) suggests that the nature of the subject matter is such as to require the use of myth.³⁷¹ But he was ambivalent as to whether this was Plato's reason for the use of myth

from the prophet Jeremiah, whom he met, what is good in his writings (*Ita consideratis temporibus fit multo credibilis istos [sc. the Pythagoreans and Plato] potius de litteris nostris habuisse quaecumque bona et vera dixerunt quam de Platonis dominum Jesum Christum, quod dementissimum est credere*). In *C. D.* (VIII.11) he acknowledged Ambrose was wrong. Plato was a hundred years younger than Jeremiah and could not have met Jeremiah. Nevertheless he noted close parallels between the book of *Genesis* and the *Timaeus* which, he said: *et me plurimum adducit, ut paene assentiar Platonem illorum librorum expertem non fuisse*.

³⁶⁷ Eusebius *Praep. Ev.* XI.23-27. Eusebius (XI.10.14) cited a remark attributed to Numenius: τί γὰρ ἐστὶ Πλάτων ἢ Μωσῆς ἀπτικίζων;

³⁶⁸ See *Contra Julianum* I.8 Migne *P.G.* 76 col. 548A.

³⁶⁹ Bessarion's use of τότε in the phrase τούτου τότε καὶ οὐκ ἀποτρόπου τοῦ ἔθους ἐπικρατοῦντες (ICP 2.8.18 p.156 43- p.158.1) suggests that the practice had been superseded by his time.

³⁷⁰ *Usus interdum fabula Plato est, sed non more poetarum, quos aperte improbat et a sua republica prorsus expellit; verum id fabularum genus probare videtur, quod ad honestatem spectat et ad virtutem hortatur ac divinae naturae rationem figmentis quibusdam non ineptis modestissime indicat, plerumque etiam, quae palam pronuntiare non decet, quasi subtilioribus velis obtecta ostendit* (ICP 2.8.22 p.161.18-23). Plato used myth as a way of explaining matters that are beyond the scope of reason but only in 'a probable way'. In the *Phaedrus* he used the myth of the two horse chariot to give a probable account of the nature of soul since a true account would be beyond human capacity (246a4-6). The myth of creation in the *Timaeus* is a 'likely account' (ὄντος δὲ εἰκόνοσ εἰκότασ ἀνὰ λόγον τε ἐκείνων ὄντασ *Timaeus* 29c2). He objected to those who treated myths as just allegories in order to sanitise them. See *Phaedrus* 229c-e and *Republic* 378d. See Wright (2000) 3-9.

³⁷¹ The Latin version reads: *divinae naturae rationem figmentis quibusdam non ineptis modestissime indicat, plerumque etiam, quae palam enuntiare non decet, quasi subtilioribus quibusdam velis obtecta ostendit*. Compare with Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.4 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.21.7-10: ἔστι μὲν γὰρ ὁ τῆσ μυθολογίασ

or whether it is because of the limited understanding of the common crowd; he added:

Plato nonnunquam utitur [hoc genere fabulae] ut rude vulgus atque indoctum facilius percipiat divinam naturam bonorum omnium causam esse (ICP 2.8.22 p.161 25-6).

Scholarios in his *Polemic against Gemistos Plethon in defence of Aristotle* said that Plato hid his teaching in metaphor (ἐν πολλοῖς μεταφοραῖς) and images (τύποις). Where Aristotle was obscure it was the obscurity of a philosopher but Plato's obscurity was 'that of the poet, not to say some worse practice'.³⁷² In his response to Scholarios Plethon wrote: 'Why ever would a philosopher choose to be obscure?...Myths can have a point. They offer something to the crowd of those who cannot attain an understanding of profound ideas. Plato, like other theologians, acted out of philanthropic motives. He avoided the people's taste for the harmful myths of poetry and conveyed knowledge of the divine through clear stories so that both philosophers and the common folk could derive benefit'.³⁷³ But Proclus referring to Plato's use of myths in *Republic* book two said that they hid 'the mystery that must not be spoken as if in veils'.³⁷⁴ There was a tension between the use of myth to throw light, however dim, on a truth and its use to hide truth from all except the initiated.

The use of mathematics as symbol

Bessarion explained Plato's use in the *Timaeus* (34a-36c) of mathematical language in describing the world soul. Discourse on divine or intelligible matters has to use a common discourse such as mathematics which is detached from all matter and grasped by

τρόπος ἀρχαῖος, δι' ὑπονοιῶν τὰ θεῖα μηνύων καὶ πολλὰ παραπετάσματα τῆς ἀληθείας προβεβλημένος καὶ τὴν φύσιν ἀπεικαζόμενος.

³⁷² See note [318348](#) above.

³⁷³ See note [319349](#) above.

³⁷⁴ τὴν ἀπόρρητον περὶ αὐτῶν μυσταγωγίαν ἐν τούτοις ὥσπερ παραπετάσμασι κρύπτοντες (*Plat. theol.* I.17 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.81.8-10).

abstraction.³⁷⁵ ‘We know that it was a characteristic of the Pythagoreans to transmit divine matters in images and to use mathematics to recover the memory of intelligibles and by means of these as images to try to reach those things which are between the incorporeal and corporeal.’³⁷⁶ Mathematics concerns entities which are intermediate and are arrived at by abstraction. Bessarion gives as an example the idea of line without breadth but with length.³⁷⁷ This is the Euclidean definition of line. According to Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* Plato divided reality between sensible things, forms and an intermediate class of objects of mathematics (τὰ μαθηματικὰ τῶν πραγμάτων εἶναι φησι μεταξύ).³⁷⁸ In other words the objects of mathematics exist as separate entities and not in sensibles.³⁷⁹ But it is difficult to be sure where the doctrine is found in Plato’s dialogues. Ross suggests that Plato’s advocacy of mathematical studies in the *Republic* to lead the soul towards being implies that mathematical objects, including geometrical shapes, are intermediate between sense objects and being in the full sense.³⁸⁰ Plutarch in commenting on *Timaeus* 35a1-b3 ascribed to Posidonius and his followers the view that the soul holds an intermediate position between the realm of the intelligible and that of the sensible. ‘For, they said, the mathematical have been ranked between the primary intelligibles and the perceptibles and it is an appropriate thing for the soul likewise, possessing as she does the everlastingness

³⁷⁵ ICP 2.8.17 p.157.15-19. See note [340340](#) above.

³⁷⁶ ICP 2.8.21 p.160.20-23. See pages 94-5 above.

³⁷⁷ *Quocirca his mediis ad illas transeundum censebant* (sc. the Pythagoreans), *quandoquidem inter res naturales atque immateriales locum tenent medium, quippe nec cum materia considerantur nec esse sine materia possunt, sed per abstractionem quandam intellectus sumuntur. Non haec pedalis, quae scripta est, linea sumitur, inquit Aristoteles, sed illa, quae intellegitur exers latitudinis et pedalis, etiamsi maior praescripta est* (ICP 2.8.21 p.161.9-15). Aristotle used line as an example of an intermediate concept between corporeal and incorporeal (*Metaphysics* 997^b35-998^a9). Plato used the line and circle in *Phaedo* 72a12-b6 as symbols for arguing the immortality of the soul: εἰ γὰρ μὴ αἰεὶ ἀνταποδοιοῖη τὰ ἕτερα τοῖς ἑτέροις γιγνόμενα, ὥσπερ εἰ κύκλῳ περιόντα, ἀλλ’ εὐθεῖά τις εἴη ἢ γένεσις ἐκ τοῦ ἑτέρου μόνον εἰς τὸ καταντικρὺ καὶ μὴ ἀνακάμπτοι πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ ἕτερον μηδὲ καμπὴν ποιοῖτο, οἷσθ’ ὅτι πάντα τελευτῶντα τὸ αὐτὸ σχῆμα ἂν σχοίη καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ πάθος ἂν πάθοι καὶ παύσαιτο γιγνόμενα;

³⁷⁸ *Metaphysics* 987^b14-18. This doctrine is ascribed to Plato also in *Metaphysics* 7 (1028^b19-21).

³⁷⁹ The theory of intermediates existing in sensibles is alluded to *Metaphysics* 998^a7-9 and 1076^a32-^b11. Aristotle criticised the theory. He did not ascribe it but Ross argues that it must refer to some Platonists (Ross I (1924) 232)

³⁸⁰ *Republic* 523a, 525a and c, 526b, 527b. See Ross I (1924) 166-168.

of the intelligibles and the passivity of the perceptibles, to have her being in the middle'.³⁸¹ This is essentially the same as Aristotle's presentation of Plato as teaching a division into ideas, mathematical, and sensibles.³⁸² Bessarion's reference to mathematics ὡς εἰκόνων ἐπ' ἐκεῖνα διαβαίνειν ἐπιχειρεῖν μέσην τῶν αὐλῶν καὶ ὑλικῶν τάξιν ἐχόντων (*ICP* 2.8.21 p.160.22-3) suggests that he agreed with Aristotle's understanding of Plato.

Bessarion stayed close to what Proclus, commenting on 36b6-c1 of the *Timaeus*, said: 'Doubtless Plato secretly used mathematical terminology as a disguise for the truth of things, just as the [Orphic] Theologians used myths and the Pythagoreans used symbols. For it is possible to see the paradigms in the images and it is possible to make the transition to the paradigms through the images.'³⁸³ In the opening paragraphs of his commentary on the *Timaeus* Chalcidius wrote that the *Timaeus* had from of old been thought difficult not because of the obscurity of the language but because it required acquaintance with technical language including geometry and mathematics. He was critical of the Platonists for wanting to restrict knowledge of Plato to an elite specialist audience which, in his view, had been Plato's intention in the *Timaeus*.³⁸⁴ At the start of the *Timaeus* Socrates had said that he only felt able to discourse with an elite, like Timaeus, Critias and Hermocrates, who were both temperamentally suited and sufficiently educated to discuss philosophy and statesmanship.³⁸⁵

³⁸¹ *De Anima Procreatione in Timaeo* 1023B4-D1 translation Cherniss (1976). See Kidd (1999) 199-200.

³⁸² See Merlan (1967) especially 15-18 and 62.

³⁸³ in *Tim.* II.246.4-9 translation Baltzly (2009). See note ~~351~~354 above.

³⁸⁴ *Timaeus Platonis et a veteribus difficilis habitus atque existimatus est ad intelligendum, non ex imbecillitate sermonis obscuritate nata...sed quia legentes artificiosae rationis, quae operatur in explicandis rerum quaestionibus, usum non habebant stili genere sic instituto, ut non alienigenis sed propriis quaestionum probationibus id quod in tractatum venerat ostenderetur....Ex quo apparet hoc opus illis propemodum solis elaboratum esse ac videri qui in omnium fuerant huius modi scientiarum [sc. mathematics, astronomy etc.] usu atque exercitatione versati; quos cum oporteret tantam scientiarum claritudinem communicare cum ceteris, infelicis invidiae detestabili restrictione largae beatitudinis fusionem incommunicabilem penes se retinuerunt* (ed. Waszink (1962) 57-8). See Reydams-Schils (2007) 301-327 especially 306-7.

³⁸⁵ *Timaeus* 19e8-20c2.

In summary Bessarion saw Plato's use of mathematics as symbols (a) derived from the Pythagoreans, (b) as a deliberate method of disguising the truth from the uninitiated and (c) whose abstractions were closest in nature to the paradigm. Plato's symbols could not be understood without interpretation. He accused Trebizond of a wilful misunderstanding of the nature of Plato's philosophical discourse.³⁸⁶ Bessarion seems to have held that only a *vir doctus* is capable of penetrating the mathematical analogies to their deeper meaning.³⁸⁷ On the other hand he said of Plato's use of myth that it was a means by which the common uneducated folk could have some knowledge of the divine nature as the source of all good things. Plethon similarly commented: 'Myths offer something to the crowd of those unable to reach an understanding of profound ideas'.³⁸⁸

Bessarion starts from the position that divine and intelligible matters are beyond normal human language.³⁸⁹ There were two different ways of expressing in figurative language such matters and two different audiences. There are the initiated or the *eruditi* and there are common folk (*rude vulgus atque indoctum ICP 2.8.22 p.161.25*). Plato's writing on sacred matters is obscure so as not to be easily understood by the common folk (*ICP 1.2.4 p.15.36-40 and 6 p.19.21-24*). These obscurities hide his teachings from all except the initiated who are his followers (*ICP 2.8.18 p.156.27-9*). They received his teaching from the master or, as Chalcidius argues, had the particular skill, like mathematical knowledge,

³⁸⁶ *Atqui adversarius, qui plane omnia pervertit, beluas dicit apud Platonem humana anima formari. Quod, etiamsi animam hominis beluinum corpus ingredi Plato concederet, non tamen ita intelligendum esset, ut adversarius sentit (ICP 2.8.23 p.163.23-26). Quae cum ignoraret Platonis objurgator, quamquam dilucide genere fabularum apud Macrobius in expositione M. Tullii de somnio Scipionis videre potuerat, figmenta Platoni et fabulas objecit, surdus videlicet tum ad ea, quae modo retuli dicta Platonis, tum ad alia multa (ICP 2.8.22 p.161.29-32).*

³⁸⁷ *At certe vir doctus dumtaxat verba, quorum profundiore sententiam probabat, ad usum communem vulgarem reprehendit, ne quod significare primo aspectu videbantur id ita esse putaretur (ICP 2.8.17 p.157.2-5).* The Greek text does not use any word as explicit as *vir doctus* but simply uses the indefinite εἰ τις.

³⁸⁸ *Hoc genere [sc fabula], quem ad modum Socrates in constituenda re publica docet esse faciendum, sapientissimus Plato nonnunquam utitur, ut rude vulgus atque indoctum facilius percipiat divinam naturam bonorum omnium esse causam (ICP 2.8.22).* For Plethon see note [319319](#) above.

³⁸⁹ *ICP 2.8.17 p.157.15-16.*

needed to interpret the teaching. In these cases the actual words understood literally may even mislead the common crowd (*ICP* 2.11.2 p.201.20-26). A myth might also be used to obscure the truth from all except those who have been initiated into its interpretation as Proclus seems to have thought (Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.17 ed. Saffrey and Westerink p.81.4-10). But myths might also be used to convey insights into divine or intelligible matters even to the uninitiated (*ICP* 2.8.22 p.161.23-8). Plato used stories because the common people cannot understand deep ideas or abstractions but they can appreciate stories.

Bessarion's critique of Aristotle

Bessarion holds that Aristotle and Plato agreed and in cases where Aristotle disagreed with Plato he tried to mount arguments to show that in reality the two philosophers were congruent. He makes much of the distinction between the surface meaning of words and their underlying and hidden meaning which is only accessible to the initiated. He argues that some of Aristotle's criticisms of Plato and the Pythagoreans are only valid against the literal meaning of their words; if the underlying meaning of the words is understood they did not disagree with each other.³⁹⁰ He holds that Aristotle was aware of this but was concerned to protect the ignorant from being misled by the literal meaning of words. 'Aristotle always acts like a teacher....But if [the ancient authors] seem to have used words ambiguously, perhaps by taking words meant for one context and applying them to another, he does not address the real meaning of the words. He tries to argue not so much against the true meaning of the words but against the arguments based on the incorrect use of the words. In the opinion of all the most learned authorities, as I have said above, he does this to avoid somebody being misled by the apparent argument into ideas contrary to

³⁹⁰ *Argumenta, quibus Aristoteles adversus Platonem usus fuit, non ad sententiam, sed ad primum quasi aspectum pro suis assumpsit* (*ICP* 2.11.1 p.199.10-11).

the correct understanding of the matter.³⁹¹ His Greek text has a passage, which does not appear in the Latin text, making a contrast between Plato and Aristotle. ‘For since Plato and the Pythagoreans transmit the majority of their teaching regarding divine matters through symbols and images and enigmas and hide the deeper concepts in myth and figures they could be responsible for leading astray the ignorant majority in their understanding of these very sophisticated matters into believing in the literal words and being unable to distinguish between appearances and reason. Aristotle with great philanthropy anticipates this and protects those who are unable to understand these matters from pursuing what are mere appearances.’³⁹²

He cites as an example of confusion between the surface meaning of words and their underlying meaning Aristotle’s criticism of the teaching of the Eleatics, Parmenides and Melissus, on the One, existence and the first principle of beings (περὶ τοῦ ἑνὸς καὶ τοῦ ὄντος καὶ τῆς τῶν ὄντων ἀρχῆς) in the *Physics* (184^b15-187^a11).³⁹³ In the Greek text he says that this was the best and clearest example of how Aristotle and Plato were in fact saying the same things about the One, about being and about the principle of beings.³⁹⁴ In this passage of the *Physics* Aristotle was refuting the view which he attributed to

³⁹¹ *Agit quidem Aristoteles semper more eorum, qui aliqua de re docent, sermone artificiose scripto et optima ratione disposito....Si qui vero verba fortassis ex re alia in aliam transferrentes minus proprie locuti videntur, eorum verba ipsa parum proprie insectatur, nec quod illi senserunt, sed quod verbi impropriate urgeri potest, conatur refellere. Quod iudicio quidem omnium doctissimorum ideo, ut supra diximus, facit, ne quis primo aspectu sermonis arreptus sentiat, quid alienum sit a rei, de qua agitur, recta veraque ratione (ICP 2.11.2 p. 199.18-p.201.1). See also: Sed voluit [Aristoteles]...auditoribus suis consulere, ne forte divinarum rerum disciplinam ad naturalium considerationem imprudenter transferrent (ICP 2.12.9 p.217.34-36).*

³⁹² ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι [i.e. Plato and the Pythagoreans] συμβολικῶς τε καὶ εἰκονικῶς ἅμα καὶ αἰνιγματωδῶς τὰ πλείω τῶν θειοτέρων δογμάτων παραδιδόντες καὶ τῷ μυθικῷ τε καὶ πλασματικῷ τὰ βαθύτερα τῶν νοημάτων ἐπικρύπτοντες τῷ πολλῷ ὄχλῳ καὶ ἀμαθεῖ πλάνης ἂν ἐγεγονείσαν αἴτιοι τῇ δόξῃ τε καὶ ὑπολήψει τῇ περὶ αὐτῶν ὡς σοφωτάτων γενομένων πρὸς τὸ τοῖς λεγομένοις πιστεῦν ἐπαγομένῳ καὶ τὸ νοούμενον τοῦ φαινομένου μὴ διακρίνειν δυναμένῳ, φιλανθρώπως αὐτὰ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐλέγχει καὶ τοὺς αὐτοὺς συνιέναι μὴ δυναμένους μὴ τῷ φαινομένῳ ἀκολουθεῖν ἀσφαλίζεται (ICP 2.11.2 p.200.23-31).

³⁹³ ICP 2.12 ‘*De Parmenidis et Melissi ente intelligibili non physice sed theologice disputatio*’.

³⁹⁴ ἐνί τινι παραδείγματι, μεγίστῳ μέντοι τῶν πάντων καὶ σαφεστάτῳ, τὸν πάντα πιστωσόμεθα λόγον, τὰ ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ τῶν Φυσικῶν κατὰ Μελίττου καὶ Παρμενίδου, ταῦτο δ’ εἶπεῖν καὶ Πλάτωνος περὶ τοῦ ἑνὸς καὶ τοῦ ὄντος καὶ τῆς τῶν ὄντων ἀρχῆς εἰρησθαι δοκοῦντα προχειρισάμενοι (ICP 2.12.1 p.200.40-p.202.2).

Parmenides and Melissus that existence is one and changeless (ἐν καὶ ἀκίνητον τὸ ὄν 184^b26). Bessarion summarised part of Aristotle's argument.³⁹⁵ He starts by quoting *Physics* 184^b15-17: 'There must either be one principle of nature or a multiplicity. If there is only one it is either changeless, which is the view of Parmenides and Melissus, or it is subject to change, which is what the physicists say.' He goes on in his summary to say that Aristotle aimed his attack at the view of Parmenides and Melissus that existence or the first principle of beings was one and changeless. According to Aristotle, he says, such a position did not reflect the reality of nature. Nevertheless Aristotle thought that it was worth examining their arguments since they raised philosophical questions which were worth examining.³⁹⁶ Aristotle argued that existence or the first principle of beings cannot be a principle if it is one and thus changeless for it has to be a principle of something or somethings. It is of the nature of a principle to incorporate within itself (*repraesentat*, συνεισφέρουσιν ἑαυτῆ) those things of which it is the principle. This cannot be the case if being is one and unique.³⁹⁷

Bessarion's response is that Aristotle's critique of Parmenides and Melissus was not valid because they were talking about different things. Aristotle was talking about nature, whereas Parmenides and Melissus were talking about divine and intelligible things.³⁹⁸ The words might be the same but the connotation is different. Aristotle interpreted Melissus and Parmenides to be talking about being in the physical world which can have predicates

³⁹⁵ *ICP* 2.12.1 p.209.7-19 summarising *Physics* 185^a20-^b25.

³⁹⁶ *Physics* 185^a19-20. Aristotle accepted that Parmenides and Melissus were not talking about nature (*Physics* 185^a18). See also *de Caelo* 298^b16-20 where Aristotle said that even if some of what the followers of Melissus and Parmenides said was right they did not speak as physicists. Uncreated and unmoving beings are outside the scope of physics but are the subject for some higher study.

³⁹⁷ μήτε περὶ φύσεως λέγων εἶναι σκοπεῖν τὸ οὕτω τιθέναι μήτε ἔτι ἀρχὴν εἶναι, εἰ ἔν εἴη καὶ οὕτως ἔν ὡς ἀκίνητον. τινὸς γὰρ ἢ τινῶν τὴν ἀρχὴν εἶναι ἀρχὴν, συνεισφέρουσιν ἑαυτῆ δηλονότι καὶ τὰ ὧν ἔστιν ἀρχή. ὅπερ οὐκ ἂν εἴη, εἰ ἔν μόνον εἴη τὸ ἔν, ὡς ἐκεῖνοι φασί (*ICP* 2.12.1 p.202.17-21).

³⁹⁸ *Cum itaque viri illi de rebus intelligibilibus ac divinis et de primo principio vereque ente agerent, his verbis utebantur, unum esse ens ipsum idque immobile et infinitum et reliqua, quae huic sententiae conveniunt* (*ICP* 2.12.3 p.211.8-10). *Non enim physici erant, nec de principiis, hoc est naturalibus, sed divinis et intelligibilibus disserebant* (*ICP* 2.12.2 p.209.33-5) and see note [347347](#) above.

e.g. large, small etc. Bessarion, based on Simplicius, understood that this was not the case. Melissus and Parmenides were talking of self-existent being (περὶ τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος) which is pure substance without predicates.³⁹⁹ As further examples of confusion in philosophical language Bessarion set out to demonstrate that the three pre-Socratic philosophers Xenophanes, Parmenides and Melissus held the same view about being in itself but because they used different language they appeared to disagree.⁴⁰⁰ Bessarion's text in these paragraphs (ICP 2.12.3-6) was lifted with adaptations from Simplicius' *In Aristotelis Physicorum Libros* (29.15 to 31.17).

In chapter ICP 2.12 Bessarion digressed from his main purpose of setting out the teachings of Plato. The chapter is concerned with the interpretation of Parmenides and Melissus and enabled Bessarion to draw out the distinction between the language of theology and the language of nature which was important to his argument. The context of this long digression was his contention that Aristotle aimed his criticisms of Plato against the literal meaning of his words rather than his underlying and true meaning.⁴⁰¹ Bessarion explains why Aristotle presented the arguments of Melissus and Parmenides as he did; he was taking account of the inexperience of his hearers in philosophical language.⁴⁰² The argument is special pleading by Bessarion. His purpose was to defend Aristotle and to sustain his thesis that Aristotle and Plato were really in agreement. In the case of Parmenides and Melissus he said that Aristotle knew their true opinions and thought no

³⁹⁹ See Cherniss (1935) 65. Proclus drew a similar distinction regarding Plato and Aristotle: καὶ ὅσα τῆ οὐσίᾳ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὁ Πλάτων, ταῦθ' οὗτος τῆ κυκλοφορίᾳ, τῶν μὲν θεολογικῶν ἀρχῶν ἀφιστάμενος, τοῖς δὲ φυσικοῖς λόγοις πέρα τοῦ δέοντος ἐνδιατρίβων (in *Tim.* I.295.25-27).

⁴⁰⁰ *Hoc modo ipsi quoque inter sese, cum sententia minime discrepent, usu tamen quodam verborum contraria dicere videntur* (ICP 2.12.3 p.211.28-9).

⁴⁰¹ *Quippe argumenta, quibus Aristotelis adversus Platonem usus fuit, non ad sententiam, sed ad primum quasi aspectum pro suis sumpsit* (ICP 2. 11.1 p.199.10-11).

⁴⁰² *Auditorum adhuc imperitiorum ingenio humaniter consulens ea proponebat, ut omni ex parte tutissime erudirentur* (ICP 2.11.2 p.201.23-24).

differently from them.⁴⁰³ But his wish to avoid criticism of Aristotle made Bessarion too charitable; this was pointed out by the Aristotelian scholar Francesco Vimercato (1512-1571). He wrote: ‘For if Aristotle did this not out of envy or dislike of Plato but to prevent those who wanted to pursue philosophy from falling into error why did he not say that Plato did not believe what his words appeared to say, but that he was transmitting in this way of speaking a recondite Philosophy which he did not wish to be open to all?’⁴⁰⁴ In Vimercato’s view Aristotle was driven by personal ambition and a desire to establish his own superiority over Plato and all other philosophers.

There is, however, another possible reading of Bessarion’s purpose in his defence of Aristotle. His readers might only have been able to form their judgements of Melissus and Parmenides (and of Plato) from Aristotle’s criticism of them. He acknowledged that they were unlikely to have access to the texts of Parmenides or Melissus and they did not have all the Platonic dialogues.⁴⁰⁵ Bessarion’s material on Parmenides came from Simplicius who would not have been accessible to most of his Latin readers at the time.⁴⁰⁶ In the circumstances their knowledge of Parmenides and Melissus would have been based on Aristotle’s critique and Bessarion would have been anxious to correct any

⁴⁰³ *Ubi de summis philosophiae opinionibus agitur, sententiam Parmenidis et Melissi quamquam veram esse [Aristotelis] existimat nec ab ea opinione dissentit, tamen diversa dissimulat (ICP 2.12.p.201.7-9).*

⁴⁰⁴ *Non illo inquam modo respondebo, quanvis id mihi prorsus non displiceat, quod Bessarion ut vir bonus, et qui nulli, ipsi praesertim Aristoteli maledicere volebat, eius maledicta excusare volens, attulit. Namque Aristotelis, si philosophari tantum volentium gratia, ne in opiniones absurdas inciderent, id fecit, non item odio et invidia abductus, cur Platonem ea non sensisse, quae verba ipsa quandoque praeseferebant, sed reconditam quandam philosophiam, quam non omnibus patere vellet, ea dicendi ratione tradidisse, non dixit? Franceso Vimercato *De placitis naturalibus Platonis et Aristotelis* (1541) quoted by del Soldato (2010) 330.*

⁴⁰⁵ *Multos autem esse opinor, praesertim Latinos, qui cum non habeant veterum illorum opera, libenter audierint, quibusnam rationibus adducti ea de rebus propositis senserint, quae non parum absurda primo aspectu videntur (ICP 2.11.2 p.201.13-14). ἄ τε οἱ παρὰ Λατίνοις αὐτοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους ἐξηγηταί, ἄνδρες σοφοί, οὐδὲν ἦτον πολλά καὶ καλὰ εἰρήκασι καὶ αὐτοὶ τῶν μὲν Πλάτωνος πάντη ἀνήκοοι, Ἀριστοτέλει δὲ πρὸς τὸ φαινόμενον μόνον ἀπαντῶντι ἐπόμεινοι (ICP 2.11.1 p.198.19-22) (These words are not in the Latin text).*

⁴⁰⁶ The Aristotelian commentaries were extensively translated into Latin and published in the sixteenth century but some were available in Latin in the fifteenth century. See Lohr (2000) 24.

misapprehension. In doing so he was also making an indirect comment on the deficiencies of Aristotle's philosophical language based on nature in dealing with theological matters. He may have had in mind a passage in the *Timaeus* where Plato drew a distinction between knowledge of that which always is and which can only be grasped by intuition together with reason and what comes into being and passes away and is ever changing which can only be known by opinion.⁴⁰⁷ Bessarion refers to this passage in the *Timaeus* in a comment regarding a distinction which Parmenides drew between intelligibles and truth on the one hand and sensibles and opinion i.e. the realm of physics on the other.⁴⁰⁸

There is further evidence that Bessarion was conscious of the risk of seeing Plato through Aristotle's version of him. According to Bessarion Trebizond had accused Plato of *inscitiam* because he had reduced the elements in nature to plain surfaces.⁴⁰⁹ Trebizond was referring to the account in the *Timaeus* of the composition of the primary elements from triangles (*Timaeus* 53c4-56c7). Aristotle criticised this theory in the *de Caelo* (299^a2-300^a12). Bessarion addressed Aristotle's argument as an example of how Aristotle criticised Plato but had, in fact, misrepresented him.⁴¹⁰ Aristotle was criticising Plato's account in the *Timaeus* (53c-55c) of the construction of the four primary figures of earth, air, fire and water from compositions of triangles into three dimensional shapes. He based his argument on the view that planes were constructed from lines and lines were constructed from points which were indivisible. He stated this as a proposition, referring to

⁴⁰⁷ τί τὸ ὄν αἰεὶ, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν αἰεὶ, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε; τὸ μὲν δὴ νοήσει μετὰ λόγου περιληπτὸν, αἰεὶ κατὰ ταῦτ' ὄν, τὸ δ' αὖ δόξει μετ' αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου δοξαστόν, γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν (*Timaeus* 27d6-28a4).

⁴⁰⁸ ICP 2.12.5 p.213.31-43.

⁴⁰⁹ ICP 2.11.1 p.199.5-7. See Trebizond: *Nam siquid forte de corporum principiis [Plato] dicit, ad superficies et lineas resolvit, et inde constitui corpora opinatur, peritum philosophum, atque acutum, mentemque ita divinum, ut haec ignominatio, paulo immutata, apprime illis accommodetur, qui eum Aristoteli praeferunt, simul enim et naturales, et mathematicas disciplinas funditus evertit* (*Comparatio* 1.5).

⁴¹⁰ ICP 2.11.3-7.

proofs in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.⁴¹¹ His objection to Plato's account was that an indivisible cannot be constitutive of physical bodies because indivisibility is incompatible with qualities like weight which inhere in the bodies that they constitute. An indivisible point cannot have weight because what has weight cannot be indivisible.⁴¹² Bessarion traces the history of the search for a philosophical explanation of the composition of the primary physical bodies through Timaeus Locrus, Democritus and the Pythagoreans to Plato who followed the Pythagoreans.⁴¹³ He was making the point that Aristotle's objection was only valid if Plato's shapes were mathematical figures composed of lines and points which have length and width but no volume. But for the Pythagoreans body has volume which is derived from composition of planes. He quotes Timaeus Locrus as an authority.⁴¹⁴ He is careful to point out that Plato advanced his theory as no more than probable and open to better explanations.⁴¹⁵ Bessarion's argument and much of his text is again drawn from Simplicius (*In Aristotelis De caelo* p.561-6).⁴¹⁶

⁴¹¹ *De Caelo* 299^a6-12 referring to *Physics* VI 1 and 2 and *Metaphysics* 992^a20.

⁴¹² *De Caelo* 299^a12-b23. See Cherniss (1944) 129-143 and Elders (1966) 273-4.

⁴¹³ *ICP* 2.11.4-7.

⁴¹⁴ *Sic Pythagorei, cum principia qualitatum quaererent, ad figuras prostremo devenerunt, non tamen figuras mathematicas, quae longitudinem dumtaxat et latitudinem haberent, - his enim opponi illa merito possent, quae ab Aristotele dicta sunt - sed naturales figuras, quae cum longitudine et latitudine altitudinem etiam sive profunditatem haberent et primae constitui in rebus naturalibus possent. Quod ita opinari se plane se ostendunt, cum materiales dicunt figuras...Magni profecto momenti essent objecta Aristotelis, si illi mathematicas figuras statuissent. Verum quoniam non mathematicas, sed naturales esse voluerunt, argumenta illa non tam sensum coargunt, quam verbis illudunt* (*ICP* 2.11.6 p.205.1-8 and 7 p.205.25-27). He quoted as his Pythagorean authority Timaeus Locrus: ἀρχαὶ μὲν ὧν τῶν γεννωμένων ὡς μὲν ὑποκείμενον ἄϋλα, ὡς δὲ λόγος μορφᾶς τὸ εἶδος· ἀπογεννάματα δὲ τούτων ἐντὶ τὰ σώματα, γὰρ τε καὶ ὕδωρ ἀήρ τε καὶ πῦρ, ὧν ἄ γεννάσις τοιαύτα. ἅπαν σώμα ἐξ ἐπιπέδων ἐντί, τοῦτο δὲ ἐκ τριγώνων, ὧν τὸ μὲν ὀρθογώνιον ἰσοσκελὲς ἡμιτετράγωνον (*de Natura Mundi* 97e-98a ed. Marg p.134.2-6). He included Plato and Timaeus Locrus with the Pythagoreans. See *ICP* 2.11.4 p.203.4-6.

⁴¹⁵ *ICP* 2.11.8 p.205.30-2 and 9 p.207.7-14 quoting *Timaeus* 53d4-6 and 54a4-5. Bessarion likened this uncertainty to that of astronomers putting forward a variety of hypotheses to explain irregularities in the movements of celestial bodies.

⁴¹⁶ Compare with *ICP* 2.13.1-6 p.212-216 in the Greek text (Latin 2.11.3-8 p.201-205).

Conclusion

Bessarion's treatment of Plato's philosophical discourse needs to be seen as integral to his overall purpose. It would have presented new insights for his Latin readers familiar with modes of Aristotelian discourse and lacking access to many of the Platonic texts and their commentators particularly as they ran the risk of reading Plato through Aristotle's critique of him. It was important for Bessarion's aim of expounding and vindicating Plato to establish that his enigmatic form of discourse, whether in the form of myths or symbols, was a legitimate way of conveying teaching about divine matters and was, in fact, a more useful tool for theological discourse than Aristotle's logic. His arguments were drawn from the Neo-Platonists but whereas they were seeking to combine the genius of Aristotle with that of Plato, Bessarion was aiming to correct the adverse opinions of Plato in the West.

Chapter four

The One, the creation of the cosmos and the nature of matter

Summary

In book two of *ICP* Bessarion considered two related matters. The first was Plato's view of the transcendent nature of the supreme being: *Quid in Parmenide Plato dicat de principio omnium entium* (*ICP* 2.4) and the second, which drew heavily on the *Timaeus*, was the relation of the supreme being to the creation of the cosmos: *De entium productione quid Plato atque Aristoteles senserint* (*ICP* 2.6). Bessarion treated the *Parmenides* as a work of theology. He wrote a paeon of praise for the dialogue which, he says, Dionysius the Areopagite had copied: *quid toto Parmenide sublimius? Quid sapientius? Quid divinius? Quid de summa simplicitate unitateque primi entis vel potius supra omnia entia dei plenius atque explicacius? Cuius non modo sentiis, verum etiam verbis ipsis princeps Christianae theologiae Dionysius Areopagita in omnibus suis operibus utitur.*⁴¹⁷ By contrast he treated the *Timaeus* as a work of science and cosmology. The distinction had been drawn by Proclus who described the *Timaeus* as a work of nature and the *Parmenides* as a work on pure being (περὶ τῶν ὄντως ὄντων). Iamblichus had said that the whole of Plato's thought was contained in the two dialogues.⁴¹⁸ According to Proclus the

⁴¹⁷ *ICP* 1.7.1 p.73.6-11. Proclus described the theological pre-eminence of the *Parmenides*: πάντα γὰρ ἐν τούτῳ τὰ θεῖα γένη καὶ πρόεισιν ἐκ τῆς πρωτίστης αἰτίας ἐν τάξει καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἄλληλα συνάρτησιν ἐπιδείκνυσι.....καὶ πάντα, ὡς συνελόντι φάναι, τὰ τῆς θεολογικῆς ἐπιστήμης ἀξιώματὰ τελέως ἐνταῦθα καταφαίνεται καὶ τῶν θεῶν οἱ διάκοσμοι πάντες συνεχῶς ὑφιστάμενοι δείκνυνται· καὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἢ θεῶν γένεσις ὑμνημένη καὶ τῶν ὁπωσοῦν ὄντων ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρρήτου καὶ ἀγνώστου τῶν ὄλων αἰτίας (*Plat. theol.* I.7 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.31.14-27). See Saffrey and Westerink (1968) lxx-lxxv.

⁴¹⁸ Τιμαίῳ τε γὰρ τοιοῦτο τι γράμμα περὶ τῆς τοῦ παντός ἐγγράπτο φύσεως, καὶ Παρμενίδῃ δὲ περὶ τῶν ὄντως ὄντων. ὀρθῶς ἄρα φησὶν ὁ θεῖος Ιάμβλιχος τὴν ὅλην τοῦ Πλάτωνος θεωρίαν ἐν τοῖς δύο τούτοις περιέχεσθαι διαλόγοις, Τιμαίῳ καὶ Παρμενίδῃ (*in Tim.* I.13.12-17). Iamblichus, according to Proclus, divided

Parmenides was about intelligibles while the *Timaeus* concerned sensibles. The *Timaeus* made the Demiurge responsible for all things in the cosmos, while the *Parmenides* linked the procession of all beings to the One.⁴¹⁹ Bessarion followed this distinction in chapters four and six of book two. Chapter four interpreted the *Parmenides* as a text about the principle of all being which is beyond being while chapter six concerning the creation of the cosmos is largely based on the *Timaeus*. In making the same distinction Bessarion placed himself clearly in the Neo-Platonic tradition of seeing the *Parmenides* and *Timaeus* as twin but distinct pillars of philosophy.

As part of his overall purpose Bessarion wanted to show in book two that Christian language about God was similar to Plato's language about the One in the *Parmenides*. He interpreted the *Timaeus* as evidence that Plato held that the cosmos was created by God *ex nihilo* and in this he was consistent with Christian belief in contrast to Aristotle who took the opposite view.⁴²⁰ He was responding to Trebizond's claim that Plato held that God made the world out of pre-existing matter coeternal with and uncreated by God but that Aristotle thought being had been created out of non being by divine will.

Chapter four of book two is an account of what Plato says about 'the One' (τὸ ἓν) mainly in the *Parmenides*; Bessarion equated 'the One' of Plato with the Christian God. I shall argue that in drawing parallels between the language of Plato and the Fathers of the

the theory of intelligible and spritual being (*Parmendes*) from the theory of physical beings (*Timaeus*): ὁ μὲν Παρμενίδης τὴν περὶ τῶν νοημάτων πραγματείαν περιείληφεν, ὁ δὲ Τίμαιος τὴν τῶν ἐγκοσμίων (*in Tim.* I.13.5-7). Chalcidius set the tone for later interpretation among the Latins when he wrote: *haec (sc. Timaeus) quippe naturalis, illa [sc. Parmenides] epoptica disputatio est (in Timaeum CCLXXII)*. See Klibansky (1981) 282-3.

⁴¹⁹ *In Tim.* I.13.5-24.

⁴²⁰ *Ergo si Aristoteli magis quam adversario de opinione et sua et Platonis adhibenda est, profecto Plato, non Aristoteles est, qui substantias intellegibiles et caelum naturamque universam ex non ente simpliciter produci affirmans maxime cum nostra religione consentit (ICP 2.7.7 p.137.39- p.139.3).*

Church Bessarion's purpose was to demonstrate that Plato is not only close to Christianity but also a source or authority used by Christian writers.

I argue that in chapters six and seven he treated the question of the creation of the cosmos as philosophical rather than theological. He referred only in passing to the foundational Christian text on creation in *Genesis* 1 and when he did so he quoted Hesiod on an equal basis (*ICP* 2.6.12 p.121.35-p.123.3). His main source in the *Timaeus* was mythological and so open to interpretation. His purpose was to show that Plato could be interpreted in a way that was consistent with the Christian belief that God created the cosmos out of nothing. Bessarion acknowledged that the mythological nature of Plato's account where some passages seemed to imply that the cosmos was created from pre-existing and eternal matter left open difficult metaphysical questions.⁴²¹

I shall show that in answering these metaphysical questions Bessarion drew heavily on Neo-Platonist commentators and Aristotle. In doing so he was attempting to draw from Plato an authoritative philosophical basis for Christian belief. He went further than Aquinas' statement in the *Summa Theologiae* that the creation of the world *ex nihilo* could not be demonstrated philosophically but was known by faith.⁴²²

⁴²¹ *Quibus verbis decepti plerique materiam putant rerum causam ab eo positam esse et ante mundi originem fuisse (ICP 2.6.7 p.115.13-14).*

⁴²² *Moyses prophetizavit de praeterito, dicens: In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram; in quo novitas mundi traditur. Ergo novitas mundi habetur tantum per revelationem. Et ideo non potest probari demonstrative. Respondeo dicendum quod mundum non semper fuisse, sola fide tenetur, et demonstrative probari non potest....Voluntas enim Dei ratione investigari non potest, nisi circa ea quae absolute necesse est Deum velle: talia autem non sunt quae circa creaturas vult....Unde mundum incoepisse credibile, non autem demonstrabile vel scibile (Aquinas S.T. Ia q.46 a.2).*

The Parmenides

In chapter four of book two Bessarion tried to establish Plato's authority by showing that Christian writers had used not just the ideas but the actual words of Plato.⁴²³ His argument was that what Plato taught by the light of reason is confirmed by what the Fathers taught by the light of revelation. He interpreted the text of the *Parmenides* in the light of Dionysius the Areopagite whom he described as 'the prince of Christian theology'. He argued that Dionysius used practically the same words as Plato in the *Parmenides* and, therefore, Plato was close to Christian belief. Nicholas of Cusa had expressed much the same thought in his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* of 1449.⁴²⁴ Whatever Bessarion intended this was good propaganda for Plato before Bessarion embarked on issues where he had to respond to Trebizond's challenges.⁴²⁵ He was using the prestige which Dionysius enjoyed in the West as a way of enhancing the authority of Plato. In this matter Plato compared favourably with Aristotle. He notes that whatever Aristotle had said on these matters he copied from Plato and did not express it as well.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ *Haec nonne a Platone per eadem fere verba Dionysius sumpsit? Quid Gregorium memorem, qui ob excellentiam huius disciplinae theologi cognomen apud Graecos adeptus est?...Haec de uno et primo omnium principio ac de simplicitate et unitate dei Plato luce dumtaxat naturae illustratus scripsit. Haec nostri sanctissimique doctores Christianae religionis proceres divino afflatu spiritu docuere, quae res aperte satis testari videtur recte haec et sensisse et scripsisse Platonem. Quodsi principes nostrae fidei hoc sentiunt, quis ceteros dubitet id ipsum opinari (ICP 2.4.3 p.89.41-p.91.13)?*

⁴²⁴ *Unde, quando Avicenna in Dei singularitatem conatur ascendere per theologiam negativam, Deum ab omni singulari et universali absolvit; sed acutius ante ipsum divinus Plato in Parmenide tali modo in Deum conatus est viam pandere; quem adeo divinus Dionysius imitatus est, ut saepius Platonis verba seriatim posuisse reperiatur (Opera Omnia II.10 quoted in Klibansky (1981) 305).*

⁴²⁵ Trebizond had translated the *Parmenides* into Latin. Bessarion said of the translation that it destroyed Plato's work (ICP 4.17.2 p.624.33). The comment does not occur in the Latin text.

⁴²⁶ *Plato itaque in his mirifice ab omnibus comprobatus est, Aristoteles vero, quicquid de huiusmodi rebus scripsit, Platonem secutus est, quamvis non ita expresse de his locutus fuerit (ICP 2.4.4 p.91 36-p.93 1).* Compare with Bessarion's later words: *Fidem autem de supernis ac divinis rebus, quibus nihil est prius, unde sumi demonstrationis medium possit, cum omnium rerum primae et universorum causae sint, [Aristoteles] praeteriit omnino, ita ut non modo nihil de his scripserit, sed etiam quid senserit, obscurum omnibus reliquerit (ICP 2.5.10 p.105.10-14).*

Dionysius had been widely used in the West as a key to interpreting the *Parmenides*. He enjoyed enormous prestige among theologians at the time.⁴²⁷ He was still believed to be the Dionysius converted to Christianity by the Apostle Paul's sermon in Athens, although this tradition had been challenged by, among others, Bessarion's friend Valla.⁴²⁸ Aquinas, who quoted Dionysius more than any authority other than scripture, had written a commentary on Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus*.

The influence of Proclus on the thinking of Dionysius becomes apparent by comparing a passage in his *Mystical Theology* with Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides*. In the *Mystical Theology* Dionysius wrote: οὐδὲ λόγος ἐστὶν οὔτε νόησις, οὔτε λέγεται οὔτε νοεῖται· οὔτε ἀριθμὸς ἐστὶν οὔτε τάξις, οὔτε μέγεθος οὔτε σμικρότης..... οὔτε ἄλλο τι τῶν ἡμῖν ἢ ἄλλω τινὶ τῶν ὄντων συνεγνωσμένων.....οὔτε λόγος αὐτῆς ἐστὶν οὔτε ὄνομα οὔτε γνῶσις.⁴²⁹ There is a parallel between this and the closing passage of Morbeke's translation of Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides* (now lost in the Greek original). *Quid oportet de ipso Uno dicere? Non quod omnia nomina ab ipso deficient et omnis sermo et omnis scientia? Non ergo est nominabile neque dicabile neque scibile neque sensibile nulli entium le Unum. Quare omni sensui incomprehensibile est et omni opinioni et scientiae omni et omni rationi, et omnibus nominibus incomprehensibile.*⁴³⁰

Bessarion began chapter four with a summary of the *Parmenides* 137c-142a concerning the One (*unum ipsum* or τὸ ἓν).⁴³¹ He says that he had drawn together words from various

⁴²⁷ This is apparent from the number of translations and commentaries that had been produced in the middle ages. Hilduin, Abbot of St Denis in Paris, and John Scotus Erigena had translated the *De divinis nominibus* into Latin in the ninth century. Erigena, Hugh of St Victor, Robert Grosseteste and Albert the Great had written commentaries.

⁴²⁸ Acts 17.34. On views regarding the authenticity of Dionysius the Areopagite see Hankins (1987).

⁴²⁹ Dionysius the Areopagite *De mystica theologia* 5.

⁴³⁰ *In Parmenidem* III.514.10-13. See Klíbanky (1929) 37 sq. and Steel (2009) v-vi.

⁴³¹ Plethon had encouraged Bessarion to study the *Parmenides* (Migne P.G. 161 col. 721C). He told him that there he would find the true meaning of participation i.e. emanation from the One. εὐρήσεις γὰρ ἐκεῖ

passages in Plato's text. His summary followed closely the Greek text of the *Parmenides* except in one respect. He says at the start of his chapter that τὸ ἓν is Plato's way of referring to the supersubstantial divinity of God (ἡ ὑπερούσιος θεότης).⁴³² In fact Plato does not refer to θεός in this passage and hardly at all in the whole of the *Parmenides* and where he does so it is never qualified by ὑπερούσιος.⁴³³ Bessarion was adopting the Proclan and Neo-Platonist interpretation of the *Parmenides*, particularly of the first hypothesis (137c-142a).⁴³⁴ When Plato says that τὸ ἓν had no positive attributes and could not 'be' in any sense (141d7-142a8), the Neo-Platonists interpreted Plato to mean that it is beyond and above being.⁴³⁵ They identified τὸ ἓν with the text in the *Republic* (509b7-9) where Plato said of the good that it was beyond being: οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεία καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος.⁴³⁶ As Cornford writes: 'This revelation of mystical doctrine could never have been discovered by anyone who had nothing more to go upon than the text of the dialogue itself.'⁴³⁷

Bessarion betrays his Proclan influences when at the end of his summary of the attributes of the 'One' he says that when Plato spoke of the One as the origin of all things (ἡ

ἀμφοτέρας τὰς μεθέξεις ἐν τῇ τῶν τῆδε πρὸς τὰ νοητὰ εἶδη κοινωνία, καὶ τὴν μὲν, ὡς μάλιστα ἀποδοκιμαζομένην, τὴν δ' ὡς ἡκιστα, τὴν κατ' αἰτίαν δὴ ἐν οἷς φησι, τὰ μὲν εἶδη ταῦτα ὡς περ παραδείγματα ἐστάναι ἐν τῇ φύσει, τὰ δ' ἄλλα τούτοις εἰκέναι καὶ εἶναι ὁμοιώματα. See Proclus *Elements of theology* prop. 23 and Dodds (1963) 210-1.

⁴³² τὸ ἓν, φησὶν, οὕτω δὲ καλεῖ τὴν ὑπερούσιον θεότητα (*ICP* 2.4.1 p.86.33-4). Proclus, unlike Bessarion, drew a distinction between the 'One' and the Demiurge. ὁ Τίμιαιος πάντων τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τὴν αἰτίαν ἐπὶ τὸν πρότιστον ἀνάγει δημιουργόν, οὕτως ὁ Παρμενίδης τῶν ἀπάντων τὴν πρόοδον ἐξάπτει τοῦ ἐνός (*in Tim.* I.13.22-4).

⁴³³ Plato used θεός in an earlier passage (134d9-e6) where Parmenides argued that God cannot have knowledge of us or of the things in this world.

⁴³⁴ For the Neo-Platonic interpretation of the *Parmenides* see Klibansky (1981) 281-330, Cornford (1951) 131-4, Taylor (1934) 145-159, Dodds (1928). Little was known in the West of the *Parmenides* before Trebizond's translation. Moerbeke had translated the *Parmenides* as far as the end of the first hypothesis into Latin in the thirteenth century (see page 3940 above). It must be partly for this reason that the *Parmenides* tended to be seen through the first hypothesis. Bessarion quoted from it in four places in *ICP* (1.5.2, 1.5.7, 2.4.2, 2.6.5) and none of his quotations go further than the first hypothesis.

⁴³⁵ See Plotinus V.1.8 and Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.8-10.

⁴³⁶ See Cornford (1951) 131-2. See Plotinus: τοῦ αἰτίου δὲ νοῦ ὄντος πατέρα [ὁ Πλάτων] φησὶ τὰ γὰρ ἄθρον καὶ τὸ ἐπέκεινα νοῦ καὶ ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας (V.1.8).

⁴³⁷ Cornford (1951) 131.

πρωτίστη ἀρχή) he was celebrating (ἀνυμνούμενον) the creator of the universe (τῶν ὅλων ὑποστάτην), the highest good (τάγαθόν) and the king and founder of all things (πάντων βασιλέα καὶ δημιουργόν).⁴³⁸ According to Bessarion Plato's τὸ ἔν is equated with the δημιουργός of the *Timaeus* and the *summum bonum* (τάγαθόν) of the *Republic*. But the *Parmenides* does not link τὸ ἔν with the δημιουργός. Bessarion was aware of this. He notes that Plato distinguished the 'primum per se' from the 'creator sensibilibus rerum propinquum'.⁴³⁹ Ὑποστάτης is not used by Plato and the phrases ἡ πρωτίστη ἀρχή and ἡ πάντων βασιλέα are not in the texts of Plato. But these terms were used by Proclus. In the *Platonic Theology* (III.7) Proclus described the orders of gods using 'Plato as a guide'. He started from the initiation into the One in the *Parmenides* (τὴν περὶ τοῦ ἑνὸς μυσταγωγίαν) who is to be celebrated (ὕμνήσωμεν) and began from the first principle (ἰόντες ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης ἀρχῆς) which is 'the good' of the *Republic* (ὁ μὲν ἐν Πολιτεία Σωκράτης τάγαθόν ἀποκαλεῖ) and is called the origin of the whole of being (αἰτίαν τῶν ὅλων οὖσαν) and king of all (βασιλέα τῶν πάντων) whom in the *Philebus* Plato praised as the ground of all things (ὁ δὲ ἐν τῷ Φιλήβῳ Σωκράτης οἶον τῶν ὅλων ὑποστάτην εὐφημεῖ). The closeness of the verbal parallels between Bessarion and Proclus, including the resonance between Proclus' ὕμνήσωμεν and Bessarion's ἀνυμνούμενον and the difficulty of finding exact verbal matches in the Platonic texts shows that Bessarion was following Proclus closely in his terminology and interpretation of the *Parmenides*.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁸ ICP 2.4.1 p.88.12-14. Note Plethon: πρῶτον μὲν οὖν τὸν πάντων βασιλέα θεὸν Πλάτων δημιουργόν τῆς νοητῆς τε καὶ χωριστῆς πάντη οὐσίας, καὶ δι' αὐτῆς τοῦ παντὸς τοῦδε οὐρανοῦ τίθεται. Ἀριστοτέλης δὲ δημιουργόν μὲν οὐδενὸς οὐδαμοῦ αὐτὸν φησιν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ μόνον τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τοῦδε κινητικόν (*De differentiis* 1 ed. Lagarde p.321.23-27). See Plato *Epistles* 2.312e1-3 and *Timaeus* 28c2-29a2 and Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1072^b7-8 and *Physics* 8.258^b4-9.

⁴³⁹ *Servat quidem hoc propositum Plato semper, ut non primum per se principium existimet creatorem sensibilibus rerum propinquum, sed eum, qui post primum illum, quem unum vocat, secundo loco constitutus est* (ICP 2.6.15 p.125.7-10).

⁴⁴⁰ Ὑποστάτης was used by Dionysius (καὶ ἀληθῶς ὕμνηται πάντων ὑποστάτης, ἀρχηγική καὶ τελειωτική *De divinis nominibus* 1.7) which has parallels with the terminology of Proclus. Dionysius referred to the cause of all things (πάντων αἰτία) who had kingship over all (τῶν ὅλων βασιλεία) and was the beginning (ἀρχή) and cause of all (παντῶν ὑποστάτης). Again the word ὕμνηται is used in this context.

He makes, however, no reference to Proclus at this point but referred to Dionysius. He quoted directly from Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus* 1.1 and 1.5 the attributes of the ὑπερούσιος οὐσία which Dionysius also called τὸ ὑπὲρ διάνοιαν ἔν and τὸ ὑπὲρ λόγον ἀγαθόν including οὔτε αἴσθησις αὐτῆς ἐστὶν οὔτε φαντασία οὔτε δόξα οὔτε ὄνομα οὔτε λόγος οὔτε ἐπαφή οὔτε ἐπιστήμη.⁴⁴¹ This is close to wording in the *Parmenides* particularly 142a2-3: οὐδ' ἄρα ὄνομα ἔστιν αὐτῶ οὐδὲ λόγος οὐδέ τις ἐπιστήμη οὐδὲ αἴσθησις οὐδὲ δόξα. Bessarion with a rhetorical question attributes Dionysius' words to the *Parmenides*.⁴⁴² He quotes from a sermon of Gregory Nazianzenus to underline how close Plato, using the light of reason, was to the Fathers of the Church.⁴⁴³

Bessarion closed his case by quoting passages from Plato's *Laws* (715e-716a) and comparing them with passages from scripture which were, in his view, parallel but it has to be admitted that he stretched the parallels.⁴⁴⁴ He compared, for instance, ὁ θεὸς ἀρχὴν καὶ τελευτὴν καὶ μέσα τῶν ὄντων ἔχει (*Laws* 715e6-7) with ἐγώ, φησὶν ἐκείνη, θεὸς πρῶτος καὶ ἐγὼ μετὰ ταῦτα (*Isaiah* 41.4) and ἦς ὁ εὐδαιμονήσειν μέλλων ἐχόμενος ζυνέπεται ταπεινός (*Laws* 716a3-4) with ὀπίσω κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου πορεύση (*Hosea* 11.10).

⁴⁴¹The language of Dionysius quoted by Bessarion in describing the One goes beyond the *Parmenides* 137e-142a. For instance Dionysius wrote τὴν μὲν οὖν ὑπερουσιότητα τὴν θεαρχικὴν, ὃ τι ποτὲ ἐστὶν ἢ τῆς ὑπεραγοθότητος ὑπερῦπαρξις, οὔτε ὡς λόγον ἢ δύναμιν οὔτε ὡς νοῦν ἢ ζωὴν ἢ οὐσίαν ὑπομῆσαι θεμιτὸν οὐδενὶ τῶν, ὅσοι τῆς ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν ἀλήθειαν ἀληθείας εἰσὶν ἐρασταί, ἀλλ' ὡς πάσης ἕξεως, κινήσεως, ζωῆς, φαντασίας, δόξης, ὀνόματος, λόγου, διανοίας, νοήσεως, οὐσίας, στάσεως, ἰδρύσεως, ἐνώσεως, πέρατος, ἀπειρίας, ἀπάντων ὅσα ὄντα ἐστὶν, ὑπεροχικῶς ἀφηρημένην (*De divinis nominibus* 1.5 ed. Suchla p.117.5-11). Words like ὑπεραγοθότητος ὑπερῦπαρξις suggest that Dionysius was developing a theological vocabulary on his Platonic base. He also used a vocabulary of negative attributes ἀπειρία ἀνόητος ἄρρητος ἀνοησία ἀνωνμία for which compare the *Sophist* where Plato was talking about 'not-being': οὔτε φθέγγασθαι δυνατὸν ὀρθῶς οὔτ'εἰπεῖν οὔτε διανοηθῆναι τὸ μὴ ὄν αὐτὸ καθ'αὐτό, ἀλλ' ἔστιν ἀδιανόητόν τε καὶ ἄρρητον καὶ ἀφθεγτόν τε καὶ ἄλογον (238c8-11).

⁴⁴² *Haec.....nonne a Platone per eadem fere verba Dionysius sumpsit?* (*ICP* 2.4.3 p.89.41-2).

⁴⁴³ θεὸς ἦν μὲν αἰεὶ, καὶ ἔστι, καὶ ἔσται· μάλιστα δὲ, ἔστιν αἰεὶ. τὸ γὰρ ἦν, καὶ ἔσται, τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνου τμήματα, καὶ τῆς ῥευστῆς φύσεως· ὁ δὲ ὦν αἰεὶ, καὶ τοῦτο αὐτὸς ἑαυτὸν ὀνομάζει, τῷ Μωϋσεὶ χρηματίζων ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους. ὅλον γὰρ ἐν ἑαυτῷ συλλαβῶν ἔχει τὸ εἶναι, μήτε ἀρξάμενον, μήτε παυσόμενον (Gregory Nazianzenus *Oratio xlv* in Migne *P.G.* 36 col. 625C). There are parallels between Gregory's words and *Parmenides* 141e but Gregory replaced Plato's negative dialectic (οὔτε ποτὲ γέγονεν, οὔτε ἐγίγνετο, οὔτε ἦν ποτὲ κ.τ.λ.) with positive statements (θεὸς ἦν μὲν αἰεὶ, καὶ ἔστι, καὶ ἔσται).

⁴⁴⁴ See *ICP* 2.4.4. *Animadvertite, obsecro, quanta sit horum verborum cum sacris litteris similitudo atque conformitas* (p.91.23-4).

In summary he presented the *Parmenides* to the Latins in the Neo-Platonic tradition of interpretation which saw it as a work of theology. He read it both in the light of Proclus and other Neo-Platonist commentators and of the Greek Christian writers Dionysius and Gregory Nazianzenus. Although he argued parallels between scriptural texts, the Christian writers and the *Parmenides*, his parallels were predicated on an interpretation of the *Parmenides* by the Neo-Platonists. His purpose was to demonstrate the close conformity between Plato and Christianity.

The *Timaeus*

In chapters six and seven Bessarion addressed the question of the creation of the cosmos which he described as ‘one of the greatest issues of philosophy’.⁴⁴⁵ He begins by saying that he is going to consider whether beings were created from pre-existing matter or out of non-being. He maintains that Plato held that matter was created by God out of non-being.⁴⁴⁶ His challenge was to respond to Trebizond’s claim that Plato, influenced by poetic fantasies and in contrast with Christian belief handed down by revelation that the world was created *ex nihilo*, held that God made the world out of pre-existing matter coeternal with and uncreated by God but that Aristotle thought being had been created out of non-being by divine will.⁴⁴⁷ According to Trebizond the Platonists held that there were

⁴⁴⁵ μέγιστου τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ δογμάτων ὄντος (ICP 2.7.7 p.138.2) does not occur in Bessarion’s Latin text.

⁴⁴⁶ *ex non ente simpliciter* (ICP 2.6.1 p.109.36-7).

⁴⁴⁷ Trebizond wrote: *Haec ergo ut brevius repetamus, Aristoteli sententia est, mundum a deo produci et ab eo semper dependere totum simul ita, ut ne materia quidem praefuerit, nec re nec ratione sive natura, nec quovis pacto, et produci ac dependere a voluntate dei libera ut esse perpetuum, atque ingenerabilem, quia nullum principium temporis habet, et incorruptibilem, quia nullum temporis terminum habebit. Conferas haec veritati catholicae, non discrepant nisi in uno. Veritas enim catholica, principium mundi per revelationem nobis tradit, non quod in tempore factus sit aut ex materia, sed quod una cum tempore, et simul cum materia sua productus est ex nihilo. Plato autem, pudet dicere, figmentis deceptus poeticis praefuisse ait, ex qua deus mundum effecit, coeternam enim materiam deo, nec ab eo productam, et ipse et omnes qui ex materia facta omnia putant, ex insania credunt. Haec opinio vel potius furor, multo ante Platonem ferebatur.*

two eternal principles, God and matter which they regarded as the fount of darkness.⁴⁴⁸

Bessarion had to counter this claim by Trebizond in order to establish, as he aimed to do throughout book two, that Plato was closer to orthodox Christian belief than Aristotle. He concludes that Plato held that intelligibles, the heavens and nature were created out of not being and was, therefore, closer to Christianity than Aristotle.⁴⁴⁹

In responding to the challenge he drew mainly on the account of the creation of the cosmos in Plato's *Timaeus* (29d-52d) which he quotes more often in chapter six than in any other chapter of *ICP*. He addressed a central problem of the *Timaeus*. How can being, matter and becoming be prior to the creation of the cosmos and not be without cause?⁴⁵⁰ *Timaeus'* mythological account of creation in Plato's dialogue managed to reconcile the traditional accounts in the Greek myths of creation of the world by the gods with the eternity of the world. The cosmos was generated by the Demiurge but remains perpetually in existence through the kindness of its creator. *Timaeus'* Demiurge is a supreme Greek God. This suited Bessarion's aim of demonstrating the conformity of Plato with Christianity but opened Plato to Trebizond's charge that Plato was *figmentis deceptus poeticis* in contrast

Hesiodus enim chaos dicit mundo praefuisse, quasi massam incompositam atque informem. Obstrepant nunc quicunque, sive graeci sive latini, accommodatiorem Platonem esse veritati quam Aristotelem. Non facit inquit mundum perpetuum Plato. Accommodatior ergo, vere namque credimus non esse perpetuum, at eum ex materia producit, et materiam aeternam putat, quod multo peius est quam mundum praedicare perpetuum, sicut Aristoteles sentit, quid enim magni deus habebit, si quemadmodum opifices, nihil agere possit, nisi ex materia, et quomodo materia erit coeterna deo?.....

Quas ob res duas manifeste substantias principia et quasi deos primos rerum omnium, platonici dicunt, deum primum et materiam primam et alteram caeteris rebus omnibus meliorem, alteram peiorem, illam sensus, rationis, vitae, lucis, omnium bonorum, hanc insensationis, mortis, tenebrarum fontem esse. Quare omnia, non a catholica veritate solum, nec ab Aristotelica disciplina, verum etiam ab omni ratione, ac sensu remotissima sunt, non autem ignoramus putasse nonnullos, mundum etiam a Platone perpetuitate donari, quod si quis verum esse contendat, libenter admittemus, quod pro nobis est, sed quantum ad rerum exordia pertinet, contradictio implicat, nam qui ex materia prima mundum producit, delirare magis quam philosophi more naturam rerum exponere videbitur (Comparatio 2.11).

⁴⁴⁸ The reference here to *Platonici* may be to Plotinus I.8.3 and II.4.16.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ergo si Aristoteli magis quam adversario de opinione et sua et Platonis adhibenda est, profecto Plato, non Aristoteles est, qui substantias intelligibiles et caelum naturamque universam ex non ente simpliciter produci affirmans maxime cum nostra religione consentit. (ICP 2.7.7 p.137.39-p.139.4).*

⁴⁵⁰ Compare Plato: οὗτος μὲν οὖν διὰ τῆς ἐμῆς ψήφου λογισθεὶς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ δεδόσθω λόγος, ὃν τε καὶ χώραν καὶ γένεσιν εἶναι, τρία τριχῆ, καὶ πρὶν οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι (*Timaeus* 52d3-4) with Bessarion: εἰ γὰρ καὶ ὃν καὶ χώραν καὶ γένεσιν προεῖναι φησὶ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου γενέσεως, οἷς τινες ἴσως ἀπατηθέντες ἐνόμισαν ἀναίτιον τὴν ὕλην ὑπ' αὐτοῦ λέγεσθαι καὶ πρὸ τῆς κόσμου γενέσεως εἶναι κ.τ.λ. (*ICP* 2.6.7 p.114.12-14).

to Aristotle's more rigorously scientific denial that the cosmos had either beginning or end.⁴⁵¹ Bessarion dealt with the issue as a philosophical rather than a theological question. In doing so he claims to expound what Plato said but, in fact, he interpreted and explained him by drawing on a range of sources including Aristotelian metaphysics, Proclus, Simplicius and Philoponus. Certain passages of the *Timaeus* presented a problem to Bessarion in trying to argue that matter was created by God and he admits as much.⁴⁵²

Bessarion claims that all the wisest commentators on Plato and Aristotle agreed with his interpretation of Plato that God did not create the cosmos out of pre-existing matter.⁴⁵³ The claim was not entirely accurate. The creation of the cosmos was a contentious philosophical and theological issue in both the Byzantine and the Western tradition. The interpretation of the *Timaeus* on this matter had long been contested. A scholion on Aristotle said: 'Xenocrates and Speusippus, in trying to come to the aid of Plato, claimed that Plato did not hold that the cosmos was created, but uncreated, and had portrayed it as created only for the purposes of instruction and for explaining and understanding its situation more clearly.'⁴⁵⁴ Plutarch held that according to Plato matter was uncreated.⁴⁵⁵ Proclus while holding that God made all that is corporeal including matter conceded that the question was contested and cites Plutarch and Atticus who held that matter was ungenerated.⁴⁵⁶ Chalcidius noted the great diversity of views about matter among the

⁴⁵¹ See Baudry (1931) especially 299-306.

⁴⁵² See note [421421](#) above.

⁴⁵³ *ICP* 2.6.1 p.109.35-39.

⁴⁵⁴ Scholion on *De Caelo* 278^b32 ff. See Dillon (2002) 80-81, who points out that from the earliest stages Plato's followers adopted a non-literalist interpretation of the dialogue. They disputed Aristotle's version that Plato held time had a beginning simultaneous with the universe (*Physics* 251^b17-19). Bessarion said that Aristotle and Plato reached opposite conclusions about the cosmos. For Aristotle it was uncreated but for Plato it was created (*ICP* 1.5.3 p.59.40-1).

⁴⁵⁵ *De Anima Procreatione* 1014b.

⁴⁵⁶ *In Tim.* I.277.1-16 and 383.22-387.5. Proclus stated his position *in Tim.* 277.10-16: Πλωτῖνος δὲ καὶ οἱ μετὰ Πλωτῖνον φιλόσοφοι, Πυρφύριος καὶ Ἰάμβλιχος, τὸ σύνθετον φασιν ἐν τούτοις κεκλῆσθαι γενητόν, τούτῳ δὲ συνυπάρχειν καὶ τὸ ἀφ' ἑτέρας αἰτίας ἀπογεννᾶσθαι. ἡμεῖς δὲ καὶ ταῦτα μὲν εἶναι φαμεν πάντων ἀληθέστατα, καὶ εἶναι γενητόν τὸν κόσμον καὶ ὡς σύνθετον καὶ ὡς ἄλλων αἰτίων εἰς τὸ εἶναι δεόμενον. In

followers of Plato.⁴⁵⁷ Among Christian writers Ambrose referred to Plato's theory of the three principles of creation i.e. God, the exemplar and matter. He says that according to Plato the exemplar and matter were uncreated and incorruptible; God was not the creator of matter or the archetype but the world was neither created nor made.⁴⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas also wrote that Plato and Aristotle thought that first matter was uncreated.⁴⁵⁹ In the fifteenth century Dominici in his *Lucula noctis* criticised Plato for denying God's universal creation.⁴⁶⁰ Trebizond, as has been said, and Scholarios aligned themselves with these critics of Plato.⁴⁶¹

The traditions of the interpretation of the *Timaeus*

Two traditions of interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus* can be distinguished. On the one hand Christian writers had used the *Timaeus* as a source for elucidating a theological understanding of creation drawn from scriptural texts. On the other hand there was a long philosophical tradition of interpretation. I shall argue that Bessarion was in the philosophical tradition in his interpretation of Plato on the creation of the cosmos in the sense that he made no appeal to scripture but relied on philosophical arguments.

other words the cosmos is eternally dependent on a cause other than itself with which it is coexistent. See Atticus fr. 4.

⁴⁵⁷ *Superest ipsa nobis ad tractandum Platonis de silva, quam diverse interpretari videntur auditores Platonis. Quippe alii generatam dici ab eo putaverunt verba quaedam potius quam rem secuti, alii vero sine generatione, sed anima praeditam, quando ante illustrationem quoque motu instabili atque inordinato dixerit eam fluctuasse.....quoque idem saepe alias duas esse mundi animas dixerit, unam malignam ex silva, alteram beneficam ex deo* (Chalcidius in *Timaeum* CCC).

⁴⁵⁸ *Tantumne opinionis assumpsisse homines, ut aliqui eorum tria principia constituerent omnium, Deum et exemplar, et materiam, sicut Plato discipulique eius; et ea incorrupta, et increata, ac sine initio esse asseverarent: Deumque non tamquam creatorem materiae, sed tamquam artificem ad exemplar* (*Hexaemeron* I.1 Migne P.L. 14 col. 123A).

⁴⁵⁹ *S. T. Ia q44 a2.*

⁴⁶⁰ *Non fuit Plato primus fctor Deum non cuncta creasse, sed prescise que durant omne per evum* (*Lucula Noctis* XLV.10 ed.Coulon p.416).

⁴⁶¹ See Scholarius *Contra Plethonem* Petit et al. edd. IV.38.15-20 and Karamanolis (2002) 272-278.

In the theological tradition Origen drew on the *Timaeus*: ‘By matter we mean that which underlies bodies, namely, that from which they take their existence when qualities have been applied to or mingled with them...This matter has an existence by its own right without qualities, yet it is never found existing apart from them.’ He accepted the idea of first matter but said it was an impiety to hold that ‘matter is uncreated and coeternal with the uncreated God’ and quoted three passages of scripture as authorities.⁴⁶² Eusebius quoted from Origen’s comment on *Genesis* 1.2 from a lost work *Commentary on Genesis*.⁴⁶³ Origen rejected the image from the *Timaeus* of a craftsman working on matter like a sculptor. This misrepresented God’s power. God could achieve whatever he willed. If it was inconceivable for the world to have been created without a wise architect, it was also inconceivable that matter which is so responsive to God’s artistry was uncreated. The argument is a response to the Gnostics who interpreted the passage in *Genesis* 1.2 to imply preexisting matter on which God worked.⁴⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa quoted *Hebrews* 11.3 (πίστει νοοῦμεν κατηρτίσθαι τοὺς αἰῶνας ῥήματι θεοῦ, εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων γεγονέναι) as a proof that the world was created *ex nihilo* and that the how of its creation is not accessible to reason.⁴⁶⁵ The problem for these writers and others like them, as it would be for Bessarion, was to give a coherent explanation of how matter could be created *ex nihilo*. Augustine in the *Confessions* formulated the problem and gave an explanation: ‘Lord God almighty in the beginning, that is from yourself, in your wisdom which is begotten of your substance, you made something and made it out of nothing. For you made heaven and earth not out of your own self, or it would be equal to your only-begotten Son and therefore to yourself. It cannot possibly be right for anything which is not of you to be

⁴⁶² 2 *Maccabees* 7.28, *Psalms* 148.5, the Shepherd of Hermas *Mandate* I.1. Origen *De Principiis* 2.1.4 translation Butterworth (1936) 79-80.

⁴⁶³ *Praep. Ev.* VII.20 and see Des Places et al. edd. VII p.270 n.3 for the the identification of Origen’s lost work.

⁴⁶⁴ See Des Places et al. edd. VII p.272 n.2.

⁴⁶⁵ *Dialogus de Anima et Resurrectione* in Migne *P.G.* 46 cols. 121B-124D.

equal to you. Moreover, there is nothing apart from you out of which you could make them....That is why you made heaven and earth out of nothing.⁴⁶⁶

Bessarion placed himself in a philosophical rather than a theological tradition and was explicit about the philosophical tradition within which he read the Platonic texts. Having set out the arguments for the creation of matter by God, he writes: ‘This is the opinion of Plotinus, Porphyry, Amelius, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus and all followers of Plato.’⁴⁶⁷ This was the same list as Proclus gave at the beginning of the *Platonic Theology* with the exception of Theodorus of Asine whom Proclus had named and Proclus’ own name which Bessarion has added.⁴⁶⁸ The list occurred in Proclus’ proem where he was outlining the tradition of the true interpretation of Plato. The knowledge of higher things in souls of the initiated is mediated through Plato. These initiates are few in number; the general readership even among philosophers does not have access to the true meaning.⁴⁶⁹

Bessarion’s use of this source raises a question about his readers. Did he think they were,

⁴⁶⁶ *Confessions* 12.7.7 translation Chadwick (1992).

⁴⁶⁷ *ICP* 2.6.17 p.127.35-7. In *de Natura et Arte* Bessarion referred to Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblichus, Damascius and Simplicius describing them as ἄνδρας σοφωτάτους (Mohler (1942) p.114.33-6). Proclus’ position is not as clear cut as Bessarion suggested. He may have overstated the extent to which Proclus agreed with the Christian creation account for his own apologetic purpose. In *in Tim.* Proclus accepted that the cosmos was generated (see note ~~456456~~ above). But in *De aeternitate mundi* (XI) (an anti-Christian apologetic against the belief in creation) he seems to reject the view that matter came ἐκ μηδενος (εἰ μὲν οὖν ἐκ μηδενος ἢ ὕλη, κατὰ τύχην ἔνεκά του ἂν εἶη καὶ τὸ γεγόμενον ὕλην ἔχει κατὰ τύχην). His argument is that: ‘As soon as [matter] is, it has the forms of which it is the matter. And the matter is ungenerated and incorruptible, so that it should not be the case that matter, when it is absolutely, requires other matter. Therefore the forms are in the matter from eternity and so the cosmos is eternal (translation Lang and Macro).’ See de Haas (1997) pp.1-6.

⁴⁶⁸ *Plat. theol.* I.1 edd. Saffrey and Westerink pp.6.16-7.8 where Syrianus is not named but referred to as ἡγεμών. Bessarion’s list is interesting as much for what it did not include as for what it included. It is not surprising that it does not include Aristotle who held different views about the origin of matter. But there is no reference to the middle Platonists like Numenius, Plutarch, Albinus or Alcinous. There is also a very long jump between Proclus and Bessarion. The sequence of names gives the impression of historical development culminating in Proclus. But in the course of the development there were disagreements among those named on the true interpretation of Plato. See Buckley (2006).

⁴⁶⁹ τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν φιλοσοφεῖν ἐπαγγελλομένων καὶ τῆς τοῦ ὄντος θήρας ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι σπυδόντων ἀφανῆ [τὴν φιλοσοφίαν] καταστᾶσαν....ὄν [sc. Plato] οὐκ ἂν ἀμάρτοιμι τῶν ἀληθινῶν τελετῶν, ἃς τελοῦνται χωρισθεῖσαι τῶν περὶ γῆν τόπων αἰ ψυχαί, καὶ τῶν ὀλοκλήρων καὶ ἀτρεμῶν φασμάτων ὧν μεταλαμβάνουσι αἰ τῆς εὐδαιμόνος καὶ μακαρίας ζωῆς γνωσίως ἀντεχόμεναι, προηγεμόνα καὶ ἱεροφάντην ἀποκαλῶν (*Plat. theol.* I.1 edd. Saffrey and Westerink pp.5.13-6.7).

if not initiates, at least the most erudite and philosophically literate? If this is so, his potential readership must have been small and exclusive.

Bessarion also cited Hermes Trismegistus among his list of authorities.⁴⁷⁰ He probably singled out Hermes because he was held in special respect at the time; he was believed to be a contemporary of Moses and a pagan sage who foresaw the coming of Christ. In the preface to his translation of the hermetic writings Ficino referred to the fact that Trismegistus foresaw ‘the ruin of the old religion, the rise of the new faith, the coming of Christ, the judgement to come, the resurrection of the race, the glory of the blessed and the torments of the damned’.⁴⁷¹ Before Ficino, fragments of Hermes had been quoted by Latin writers such as Augustine.⁴⁷²

Bessarion’s appeal to these pagan philosophers as authorities with barely a mention of scripture is strange since they were unlikely to have been widely known at the time in the West. Some of his cultured readers would have had knowledge of Proclus through the translations into Latin by Moerbeke of Proclus’ *Commentary on the Parmenides* and his *Elements of theology*.⁴⁷³ With these exceptions the Latins, at the time, were unlikely to have had any detailed knowledge of the other Neo-Platonist commentators. Bessarion must have thought, however, that his references to these Neo-Platonists, some of whom, at least, were anti-Christian, would add authority to his interpretation of Plato. By establishing the

⁴⁷⁰ ‘Iamblichus wrote that this was also in line with Hermes Trismegistus who wanted matter to be created from substantiality (*ICP* 2.6.17 p.127.37-9).’ Bessarion’s source was Proclus *in Tim.* I.386.10-11: ‘The divine Iamblichus reported that Hermes too wants materiality to be derived from substantiality. And in fact it is even likely, [he adds,] that Plato gets this kind of view of matter from [Hermes] as well (translation. Runia and Share (2008)).’

⁴⁷¹ See Copenhaver (1992) xlvi. The hermetic writings were translated by Ficino at the instigation of Cosimo de’ Medici.

⁴⁷² Augustine *Contra Faustum* XIII.1 and *C. D.* VIII.23-24. See Copenhaver (1992) xxxi-xxxii, Scott (1924-36) I.94-95 and IV.9-27 and Woodhouse (1986) 59-60 for the interest in Hermes among Latin writers into the Renaissance.

⁴⁷³ See pages 39-40 above.

philosophical context of his work Bessarion placed himself also in the rationalist tradition of Greek thinking.

The purpose and structure of Bessarion's chapter on the creation of beings

In chapter *ICP* 2.6 Bessarion addressed two problems of the *Timaeus*; whether the cosmos was generated and how could being, matter and becoming be prior to the creation of the cosmos? In the *Timaeus* the character of Timaeus argued that the cosmos is knowable by the senses and, therefore, it is only apprehended by opinion; it is in the class of things that are generated but the Demiurge made it as an eternal image of the eternal living model.⁴⁷⁴ Bessarion said he was giving an account of the opinions of Plato (*Iam de materia quid Plato senserit consideremus* (*ICP* 2.6.5 p.113 9)) but the chapter is a commentary rather than a simple statement of Plato's ideas. The text is modelled on Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus*, especially the section on the question of whether matter is created or uncreated (*in Tim.* I.383.22-387.5).

In order to establish his claim that Plato held that the cosmos was created by God *ex nihilo* Bessarion had to do three things:

- a. He had to find justification for his claim in the text of Plato; to do this he drew mainly on the *Timaeus* and *Philebus*.
- b. He had to explain two passages in the *Timaeus* which appeared to suggest that God created the world out of pre-existing uncreated matter.

⁴⁷⁴ σκεπτόν δ' οὖν περὶ αὐτοῦ πρῶτον, ὅπερ ὑπόκειται περὶ παντὸς ἐν ἀρχῇ δεῖν σκοπεῖν, πότερον ἦν αἰεὶ, γενέσεως ἀρχὴν ἔχων οὐδεμίαν, ἢ γέγονεν, ἀπ' ἀρχῆς τινὸς ἀρξάμενος. γέγονεν· ὁρατὸς γὰρ ἀπτός τέ ἐστιν καὶ σῶμα ἔχων, πάντα δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα αἰσθητά, τὰ δ' αἰσθητά, δόξη περιληπτά μετὰ αἰσθήσεως, γιγνόμενα καὶ γεννητὰ ἐφάνη (*Timaeus* 28b4-c2). εἰκὼ δ' ἐπινοεῖ κινητὸν τινα αἰῶνος ποιῆσαι, καὶ διακοσμῶν ἅμα οὐρανὸν ποιεῖ μένοντος αἰῶνος ἐν ἐνὶ κατ' ἀριθμὸν ἰοῦσαν αἰώνιον εἰκόνα, τοῦτον δὲν δὴ χρόνον ὠνομάκαμεν (*Timaeus* 37d5-7).

- c. He had to give a coherent philosophical account of matter otherwise he could not claim that Plato gave philosophical support to orthodox Christian teaching. Plato himself stated the basic question in the *Timaeus*: ‘The primary question which has to be investigated at the outset in every case is whether the cosmos has existed always, having no beginning of generation, or whether it has come into existence having begun from some beginning (*Timaeus* 28b4-7 translation Bury (1961) adapted).’ The problem was to explain how the cosmos could be both uncreated in time and yet created by God *ex nihilo*.

He begins his exposition of the creation of physical matter with Plato’s statement: ‘Every thing that comes into being must have a cause. For nothing can come into being without a cause.’⁴⁷⁵ Like Proclus in the *proemium* to his commentary on the *Timaeus*, he follows it with an analysis of causes. Proclus distinguished five causes in any inquiry into nature, the efficient or productive (τὸ ποιητικόν), the paradigmatic (τὸ παραδειγματικόν), the final (τὸ τελετικόν) and form (τὸ εἶδος) and matter (ἡ ὕλη). Of these the first three, he said, were causes in the strict sense (τὰς κυρίως αἰτίας τῶν φύσει γινομένων) and the latter two were not strictly causes but supplementary causes (τὸν τῶν συναιτίων ἔχειν [λόγον]).⁴⁷⁶ Plato, says Proclus, followed the Pythagoreans in treating the two supplementary causes of natural things, *i.e.* the receptacle and enmattered form (τὸ πανδεχὲς καὶ τὸ ἐνυλον εἶδος), as dependent on the primary causes (δουλεύοντα κυρίως αἰτίοις εἰς γένεσιν).⁴⁷⁷ Bessarion said that Aristotle divided the causes into four (*materialis, formalis, finalis, agens*) whereas Plato added the exemplary and instrumental causes (*exemplaris, instrumentalis/*

⁴⁷⁵ πᾶν δὲ αὖ τὸ γιγνόμενον ὑπ’ αἰτίου τινὸς ἐξ ἀνάγκης γίνεσθαι· παντὶ γὰρ ἀδύνατον χωρὶς αἰτίου γένεσιν σχεῖν (*Timaeus* 28a4-6) quoted in *ICP* 2.6.2 p.110.11-12.

⁴⁷⁶ *In Tim.* I.2.1-8.

⁴⁷⁷ *In Tim.* I.2.29-3.2.

τὸ παραδειγματικὸν τε καὶ ὀργανικόν).⁴⁷⁸ He took this analysis from Simplicius. According to Simplicius Aristotle listed two causes, τὸ ποιητικὸν and τὸ τελικόν, as principles and two supplementary causes, τὸ εἶδος and ἡ ὕλη. To these Plato added τὸ παραδειγματικὸν to the principle causes and τὸ ὀργανικόν to the supplementary causes.⁴⁷⁹ Plato's exemplary causes are the eternal forms in the mind of reason which are the models of creation (*Timaeus* 30c2-31a1, 52a1-4). The instrumental cause is the Demiurge who fixed his gaze in fashioning the cosmos on the eternal models (*Timaeus* 29a2-6, *Philebus* 53e4-7). Aristotle's four causes relate to the physical world; whereas Plato's six causes provide the wider metaphysical framework. This enabled the Neo-Platonists to subsume Aristotle's analysis within Plato's framework. Bessarion uses the same distinction as Proclus between primary and supplementary causes which he attributed to Plato and Aristotle.⁴⁸⁰ He says that matter and informed matter were *elementale principium* and that this elemental cause was not opposed to the efficient or final cause; it was not a cause like them but rather a supplementary cause.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁸ *ICP* 2.6.1 p.110.4-5. Aristotle's four causes are set out in *Physics* 194^b16-195^a3 i.e. the material cause (τὸ ἐξ οὗ γίνεται τι), the formal cause (τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὸ παράδειγμα), the efficient cause (τὸ ποιοῦν τοῦ ποιουμένου καὶ τὸ μεταβάλλον τοῦ μεταβαλλομένου) and the final cause (τὸ τέλος). Proclus enumerated Plato's three causes of natural things as the πρωτουργοὶ αἰτίαι i.e. τὸ ποιοῦν (νοῦς δημιουργικός), τὸ παραδείγμα (νοητὴ αἰτία), τὸ τέλος (τὸ ἀγαθόν) and two supplementary causes (τὸ πανδεχέες καὶ τὸ ἔνυλον εἶδος) which are dependent (δουλεύοντα τοῖς κυρίως αἰτίαις) on the true causes (*in Tim.* I.3.3-12). Aristotle referred to matter as a supplementary cause in *Physics* 192^a13-14: ἡ μὲν γὰρ ὑπομένουσα συναίτια τῇ μορφῇ τῶν γιγνομένων ἐστίν, ὥσπερ μήτηρ with reference to Plato's description of χώρα as mother in *Timaeus* 50d3 and 51a5. But in *in Tim.* I.263.19-21 Proclus enumerated six causes: ταῦτά ἐστιν αἰτία τοῦ κόσμου τὸ τελικόν, τὸ παραδειγματικόν, τὸ ποιητικόν, τὸ ὀργανικόν, τὸ εἰδητικόν, τὸ ὑλικόν. Bessarion uses (*ICP* 2.6.1) a similar list of causes as Proclus in *in Tim.* I.263.19-21 where Proclus has added τὸ ὀργανικόν to the enumeration of the five causes in his Proemium to *in Timaeum* (2.1-8). See Gerson (2006) 205- 7 and 218 n.70 for an analysis of the Neo-Platonic view of the convergence of Platonic and Aristotelian positions regarding four causes.

⁴⁷⁹ *In Physicorum* 3.16.19. Gerson (*loc. cit.*) refers to this as 'the obvious Neo-Platonic strategy of incorporating Aristotelian philosophy into the larger Platonic vision'. Philoponus (*in Physicorum* 241.3-27) added that Aristotle did not use Plato's exemplary cause because he was concerned with physical nature and the instrumental cause was subsumed by Aristotle in the material cause. In *in Physicorum* 244.14-23 he assimilated Plato's instrumental cause to Aristotle's form (see Gerson (2006) p.218 n.70).

⁴⁸⁰ Εἰ δὲ καὶ ἀρχὴν πη τῶν γινομένων τὴν ὕλην καὶ Πλάτων καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης φατόν, ἀλλ' οὐχ ἀπλῶς ἀρχὴν ἀλλὰ στοιχειώδη αὐτὴν τε καὶ τὸ ἔνυλον εἶδος τίθετον, ἐξ ὧν τὸ σύνθετον γίνεσθαι (*ICP* 2.6.16 p.124.37-9).

⁴⁸¹ *Nec principium hoc elementale adversum esse causae agentis aut finali, nec tam causam esse, quam illae sunt, sed dumtaxat esse concausam* (*ICP* 2.6.16 p.125.22-3).

His analysis of causes into primary and supplementary causes enabled Proclus to place the creation of the cosmos within a hierarchy of causes where the causes in the proper sense (efficient, paradigmatic and final) are placed outside the universe.⁴⁸² There was a hierarchy of demiurgy in which the higher levels gave existence to the lower levels in a continuous chain of emanation from the One.⁴⁸³ Bessarion did not adopt Proclus' demiurgic hierarchy but the influence of Proclus is evident in the use Bessarion made of συναιτία. Aristotle treated form and matter as causes in the full sense but for Bessarion ἡ ὕλη and τὸ ἔνυλον εἶδος were the supplementary causes of becoming which are not true causes. This enabled him to explain the intermediate nature of matter suspended between being and non being. It is neither a cause nor a not-cause. One could say that it is not caused because what has not yet come into being does not yet have a cause nor can it be a cause of anything else. As a potential being it is a supplementary cause of things that come into being.⁴⁸⁴

The sources in the text of Plato.

He begins his exposition of the Platonic text with three short paragraphs drawing on passages from the *Timaeus* to show that Plato held that God was the efficient, final and exemplary cause of the cosmos.⁴⁸⁵ He conflates God and the Demiurge. But thereafter he directs most of his attention to matter. His purpose, as he had said, was to demonstrate that Plato did not derive being from pre-existing matter.⁴⁸⁶ He begins with the proposition: that the cause of physical things must be material. It is not possible for physical things to come

⁴⁸² Proclus *in Tim.* I.3.1-19. See Cleary (2006) 136.

⁴⁸³ See Opsomer (2000).

⁴⁸⁴ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδ' αἰτία ὅλως καὶ οὐχὶ οὐκ αἰτία μόνον, ἀλλ' εἰ μήπω μὴδ' αἰτιατόν τις εἶποι, οὐκ ἂν ἴσως ἀμάρτοι τῆς ἀληθείας. τὸ γὰρ μήπω ὄν, ἢ μὴ ὄν, οὔτ' ἂν τινα ἔχοι αἰτίαν οὔτ' ἂν αὐτὸ αἴτιον ἄλλου εἶη. ἢ δὲ πῆ ἔστιν ὄν δυνάμει γε, συναιτία τῶν γινομένων ἐστίν (*ICP* 2.6.16 p.124.43-126.3). See page 143-4 and note [540540](#) below.

⁴⁸⁵ *ICP* 2.6.2-4.

⁴⁸⁶ *ICP* 2.6.1 p.109.35-9.

into existence without matter.⁴⁸⁷ Timaeus laid down a set of principles in the *Timaeus* (27d5-29b1) before embarking on his account of creation. Bessarion did something similar. Although his normal practice was to refer to or to quote Plato's text, in this case he restricts himself to a series of propositions synthesising what he claimed to be Plato's position. Despite what Bessarion says, it is not always easy to track back his principles to Plato's texts. He uses a Proclan interpretation of Plato's text.⁴⁸⁸ His principles are to a large extent a reworking of *Timaeus* 27d5-29b1 with a Proclan interpretation. What he aimed to show was that matter is both generated and ungenerated, generated because it has a cause and ungenerated because it is not generated in time. He calls them 'the principles of being' (*principia omnium entium* or ἀρχὰς τῶν γινομένων).⁴⁸⁹

His principles were (*ICP* 2.6.5 p.113 17-37):

1. There are three principles of being which are matter, form and God (ὕλη, εἶδος, θεός; *materia, forma, deus*) or being, the receptacle and generation (ὄν, χώρα, γένεσις; *ens, formae capedo, generatio*). Form may be either exemplary or material (p.112.12-13).⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁷ *ICP* 2.6.5 p.113.13-14.

⁴⁸⁸ *Sed iam de materia quid Plato senserit, consideremus etc* (*ICP* 2.6.5 p.113.9). Bessarion believed that he was justified in reading into Plato's text material that was not there. He asserted that the *Timaeus* had many references to the soul and the soul of the world being created by God and then admitted: *In Timaeo quoque diffusius explicatur productam a deo animam esse, tum nostram tum mundi universi, substantiaequae et virtutis eius ratio redditur. Qui locus etsi non facile percipitur, tamen ingenii bonitate et ope scriptorum, qui libros Platonis exposuere, satis intellegi potest* (*ICP* 2.8.14 p.153.7-10). This is a clear indication of the authority which he attached to his sources in the Platonic commentators. Plethon in his controversy with Scholarius maintained that Plato, like the Pythagoreans, did not write everything down and that his disciples were free to fill out the details. So Plethon attributed to Plato material from later sources like those of the Stoics. See Karamanolis (2002) 260-261.

⁴⁸⁹ *ICP* 2.6.5 p.112.10-11. Plato had rejected the use of ἀρχαί in this context. He said: τὴν μὲν περὶ πάντων εἶτε ἀρχὴν εἶτε ἀρχὰς εἶτε ὅπη δοκεῖ τούτων περὶ τὸ νῦν οὐ ῥητέον (*Timaeus* 48c2-4) on the grounds that he was only giving a likely account of creation.

⁴⁹⁰ In *Timaeus* 28a6-b1 Plato drew a distinction between the model which is uniform and unchanging and the model which is generated.

2. God, whom Plato called being itself and being above all being (αὐτόν τε τὸ ὄν ὄντα καὶ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ἔτι τὸ ὄν), is both the efficient and final cause of beautiful things (θέον δὲ τὴν ποιητικὴν αἰτίαν καλῶν καὶ ἔτι τὴν τελικὴν) (p.112.14-15).⁴⁹¹
3. But neither matter nor informed matter are to be separated from the Demiurge (*ex adverso distinxit conditori*) or are causeless (*absolute prima*) or have equality with the cause of being (*nec aequales entium causas*) (p.113.22-4).⁴⁹²
4. The forms are from God (*a deo formas esse productas* p.113.28).
5. Also from God is formless first matter which is the first and most general cause of all beings (*a deo productam esse materiam omnino informem ac primam ut a prima absolute et universali omnium entium causa* p.113.29-31).⁴⁹³

⁴⁹¹ Compare with *Timaeus*: θέμις δὲ οὐτ' ἦν οὐτ' ἔστι τῷ ἀρίστῳ δρᾶν ἄλλο πλὴν τὸ κάλλιστον.....ὅπως ὅτι κάλλιστον εἶη κατὰ φύσιν ἄριστόν τε ἔργον ἀπειργασμένοσ (30a6-b6). Compare also with Proclus: ὁ Τίμαιος ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ποιεῖται τὴν ἀρχὴν ὀρημητήριον αὐτῷ κάλλιστον εἶναι νομίζων τὴν τῆς τελικῆς αἰτίας εὐρεσιν· ὡς γὰρ πάντων τῶν ὄντων αἴτιον ἔστι τὰγαθόν, οὕτω δεῖ καὶ τὴν τοῦ κόσμου γένεσιν ἀπὸ ταύτης προίεναι τῆς ἀρχῆς πρωτίστης...πάντα γὰρ ἐκεῖνο ἕνεκά ἔστι, καὶ ἐκεῖνο αἴτιον πάντων καλῶν, ὡς εἴρηται ἐν Ἐπιστολαῖς (*in Tim.* I.356.1-10). In this passage Proclus was commenting on Plato's δι' ἧντινα αἰτίαν in *Timaeus* 29d7-e1. Runia and Share (2008) p.215 n.14 point out that by a sleight of interpretation Proclus has attributed the passage to 'the Good' rather than the Demiurge which was clearly the sense of Plato. In the *Timaeus* 28b-c the 'Father and the Maker of the Universe is the creator of the 'whole heaven or cosmos', which has body. But this is the Demiurge (28a) and not αὐτόν τε τὸ ὄν καὶ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ἔτι τὸ ὄν who, according to *Parmenides* 134d-e, cannot have knowledge of the things in this world. Bessarion went along with Proclus' sleight of hand. His Latin text is different from the Greek text: *deum autem posuit causam agentem, cum de ortu et generatione mundi disseruit.*

⁴⁹² οὐτε μὴν τὸ ὑλικὸν εἶδος οὐτε πολλῶ ἦττον τὴν ὕλην ἀντιδιαίρων τῷ δημιουργῷ, καὶ τούτων ἐκάτερον ἀνάρχου ἀρχᾶς καὶ ἰσοτίμου αἰτίας τῶν ὄντων τιθέμενος, ἄπαγε (*ICP* 2.6.5 p.112.15-17). This proposition, which Bessarion attributed to Plato, was contested by Trebizond and others. It is not so obvious from the text of the *Timaeus* that matter and informed matter did not preexist as ἀρχᾶς καὶ ἰσοτίμου αἰτίας. But Proclus interpreted *Timaeus* 29e1 *in Tim.* I.356.5-9 (see note [491](#) above). He based his argument on Plato *Letters* 2.312e1-3. He quoted the same text again at I.393.19-21 and devoted two chapters in the *Plat. theol.* (II.8-9) to its exegesis. See Saffrey and Westerink edd. (1974) II.xx-lix for the history of the different interpretations of the text.

⁴⁹³ 'First matter' is an Aristotelian term e.g. *Metaphysics* 1015^a7-10: φύσις δὲ ἢ τε πρώτη ὕλη.....καὶ τὸ εἶδος καὶ ἡ οὐσία where πρώτη means that it is ultimate (see Ross (1924) 298 n.8). Proclus quoted *Philebus* 23c9-10: τὸν θεὸν ἐλέγομέν που τὸ μὲν πέρας δεῖξαι τῶν ὄντων, τὸ δὲ ἄπειρον; But he glossed δεῖξαι by adding: ἐξ ὧν καὶ τοῖς σώμασι καὶ τοῖς πᾶσιν εἶναι τὴν σύστασιν (*in Tim.* I.384.26-27). He said later: εἰ οὖν, ὡσπερ εἴπομεν, ὁ θεὸς πᾶσαν ἀπειρίαν ὑφίστησι, καὶ τὴν ὕλην ὑφίστησιν, ἐσχάτην οὖσαν ἀπειρίαν (*in Tim.* I.384.30-385.2). So he argued that Plato held matter to be generated by God: ὡστε κατ' αὐτὸν [Plato] ἡ ὕλη πρόεισιν ἐκ τε τοῦ ἔνος καὶ ἐκ τῆς ἀπειρίας τῆς πρὸ τοῦ ἔνος ὄντος, εἰ δὲ βούλει, καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔνος ὄντος καθόσον ἔστι δυνάμει ὄν. διὸ καὶ ἀγαθόν πῆ ἔστι (ἡ ὕλη) καὶ ἄπειρον, καὶ ἀμυδρότατον, ὄν καὶ ἀνείδεον, διὸ καὶ ταῦτα πρὸ τῶν εἰδῶν καὶ τῆς ἐκφάνσεως αὐτῶν (*in Tim.* I.385.12-17). He said Orpheus taught the same doctrine (*in Tim.* I.385.17 sq.). Later in *ICP* (2.6.11 and 12) Bessarion quoted the same text from the *Philebus* including Proclus' gloss and referred to Orpheus which suggests that he had the passage from Proclus in mind.

6. It is eternal and ungenerated as are the forms being created by an unmoved cause
(*aeternam etiam ipsam atque ingeneratam, sicut formae sunt, propterea a causa immobili sunt productae* p.113.31-2),
7. because everything generated by an unmoved cause has an unchanging substance
(*πάν γὰρ δὴ τὸ ὑπ' ἀκινήτου αἰτίας γινόμενον ἀμετάβλητον ἔχειν τὴν ὑπαρξιν*
p.112.23-24).
8. It is not, however, wholly ungenerated since it is generated because it has a cause;
nor is it wholly generated since it is ungenerated in time (*οὐ μὴν οὔτε πάντα ἀγένητον τῇ αἰτία γενητὴν οὔσαν, οὔτε πάντα γενητὴν τῷ γε χρόνῳ ἀγένητον οὔσαν, ἀλλ' ἀγενήτου καὶ γενητοῦ μέσσην* p.112.24-25).⁴⁹⁴

The *Timaeus* contains no passage that would support ὕλη εἶδος θεός grouped together in this way. It refers (52d3) to being, space and generation (*ὄν χώρα γένεσις*) which existed before the heaven came into being.⁴⁹⁵ ὕλη was not used by Plato; instead he spoke of ‘the receptacle of becoming’ (*γενέσεως ὑποδοχή* 49a5-6). But ὕλη is used by both Aristotle and Proclus and entered the philosophical tradition in place of *χώρα* and *γενέσεως ὑποδοχή*.⁴⁹⁶ Proclus identified Aristotle’s ὕλη with Plato’s ὑποδοχή.⁴⁹⁷ This identification has been

⁴⁹⁴ Compare with what Bessarion says on the soul: *neque generabilis est modo sensibilium, quae in tempore generabilia et corruptibilia sunt, neque ingenerabilis modo intelligibilium, quae sempiterna sunt et intra se totum suum esse omnino completuntur. Verum ingenerata et ingenerabilis tempore et incorruptibilis sua quidem substantia est ideoque quodam modo aeterna, cum tamen suas operationes in tempore agat* (ICP 2.8.14-15 p.153.27-33).

⁴⁹⁵ Plato used various formulae for expressing the preconditions for the creation of the material world: ‘the intelligible and always unchangeable real model’ (*παραδείγματος εἶδος, νοητὸν καὶ αἰεὶ κατὰ ταῦτὰ ὄν* *Timaeus* 48e5-6) or ‘the unchanging form’ (*τὸ κατὰ ταῦτὰ εἶδος* 52a1), the copy which is visible (*μίμημα παραδείγματος, γένεσιν ἔχον καὶ ὁρατὸν* 48e6-7) and the receptacle (*πάσης γενέσεως ὑποδοχὴν αὐτό, οἷον τιθήνην* 49a5-6) or ‘space’ (*τὸ τῆς χώρας αἰεὶ* 52a8). In *Timaeus* 50c7-d2 they are: *τὸ μὲν γινόμενον, τὸ δ' ὃ γίγνεται, τὸ δ' ὅθεν ἀφομοιούμενον φύεται τὸ γινόμενον*.

⁴⁹⁶ εἰ οὖν ἐστὶ τὸ μὲν ὕλη τὸ δὲ εἶδος τὸ δ' ἐκ τούτων, καὶ οὐσία ἢ τε ὕλη καὶ τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὸ ἐκ τούτων, ἔστι μὲν ὡς καὶ ἡ ὕλη μέρος τινὸς λέγεται, ἔστι δ' ὡς οὐ, ἀλλ' ἐξ ὧν ὁ τοῦ εἶδους λόγος (Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1035^a1-3). καὶ εἰ δύο ταύτας ἀρχὰς θετέον κατὰ Πλάτωνα τῶν ὄλων, ὕλην καὶ θεόν, μήτε τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ὕλην παράγοντος μήτε τῆς ὕλης τὸν θεόν (Proclus *in Tim.* I.384.9-11).

⁴⁹⁷ ἐπει μᾶθησόμεθα διὰ παντὸς τοῦ κόσμου τὴν ὕλην διήκειν, ὥσπερ οἱ θεοὶ φασιν· διὸ καὶ τοῦ παντὸς ὑποδοχὴν αὐτὴν ἐρεῖ προελθῶν (*in Tim.* II.10.7-9).

contested. But Proclus had earlier authorities like Timaeus Locrus and Plutarch.⁴⁹⁸

Bessarion's perception of ὕλη seems to be essentially Aristotelian.⁴⁹⁹ The trio, matter, form and God, had become common in the doxographical accounts of Plato among pagan and Christian writers, at least from the time of Theophrastus (c371-c287 B.C.).⁵⁰⁰

Propositions six, seven and eight were critical to Bessarion's argument in explaining how matter can be at once caused but ungenerated in time. He drew the seventh proposition from proposition seventy six of Proclus' *Elements of theology*.⁵⁰¹ Proposition eight is also derived from Proclus. It has its roots in the interpretation of Plato's distinction in the *Timaeus* between what is known by reason and is always the same being ungenerated and what is apprehended by sensation and is the changeable object of opinion.⁵⁰² Proclus, in commenting on this passage, said that matter was neither being nor becoming for it is neither comprehended by intellect nor perceived by the senses and he referred to the proof

⁴⁹⁸ See Baltzly (2007) 50 n.42 and Cherniss (1944) 121.

⁴⁹⁹ Like his sources, Bessarion equated Plato's χώρα with the Aristotelian ὕλη but this is a misinterpretation of Plato. Taylor says: 'It is never said [by Plato] that χώρα is an ὑποδοχή of the παραδείγματα at all, only that "it receives" (δέχεται) the μιμήματαMatter really plays no part in his cosmology at all. The "permanent implied in change" is not thought by him as "stuff" or a "substrate". In being the permanent implied in change, it discharges the same function which ὕλη or "matter" does in the *Physics* of Aristotle, but there the resemblance of the two notions stops. There is no "substrate of change" in the scheme of the *Timaeus*. Aristotle is himself so imbued with the view that the permanent implied in change can only be thought of as "stuff", that he was probably unconscious that he was falsifying the theory of the *Timaeus* by forcing his own terminology into it (Taylor (1928) 347).'

⁵⁰⁰ The schema of a triad of principles God, matter and form is found in Varro, Apuleius, Irenaeus, Ambrose's *Hexaemeron*, Augustine and Martianus Capella (Varro *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* fr 206, Apuleius *de Platone et eius dogmate* 1.5.190, Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 2.14.3 in Migne P.L. 7 col.751C, Ambrose *Hexaemeron* 1.1.1, Chalcidius in *Timaeum* CCCVII-CCCIX, Augustine C. D. 7.28, Martianus Capella *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* 7.733). See Gersh (2002) 15 and Gersh (1986) 237-250. But it is not found in this grouping in Proclus. See note [496496](#) above for his alternative. Matter, according to Proclus, is devoid of form: διὸ καὶ ἀγαθὸν πῆ ἐστὶ (ἡ ὕλη) καὶ ἄπειρον, καὶ ἀμυδρότατον, ὄν καὶ ἀναΐδεον, διὸ καὶ ἀνειδέον, διὸ καὶ ταῦτα πρὸ τῶν εἰδῶν καὶ τῆς ἐκφάνσεως αὐτῶν (*in Tim.* I.385.14-17).

⁵⁰¹ πᾶν μὲν τὸ ἀπὸ ἀκινήτου γινόμενον αἰτίας ἀμετάβλητον ἔχει τὴν ὕπαρξιν· πᾶν δὲ τὸ ἀπὸ κινουμένης, μεταβλητὴν (*Proclus Elements of theology* prop. 76). See also Proclus' fourth argument in *On the Eternity of the World*: πᾶν τὸ ἐξ ἀκινήτου γινόμενον αἰτίου κατὰ τὴν ὕπαρξιν ἀκινήτὸν ἐστὶν (ed. Lang and Macro (2001) 50). The phrase κατὰ τὴν ὕπαρξιν is not found in Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus but appears several times in Proclus (See *ibid.* 51 n.1). Proclus (*in Tim.* I.288.16-18), commenting on *Timaeus* 28b7-c2, argued that Plato did not deny the eternity of the universe. He argued that the Demiurge is and has always been active in creation. 'If the demiurge belongs to the beings that always exist, he does not create at one time and release the rudder at another. If he is always creating, then the created product [*sc.* the cosmos] also exists always (translation Runia and Share (2008) adapted). See also *Elements of theology* prop. 18: πᾶν τὸ τῷ εἶναι χορηγοῦν ἄλλοις αὐτὸ πρῶτως ἐστὶ τοῦτο, οὗ μεταδίδωσι τοῖς χορηγουμένοις.

⁵⁰² See note [407407](#) above.

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in the fifth hypothesis of the *Parmenides* (160b5-163b6) where a non-existent entity can be shown to exist at the same time.⁵⁰³ He classed matter as an intermediate between being and becoming (τὸ μέσον, τὸ πῆ μὲν αἰεὶ ὄν, πῆ δὲ γενητόν).⁵⁰⁴ Elsewhere he used the distinction ἀγένητον/γενητόν.⁵⁰⁵ Bessarion also referred to the fifth hypothesis of the *Parmenides* saying that the state of being both generated and ungenerated was more fully explored in the fifth hypothesis of the *Parmenides*.⁵⁰⁶

Bessarion, therefore, interpreted Plato's notion of χώρα and ὑποδοχή in the light of Proclus' interpretation which saw ὕλη (and the cosmos) as both γενητόν and ἀγένητον. But he had to explain two problematical passages in the *Timaeus* in the light of his conclusions from these propositions and also the ontological nature of something that is both generated and ungenerated.

Difficulties with two passages of the *Timaeus*

He considered two passages in the *Timaeus*' account of matter which appeared to contradict his thesis that Plato held that it was created *ex nihilo*. He took his response to

⁵⁰³ καὶ γὰρ ἡ ὕλη οὔτε ὄν ἐστὶν οὔτε γενητόν- οὔτε γὰρ νοήσει περιληπτόν οὔτε αισθητόν- καὶ τὸ ἕν, ὡς ἀμφοτέρωθεν δείκνυσιν ὁ Παρμενίδης· τὸ μὲν κατὰ τὴν πρώτην, τὸ δὲ κατὰ τὴν πέμπτην ὑπόθεσιν (*in Tim.* I.256.9-11). See also Proclus on the cosmos: πᾶν γὰρ τὸ ἐξ ἀκινήτου γιγνόμενον αἰτίας ἀνέκλειπτον ἔλαχε φύσιν.....ὥστε καὶ κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον ὁ κόσμος ἔχει ἂν τὸ αἰδίον ἐξ ἀκινήτου δημιουργίας προϊῶν. ἐπειδὴ δὲ κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν φύσιν γενητόν ἐστὶν (*in Tim.* I.294.12-16); and again on the cosmos: τί θαυμαστόν, εἰ καὶ τὸν ὅλον κόσμον, ἀγένητον ὄντα κατὰ χρόνον, ἕτερον τρόπον προσαγορεύει γενητόν; (*in Tim.* I.287.21-23).

⁵⁰⁴ *In Tim.* I.255.27-258.8. See also I.218.1-7.

⁵⁰⁵ See, for example, *in Tim.* I.275.17-19, 287.20-3, 292.10-12.

⁵⁰⁶ *ICP* 2.6.5 p.113.36-7. According to the Neo-Patonic interpretation Plato was investigating the nature of matter in the fifth hypothesis (see Runia and Share (2008) p.101 n.312). The fifth hypothesis was: οὕτω δὲ ἔν ἐστιν, πάντα τέ ἐστι τὸ ἕν καὶ οὐδὲ ἕν ἐστὶ καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὸ καὶ πρὸς τὰ ἄλλα ὡσαύτως (*Parmenides* 160b2-4). In the hypothesis Plato showed that 'the non-existent' possesses qualities as predicates including unlikeness and existence. The 'non-existent' is subject to movement since it can pass from non-existence to existence so it both comes into being and does not come into being (162c-163b).

the objections in both cases from Proclus arguing that Plato's words are not to be interpreted literally but metaphorically. In his account of the origin of the cosmos in the *Timaeus* Plato said: ὄν τε καὶ χώραν καὶ γένεσιν εἶναι, τρία τριχῆ, καὶ πρὶν οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι (52d3-4). This presented two problems of interpretation. It appeared to imply that matter was ungenerated and coexistent with being, which was Trebizond's criticism of Plato, and that matter existed and could exist in a temporal order outside creation. Bessarion's solution is to say that πρὶν does not express a real temporal sequence but a mental distinction. Conceptually matter is prior to generation and whatever is generated from an underlying matter. For this reason Plato says matter preexisted creation.⁵⁰⁷ Bessarion uses an analogy; God created the whole and parts simultaneously and yet we distinguish in our minds between them as if one were prior to the other.

The problem is the lack of language in which to explain realities which are outside time. The use of time language is inappropriate, says Bessarion, but we have to use it because we do not have an alternative.⁵⁰⁸ So when we speak of God having been before time and before the heavens were created we are speaking inappropriately. Plato used similar language in the *Timaeus* when he says: 'Even as "was" and "shall be" are generated forms of time, although we apply them wrongly, without noticing, to Eternal Being. For we say that it "is" or "was" or "will be", whereas in truth of speech "is" alone is the appropriate

⁵⁰⁷ *Intellegant si possunt haec non re separari, ut alterum praecedat, alterum sequatur sed cogitatione seu ratione generationis se jungi....Cum itaque via et ratione generationis materiam praeesse oporteat et ex materia subiecta consentaneum sit quod generatur generari, ob eam causam praefuisse materiam Plato inquit (ICP 2.6.7 p.115.14-21).*

⁵⁰⁸ *Per multa etiam eodem, quo sunt aut fiunt modo, exprimi non possunt, praesertim cum de rebus divinis loquimur. Quis enim nesciat, cum dicimus deum fuisse, antequam tempus aut caelum fieret, improprie hoc dici? Et tamen concedi oportet, quia aliter loqui non possumus (ICP 2.6.8 p.117.5-9).*

term'.⁵⁰⁹ Bessarion concludes that reason can distinguish things that occur simultaneously and attributes generation to the ungenerated and time to the eternal.⁵¹⁰

If, as he argues, there is not a real distinction between matter and creation but only a mental distinction (ἐπίνοια) in what sense can we say that matter is real?⁵¹¹ This question was illustrated by Proclus who rejected the theory of those who held that the Demiurge created the cosmos in a conceptual manner (κατ'ἐπίνοιαν) on the grounds that this would imply there was a creator of the universe only conceptually and not actually.⁵¹² When Bessarion uses the analogy of the mental distinction between the whole and the parts it is possible that he has in mind a passage of Diogenes Laertius' life of Zeno (VII.135) where he was talking about the surface of a solid body and said that Posidonius maintained that surface had both a mental and real existence (καὶ κατ'ἐπίνοιαν καὶ καθ' ὑπόστασιν).

The second challenge for Bessarion was to interpret the passage of the *Timaeus* where Plato appeared to say that in creating physical nature God worked on preexisting matter (ὁ θεός.....πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὁρατὸν παραλαβὼν οὐκ ἤσυχίαν ἄγον ἀλλὰ κινούμενον πλημμελῶς καὶ ἀτάκτως εἰς τάξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας (30a2-5)). Bessarion acknowledges that: 'Plato seems to say that not merely matter but bodies themselves and soul were in random motion before the creation of the world.'⁵¹³ This was the interpretation put on Plato by Trebizond and Scholarios.⁵¹⁴ Bessarion did not say that this was a mental distinction based on the poverty of language but that Plato was speaking in a didactic mode. He was using

⁵⁰⁹ *Timaeus* 37e3-38a1 translation Bury (1961).

⁵¹⁰ *Ratio igitur, quae simul fiunt, distinguit et generat, quae ingenerata sunt, et dividit secundum tempus, quae aeterna sunt* (ICP 2.6.7 p.115.26-7).

⁵¹¹ In fact Basil (*in Hexaemeron* 1.21a-b) and Gregory of Nyssa (*de Hominis Opificio* 213b-c) rejected the existence of ὄλη on the grounds that if you abstract the formal and intelligible characteristics of material objects nothing remains. See Armstrong (1962) 428.

⁵¹² ὅτι δημιουργὸς ἐστὶ τοῦ παντὸς κατ'ἐπίνοιαν συλλογισαίμεθα καὶ οὐ κατὰ ἀλήθειαν (*In Tim.* I.290.7).

⁵¹³ ICP 2.6.9 p.117.18-20.

⁵¹⁴ See note [447447](#) above and Scholarios *Contra Plethonem* Petit et al. edd. IV.19.30-33, 29.27-28, 38.17.

human language to explain divine matters.⁵¹⁵ He argued that when Plato said that disordered matter pre-existed the creation of the world it was a way of emphasising the providence of God in creating an ordered world. He took his argument from Proclus and even used Proclus' words.⁵¹⁶

The ontological nature of first matter⁵¹⁷

He wrestled with the question of the ontological nature of first matter. I argue that he did this because the question was left open by the Platonic text and in order to establish Plato's philosophical credentials he needed to show that Plato could be read in a way that was philosophically defensible. In doing so, he drew primarily on Aristotle, the Neo-Platonic commentators on Aristotle, and Proclus. He considered three questions. How is it possible to have knowledge of first matter? What is its ontological nature? And in what sense can first matter be said to be both created and eternal? I shall deal with his treatment of these questions in turn.

How can we know first matter? (ICP 2.6.16-17)

⁵¹⁵ *Verum haec quidem non ita accipienda sunt, ut humano sermone proferuntur et sonant. Quippe rem intelligibilem ac divinam per verba humanis auribus familiaria Plato exponit, quomodo divinus propheta Moyses de mundi creatione locutus est* (ICP 2.6.9 p.117.24-8).

⁵¹⁶ Compare: αὐτοὶ [sc. Porphyrus and Iamblichus] δὲ φασιν, ὅτι τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ πρόνοιαν τὴν εἰς τὸ πᾶν καθήκουσαν ὁ Πλάτων ἐνδείξεσθαι βουλόμενος καὶ τὴν ἀπὸ νοῦ χορηγίαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς παρουσίαν ὅσων ἐστὶ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἡλικῶν αἰτίων ἀγαθῶν αἰτία πρότερον αὐτὴν ἐφ' ἑαυτῆς θεωρεῖ τὴν ὅλην σωματοειδῆ σύστασιν, ὅπως ἐστὶ πλημελλῆς καὶ ἄτακτος, ἵνα δὴ καὶ τὴν ἀπὸ ψυχῆς τάξιν καὶ τὴν δημιουργικὴν διασκόμησιν καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἰδὼν ἔχῃς ἀφορίζεσθαι (Proclus *in Tim.* I.382.20-28) with Bessarion's text: τὴν γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ δηλαδὴ πρόνοιαν τὴν εἰς τὸ πᾶν καθήκουσαν ὁ Πλάτων ἐνταῦθα βουλόμενος ἐνδείξεσθαι καὶ τὴν ἀπὸ νοῦ χορηγίαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς παρουσίαν, ὅσων ἐστὶ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἡλικῶν αἰτίων ἀγαθῶν αἰτία, πρῶτον αὐτὴν ἐφ' ἑαυτῆς θεωρεῖ τὴν ὅλην σωματοειδῆ σύστασιν, ὅπως ἐστὶ πλημελλῆς καὶ ἄτακτος, ἵνα δὴ καὶ τὴν ἀπὸ ψυχῆς τάξιν καὶ τὴν δημιουργικὴν διασκόμησιν καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἰδὼν ἔχῃς ἀφορίζειν (ICP 2.6.10 p.118.21-7).

⁵¹⁷ For the continuing interest in hylemorphism throughout the Renaissance see Schmitt et al. edd. (2008) 215 and n. 39.

The epistemological problem was how it is possible to know something, like first matter, that was formless. Bessarion borrows expressions from the *Timaeus* (52b), when he says we understand first matter only ‘as in a dream’ (ὄνειροπολῶν 2.6.16 p.126.9) and by bastard reasoning (λογισμῶ νόθῳ 2.6.17 p.126.26). Both expressions were used by Plato, referring to how we derive our knowledge of ‘ever-existing place’ (τὸ τῆς χώρας ἀεί) or the receptacle. According to Bessarion first matter is only known by reason prior to composition.⁵¹⁸ ‘Prior to’ does not have a temporal sense. Bessarion, like Aristotle, holds that first matter did not exist except in composition. For Aristotle matter cannot be separable or individual otherwise it would be substance. Matter can only exist in combination with form to become substance.⁵¹⁹ So ‘prior to’ signals a mental abstraction from composition.

The answer to the question ‘How do we know first matter?’ is according to Plato and *Timaeus* Locrus, says Bessarion, by ‘bastard reasoning’ (λογισμῶ νόθῳ); also according to *Timaeus* and Aristotle ‘by analogy’ (κατ’ ἀναλογίαν). First matter is known by negation and the abstraction of all form in a kind of staggering thought.⁵²⁰ This epistemological understanding was common in the tradition. Aristotle said that when all the qualities like length, breadth and depth and other affections are removed from bodies all that remains is matter.⁵²¹ In his commentary on this passage in Aristotle Aquinas wrote that when the dimensions were removed there was nothing except their subject which is determined by

⁵¹⁸ *Ea materia... ratione quidem ante compositum mente percipitur, re autem nec esse seorsum nec intellegi potest* (ICP 2.6.16 p.127.7-9).

⁵¹⁹ *Metaphysics* 1029^a26-32.

⁵²⁰ πῶς γὰρ τὸ παντὸς εἶδους ἄμοιρον ἂν νοηθεῖη, ἢ ὡς μὲν Τίμαιος καὶ Πλάτων φασι λογισμῶ νόθῳ ἢ ὡς δ’ αὐτός τε Τίμαιος καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης κατ’ ἀναλογίαν; τῷ γὰρ μὴ κατ’ ἐπέρεισιν εἶδους, ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἀπόφασιν καὶ πάντων εἰδῶν ἀπογύμνωσιν οἷον μύοντα τὸν λογισμὸν τὴν ὕλην ὄραν νόθῳ λογισμῶ νοεῖσθαι λέγεται, οὐ νόησιν μᾶλλον ἢ ἄνοιαν τὴν αὐτῆς ἐννοίαν οὐσαν (ICP 2.6.17 p.126.22-7).

⁵²¹ *Metaphysics* 1029^a12-15.

the dimensions and this ‘subject’ is matter.⁵²² Plotinus, in commenting on Plato’s expression ‘bastard reasoning’ had described this process of negative reasoning.⁵²³ Bessarion drew on Simplicius almost word for word. He used the word ‘stripping’ (ἀναγύμνωσις) to describe the process of negative reasoning. Simplicius used the same expression when he too was commenting on Plato’s ‘bastard reasoning’.⁵²⁴ Most of these authorities emphasise the vagueness and uncertainty of knowledge so derived.

What is first matter? (ICP 2.6.11 and 16)

Bessarion drew on Simplicius as well as Aristotle and Proclus on the ontological nature of first matter to explain the meaning of *Timaeus* 30a1-5. He took it as axiomatic that Plato held that matter neither pre-existed God nor was equal to God.⁵²⁵ But he acknowledges that the nature of this matter is mysterious, quoting *Timaeus* 51a7-b2: ἀλλ’ ἀνόρατον εἶδος τι καὶ ἄμορφον, πανδεχές, μεταλαμβάνον δὲ ἀπορώτατά πη τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ δυσσαλωτότατον αὐτὸ λέγοντες οὐ ψευσόμεθα.

Proclus had devoted a section in his commentary on the *Timaeus* to the question whether matter is created or uncreated and acknowledged that the question was much discussed.⁵²⁶

He wrote: ‘One may ask with regard to matter whether it is ungenerated by any cause, as

⁵²² *Sed remotis istis dimensionibus nihil videtur remanere nisi subjectum earum, quod est determinatum et distinctum per huiusmodi dimensiones. Haec autem est materia (in Metaphysicam VII, lect. 2, n. 1283).*

⁵²³ ὁ οὖν ἐν τῷ ὄλῳ καὶ συνθέτῳ λαμβάνει μετὰ τῶν ἐπόντων ἀναλύσασα ἐκεῖνα καὶ χωρίσασα, ὃ καταλείπει ὁ λόγος, τοῦτο νοεῖ ἀμυδρῶς ἀμυδρὸν καὶ σκοτεινῶς σκοτεινὸν καὶ νοεῖ οὐ νοοῦσα (II.4.10.28-32).

⁵²⁴ τὴν δὲ κατὰ ἀναλογίαν ταύτην γνῶσιν νόθον λογισμὸν ἐκάλεσεν ὁ Πλάτων, διότι οὐ κατ’ ἐπέρεισιν εἶδους ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἀναγύμνωσιν καὶ ἀπόφασιν γίνεται τῶν εἰδῶν καὶ οἷον μύων ὁ λογισμὸς ὄρᾳ τὴν ὕλην. καὶ ἡ περὶ αὐτῆς νόησις οὐ νόησις, ἀλλ’ ἀνοια μᾶλλον. διὸ νόθον ἂν εἴη τὸ φάντασμα αὐτῆς καὶ οὐ γνήσιον (*In Physicorum* 226.25-29). See Sorabji (1988) 8. Simplicius said that Plato used νόθῳ λογισμῷ where Aristotle, following *Timaeus* Locrus, used κατὰ ἀναλογίαν (*in Physicorum* 229.1-4, 542.19-22).

⁵²⁵ *Neque materialem causam neque multo minus materiam ex adverso distinxit conditori; neque has principia rerum absolute prima nec aequales entium causas esse posuit neque praeesistere quomodo adversarius intendit materiam praefuisse informem, ex qua postea deus mundum creavit (ICP 2.6.5 p.113.23-6).*

⁵²⁶ *In Tim.* I.383.22-387.5.

Plutarch and Atticus claim, or whether it is generated and if so from what cause.⁵²⁷ He goes on: ‘Our present argument first asserts that matter is everlasting, then goes on to ask whether it is ungenerated by any cause, and whether in Plato’s view one should posit two principles of the universe, namely matter and God, with neither God producing matter nor matter God, so that matter will be totally everlasting and without God and God totally without matter and simple’.⁵²⁸ In answering his own question he quotes the *Philebus* that God created the limited and unlimited (τὸν θεὸν ἐλέγομέν που τὸ μὲν πέρασ δειξαι τῶν ὄντων, τὸ δὲ ἄπειρον (23c9-10)) but adds his own gloss as if it was part of the quotation that the structure of everything is formed from these (ἐξ ὧν καὶ τοῖς σώμασι καὶ τοῖς πᾶσιν εἶναι τὴν σύστασιν).⁵²⁹ He interprets Plato’s τὸ πέρασ as form and τὸ ἄπειρον as matter.⁵³⁰ Proclus’ answer to the question must be seen within his framework of the hierarchy of divinities emanating from the One. In this framework matter derived its existence from the triad consisting of the One, Unlimitedness and One Being and the second and third level causes (the intelligible and the intellectual, the supercelestial and the encosmic) which bring matter into existence.⁵³¹ For Proclus there was another order of causes above the Demiurge and, therefore, ‘God brings all unlimitedness into existence; he also brings matter, which is ultimate unlimitedness, into existence. And this is the very first and ineffable cause of matter.’⁵³²

Bessarion concludes, following closely Proclus’ wording: ‘It is clear that matter is unlimitedness and that is what it is called in this text [the *Philebus*]. Therefore, since God

⁵²⁷ *In Tim.* I.384.2-5 translation Runia and Share (2008).

⁵²⁸ *In Tim.* I.384.8-12 translation Runia and Share (2008).

⁵²⁹ *In Tim.* I.384.26-27.

⁵³⁰ *In Tim.* I.384.29-30. This interpretation of Plato has been much debated. See Bury (1897) lxxii-lxxiv and Hackworth (1972) 37-43.

⁵³¹ See Proclus *in Timaeum* I 385.12-14 and 386.13-16 and Runia and Share (2008) p.256 n. 278. For the account of the operation of the Proclan hierarchy in its demiurgic activity see Opsomer (2000) 119-122.

⁵³² *In Tim.* I.384.30-385.3 translation Runia and Share (2008).

creates all unlimitedness, he has also created matter, which is ultimate unlimitedness. Since Plato holds that natural objects are made as copies of intelligibles, as equality here is derived from equality in itself and other things in the same way, so also the ultimate unlimitedness of matter would be derived from the first unlimitedness in itself, which the Platonists place at the summit of intelligibles.⁵³³ He was seeking to establish that Plato held the matter was created by God.⁵³⁴ He quotes the same passage of the *Philebus* as Proclus including his gloss (ἐξ ὧν καὶ τοῖς σώμασι καὶ τοῖς πᾶσιν εἶναι τὴν σύστασιν) and follows Proclus' interpretation in identifying the limited with form and the unlimited with matter.⁵³⁵ Bodies, he says, are constituted from the limited and the unlimited of which form is the limiting element and matter the unlimited.⁵³⁶ He did not subscribe to Proclus' complex hierarchy and omitted from his rendering of Proclus quoted above the words καὶ ἐκεῖθεν αὐτῆς διατείνει τὴν ἔλλαμψιν ἄχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων. All he wished to establish was Plato's belief in God's universal creation including matter.

⁵³³ δῆλον ὡς ἡ ὕλη ἀπειρία ἐστὶ τε καὶ καλεῖται ἐνταῦθα. πᾶσαν οὖν ἀπειρίαν ὑφίστας ὁ θεὸς καὶ τὴν ὕλην ἐσχάτην γε οὖσαν ἀπειρίαν παράγει. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὰ ἐνταῦθα ὄντα τοῖς νοητοῖς ἀνάλογον ἀπ' ἐκείνων ὁ Πλάτων παράγει ὡς ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτοῖσου τὸ ἐνταῦθα ἴσον καὶ τᾶλλα ὡσαύτως, καὶ ἡ τῆς ὕλης ἐσχάτη ἀπειρία ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης παράγοιτ' ἂν κατ' αὐτὸν ἀπειρίας, ἦν ἐν τῇ τῶν νοητῶν ἀκρότητι οἱ περὶ Πλάτωνα τίθενται (Bessarion *ICP* 2.6.11 p.120.15-20). Compare with Proclus: δῆλον τοίνυν, ὡς τὴν μὲν ὕλην ἀπειρίαν φήσομεν, τὸ δὲ εἶδος πέρασ, εἰ οὖν, ὡσπερ εἶπομεν, ὁ θεὸς πᾶσαν ἀπειρίαν ὑφίστησι, καὶ τὴν ὕλην ὑφίστησιν, ἐσχάτην οὖσαν ἀπειρίαν. καὶ αὕτη μὲν πρωτίστη καὶ ἄρρητος αἰτία τῆς ὕλης· ἐπειδὴ δὲ πανταχοῦ τὰ ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ἀνάλογον ὄντα πρὸς τὰς νοητὰς αἰτίας ἀπ' ἐκείνων ὁ Πλάτων ὑφίστησιν, οἷον τὸ ἐνταῦθα ἴσον ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτοῖσου...κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τὴν ἐνταῦθα ἀπειρίαν ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης ἀπειρίας παράγει, καθάπερ καὶ τὸν ἐνταῦθα πέρασ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐκεῖ πέρατος. δέδεικται δ' ἐν ἄλλοις, ὅτι τὴν πρώτην ἀπειρίαν, τὴν πρὸ τῶν μικτῶν, ἐν τῇ ἀκρότητι τῶν νοητῶν ἴδρυσε καὶ ἐκεῖθεν αὐτῆς διατείνει τὴν ἔλλαμψιν ἄχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων (in *Tim.* I.384.29-385.11).

⁵³⁴ *Ad haec si Plato animae, quae multo nobilior atque divinior est, non modo habitum, sed etiam subjectum et quasi materiam productam a deo dicit, idem videlicet et diversum tamquam animae elementa constituens, quomodo materiam corpulentiae longe ignobiliorem minime ab eodem creatore productam existimaret* (*ICP* 2.6.11 p.121.3-7)

⁵³⁵ Compare Bessarion: πέρασ δὲ οὐδὲν ἄλλ' ἢ τὸ εἶδος ἐστίν...δῆλον ὡς ἡ ὕλη ἀπειρία ἐστὶ τε καὶ καλεῖται ἐνταῦθα (*ICP* 2.6.11 p.120.14-15) with Proclus: δῆλον τοίνυν, ὡς τὴν μὲν ὕλην ἀπειρίαν φήσομεν, τὸ δὲ εἶδος πέρασ (in *Tim.* I.384.29-30). See also Proclus *Plat. theol.* edd. Saffrey and Westerink III.32.2-8, 34.5-14; 34.20-35.7; 36.10-13 citing the same text of the *Philebus*. See Hankins (1990a) 443 and Dodds (1963) 246-249. 'The increased importance assigned to the Limit and the Infinite as cosmogenic principles is one of the characteristics of the Athenian school.....The primary source of these speculations is, of course, the *Philebus*' (Dodds *loc. cit.* 246).

⁵³⁶ *ICP* 2.8.12 p.12. 9-13.

He was left, however, with the question of the ontological nature of matter. He gave an analysis in *ICP* 2.6.16. He said that both Plato and Aristotle held that matter is ‘in some way’ a principle of becoming (ἀρχή πη). The qualification signals a distinction between a simple principle (ἀπλῶς ἀρχήν) and an elemental principle (στοιχειώδης ἀρχή). Both Plato and Aristotle held that the principle of becoming was both matter and informed matter (τὴν ὕλην καὶ τὸ ἔνυλον εἶδος). He drew his terminology from Simplicius.⁵³⁷ In Aristotle στοιχεῖον can mean a component or element as in *Metaphysics* 985^a25-6: ὅταν μὲν γὰρ εἰς τὰ στοιχεῖα διίσθηται τὸ πᾶν ὑπὸ τοῦ νείκους. According to Plutarch, Aristotle and Plato drew a distinction between a principle and an element. Elements are compositions like earth, water, air and fire; principles are neither compositions nor outcomes. Earth and water are compositions of formless matter, form and privation.⁵³⁸ Bessarion follows Plutarch’s understanding of Plato and Aristotle making the point that matter is a principle in the sense that it is a component in a composition with form.⁵³⁹

He drew on Aristotle to explore this elemental principle. He says: ‘It is not strictly a cause like the efficient or final cause but only a supplementary cause (συναίτια) requiring

⁵³⁷ Πλάτων καὶ πρὸ τοῦ Πλάτωνος ὁ Πυθαγορικὸς Τίμαιος, προσεχῆ μὲν τὰ τέτταρα στοιχεῖα ποιήσαντες, πρὸ ἐκείνων δὲ τὰ ἐπίπεδα, ἀρχὰς δὲ πρώτας στοιχειώδεις τὴν ὕλην καὶ τὸ εἶδος (Simplicius in *Physicorum* 7.25-7). The term *principium elementare* is also used by Aquinas. *Est autem elementum ex quo componitur aliquid primo et est in eo et non dividitur secundum formam. Manifestum est quod, in omni composito, est aliqua componentium multitudo; omnis autem multitudinis elementum est unum, cum unum sit indivisibile et unum sit in multitudine, sicut id ex quo primo componitur multitudo. Reliquitur ergo quod unum sit sicut principium elementare omnium elementatorum* (*De divinis nominibus* XIII lectio 2 980).

⁵³⁸ Οἱ μὲν οὖν περὶ Ἀριστοτέλην καὶ Πλάτωνα διαφέρειν ἡγοῦνται ἀρχὴν καὶ στοιχεῖα...τὰ μὲν γὰρ στοιχεῖα ἐστὶ σύνθετα, τὰς δ’ ἀρχὰς φαμεν εἶναι οὔτε συνθέτους οὔτ’ ἀποτελέσματα· οἷον στοιχεῖα μὲν καλοῦμεν γῆν ὕδωρ ἀέρα πῦρ· ἀρχὰς δὲ λέγομεν διὰ τοῦτο, ὅτι οὐκ ἔχει τι πρότερον ἐξ οὗ γεννᾶται, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἔσται ἀρχὴ τοῦτο, ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνο ἐξ οὗ γεγέννηται. τῆς δὲ γῆς καὶ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐστὶ τινὰ πρότερα ἐξ ὧν γέγονεν, ἡ ὕλη ἄμορφος οὕσα καὶ ἀειδής, καὶ τὸ εἶδος ὃ καλοῦμεν ἐντελέχειαν, καὶ ἡ στέρησις (*De placitis philosophorum* 875C4-D6). See also Diogenes Laertius 7.134 for the distinction between principles and elements. Principles, according to Zeno, Archidemus and Posidonius, are ungenerated and without form while elements can be destroyed and have form. Plato in *Timaeus* 48b3-c2 seems to regard the words as interchangeable when applied to fire, water, air and earth (πῦρ ὃ τί ποτε ἔστι καὶ ἕκαστον αὐτῶν λέγομεν ἀρχὰς αὐτὰ τιθέμενοι στοιχεῖα τοῦ παντός) although he objects to using ἀρχὰς because he was giving only a probable account of the origin of these things (*Timaeus* 48c2-6). See Lachenaud (1993) 196 n.2 for the different understandings of principle and element in Plato and Aristotle.

⁵³⁹ *Concedimus principium esse materiam earum rerum quae fiunt, quod et Platonis et Aristotelis sententia perspicuum est, non tamen simpliciter, sed elementale principium tum materiam ipsam tum etiam formam materialem ponimus, ex quibus res compositae constant* (*ICP* 2.6.15 p.125.17-21).

another cause. In so far as matter is not being and is beyond all non-being as is shown in the *Sophist* it is neither a cause nor a non-cause.⁵⁴⁰ One might say without inaccuracy ‘nor yet is it caused’. For what is not yet in existence, while it is non-being, does not have a cause nor yet can it be a cause. It is a potential being (πη ἐστὶν ὄν δυνάμει) and, as such, a ‘supplementary cause’ of being. In the same way as a composition so matter, which is an element in a composition, is created by God who created all things. It is conceived mentally prior to composition although in fact it cannot exist or be understood separately.⁵⁴¹ The argument is that matter is a potentiality and as such shares being and non-being. It can only exist as a contributory cause with another cause since it has only a potential existence.⁵⁴² A potential existence does not exist; so matter, unlike an efficient or final cause, cannot be fully a cause. Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, called matter a potentiality which persists through change but as a potentiality it is not an actuality.⁵⁴³ It is prevented from being nothing by composition: ‘Our theory is that there is matter of which the perceptible bodies consist, but it is not separable but always accompanied by

⁵⁴⁰ ἢ μὲν γὰρ μὴ ὄν ἐστὶν ἢ ὕλη καὶ ἔπ’ ἕκαστα παντὸς μὴ ὄντος (*ICP* p.124.41-2). Bessarion does not say to what passage in the *Sophist* he was referring. But *Sophist* 236d-259d dealt with the meaning of being and not-being as a response to Parmenides and the Eleatics who denied any possibility of being sharing in not-being or of making true statements about not-being. The Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* demonstrated how not-being can be both being and not-being (241d5-7) and motion is both something that is and something that is not (256d5-9). In the *Timaeus* the cosmos never is but is always becoming (28a-29b). A key text from the *Sophist* is: οὐκοῦν, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἢ τῆς θατέρου μορίου φύσεως καὶ τῆς τοῦ ὄντος πρὸς ἄλληλα ἀντικειμένων ἀντίθεσις οὐδὲν ἦττον, εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν, αὐτοῦ τοῦ ὄντος οὐσία ἐστὶν (*Sophist* 258a11-b2). Proclus misquoted this text in *Plat. theol.* II.5.39.1 as ὁ Ἐλεάτης ξένος οὐδὲν τὸ μὴ ὄν τοῦ ὄντος ἔλαττον, εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν, ἐπιδείκνυσιν. Saffrey and Westerink edd. (1974) II pp.99-100 point out that Proclus used this text in several places in discussion on affirmation and negation and the degrees of being but he never quoted the text of Plato exactly. See de Garay (1957).

⁵⁴¹ *ICP* 2.6.16 p.124.40-p.126.8.

⁵⁴² Proclus referred to matter as καθόσον ἐστὶ δυνάμει ὄν (*in Tim.* I.385.14).

⁵⁴³ Ἔτι τὸ μὲν ὑπομένει, τὸ δ’ ἐναντίον οὐχ ὑπομένει· ἐστὶν ἄρα τι τρίτον παρὰ τὰ ἐναντία, ἢ ὕλη...ἀνάγκη δὴ μεταβάλλειν τὴν ὕλην δυναμένην ἄμφω· ἐπεὶ δὲ διττὸν τὸ ὄν, μεταβάλλει πᾶν ἐκ τοῦ δυνάμει ὄντος εἰς τὸ ἐνεργεῖα ὄν...ἐξ ὄντος γίγνεται πάντα, δυνάμει μέντοι ὄντος, ἐκ μὴ ὄντος δὲ ἐνεργεῖα (*Metaphysics* 1069^b7-20). Aquinas used similar terminology: *Materia enim non potest per se existere sine forma per quam est ens actu, cum de se sit in potentia tantum; ipsa enim non est hoc aliquid nisi per formam per quam fit actu. Unde esse hoc aliquid maxime competit composito* (*In Metaphysicam* VII lect. 2.1292).

contrariety.⁵⁴⁴ He criticised Plato for not making it clear in *Timaeus* 51a whether the substrate had any existence apart from the elements.⁵⁴⁵

Bessarion then fleshed out more precisely the nature of matter as potency. He says that, according to the most distinguished interpreters of Plato and Aristotle, matter is not a body without quality (ἄποιον σῶμα) which is called ‘second substrate’ (δεύτερον ὑποκείμενον); neither is it incorporeal (ἄσώματον).⁵⁴⁶ This apparent contradiction was a Middle-Platonic notion. Alcinoüs says that matter is without quality or form, being the substrate of form; it is a potency and neither corporeal nor incorporeal.⁵⁴⁷ But it is most likely that Bessarion had in mind Philoponus and Simplicius, the Neo-Platonist commentators on Aristotle. These commentators seem to have introduced the phrase δεύτερον ὑποκείμενον to refer to body with bulk and extension but without properties, as opposed to first matter (πρῶτον ὑποκείμενον). According to Philoponus prime matter is without body before receiving three dimensions. It becomes second substrate when it has three dimensions capable of taking on qualities.⁵⁴⁸ When qualities like heat and dryness, which are accidents, are added

⁵⁴⁴ Translation Forster (1955). ἡμεῖς δὲ φαμὲν μὲν εἶναι τινα ὕλην τῶν σωμάτων τῶν αἰσθητῶν, ἀλλὰ ταύτην οὐ χωριστὴν ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ μετ’ ἐναντιώσεως, ἐξ ἧς γίνεται τὰ καλούμενα στοιχεῖα (*Aristotle De Generatione et Corruptione* 329^a24-26).

⁵⁴⁵ *De generatione et corruptione* 329^a13-17. Rashed (2005) p.153 n.4 notes that Plato’s use of metaphor in the *Timaeus* to describe matter (receptacle (49a), mould (50c), mother (50d, 51a), invisible, formless and all receptive (51a)) gives the impression of a reality separate from the senses. Plato touched on the possibility of being and not being in *Timaeus* 27d6-28a1: τί τὸ ὄν αἰεὶ, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν αἰεὶ, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε; In his commentary on this passage Proclus wrote: καὶ ἐν οἷς ἄλλο μὲν ἐδείκνυ τὸ παντελὲς ὄν καὶ ὄντως ἐπιστητὸν καὶ ἄλλο τὸ πῆ μὲν ὄν, πῆ δὲ μὴ ὄν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο δοξαστὸν ὑπάρχον (*in Tim.* I.228.1-3). Plato was making an epistemological point about knowledge and opinion but Proclus gave an ontological interpretation (see Runia and Share (2008) II.67 n.140).

⁵⁴⁶ *ICP* 2.6.16 p.126.11-13.

⁵⁴⁷ ἄποιόν τε εἶναι καὶ ἀνείδεον πρὸς ὑποδοχὴν τῶν εἰδῶν. τοιαύτη δ’ οὕσα (ἡ ὕλη) οὔτε σῶμα ἂν εἴη οὔτε ἄσώματον, δυνάμει δὲ σῶμα (*Epitome* 8 ed Hermann p.163.5-7). See also Apuleius: *Sed neque corpoream nec sane incorpoream concedit [sc. Plato] esse; ideo autem non putat corpus, quod omne corpus specie qualicumque non caret; sine corpore vero esse non potest dicere, quod nihil incorporale corpus exhibeat; sed vi et ratione sibi eam videri corpoream, atque ideo nec tactu solo neque tamen sola opinione cogitationis intellegi (de Dogmate Platonis I.5.192)*. Apuleius wrote of *vi et ratione corpoream* where Alcinoüs used δυνάμει δὲ σῶμα. But neither are found in Plato. The closest is *Timaeus* 51a and 52b.

⁵⁴⁸ Ἡ γὰρ πρώτη ὕλη, ὡς πολλάκις εἴρηται, ἄσώματος οὕσα καὶ ἀνείδεος καὶ ἀσχήμιστος πρότερον ἐξογκωθεῖσα τὰς τρεῖς διαστάσεις δέχεται καὶ γίνεται τριχῆ διαστατόν, ὃ φησιν ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης δεύτερον ὑποκείμενον, εἶθ’ οὕτως δέχεται τὰς ποιότητας καὶ ποιεῖ τὰ στοιχεῖα (*Philoponus in Categorias* 83.14-19). See also: οὐχ ὅτι ἦν ἐνεργεῖα ποτὲ ἡ ὕλη ἄσώματος ἢ τὸ σῶμα ἄποιον, ἀλλὰ τὴν εὐτακτὸν τῶν ὄντων γένεσιν

to second substrate it achieves the being of fire; when coldness and wetness are added it becomes water.⁵⁴⁹

Bessarion again followed Simplicius when he said that prime matter is not incorporeal in the sense of an incorporeal substance with some determination (ὡς ὀρισμένην τινὰ φύσιν τοῦ ἀσώματος δηλοῦντος) but it is rather ‘as a negation of body’ (ὡς ἀπόφασιν σώματος).⁵⁵⁰ Having said that first matter is a mental abstraction he gives an account of what this abstraction is. ‘It is, as it were, an indeterminate bodily extension determined by formal magnitude in the way intelligibles differ from the sensible things which derive from them and the simplicity and unity of the intelligibles is replaced by division and extension in sensible things.’⁵⁵¹ In other words formal magnitude is to indeterminate extension as the

θεωροῦντες ταῦτα φαμεν, τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ διαιροῦντες τὰ τῇ φύσει ἀχώριστα. αἱ οὖν ποιότητες αἱ ἐπιγεγόμεναι τῷ σώματι, λέγω δὴ τῷ δευτέρῳ ὑποκειμένῳ, ἢ μὲν ἀποίῳ ὄντι αὐτῷ ἐπεγέγοντο, συνβεβηκότα εἰσὶν (*ibid.* 65.25-29). Aristotle did not use δεῦτερον ὑποκείμενον but he did apply πρῶτον ὑποκείμενον to matter in *Physics* 192^a31 and *Metaphysics* 1029^a2. But in *Metaphysics* 1017^b24 he distinguished between ultimate substance (τὸ ὑποκείμενον ἔσχατον) which cannot have predicates and substance that has individual existence (τὸ χωριστόν). Proclus referred to δεῦτερον ὑποκείμενον in *in Tim.* I.387.13 where he said that when in *Timaeus* 30a Plato referred to ‘all that was visible’ he could not be referring to either matter or the second substrate since ‘it would not be visible if it were incorporeal and without qualities’. This is the only place in which he used the term and does not define it. Porphyry according to Simplicius (*in Categoriae* 48.11-33) distinguished first and second subject. Qualities that are constitutive of a substance (e.g. heat and fire) inhere in it as first subject. Qualities which are not so constitutive (e.g. white and wool) inhere in the subject as second subject. See Runia and Share (2008) p.258 n.287 who refer to Philoponus *in Categoriae* 65.16-19: ἡ ὕλη ὑποβάθρα τις οὖσα καὶ δεκτικὴ πάντων τῶν εἰδῶν τῶν ἐν τοῖς σώμασι θεωρουμένων, οὐδὲ ἐν ἑξεί οἰκεῖον εἶδος. αὐτὴ οὖν ἐξογκωθεῖσα κατὰ τὰς τρεῖς διαστάσεις ποιεῖ τὸ δεῦτερον ὑποκείμενον κατὰ Ἀριστοτέλην, τοῦτ’ ἐστὶ τὸ ἄποιον σῶμα and Ammonius *in Categoriae* 54.4-6: ἡ γὰρ πρώτη ὕλη ἀνείδεος οὖσα καὶ ἀσώματος πρότερον τὰς τρεῖς διαστάσεις δέχεται καὶ γίνεται τριχῆ διαστατὸν τὸ καλούμενον δεῦτερον ὑποκείμενον, εἴθ’ οὕτως τὰς ποιότητας καὶ γίνεται σύνθετον ποσόν. See Sorabji (1988) 18-23 for Simplicius and Philoponus on first matter.

⁵⁴⁹ Philoponus *in Categoriae* 65.22-3. See also Bessarion: τῶν γὰρ σωμάτων ἕκαστον καὶ μήπω πεποιωμένον ποσόν ἐστὶν ἐσχηματισμένον. ἡ μὲν γὰρ ὕλη καθ’ αὐτὴν ἀσώματος ἐστὶν. τὸ δὲ δεῦτερον ὑποκείμενον σῶμα μὲν ἄποιον καθ’ αὐτό, σχήμασι δὲ ποικίλοις μεμορφωμένον καὶ τοῦ μαθηματικοῦ σώματος διαφέρον τῷ ἔνυλον καὶ ἀπτὸν εἶναι, τῆς ἀφῆς κατὰ τὸ ὄγκον ἀντιλαμβανομένης αὐτοῦ καὶ οὐ κατὰ θερμότητα ἢ ψυχρότητα (*ICP* 2.13.2 p.214.16-21).

⁵⁵⁰ *ICP* 2.8.16 p.126.13-14. Compare Simplicius *in Physicorum* 230.7-9: εἰ δὲ ἀσώματος οὖσα δυνάμει λέγεται, ἰστέον ὅτι καὶ τὸ ἀσώματον οὐχ ὡς ὀρισμένη τις φύσις, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἀπόφασις τοῦ σώματος λέγεται.

⁵⁵¹ εἶναι δὲ τινα οἶον ἀόριστον τοῦ σωματικοῦ διάστασιν ὑπὸ τοῦ εἰδητικοῦ μεγέθους ὀριζομένην, ἢ τὰ νοητὰ εἶδη τῶν αἰσθητῶν παραλλάττει, παρατραπέντων ἐκεῖθεν καὶ μερισμὸν καὶ διάστασιν ἀντὶ τῆς ἐκείνων ἀμερίας τε καὶ ἐνόητος εἰληχότων (*ICP* 2.6.16 p.126.14-17). The Latin text is much fuller: *esse dimensionem quandam corporis indeterminatam, quae formali magnitudine determinatur, et qua formae intelligibiles differunt a sensibilibus inde deductis et in partitionem ac discretionem de impartibilitate illarum et unitate dispositis, quae etiam sequestrata omni forma, divisione, figura, magnitudine possit cogitatione comprehendi aptaque sit formam, figuram, divisionem, quantitatem et quodvis eiusdem generis recipere. Aliter enim intellegere non potest, quod omnis formae expertus est* (p.127.14-21).

intelligible forms are to sense objects which once informed can be multiplied and divided. His formula was lifted directly from Simplicius: οὐκ ἄρα οἶόν τε τὸ σῶμα εἶναι τὴν πρώτην ὕλην. καὶ ἐν τῷ τετάρτῳ γούν τῆσδε τῆς πραγματείας [Φυσικῆς] ὕλην τοῦ μεγέθους εἶναι βούλεται ἀόριστόν τινα διάστασιν ὀριζομένην ὑπὸ εἰδητικοῦ μεγέθους.⁵⁵² On this interpretation first matter has volume but without particular dimensions. This indeterminate extension, which is first subject, is the subject of properties.⁵⁵³ It is apparent that in this important paragraph (*ICP* 2.11.6) Bessarion draws heavily on Simplicius' commentary on Aristotle *Physics* 191^a7-8 (ἡ δὲ ὑποκειμένη φύσις ἐπιστητὴ κατ' ἀναλογίαν) from *in Physicorum* 227.19-230.33. He was using Simplicius as the basis for a commentary or gloss on *Timaeus* 51a where Plato described matter (or τὸ ἐν ᾧ γίγνεται as he refers to it) as ἀνόρατον εἶδος τι καὶ ἄμορφον, πανδεχές, μεταλαμβάνον δὲ ἀπορώτατά πη τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ δυσαλωτότατον (51a7-b1).

The eternity of matter (*ICP* 2.6.18).

Bessarion says that Plato held matter to be eternal but not coeternal with God.⁵⁵⁴ This left open the question how matter can be created *ex nihilo* which he maintained was the view of Plato.⁵⁵⁵ The problem was expressed by John Milton: 'The material cause must be either God or nothing. But nothing is no cause at all....For not even God's virtue and efficiency could have produced bodies out of nothing (as it is vulgarly believed he did) unless there had been some bodily force in his own substance, for no one can give something he has

⁵⁵² *In Physicorum*. 229.4-7.

⁵⁵³ See Sorabji (1985).

⁵⁵⁴ *Aeternam quidem Plato esse materiam dixit, coaeternam deo nusquam ab eo dictum reperies* (*ICP* 2.6.18 p.129.2-3).

⁵⁵⁵ *ICP* 2.6.1 p.109.35-9.

not got.⁵⁵⁶ Bessarion did not explicitly address the objection. His answer is implicit in his Proclan understanding of creation. According to Proclus: ‘What really comes into being is that which does not generate itself, but is brought into existence by another....It is such an existent which has time yoked to it, since it has unfailing generation coextensive with the infinity of time....One might even say that what is generated in this way proceeds from non-being (τὸ δὲ οὕτω γενητὸν καὶ ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἴποις ἂν προϊέναι)....That which exists only in dependence on another existent subsists from non-being (τὸ δὲ ἀπ’ ἄλλου μόνον ὄντος ἐκ μὴ ὄντος ὑφίσταται), because once separated from its cause, it no longer exists and the cause differs from the resultant product.’⁵⁵⁷ For Proclus matter proceeds from the One and from unlimitedness.⁵⁵⁸ He uses ‘irradiation’ (μετασχεῖν) to describe the manner ‘in which unparticipated entities affect entities below them in the causal chain’.⁵⁵⁹ Bessarion echoes Proclus when he writes of matter: οὐδ’ ἂν πη ὄν, εἰ μήπου τοῦ ἐνὸς μετείχεν, οὗ καὶ πάντα τὰ ἄλλα μετέχοντα ἔστι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ἔχει, δι’ ἐκεῖνό γε ὄντα.⁵⁶⁰ In other words for Bessarion ‘creation of matter *ex nihilo*’ expressed a relation of eternal dependency on the creator.⁵⁶¹

In considering the question of the eternity of matter he starts from the position that Plato held matter, although created, to be eternal.⁵⁶² He cites no reference to justify his statement about Plato’s position. There are references to the eternity of the cosmos in the *Timaeus*.

⁵⁵⁶ Carey, J. translator *John Milton On Christian Doctrine* in Kelley, M. ed. (1973) *Complete prose works of John Milton* (New Haven and London) vol. VI pp.308-9.

⁵⁵⁷ Proclus in *Tim.* I.280.28-281.13 translation Runia and Share (2008).

⁵⁵⁸ ἡ ὕλη πρόεισιν ἐκ τε τοῦ ἐνὸς καὶ ἐκ τῆς ἀπειρίας τῆς πρὸ τοῦ ἐνὸς ὄντος (in *Tim.* I.385.12-13).

⁵⁵⁹ See Runia and Share (2008) p. 221 n.49 commenting on: τὶ δὲ τὸ ποιοῦν τὰς νοερὰς ψυχὰς τοιαύτας, ἢ ὁ ἐν αὐταῖς νοῦς ἔλλαμμις ὦν τοῦ ὅλου νοῦ; τὶ οὖν καὶ τὸ τὸν νοῦν καὶ τὴν νοητὴν οὐσίαν ἐκθεῶσαν ἢ τὸ μετασχεῖν τοῦ πρώτου καὶ τῆς ἐξ αὐτοῦ προλάμψεως; (in *Tim.* I.360.30-361.3). See also *Elements of theology* prop. 23 and Dodds (1963) pp.210-1.

⁵⁶⁰ *ICP* 2.6.6 p.114.5-6.

⁵⁶¹ See also: *omne enim, quod ab immobili causa fit, immutabilem habere essentiam censet, non tamen aut omnino ingeneratam, cum generata sit, quia non sine causa, aut omnino generatam, cum tempore ingenerata sit* (*ICP* 2.6.5 p.113.32-5).

⁵⁶² See note [554554](#) above.

At 29a2-8 Timaeus says that the Demiurge in creating the cosmos copied the model which is eternal and apprehended by reason. More pertinently he says in 37d1-7 that the Demiurge made time as an eternal image of the model. But Bessarion took an idea from Proclus and says that matter is eternally becoming and always receiving the limitless potency or power of being.⁵⁶³ Proclus (*in Tim.* I.239.2-6) distinguished between the use of ‘always’ in a temporal sense and in the sense of eternity. In the latter case eternity is being wholly together (τὸ ἀθρόως πᾶν ὄν); in the former case it is unlimited by extension through the entirety of time (τὸ δὲ τῆ ὅλη συνεχεία τοῦ χρόνου συνεκτεινόμενον καὶ ἄπειρον) and is always becoming.⁵⁶⁴ He was commenting on *Timaeus* 27d6-28a1 where Plato distinguished between the always existing (i.e. eternal according to Proclus) and the always becoming (i.e. temporal). ‘That which is generated is coupled with time, that which is ungenerated is coupled with eternity.’⁵⁶⁵ He solved the apparent contradiction in Plato between saying that the sensible cosmos is generated but never perishes by drawing a crucial distinction between being imperishable in a temporal sense of lasting through time and being imperishable in the sense of being able to preserve itself in existence.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶³ πολὺ γὰρ καὶ τὸ πᾶν διαφέρει τὸ πᾶσαν ἅμα τὴν τοῦ ὄντος ἀπειρίαν περιειληφὸς αἰδίων, οἷον τὸν θεὸν εὐσεβῶς Πλάτων γεραίρει, τοῦ ἐν τῷ γίνεσθαι αἰεὶ τὸ εἶναι ἔχοντος αἰδίου καὶ τὴν ἄπειρον τοῦ εἶναι δύναμιν αἰεὶ δεχομένου (*ICP* 2.6.18 p.128.9-12). Compare this with Proclus: ἔπεται δὲ αἰεὶ μὲν λαμβάνειν τὸν κόσμον τὴν ἄπειρον δύναμιν, ὄντα σωματικόν, μηδέποτε δὲ τὴν ὅλην ἔχειν, διότι πεπέρασται. μόνως οὖν ἀληθὲς περὶ αὐτοῦ λέγειν, ὅτι ἀπειροδύναμος γίνεται, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔστιν (*in Tim.* I.295.4-8). In the *Timaeus* Plato uses the phrase τὸ γινόμενον αἰεὶ to denote objects of opinion which come into existence and pass away and are never ‘being’ (27d-28a). The sense of τὸ γινόμενον αἰεὶ is ambiguous. τὸ γινόμενον could refer to things that come into being at some point in time and go on existing or it could refer to things that are always in the process of change that is going on perpetually without beginning or end. Bessarion interpreted it in the second sense as did Proclus (*in Tim.* I.252.11-253.28, 294.28-296.12). See Cornford (1937) 24-26.

⁵⁶⁴ See Runia and Share (2008) p.81 n. 225 and Sorabji (1983) 114-5.

⁵⁶⁵ *In Tim.* I.239.17-21 translation Runia and Share (2008).

⁵⁶⁶ ὁ δ’ οὖν κόσμος καὶ ἀπολλύμενός ἐστι καὶ ἄφθαρτος, οὐ κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ δῆπου καὶ ἀπολλύμενον αὐτὸν καὶ ἄφθαρτον τοῦ φιλοσόφου καλοῦντος· γελοῖον γάρ· ἀλλὰ ἄφθαρτον μὲν κατὰ χρόνον, ὥσπερ καὶ ἀγένητον· εἰ γάρ τὸ γενήτων φθαρτόν...τὸ ἄφθαρτον ἀγένητόν ἐστιν· ἀπολλύμενον δὲ ὡς ἑαυτὸ συνέχειν μὴ δυνάμενον (I.293.14-20). Boethius distinguished *aeternus* and *perpetuus*: *Itaque si digna rebus nomina velimus oponere, Platonem sequentes deum quidem aeternum, mundum vero dicamus esse perpetuum* (*De consolatione Philosophiae* 5.6.14).

Bessarion advanced two brief arguments to explain what he regarded as Plato's position.

He drew his first argument from Boethius and it turned on the meaning of 'eternal'.

'Eternal', he says, is ambiguous and in Plato there are many levels of eternity.⁵⁶⁷ The eternity of God who possesses all infinitude simultaneously (*quod omnem simul infinitudinem suam comprehendit*) is different from what has infinitude (like first matter) (*quod suum esse non absolute sed cum fluxu generationis connexum habet*).⁵⁶⁸ These definitions are from Boethius who was writing about the cosmos as a whole whereas Bessarion was writing about prime matter.⁵⁶⁹

The second argument was that God is the cause of the eternity of matter and the world and there is a distinction between the causer (*causans*) and the caused (*causatum*).⁵⁷⁰ Nothing can be the cause of itself.⁵⁷¹ This phrase is similar to one found in Aquinas: *nec est possibile quod aliquid sit causa efficiens sui ipsius* (Aquinas *S.T. Ia q2 a3*). Bessarion used an image to illustrate the point: the distinction between a foot (*causans*) and the foot print (*causata*) or the walking stick and the shadow which it casts. If the foot were eternal, the

⁵⁶⁷ *Multi enim apud Platonem ac varii sunt gradus aeternitatis, immutabilitatis aliarumque conditionum, quae de deo atque omnibus entibus communiter praedicantur* (ICP 2.6.18 p.129 7-9). Compare Proclus: διττή ἦν ἡ αἰδιότητα, αἰώνιος μὲν ἄλλη, κατὰ χρόνον δὲ ἄλλη... ἡ μὲν ἠθροισμένον ἔχουσα τὸ εἶναι καὶ ὁμοῦ πᾶν, ἡ δὲ ἐκχυθεῖσα καὶ ἐξαπλωθεῖσα κατὰ τὴν χρονικὴν παράτασιν (*Elements of theology* prop. 55).

⁵⁶⁸ ICP 2.6.18 p.129.11-15.

⁵⁶⁹ *Quod igitur interminabilis vitae plenitudinem totam pariter comprehendit ac possidet, cui neque futuri quicquam absit nec praeteriti fluxerit, id aeternum esse iure perhibetur idque necesse est et sui compos praesens sibi semper adsistere et infinitatem mobilis temporis habere praesentem. Unde non recte quidam, qui audiunt visum Platoni mundum hunc nec habuisse initium temporis nec habiturum esse defectum, hoc modo conditori fieri coaeternum putant. Aliud est enim per interminabilem duci vitam, quod mundo Plato tribuit, aliud interminabilis vitae totam pariter complexum esse praesentiam, quod divinae mentis proprium esse manifestum est* (*De consolatione Philosophiae* 5.6.8-10). Compare this with Bessarion: *Maxime enim differt aeternum illud, quod omnem simul infinitudinem entis comprehendit, qualem Plato statuit deum, ab eo aeterno, quod suum esse non absolute, sed cum fluxu generationis connexum habet et, ut perpetuum esse possit, aliunde acquirit, qualis Platonis sententia est mundus et res omnes naturales suo quaeque genere et, ut sequitur, materia ipsa* (ICP II.6.18 p.129 11-15). See also a similar distinction in Proclus at *in Tim.*

I.277.33-278.11 and *Elements of theology* props. 52 (πᾶν τὸ αἰώνιον ὅλον ἅμα ἐστίν) and 55 (πᾶν τὸ κατὰ χρόνον ὑφεστός ἢ τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον ἔστιν ἢ ποτὲ ἐν μέρει χρόνου τὴν ὑπόστασιν κεκτημένον). See Courcelle (1967) 221-31 for Boethius on the eternity of the world. He argues (226-8) that Boethius derived his theory from Proclus through an intermediary whom he identifies as Zacharias of Mytilene.

⁵⁷⁰ ICP 2.6.18 p.129 19-30.

⁵⁷¹ *Neque fieri potest ut quod causatum est, etiam causa eius sit, a quo est causatum* (ICP 2.6.18 p.129 25-6). The idea but not the wording occurs among the Neo-Platonists e.g. ἄλλο γὰρ, ὡς φαμεν, τὸ αἰτιατὸν καὶ ἄλλο τὸ ἢ αἰτία (Damascius *De Primis Principiis* 1.226).

footprint would also be eternal but the footprint would not be called coeternal.⁵⁷² The analogy is found in Aquinas and Augustine.⁵⁷³ Aquinas spelt out the argument in the *Summa Theologiae* where he distinguished between the *causa efficiens* and the *effectum* and wrote that if the action was simultaneous it did not necessarily follow that the agent was prior in duration to the effect as can be seen in the case of light.⁵⁷⁴ He quoted from Augustine *C. D.* (X.31) who in a comment on *Timaeus* 43b used the image of the foot print in the same way as Bessarion.⁵⁷⁵ Augustine attributed the image to the *Platonici*.⁵⁷⁶

Matter and the structure of the basic elements

Bessarion devoted a chapter to Plato's theory of the composition of the basic elements of fire, water, earth and air in the *Timaeus*.⁵⁷⁷ He was not attempting to argue that Plato was right or that he was close to Christianity but to respond to criticisms of Plato by Aristotle and Trebizond. Trebizond set out the critique of Aristotle and dismissed Plato's efforts

⁵⁷² *Siquidem vestigium pedis aeternum foret, si pes esset aeternus, et umbra baculi aeterna, si baculus aeternus esset splendidioremque ab aeterno. Nec tamen coaeternum cum pede vestigium nec umbra cum baculo coaeterna diceretur* (ICP 2.6.18 p.129.27-30)

⁵⁷³ *Confitentur [qui ponunt aeternitatem mundi]....hoc modo Deum sempiternum mundi causam existere sicut pes ab aeterno fuisset causa vestigii si ab aeterno fuisset impressus in pulvere* (Aquinas C.G. 1.43.368).

⁵⁷⁴ *Si actio sit instantanea, et non successiva, non est necessarium faciens esse prius facto duratione; sicut patet in illuminatione* (S.T. Ia q46 a2 ad1).

⁵⁷⁵ *Si pes ex aeternitate semper fuisset in pulvere semper fuisset vestigium* (C.D. X.31).

⁵⁷⁶ The text of Augustine suggests that he was quoting from a Platonic source. If that is the case it is uncertain what the source was. See Dombart and Kalb edd. (1959) 635 n.92. Courcelle (1969 p.186 n.165) assumes that it is a fragment from *de Regressu Animae* of Porphyry.

⁵⁷⁷ ICP 2.11 (In the Greek text 2.11 and 13). Monfasani (2012) 472 n.18 notes that the material in Bessarion's chapters ICP 2.11-13 in the Greek (11-12 in the Latin text) is drawn from Simplicius *de Caelo* 561.10-25, 638.14-640.19 and 671.7-20 and in *Physicorum* 1248.21-1249.6.

with the words: *ut rusticus ex crapula se recipiens, eructavit*.⁵⁷⁸ Bessarion rejects the validity of Aristotle's critique of Plato which he said was based on a misunderstanding (see pages 109-110 and note [409409](#) above).⁵⁷⁹ The philosophical problem was to explain the composition of the basic elements (fire, water, earth, air) which could be transformed from one to the other (*Timaeus* 49b2-c7, 56c8-57c6). Bessarion sets out the issue. The form of the elements cannot be received into matter, he says, unless matter itself possesses the form in an indeterminate way.⁵⁸⁰ Aristotle addressed the same question in *De generatione et corruptione*.⁵⁸¹ Plato held that the primary bodies were compositions of shapes whereas Aristotle argued that the four qualities hot, cold, dry and moist were qualities of the *substratum* (ὕλη) forming the simple bodies of fire, water, earth and air.⁵⁸²

Bessarion sets out in detail Plato's account of the composition of the elements from shapes (*Timaeus* 53c4-56c7). He places Plato's account in a philosophical history citing Democritus, the Pythagoreans and Timaeus Locrus. Democritus, said Bessarion, thought there were basic qualities (heat, coldness etc.) which he attributed to atoms.⁵⁸³ But Plato along with the Pythagoreans and Timaeus Locrus thought plane surfaces were first principles because they have the properties of both quantity and quality. According to

⁵⁷⁸ *Comparatio* 1.5. Bessarion in return was particularly withering about Trebizond: *quem locum, ne minus multa scire videretur, argumentis quibusdam, quae nescio quo dictante accepit, urgere conatur et telis alienis armatus in certamen descendit. Quippe argumenta, quibus Aristotelis adversus Platonem usus fuit, non ad sententiam, sed ad primum quasi aspectum pro suis sumpsit. Addidit etiam nonnulla, quae nostrae aetatis expositores Aristotelis argumentationem secuti captiose quidem, non tamen sine artificio protulerunt.... Nam si qui ex se adversarius addidit, ne responsione quidem dignum est, cum nihil habeat, quod ad aliquam philosophiae partem possit referri* (ICP 2.11.1 p.199 5-17).

⁵⁷⁹ Karamanolis (2006) 3 argues: 'When confronted with contradictions between Aristotle and Plato, the Neo-Platonists argued that such contradictions were only apparent, the results of uncritical focus on the letter and not the real spirit of the texts.' He cites Simplicius in *Categorias* 6.7-18, 7.23-32, in *De caelo* 454.23-4, 640.27-8, Philoponus in *De anima* 10.8-12, 12, Olympiodorus *Prolegomena* 4.3-15 and in *Meteora* 7.21-30. See Blumenthal (1987) 92-7. See ICP 1.6.3 p.71.2-10 where Bessarion argued that Plato and Aristotle could be interpreted as agreeing on the composition of the elements.

⁵⁸⁰ *Sed quoniam forma ipsa elementorum recipi in materiam non potest, nisi ipsa materia sibi indeterminate insita habeat ea quae in generatione determinantur* (ICP 2.11.3 p.201.34-6).

⁵⁸¹ ἐπειδὴ καὶ τὸν τρόπον τοῦτόν ἐστιν ἐκ τῆς ὕλης τὰ σώματα τὰ πρῶτα, διοριστέον καὶ περὶ τούτων, ἀρχὴν μὲν καὶ πρότην οἰομένους εἶναι τὴν ὕλην τὴν ἀχώριστον μὲν, ὑποκειμένην δὲ τοῖς ἐναντίοις (329^a28-31).

⁵⁸² Aristotle's theory still had currency in the Renaissance. See Wallace (1988) p.216-7.

⁵⁸³ ICP 2.11.4 p.203 1-4.

Plato the primary bodies were composed of the shape of one of the four geometrical solids (the pyramid, the octahedron, the icosahedron and the cube) (*Timaeus* 54d2-55b2 and 55d6-56c7). These are the ‘best’ shapes so they bring order and rationality to disorder. The shapes, according to Plato, were built up from triangles (*Timaeus* 53c7-d5). Because each of the shapes can be broken down into triangles Plato was able to explain how one element could be transformed into another by a rearrangement of the basic triangles.⁵⁸⁴

Bessarion sees Plato’s account as an attempt to resolve the metaphysical problem of explaining the origin of matter but it was no more than a likely account.⁵⁸⁵ He quotes *Timaeus* 53d4-6 to the effect that Plato’s account was not more than probable (εἰκὸς λόγος).⁵⁸⁶ Plato and the Pythagoreans in his view were using ‘shape’ and ‘quantity of shape’ as conceptual models to explain the origin of ‘quality’.

Conclusion

Bessarion’s aim was to show that Plato held that matter was created by God and that in this he was closer to Christian teaching than Aristotle. He was trying to introduce a Platonic understanding where Aristotelian metaphysics prevailed and this was never going to be easy.⁵⁸⁷ He found support for his claim largely in the *Timaeus* and *Philebus*. Plato’s text is often ambiguous and lacks metaphysical detail. Bessarion treated the issue as metaphysical

⁵⁸⁴ This is only true of fire, air and water. Earth, which is formed of a cube, could not be broken down in this way because it is built of a different triangle (half equilateral) from the other three (isosceles) (*Timaeus* 54b6-d2).

⁵⁸⁵ *Sic igitur Pythagorei et Plato in exquirendis naturae principiis ulterius, quam elementorum sumerent qualitates, comperire simplicius aliquid conati sunt, et quod compererunt, tamdiu servandum censuerunt, donec melius aliquid occurreret* (ICP 2.11.10 p.207.27-30). See also *Timaeus* 54a4-5 quoted by Bessarion in ICP 2.11.9 p.207.9-11.

⁵⁸⁶ ICP 2.11.9 p.207.11-14.

⁵⁸⁷ See Kristeller (1956) 21-3.

unlike many earlier Christian commentators for whom the question was theological. In much of what he wrote he drew on the thinking and even the words of the Neo-Platonists, particularly Proclus, the Aristotelian commentators and Boethius. He was not being original. He did not regard ideas drawn from sources external to Plato as necessarily distorting Plato's teaching. He wrote within the tradition of the Neo-Platonist commentators and, as Tarrant points out, for the Neo-Platonists, 'the activity of philosophy is the same as the act of interpreting Plato because truth is to be found in Plato.'⁵⁸⁸

The heart of his argument was that first matter is caused. It is real and not a mental abstraction but it only exists in composition with form. It can be known by mental abstraction but when conceptualised in abstraction from composition it is a potentiality rather than being. It is without quality but has indeterminate extension.

What may have been regarded as original or, at least, as surprising by his Latin readers was Bessarion's contention that Plato was closer to Christianity than Aristotle. The Aristotelian interpretation of hylemorphic theory had been entrenched in Scholastic teaching.

In fact in the course of *ICP* 2.6 and 7 he notes the many respects in which Plato and Aristotle were in agreement. They both distinguished form and matter (*ICP* 2.6.5 p.113 11-13) and regarded matter as a principle of being (*ICP* 2.6.16 p.125.18-21). 'Both make matter the elemental principle and *concausa* of things which are generated and both of them hold that generation is from matter which is both being and non-being inasmuch as its nature is without form so that, as Plato says, its proper form may not be an obstacle to

⁵⁸⁸ Tarrant (2007) 11. See Karamanolis (2006) for different interpretations of Plato and the use of Aristotle as a pathway to understandings of Plato.

taking on other forms. Aristotle follows Plato in this. But matter is able to take on particular forms in turn and as it were in succession.⁵⁸⁹ But Plato, according to Bessarion, attributed the efficient and final causes of creation to God whereas Aristotle held the cosmos to be uncreated by a cause or in time (*ICP* 2.7.3 p.133.42-3). He refers to *Metaphysics* 7 where Aristotle said that substances without matter have no cause of generation.⁵⁹⁰ Plato on the other hand said that that the Good and the One is the cause of substances and that first and formless matter is created by the first principle by his infinite power. Aristotle objected to this view in Plato and Parmenides (*ICP* 2.7.4 p.135 10-13).⁵⁹¹ Bessarion concluded that it was clear that Plato, unlike Aristotle, held that eternal things had a cause and therefore was the more consistent with Christian teaching (*ICP* 2.7.7).

⁵⁸⁹ *ICP* 2.7.3 p.123 33-39.

⁵⁹⁰ Bessarion did not give a precise reference but he may have had in mind: ὥστε, καθάπερ λέγεται, ἀδύνατον γενέσθαι εἰ μὴδὲν προϋπάρχει. ὅτι μὲν οὖν τι μέρος ἐξ ἀνάγκης ὑπάρξει φανερόν· ἢ γὰρ ὅλη μέρος (ἐνυπάρχει γὰρ καὶ γίγνεται αὐτή) (*Metaphysics* 1032^b30-1033^a1). Mohler's reference (II p.184 n.) is wrong.

⁵⁹¹ See Aristotle *Physics* 186^a3-187^a11.

Chapter five

On the Soul

Summary

In this chapter I show that in responding to Trebizond's critique Bessarion remained close to the Platonic texts on the immortality of the soul but he glossed them in order to show them compatible with Christian teaching. He acknowledged that there were some aspects of Christian teaching on the soul which could only be known by faith. But his purpose was to demonstrate that Plato's thinking on the soul was closer to Christian teaching than Aristotle and that Plato demonstrated the immortality of the soul by robust philosophical proofs.

Trebizond's critique of Plato

Trebizond had a chapter entitled *Quod Plato poeticae ac per figmenta De Anima et immortalitate ipsius loquitur, Aristoteles demonstrat* in which he claimed to demonstrate that Aristotle was closer to Christian orthodoxy than Plato.⁵⁹² Bessarion in his chapter on the soul, *De Anima quid senserit Plato (ICP 2.8)*, argued the opposite. Trebizond dismissed Plato summarily and concentrated on showing that Aristotle demonstrated the immortality of the soul with rational arguments. He says that it is not surprising Plato believed the soul to be immortal since it had been said by many poets before him, particularly Homer. Plato got his account of the soul from the poets although he called it

⁵⁹² *Comparatio* 2.12.

vehiculum rather than *umbra* as they did. The movement of a shadow or shade could be measured because a shade had magnitude but it was superficial rather than a corporeal magnitude.⁵⁹³ He was thinking of the insubstantial shades in Homer's underworld. Plato, according to Trebizond, used the word *vehiculum* for this function i.e. movement of soul. It is not obvious in what way the image of a *vehiculum* finds a parallel in a shade. Plato's *vehiculum* could hardly be described as *umbrosum*. Plato's *vehiculum* allowed soul's to move beyond the earthly realm whereas Homer's shades were confined to the underworld. Trebizond's text might suggest that the parallel lay in the soul's separation from the body in both images. But this can hardly be the case since Aristotle also, whom Trebizond is defending, held the separation of soul from body. Possibly his point is no more than that Plato uses 'poetic' images to describe the nature of soul. He does not cite references but no doubt he has in mind the *Phaedrus* (246a-249d), where Plato likened the form of the soul to a two-horsed winged-chariot, and the *Timaeus* (41e) where the Demiurge mixes souls and mounted them as it were on chariots or perhaps *Phaedo* (87d) where the soul is likened to a person outlasting many cloaks as they wear out.

Again like the poets, says Trebizond, Plato attributed immortality to all soul including pigs and worms. He gives no indication of his source for this claim but in the *Phaedrus* Plato

⁵⁹³ *Immortalis ait Plato animus est. Quid mirum? Nam hoc ante ipsum poetae multi et praecipue Homerus cecinit. Tartara, stigem, acheronta, et helysios compos, nulla ratione, nisi auctoritate poetarum, commotus describit, quod magni dicit, quia fabulas recitat, quas non ipse finxit, sed a priscis accepit, animos a corpore separatos vehiculo ferri censet, sed id quod alienum, non suum est, nam quod poetae umbram appellant, id Plato, ut suum aliquid dicere videretur, vehiculum nominat. Umbram enim poetae animi vocant, in qua cernitur animus et in qua movetur, localiter quippe ipsum visibilem esse umbram, visibilem ipsum immobilem localiter, qua incorporeus est, quod vero per locum movetur mensurat locum, qui non potest a re incorporea mensurari, quod non mensurabitur spatium a non spatio. Umbram autem putat posse per locum moveri et metiri spatium, quid magnitudinem habeat, licet non corporis, sed superficiei. In umbra igitur putant sua et cerni et moveri animum haec ipsa Plato per vehiculum animo tribuit. Quas ob res nihil inter ipsum et poetas si verborum crepitum abstuleris, inter est, adde quod non humano animo solum sicut poetae sed omni simpliciter animae immortalitatem largitur, rudem hominem atque iniquum, ne turpissimum dicam, qui porcis, vermiculis, qui scarabeis eundem animum quem hominibus dedit. Quid istis et catholicae veritati commune? Nihil prorsus, quid quod animos de corpore in corpus, et de belluis in belluas transire ita credit, ut ab hominibus in bestias et converso provolvantur. Nec veritas est quod exitiis sequitur quod et ipse aliquando, scarabeus et fuerit, ac ex stercore globis editus, ipsis quoque aleretur et futurus forte sit (Comparatio 2.12).*

wrote: ‘In the thousandth year, both sorts [the just and unjust soul] come to the allotment and choice of their second life and each chooses whichever it wishes: then a human soul may pass into the life of a wild animal, and what was once a human soul may pass again into a man from animal’.⁵⁹⁴ The same idea occurs in the *Phaedo* (81e6-82a6) where the gluttonous souls may enter asses and tyrants, and where robbers become wolves and kites. Trebizond concludes that Plato could have nothing in common with the Catholic faith if he thought souls could pass from one body to another, from men to animals and *vice versa*. Trebizond’s language is colourful but he presented Bessarion with a number of serious challenges: to show (1) that Plato’s arguments about the immortality of the soul were rational, (2) that his teaching was not contradictory to Christian orthodoxy and (3) that he did not teach the transmigration of human souls into animals.

Trebizond bases his argument on Aristotle’s *De Anima* to show that Aristotle demonstrated the immortality of the soul.⁵⁹⁵ According to him Aristotle argued that the soul is immortal if it is separable from body and it must be separable if it does not use a corporeal body. Trebizond produces a proof of the soul’s separability from the body which was taken almost word for word from Aristotle (*De Anima* 429^a22-^b6). But Aristotle’s argument showed that the soul was separable from the body, not that, as a consequence, it was immortal. Trebizond presumably had in mind another passage in *De Anima* (430^a23-4): χωρισθεῖς δ’ ἐστὶ μόνον τοῦθ’ ὅπερ ἐστὶ, καὶ τοῦτο μόνον ἀθάνατον καὶ αἰδῖον (see note [618618](#) below). Bessarion did not dispute Trebizond’s account of Aristotle but argues that Plato used rational arguments to demonstrate the immortality of soul.

⁵⁹⁴ 249b1-5 translation Rowe (1986) adapted.

⁵⁹⁵ *Comparatio* 2.12.

The context of Bessarion's response to Trebizond

Bessarion admitted that the soul was a difficult subject.⁵⁹⁶ He addressed his chapter on the soul to *viri docti atque praestantes* and invited them to judge whether Plato's writings about the soul were fables, as Trebizond claimed, or whether they were as wise as it was possible to be without the light of faith.⁵⁹⁷ He clearly regarded the Platonic arguments which he quoted to be philosophically robust. His Platonic sources were the *Laws* (893b-904c), the *Phaedrus* (245c-e), and the *Phaedo* (80b and 102a-105c). He reports the Platonic texts faithfully but his exposition is in many cases refracted through Proclus and others. He emphasises the conformity of Plato and Aristotle. He holds that the immortality of the soul was demonstrable by reason but not its creation in time. Arguments from reason lead to the eternity of the soul *ex parte ante* and *ex parte post*. We only know by faith that the individual soul is created by God in time.⁵⁹⁸ He reminds his readers that it is not his intention to show that Plato was Christian but that Plato's teaching on the soul was closer to Christian teaching than Aristotle's.⁵⁹⁹

The nature of soul was a subject of controversy in the fifteenth century.⁶⁰⁰ The problem for natural philosophers was to demonstrate the immortality of the individual soul without

⁵⁹⁶ *Sed de generatione animi hoc loco dicendum non est, cum et multo difficilior quaestio sit nec nisi ab iis intelligi possit, qui Pythagoreorum et Platoniorum rationes perfecte noverunt et mathematicarum disciplinarum cognitionem habent, sit praeterea ad eam explicandam longe prolixior oratio necessaria* (ICP 1.6.1 p.69.7-12).

⁵⁹⁷ ICP 2.8.1 p.139.10-15.

⁵⁹⁸ ICP 2.8.8 p.147.26-8.

⁵⁹⁹ *Neque enim, ut saepe dixi, Christianum mihi animus est ostendere Platonem, sed inspiciendum censeo, an magis consentaneae sint nostrae religioni Platonis de anima opiniones quam Aristotelis* (ICP 2.8.2 p.141.15-18).

⁶⁰⁰ See Kessler (2008a) 500-504, Blum (2007), Lohr (2008) 595. In Kristeller's view there had been little serious interest in questions regarding the immortality of the soul in the Middle Ages but they came to prominence in the Renaissance (see Kristeller (1973) 30-2).

falling into the Averroistic position of the unicity of the intellect.⁶⁰¹ Averroists like Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525) in his *de Immortalitate Animae* (1516) maintained that the immortality of the individual soul could not be demonstrated philosophically but was a matter of faith and personal belief. The propositions of Pico's philosophical synthesis *Conclusiones* included 'the intellective soul is one'. Scotus doubted and Ockham denied that the immortality of the individual soul could be proved philosophically. As long as one asserted one's own belief in the soul's immortality there was no heresy in rejecting the possibility of proving the immortality of the soul; this was the position of Scotus and Ockham.⁶⁰² On the other hand the Thomists and Platonists like Ficino held that the immortality of the individual soul could be demonstrated by reason.⁶⁰³ Another problem facing Bessarion was Plato's belief in the transmigration of souls. This was one of the charges laid against Plato by Trebizond and was not new. Giovanni Dominici had criticised Plato in his *Lucula Noctis* for maintaining the transmigration of souls.⁶⁰⁴

Bessarion begins his account of the soul by distinguishing a set of questions which needed to be addressed including:

⁶⁰¹ *Questio autem secunda, dicens quomodo intellectus materialis est unus in numero in omnibus individuis hominum, non generabilis neque corruptibilis* (Averroes *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima libros III* p.401 cited by Monfasani (1993b) 179 n.104). For the dominance of Averroists in Italian philosophical faculties see Monfasani (1993a). Averroism was still sufficiently strong by the beginning of the sixteenth century for Pope Leo X to issue the bull *Apostolici Regimini* in 1513 condemning the philosophical doctrines of the mortality of the soul and the unicity of the intellect. The strength of the Averroists may be gleaned from a letter of Pietro Barozzi, Bishop of Padua, in 1504: 'the Scotist chair of theology [in Padua] is like a medicine for the errors on the eternity of the world, the unicity of the intellect, on nothing coming from nothing, and so forth, which abound among the philosophers.' Plethon had been critical of Averroes. 'How can anyone believe somebody who rejects the immortality of the soul? Even Aristotle does not make this error,' he asks at the beginning of *De differentiis*. In the preface to his translation of Plotinus Ficino condemned the contemporary Aristotelians who had been misled by Averroes and Alexander of Aphrodisias and diverged from Aristotle whom Plethon had interpreted as agreeing with Plato on the immortality of the soul (see Monfasani (2002) 191-2).

⁶⁰² See Monfasani (1993b) 259.

⁶⁰³ Bessarion's friend, Ambrogio Traversari, translated into Latin between 1433 and 1434 (but not published until 1513) Aeneas of Gaza's (ob. c. 518) dialogue *Theophrastus* on the immortality of the soul. In it Theophrastus expounds the doctrines of the *prisca philosophi* on the human soul. He cites the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Eleatics along with Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus. In the end the participants in the dialogue renounce the Platonic doctrine of the soul's pre-existence and affirm its immortality. They achieve a synthesis of Platonism and Christianity. See Lackner (2002) 21.

⁶⁰⁴ See note [164164](#) above.

Cur sint?

Causa vacent?

An a deo productae sint?

Quid sit?

Utrum tamquam potentia subiecta et substantiae accommodata?

An actu subsistens natura existimanda sit?

Utrum ante corpus?

Utrum post corpus maneat an cum corpore pereat?

Utrum se in diversa transtulit?

An omnino incorruptibilis immortalisque sit?

An partibilis necne sit?

Si impartibilis est, simplexne omnino natura, an partium quidem multitudinem

nullam, potentias vero, quas etiam virtutes dicimus, habeat multas?

Utrum omnes animae sub eadem specie contineantur, an sub diversis?

Pluresne animae sint (vegetativa, nutritiva, appetitiva, intellectiva) an haec unius

*animae partes seu virtutes dici debeant?*⁶⁰⁵

This analysis follows closely a similar analysis by Aristotle in *De Anima* (402^a23-403^a16).

The nature of soul (ICP 2.8.3-7)

In addressing the question: ‘What is Plato’s teaching on the nature of soul?’ Bessarion had to show that human souls are different from the souls of animals and other living creatures. He drew on Plato’s *Laws* 893b1-904c4, either quoting the text verbatim or using the words of Plato’s text with some adaptation. He began with a summary of Plato’s analysis of

⁶⁰⁵ ICP 2.8.1-2. In fact Bessarion did not address all these questions.

‘soul’: the motion that moves itself is the first and oldest and most powerful of all movement and change; whatever moves itself is alive, so whatever moves has life. ‘Soul’ is that which moves itself; it is the name of self-movement.⁶⁰⁶ ‘Soul’ generates or brings into existence everything past, present and to come; it is the first mover.⁶⁰⁷ ‘Soul’ is prior to body.⁶⁰⁸ Plato’s argument was aimed at atheists (899b3-d2) and deists (900c8-d3). But this was not Bessarion’s purpose here; his interest was in the nature of soul.⁶⁰⁹ The important point for him was that Plato demonstrated that the soul is self-moving and the principle of life.⁶¹⁰

If soul is the principle of movement, soul must reside in animals and even plants as well as mortals. Plato makes the point that it can reside in a thing made of earth or water or fire either separately or combined.⁶¹¹ Bessarion was sensitive to this point. He says that ‘self-movement’ is a general definition of soul which is not limited to bodies; the intellective

⁶⁰⁶ Compare Bessarion: ἡ αὐτὴ ἄρα αὐτὴν κινουσα δύναμις καὶ ἀφ’ ἑαυτῆς ἀρχομένη τῆς ἐνεργείας ἀρχὴ κινήσεων πασῶν καὶ πρώτη ἔν τε ἐστῶσι καὶ κινουμένοις ἐστί, πρεσβυτάτη καὶ κρατίστη πασῶν οὐσα μεταβολῶν.... ὅπου δὲ ἡ αὐτὴ αὐτὴν κινουσα δύναμις ἔνεστι, τοῦτο ζῆν λέγομεν. ζῆν δὲ τὰ ψυχὴν ἔχοντα, ὡς ψυχὴν εἶναι τὴν αὐτὴν αὐτὴν κινουσαν.... ὅ ψυχὴ τούνομα, τίς ἄλλος αὐτοῦ λόγος πλὴν τοῦ νῦν δὴ ῥηθέντος; τὴν γὰρ δυναμένην αὐτὴν αὐτὴν κινεῖν κίνησιν φάμεν ψυχὴν (ICP 2.8.5 p.142.5-19) with Plato: ἀρχὴν ἄρα κινήσεων πασῶν καὶ πρώτην ἔν τε ἐστῶσιν γενομένην καὶ ἐν κινουμένοις οὐσαν τὴν αὐτὴν κινουσαν φήσομεν ἀναγκαίως εἶναι πρεσβυτάτην καὶ κρατίστην μεταβολὴν πασῶν.... μὴν ἄρα με ἐρωτᾷς εἰ ζῆν αὐτὸ προσερούμεν, ὅταν αὐτὸ αὐτὸ κινῆ.... ὅπότεν ψυχὴν ἔν τισιν ὁρώμεν, μὴν ἄλλο ἢ ταῦτόν τούτω; ζῆν ὁμολογητέον;... ὅ ψυχὴ τούνομα, τίς τούτου λόγος; ἔχομεν ἄλλον πλὴν τὸν νυνδὴ ῥηθέντα, τὴν δυναμένην αὐτὴν αὐτὴν κινεῖν κίνησιν; (Laws 895b3-896a2).

⁶⁰⁷ Compare Bessarion: τὸ τὴν ψυχὴν εἶναι πρώτην γένεσιν καὶ κίνησιν τῶν τε ὄντων καὶ γεγονότων καὶ ἐσομένων, μεταβολῆς καὶ κινήσεως ἀπάσης αἰτίαν ἅπασιν δειχθεῖσαν. κἀντεῦθεν πρεσβυτάτην εἶναι πάντων τῶν κινουμένων, ἀρχὴν οὐσαν κινήσεως, καὶ αὐτὴν μὲν πάντων σωμάτων πρεσβυτέραν, σῶμα δὲ δεύτερον καὶ ὕστερον ψυχῆς ἀρχούσης ἀρχόμενον κατὰ φύσιν. τὰ μὲν γὰρ σώματα πάντα μόνως κινεῖται, οὐδενὸς ὄντα ποιητικά (ICP 2.8.5 p.142.23-28) with Plato: ψυχὴν ταῦτόν ὄν καὶ τὴν πρώτην γένεσιν καὶ κίνησιν τῶν τε ὄντων καὶ γεγονότων καὶ ἐσομένων καὶ πάντων αὐτῶν ἐναντίων τούτοις, ἐπειδὴ γε ἀνεφάνη μεταβολῆς τε καὶ κινήσεως ἀπάσης αἰτία ἅπασιν.... σῶμα δὲ δεύτερον τε καὶ ὕστερον, ψυχῆς ἀρχούσης, ἀρχόμενον κατὰ φύσιν (Laws 896a6-c3).

⁶⁰⁸ Compare Bessarion: ἦν δὲ ψυχὴν ἔφαμεν εἶναι παντὸς σώματος πρεσβυτέραν (ICP 8.4.6 p.142.35-6) with Plato: ὀρθῶς ἄρα καὶ κυρίως ἀληθέστατα τε καὶ τελεώτατα εἰρηκότεσ ἀν εἶμεν ψυχὴν μὲν προτέραν γενομένην σώματος ἡμῖν (Laws 896b10-c2).

⁶⁰⁹ *Quin etiam ulteriore progressu essentiam divinitatis ex his demonstrat, de qua non est hoc loco dicendum* (ICP 2.8.6 p. 143.40-2).

⁶¹⁰ *Quod se ipsum movet, id procul dubio vivere dicimus; vivunt autem, quae animam habent. Ex quo colligitur animam esse, quae ipsa se ipsam movet* (ICP 2.8.5 p.143.8-10).

⁶¹¹ Laws 895c4-13. ‘In implying that soul can reside in fire and earth by itself, [Plato] is likely talking about the heavenly bodies (Mayhew (2008) 124).’

soul is not the activity of body.⁶¹² He responds to the challenge of Trebizond, who had claimed Plato attributed immortal souls to animals, by arguing that Plato used the word ‘soul’ metaphorically of animals.⁶¹³ It applied to humans univocally but only equivocally to animals. He quotes as evidence the *Timaeus* (69c5-e2) where the gods are said to frame the immortal principle of soul (ἀρχὴν ψυχῆς ἀθάνατον) in bodies but separately from the mortal soul (ἄλλο τι εἶδος ψυχῆς τὸ θνητόν) which is the seat of sensation and passions. He attributes this sensitive and mortal soul to animals and concludes that he called the soul of animals ‘a life’ and only metaphorically ‘a soul’. When he spoke of immortal souls he was never talking of animals.⁶¹⁴ Throughout the chapter Bessarion uses the word ‘soul’ to apply to the ‘intellective soul’ of humans as distinct from the sensitive soul of animals or plants. This may be a reflection of his Neo-Platonist sources. For Proclus the irradiation of the One extended to ‘the reflections of souls’ (τὰ εἶδωλα τῶν ψυχῶν in *Elements of theology* prop. 64) which were the ‘souls’ of animals and plants. He distinguished the rational soul which is the only true soul and is immortal from the irrational ‘soul’ which is mortal (*Plat. theol.* III.6 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.23.16-25). These ‘reflections of souls’ participate in the creative action of intellect. Only rational souls were intrinsically

⁶¹² *Huic enim substantiae, cui nomen anima est, nulla ratio magis convenit, quam quae eam per se ipsam moveri statuit....Nam formam esse hanc sive actum corporis vere quidem affirmamus. Non tamen commune hoc cuiuscumque animae est, siquidem intellectivam animam corporis actum esse nemo diceret. Communiori ergo ratione animam id esse dicimus, quod se ipsum movere potest, et vicissim, quod se ipsum movere potest, id animam esse (ICP 2.8.5 p.143.17-23).* Bessarion was surprisingly summary in dismissing the possibility of Plato’s belief in immortality applying to animal souls simply quoting *Timaeus* 69c5-8, d4-6, e2-4 (see *ICP* 2.8.24). He dismissed the notion with little argument. Aquinas addressed the same question in *C.G.* II.32 where he attributed the view to Plato that animal souls were immortal (*ibid.* 1639-40). His response was much more detailed than Bessarion’s but included rejecting the idea of an intellectual soul in animals (*ibid.* 1632).

⁶¹³ *Brutorum animam, ut modo dixi, vitam quandam appellat et metaphorice animam, quapropter cum animam omnem immortalem esse affirmat, nequaquam de brutis intellegit (ICP 2.8.24 p.165.8-10).*

⁶¹⁴ Bessarion also said that there is a tripartite division in what can legitimately be termed ‘soul’: τριῶν εἶδος ψυχῶν οὐρανίων, δαιμονίων καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων εἶναι δοξάζουσι, τὸ μὲν ἐπιστημονικὸν πάντων, τὸ δὲ περὶ πάντα ὀρθοδοξαστικόν, τὸ δὲ πῆ μὲν ὀρθῶς, πῆ δὲ καὶ ἐσφαλμένως δοξάζον, μέχρι τούτων τὸ ψυχῆς ὄνομα κυρίως κατὰγοντες (*ICP* 2.8.24 p.162.37- p.164.2). The terminology is different from Plato’s tripartite division of soul in the *Republic* (λογιστικόν, θυμοειδές, ἐπιθυματικόν). Proclus (*in Tim.* 1.301.12) distinguished θείας τε καὶ δαιμονίας καὶ τὰς τῶν θνητῶν ζώων φύσεις which resonates with Bessarion’s ψυχῶν οὐρανίων, δαιμονίων καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων. In *in Tim.* II.138.26-139.3 he distinguishes five levels of soul (θείαν, ἀγγελικὴν, δαιμονίαν, ἡρωϊκὴν, ἀνθρωπίνην) according to the mixture of being, sameness and difference.

self-moving and thus immortal; animal souls could not be immortal. He claimed the authority of *Timaeus* 41d2-3 where the gods are enjoined to weave the mortal with the immortal and in this way to create living things.⁶¹⁵

Bessarion glosses the text of Plato at two points. He says that the soul is the ‘form of the body’ or ‘the actuality [ἐντελέχεια/*actus*] of the body’.⁶¹⁶ This was Aristotle’s terminology, which does not occur in Plato. In the *De Anima* Aristotle described the soul as the form of the body (εἶδος σώματος φυσικοῦ) and the actuality of the body (ἐντελέχεια ἢ πρώτη σώματος φυσικοῦ).⁶¹⁷ But there is a difference between Bessarion and Aristotle. For Bessarion although soul which is self-movement is the form of the body, the power of self-movement is not limited to physical bodies only. For Aristotle the soul is a substance; it is the form of physical body which potentially has life; it is the actuality of an organic natural body (412^b5-6). So soul is not separable from body (413^a2-6).⁶¹⁸ In other words according to Bessarion the soul as ‘self-mover’ is not the form of physical bodies; it may be separate from physical bodies; whereas for Aristotle ‘soul’ is the substance of physical bodies and, therefore, inseparable from them.

⁶¹⁵ For an analysis of the emanation of soul from the one according to Proclus see Dodds (1963) 232 and 294-6.

⁶¹⁶ εἶδος γὰρ αὐτὴν ἢ ἐντελέχειαν τοιοῦδε τοῦ σώματος εἶναι λέγειν λέγεται μὲν καλῶς, οὐ μὲντοι κοινός ἐστιν πάσης ψυχῆς ὀρισμός, εἴ γε ἡ νοερὰ ψυχή οὐδενός ἐστιν ἐντέλεχεια σώματος. τὸ αὐτὸ ἄρα ἑαυτὸ κινούσιν κοινότερος ψυχῆς ὀρισμός (*ICP* 2.8.5 p.142.19-21).

⁶¹⁷ ἀναγκαῖον ἄρα τὴν ψυχὴν οὐσίαν εἶναι ὡς εἶδος σώματος φυσικοῦ δυνάμει ζῶν ἔχοντος. ἢ δ’ οὐσία ἐντελέχεια... διὸ ἡ ψυχή ἐστιν ἐντελέχεια ἢ πρώτη σώματος φυσικοῦ δυνάμει ζῶν ἔχοντος (412^a19-28).

⁶¹⁸ But Aristotle qualified his statement with: οὐ μὴν ἀλλ’ ἐνία [i.e. parts of the soul] γε οὐθὲν κωλύει, διὰ τὸ μηθενός εἶναι σώματος ἐντελεχείας. ἔτι δὲ ἄδηλον εἰ οὕτως ἐντελέχεια τοῦ σώματος ἢ ψυχή ἢ ὡσπερ πλωτῆρ πλοίου (413^a6-9). This is a reference to *De Anima* III chapter 5 where Aristotle distinguished νοῦς ποιητικός and νοῦς παθητικός, both being in soul (430^a13-14). The former is separable, impassive and unmixed being an activity (430^a17-19) and is immortal and eternal (430^a22-23). There has been much debate about the interpretation of *De Anima* 429^a22-430^a25 and, in particular, about what Aristotle was referring to by νοῦς ποιητικός (430^a15) which alone is ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀίδιον (430^a23). Ross, after considering the ancient commentators, concludes that the faculty of reasoning which can apprehend universals which are not present in perceptible things e.g. geometrical shapes and logic ‘is purely active and not dependent in any degree on sense perception of perfect squares or perfect circles; and its power of doing so may not unnaturally be described as surviving death, since it does not depend on the use of any sense-organ’. See Ross (1961) pp.41-48.

By introducing Aristotle's terminology at this point Bessarion may have wished to stress convergence between Plato and Aristotle by using terminology which would have been familiar to those of his readers schooled in Aristotelian Scholasticism.⁶¹⁹ But in doing so he was entering controversial territory. The problem was that if the soul is the form of physical body, the soul must perish with the body. Aquinas had expressed the problem. Nothing incorruptible can be the form of a corruptible body. If body is corruptible, its form must be corruptible. If, therefore, intellect is the form of the body it follows that it is corruptible.⁶²⁰ For this reason the view of soul as the form of the body was condemned as heretical in 1277 by Robert Kilwardy, Archbishop of Canterbury, but in the following century when Aristotle had become the prevalent orthodoxy the Council of Vienne (1311-12) decreed the soul as the form of the body to be an article of faith.⁶²¹

Bessarion is careful to distance himself from any Aristotelian trap by adding that 'the intellectual soul is not the activity of body'.⁶²² He does not explain how the intellectual soul could be separate from body but his point was made by the Neo-Platonist commentators and the Scholastics. Philoponus, commenting on Aristotle's image of the

⁶¹⁹ Mioni (1991 143-4) notes the evidence in Bessarion's manuscripts of his deep study of the question of the soul. He annotated a copy of Aristotle's *De Anima* with comments from Alexander of Aphrodisias, Simplicius, Philoponus and Themistius. He also collected works in Latin on the soul by Avveroes, Aquinas and Albertus Magnus.

⁶²⁰ *Videtur quod nihil incorruptibile possit esse forma corporis corruptibilis....Forma corporis non potest esse sine corpore. Si ergo corpus sit corruptibile, sequitur formam corporis corruptibilem esse...Destructo ergo corpore, vel destituitur forma corporis, vel transit ad aliud corpus. Si ergo intellectus est forma corporis, videtur ex necessitate sequi quod intellectus sit corruptibilis (de Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas 32).*

⁶²¹ See Kristeller (1972) 29-30. Aquinas did, in fact, hold the intellectual soul to be the form of the body. As he says: *necesse est dicere quod intellectus, qui est intellectualis operationis principium, sit humani corporis forma. Illud enim quo primo aliquid operatur, est forma eius cui operatio attribuitur....Nihil agit nisi secundum quod est actu: unde quo aliquid est actu, eo agit. Manifestum est autem quod primum quo corpus vivit est anima (S. T. Ia q76 a1).* The soul is united to a body by natural inclination thus completing its nature. The intellectual soul exists *per se* separate from matter, but as a substantial form, it is only part of a substance and does not have complete essence (see *S. T. Ia q76 a1 ad 6* and *Quaestiones de Anima q1 49 ad4-12* and *q14 ad11*). But, as Lagerlund ((2004) 371-372) points out, the problem remains. 'If the soul can exist apart from the body, the union seems to be accidental. The possibility of separation without destruction destroys the essential connection between soul and body.'

⁶²² *Non tamen commune hoc cuiuscumque animae est, siquidem intellectivam animam corporis actum esse nemo diceret (ICP 2.8.5 p.143.19-21).*

steersman (έντελέχεια τοῦ σώματος ἢ ψυχῆ ὡσπερ πλωτῆρ πλοίου *De Anima* 413^a9), considered the soul *qua* actuality inseparable from body in the same way as the steersman *qua* steersman is inseparable from the ship. But the soul as a substance is separable from the body as the steersman *qua* man is separable from his ship. The soul as principle of life is inseparable from body.⁶²³

A second gloss on the text of Plato is Bessarion's comment on the soul's priority over body and that it moves others but is itself unmoved. The aim of the gloss is to demonstrate the transcendence of soul. Bessarion bases his gloss on a text from the *Laws* which he interprets in the light of Proclus. But the arguments of Plato and Proclus had different purposes and drew different conclusions from Bessarion. He draws on a passage from Plato *Laws* 893b1-899d2 where Plato used the notion of the self-moving soul to develop an argument refuting atheism (899b3-d2). Plato starts from the principle that soul is that which moves itself and goes on to argue that souls are gods who govern the universe without themselves being moved. Bessarion uses Plato's text to argue that the soul is the first origin and motion of what is, of what has been and what will be, that it is the cause of all change and movement, and that it is prior to body.⁶²⁴ His wording is almost identical with *Laws* but he adds a sentence from Proclus that 'whatever is efficient and moves other

⁶²³ See Karamanolis (2002) 277-278, Philoponus in *De Anima* 224.12-48 and 246.15-247.11 and also Simplicius in *De Anima* (246.15-247.11). Aquinas also made the point: *separata [anima humana] quidem est secundum virtutem intellectivam, quia virtus intellectiva non est virtus alicuius organi corporalis, sicut virtus visiva est actus oculi: intelligere enim est actus qui non potest exerceri per organum corporale sicut exercetur visio. Sed in materia est, in quantum ipsa anima cuius est haec virtus, est corporis forma, et terminus generationis humanae* (*S. T.* Ia q76 a1 ad1).

⁶²⁴ Compare Bessarion: οὗ δειχθέντος συναποδείκνυται καὶ τὸ τὴν ψυχὴν εἶναι πρώτην γένεσιν καὶ κίνησιν τῶν τε ὄντων καὶ γεγονότων καὶ ἐσομένων, μεταβολῆς καὶ κινήσεως ἀπάσης αἰτίαν ἅπασι δειχθεῖσαν (*ICP* 2.8.6 p.142.23-5) with Plato: εἰ δ' ἐστὶ οὕτως ἔχον, ἄρα ἔτι ποθοῦμεν μὴ ἰκανῶς δεδεῖχθαι ψυχὴν ταῦτόν ὄν καὶ τὴν πρώτην γένεσιν καὶ κίνησιν τῶν τε ὄντων καὶ γεγονότων καὶ ἐσομένων καὶ πάντων αὐτῶν ἐναντίων τοῦτοις, ἐπειδὴ γε ἀνεφάνη μεταβολῆς τε καὶ κινήσεως ἀπάσης αἰτία ἅπασιν; (*Laws* 896a5-b1).

things does so by an incorporeal power'.⁶²⁵ In the *Platonic Theology* (I.14) Proclus recast Plato's argument from the *Laws* to demonstrate the hierarchy of beings emanating from and subservient to the 'One'. He postulated a hierarchy of being based on categories of movement: κινούμενα μόνον (body), κινούμενα καὶ κινουῦντα (qualities, forms-in-matter immanent in bodies), αὐτοκίνητα (intelligent souls which cause movement in the universe and the world) and ἀκίνητα (the Divine intellect first cause of all movement and source of life which is divinised by the One).⁶²⁶ Bessarion uses Proclus' distinction between the incorporeal powers such as qualities and material forms which are divided among bodies and which move others but themselves are moved by others (τὰ κινουῦντα μὲν ἄλλα, κινούμενα δὲ ὑπ' ἄλλων) from the powers such as substance which are separate from all bodies and which are self-subsistent and move themselves (τὴν αὐτοκίνητον οὐσίαν ἐν ἑαυτῇ καὶ οὐκ ἐν ἄλλοις ἰδρυμένην καὶ σωμάτων ἐξηρημένην). The latter power is the source of all bodily movement and is older than all body.⁶²⁷ His point is that body is inert and depends for its movement on participation in a self-mover. The self-mover is immaterial but can move others (i.e. bodies) but is itself unmoved. This being, which is the soul, exists in itself and transcends all body.⁶²⁸ Bessarion took his gloss from Proclus' *Platonic Theology* and uses much the same wording.⁶²⁹ Proclus was arguing the logical

⁶²⁵ *Quidquid enim efficiens movensque aliorum est, id virtute incorporeae essentiae ad efficiendum movendumque inducitur* (ICP 2.8.6 p.143.29-31). See Proclus ἅπαν τὸ ποιητικὸν ἄλλων καὶ κινητικὸν ἀσωμάτω χρώμενον ποιεῖν τε καὶ κινεῖν πέφυκε (*Plat. theol.* I.14 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.61.26-p.62.1).

⁶²⁶ See Hankins (1990) 443-4. See also *Elements of theology* prop. 14: 'All that exists is either moved or unmoved; and if the former, either by itself or by another, that is, either intrinsically or extrinsically: so that everything is unmoved, intrinsically moved, or extrinsically moved' (translation Dodds (1963)) and prop. 20: 'Beyond all bodies is the soul's essence; beyond all souls, the intellective principle; and beyond all intellective substances, the One' (translation Dodds (1963)). See Dodds (1963) 201-2 and 206-7. See also Proclus in *Tim.* I.373.13-18.

⁶²⁷ ICP 2.8.6 p.142.29-36.

⁶²⁸ See *Elements of theology* prop. 20 for similar ideas: πᾶν γὰρ σῶμα κινητὸν ἐστὶν ὑφ' ἑτέρου, κινεῖν δὲ ἑαυτὸ οὐ πέφυκεν, ἀλλὰ ψυχῆς μετουσίᾳ κινεῖται ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ ζῆ διὰ ψυχῆν· καὶ παρούσης μὲν ψυχῆς αὐτοκίνητον πῶς ἐστὶν, ἀπουσίας δὲ ἑτεροκίνητον, ὡς ταύτην ἔχον καθ' αὐτὸ τὴν φύσιν, καὶ ὡς ψυχῆς τὴν αὐτοκίνητον οὐσίαν λαχούσης...ἐπέκεινα ἄρα σωμάτων ἐστίν, ὡς αὐτοκίνητος κατ' οὐσίαν, τῶν κατὰ μέθεξιν αὐτοκινήτων γινομένων.

⁶²⁹ Compare Bessarion: πᾶν γὰρ τὸ ποιητικὸν καὶ κινητικὸν ἄλλων ἀσωμάτω δυνάμει χρώμενον ποιεῖν καὶ κινεῖν πέφυκε. τῶν δ' ἀσωμάτων τὰ μὲν ἐστὶ μεριστὰ περὶ τοῖς σώμασιν, εἴτ' ἐν ποιότησιν εἴτε ἐν εἶδεσιν ἐνύλοις ὑφ' ἑσθηκότα, οἷα εἰσὶ τὰ κινουῦντα μὲν ἄλλα, κινούμενα δὲ ὑπ' ἄλλων, τὰ δ' ἐξηρημένα ἐστὶ τῆς περὶ

necessity of the unmoved and unmoving ‘One’ but Bessarion was drawing on Proclus and Plato to demonstrate the soul’s transcendence. It is, as he says, ‘the principle of all movement and prior to all bodies’.⁶³⁰ What Bessarion has added by this use of Proclus to the analysis of the soul drawn from Plato is that the soul is an actuality, an indivisible life-giving principle and, as such, precedes all body.⁶³¹ Bessarion’s wording τὸ ἐνεργεῖα, οὐ δυνάμει εἶναι and ἀμερῆς οὐσία echoes Aristotle’s distinction between active and passive intellect in *De Anima*.⁶³²

These two glosses are examples of the way in which Bessarion presents a Platonic text and then uses other sources to interpret it in a way that fits his purpose of demonstrating Plato’s conformity with Christian teaching. They demonstrate the debt which he owed to the Neo-Platonists for his understanding of the Platonic text.

At issue for Bessarion and Christian commentators was the relationship between an incorporeal soul and a physical body and the immortality of the soul. This was a difficult problem for medieval philosophy. The soul lay on the boundary between material and immaterial worlds (*ipsa [anima] est in confinio corporalium et separatarum substantiarum constituta*).⁶³³ Bessarion addresses the question by starting from the

τὰ τῶν ὄντων ἔσχατα διαιρέσεως, οἷον δὴ τὴν αὐτοκίνητον οὐσίαν φημὲν ἐν ἑαυτῇ καὶ οὐκ ἐν ἄλλοις ἰδρυμένην καὶ σωμάτων ἐξηρημένην, παρ’ ἧς καὶ τὸ κινεῖσθαι πρώτως τοῖς σώμασιν. ἦν δὴ ψυχὴν ἔφαμεν εἶναι παντὸς σώματος πρεσβυτέραν (*ICP* 2.8.6 p.142.29-36) with Proclus: τῶν δὲ ἀσωμάτων τὰ μὲν ἐστὶ μεριστὰ περὶ τοῖς σώμασιν, τὰ δὲ ἐξηρημένα τῆς τοιαύτης περὶ τὰ τῶν ὄντων ἔσχατα διαιρέσεως. τὰ μὲν οὖν μεριζόμενα περὶ τοὺς ὄγκους τῶν σωμάτων εἴτε ἐν ποιότησιν εἴτε ἐν εἶδεσιν ἐνύλοις ὑφεστηκότα τῶν ὑπ’ ἄλλου μὲν κινουμένων ἄλλα δὲ κινούντων ἐστὶ (*Plat. theol.* I.14 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.62.1-6).

⁶³⁰ πρεσβυτάτην εἶναι πάντων τῶν κινουμένων, ἀρχὴν οὖσαν κινήσεως (*ICP* 2.8.6 p.142.25-6).

⁶³¹ οἷς συναποδείκνυται καὶ τὸ ἐνεργεῖα τε αὐτὴν, οὐ δυνάμει εἶναι, καὶ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν αὐτῆς πλειόνων οὐσῶν ἢ γε ζωτικῆ, ὅτι τε πρὸ παντὸς ἐστὶ σώματος καὶ ἀμερῆς οὐσία (*ICP* 2.8.6 p.142.38-144.1)

⁶³² καὶ οὗτος ὁ νοῦς χωριστὸς καὶ ἀπαθὴς καὶ ἀμιγῆς, τῇ οὐσίᾳ ὡς ἐνεργεῖα. ἀεὶ γὰρ τιμιώτερον τὸ ποιῶν τοῦ πάσχοντος καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς ὕλης (430^a17-23).

⁶³³ Aquinas *Quaestiones De Anima* q1 a1. Aquinas tried within an Aristotelian metaphysics to explain how something material can have an effect on something immaterial: *patet quod immaterialitas alicuius rei est ratio quod sit cognoscitiva; et secundum modum immaterialitatis est modus cognitionis. Unde in II de Anima dicitur quod plantae non cognoscunt propter suam materialitatem. Sensus autem cognoscitivus est, quia receptivus est specierum sine materia: et intellectus magis cognoscitivus, quia magis separatus est a materia*

Timaeus where Plato explained that the Demurge compounded the World Soul from the indivisible and eternal and the divisible and changing ([ἐκ] τῆς τε ταύτου φύσεως καὶ τῆς θατέρου, καὶ κατὰ ταῦτὰ ζυνέστησεν ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ τε ἀμεροῦς αὐτῶν καὶ τοῦ κατὰ τὰ σώματα μεριστοῦ (35a4-6)).⁶³⁴ He argues that, according to the *Timaeus*, both the soul of the cosmos and the individual soul are created by God.⁶³⁵ The soul is superior to the sensible and physical but it is lower than intelligible and immaterial substances; it holds a middle position. It is not divisible like body nor indivisible like intelligibles. It is not generated like sensibles which are created in time and are corruptible; neither is it ungenerated like intelligibles which are everlasting and hold their whole being within themselves.⁶³⁶

Proclus provided a tool for interpreting Plato to explain in what sense the soul can be both generated and ungenerated.⁶³⁷ Bessarion deploys an argument which he drew from

et immixtus, ut dicitur in III de Anima. Unde, cum Deus sit in summo immaterialitatis,... sequitur quod ipse sit in summo cognitionis (S.T. 1a q14 a1). See Lagerlund (2004) 372-

⁶³⁴ Quoted in ICP 2.8.14 p.152.24-26. Dodds (1963) 297 notes that *Timaeus* 35a was ‘the main source for the conception of the soul as the frontier between the two worlds, which gained wide currency from the time of Poseidonius onwards and dominates the Neoplatonic psychology.’

⁶³⁵ Bessarion admitted that it was not easy to find in the *Timaeus* a text that said the individual soul or the world soul were created by God (ICP 2.8.14 p.153.7-9); see note [488488](#) above.

⁶³⁶ ICP 1.8.14 p.153.18-30. Compare: ἅτε τῶν μὲν αἰσθητῶν καὶ ὕλικῶν τούτων, ὧν ἡ διαίρεσις καὶ τὸ θάτερον μεριστὸν οἰκεῖον, πολλῶ τῷ μέτρῳ ὑπερέχουσιν, τῶν δὲ νοητῶν καὶ ἀύλων οὐσιῶν, οἷς τὸ ταῦτὸν καὶ ἀμέριστον, ἀρμόζει ὑφειμένην. τοῦ γὰρ παντὸς ἐκ νοῦ καὶ ψυχῆς καὶ σώματος συμπληρουμένου μέσην τὴν ψυχὴν εἶναι οὔτε, ὡς τὰ σώματα μεριστήν, οὔτε δὲ ἀμερῆ ὡς τὰ νοερά μὴ τὸ ἀπλοῦστατον οὔσαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ πλῆθος τι δυνάμεων ἐν αὐτῇ ἔχουσιν, καὶ οὔτε ὡς τὰ αἰσθητὰ γενητὴν καὶ κατὰ χρόνον γενητὰ ὄντα καὶ φθαρτά, οὔτε ὡς τὰ νοητὰ ἀγένητον, αἰώνια ὄντα καὶ πᾶν ἅμα τὸ εἶναι αὐτῶν ἐμπειριημμένον ἔχοντα (ICP 2.8.14 p.152.26-34) with Proclus: μέσα δ’ οὖν τούτων ἐστὶ τῶν ἄκρων τὸ οὐκ ὄντως ὄν κρείττον μὲν ὄν τοῦ μὴ ὄντος, ὑφειμένον δὲ τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος, τὸ κατ’ οὐσίαν μὲν πῆ ὄν αἰώνιον, τὰς δὲ ἐνεργείας ἐν χρόνῳ ποιούμενον, τὸ ἀμέριστον μὲν κατὰ τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ θειότατον, μεριζόμενον δὲ κατὰ τὴν παντοίαν τῶν λόγων πρόοδον (in *Tim.* II.128.15-20) and αὕτη μέση προήλθε τῶν τε νοητῶν ἀπλῶς καὶ τῶν αἰσθητῶν, τῶν τε αἰεὶ μόνως ὄντων καὶ τῶν ἀπλῶς γενητῶν. τὸ δὲ μέσον αὐτῆς μὴ τοιοῦτον ὑπολάβης, οἷον συναγωγὸν τῶν ἄκρων, ἐξηρημένον τῶν συναγομένων· οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶ τῶν νοητῶν κρείττον, ἀλλὰ πέρας αὐτῶν. μηδ’ αὐτὸ τοιοῦτον, οἷον ὑφειμένον ἀμφοτέρων· ὑπερέχει γὰρ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ὑπ’ αὐτῆς κινουμένων (in *Tim.* II.129.31-130.5).

⁶³⁷ There is some dispute about Plato’s text among scholars. According to Baltzly: ‘Proclus’ commentary is the first source we possess that takes what most people now regard as the proper reading of *Timaeus* 35a1-8 (Baltzly (2009) 27).’ The issue of the relation between the World Soul and the individual soul was much disputed among Platonists. See Baltzly *ibid.* 29-31.

Proclus' commentary on *Timaeus* 35a1-4.⁶³⁸ Proclus was seeking to explain the relationship between νοῦς and individual souls where soul is the middle point harmonizing the intelligible and the material.⁶³⁹ For the Neo-Platonists the soul was an emanation in a hierarchy of emanations from the One. They saw the individual soul as 'a descending succession of forms or as a series of reflections from, or images of, its highest part'.⁶⁴⁰ In the Neo-Platonist concept of cause the cause is like the effect and some property must pass from one to the other but the effect cannot receive all the potencies of its cause.⁶⁴¹ The self-moved is intermediate between what is unmoved and what is moved from outside itself. 'Soul is beyond bodies, as being self-moved in essence, while they by participation come to be self-moved. Soul has a rank inferior to the unmoved principle which is unmoved even in its activity.'⁶⁴² Bessarion attempts from within this Neo-Platonic framework to explain the connection between an immortal and immaterial soul and a corruptible physical body. He says that the soul is ἀγέννητον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον and γενητόν. (*ICP* 2.8.15 p.152 35-6).⁶⁴³ His argument runs:

- The soul is ungenerated in time and in its substance incorruptible; therefore it is eternal although it acts in time.⁶⁴⁴
- It is generated by the fact that it is derived from intelligible causes.⁶⁴⁵

⁶³⁸ *In Tim.* II.122.26-132.3.

⁶³⁹ *In Tim.* II.127.3-5.

⁶⁴⁰ Blumenthal (1976) 68. See for example Plotinus I.1.11, V.9.6.15-19, VI 5.8, Philoponus *De Anima* 195.2ff., 201.22ff., Simplicius *De Anima* 85.18 and Baltzly (2009) 29-31.

⁶⁴¹ See Proclus *Elements of theology* props. 35 and 150. Dodds ((1963) 277) comments: '[This schematism] marks the doctrine of henads as primarily an artificial device for bridging, or concealing, the gulf which separates the One from the world of Forms.' See Gersh (1973) 65.

⁶⁴² Proclus *Elements of theology* props 14 and 20 (translation Dodds (1963)). See also Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.14 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.60.23-62.1 and Opsomer (2000).

⁶⁴³ *ICP* 2.8.15 p.152 35-6.

⁶⁴⁴ Bessarion: ἀγέννητον μὲν κατὰ χρόνον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον τῆ γε οὐσία καὶ πῆ διὰ τοῦτο αἰώνιον, τὰς μὲντοι ἐνεργείας ἐν χρόνῳ ποιουμένην (*ICP* 2.8.15 p.152 35-6). Compare with Proclus: τὸ κατ' οὐσίαν μὲν πῆ ὄν αἰώνιον, τὰς δὲ ἐνεργείας ἐν χρόνῳ ποιούμενον (*in Tim.* II.128.17-19). See also *Elements of theology* prop. 192.

⁶⁴⁵ Bessarion: τῆ γε μὴν αἰτία καὶ τῆ κατ' οὐσίαν ἀπὸ τῶν νοητῶν αἰτίων προόδῳ...γενητήν (*ICP* 2.8.15 p.152 37-8). Compare Proclus: γενητὴ δὲ ὡς πρὸς τὰ νοητὰ...ὑποδεχομένη δὲ τοῖς ἐαυτῆς κόλποις τὰς ἀπὸ τῶν νοητῶν προόδους εἰς αὐτήν (*in Tim.* II.130.21-25). See also *Elements of theology* prop. 193.

- By its nature and because it does not have the whole infinity of being as do intelligibles and eternal, it has infinity always ‘flowing’ into it.⁶⁴⁶

The soul is, therefore, both generated and ungenerated holding a middle position between mind and body.⁶⁴⁷

In developing his argument about the soul Bessarion took two ideas from Proclus; that the soul is a harmony between the intelligible and the material, and that infinity flows into the soul which cannot contain it all at once. According to Proclus the soul holds an intermediate position between the intelligibles and material things. It is not superior to the intelligibles but limits them. It is superior to material things which are moved by it. He described it as a bond between intelligibles and the sensible which brought into harmony pluralities with itself. Being in the middle between intelligibles and material things makes the soul intelligible in respect of things that are generated and itself generated in relation to intelligibles. It is both γενητή and ἀγένητος. In so far as it is ungenerated the soul is eternal but being generated it is also in time.⁶⁴⁸ Proclus’ analysis of soul was lengthy and detailed. Bessarion’s account by comparison is summary but follows Proclus closely, using the

⁶⁴⁶ Bessarion: *ἰδίᾳ δὲ καὶ τῷ μὴ ὅλην ἅμα τὴν τοῦ ὄντος ἀπειρίαν ἔχειν ὡς τὰ νοητὰ καὶ αἰώνια, ἀλλ’ ἐπινάουσιν αὐτὴν δεχέσθαι* (*ICP* 2.8.15 p.152.39-40) and *ἐπειπερ οὐχ ἅμα τὴν ὅλην τοῦ ὄντος ἀπειρίαν δεξασθαι δύναται, ἀλλ’ αὐτὴν δέχεται αὐτὴ ἐπινάουσαν* (p.152.43-p.154.1). Compare Proclus: *πῶς γὰρ ἀγένητον τὸ ὄν ἢ τῷ τὴν ἄπειρον τοῦ εἶναι δύναμιν ὅλην ἅμα παροῦσαν ἔχειν; πῶς δὲ τὸ σῶμα γενητὸν ἢ τῷ αὐτὴ ἐπινάουμένην ἔχειν τὴν ἄπειρον δύναμιν, ὅλην ἅμα δεξασθαι μὴ δυνάμενον;* (*in Tim.* II.131.1-4). See also *Plat. theol.* I.26 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.116.4-17 where Proclus described dependent immortality as *ἀθανασίας ἐπισκευαστῆς*. The phrase occurs in Plato *Statesman* 270a4 (also quoted by Bessarion in *ICP* 2.8.15 p.152.40) where Plato suggested the universe is guided by an extrinsic divine power giving it renewed immortality. Hankins (1990a) 444 believes that Bessarion’s source for this quotation was the passage cited of Proclus’ *Plat. theol.* where Proclus used it in the sense of immortality conveyed from outside. Saffrey and Westerink note that Plato speaks of ‘renewed immortality’ where Proclus speaks of ‘immortality conferred from outside’; see Saffrey and Westerink (1968) p.116 n.2).

⁶⁴⁷ See note [636636](#) above.

⁶⁴⁸ *συνέχουσα τὸν δεσμὸν...αὐτὴ [ψύχη] τῆς νοητῆς οὐσίας καὶ τῆς αἰσθητῆς* (*in Tim.* II.127.4-5). *ἢ τε γὰρ ὑπαρξίς ἔχει μεθ’ ἑαυτῆς τὸ ἡρμοσμένον πλῆθος* (II.126.9-10). *νοητὴ μὲν οὐσα ὡς πρὸς τὰ γενητὰ, γενητὴ δὲ ὡς πρὸς τὰ νοητὰ* (II.130.20-21). *χρόνος οὖν ἅμα καὶ αἰὼν περὶ ψυχὴν, ὡς ἀγένητον αἰὼν, ὡς γενητὸν χρόνος* (II.125.7-8) and see note [636636](#) above. Baltzly notes that the soul as a bond between intelligibles and sensibles is immanent in that which it binds. ‘This is presumably shown by the fact that it is a self mover, and thus motive, in contrast to the intelligibles. Hence it is among the generated things that it binds (Baltzly (2009) 91 n.91)’.

same word as Proclus that the soul ‘harmonizes’ the intelligible and material in itself.⁶⁴⁹

Proclus had provided Bessarion with a way of explaining the duality in soul which is both generated and ungenerated.

The problem was to explain the relationship between νοῦς and the individual soul. Proclus wrote that the soul could not receive the whole infinity of being at once (τοιαύτη γὰρ καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ, τὴν ὅλην ἀπειρίαν τοῦ ὄντος ἅμα μὴ δυναμένη δέξασθαι (*in Tim.* II.124.16-17)).

The problem had been stated by Aristotle in the *Physics* when he says that an unlimited power cannot be contained within a limited magnitude (ὅτι μὲν οὖν οὐκ ἐνδέχεται ἄπειρον εἶναι δύναμιν ἐν πεπερασμένῳ μεγέθει, οὐδ’ ἐν ἀπείρῳ πεπερασμένην, ἐκ τούτων δῆλον (266^b24-6)). Proclus applied the passage from the *Physics* about the body to the soul.⁶⁵⁰ He argues: ‘not being active in relation to all things simultaneously (i.e. limited), it is not the case that it simultaneously possesses all powers and is active with respect to all of them (i.e. it is not unlimited) but it always has a single activity....All things that are active in a temporal sense always receive the power of being active, but they do not receive the entirety of this power at once, and in virtue of this fact these things are generated.’⁶⁵¹ Later he says that body is generated by the infinite power of being flowing into it but it cannot receive the whole all at once.⁶⁵² He goes on to elaborate his point that incorporeal soul in

⁶⁴⁹ See note [636636](#) and [648648](#) above.

⁶⁵⁰ *In Tim.* II.122.28-123.13. Proclus paraphrased Aristotle’s text.

⁶⁵¹ Translation Baltzly (2009). πάσης γὰρ δυνάμεως ἐνέργεια μία μιᾶς. αἰεὶ ἄρα λαμβάνει τὴν τοῦ ἐνεργεῖν αἰεὶ δύναμιν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ αἰεὶ ὡσαύτως ἐνεργεῖ, ἀλλὰ ἄλλοτε ἄλλως. ὥστε συλλήβδην ἀληθές, ὅτι πᾶν τὸ κατὰ χρόνον ἐνεργοῦν δέχεται αἰεὶ τὴν τοῦ ἐνεργεῖν δύναμιν, ἀλλ’ οὐχ ἅμα δέδεκται ὅλην. καὶ ταύτη γένητον ἐστὶν (*in Tim.* II.123.8-13). Compare with Bessarion, who referred to the same passage as Proclus from the *Physics*: αἰεὶ δῆπου λαμβάνων τὴν τοῦ κινεῖσθαι δύναμιν, ἀλλ’ οὐχ ἅμα τὴν ἄπειρον δύναμιν ἔχων, οὕτω καὶ ψυχὴ μεταβατικῶς ἐνεργοῦσα καὶ κατὰ προβολὴν ἄλλων καὶ ἄλλων ἄλλοτε λόγων χρόνου τε μετέχει. πᾶσα γὰρ μεταβατικὴ κίνησις συνεζευγμένον ἔχει τὸν χρόνον καὶ οὐχ ἅμα πᾶσαν τὴν ἄπειρον δύναμιν, ἀφ’ ἧς αἰεὶ ἐνεργεῖ, ἔχει, ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ αὐτὴν δέχεται. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ αἰεὶ ὡσαύτως, ἀλλ’ ἄλλοτε ἄλλως ἐνεργεῖ. ἢ οὖν τοιαύτη ἐστὶ, λέγεται τε καὶ ἐστὶ γενητὴ (*ICP* 2.8.15 p.154.3-9). See also *Elements of theology* prop . 191.

⁶⁵² See note [646646](#) above. Compare with Bessarion: ὡς γὰρ ἐπὶ τοῦ σωματοειδοῦς γενητόν φησὶ [Plato] τὸ αἰεὶ γινόμενον καὶ τὴν ἄπειρον τοῦ εἶναι δύναμιν αἰεὶ δεχόμενον, οὕτω καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν φησὶ γενητὴν, ἐπεὶπερ οὐχ ἅμα τὴν ὅλην τοῦ ὄντος ἀπειρίαν δέξασθαι δύναται, ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ αὐτὴν δέχεται αἰεὶ ἐπινάουσαν (*ICP* 2.8.15 p.152.41-p.154.1).

itself has unlimited power of being and is immortal but in its incorporated parts it is always coming into being until infinity.

Bessarion uses both these arguments and followed Proclus' texts closely in demonstrating the same conclusion as Proclus that the soul is generated.⁶⁵³ He uses a phrase taken from Proclus which was crucial to his argument that the soul is generated because of receiving the infinite power of being flowing into it (ἰδίᾳ δὲ καὶ τῷ μὴ ὅλην ἅμα τὴν τοῦ ὄντος ἀπειρίαν ἔχειν ὡς τὰ νοητὰ καὶ αἰώνια, ἀλλ' ἐπινάουσαν ἀεὶ δέχεσθαι ICP 2.8.15 p.152.38-40).⁶⁵⁴ Bessarion does not explain the meaning of the obscure phrase ἐπινάουσαν ἀεὶ δέχεσθαι. Proclus' *in Parmenidem* gives a clue to the meaning. 'Intellect thinks all Forms as one but Soul sees them all one by one....So division is the peculiar function of Soul, since she lacks the power of thinking all things simultaneously in unity and has been allotted the thinking of them all separately.'⁶⁵⁵ Aquinas made a similar point, explaining how soul participated in the infinite principle of all action.⁶⁵⁶

Bessarion does not make clear in what respect he regarded his interpretation of Plato on the nature of soul as being close to Christian teaching. The context of his comments was Plato's and Aristotle's attribution of soul to heaven and the whole of earth.⁶⁵⁷ He described this view as *crimen*. He admits that the argument of the Platonists that soul was

⁶⁵³ See note [651651](#) above.

⁶⁵⁴ See note [646646](#) above.

⁶⁵⁵ Trans Chlup (2012): ἐκεῖνο μὲν γὰρ ἐν μόνον ἐστὶ καὶ πρὸ νοήσεως· ὁ δὲ νοῦς ὡς ἐν πάντα νοεῖ, ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ καθ' ἐν πάντα ὀρᾷ. ταύτη τοίνυν προσήκει τὸ διαιρεῖν πρώτως, ἥτις τῆς ἐν ἐνὶ καὶ ἀθρόας πάντων ἀπολειπομένη νοήσεως τὴν καθ' ἐν πάντων νόησιν ἔλαχε (*in Parmenidem* 808.11-15). See Chlup (2012) 139-140.

⁶⁵⁶ *Primus actus est universale principium omnium actuum, quia est infinitum....Unde participatur a rebus, non sicut pars, sed secundum diffusionem possessionis ipsius. Potentia autem, cum sit receptiva actus, oportet quod actui proportionetur. Actus vero recepti, qui procedunt a primo actu infinito et sunt quaedam participationes eius, sunt diversi. Unde non potest esse potentia una quae recipiat omnes actus, sicut est unus actus influens omnes actus participatos. Est autem alia potentia receptiva in anima intellectiva....Intellectus autem recipit formas absolutas* (S. T. Ia q75 a5 ad1).

⁶⁵⁷ ICP 2.8.14 p.153.10-14.

ungenerated implied the preexistence of soul, which was contrary to Christian belief.⁶⁵⁸ He was of the opinion that Aristotle also held that the soul was ungenerated.⁶⁵⁹ Nevertheless he thought that Plato was more in conformity with Christianity than Aristotle. If, as Bessarion holds, both Plato and Aristotle believed that the soul was incorruptible and, therefore, ungenerated and if they both held that heaven and earth were ensouled which was contrary to Christian orthodoxy, in what way can Plato's account of the nature of soul be closer to Christianity than Aristotle, as Bessarion claims?⁶⁶⁰ Bessarion does not make it clear at this point. In fact he emphasises the agreement of Plato and Aristotle even to the extent of projecting a view of the transmigration of souls onto Aristotle.⁶⁶¹

The proofs for the immortality of the soul

Bessarion turned from Plato's account of the nature of soul to his proofs of its immortality. He gave an account of four proofs from Plato in varying degrees of detail. A fifth proof can hardly be said to be Plato's; it is more a proof from the Platonists. In this fifth proof Bessarion introduces an argument for the soul's immortality based on its creation by an

⁶⁵⁸ *Quippe de animarum praeexistentia eius opinio a nostra fide prorsus aliena, quamquam a ceteris gentilibus atque ipso Aristotele teneri oporteat.* (ICP 2.8.16 p.155.18-20). See Hankins (1990a) 257-259 and (2004) II 428. According to Hankins (1990a p.258): 'What Plato had meant [according to Bessarion] to teach by this doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul was the soul's ontological dependence on a realm of intelligible being. From a temporal mode of consciousness, the soul appeared to be created in time; in an eternal mode of consciousness, it was eternally created.' See Bessarion: *nisi divinitus animae quoque in tempore procreentur, praeesse quod immortale permaneat, ostendatur* (ICP 2.8.8 p.147.15-16).

⁶⁵⁹ *Incorruptibilem autem mentem hominis esse Aristoteles existimat; malo enim ita de eo sentire quam eos sequi, qui contrarium de illo sentiunt et eum affirmant mortalem animam opinatum fuisse, quamquam illi sunt partim gentiles, partim nostrae religionis viri* (ICP 2.8.16 p.155.21-25). He also referred (p.155.27-29) to *de Generatione Animalium* (736^b27-29) where Aristotle argued that reason enters the body from outside and it is divine because it has nothing in common with physical body. He was contrasting his interpretation with Averroes and Alexander of Aphrodisias and their followers; see ICP 3.22.5 p.371.9-14. He quoted the early Dominican Thomist, Thomas Anglicus: *'Arbitror Aristotelem et Averroem eiusdem fuisse opinionis...eam sententiam Aristotelis esse, ut intellectus incorruptibilis quidem sit* (ICP 3.22.8 p.375.10-12).'

⁶⁶⁰ ICP 2.8.16 p.155.15-18. He was repeating what he had already said in ICP 2.8.2 p.141.15-19.

⁶⁶¹ See pages 178-9 and note [684684](#) below. For the references to the congruence of Plato and Aristotle in this chapter see ICP 2.8.7 p.145.1-8, 8 p.147.20-26, 11 p.151.4-5, 14 p.153.12-13, 15 p.155.4-5, 16 p.155.28, 17 p.157.9-10, and 19 p.159.4-6.

unmoved mover.⁶⁶² His argument is that the soul is produced by an unmoved cause; but whatever comes from an unmoved cause has an unchangeable essence; therefore its substance is immortal. It is the same argument which he used to show that matter is eternal and ungenerated. The argument is a Proclan elaboration of the *Timaeus*. Bessarion attributes to Plato the statement that the soul is produced by an immovable cause.⁶⁶³ In support of this he quotes words of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* (41c2-3): δι' ἐμοῦ δὲ ταῦτα γεγνημένα καὶ βίου μετασχόντα θεοῖς ἰσάζοιτο. The Demiurge was addressing the lesser gods (41a7-d3) and instructing them to create mortals and other creatures. The phrase quoted by Bessarion is conditional: 'If I (the Demiurge) were to give mortals birth they would be equal to gods.' Later in the same passage the Demiurge says that he would hand over to these lesser gods the immortal and divine part (41c6-d1). In other words he would give them the immortal element of the human soul. Bessarion treats the Demiurge as the unmoved mover. He attributed to Plato a proposition which is not in Plato but drawn from Proclus that everything proceeding from an unmoved cause has an unchanging essence (πᾶν γὰρ τὸ ἀπ' ἀκινήτου αἰτίου προσεχῶς παραγενόμενον ἀμετάβλητον ἔχειν τὴν ὑπαρξιν αὐτὸς καὶ οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν τίθενται).⁶⁶⁴ There is nothing in the *Timaeus* about the maker of the world being unmoved but Bessarion has drawn this from proposition seventy six of Proclus' *Elements of theology*.⁶⁶⁵ Proclus' argument was that if the maker is unmoved, he is unchanged and creates from his very being; as an unmoved cause he must always be in the act of causing, otherwise he would move or change, so he is a cause of something eternal.⁶⁶⁶ So Bessarion was using Proclus as an interpretative tool for a passage

⁶⁶² ICP 2.8.12 p.151.6-15.

⁶⁶³ *Cum animam Plato ad immobilis causa produci affirmet* (ICP 2.8.12 p.151.6). He claimed that the *Timaeus* frequently acknowledged that the soul is created by God but admitted a precise text was hard to find. See note [488488](#) above

⁶⁶⁴ ICP 2.8.12 p150.19-21. The phrase οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν does not occur in the Latin text. The Latin text tends not to refer to the *Platonici* but focuses exclusively on Plato (see note [878878](#) below).

⁶⁶⁵ See page 134 and note [501501](#) above.

⁶⁶⁶ See Lang and Macro (2001) 51 and n.2 on Proclus' *De aeternitate mundi* fourth argument.

in Plato presented in the form of myth. He can be seen giving an implicit response to Trebizond's criticism of Plato that he spoke of the immortality of the soul in stories.

Bessarion begins his proofs of the soul's immortality from Plato with the proof from the *Phaedrus* (245c5-246a2) where, according to him, Plato proves the soul to be ungenerated and incorruptible from its power of self-movement and its being the source of movement.⁶⁶⁷ Plato's argument is that 'what is self-moving is always moving; as the source of all that comes into existence in the universe, what is self-moving neither comes into existence nor ceases to exist but always exists; the self-moving is the soul; therefore since the self-moving is always moving and the always moving always exists, the soul always exists.'⁶⁶⁸ Bessarion quotes the text of Plato with slight adaptations.⁶⁶⁹ In his rendering of Plato's argument he used the Aristotelian ἀφθαρτον rather than Plato's ἀδιάφθορον noting that in Aristotle ἀφθαρτον necessarily followed from ἀγένητον.⁶⁷⁰ It is difficult to see why he made this point unless he was again demonstrating the consistency between Plato and Aristotle. He says that both Plato and Aristotle hold the pre-existence of

⁶⁶⁷ *Ex ipso illius per se motu et ex principio motus, quod illi tribuit, argumenta deducens, quibus et ingeneratum eum et incorruptibilem esse declarat* (ICP 2.8.8 p.145.33-p.147.1).

⁶⁶⁸ See Yunis (2011) 135-6. Plotinus used the proof from self movement in IV.7. 9. The proof was regarded as robust by the Scholastics. Albertus Magnus treated it at length in his *de Natura et Origine Animae* (tract II cap. 1). He concluded: *sic autem correctis dictis Platonis probatio sua est necessaria et inevitabiliter concludit animam rationalem movere et manere post mortem nec perire eam pereunte corpore*. Bessarion referred to Albertus' text in ICP 3.22.1. The *Phaedrus* argument was well known in the West. Cicero included a translation of Plato's argument in the *Somnium Scipionis* (VI.31-2). Macrobius quoted Cicero's translation and defended Plato's argument in his *Commentarium in Somnium Scipionis* (I chapters 13-16). Chalcidius, who may have been Albertus' source, also quoted the *Phaedrus* in *in Timaeum* LVII.

⁶⁶⁹ Compare Bessarion: ἡ ψυχὴ γὰρ φησὶν αὐτοκίνητος. οἷα δὲ κινήσει προεὶρηται. τὸ δὲ τοιοῦτον ἀεὶκίνητον. τὸ γὰρ αἰεὶ παρὸν ἑαυτῷ καὶ μηδέποτε ἀπολειπόμενον αἰεὶ τοιοῦτον ἐστὶ. τοιοῦτον δὲ ὄν εἴη ἂν καὶ ἀθάνατον. πῶς γὰρ ἂν αἰεὶ κινεῖτο θνητὸν ὄν; τὸ γὰρ θανὸν καὶ ἀκίνητον εἶναι ἀνάγκη (ICP 2.8.8 p.144.32-p.146.4) and εἰ ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτοκίνητος, ἀνάγκη αὐτὴν ἀρχὴν εἶναι καὶ πηγὴν πάσης κινήσεως (ICP 2.8.8 p.146.4-5) with *Phaedrus*: 245c5-d1: ψυχὴ πᾶσα ἀθάνατος. τὸ γὰρ ἀεὶκίνητον ἀθάνατον....μόνον δὲ τὸ αὐτὸ κινεῖν, ἅτε οὐκ ἀπολείπον ἑαυτό, οὔποτε λήγει κινούμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὅσα κινεῖται τοῦτο πηγὴ καὶ ἀρχὴ κινήσεως. Compare Bessarion: ἀρχὴ δὲ κινήσεως, ὄν καὶ ἀγένητον ἂν εἴη. τὸ γὰρ γενητὸν οὐκ ἂν εἴη ἀρχὴ (p.146.6-7) with *Phaedrus* 245d1-3: ἐξ ἀρχῆς γὰρ ἀνάγκη πάν τὸ γινόμενον γίνεσθαι, αὐτὴν δὲ μηδ' ἐξ ἐνός. εἰ γὰρ ἔκ του ἀρχῆς γίγνοιτο, οὐκ ἂν ἔτι ἀρχὴ γίγνοιτο. Compare Bessarion: ἀγένητον δὲ ὄν εἴη ἂν ἐξ ἀνάγκης καὶ ἀφθαρτον, εἴ γε τὸ ἀγένητον ἀντιστρέφει τῷ ἀφθάρτῳ, ἧ καὶ Ἀριστοτέλει δοκεῖ (p.146.7-9) with *Phaedrus* 245d3-4: ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἀγένητόν ἐστιν, καὶ ἀδιάφθορον αὐτὸ ἀνάγκη εἶναι.

⁶⁷⁰ The reference is to Aristotle *Physics* 203^b3-15 ἐτι δε καὶ ἀγένητον καὶ ἀφθαρτον ὡς ἀρχὴ τις οὔσα where Aristotle argued that what is unlimited cannot depend on a principle but is itself a principle and as a principle is ungenerated and incorruptible.

souls *ex parte ante*.⁶⁷¹ He recognises that he had a problem with Plato's argument; it led as a consequence to the transmigration of souls.⁶⁷² The alternative was to accept the doctrines of Alexander of Aphrodisias and of the Averroists on the unicity of the intellect which he describes as *nefarium illud*.⁶⁷³

According to Alexander the soul was not immortal.⁶⁷⁴ The soul was inseparable from body. It was a form, the ἐντελέχεια or τελειότης of the body, and died with the body.⁶⁷⁵ It was the 'material intellect'. But what he called the 'productive intellect' was not mixed with any matter and was imperishable.⁶⁷⁶ This active intellect gave the material intellect a disposition or dispositional intellect which enabled it to separate forms from matter; it was 'from outside' and was a non-human intellect. Alexander's source was Aristotle's *de Generatione Animalium*.⁶⁷⁷

Whereas Alexander held that the passive intellect was a disposition, Averroes in his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* held that there is a single active and passive intellect separate from the individual soul that is one in all men.⁶⁷⁸ A problem with this psychology

⁶⁷¹ ICP 2.8.16 p.155.28.

⁶⁷² *Nam qui mundum ingenitum atque incorruptibilem et nihil actu infinitum ponit, hunc Platonis sententiam probare de transitione animarum necess est, si animam hominis immortalem fatetur* (ICP 2.8.8 p.147.18-20).

⁶⁷³ *Nec Aristotelem hoc negaturum fuisse existimo, modo, quod equidem reor, immortalem esse hominis animam censuerit, quod nisi hunc teneat animationis modum, nefarium illud amplectetur, necesse est, quem eius expositores, qui praesertim doctores habiti sunt, Alexander Aphrodisiensis Graecus et Averroes Arabs ei manifeste tribuerint, ut unus communisque sit omnium hominum intellectus* (ICP 2.8.8.p.147.20-26). For the dominance of Alexander and Averroes in the second half of the fifteenth century see note ~~288288~~ above.

⁶⁷⁴ Alexander of Aphrodisias was a commentator on Aristotle probably living in Athens at the end of the second and early third century A.D. His work *De Anima* was influential in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (see Kristeller (1972) 30). The *Mantissa* is sometimes described as the second book of *De Anima* and sometimes the *Supplement*. A partial Latin translation of *De Anima* (entitled *De Intellectu*) had been available from the twelfth century (see Kristeller, P. ed. (1960-) I.80-1).

⁶⁷⁵ Alexander *De Anima* 17.9-15; 21.23-24 and Caston ed. (2012) 7-8.

⁶⁷⁶ *De Anima* 88.23-24, 89.9-19. See Sorabji (2004) I.104-105 and Caston ed. (2012) 108 n.200.

⁶⁷⁷ Alexander *Mantissa* 107. 28-34 and 108.19-24. See Sorabji (2004) I.104. Aristotle *de Generatione Animalium*: λείπεται δὴ τὸν νοῦν μόνον θύραθεν ἐπεισιέναι καὶ θεῖον εἶναι μόνον· οὐθὲν γὰρ αὐτοῦ τῆ ἐνεργείᾳ κοινωνεῖ σωματικὴ ἐνεργεία (736^b28-29).

⁶⁷⁸ *Commentarium magnum de Anima* III.5. Averroes' work was translated into Latin from Arabic by Calo Calonymos by 1328 (See Zedler ed. (1961) 18-24). Besides his commentaries on Aristotle which were immensely influential in the Middle Ages through to the sixteenth century, Averroes wrote a polemical work

for the Scholastics was that it put in doubt the immortality of the individual soul.

Averroists denied that the immortality of the soul was philosophically demonstrable; they denied creation and maintained a distinction between philosophical discourse and the tenets of faith.⁶⁷⁹ Aquinas had written a treatise, *de Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas*, against Averroes' theory, but at the time of Bessarion Avveroism had supporters in Italy such as Nicoletto Vernia (c.1420-1499) and Agostino Nifo (c.1473-1538 or 1545);⁶⁸⁰ John Argyropoulos, the Aristotelian philosopher, lectured in Florence on Aristotle's *De Anima* and in support of Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle on the unicity of the intellect.⁶⁸¹

Bessarion says that, if you argue that the cosmos is eternal, ungenerated and incorruptible but being is finite as Aristotle did in *Physics* 3, you must necessarily either hold knowledge is memory from a pre-existence and that there are many transmigrations of the soul (the position of Plato which Bessarion attributes to Aristotle also) or else, if you deny the immortality of the soul, you are driven to the opinions of Alexander of Aphrodisias or Averroes.⁶⁸² By his ὡσπερ ἡμεῖς βουλόμεθα τὸν Ἀριστοτέλην λέγειν contrasted with ὡς Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τῷ Ἀφροδισιεῖ καὶ Ἀβερὸν τῷ Ἄραβι τοῖς δοκοῦσι κλεινότεροις τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους ἐξηγητῶν Bessarion signals that his own interpretation of Aristotle *Physics*

which goes under the title of its Latin translation, *Destructio Destructionum Philosophiae Algazelis*, in which he presented his own thinking in the form of a dialogue with the orthodox Muslim theologian Algazel.

⁶⁷⁹ 'But since to many Christians it looked as though Averroes was teaching that there is one agent intellect and possible intellect for all men, that the world is and must be eternal, and that God has no knowledge of singulars, philosophy itself seemed to be demanding a denial of immortality, creation and providence. Some, the "Latin Averroists", tried to remain both good philosophers and good Christians by saying that although these were necessary conclusions of the human reason, one could refrain from asserting that they were true (Zedler ed. (1961) p.19).' See Gilson (1955) pp.387-9 and (1966) pp.37-66.

⁶⁸⁰ See Blum (2007) 218 and 225.

⁶⁸¹ See Monfasani (1993b).

⁶⁸² The argument is clearer in the Greek text than in the Latin: οἱ γὰρ δοξάζοντες τὸν κόσμον ἀίδιον, ἀγένητόν, τε καὶ ἄφθαρτον, μηδὲν τε ἐνεργεῖα ἄπειρον εἶναι, ὡς ἐν τῷ τρίτῳ τῶν Φυσικῶν ἄριστα δέικνυται, ἀναγκαίως ἢ καὶ τὴν μάθησιν ἀνάμνησιν εἶναι καὶ πλείους μεταμφιεχνύσεις σωματίων δέξονται τὴν ψυχὴν ἀθάνατον τιθέμενοι, ὡσπερ ἡμεῖς βουλόμεθα τὸν Ἀριστοτέλην λέγειν, ἢ ἐκεῖνα ἀρνούμενοι καὶ τὴν ψυχῆς ἀθανασίαν συναπαρνήσονται καὶ εἰς μείζον αὐτοῖς τε Ἑλληνισι κριταῖς ἄτοπον περιπεσοῦνται, τὰ περὶ ἀθανασίας εἰρημένα ἐν τοῖς περὶ Ψυχῆς Ἀριστοτέλει κοινῶ τινι νῶ, ὡς Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τῷ Ἀφροδισιεῖ καὶ Ἀβερὸν τῷ Ἄραβι τοῖς δοκοῦσι κλεινότεροις τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους ἐξηγητῶν κακῶς ἐδοξεν, ἀπονεμοῦσι (*ICP* 2.8.8 p.146.16-24). The reference to memory links the point to the proof of the soul's immortality from memory from the *Phaedo* (72e1-77e2).

3 is different from that of the distinguished Aristotelian commentators Alexander and Averroes.⁶⁸³ His Greek makes it clear that he was projecting an opinion onto Aristotle; in the Latin text he claims that Aristotle ‘would have accepted’ the transmigration of souls as a logical necessity since he held the immortality of the soul.⁶⁸⁴

In *Physics* 3 (205^b24-206^a8) Aristotle explored the nature of ‘unlimited’ or ‘infinite’ and concluded that an unlimited body cannot exist. Bessarion gives a fuller account of his argument in book three (*ICP* 3.22.7-8). The later passage illuminates the condensed argument in *ICP* 2.8.8. In *ICP* 3.22.7 he refers to Aquinas’ view that, contrary to the view of Avicenna, an infinite number of beings *actu* is impossible.⁶⁸⁵ He also quotes Aquinas to the effect that some held that the soul died with the body; others that there remained a unique soul among many; others posited a circulation of souls so that souls having been separated from the body returned after a period to [another] body.⁶⁸⁶ Bessarion’s argument must, therefore, be: (a) if the world is eternal and the soul immortal, there will either be an infinite number of souls or a finite number that are continuously recycled (b) Aristotle rejected the possibility of an infinite number of limited bodies, (c) therefore there cannot be an infinite number of immortal souls *in actu*, (d) therefore there must be a finite number of immortal souls which transmigrate from body to body (e) *or* there is one common

⁶⁸³ Bessarion was conscious that his interpretation of Aristotle was different not just from the Greek commentators but also from certain Christian commentators as he made clear in *ICP* 2.8.16 p.155.21-25. See note [659659](#) above.

⁶⁸⁴ *Nec Aristotelem hoc negaturum fuisse existimo, modo, quod quidem reor, immortalem esse hominis animam censuerit* (*ICP* 2.8.8 p.147.20-1).

⁶⁸⁵ *Respondeat igitur adversarius, si potest, divo Thomae improbanti rationem illorum, qui cum mundum aeternam statuunt, animas esse actu infinitas absurdum non putent, et iudicanti fieri non posse, ne aut infinitum sit actu contra naturae rationem aut per circuitiorem animarum agent aut una omnibus anima sit aut una cum corpore intreat omnibus* (*ICP* 3.22.7 p.373.16-21). See *S. T.* Ia q7 a4.

⁶⁸⁶ *Quidam vero dicunt animam corrumpi cum corpore. Quidam vero quod ex omnibus animabus remanet una tantum. Alii vero posuerunt propter hoc circuitum animarum; ut scilicet animae separatae a corporibus, post determinata temporum curricula, iterum redirent ad corpora* (*S. T.* Ia q46 a2 ad8).

intellect for all or the soul perishes with the body.⁶⁸⁷ Bessarion's phrase '*nec Aristotelem hoc negaturum fuisse existimo* (ICP 2.8.8 p.147.20-1)' suggests that because Aristotle, according to Bessarion's interpretation, held the soul to be incorruptible (see note [659659](#) above) he must have agreed with Plato on the transmigration of souls otherwise he would be driven to an Avveroistic position of which Bessarion denies, by implication, the possibility.⁶⁸⁸

Bessarion does not engage in reasoned response to the theories of Alexander and Averroes but dismisses them in accordance with received Catholic orthodoxy. While he acknowledges the strength of the philosophical arguments for the eternity of the soul *ex parte ante* he dismisses them on the grounds that they were contrary to the teaching of faith.⁶⁸⁹ He dismisses the possibility of the unicity of intellect without any other argument than that it is *nefarium* (ICP 2.8.8 p.147.23). But the problem of Plato's teaching on the transmigration of souls even into animals remained. This was a critical matter for the reception of Plato at the time. Augustine, Aquinas and other Scholastics condemned the doctrine; Trebizond, Dominico da Fiandria, Savonarola used it as an example of Plato's

⁶⁸⁷ In the next century the Italian Aristotelian scholar, Francesco Vimercato (1512-1571), wrote: *Statuit enim Aristoteles mundum parte ante, et parte post, perpetuum, quomobrem hactenus infiniti homines extiterunt, quorum intellectus si plures fuerint, et illi quidem immortales ut Aristoteles credit, nunc actu infiniti ut sint, necesse est. Hoc argumentum quod Dominus Thomas putavit nec Aristoteli, nec Commentatori fuisse cognitum, multos ex modernis ad hanc unitatem ex Aristotelis sententia tuendam traxit, inter alios vero est Bessarion Cardinalis (Commentarii in tertium librum Aristotelis de anima (1565 Venice) p.48 cited in del Soldato (2010) 333).*

⁶⁸⁸ See Hankins (1990a) 257-9 for an analysis of the differences between Plato and Aristotle on the eternity of the soul and how Plato escaped from an Averroist position. Although Bessarion rejected out of hand the Averroistic position on the unicity of the intellect he clearly regarded Averroes as an authoritative interpreter of Aristotle. He quoted or cited him frequently in book three either as agreeing with Aristotle or as interpreting Aristotle contrary to Trebizond's interpretations. This demonstrates how significant Averroes was regarded in the fifteenth century and probably owes much to the influence of Gatti (see page 62 and note [237237](#) above). The one substantial point on which Bessarion parts company with Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle is over the unicity of the intellect. He did not argue the point but simply rejected Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle *De Anima* 430^a17-25 (see ICP 3.22.5).

⁶⁸⁹ ICP 2.8.8 p.147.26-28; see note [251251](#) above. Aquinas in *S. T.* Ia q46 a3 argued: *dicendum quod mundum non semper fuisse, sola fide tenetur, et demonstrative probari non potest.*

incompatibility with Christianity.⁶⁹⁰ Bessarion's defence is that when Plato talked of human souls passing into animals and other such punishments he was using figurative language as a way to deter people from wickedness and should not be interpreted literally.⁶⁹¹ He quotes from Timaeus Locrus who said that it is often necessary to coerce souls by fiction if they will not submit to the truth and he gave as examples accounts of unusual punishments.⁶⁹² Bessarion cites images (*ignes Tartareos, Pyriphlegontas, Cocytos, Acherontas* ICP 2.8.23 p.163.34-5) from the myth at the end of the *Phaedo* (114a) as examples of Plato's figurative language.

The next set of arguments which Bessarion presents was drawn from the *Phaedo* to demonstrate that the soul remains after the death of the body.⁶⁹³ Out of the four proofs in the *Phaedo* he does not mention the cyclical argument (69e5-72d10) or the argument from recollection (72e1-78b3) presumably because they were predicated on the idea of the pre-existence of souls as is suggested in Bessarion's text.⁶⁹⁴

⁶⁹⁰ Augustine C. D. X.30, Aquinas in *Sent.* II.19.1.1, C. G. II cap.83. See Hankins (1990a) 358-9 and (2004) II 428.

⁶⁹¹ *De beluarum autem corporibus reliquis huiusmodi non modo a Platone, sed etiam a Timaeo deterrendi causa vulgo proditum fuit, ut homines poenae formidine a vitiis retraherentur....Atqui adversarius, qui plane omnia pervertit, beluas dicit apud Platonem humana anima formari. Quod, etiamsi animam hominis beluinum corpus ingredi Plato concederet, non tamen ita intellegendum esset, ut adversarius sentit* (ICP 2.8.23 p.163.5-8 and 23-26).

⁶⁹² ὡς γὰρ τὰ σώματα νοσώδεσί ποκα ὑγιάζομενες, αἱ κα μὴ εἴκη τοῖς ὑγεινοτάτοις, οὕτω τὰς ψυχὰς ἀνείργομες ψευδέσι λόγοις, εἴ κα μὴ ἄγεται ἀλαθέσιν. λέγοντο δ' ἀναγκαίως καὶ τιμωρίαί ξένα κ.τ.λ. (*De Natura Mundi et Anima* 104d ed. Marg p.150). Compare what Bessarion said later: *ad haec cum Plato et sectae eius aemuli nihil fere in parte hac a nostra religione et fide catholica discrepantes, quem ad modum praemia aeterna et veram felicitatem recte agentibus statuerunt, ita etiam male viventibus non leves poenas et corporis cruciatus paratos censuerint, anima vero incorporea atque immaterialis pati a corpore immediate non possit, itaque nec poenas ullas sentire nec sentiendo turbari, haud ab re corpus istud quamvis subtile atque aetherium corpus, tamen ei perpetuo univertunt, in quo puniri pro meritis possent* (ICP 3.22.3 p.369.4-11).

⁶⁹³ Bruni's first Platonic translation in 1405 was the *Phaedo*. Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.12) had said that there was no more eloquent defence of human immortality than Plato's book 'On the Soul'. Bruni drew attention to this fact in his dedicatory preface to Innocent VII saying: 'it will bring no small increase in true faith [to Christians] if they see that the most subtle and wise of pagan philosophers held the same belief about the soul as we hold.' He referred to the belief, which he discounted, that Plato had a Hebrew source for his doctrines: *minime equidem admiror fuisse iam nonnullos, qui opinarentur Hebraeorum libros huic philosopho non fuisse incognitos*. See Baron (1928) 4, Hankins (1990a) 41 and 50 n.45.

⁶⁹⁴ *In Phaedone autem, cum duplex quaestio sit: una, utrum anima corpus antecedit, altera, an post corpus permaneat, prima dubitatio ex iis manifesta fit, quae ante dicta sunt, et satis quidem, quatenus ad nostrum*

He gives only a cursory account of the proof from affinity (78b4-84b7) which Plato offered as a proof that the soul lives on after death.⁶⁹⁵ Plato's argument turns on drawing analogies between unchanging essences and the soul and a parallel between the rule of the gods and the rule of the soul over the body. From the analogies he drew the conclusion that the soul was indissoluble or at least nearly so (ψυχῆ δὲ [προσῆκει] αὖ τὸ παράπαν ἀδιάλυτον εἶναι ἢ ἐγγύς τι τούτου (80b10-11)). In fact Bessarion reports no more than a summary of Plato's argument that the soul's invisibility (ἀόρατος), its intellectual nature (διανοητική) and its control over the body (τὸ τοῦ σώματος ἄρχειν) shows that it is closer to essence than to generation and demonstrates its immortality (καὶ μὴν καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς οὐσίαν μᾶλλον ἢ γένεσιν ὁμοιώσεως ἄριστα τὴν ἀθανασίαν αὐτῆς ἀποδείκνυσι) and the conclusion that it is indissoluble (ἀδιάλυτον εἶναι καὶ πολυχρονιωτέραν τοῦ σώματος) (ICP 2.8.11 p.150.2-12). Plato's argument which is drawn from analogy between the soul and pure essence is not conclusive, as Socrates' interlocutors Simmias and Cebes point out (85c1-88b8). As Bostock observes, even if one accepts the force of analogy, all that the argument demonstrated is that the soul is invisible, that it is at rest when contemplating forms (but not at other times) and that it is in its 'nature' to rule the body. It does not follow from this that it is indissoluble.⁶⁹⁶ The argument was nevertheless important in

hoc de Platone institutum pertinet, ut nisi divinitus animae quoque in tempore procreentur, praesesse quod immortale permaneat, ostendatur, satis etiam ad homines illos gentiles, apud quos Plato de animarum immortalitate disserebat (ICP 2.8.8 p.147.12-18).

⁶⁹⁵ ICP 2.8.11.p.149.37-151.5. In his Greek text but not in the Latin Bessarion incorporated material from *Phaedo* 80c2-81a11. Plato argued that we can see bodies decaying, even those corpses which last a long time if they are in good condition or embalmed according to the method of the Egyptians. If this is true of the body, the soul must last much longer than the body, particularly the virtuous soul which enjoys happiness. Bessarion makes the same points: πολλῶ μᾶλλον τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ μάλιστα καθαρὰν ἐξιοῦσαν κηλίδων μετὰ τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἐπιδιαιμένειν φθορὰν εἰς τὸ θεῖον τε καὶ ἀθάνατον καὶ φρόνιμον ἀπαλλάττεσθαι. οἷ ἀφικομένη αὐτῇ ὑπάρχειν εὐδαίμονι εἶναι (p.150.15-17). This is more a pious gloss than a philosophical argument and perhaps for this reason was omitted from the Latin text.

⁶⁹⁶ See Bostock (1986) 116-21.

underlying the superiority of the moral self.⁶⁹⁷ Bessarion adds that Aristotle imitated this passage of Plato in the second book of *De Anima*.⁶⁹⁸ It is not clear what Bessarion had in mind with this general reference to the *De Anima* and this comment does not appear in the Greek text. There is nothing in the *De Anima* to compare with Plato's argument from affinity. Aristotle set out to define soul and he did so by drawing a number of distinctions which would justify Bessarion's comment *per divisionem perquirat atque definit*. The comment may have been included in the Latin text without any clear reference to impress on Latin readers the convergence of Plato and Aristotle.⁶⁹⁹

He gives a fuller account of the argument from opposites in the *Phaedo* (102a11-107b10).⁷⁰⁰ The essence of Plato's argument is that the forms do not admit their opposites. There are some things like odd numbers where the link between the object and its idea (number and the idea of oddness) is such that an odd number can never admit evenness and stay itself. In the same way the cause of life is soul and soul will never admit its opposite which is death. Bessarion summarises the argument. He says that whatever participates in forms cannot at the same time receive the form of the opposite.⁷⁰¹ So something cannot be both hot and cold, equal and unequal; the soul brings life to the body

⁶⁹⁷ Proclus turns the argument round in *Plat. theol.* VI.11 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.54.16-p.55.5 arguing from the similitude to the existence of the source: εἰ δὴ κατ' οὐσίαν αὐτὴν ἔλαχον, ἀνάγκη δὴπου καὶ τὸ ὁμοιοῦν αὐτὰς ἐν θεοῖς εἶναι πρῶτως.

⁶⁹⁸ *Quem locum Aristoteles imitatus secundo libro De Anima, quid anima sit, per divisionem perquirat atque definit* (ICP 2.8.11 p.151.4-5).

⁶⁹⁹ See page 164 and note [618618](#) above for Bessarion's use of Aristotle's *De Anima*.

⁷⁰⁰ ICP 2.8.9-10. Plato's argument was known and regarded as strong in the tradition. Aquinas uses it without referring to Plato in *S. T.* Ia q.75 a.6 and in *C. G.* II cap 79 1606.

⁷⁰¹ Compare Bessarion: καὶ ὡς μὲν τῶν εἰδῶν οὐδὲν οὐδεποτ' ἂν τοῦ ἐναντίου μετάσχοι...συμπεραίνει οὐ μόνον τὰ ἐναντία οὐχ ὑπομένειν ἐπίοντα ἄλληλα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅσα οὐκ ὄντα ἀλλήλοις ἐναντία ἔχει ἀεὶ τὰναντία, οὐδὲ ταῦτα δέχεσθαι τὴν ἐναντίαν τῇ ἐν αὐτοῖς οὕση ἰδέαν (ICP 2.8.9 p.146.34-p.148.7) with Plato: αὐτὸ τὸ ἐναντίον ἑαυτῷ ἐναντίον οὐκ ἂν ποτε γένοιτο (103b4-5) and ἀλλ' ὄρα δὴ εἰ οὕτως ὀρίζη, μὴ μόνον τὸ ἐναντίον τὸ ἐναντίον μὴ δέχεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκεῖνο, ὃ ἂν ἐπιφέρη τι ἐναντίον ἐκείνω, ἐφ' ὅτι ἂν αὐτὸ ἦ, αὐτὸ τὸ ἐπιφέρον τὴν τοῦ ἐπιφερομένου ἐνανιότητα μηδέποτε δέξασθαι (105a1-5).

and must, therefore, be alive itself and cannot admit death which is the opposite of life.⁷⁰² Plato draws a distinction (103e2-104a5) between an idea which always has the same name and something that as long as it exists has the form of the idea. He gives as an example the idea of ‘odd’ which is always odd and the number three which as long as it is the number three participates in ‘oddness’ and can be called ‘odd’. Bessarion applies the distinction to ‘soul’ which, he says, may be considered either as a form or an idea or pure life which admits no contrary to itself or as substance invested with life as fire is invested with heat; the example is from the *Phaedo* (105b8-106c2). Plato’s argument is valid whichever way you take soul because the simple idea admits no contrary to itself and those which participate in the idea admit no contrary.⁷⁰³

Bessarion restates Plato’s argument in the form of three different syllogisms although in the *Phaedo* it is developed in Plato’s usual dialogic form as a dialogue between Socrates and Cebes. The syllogisms are:

1. *Formas, quae ita applicantur subjecto, ut nunquam illi contrarium afferant, semper easdem manere necesse est;*
Atqui anima ita corpori applicatur, ut vitae, qua corpus afficit, contrarium, hoc est mortem, nunquam afferat;
Animam igitur semper vitam semperque vitae nunquam mortis participem oportet.
2. *Quidquid alicui rei aliquid affert, ipsam, cui affert, rem praecedens, contrarii eius, quod affert, impatiens est;*

⁷⁰² Compare Bessarion: ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ οὕτως ἐπιφέρει ζῶν τῷ σώματι, ὡς μηδέποτε αὐτῷ τὸναντίον θάνατον ἐπιφέρειν (*ICP* 2.8.10 p.148.25-6) with Plato: ἡ ψυχὴ ἄρα ὅτι ἂν αὐτὴ κατὰσχη, ἀεὶ ἦκει ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνο φέρουσα ζῶν;....οὐκοῦν ψυχὴ τὸ ἐναντίον ᾧ αὐτὴ ἐπιφέρει ἀεὶ οὐ μὴ ποτε δέξεται; (105d3-11).

⁷⁰³ *His itaque distributis subiungit oportere intellegi animam non modo ut formam sive ideam simplicem vitamque simplicem, cui nihil unquam contrarium, unde minuatur vel pereat, accidere possit, sed talem etiam, quae suam ideam iis communicet, quibus se absque ullo contrarii consortio coniungit, quae certe eo tendunt, ut animae immortalitas servetur sive eam per se formam et vitam simplicem tamquam ideam ut caliditatem ac frigiditatem contempleris sive substantiam vita contentam, quem ad modum ignis sua essentiali caliditate continetur* (*ICP* 2.8.10 p.149.4-11).

At anima corpori, quod natura praecedat, vitam affert;

Impatiens igitur contrarii eius est;

Id autem esse mortem constat.

3. *Cum anima inter formas connumeretur, quarum participatio nomen etiam earundem recipit;*

Nulla autem earum formarum contrarium patitur, quippe magnitudo nunquam parvitas effici potest;

*Sequitur, ut anima, quae vita est, nunquam mortem patitur, quae vitae contraria est.*⁷⁰⁴

The first syllogism treats ‘soul’ as a form like ‘oddness’ as the middle term; in the second ‘soul’ as ‘the definition of life’ is the middle term; in the third the middle term is ‘soul as participating in the form’ and in the same way as a large person can be called large by participating in the form of ‘largeness’. These formulations demonstrated Bessarion’s understanding of the subtleties of Plato but his reason for presenting the argument in this way was more likely a wish to show that Plato was adept at syllogistic argument contrary to the criticism levelled against him by Trebizond and others.⁷⁰⁵ The argument would prove that all living things have immortal souls, not just those who have powers of thinking and reasoning. Bessarion concedes that Plato spoke of the souls of animals but in doing so he was using the term analogically.⁷⁰⁶

Bessarion’s final proof of the immortality of the soul in Plato is drawn from *Republic* 608d2-612a6. Plato argues that for every natural object there is something that can corrupt and destroy them as wood is destroyed by rot. But the soul’s evil making-components are

⁷⁰⁴ *ICP* 2.8.10 p.149.16-29.

⁷⁰⁵ See *ICP* 1.5 for a detailed defence of Plato against Trebizond’s criticism on this matter.

⁷⁰⁶ See pages 162-4 and note [613613](#) above.

ἀδικία καὶ ἀκολασία καὶ δειλία καὶ ἀμαθία. None of these can destroy the soul nor can any external factor such as illness; therefore, the soul is immortal. Bessarion gives an account of the argument without comment and concludes with ἀεὶ δὲ οὐσα καὶ ἀθάνατος ἂν εἴη which echoes Plato's similarly phrased conclusion in *Republic* 611a1-2 (δῆλον ὅτι ἀνάγκη αὐτὸ ἀεὶ ὄν εἶναι, εἰ δ' ἀεὶ ὄν, ἀθάνατον).⁷⁰⁷ The problem with the argument is that one might accept that injustice cannot destroy the soul but does it follow that nothing else can? Why would it follow that death cannot destroy the soul indirectly as it destroys the eyes? The argument only works because Plato takes it for granted that the soul is neither a part of nor dependent on the body which is the view of Bessarion (see pages 161-66 above).⁷⁰⁸

Trebizond had claimed that Aristotle in contrast to Plato actually proved rationally the immortality of the soul whereas Plato spoke of the soul in poetic figments. Bessarion set out to show that Plato demonstrated by reason that the soul was eternal, immortal, ungenerated and incorruptible (*ICP* 2.8.8 p.145.32-p.147.1). He counters Trebizond in highly charged rhetorical language to the effect that no philosopher, not even Aristotle, had greater wisdom than Plato.⁷⁰⁹ He gives an unusually thorough account of the Platonic texts. He had combed the Platonic dialogues for all proofs of the immortality of the soul and reproduces them accurately with the exception of the two in the *Phaedo* which he omits. In view of the philosophical controversies at the time over the possibility of demonstrating from reason the soul's immortality these were important paragraphs. But it is difficult to judge the extent to which Bessarion thought the proofs philosophically robust. He does not comment on their validity. It is hard to believe that he placed much weight on the proof from affinity (*Phaedo* 778b4-84b7) since he does not give an account of the argument; he

⁷⁰⁷ *ICP* 2.8.12-13 p.151.15-p.153 .6.

⁷⁰⁸ See Bluck (1955) 28-9.

⁷⁰⁹ *Quid igitur per deum immortalem fabulae, quid figmenti in his dictis Platonis animadvertimus? Vel potius quid non optime et sapientissime dictum, si eum cum Aristotele ceterisque gentilibus contulerimus?* (*ICP* 2.8.16 p.155 13-15).

merely records the conclusion. Since he set out to persuade his readers that Plato's teachings are as wise as it is possible to be without the light of faith, and he says twice in the course of the chapter that Plato was closer than Aristotle to Christian belief he must have been presenting Plato in what he thought was a cogent way. Two of the proofs were used in the Scholastic tradition (the proof from self-movement in the *Phaedrus* (245c5-246a2) and the proof from opposites in the *Phaedo* (102a11-107b10) (see notes [668668](#) and [700700](#) above). In contrast to contemporary Averroists, by accepting Plato's proofs Bessarion acknowledges the possibility of a philosophically sound proof for the immortality of the soul. He also acknowledges that it is not possible to know except by faith that the world (and therefore souls) was created in time, which was also the position of Aquinas.⁷¹⁰ He is at pains in the cases of the proof from self-movement and the proof from affinity (78b4-84b7) to claim convergence between Plato and Aristotle. In contrast to the use which he makes of Proclus and, to some extent, of Aquinas, to interpret Plato, he uses his references to Aristotle not to interpret but rather to indicate, sometimes rather artificially, points of convergence between the two philosophers.

Congruence of Plato and Aristotle

Bessarion emphasises the congruence of Plato and Aristotle several times in his chapter on the soul.⁷¹¹ He acknowledges few differences between them. He distinguishes Plato's view that the soul is the form not just of physical bodies from Aristotle's view that it was the substance of physical bodies (see page 164 and note [618618](#) above). His contention was that Aristotle and Plato agree on the nature of soul; their differences are terminological rather than substantial (*ICP* 2.8.7). According to Bessarion Aristotle derived from Plato his

⁷¹⁰ See notes [251251](#) and [689689](#) above.

⁷¹¹ See note [661661](#) above.

proof for the prime mover in *Physics* 254^b1-258^b12.⁷¹² But whereas in Plato the prime-mover is the self-mover (ἡ τῆς αὐτῆς αὐτὴν κινήσασα μεταβολή *Laws* 895a2-3) for Aristotle it is not movable (φανερὸν ὅτι τὸ πρῶτως κινουῦν ἀκίνητον 258^b4-5). Bessarion's argument is that, unlike Plato, Aristotle restricted the use of the term movement (κίνησις) to corporeal substances, which alone are subject to passive motion (παθητικὴ κίνησις). Aristotle uses 'energy' (ἐνέργεια) for changes in soul rather than movement. 'Ἐνέργεια is a species within the genus κίνησις and the species, says Bessarion, can be used instead of the genus.

Bessarion's argument is not entirely sound since there is more than a difference in terminology between Plato and Aristotle but he was influenced by Simplicius' understanding. In *Physics* 257^a32-258^b9 Aristotle, without naming Plato, mounts a critique of the view that the prime agent of movement can be self-moving. In *De Anima* (405^b31-406^a6) he explicitly rejects the notion of soul as self-moving or that motion could be treated as one of its characteristics. What produces movement need not be self-moving. Notwithstanding such a clear statement the Neo-Platonists argued that Plato and Aristotle were in agreement; their differences were ones of terminology.⁷¹³ Simplicius in *in Physicorum* (1247.11-1250.31) says that Aristotle restricts movement to physical bodies but the soul is active without being moved (τὴν ψυχὴν ἐνεργεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ κινεῖσθαι νομίζει (1248.30-1)).⁷¹⁴ He describes Aristotle as the 'best exegete of Plato' (*in De Anima* 245.12) and argues (246.16-248.16) that Plato's view of the immortality of the soul in the

⁷¹² *Plato scilicet atque Aristoteles, cur anima sit quidve sit, conquisierit, operae pretium est videre, quomodo Plato id ex motus ratione investigarit, quem imitatus Aristoteles libro Naturalis auditionis octavo ex motu in dei cognitionem fertur, quem primum movens immovibile nominat, sive id mentem statuat sive animum. Incipit paene a simili divisione, quamquam interim ab eo dissentit (ICP 2.8.7 p.145.1-6).*

⁷¹³ See for example Simplicius in *Physicorum* 1249.12-13: οὐ περὶ πράγμα νῦν, ἀλλὰ περὶ ὄνομα τοῖς φιλοσόφοις ἐστὶν διαφορὰ, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐν τοῖς πλείοσι τῶν ἄλλων.

⁷¹⁴ See Gertz (2009). Philoponus has a similar argument in *De Anima* 92.13-95.35.

Phaedo and the *Phaedrus* is in harmony with Aristotle.⁷¹⁵ Gerson comments: ‘The passage is a stellar example of Neoplatonic commentary. It also provides an excellent example of how the harmony of Plato and Aristotle was understood.’⁷¹⁶

Conclusion

At the time Bessarion was writing on the soul most of the controversy centred around the interpretation of Aristotle. Most of the discussion in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries on the soul and its immortality was confined to the schools.⁷¹⁷ Bessarion with his exposition of Plato and the interpretation of the Neo-Platonists was introducing a different perspective. Most other writers on the soul, in the tradition of Aristotle and the Scholastics, approached the question epistemologically; whereas for Bessarion and the Neo-Platonists the questions were less how the soul knows but what is its nature. Bessarion’s account is brief when measured against contemporary treatises on the soul. Ficino’s *Platonic Theology, on the Immortality of the Soul*, completed in 1474, ran to eighteen books. Many other contemporary writers produced such treatises, whereas Bessarion’s chapter, although long, is no more than an introduction to the subject. He combined presentation of the Platonic texts, which would have been largely unknown to his *viri docti atque praestantes*, with a commentary drawn from Proclus, which was also largely unknown at the time. His repeated claim that Plato was closer to Christianity than Aristotle was important in establishing that Plato provided a better philosophical base for Christianity than Aristotle. But he did not explain in any detail why he thought Plato superior to Aristotle in this respect. In fact his frequent attempts to show conformity between Plato and Aristotle tend to dilute the strength of the claim.

⁷¹⁵ See Gerson (2006) 195-221 especially 207-9.

⁷¹⁶ See Gerson (2006) 208.

⁷¹⁷ See Blum (2007) 213.

Chapter six

On providence, fate and free will

Summary

When Bessarion turned to questions of providence, fate and free will he was entering contentious waters as he himself acknowledged.⁷¹⁸ At one level his purpose was simply to respond to the claim of Trebizond that Plato denied God's providence and was a determinist.⁷¹⁹ He did this by quoting a number of texts, in particular passages from *Laws* X. He claims that his purpose was not to discuss the problems but to set out Plato's opinion on them and to demonstrate that Trebizond's charge was groundless.⁷²⁰ Trebizond's claim was that Plato held that everything was bound by fate but Bessarion claims to show that in this matter Plato and his followers agree to a great extent with Christianity.⁷²¹ Notwithstanding his disclaimer he devoted much space to examining the nature of fate and its relation to free will.

I first consider what Plato said about providence and fate. Then I examine Bessarion's main sources for his interpretation of Plato. I shall then set out the philosophical tradition on questions of providence and fate in the texts of Plato and the interpretations of the commentators from Alcinous and Plotinus to Boethius which was the context within which

⁷¹⁸ *Haec etsi in magna fore controversia non ignoro, an videlicet fatum sit, et quid sit, et utrum ita, ut Plato censet, an ut Aristoteles, an alia quavis ratione (ICP 2.10.13 p.197.27-29).*

⁷¹⁹ *Objurgator noster, quasi omnibus doctior sit, Platonem nec dixisse quicquam de providentia nec eam probasse contendit et clamat Maxime vero auget calumniam suam cum Platonem de fato reprehendit, quasi fatali necessitate fieri cuncta voluerit (ICP 2.9.12-2.10.1 p.179.36-p.181.2).*

⁷²⁰ *Hoc enim praecipue meum institutum fuit, ut non dubia ipsa discuterem, sed Platonis de huiusmodi rebus opinionem aperirem falsoque eum ostenderem ab adversario reprehendi (ICP 2.10.13 p.197.35-7).*

⁷²¹ *Ex cuius [sc. Plato] verbis palam fit non ita esse, ut adversarius scribit, sed contra vel solum vel unum ex omnibus maxime cum nostra religione hoc loco convenire (ICP 2.10.13 p.197.33-5).*

Bessarion was writing. I shall then examine the controversies which were live in the fifteenth century. There were three critical issues; (a) doubts about God's providence, (b) questions of astrological determinism and (c) the conflict between God's universal providence and human freedom.⁷²² Finally I set out the detail of Bessarion's presentation and interpretation of Plato and the differences between him and Aristotle. When he purported to be setting out Plato's teaching on providence and fate he was not doing so in a neutral environment. The often sparse Platonic texts had been subjected to interpretation and elaboration and Bessarion was writing at a time when the issues were contested. My contention is that in presenting and interpreting Plato on these issues he was reading back into Plato the answers to questions which Plato had not addressed. The thread that connects the chapters on providence and fate with the rest of book two is to present the teachings of Plato and to demonstrate their consistency with Christianity.

Plato on Fate and Providence

Plato did not devote a great deal of attention to questions of fate and providence and where he did so it was often wrapped up in myth. He distinguished providence using the verbs φροντίζειν and ἐπιμελεῖσθαι from fate (εἰμαρμένη and μοῖρα).⁷²³ He also referred twice to Ἀδράστεια (destiny) or Ἀδραστείας θεσμός.⁷²⁴ He occasionally used πρόνοια for providence or divine foreknowledge.⁷²⁵

⁷²² Poppi (2008) 639-667 has a full account of the Medieval and Renaissance context.

⁷²³ For φροντίζειν see *Laws*: τότε τοίνυν σοι παραγεγωναὶ αὐτῶν πολλοῖσι, φράζοιμ' ἄν, τὸ μηδένα πόποτε λαβόντα ἐκ νέου ταύτην τὴν δόξαν περὶ θεῶν, ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν, διατελέσαι πρὸς γῆρας μείναντα ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ διανοήσει, τὰ δύο μέντοι πάθη περὶ θεοῦς μείναι, πολλοῖσι μὲν οὐ, μείναι δὲ οὖν τισί, τὸ τοὺς θεοὺς εἶναι μὲν, φροντίζειν δὲ οὐδὲν τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων, καὶ τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο, ὡς φροντίζουσι μὲν, εὐπαραμύθητοι δ' εἰσι θύμασιν καὶ εὐχαῖς (888b8-c7). For ἐπιμελεῖσθαι see *ibid.*: οὐ γάρ που ὅταν γε ἀδύνατον ἢ τῶν ἀπάντων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι, τότε ἀμέλεια ἔσται τῶν σμικρῶν ἢ μεγάλων, μὴ ἐπιμελουμένῳ (901c2-3).

⁷²⁴ *Phaedrus* 248c2, *Republic* 451a4.

⁷²⁵ See *Timaeus* 30c1 and 44c7. In Plato ἐκ προνοίας means 'deliberately'. See, for example, *Laws* 873a6 and 874e7. Bessarion uses πρόνοια meaning 'providence' in the chapter heading of *ICP* 2.9 and to translate

In *Laws* (899d5-903a9) Plato refutes the deist position that the gods exist but have no care for affairs of mortals (τὸν δὲ ἡγούμενον μὲν θεοὺς εἶναι, μὴ φροντίζειν δὲ αὐτοὺς τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων 899d5-6). He argued that the gods care for even the small affairs of mortals. He based his argument on the view that gods were virtuous and it was part of virtue to care for even small things. Being virtuous the gods must have courage, moderation and reason and have no part in their opposites, which, he says, are cowardice and idleness. The only reasons why a reasonable person would care for great matters but ignore small ones are ignorance or idleness. But the gods are neither ignorant of even the smallest matters nor idle so they must care for small as well as great matters. There is no basis for the view that the affairs of mortals are too small for the gods to care about because (a) humans have souls and are the most God-fearing of living creatures and (b) they are possessions of the gods along with the entire heavens. Doctors, stonemasons, captains, generals, the heads of households and certain politicians must have concern not just for the whole of the objects of their concern but also with the parts. God is not inferior to mortal craftsmen so God must concern himself with the great universe and the small mortals.⁷²⁶ Plato's argument assumed that the gods were moral agents and possessed reason. It also presented a different understanding of the Olympian gods from traditional Greek myth where Cronos ate his own children and Zeus put his father in chains.⁷²⁷ It is necessary to turn to other dialogues for an indication of what form this care by the gods for mortal affairs takes.

Boethius' *providentia*. See also *ICP* 2.10.8 (p.190.1 and 20) and 10 (p.192.32) for similar uses of *προνοία*. See also note [817817](#) below.

⁷²⁶ The argument is summarised and analysed in Mayhew (2008) 155-169.

⁷²⁷ In the *Euthyphro* (5e5-b4) Socrates, unlike Euthyphro, rejected the validity of the myths.

In the *Timaeus* Plato uses the image of the craftsman to describe how the Demiurge fashioned the world in accordance with a model (29d7-31a1). He fashioned it out of earth, air, fire and water (31b4-32c4). The universe was generated through a combination of necessity (δι' ἀνάγκης) and reason (τῷ λόγῳ).⁷²⁸ The passage is important for indicating the underlying principle that necessity is subject to persuasion by intellect which leads it towards the good. The things that occur of necessity are earth, air, fire and water. They operate with a regularity that can produce dependable effects and so Plato could describe them as τὰ δι' ἀνάγκης γιγνόμενα (47e4-5). But they are also disorderly. He calls them wandering causes (ἡ πλανωμένη αἰτία 48a7) which produces chance effects without order. The point of the metaphor was to illustrate the operation of intelligent purpose in creation (30d1-31a1). The craftsman did not force the materials but worked with their inherent properties; in other words he 'persuaded' them. Intelligence lay in moulding together the elements with their inherent powers in such a way as to produce a good effect.⁷²⁹

The importance of this passage is the distinction drawn between reason and necessity. Plato accepts the operation of necessity in human affairs. He has several ways of expressing it in relation both to the soul of the cosmos and to human souls. In the *Republic* (450d7-451a9) Socrates professed reluctance to argue in support of the common ownership of women and children in the State for fear he might be wrong and lead his hearers astray but he says that he would bow down before Adrasteia (προσκυνῶ Ἀδράστειαν). He meant that he accepted the inevitability of punishment if he was proved mistaken. 'Adrasteia' was originally, perhaps, a personification of ἀνάγκη in its relation to humanity and the

⁷²⁸ τὰ μὲν οὖν παρεληλυθότα τῶν εἰρημένων πλὴν βραχέων ἐπιδέδεικται τὰ διὰ νοῦ δεδημιουργημένα· δεῖ δὲ καὶ τὰ δι' ἀνάγκης γιγνόμενα τῷ λόγῳ παραθέσθαι. μεμειγμένη γὰρ οὖν ἡ τοῦδε τοῦ κόσμου γένεσις ἐξ ἀνάγκης τε καὶ νοῦ συστάσεως ἐγεννήθη· νοῦ δὲ ἀνάγκης ἄρχοντος τῷ πείθειν αὐτὴν τῶν γιγνομένων τὰ πλεῖστα ἐπὶ τὸ βέλτιστον ἄγειν, ταῦτη κατὰ ταῦτα τε δι' ἀνάγκης ἡττωμένης ὑπὸ πειθοῦς ἔμφορος οὕτω κατ' ἀρχὰς συνίστατο τόδε τὸ πᾶν (47e3-48a5).

⁷²⁹ For this argument and analysis see Marrow (1950).

issue of human conduct.⁷³⁰ In the *Phaedrus* (248c2) Plato speaks of θεσμὸς Ἀδραστείας by which the soul which follows God and sees the truth is free of sorrow for a cycle of years.⁷³¹

He also speaks of the laws of fate. In the *Timaeus* (41d3-42e3) the Demiurge mixed immortal soul in the mixing bowl and divided it among individuals, each being assigned to a star. He then showed them the nature of the universe and revealed the laws of fate (νόμους τοὺς εἰμαρμένους). The laws of fate included how they would become the most religious of living beings when they had been scattered into the organs of time. They were to be implanted into bodies by necessity (ὅποτε δὴ σώμασιν ἐμφυτευθεῖεν ἐξ ἀνάγκης). Plato's mythical language leaves the passage open to interpretation. But what he appears to be saying is that God created a limited number of souls equal to the number of stars. Each was assigned to a different star. Riding on the stars like chariots the souls survey the realm of Forms and the order in the cosmos. With this knowledge they are then implanted in bodies where they are free to choose the good life or wickedness.⁷³²

In the *Laws* (903b4-905d6) Plato adds to the arguments which he had already given against the deists another kind of argument which is mythical. Again interpretation is not clear cut. The myth is an account of how the universe as a whole was created for the preservation of the whole. Each individual is located by the creator to its allotted place (κατὰ τὸ πρέπον αὐτῶν [sc. souls] ἕκαστον, ἵνα τῆς προσηκούσης μοίρας λαγχάνῃ) (903d8-e1) where it contributes to the good of the whole. In these allotted places souls can change according to the law of fate. The mythical king decides the appropriate place for each soul but within that space the reincarnated soul may initiate movement by its own

⁷³⁰ See Adam (1963) 278.

⁷³¹ The idea and expression was derived from Orphism. See Empedocles fr. 107.

⁷³² See Cornford, (1937) 143-146 and Taylor (1928) 255-260.

will (τῆς γενέσεως τοῦ ποίου τινὸς ἀφῆκε ταῖς βουλήσεσιν ἐκάστων ἡμῶν τὰς αἰτίας 904b8-c2). The movement may be small or it may change in the direction of iniquity and move down to Hades according to its choices or, for the good soul, it may move to a higher region and share in the happiness of the gods. Although this movement is overseen by God it is in accord with the laws of fate (κατὰ τὴν τῆς εἰμαρμένης τάξιν καὶ νόμον 904c8-9) from which no escape is possible (ταύτης τῆς δίκης οὔτε σὺ μὴ ποτε οὔτε εἰ ἄλλος ἀτυχῆς γενόμενος ἐπεύξεται περιγενέσθαι θεῶν 905a1-2).⁷³³

The *Republic* has a similar passage. In *Republic* X Plato recounts the myth of Er (614b1-621b7) who returned from death and described what he had seen of the underworld and the rewards and punishments after death. The myth is not easy to interpret.⁷³⁴ However obscure, it is an important source on the relationship between providence and fate in Plato. The myth contains strong elements of fatalism. Souls are bound on a relentless and eternal wheel of reincarnation and even if they have a choice of future lives their choices are circumscribed by their former lives. The spokesman of the gods invites souls to take their lots from the lap of Lachesis and says: ‘Let the one who draws the first lot be the first to choose a life to which he will adhere of necessity. But virtue has no master; by honouring or dishonouring it, each will have a greater or lesser share in it. The responsibility is the chooser’s; God is not to be blamed.’⁷³⁵ It appears from these passages in the *Laws* and the *Republic* that Plato accepted that the embodied soul could exercise free choices within certain laws of fate by which the consequences of these choices followed ineluctably and even the choices were constrained by character.

⁷³³ See Mayhew (2008) 169-184 for an interpretation of the whole passage.

⁷³⁴ See Annas (1981) 349-353 for an account of the difficulties of interpretation.

⁷³⁵ *Republic* 617e1-4 translation Emlyn-Jones and Preddy (2013). Compare *Laws* 904b6-c2.

In the *Statesman* Plato tells the myth of Cronos. In it he speaks as if fate if left unchecked acts independently of the will of the gods. The Athenian stranger tells a story about the cycles of creation (269c4-273e4) and how the blessed age of Cronos, when God watched over all things, was succeeded by the age of Zeus when God released the tiller and the earth turned backwards under the influence of fate and innate desire (τὸν δὲ δὴ κόσμον πάλιν ἀνέστρεφεν εἰμαρμένη τε καὶ ξύμφυτος ἐπιθυμία 272e5-6). The adjective εἰμαρμένη qualifies ἐπιθυμία. Plato's explanation of the meaning is that gradually in the age of Zeus the material element in soul asserted itself. This element, which was inherent in primitive nature, was the source of disorder.⁷³⁶

Plato seems to argue that the gods exercise providence (φροντίζειν/ἐπιμελεῖσθαι) but he also believes in the deterministic laws of fate (ἡ τῆς εἰμαρμένης τάξις καὶ νόμος) within which there is limited room for personal choice (αἴρεσις *Republic* 619b5; βούλησις *Laws* 904d5). The gods themselves have little control over fate. He does not give an account of the relationship between providence, fate and human choice.

In the next section I shall describe the commentators' development of Plato's thought and the background understanding of providence and fate within which Bessarion set out his interpretation of Plato.

The Commentators on Plato

The commentators filled in ambiguities in Plato's treatment and articulated new questions. Plutarch's *De fato* was written as a response to Stoic determinism. Plutarch outlined a

⁷³⁶ τὸ τῆς πάλαι ποτὲ φύσεως σύντροφον, ὅτι πολλῆς ἦν μετέχον ἀταξίας πρὶν εἰς τὸν νῦν κόσμον ἀφικέσθαι (273b5-7).

theory of fate which was compatible with divine providence and human free will.⁷³⁷ He distinguishes between an active fate or energy and fate as a substance (ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶν ἐνέργεια ἢ δ' οὐσία 568c5). He identifies the former with Adrasteia of the *Phaedrus*, νόμους τε τοὺς εἰμαρμένους in the *Timaeus* and the λόγος Λαχέσεως of the *Republic*. He defines it as an ineluctible divine law determining everything that happens (λόγος θεῖος ἀπαραβάτος δι' αἰτίαν ἀνεμπόδιστον (568d5), νόμος ἀκόλουθος τῆ τοῦ παντὸς φύσει καθ' ὃν διεξάγεται τὰ γινόμενα (568d6-7)). Fate as substance is the world-soul (ἡ τοῦ κόσμου ψυχή 568e2-3) which is divided in three ways- the fixed part (μοῖρα), the wandering part and the part around the earth below the heavens. He identifies these three parts with Clotho, Atropos and Lachesis respectively.

Active fate is the cycle of the heavenly bodies and everything on earth which is dependent on the heavenly bodies. It is like law which issues commands which are consequent upon antecedents and embraces all in universal statements.⁷³⁸ The antecedents which are the possible, the contingent, what is in our power and chance (τό γ' ἐφ' ἡμῖν καὶ ἡ τύχη, τό τε δυνατὸν καὶ τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον) are contained in fate (570e6-9). He draws a distinction between everything which is in accord with fate and necessary and the many things under fate which are in our power.⁷³⁹ He says that according to Plato's *Timaeus* fate is a law subject to nature which determines everything that happens or according to the *Republic* it is a divine law linking together the future with the present with the past (νόμος θεῖος καθ' ὃν συμπλέκεται τοῖς γεγρονόσι καὶ τοῖς γινομένοις τὰ γενησόμενα 568d6-11).

⁷³⁷ The view among most scholars is that the *De fato* was wrongly attributed to Plutarch in the manuscripts but is the work of a Platonist in the second century A.D. See Hani (1980) 3-7. In the rest of this chapter I shall refer to 'Plutarch' as the author as a matter of convenience.

⁷³⁸ ἐν γὰρ τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ ὠρισμένῳ τ' ὄντι καὶ θεωρουμένῳ πάνθ' ὅσα τε κατ' οὐρανὸν ἅ τ' ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἄνωθεν συνίσταται, πάλιν μὲν εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ καταστήσεται, πάλιν δ' ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὅλα κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ἀποδοθήσεται (569a9-b3). οἷος πολιτικὸς νόμος... ὃς ἐξ ὑποθέσεως προστάττει, ἔπειτα μὴν καθόλου τὰ πόλει προσήκοντα εἰς δύναμιν περιλαμβάνει (569d4-7).

⁷³⁹ μόνα δ' εἰμαρμένα καὶ καθ' εἰμαρμένην τὰ ἀκόλουθα τοῖς ἐν τῇ θεῖα διατάξει προηγησάμενοις. ὥστε πάντα μὲν τὰ γινόμενα ἢ εἰμαρμένην περιλαμβάνει, πολλὰ δὲ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ σχεδὸν ὅσα προηγείται οὐκ ὀρθὸν λέγειν καθ' εἰμαρμένην (570e1-5).

Fate conforms to providence. The primary providence is the benign understanding and will of the first God ordering all things for the best. There is also a secondary providence of the secondary gods who oversee the good order of mortal affairs and the safety of each genus.⁷⁴⁰ Plutarch related this secondary providence to the *Timaeus* (42d1-e4) in which the Demiurge handed over to the young gods the framing of human bodies and souls to be guided in the best possible way in so far as was possible but not to be responsible for their evils (573d11-f6). He comments that this last phrase (ὅτι μὴ κακῶν αὐτὸ ἑαυτῷ γίγνοιτο αἴτιον *Timaeus* 42e3-4) indicated the reason for fate. But a third providence is that of daemons who oversee human actions (573a5-6). He relates (573f11-574a9) this third providence to the phrase ‘that he might be blameless for the future evil of each’ (ἵνα τῆς ἔπειτα εἴη κακίας ἐκάστῳ ἀναίτιος (*Timaeus* 43d3-4)). He says that all that conforms to fate must also conform to providence. But the reverse is not true. Providence does not conform to fate because it is prior to fate (573b2-11).

Nemesius, bishop of Emesa (fl. c. 400 A.D.), in *De natura hominis* also attributed to Plato belief in three providences.⁷⁴¹ He says that although Plato held that God governed both the general and the particular he divided providence into three. ‘But Plato wants there to be a general providence and particular providence. He divided providence into three kinds. The first is the providence of the first God who has providence over forms in the first place, then the cosmos as a whole comprising heaven and stars and the whole universe, that is species, substance (quantity and quality), and other such things and the forms underlying them. The secondary gods who wander in the cosmos have providence over the generation

⁷⁴⁰ ἔστιν οὖν πρόνοια ἢ μὲν ἀνωτάτω καὶ πρώτη τοῦ πρώτου θεοῦ νόησις εἴτε καὶ βούλησις οὓσα εὐεργέτις ἀπάντων, καθ’ ἣν πρώτως ἕκαστα τῶν θείων διὰ παντὸς ἄριστα τε καὶ κάλλιστα κεκόσμηται...ἢ δὲ δευτέρα καθ’ ἣν τὰ τε θνητὰ γίνεται τεταγμένως καὶ ὅσα πρὸς διαμονὴν καὶ σωτηρίαν ἐκάστων τῶν γενῶν (572f5-573a2).

⁷⁴¹ Nemesius *De natura hominis* 43 ed. Morani pp.125.19-126.21.

of baser animals and plants and everything that is subject to generation and corruption....Plato proposes a third providence over practical matters and their achievement, both physical, material, and instrumental goods and the opposite of these. He placed certain earth-bound daemons as custodians over human affairs. The second and third providence depend on the first as everything is by the power of the first God who establishes the second and third providences.⁷⁴² Nemesius also says that according to Plato: 'this active fate is also in accordance with providence, for fate is delimited by providence. For everything that occurs by fate does so also in accordance with providence, but everything providential is not also fated.'⁷⁴³

Nemesius, like Plutarch, said that Plato distinguished two fates- a substance which is the world soul and fate in action which is the unalterable and unavoidable law of God which Plato calls the decree of Adrasteia. Plato 'holds that this law was given by the first and highest God to the soul of the universe for the ordering of everything, and according to it everything that happens proceeds. He says that this active fate is also in accordance with providence. For providence encompasses fate. For everything that occurs by fate does so in accordance with providence, but everything providential is not also fated. The divine law itself, which he says is providence together with fate, contains everything within it, some things as a condition, some things as a result of a condition. For it includes the antecedent causes, as it were as certain causes which are conditions, and these are up to us- assents and judgments and impulses. Those matters that follow on from these of necessity are because of the condition. And the choice of things that are done is up to us as a condition;

⁷⁴² *De natura hominis* 43 ed. Moroni p.125.21-p.126.15.The belief in a tripartite division of fate had currency. It occurs in Apuleius *de Platone et eius Dogmate* I.12. See also Apuleius ed. Beaujeu (1973) p.274 nn. 3 and 4 and notes pp. 272-4. It is also recorded by Augustine in *C. D.* IX.1 (concerning the belief of the *Platonici in daemones*) and VIII.14.

⁷⁴³ *De natura hominis* 38 ed. Morani p.109.16-18 translation Sharples and van der Eijk (2008).

when things that are up to us are established, what is fated follows on from these themselves as from a condition.⁷⁴⁴

These passages from Plutarch and Nemesius are interpretative glosses on *Timaeus* 41d4-42a1 and *Republic* 617d2-e5. They demonstrate interpretations of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic* which were important in future debates on providence and fate. Providence extends not only to causes but to effects of human choices. It encompasses fate which is both the world soul and the inevitable law which governs the consequences of human choice. Bessarion also attributes two senses of providence to Plato. The first is the providence of the divine law and the second the providence working through secondary causes.⁷⁴⁵

There was debate in the commentators about the extent of God's foreknowledge; whether it extended to the outcome of human choice or just to the fact of the choice itself. Alcinous gave a convenient summary of the Middle Platonist understanding of Plato on fate:

‘According to Plato all things take place within fate (ἐν εἰμαρμένῃ), but this does not mean that they would all be determined by fate. For fate has the status of a law: it does not say that this man will do this and that man will suffer that. For all such specifications would run to infinity, since the number of begotten individuals is unlimited and the events that befall them are equally without limit. Moreover that which is within our power would vanish, and it would no longer make sense to do such things as praise or blame anyone.

No, fate says, rather, that whenever any soul chooses a certain type of life and does certain

⁷⁴⁴ *De natura hominis* 38 ed. Morani p.109.10-25 translation Sharples and van der Eijk (2008).

⁷⁴⁵ διττήν γὰρ εἶναι τὴν πρόνοιαν, τὴν μὲν αὐτὴν τὴν τάξιν ἢ καὶ αὐτῆς τῆς τάξεως καὶ διαθέσεως τὴν αἰτίαν, ἣτις αὐτὴ ἐστὶν ἡ πρωτίστη καὶ ἀρχοειδεστάτη τῶν ὄντων αἰτία, τὴν δὲ τὴν ἐν τοῖς οὐσι καὶ γινομένοις τῆς τοιαύτης τάξεως ἀποπλήρωσιν, ἣτοι διεξαγωγὴν τε καὶ διαχείρισιν, ἐν ταῖς δευτέραις καὶ μέσαις ἔτι τε μερικαῖς θεωρουμένην αἰτίας (*ICP* 2.10.8. p.190.19-24).

kinds of actions, such and such consequences will follow.⁷⁴⁶ In other words the law of fate determines the consequences that follow our actions. This is called conditional fate. The gods know the possible alternatives but they do not know which will happen.⁷⁴⁷

Proclus, by contrast, held that the gods know not only the definite but also the indefinite and contingent. ‘Every God’, he says, ‘has an undivided knowledge of things divided and a timeless knowledge of things temporal; he knows the contingent without contingency, the mutable immutably, and in general all things in a higher mode than belongs to their station’.⁷⁴⁸ The knowledge of the gods is determined by their transcendent nature, not by the nature of the objects which are the subjects of their knowledge. They have foreknowledge of the outcome of contingent choices. Proclus’ view influenced both Boethius and Aquinas.⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁶ Alcinoüs *Didaskalikos* 26 ed. Hermann p.179.1-10 translation Chlup (2012). The date and even the existence of a philosopher of the name Alcinoüs is the subject of controversy. The *Didaskalikos* is variously dated but a likely date is c.150 A.D. See Whittaker (1990) vi-xiii. Chlup ((2012)12-13) argues that Middle Platonists, like Alcinoüs, saw fate as a law laying down general rules without specifying the detail of what is to befall the individual. The Neo-Platonists, by contrast, meticulously filled in every detail. Plutarch explained it: οἷον μὲν ἔστι τὸ ἐξ ὑποθέσεως, ὅτι δὲ τοιούτων καὶ ἡ εἰμαρμένη, ὠριζέσθω. ἐξ ὑποθέσεως δὴ ἔφαμεν τὸ μὴ καθ’ ἑαυτὸ τιθέμενον, ἀλλὰ πῶς ἐτέρῳ τινὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὑποτεθέν, ὅποσα ἀκολουθίαν σημαίνει. θέσμός τε Ἀδραστείας ὁδε (*De fato* 570a4-8). As an example of this necessary entailment Plutarch quotes Plato’s *Phaedrus* 248c where Plato says it is the law of Adrasteia that the soul which follows God must be free of sorrow for the next cycle of years. Nemesius took a similar view as did Chalcidius in *Tim.* CXLII-CXC.

⁷⁴⁷ See Chlup (2012) 13. God’s lack of knowledge of contingent outcomes is set out by Chalcidius: *Ergo etiam dei scientia de divinis quidem, quorum est certa et necessitate perpetua munita felicitas, certa et necessaria scientia est, tam propter ipsius scientiae certam comprehensionem quam pro eorum quae sciuntur substantia; at vero incertorum necessaria quidem scientia, quod incerta sint et in eventu ambiguo posita- nec enim possunt aliter esse quam est natura eorum-, ipsa tamen in utramque partem possibilia sunt potius quam necessitatibus subiugata* (in *Tim.* CLXII). See also Alexander of Aphrodisias *De fato* 30 for a similar view.

⁷⁴⁸ Proclus *Elements of theology* prop. 124 translation Dodds (1963). The point is expanded in *in Tim.* I.351.20-352.28 and in *Plat. theol.* I.21 ed. Saffrey and Westerink p.98.1-12. See also: *Si igitur aliquis inquirat qualiter providentia cognoscit contingentia, ad inquirentem hoc dicemus: non ut sunt contingentia sed ut est providentia, hoc autem est meliori modo quam contingentia sint* (Proclus *De decem dubitationibus* 8 ed. Boese p.14). Sharples ((1983) 28) argues that Proclus’ view of divine foreknowledge was in conscious opposition to that of Alexander of Aphrodisias and that of the Stoics.

⁷⁴⁹ See Sharples (1983) 28-9.

Plotinus' treatise *Περὶ Προνοίας* (*Ennead* III 2-3) was very influential.⁷⁵⁰ This will be apparent from Bessarion's use of it. Plotinus was trying to explain how there could be so much evil in a world under the oversight of divine providence. He was aiming his treatise at the Epicureans, who denied providence, the Peripatetics, who limited the workings of providence to the sphere of the constellations, and the Gnostics for whom the material world was the creation of evil.⁷⁵¹ According to him: 'Providence is a foreseeing and calculation of God about how this All might come into existence, and how it might be as good as possible....Providence for the All is its being according to Intellect (κατὰ νοῦν).'⁷⁵² He emphasises the rationality of providence which is everlastingly at peace. He refers to God's creative providence as 'reason' which flows from mind (οὗτος ὁ λόγος ἐκ νοῦ ῥυεῖς (III.2.2.16-17)).⁷⁵³ Like Plato he distinguishes intellect and necessity. 'This All of ours is not intellect and rational principle, like the All there, but participates in intellect and rational principle. Therefore, there was a need of a concord in which "intellect and necessity" came together, in which necessity drags it down to what is worse and carries it away to unreason, because it is not a rational principle itself, but, all the same, "intellect controls necessity".'⁷⁵⁴ So creation is a mixture. 'Order does not exist because of disorder or law because of lawlessness, as someone thinks [i.e. Epicurus], that these good things may exist and be manifest because of the worse ones; but disorder and lawlessness exist because of order, which is imposed from outside.'⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵⁰ Plotinus used *προνοία* for providence. But in *Enneads* III.2.7.24 and II.9.18.40 where he quoted the *Phaedrus* 246b6 he used *ἐπιμελεῖσθαι* in the same sense as Plato talking about the providential care of the gods.

⁷⁵¹ See Armstrong (1967) *On Providence* III.38.

⁷⁵² III.2.1.18-22 translation Armstrong (1967) adapted.

⁷⁵³ Plutarch (*De fato* 568c10-d2) said that Plato called fate *λόγος* in the *Republic* and quoted *Ἀνάγκης θυγατρὸς κόρης Λακέσεως λόγος* (*Republic* 617d6).

⁷⁵⁴ III.2.2.32-36 translation Armstrong (1967). Compare Plato *Timaeus*: νοῦ δὲ ἀνάγκης ἄρχοντος τῷ πείθειν αὐτήν τῶν γιγνομένων τὰ πλεῖστα ἐπὶ τὸ βέλτιστον ἄγειν (48a2-3).

⁷⁵⁵ III.2.4.26-28 translation Armstrong (2006).

Because of human origin in providence everything in humans seeks after the good each according to their power (III.2.3.31-33). But Plotinus poses the problem of why bad things come to the good and good things come to the evil (ἀλλὰ διὰ τί τὰ μὲν παρὰ φύσιν τῷ [ἀγαθῷ], τὰ δὲ κατὰ φύσιν τῷ πονηρῷ (III.2.6.3-4);). How could a wicked ruler get the upper hand and get away with lawlessness if there is providence (III.2.6)?⁷⁵⁶ He answers that the excellence of the unmixed (providence) cannot be expected in the mixed soul (III.2.7.1-3). Living things, which have control of their own movement, sometimes tend towards what is better and sometimes to what is worse (III.2.4.36-8). Providence is not to be blamed (τὴν γε πρόνοιαν ἐπὶ τούτοις οὐ μεμπτέον). Plotinus at this point quotes *Republic* 617e4: ‘αἰτία ἐλομένου’ (III.2.7.19-20).

‘Man has the middle place between gods and beasts and inclines now one way, and now the other, and some men become like gods and others like beasts, and some, the majority, are in between’.⁷⁵⁷ Men are free to choose. It is not providence to let the worse get the upper hand; they are punished (III.2.8). Evil deeds are met with retribution according to *Ἀδράστεια* (III.2.13.12-17).⁷⁵⁸ Like Plutarch in *De fato* Plotinus distinguishes a higher providence and a lower fate.⁷⁵⁹ Reason is the realm of providence but fate, which Plotinus identifies with necessity, operates in mixed souls.⁷⁶⁰ Evil deeds are necessary consequences which we cause. We are not forced by providence but we connect our deeds with the workings of providence.⁷⁶¹ A good person acts according to providence (κατὰ προνοίαν) rather than by the agency of providence (ὑπὸ προνοίας) (III.3.5.47-50). Gerson

⁷⁵⁶ See also III 2.7.29-33.

⁷⁵⁷ III.2.8.9-11 translation Armstrong (2006).

⁷⁵⁸ See Plato *Phaedrus* 248c.

⁷⁵⁹ Ἐν δὲ ἐκ πάντων καὶ πρόνοια μία· εἰμαρμένη δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ χειρόνος ἀρξάμενη, τὸ δὲ ὑπεράνω πρόνοια μόνον (III.3.5.14-16).

⁷⁶⁰ For the identification of fate and necessity see III.1.3.8, III.1.4.4-5, III.3.5.14-16.

⁷⁶¹ ὥστε τὰ κακὰ ἐπόμενα εἶναι, ἐξ ἀνάγκης δέ· καὶ γὰρ παρ’ ἡμῶν κατ’ αἰτίας οὐχ ὑπὸ τῆς προνοίας ἠναγκασμένων, ἀλλ’ ἐξ αὐτῶν συναψάντων μὲν τοῖς τῆς προνοίας καὶ ἀπὸ προνοίας ἔργοις (III.3.5.33-6).

explains this distinction: ‘If we act according to providence, we act on the basis of cognition of the good. To act by providence would mean acting according to the laws of nature.’⁷⁶²

Plotinus used the image of a drama in his exposition. Providence or reason is like the writer and director of a play. The director provides the words and assigns the parts; some parts are good and others bad. But the players may perform their individual parts more or less well. If they perform well they will get better parts; if badly they will get worse parts. In the same way the rational principle assigns the parts in the cosmos according to individual character and unifies all the acting into a coherent whole.⁷⁶³ Within this pattern of the whole individuals can only bring about limited change.⁷⁶⁴

Plotinus raised a question on which Plato did not comment but which was to be a subject of continuing controversy through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. The question stemmed from the passage in the *Laws* where Plato said that no one does evil willingly.⁷⁶⁵ Plotinus asks, if people were wicked because of some external force (either the circuit of the heavens (ὕπὸ τῆς φορᾶς) or the first principle (τῆς ἀρχῆς) determining all that follows from it) how could their actions be deemed unjust (III 2.10.1-6). His answer is that the error of judgement may have been unwilling but the action is wicked. The person carrying out the act is responsible for it. If they had not carried out the act it would not be a wicked act. The principle of necessity is not external to the doer. The circuit of the heavens is not such as to prevent voluntary actions. If all in us was externally driven, everything in us would be as the maker wished it to be and we could not oppose the gods; but we can if the

⁷⁶² Gerson (1994) p.275 n.82.

⁷⁶³ III.2.17.18-53.

⁷⁶⁴ II.3.13.

⁷⁶⁵ πᾶς ὁ ἄδικος οὐχ ἐκὼν ἄδικος (*Laws* 731c2-3).

opposition comes from ourselves. The first principle brings about all the consequences that follow including all the other principles that exist and humans [with the power of voluntary action] are principles (III.2.10.7-19).⁷⁶⁶

The Middle Platonists and Neo-Platonists described an elaborate framework distinguishing providence, fate and necessity. Building on a narrow base in Plato, they asked a question about the relationship between providence and fate and the experience of human free will which Plato did not address. They tried to find a place for freedom within a deterministic universe. So Plotinus, in reacting to the physical determinism of the Stoics, accepted that the heavens play some causal role, but not to the extent of removing freedom of action (III.1.4-6). These questions were to be further explored by the Medieval and Renaissance thinkers.

The Medieval and Renaissance Context

Three issues were particularly controversial, when Bessarion was writing about providence, fate and free will. The first was questions about astrological determinism. There was also a stream of pessimism which put in doubt God's providence. The most difficult issue was the apparent conflict between divine foreknowledge, implied by God's providence, and human free will.⁷⁶⁷ This difficulty was to divide Luther and the Catholic Church. The tension was at the heart of Christian belief in both divine omnipotence and man's freedom. It is illustrated by the contrasting positions of Pico and Pomponazzi.

⁷⁶⁶ The argument is not easy to follow. Although Plato did not address the question in such a clear cut way as Plotinus, in his response to the question Plotinus drew on the argument in the *Laws* where Plato said that souls can change for the better or worse because they have within themselves the cause of change but in changing they do so in accordance with the law of destiny. μεταβάλλει μὲν τοίνυν πάνθ' ὅσα μέτοχά ἐστιν ψυχῆς, ἐν ἑαυτοῖς κεκτημένα τὴν τῆς μεταβολῆς αἰτίαν· μεταβάλλοντα δὲ φέρεται κατὰ τὴν τῆς εἰμαρμένης τάξιν καὶ νόμον (904c6-9).

⁷⁶⁷ The controversies are set out in Trinkaus (1949) and Poppi (1988).

In his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* of 1486 Pico places man in the mid-point between the divine and the animal world. Unlike other creatures who are constrained within the laws of nature man has no such constraint. He is independent of the stellar and natural laws. He can shape his own destiny. He can choose divine immortality or to be among the lower beasts.⁷⁶⁸ In the *Disputationes adversus Astrologiam Divinatricem* of 1494 he stressed man's rationality and freedom from compulsion by stellar or daemonic influences or physical nature.⁷⁶⁹ Nature is subject to laws which God has established as secondary causes. For him fate is the necessity which God has written into nature. This is the working of God's providence in the world.⁷⁷⁰ The responses to *Disputationes* reveal how proponents and adversaries of astrology were divided into the next century.⁷⁷¹

In contrast to Pico, Pomponazzi, whose philosophical antecedents were Aristotle and the Stoics, took the path of Stoic determinism.⁷⁷² He contemptuously dismissed Pico's *Disputationes* saying that they contained nothing of value. His most important work on the problem of human freedom was *Libri quinque de fato, de libero arbitrio et de*

⁷⁶⁸ *Tu, nullis angustiis coërcitus pro tuo arbitrio, in cuius manu te posui, tibi illam praefinies [naturam]. Medium te mundi posui ut circumspiceres inde commodius quicquid est in mundo. Nec te caelestem neque terrenum, neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fictor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas. Poteris in inferiora quae sunt bruta degenerare; poteris in superiora quae divina sunt ex tui animi sententia regenerari (de Hominis Dignitate 6-8).*

⁷⁶⁹ *Adicit [sc. Aquinas] his exemplum, quo simul declaratur quomodo non est causa per se caelum huiusmodi eventorum, sed tantummodo ex accidenti. Instigatur, inquit, aliquis ad sepulchrum fodiendum; accidit ei ut in sepulchro thesaurus sit, quare fodiens sepulchrum thesaurum invenit; non fuit hoc a caelo, ut inveniret thesaurum praeterquam ex accidenti, quin ex accidenti est eundem esse et sepulchrum et thesauri locum. Nam instigare hominem ad sepulchri fossionem in quo latet thesaurus ut thesaurum inveniat, causae rationalis est et intelligentis (Disputationes I p.426-8)... Fortuna fieri dicimus quae praeter intentionem operantis eveniunt; quare tantum in rebus humanis fortuna dicitur, ut quae solae consilio rationeque fiunt....Fortunam vero non intellegimus aut numen, aut naturam, aut rem omnino aliquam causam talis eventus, sed potius excludimus, tantum fortuna factum dicentes ac si dicamus "ita evenit forte, non ex aliqua causa" (Disputationes I p.430).*

⁷⁷⁰ See Poppi (1988) 650-652.

⁷⁷¹ Poppi (1988) 653 n.37 cites opposing treatises.

⁷⁷² For Pomponazzi on free will and determinism see Pine (1986) 275-343.

praedestinatione of 1520. Fate is the ordering of causes by God.⁷⁷³ For Pomponazzi: ‘everything is subject to the providential order of fate. Nothing escapes God’s knowledge, for as the cause of everything, he permits no contingency, whether in physical nature or in human affairs.’ He posed the following dilemma: if God knows our future decisions, we cannot do otherwise; but if we claim to be free in our choices, they do not fall within divine causality. God would not then know all reality but in respect of human action he would be dependent on events (*moveretur a rebus*) which would be to deny God’s omniscience and causality. Faced with this dilemma he concludes: ‘I prefer slavery to sacrilege’.⁷⁷⁴ Both good and evil, therefore, come from providence (*necessarium est igitur esse peccata; divina igitur providentia per se intendit esse peccata et est autor peccatorum* *Quinque Libri* II.7 ed. Lemay p.203). Since individuals are merely subjects of the divine laws expressed in natural and cosmic laws, astrology may predict the destiny of individuals and civilisations.⁷⁷⁵ Later in the work he seems to pull back from this extreme Stoic position. The will can suspend an act of volition despite deliberation and intellectual judgement of what is to be done.⁷⁷⁶ In book IV he drew a distinction in the divine knowledge. God could know the future as an actualised present but he could also know it as a contingent future from the human perspective. God predetermines the future as

⁷⁷³ *Diciturque quod cum fato stat Deum recte universum dispensare in necessaria, contingentia et causalia* (*Quinque Libri* I.18 ed. Lemay p.135.20-1).

⁷⁷⁴ *Verum quantum sit de illa ratione, et praecipue de maiori, scilicet: Aut non est providentia, aut non est liberum arbitrium, neganda est....Dico tamen quod si maior esset necessaria, magis negandum est esse liberum arbitrium, quod fecerunt Stoici, quam negandum providentiam, quod fecit Cicero. Malo enim esse servus quam sacrilegus* (*Quinque Libri* II.3 ed. Lemay p.163.21-8).

⁷⁷⁵ Poppi (1988) 655-8.

⁷⁷⁶ *Erit igitur iste ordo in electione actus voluntatis: Nam primo intellectus practicus consultat de agendo et demonstrat voluntati quid sit agendum; et secundum hoc intellectus concurrat active, et voluntas passive non quidem quoniam tunc velit, sed intelligendo quid sit agendum et consilium recipiendo. Deinde hoc habito, voluntas habet potestatem exequendi et non exequendi quod sibi consultum fuerit, et ex sui potestate, exempli gratia, eligit partem affirmativam contradictionis. In hac electione voluntas est primum movens, objectum est secundum movens motum a voluntate et per se specificans actum; consilium autem et objectum sumptum in ratione praesentantis concurrunt ad istam electionem non primo et per se, sed in ratione adiuvantis et causae sine qua non* (*Quinque Libri* III.6 ed. Lemay p.252.9-22).

contingent.⁷⁷⁷ This is a nod in the direction of Christian orthodoxy since it left some scope for independent human choice but he concluded that Stoic determinism must be right in the natural realm.⁷⁷⁸ At the end he professes adherence to the teachings of the Church despite the philosophical arguments that seemed to undermine them.⁷⁷⁹ In this debate we see the tension between Stoic and Aristotelian physical determinism and orthodox Christian judgements on moral responsibility. Pomponazzi's complex and contradictory arguments have sown disagreement among scholars about his intentions and true position. Poppi (1988 p.659) thinks that ultimately he adopted a Stoic view and his alternative positions did no more than show the weakness of the orthodox Christian position. Trinkaus (1949 p.61) thinks that although Pomponazzi professed to adhere to the teachings of the Church when they contradicted reason, 'the view that he was genuinely skeptical is not without some plausibility'. Pine (1986 pp.340-3) thinks his purpose was to reveal the irreconcilable conflict between determinism and free will. 'The ethical achievement of man who conquers the passions through a purely rational will must always do battle, as it were, with a deterministic universe which eliminates all human freedom. Thus for Pomponazzi, the conflict remains unresolved.' Whatever may be the case Pomponazzi's work demonstrated how problematical the issue was into which Bessarion was stepping.

Renaissance thinkers were conscious of the irrational powers of nature and the constraints on human freedom. In the *Divina Comedia* Marco Lombardo tells Dante that the living

⁷⁷⁷ *Libri quinque* IV.2-3 especially: *quare si in aeternitate utramque partem contradictionis videt, non tamen secundum eandem temporis rationem; nam unam partem contradictionis videt quoniam tempus in quo verificatur illa pars est aeternitati praesens, aliam vero partem videt secundum quod tempus in quo verificatur altera pars contradictionis. Et quanquam tempora non simul sint in se, ut tamen sunt in aeternitate simul; et ubi apud voluntatem sive cognitionem nostram exigitur diversitas realis temporis, in aeternitate sufficit diversitas rationis* (*Quinque Libri* IV.3. ed. Lemay p.339.15-24)

⁷⁷⁸ Poppi (1988) 659.

⁷⁷⁹ *Dico secundo quod cum sapientia humana quasi semper sit in errore, neque homo ex puris naturalibus potest attingere ad sinceram veritatem et praecipue archanorum Dei, ideo in omnibus standum est determinationi Ecclesiae quae a Spiritu Sancto regulatur* (*Quinque Libri* V Epilogue ed. Lemay p.453.15-19).

attribute every cause to the celestial bodies and the heavens do indeed affect certain passions but not all; they can be conquered by free will.⁷⁸⁰ Petrarch doubted man's capacity to put aside the passions of the city, worldly fame, envy at the success of others, self-hatred engendered by failure in the competitive race. Fortune held sway in political and economic life. Ficino on the other hand believed passionately in man's dignity but 'our body [not our soul] is attracted by the body of the world through the forces of fate...The power of fate does not penetrate our mind if our mind has not previously immersed itself by its own will in the body subject to matter'. His recommendation was to flee from the body.⁷⁸¹

Fate was a contentious issue for Christians. Augustine said bluntly that Christians have nothing to do with the word 'fate'.⁷⁸² For him fate was what is thought to derive from some necessity, excluding God's will (*ea fatalia, quae praeter Dei et hominum voluntatem cuiusdam ordinis necessitate contingunt C.D. V.1*). It was normally used of the power of the stars over us (*usitate loquendi consuetudine non intellegunt [fatum] nisi vim positionis stellarum C.D. V.1*). So the word is to be avoided even in speaking about the will and power of God.⁷⁸³

Two major influences on the understanding of fate and providence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were Boethius and Aquinas.⁷⁸⁴ Boethius, following Plutarch and Plotinus,

⁷⁸⁰ *Purgatorio* XVI.64-81.

⁷⁸¹ See Trinkaus (1949) and Marsilio Ficino's letter to Cavalcanti cited by Kristeller (1943) 298.

⁷⁸² *Contendat ergo Cicero cum eis, qui hanc causarum ordinem dicunt esse fatalem vel potius ipsum fati nomine appellant, quod nos abhorremus praecipue propter vocabulum, quod non in re vera consuevit intellegi (C.D. V.9)*.

⁷⁸³ Compare Aquinas: *In quantum omnia quae hic aguntur, divinae providentiae subduntur, tanquam per eam praeordinata et quasi praelocuta, fatum ponere possumus: licet hoc nomine sancti Doctores uti recusaverint, propter eos qui ad vim positionis siderum hoc nomen retorquebant (S.T. Ia q116 a1)*.

⁷⁸⁴ See Grafton (1981). Boethius' importance may be gauged from the large number of commentaries on his work. Courcelle ((1967) 403-418) lists twenty six Latin commentaries known to him on the *De consolazione Philosophiae* produced between the ninth and fifteenth centuries. But the early humanists found Boethius'

drew a distinction between providence (πρόνοια) and fate (εἰμαρμένη).⁷⁸⁵ The distinction was followed by Aquinas.⁷⁸⁶ Courcelle argues that the distinction between providence and fate only made sense in the Neo-Platonic hierarchy of being. The Stoics did not draw the providence/fate distinction.⁷⁸⁷

For Boethius providence is the order of things contemplated in the mind of God; fate is the disposition of the divine mind in changeable nature. This, he says, is the view of the ancients. Providence is the divine reason itself as the summit of all things which governs all things. Fate is inherent in all that is changeable. Through it providence unifies all things in their proper order. So there is a distinction between the way in which changeable things, which are in the temporal order, are united in the foresight of the divine mind but, on the other hand, are distributed in time under the laws of fate.⁷⁸⁸ He uses as an illustration of the

condemnation of the Muses hard to take and Valla in his *De libero arbitrio* thought that Boethius had overstated the possibility of explaining fate and providence philosophically. He was *nimis philosophiae amator* and too much of a pagan philosopher. See Poppi (2008) 648.

⁷⁸⁵ In Plutarch fate is the divine law of the cosmos (ἡ εἰμαρμένη λόγος θεῖος ἀπαραβάτος δι' αἰτίαν ἀναπόδραστος *De fato* 568d5) and providence is the intellection or will of the primary God (ἡ μὲν ἀνωτάτω καὶ πρώτη τοῦ πρώτου θεοῦ νόησις εἴτε καὶ βούλησις οὓσα εὐεργέτις ἀπάντων 572f5-7). In Plotinus providence is God's plan for the wellbeing of the universe according to Intellect (προόρασίν τινα καὶ λογισμὸν θεοῦ, ὡς ἂν γένοιτο τόδε τὸ πᾶν, καὶ ὡς ἂν ἄριστα κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν εἴη...τὴν πρόνοιαν ὀρθῶς ἂν καὶ ἀκολούθως λέγοιμεν τῷ παντὶ εἶναι τὸ κατὰ νοῦν αὐτὸν εἶναι *De fato* III.2.1.18-23) and fate is lower providence (ἐν δὲ ἐκ πάντων καὶ πρόνοια μία: εἰμαρμένη δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ χείρονος ἀρξαμένη, τὸ δὲ ὑπεράνω πρόνοια μόνον III.3.5.14-16).

⁷⁸⁶ *Necesse est quod ratio ordinis in finem in mente divina praeexistat. Ratio autem ordinandorum in finem, proprie providentia est...Ipsa igitur ratio ordinis rerum in finem, providentia in Deo nominatur* (Aquinas *S.T. Ia q22 a1*) and *fatum est ordinatio secundarum causarum ad effectus divinitus provisos* (*S.T. Ia q116 a4*).

⁷⁸⁷ Courcelle (1967) 204.

⁷⁸⁸ *Haec in suae simplicitatis arce composita multiplicem rebus regendis modum statuit. Qui modus cum in ipsa divinae intelligentiae puritate conspicitur, providentia nominatur; cum vero ad ea quae movet atque disponit refertur, fatum a veteribus appellatum estProvidentia est ipsa illa divina ratio in summo omnium principe constituta, quae cuncta disponit, fatum vero inhaerens rebus mobilibus dispositio, per quam providentia suis quaeque nectit ordinibus. Providentia namque cuncta pariter quamvis diversa quamvis infinita complectitur, fatum vero singula digerit in motum locis, formis ac temporibus distributa, ut haec temporalis ordinis explicatio, in divinae mentis adunata prospectum, providentia sit, eadem vero adunatio, digesta atque explicata temporibus, fatum vocetur. Quae licet diversa sint, alterum tamen pendet ex altero; ordo namque fatalis ex providentiae simplicitate proceditManifestum est...fatum eorum quae divina simplicitas gerenda disposuit, mobilem nexum atque ordinem temporalem.... Quo fit ut, temetsi vobis, hunc ordinem minime cosiderare valentibus, confusa omnia perturbataque videantur, nihilo minus tamen suus modus ad bonum dirigens cuncta disponit. Nihil est enim quod mali causa ne ab ipsis quidem improbis fiat; quos, ut uberrime demonstratum est, bonum quaerentes pravus error avertit, nedum ordo de summi boni cardine proficiens a suo quoquam deflectat exordio *De consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.8-22).*

relationship of providence and fate and the dependence of fate on providence the image of the craftsman who crafts bit by bit in time what he had previously envisaged in a simple and instantaneous manner.⁷⁸⁹ This is an echo of Plato *Timaeus* 28a where the Demiurge is likened to the artist consulting the perfect model as he constructs the cosmos. The ancients to whom Boethius refers included Plotinus who made the same distinction between a single unifying providence which is divided in nature between individual parts.⁷⁹⁰ The Boethian distinction between God's providence and fate became current in the Renaissance. In Salutati's treatise *De fato et Fortuna*, written between 1396 and 1399, fate is the organisation and interrelationship of secondary causes as these are thought and willed by divine providence.⁷⁹¹

According to Boethius all things are subject to providence, even fate itself.⁷⁹² But some things under providence are beyond fate. They are the immovable things close to the divinity. He illustrated this with the image of a revolving sphere where the rings close to the centre of the circle are like a pivot of the outer rings. The further away things are from the 'first mind' at the centre the more they are subject to fate.⁷⁹³ Courcelle traces the

⁷⁸⁹ *De consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.12.

⁷⁹⁰ γίνεται τοίνυν ἡ πρόνοια ἐξ ἀρχῆς εἰς τέλος κατιοῦσα ἄνωθεν οὐκ ἴσα οἶον κατ' ἀριθμόν, ἀλλὰ κατ' ἀναλογία ἀλλή ἐν ἄλλῳ τόπῳ...ἐν δὲ ἐκ πάντων καὶ πρόνοια μία· εἰμαρμένη δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ χειρόνος ἀρξάμενη, τὸ δὲ ὑπεράνω πρόνοια μόνον (Plotinus III.3.5.1-16). See also Proclus: δύο δὴ οὖν νοεῖσθω [σοι] γένη, τὰ μὲν νοητά, τὰ δὲ αἰσθητά· καὶ δύο δυοῖν βασιλεῖαι, προνοίας μὲν ἄνω τῶν τε νοητῶν καὶ τῶν αἰσθητῶν, εἰμαρμένης δὲ κάτω τῶν αἰσθητῶν (*De fato* 14 ed. Boese p.121). Chalcidius made the same distinction: *sequitur hanc providentiam fatum, lex divina promulgata intelligentiae sapienti modulamine ad rerum omnium gubernatorem...Iuxta hanc legem, id est fatum, omnia reguntur, secundum propriam quaeque naturam, beata quidem necessitate incommutabilique constantia cuncta caelestia, quippe quae sint providentiae vicina atque contigua* (in *Timaeum* CLXXVII).

⁷⁹¹ See Poppi (1988) 646.

⁷⁹² Compare with Plutarch καὶ ἡ μὲν εἰμαρμένη πάντως κατὰ πρόνοιαν, ἡ δὲ πρόνοια οὐδαμῶς καθ' εἰμαρμένην (*De fato* 573b2-3).

⁷⁹³ *Quo fit ut omnia quae fato subsunt providentiae quoque subjecta sint, cui ipsum etiam subjacet fatum, quaedam vero, quae sub providentia locata sunt, fati seriem superent; ea vero sunt quae, primae propinqua divinitati, stabiliter fixa fatalis ordinem mobilitatis excedunt. Nam ut orbium circa eundem cardinem sese vertentium qui est intimus ad simplicitatem medietatis accedit ceterorumque extra locatorum veluti cardo quidam, circa quem versentur, existit, extimus vero maiorum ambitu rotatus, quanto a puncti media individualitate discedit tanto amplioribus spatiis explicatur, si quid vero illi se medio conectat et societ, in simplicitatem cogitur diffundique ac diffluere cessat: simili ratione quod longius a prima mente discedit*

source of this image to Proclus (*De decem dubitationibus* 5.25-38 ed. Boese p.10) where he likened the One to the unmoving central point of a circle who unites all things in his knowledge. The things he knows are the circle.⁷⁹⁴ Boethius' view that God directs all things to good so that even evil is a perversion of the good was influential on future thinkers.⁷⁹⁵ Plotinus (*De fato* III.2.3.31-3) put into the mouth of the universe that 'everything in me desires the good and achieves it according to the power of each' (πάντα δὲ τὰ ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐφίεται μὲν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, τυγχάνει δὲ κατὰ δύναμιν τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστα).

Aquinas in his treatment of providence and fate was influenced by Boethius, whom he quoted extensively. He followed Boethius' distinction between providence and fate and the role of fate in unifying an infinite multiplicity of seemingly random events.⁷⁹⁶ Both Boethius and Aquinas were drawing on a tradition that originated in Plato but had been greatly developed by the Neo-Platonists, particularly Plotinus and Proclus. Bessarion, who uses Boethius and Aquinas to interpret Plato was therefore largely dependent on post-Platonic sources for his interpretation.

maioribus fati nexibus implicatur ac tanto aliquid liberum est quanto illum rerum cardinem vicinius petit (de Consolatione Philosophiae IV.6.14-15).

⁷⁹⁴ Courcelle (1967) 207.

⁷⁹⁵ *De Consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.22 see note [788788](#) above and *naturam rerum omnium proditor deus idem ad bonum dirigens cuncta disponit* (IV.6.55). Compare Chalcidius: *Omnis anima particeps divinitatis naturali appetitu bonum quidem semper expetit, errat tamen aliquando in iudicio bonorum et malorum* (in *Timaeum* CLXV).

⁷⁹⁶ See for example at S.T. Ia q116 a2 where Aquinas referred to Boethius *De consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.13: *Divina providentia per causas medias suos effectus prosequitur. Potest ergo ipsa ordinatio effectuum dupliciter considerari. Uno modo, secundum quod est in ipso Deo: et sic ipsa ordinatio effectuum vocatur providentia. Secundum vero quod praedicta ordinatio consideratur in mediis causis a Deo ordinatis ad aliquos effectus producendos, sic habet rationem fati. Et hoc est quod Boethius dicit.* In S.T. Ia q116 a1 he quoted as authority *De consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.9 (*fatum est inhaerens rebus mobilibus dispositio, per quam providentia suis quaeque nectit ordinibus*) and argued: *In rebus inferioribus videntur quaedam a fortuna vel casu provenire. Contigit autem quandoque quod aliquid, ad inferiores causas relatum, est fortuitum vel casuale, quod tamen ad causam aliquem superiorem, invenitur esse per intentum...Ea quae hic per accidens aguntur, sive in rebus naturalibus sive in rebus humanis, reducuntur in aliquam causam praordinantem quae est providentia divina. Quia nihil prohibet id quod est per accidens, accipi ut unum ab aliquo intellectu.* Aquinas developed the point with a specific example of a man sent to dig a grave and finding a treasure (*sicut si aliquis sciens in quo loco sit thesaurus absconditus, instiget aliquem rusticum hoc ignorantem, ut ibi fodiat sepulcrum*). The example of the unexpected find of treasure as unintended chance had a long pedigree. See Plutarch *De fato* 572a and Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1025^a14-19.

Boethius' and Aquinas' thinking passed into the Renaissance but society, and therefore ideas, had changed. The static feudalism of the Middle Ages had been succeeded by a more urban and economically competitive society.⁷⁹⁷ In Italy the Black Death, an influx of Greek and Arabic works on astrology, and Averroistic determinism stimulated interest in astrology in the fourteenth century.⁷⁹⁸ Its enduring influence is apparent in the number of writers who devoted space to contesting its validity. It conflicted with the humanist belief in the dignity of the person exercising free will. Salutati's *De fato et Fortuna* was one such work. According to Salutati fortune and chance were natural situations but unforeseeable and beyond the scope of our choices. But such circumstances were still contained within the providential plan governing our lives. Petrarch in a letter to Boccaccio accused astrologers of ignorance and profanity and in another letter to Bruni he asked: 'What is the point of astrologers? Why do the *mathematici* waste their time in useless speculations? To be sure, they can predict eclipses, rainfall and the direction of the wind, but only God knows what will be our freely willed decisions....It is pure chance if the mendacity of the astrologers produces some small morsels of truth.'⁷⁹⁹ Nevertheless interest continued through the Renaissance. In 1494 Pico wrote his *Disputationes adversus Astrologiam Divinatricem* in which he attacked astrology and its absolute determinism and insisted on human independence from astral influences; he did not deny the influence of celestial phenomena on the human body but not on the human mind.⁸⁰⁰ Ficino upheld man's independence of celestial forces in *Theologia platonica* (1469-74) and *Disputatio contra Iudicium Astrologorum* (1489) but his fascination with magic and Eastern religion led him

⁷⁹⁷ See Trinkaus (1949).

⁷⁹⁸ See Poppi (1988) 643-4. 'Works such as those of Guido Bonatti, Cecco d'Ascoli and Ristoro d'Arezzo, as well as the teaching of Blasius of Parma in various north Italian universities, were profoundly equivocal about astrological determinism.'

⁷⁹⁹ Rizzo, S. ed. (2006) *Petrarcha Epistolae Seniles* (Florence) I.7 quoted by Poppi (1988) 645. See *ibid.* 644-6.

⁸⁰⁰ See Vasoli (1988) 69. Pico distinguished natural magic from daemonic magic. He regarded natural magic, by which natural powers could be enhanced by verbal and angelic magic from the cabala, as legitimate.

to flirt with astrology in *De Vita Coelitus Comparanda* (1489). Giovanni Pontano (1426-1503) in his *De Rebus Coelestibus* accepted that astral influences could powerfully affect human behaviour.⁸⁰¹

Bessarion was sceptical about astrology or oracles. In his letter to Apostoles lamenting the fall of Byzantium he says the he had no need of astrology or ancient oracles to see what the consequences might be without some action being taken; he fears for the complete destruction of the Greeks followed by that of the whole of Italy.⁸⁰² This suggests that astrological explanations for the fate of Byzantium were current. He was, therefore, writing at a time when interest in astrology was very much alive. The Church had always been suspicious of astrological determinism in human behaviour. It had first been condemned at the Council of Laodicaea (364-7).⁸⁰³ In the light of the Renaissance controversy over astrology it is surprising that Bessarion did not devote more space than he did to refuting the claims of astrology (see pages 227-32 below).

There was also a strand of fatalism in some writers at the time of Bessarion. Petrarch in the prologue of his *De miseria humanae conditionis* said that he was going to write about the dignity of man because others have been obsessed by man's misery.⁸⁰⁴ Other examples of pessimism about the human condition subjected to the mercy of fate were found in Poggio Bracciolini's (1380-1459) *De miseria humanae conditionis* written in the aftermath of the fall of Byzantium and the *Intercoenales* (c.1439) of Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) for

⁸⁰¹ Poppi (1988) 650-1.

⁸⁰² Mohler (1942) pp.481-3.

⁸⁰³ The persistence of a belief in astrology and the validity of its predictions is evident by the fact that Pope Sixtus V devoted a bull, *Coeli et terrae creator Deus*, in 1586 to its condemnation. The bull drew a distinction between natural and judicial astrology. It permitted the former but prohibited the latter. Astrological works had been on the index of prohibited books since 1559. See Baldine (2001).

⁸⁰⁴ *Etsi si de hoc nemo hactenus, nisi fallor, scripserit, aggressique aliqui destiterint, quod ...humana miseria nimis multa prorsus evidenter emineat, foelicitas parva et latens stilo altius fodienda sit* (Quoted by Krayer (1988) 306 n.24).

whom man was the plaything of powers outside his control. These writers believed that only virtue could prevail against the miseries of blind fate.⁸⁰⁵ This pessimism challenged orthodox belief in God's providence and was a question which Bessarion had to address.

The most difficult question was how human freedom could be consistent with God's providence and foreknowledge. In his work *De libero arbitrio* (1439) Valla stated that his purpose was to discover whether divine foreknowledge precluded free will.⁸⁰⁶ His work was anti-rationalist.⁸⁰⁷ He was a fideist who criticised Boethius for making theology subservient to philosophy.⁸⁰⁸ He argued that foreknowledge of human events did not preclude freedom of human will in bringing them about. 'The fact that God knows beforehand what man will do results in no necessity that he should do it, because man acts according to his own will: that which is voluntary cannot be necessary.'⁸⁰⁹ He quotes the story of Apollo who could predict the destiny of Sextus Tarquinius but had no power to change it. Apollo's conclusion, in the words of Valla, was: 'I know destiny; I do not decide it. I can complain about fortune, but I cannot change it. What I have is merely the ability to foreknow and predict.'⁸¹⁰

⁸⁰⁵ See Krayer (1988) 306-7 and Poppi (1988) 647-8.

⁸⁰⁶ See Poppi (1988) 648-50.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ac quidem, si probe animadvertamus, quidquid illis temporibus haeresum fuit, quas non parum multas fuisse accepimus, id omne fere ex philosophicorum dogmatum fontibus nascebatur, ut non modo non prodesset philosophia sanctissimae religioni, sed etiam vehementissime obsesset (De libero arbitrio ed. Anfossi p.8).*

⁸⁰⁸ *In praesentiarum vero ostendere volumus Boëtium nulla alia causa, nisi quod philosophiae amator fuit, non eo modo quo debuit disputasse de libero arbitrio in quinto libro de consolatione (ibid. pp.9-10). Et quid causae fuisse putas, ut homo christianus a Paulo discesserit eiusque nunquam meminerit, cum in eadem materia quam ille tractaverat versaretur, atque adeo in toto opere de consolatione nulla usquam de religione nostra, nulla de praeceptis ad beatam vitam perducentibus, nulla de Christo mentio ac paene significatio reperiatur....Nam ita existimo, nullum vehementiorem philosophiae admiratorem posse Deo placere. Ideoque Boëtius, aquilonem pro austro sequens, classem oneratam vino non in portum patriae invexit, sed in barbaras oras atque in peregrina litora impexit (ibid. pp. 47-8).*

⁸⁰⁹ Translation Poppi (1988). *Ais Deum providisse Judam praevaricatorem fore: numquid ideo et ad praevaricandum induxit? Non video: quod enim Deus praesciscit aliquid ab homine faciendum, ut id facias nulla necessitas est, quia voluntate id facis: quod autem voluntarium, hoc nequit esse necessarium (ibid. p.19). Longe diversum est aliquid posse fieri et aliquid futurum esse....Ita possum aliter agere quam eventurum sit, tamen non aliter agam (ibid. p.29).*

⁸¹⁰ Translation Poppi (1988). *[Apollo to Sextus] Ego nosco fata, non statuo; ego denunciare fortunam possum, non mutare; ego sortium index sum, non arbiter; nulla huius rei penes me culpa est: quippe qui ne*

Bessarion on the nature of providence and fate

Providence

Unlike Valla, Bessarion addressed the issues from a philosophical perspective. His account of providence and fate drew on Plato's *Laws* and interpretations of passages in the *Timaeus*, the *Gorgias*, the *Statesman* and *the Republic*. He argues that Plato, like Aristotle, believed in fate but did not think all things are subject to fate. Some things are in our power.⁸¹¹ For him *providentia* and *fatum* are the same but viewed from different perspectives. *Providentia* is God's relation to creation whereas *fatum* is the reverse, the relation of creation to God. There is no real but only a mental distinction between them (*itaque inter fatum et providentiam quid intersit, non re potest, sed ratione distingui* (ICP 2.10.2 p.183.19-20)). Unchangeable providence becomes inherent in changeable creatures through fate (*fatum esse dispositionem confirmat rebus mobilibus inhaerentem, per quam providentia suo ordine quaeque conectat* (ICP 2.10.2 p.183.17-19)).⁸¹² Human souls are above the unchangeable laws of fate in so far as they live in accordance with reason and enjoy the light of God's providence (*praestantiores [legibus fatalibus] enim sunt, quamdiu mentis ratione vivunt et providentiae lumine apud summum deum fruuntur* (ICP 2.10.3 p.183.37-8)). But in their corporeal nature they are subject to fate (*sed corporea vehiculorum natura et sorte, qua ad colendas gubernandasque terrae partes ducuntur, fato vulgari subiiciuntur* (ICP 2.10.3 p.183.38-40)).

meis quidem adversis, quae futura prospicio, obsistere queo....Tu poposcisti oraculum, ego dedi, veritatem exquisisti, mendacium dicere non potui (ibid. p.32-3).

⁸¹¹ *Enim vero Platonem fatum ponere non diffiteor, quem ad modum etiam Aristotelem facere manifestum est. Neuter tamen eorum ita de fato sentit, quasi omnia necessario fieri velint, sed locum potestati nostrae amplissimum relinquunt permultaque esse, quae fieri possint, arbitrantur nulla fati necessitate obstante* (ICP 2.10.1 p.181.3-7).

⁸¹² Compare with Boethius in note [788788](#) above.

Bessarion dealt with Plato's views on providence and fate in separate chapters.⁸¹³ His purpose was to explain Plato's views on them and why he linked them together.⁸¹⁴ His challenge was to give an account of providence which was consistent with the determinism of events and with man's free will. He needed to encompass not just providence and free will but chance and contingency.

He asserts Plato's belief in the existence of the gods, in their universal providence and in its immutability.⁸¹⁵ He distinguishes providence from fate and necessity.⁸¹⁶ He quotes arguments from Plato *Laws* X extensively to demonstrate that Plato held divine providence to extend to the most detailed human affairs while accepting free will.⁸¹⁷ He sets out Plato's position either by quotations or by summarising it without any mediation through later interpretation. Plato was rebutting the position of the deists. His position was optimistic, emphasising God's care of all people and things. Bessarion contrasts this with Alexander of Aphrodisias' version of Aristotle's view that God's (or the unmoved mover's) knowledge of human affairs and providence only extended to the regular motions of the heavenly bodies on which the cycle of generation and decay depended but not to individuals (see pages 242-3 below). He points out that Plato's view, in contrast to

⁸¹³ In ICP 2.9 (*Platonem dei providentiam non negasse*) and ICP 2.10 (*Quomodo Plato de fato locutus sit*).

⁸¹⁴ *Quid Plato de divina providentia et fato senserit, explicare decrevi, ut non modo opinio eius, sed etiam ratio, cur providentiam cum fato coniunxerit, intellegatur* (ICP 2.9.1 p.167.25-7).

⁸¹⁵ *Plato enim pietatem in tribus rebus contineri maxime docet, in opinando deos esse providereque rebus omnibus et iuste ac sine ulla mutatione providere* (ICP 2.9.1 p.165.27-29).

⁸¹⁶ *Qui igitur fieri potest, ut Plato, qui eum impietatis reum peragit, qui providentiam negat, ipse divinam neget esse providentiam? Nihil profecto apud eum reperies, quod facinus hoc affirmet. Nec vero fato aut necessitate agi omnia vel factis unquam vel dictis ostendit* (ICP 2.9.1 p.165.34-7).

⁸¹⁷ πρόνοια, like *providentia*, has two senses. It can mean 'foreknowledge' and Bessarion used it in this sense when dealing with questions about God's foreknowledge and free will. But it can mean God's 'rule of divine providence'. Plato used ἐπιμελεῖσθαι to convey this notion e.g. τῷ τοῦ παντός ἐπιμελουμένῳ πρὸς τὴν σωτηρίαν καὶ ἀρετὴν τοῦ ὅλου πάντ' ἐστὶ συντεταγμένα (*Laws* 903b4-6).

Aristotle's, was in conformity with Christianity.⁸¹⁸ He draws attention to the parallel between Plato's *Laws* 905a4-b1 and words of Psalm 138.⁸¹⁹ His explanations of Plato were closely linked to questions of Christian orthodoxy and to his aim of arguing that Plato conformed to Christian orthodoxy.⁸²⁰

He demonstrates that Plato believed in God's providence from quotations and from Plato's own practices.⁸²¹ He cites as evidence *Laws* 888b4-7, which he quotes with slight adaptation, where Plato stated the falsity of belief in the non-existence of the gods and the falsity of a more persistent belief that they do exist but have no interest in human affairs or that they are easily won over by prayers and sacrifices.⁸²² In addition, he argues that Plato offered gifts and sacrifices to the gods. He believes in petitioning the gods in prayer, as in the *Timaeus* (27c6-8), where Timaeus begins his account of creation with a prayer to the gods that his account might have their approval, and in the *Laws* (893b) where the Athenian stranger prefaces his account of the soul with an invocation of the gods. Plato also demonstrates that those who lead wicked lives are punished but those who lead virtuous lives enjoy the companionship of the blessed in the Elysian Fields. Bessarion draws the conclusion from these facts that for Plato not everything was subject to fate and that there was a big difference between the necessity of fate and free will (*patet igitur non*

⁸¹⁸ *Plato vero quid de divina providentia cum aliis pluribus in locis tum duodecimo de Republica libro scripserit, et quam digna sua sapientia et nostrae religioni convenientia illa sint, audite* (ICP 2.9.8 p. 173.17-19). This is an odd reference to Plato. There are not twelve books in the *Republic*. The Greek text refers to ἐν τῷ δεκάτῳ τῶν Νόμων which was, in fact, the source of Bessarion's arguments. See also: *quid igitur ab ore hominis gentilis accipi posset ad nostram religionem accomodatius? Quid ea praesertim aetate dici potuisset praestantius atque divinius? Nam cum ceteri deos immortales sua dumtaxat curare, res vero humanas vi quadam naturae regi gubernarique existiment, quod crimen etiam Peripateticis obiicitur, solus Plato non aliter fere, quam nostrae religionis doctores fecerint, loqui de providentia videtur* (ICP 2.9.11 p.177.33-38).

⁸¹⁹ *Haec Plato iisdem fere verbis, quibus David noster divinus propheta locutus est, 'Quo ibo a spiritu tuo, et quo a facie tua fugiam? Si ascendero in caelum, tu illuc es, si descendero in inferno, ades.'* (ICP 2.9.11 p.17.29-32).

⁸²⁰ See for example: *in his enim dumtaxat virtutibus animae, quae instrumentorum corporeorum actus sunt, illa operantur, quod nostri etiam doctores facile concedunt eodem modo quo Plato, qui motum caelestium corporum vim habere in naturalia corpora evidenter ac per se dicit* (ICP 2.10.5 p.187.20-3).

⁸²¹ ICP 2.9.1.

⁸²² See note [723723](#) above.

omnia fato subiecisce Platonem nec fieri necessitate omnia voluisse. Maxime enim inter se distant fatalis necessitas et libertas arbitrii quam semper tueri conatus est Plato (ICP 2.9.1 p.167.19-21)).

He gives an account of the objection which those who denied the providence of the gods raised, namely that the good suffer and the wicked prosper, and therefore the gods are indifferent to human virtue and vice.⁸²³ This problem had led some people to doubt God's providence.⁸²⁴ For the benefit of his Latin readers he gives a detailed summary of Plato's argument in the *Laws* refuting the claim of those who denied the universal providence of the gods.⁸²⁵ The argument is that the gods had a care for all things, however small, and ordered them all for the best and within this economy they give human beings free choice to pursue good or evil. Plato's argument demonstrates that 'the gods have as great a care for little things as for great (900c7-d1)'. Bessarion ends his summary of the argument with a free rendering of the passage from the *Laws* in which the Athenian stranger concludes by saying that each part had a contribution to make to the excellence of the whole; the individual soul is directed to the benefit of the whole not the whole for the benefit of the individual.⁸²⁶ Bessarion's entire argument is drawn from Eusebius' *in Praeparationem Evangelii* (XII.52), where Eusebius quotes in its entirety the same passage from the *Laws* and notes the close conformity with Christian teaching, citing the same verse of psalm 138 as Bessarion (*ICP* 2.9.11 p.177.31-2). Eusebius' point was that the Hebrew scriptures foreshadowed Plato.

⁸²³ *ICP* 2.9.8 p.173.21-37. See *Laws* 899d4-900b2 and *Republic* 363e4-365a3.

⁸²⁴ Bessarion: οἴονται καταφρονεῖν τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ ἀμελεῖν τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων. κἀντεῦθεν ἀπιστοῦσι τῇ προνοίᾳ τοσαύτην ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρωπίνοις ὀρώντες ἀνωμαλίαν, ἥτις οὐκ ἂν συνέβαινεν οὐσης προνοίας (*ICP* 2.9.8. p.172.29-31). Compare with Plato: ἀγόμενος δὲ ὑπὸ τε ἀλογίας ἅμα καὶ οὐ δυνάμενος δυσχεραίνειν θεοῦς, εἰς τοῦτο νῦν τὸ πάθος ἐλήλυθας, ὥστ' εἶναι μὲν δοκεῖν αὐτούς, τῶν δὲ ἀνθρωπίνων καταφρονεῖν καὶ ἀμελεῖν πραγμάτων (*Laws* 900a8-b2).

⁸²⁵ *Laws* 899d4-904c3. *Audite quaeso breviter a me nunc, latissime ab illo [sc. Plato], si quando libebit libros ejus in manus sumere atque perlegere (ICP* 2.9.8 p.173.19-21).

⁸²⁶ 903b7-e1 and 905b2-c1.

Fate

Bessarion's exposition demonstrated that Plato believed in divine providence including free will. But this left open the nature of fate.⁸²⁷ His account of the nature of fate in Plato is heavily dependent on Plotinus, Proclus and Boethius. He interprets the Platonic texts in a way that left room for fate and free will. According to his interpretation of Plato's view of fate it is the divine law applied to material and changeable nature. In order to leave a place for free will between providence and fate or necessity he uses a tripartite division consisting of the intelligible (νοητά), the intellectual (νοερά) and the natural and sensible (τὰ κατὰ τὴν φύσιν καὶ αἰσθητά).⁸²⁸ The tripartite division was common among the Neo-Platonists. Proclus distinguishes the sensible (τὸ κατὰ φύσιν καὶ αἰσθητόν), the intellective (τὸ νοερόν) and the intelligible (τὸ νοητόν).⁸²⁹ In *de Providentia* he distinguishes νοερόν, ψυχικόν and σωματικόν.⁸³⁰ According to Bessarion fate in human beings left open the possibility of free will. In physical beings it is the source of chance and contingency. For divine, intelligible and immaterial beings it is the divine law of perfect and unchanging order although one should not properly speak of fate in these cases because they are above fate.⁸³¹

⁸²⁷ According to Plato man has free will: τῆς δὲ γενέσεως τοῦ ποίου τινὸς ἀφῆκε ταῖς βουλήσεσιν ἐκάστων ἡμῶν τὰς αἰτίας (*Laws* 904b9-c1). Bessarion renders this in his summary: καὶ οἴου γενήσεται ἡθους, τούτου δὲ ταῖς βουλήσεσιν ἡμῶν ἐκάστου τὰς αἰτίας ἀπέλιπεν (*ICP* 2.9.10 p.176 10-11).

⁸²⁸ *ICP* 2.10.2 p.180.26-30.

⁸²⁹ *In Tim.* I.335.12-18.

⁸³⁰ *De Providentia* 9 ed Boese p.115 n.9. The Greek text of Proclus' *de Providentia* only survives in excerpts in a Greek compilation of the twelfth century. For most of the text we are dependent on a Latin translation by Moerbeke. For an account of the text see Steel (2007) 2-3.

⁸³¹ *Quapropter liberum servatur arbitrium, et potestas volendi nolendive non tollitur. Privationi vero, accidenti fortunae, casui causam in rebus materialibus tribuit. At in rebus divinis, intelligibilibus, immaterialibus et perpetua illa aeternarum et immutabilium causarum et rerum serie, in ratione etiam naturae universali, qua semper eodem modo quaecumque proveniunt, tum in perfecto atque ordinato administrandi modo et lege divina, qua optime omnia et pro sua natura absolute servantur atque reguntur, in his, inquam, si fatum quis dixerit abutens nomine, quamvis supra omne fatum sint, nequaquam ab utriusque philosophi sententia discedet* (*ICP* 2.10.1 p.181.15-24).

He used this typology in interpreting and applying Plato's terminology to each of the three orders.⁸³² He says that in the *Phaedrus* Plato applied *Adrasteia* or *lex Adrastiae* to intelligibles (ἐπὶ τῶν νοητῶν).⁸³³ Bessarion applies *fatum* to the sensible and natural world (ἐν τοῖς κατὰ φύσιν καὶ αἰσθητοῖς) citing the *Statesman*, *Protagoras* and *Timaeus*.⁸³⁴ He applies ἀνάγκη and τῶν Μοιρῶν μήτηρ from the *Republic* to the order of the intellectual (ἐπὶ τῶν νοερῶν), in other words the higher faculties of human souls. He gives no reference to the *Republic* and the expression τῶν Μοιρῶν μήτηρ is not found in Plato. But he may have been referring to *Republic* 617b8-e5 where Plato describes the three Fates (Clotho, Atropos and Lachesis) as the daughters of Necessity. Lachesis allocated different kinds of life to mortal souls and once they had made their choice they were bound to it by necessity (ὅτι συνέσται ἐξ ἀνάγκης). The way in which Bessarion links these typological distinctions to the Platonic texts with imprecise references is contrived. Plato was not consistent in their use. For instance in *Republic* 619c2 where in the myth of Er the man chose the lot of tyranny, Plato used εἰμαρμένη rather than ἀνάγκη. But in *Republic* 617e3 he says that the man who chooses the first lot from the lap of Lachesis is bound to his choice of life ἐξ ἀνάγκης.

According to Bessarion there is an order which runs through these three orders according to the nature of each. The order is immutable and unavoidable. It embraces intelligibles

⁸³² *ICP* 2.10.2 p.180.26-30.

⁸³³ In *Phaedrus* 248c2-5 it is the θεσμὸς Ἀδράστειας that the soul which seeks to accompany God and sees the truth will be free of grief for the following period and if it can remain always doing this will be free from harm always. See Adam (1963) I p.278: 'Adrasteia was originally, perhaps, a personification of ἀνάγκη in relation to humanity and issues of human conduct. This meaning survived in Orphic theology and appears in the *Phaedrus*.'

⁸³⁴ Bessarion does not give more precise references but he probably had in mind from the *Statesman*: τότε δὴ τοῦ παντὸς ὁ μὲν κυβερνήτης, οἷον πηδαλίων οἶακος ἀφέμενος, εἰς τὴν αὐτοῦ περιώπην ἀπέστη, τὸν δὲ δὴ κόσμον πάλιν ἀνέστρεφεν εἰμαρμένη τε καὶ σύμφυτος ἐπιθυμία (*Statesman* 272e3-6). Proclus refers to the same passage in *de Providentia* 13 ed. Boese p.121.16-17 when he says that Plato referred to necessity as the moving cause of bodies but he called it fate elsewhere. Bessarion's reference to the *Protagoras* is: ἤδη δὲ καὶ ἡ εἰμαρμένη ἡμέρα παρῆν, ἐν ἣ ἔδει καὶ ἄνθρωπον ἐξιέναι ἐκ γῆς εἰς φῶς (*Protagoras* 321c6-7) and to the *Timaeus*: νόμους τοῦς εἰμαρμένους εἶπεν αὐταῖς [ψυχᾶς] (*Timaeus* 41e2-3). All three passages refer to inevitabilities affecting the physical cosmos, human beings or nature.

(τοῖς νοητοῖς) in their entirety but sensibles (τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς) only in so far as their capacity allows. The idea of the law of destiny inscribed in or running through all things is derived from Boethius and the Neo-Platonists.⁸³⁵ According to Bessarion what proceeds from the unchangeable principles of providence is itself unchangeable. But in regard to those things which flow to us from this source, fate is inherent in things that are changeable and through fate providence connects everything to its order.⁸³⁶ This is his brief summary of an important chapter in Boethius from which Bessarion draws a number of ideas: fate is the obverse in the created order of providence so Bessarion comments *itaque inter fatum et providentiam quid intersit, non re potest, sed ratione distinguitur*; providence binds the diversity of creation together in its unity; fate which is inherent in created things directs them to their proper good.⁸³⁷

He found his Platonic source for this law of destiny in the references to Adrasteia in the *Phaedrus*, to Cronos in the *Statesman*, to the Fates in the *Timaeus* and in a reference to Zeus by the Athenian stranger in the *Laws*. He quotes texts which in each case referred to a divine and unalterable law.⁸³⁸ His quotations follow closely Proclus' *Platonic theology*.⁸³⁹

⁸³⁵ τούτοις γὰρ ἡ φύσις ἐκάστων τῶν τε πρώτων καὶ μέσων καὶ τελευταίων φρουρεῖται τε καὶ συνέχεται, καὶ ἡ ἐνδοθεῖσα αὐτοῖς τάξις καὶ διὰ πάντων διήκουσα ἐν μὲν τοῖς νοητοῖς πάντη, ἐν δὲ τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς, ἐφ' ὅσον εἰσὶ δεκτικά, ἄτρεπτός τε καὶ ἀναπόδραστος διαμένει (*ICP* 2.10.2 p.180.30-3). Compare Proclus: καὶ εἴ με δεῖ τοῦμὸν εἰπεῖν, ἡ φρουρτικὴ τῆς τριάδος ταύτης δύναμις ἡ ἀναπόδραστος καὶ ἡ τῆς διηκούσης πανταχοῦ τάξεως ἄτρεπτος περιλήψις ἐν τῇ θεῷ ταύτῃ προϋφέστηκεν (*Plat. theol.* IV.17 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.52.3-5) and Boethius: *Illud certe manifestum est, immobilem simplicemque gerendarum formam rerum esse providentiam, fatum vero eorum quae divina simplicitas gerenda disposuit, mobilem nexum atque ordinem temporalem* (*De consolazione Philosophiae* IV.6.13). Saffrey and Westerink (1981 p.155 n.2) note a word play in Proclus between Ἀδράστεια and ἀναπόδραστος. Among other sources they quote Hermeias in *Phaedrum*: Ἀδράστεια διὰ τοῦτο κεκλημένη διὰ τὸ τὰ ὑπ' αὐτῆς τεθέντα καὶ νομοθετηθέντα ἀναπόδραστα εἶναι. Bessarion must have been aware of this etymological derivation when he wrote: *unde a rerum inevitabili ordine Adrastia nomen accepit* (*ICP* 2.10.2 p.181.34-5). The sentence does not occur in the Greek text.

⁸³⁶ *ICP* 2.10.2 p.183.15-20.

⁸³⁷ See *De consolazione Philosophiae* 4.6 at note [788788](#) above.

⁸³⁸ *ICP* 2.10.2 p.181.25-183.10. The texts quoted by Bessarion are: θεσμός τε Ἀδραστείας ὄδε. ἦτις ἂν ψυχὴ θεῷ συναποδὸς γενομένη κατὶδὴ τι τῶν ἀληθῶν, μέχρι τε τῆς ἐτέρας περιόδου εἶναι ἀπήμονα, κὰν αἰεὶ τοῦτο δύνηται ποιεῖν, αἰεὶ ἀβλαβὴ εἶναι (*Phaedrus* 248c2-5). ἦν οὖν νόμος ὄδε περὶ ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ Κρόνου, καὶ νῦν ἔτι ἐστὶν ἐν θεοῖς (*Gorgias* 523a5-7). The law referred to is that the just will go to the Isles of the Blest, whereas the unjust will go to Tartarus. Bessarion's reference to the *Statesman* is wrong; his quotation is from *Gorgias* 523a5-7. It is correctly attributed in Proclus *Plat. theol.* IV p.51 18. τῷ δὲ ἔπεται δίκη τῶν

For Bessarion this immutable and unavoidable order was necessary, but it did not embrace humans to the extent of constraining human self determination or of negating free will, as some thought. Rather it was the divine law which was innate in all beings.⁸⁴⁰

He had to find a place for free will between *providentia* and *fatum*. He did so by grounding it in an interpretation of the myth of the chariot in the *Timaeus*, drawing on a distinction from Boethius and Plotinus. He applies a distinction between *providentia* and *fatum* which he incorrectly said Boethius found in Plato. In fact it came from Plotinus and Proclus.⁸⁴¹ Plotinus distinguished providence and fate.⁸⁴² Proclus drew the same distinction.⁸⁴³ For Proclus fate, which is the cause of the connexion and sequence of created things, is the nature of the world, an incorporeal being which moves all things in time, connecting the movement of things that are discrete in time and space. Mortal beings are connected to

ἀπολειπονέμων τοῦ θείου νόμου τιμωρός (*Laws* 716a2-3). Νόμους τοὺς εἰμαρμένους εἶπεν αὐταῖς [ψυχαῖς] (*Timaeus* 41e2-3).

⁸³⁹ IV.17 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.51.17-24. Proclus placed Adrasteia in the supercelestial realm. Adrasteia had dominion over all the divine laws from beginning to end including the intellectual, the hypercosmic and the encosmic laws. These encompassed the laws of Cronos in the *Gorgias* (523a5-7), the laws of Zeus in the *Laws* (716a2-3) and the laws of Fate of the *Timaeus* (41e2-3). Not only the gods but also those souls who live in accordance with intellect and submit themselves to the light of providence are above the laws of fate (νόμους τοὺς εἰμαρμένους). θεσμός with its root in θεός is appropriate for intelligibles (τοῖς νοητοῖς) but νόμος is right for the intellectuals (τοῖς νοεροῖς πατράσιν).

⁸⁴⁰ οὐ τὴν ὡς βία τῶν ὄλων ἐπικρατοῦσαν ἀνάγκην καὶ τὸ τῆς ἡμετέρας ζωῆς αὐτοκίνητον ἀφανίζουσιν τῷ τε αὐτοεξουσίῳ καὶ τῷ ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἀντικειμένην ὡς τινες οἴονται τιθέμενοι, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἐκάστῳ τῶν ὄντων ἐμφύτους θείους θεσμούς τε καὶ νόμους (*ICP* 2.10.2 p.180.33-6). Compare Boethius *fatum vero inhaerens rebus mobilibus dispositio, per quam providentia suis quaeque nectit ordinibus* (*De consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.9).

⁸⁴¹ *Minime igitur Plato videtur a providentiae ratione discedere, cum hanc legis rationem docet optimo ordine distributam, stabilem, indissolubilem, quantum subjectarum rerum ratio patitur, quae rebus indeterminatis ordinem affert, sicuti Boethius quoque libro de Consolatione ex Platonis sententia de fato scribens bifariam distribuit* (*ICP* 2.10.2 p.183.13-14). For the reference in Boethius see note [788788](#) above. See Courcelle (1967) 203-207 and Steel ed. (2007) 16.

⁸⁴² See note [790790](#) above. See also: ἔρχεται δὲ μεριζόμενος ὁ λόγος οὐκ ἴσα· ὅθεν οὐδ' ἴσα ποιεῖ, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐν ζωῳ ἐκαστῳ. τὸ δὲ ἐντεῦθεν ἤδη ἀκόλουθα μὲν τὰ δρώμενα καὶ προνοία ἐπόμενα, εἴ τις δρῶν θεοῖς φίλα· ἦν γὰρ θεοφιλῆς ὁ λόγος ὁ προνοίας... ὥστε τὰ κακὰ ἐπόμενα εἶναι, ἐξ ἀνάγκης δέ· καὶ γὰρ παρ' ἡμῶν κατ' αἰτίας οὐχ ὑπο τῆς προνοίας ἡναγκασμένων (III.3.5.20-35). ὁ λόγος is the rational principle coming from providence. 'Necessity' in Plotinus is anything that happens outside the sphere of intellect.

⁸⁴³ *Sic igitur providentia quidem deus per se, fatum autem divina aliqua res et non deus; dependet enim a providentia et velut imago est illius. Si enim ut providentia ad intellectum entium, sic fatum ad sensibilia* (*de Providentia* 14 ed. Boese p.122).

eternal beings by fate and move in rotation with them.⁸⁴⁴ The intelligible and the sensible are two realms. Providence rules in the intelligible and sensible realms, fate in the sensible realm only.⁸⁴⁵ Providence is the cause of the goods of those things which it governs. It is before intellect and is to be attributed to God only.⁸⁴⁶ Things are connected by fate but their orientation to the good is from providence. Providence, being above both the intelligible and sensible world, is superior to fate.⁸⁴⁷ Proclus quotes as his authority Plato's *Timaeus* (48a1-2). Here the cosmos was created by mixing necessity with reason but reason rules over necessity. He says that Plato called the moving cause of bodies 'necessity' but that he called it 'fate' elsewhere.⁸⁴⁸ Plato's 'reason' was identified with *providentia* also by Chalcidius.⁸⁴⁹

⁸⁴⁴ *Isto igitur inventum est, quid fatum et quomodo huius mundi natura substantia quaedam ens incorporea, siquidem corporum preses, et vita cum substantia, siquidem intrinsecus movet corpora, et non de foris, movens omnia secundum tempus et connectens omnium motus et temporibus et locis distantium; secundum quam et mortalia cooptantur eternis et illa concirculantur et haec invicem compatiuntur* (*de Providentia* 12 ed. Boese p.118).

⁸⁴⁵ *De Providentia* 14 see note ~~790790~~ above.

⁸⁴⁶ *Dicantur igitur communes de hiis conceptus apud omnes indubitanter entes, providentiam quidem causam esse bonorum hiis quibus providetur.... Nam pronoiā (id est providentia) quidem eam que ante intellectum palificat omnino operationem, quam soli bono attribuere necessarium* (*de Providentia* 7 ed. Boese p.113).

⁸⁴⁷ *Si enim fontem bonorum primum quidem divinam ipsam causam determinans, recte dices- unde enim aliunde omnibus bona quam divinitus?...Deinde: omnibus superstantem intelligentialibusque et sensibilibus superiorem esse fato, et que quidem sub fato entia et sub providentia perseverare, le connecti quidem a fato habentia, bonificari autem a providentia* (*de Providentia* 13 ed. Boese pp.118-20).

⁸⁴⁸ *De Providentia* 13 ed. Boese p.120. The references to Plato's other texts may be *Statesman* 272e5-6 (τὸν δὲ δὴ κόσμον πάλιν ἀνέστρεφεν εἰμαρμένη τε καὶ ξύμφυτος ἐπιθυμία) and *Timaeus* 89c5-6 (ἦν [τὴν περὶ τὰ νοσήματα ζύστασιν] ὅταν τις παρὰ τὴν εἰμαρμένην τοῦ χρόνου φθειρῆ φαρμακείας). See Steel (2007) p.77 n.60.

⁸⁴⁹ Chalcidius commenting on the same text of Plato identified Plato's 'reason' with *providentia*: *Mixtam vero generationem dicit esse ideo quod ex diversis elementis initiisque constet, recteque ex <necessitatis providentiaeque coetu, non ex> necessitate et providentia* (Chalcidius in *Timaeum* CCLXIX 7-9). In CLXXVI-CLXXVII he gives a similar typology of *providentia* and *fatum*. He says that according to Plato in the beginning everything that existed and the world itself was contained in and governed by the highest God who is the *summum bonum*. Afterwards it was governed by *providentia*, which is the second eminence (*secunda eminentia*) after the highest good and the Greeks call νοῦς, which is an intelligible essence ceaselessly turned towards the highest God. Men call this the will of God, the wise overseer (*tutelam*) of all things and *providentia*. It is not '*providentia*' in the sense that it foresees the future but because it is the proper role of the divine mind 'to know' (*intellegere*). *Fatum* follows this *providentia*. It is the *lex divina* promulgated for the governance of all things by the wise harmony of intelligence (*intellegentiae sapienti modulamine ad rerum omnium gubernationem*). The threefold *anima mundi* (the unmoving sphere, the wandering sphere and the sublunar sphere) submits to this *lex divina*. According to the law of fate all things are governed in accordance with their particular nature. In CXLV he draws a tripartite distinction, which he says was taken from Plato, between *divina* and *intelligibilia* which act *secundum providentiam*, *naturalia* and *corporea* which act *iuxta fatum*. Those things subject to free will and our law are done willingly (*sponte nostra*) but what happens to us from outside occurs *sine ratione atque inopinate accidunt*. If it is the result of our action it is *fortuita* but if without our initiative it is by chance (*casu*). Much of Chalcidius' material is

Bessarion used the Boethian analysis of the distinction between *providentia* and *fatum* to interpret Plato's image of the chariot in the *Timaeus* (41d8-42b2). He says that in the *Timaeus* Plato made nature depend on God. After he had explained the nature of the universe and introduced individual souls and assigned them to heavenly chariots God told them the laws of fate whose origins he held within himself. But souls, says Bessarion, are not subject to these laws when, by living according to reason, they devote themselves to the light of providence. When they become earth-bound in the physical bodies to which they are allotted they are subject to fate. Therefore they hear the laws before they are joined to the vehicle of the body.⁸⁵⁰ This is an interpretation of Plato who says in the *Timaeus* that once souls are implanted in bodies they are subject to passions. If they master the passions they live justly; if not they live unjustly (*Timaeus* 42b2). Bessarion's interpretation is similar to that of Plotinus. For Plotinus good actions follow on reason which is the principle of providence, dear to the gods. Evil deeds are not linked to providence but follow from necessity.⁸⁵¹

Fate and Contingency

In *ICP* 2.10.10-11 Bessarion covered what little he had to say about contingency.

Although God's foreknowledge is necessary that does not remove contingency from nature.⁸⁵² According to Boethius everything that is subject to fate is also subject to

drawn from Plutarch and the Middle Platonists especially Numenius; see Waszink (1962) notes on pages 183-4 and 204-7.

⁸⁵⁰ *ICP* 2.10.3 p.183.32-185.2.

⁸⁵¹ For Plotinus see note [842842](#) above. Chalcidius noted the difficulty of interpreting of Plato's νόμους τοῦς εἰμαρμένους εἶπεν αὐταῖς (*Timaeus* 41e2-3): *de qua multa disceptatio habita inter veteres perserverat etiam nunc* (in *Timaeum* CXLII).

⁸⁵² *Etsi enim divina cognitio necessaria est, naturam singulis distributam non aufert. Itaque quod contingens est, suam naturam servat, quamquam in deo nihil contingens, sed cuncta necessaria et sint et intellegantur. Nec sequitur, ut quod a deo praescitum aut praedestinatum est, necessario fiat* (*ICP* 2.10.10 p.193.21-26).

providence; fate itself is subject to providence. Providence binds men's fortunes and actions in an indissoluble chain of causes. Since the chain originates in immutable providence, men's fortunes and actions are themselves immutable.⁸⁵³ Bessarion cites Boethius but adds that fate although immutable could be subject to intermediate causes and what he called the 'weakness' of circumstances.⁸⁵⁴ To illustrate this he quotes Synesius of Cyrene's allegorical account of the struggle for mastery between Osiris, representing the good, and Typhon, representing evil. In the story the king of Egypt, who was also a prophet and experienced in divine matters, handed over the *imperium* to his son Osiris and warned him to get rid of his brother Typho who was like a pestilence and evil fate.⁸⁵⁵ The background to Synesius' story, of which Bessarion seems to have assumed some knowledge in his readers, is taken from Plutarch's tale of the death of the wise king Osiris in a plot by his treacherous brother Typhon.⁸⁵⁶ Synesius told how Osiris' father handed over to Osiris his royal estate. He explained to Osiris the ἀναγκαίαν ἀντίθεσιν between the heavenly soul and the terrestrial soul. For Synesius Osiris represented the heavenly soul and Typho the earthly soul. Osiris' father warned Osiris that it was fated that if he did not get rid of his brother he together with his kingdom of Egypt were doomed. Osiris did not take this advice and was murdered by his brother.⁸⁵⁷ Bessarion's point was that, although the order of causes is immutable in providence, in their particularity in nature they are subject to the

⁸⁵³ *Haec actus etiam fortunasque hominum indissolubili causarum connexione constringit; quae cum ab immobilis providentiae proficiscatur exordiis, ipsas quoque immutabiles esse necesse est (De consolatione Philosophiae 4.6.19).*

⁸⁵⁴ *Cum res subjectae mutari varie possint et causae mediae nequaquam perpetuae sint, fatum quoque ipsum mutari una cum rerum causarumque imbecillitate necesse est, ut saepe, quod futurum esset, non fiat vel consilio atque industria hominis vel aliqua naturae causa efficaciore. Quo circa Boëthius fatalem rerum dispositionem dicit non modo ab immobilibus providentiae initiis proficisci ideoque immutabilem esse, verum etiam rebus mobilibus inhaerere (ICP 2.10.11 p.193.38-p.195.3). Facit enim rerum ipsa mobilitas, ut, quod sua ratione perpetuum et universale est, id in agendo et generando singulare sit et vario modo contingere possit, quo fit, ut accidentis contingentisque rationem rerum natura sortiatur (ibid. p.195.5-9).*

⁸⁵⁵ τὸν ἀδελφὸν εἰ σωφρονεῖς, κώλυε, τὴν σαυτοῦ τε καὶ Αἰγυπτίων εἰμαρμένην προαναειρῶν· ἔξεστι γάρ (*The Egyptians* 11.9 ed. Lamoureux p.117.5-8). ICP 2.10.11 p.195.9-15.

⁸⁵⁶ Plutarch *Isis and Osiris* 356b-c.

⁸⁵⁷ *The Egyptians* 11.8 ed. Lamoureux p.106.13-p.107.5 and 9 p.117.5-8.

secondary causes of free will, accident and contingency. He did not relate his account of contingency to any Platonic text.

Astrology and the Good

Bessarion was keen to absolve Plato from any accusation of astrological determinism.⁸⁵⁸

He attributes to the followers of the Egyptians and Chaldaeans the view that fate is the disposition of the stars under which a person is conceived and born and quotes Philo as his authority.⁸⁵⁹ He argues that Plato attributed the stars and their dispositions to the workings of God's providence.⁸⁶⁰ He absolves Plato from the charge of astrological determinism because, for Plato, the workings of the universe are governed by an inbuilt tendency to the good. I shall argue that he was drawing on Plotinus and Aquinas to interpret Plato. For Bessarion reason is divine with an unalterable desire for the good and so is above fate but it can become subject to fate if corrupted by bodily passions. He interprets passages in the *Statesman*, *Cratylus* and *Epinomis* to give a Platonic basis for his argument.

He quotes from the account by the Athenian stranger in the *Statesman* (268e8-273e4) of the descent from the age of Cronos to the age of Zeus.⁸⁶¹ The stranger told how in the earlier age of Cronos God himself guided the revolutions of the cosmos with benign consequences but when the universe had completed its allotted cycles he let go and the

⁸⁵⁸ ICP 2.10.4-6. Note: *Sed Plato diligentius rem hanc rimari videtur, quandoquidem non modo causam caelo tribuit, verum etiam ipsum caelum ad divinam providentiam refert, ut inde dependeat* (p.185.15-17).

⁸⁵⁹ ICP 2.10.4 p.185.9-15 quoting Philo *de Abrahamo* 69 ed. Cohn p.16.21-p.17.8. According to Philo the Chaldeans were materialists and had no sense of the numinous and intelligible. Bessarion's reference to the Egyptians is probably drawn from Iamblichus. See pages 232-3 below.

⁸⁶⁰ *Plato igitur naturalem caelestium corporum dispositionem primam tribuit fato....Certe fatum id vocat, quod propinquum res sensibiles movet idemque de providentia pendet divina* (ICP 2.10.3 p.185.2-8).

⁸⁶¹ ICP 2.10.3 p.185.5-8 and 2.10.4 p.185.17-25 citing *Statesman* 272e3-5 and 272d6-e6.

universe turned back in its revolutions under its own impulse into chaos.⁸⁶² Bessarion drew two conclusions about the view of Plato from this passage: 1) that, contrary to the belief of the Chaldaeans and the Egyptians, the universe is subject to the beneficent guidance of the providence and 2) that it is drawn to the good under the compulsion of an innate desire for God.⁸⁶³ He interpreted Plato's εἰμαρμένη τε καὶ ζύμφυτος ἐπιθυμία (272e6) as an innate desire for the divine (ἐπιθυμία ζυμύτῳ καὶ ἐφέσει τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῆ πρὸς αὐτό τε καὶ τὸ καλὸν ἀνατάσει).⁸⁶⁴ This is a perverse interpretation. There is nothing in the text of the *Statesman* to suggest an innate desire for the divine or the good. Proclus in referring to the same text made the point that the world without the intellectual gods is controlled by fate and an innate urge.⁸⁶⁵ He argued (*in Rempublicam* II.357.2-28) that the fate governing the universe is not a God but nature.⁸⁶⁶

According to Bessarion uncorrupted souls desire the true and real good without any deviation or change. They dance round the good perpetually with a divine compulsion (περὶ αὐτὸ διηνεκῶς πειχορεύειν ἀνάγκη θειοτάτη) released from all free will (πάσης ἐπ' ἀμφοτέρα ἐλευθερίας ἐξηρημμένη), which is a kind of slavery. Such is true happiness.⁸⁶⁷

In support of this as the view of Plato he quotes the *Cratylus* and *Epinomis*. In the *Cratylus* (403b2-404a7) Socrates explained the origin of the name of Pluto and the power by which

⁸⁶² Plato wrote τὸ γὰρ πᾶν τόδε τοτὲ μὲν αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς συμποδηγεῖ πορευόμενον καὶ συγκυκλεῖ, τοτὲ δὲ ἀνῆκεν (*Statesman* 269c4-5). Bessarion glosses these words saying that they were not to be taken literally: εἰ δὲ ποτὲ μὲν ζυμποδηγεῖν, ποτὲ δὲ ἀφίστασθαί φησιν τὸν θεόν, μὴ προσκόψης ταῖς λέξεσιν, κατὰ τὴν κοινὴν τῶν πολλῶν χρῆσιν αὐτὰς ἐξηγούμενος. εἴρηται γὰρ δὴ ἀναγκαίως ὀνόμασιν ἡμῖν συνήθεσι, ταῦτα λέγεσθαι μὴ ἐνὸν ἄλλως, ἰν' ὃ οὐκ ἄλλως ἢ λόγῳ διακρίνοιτο μόνον, τῷ παρουσίας καὶ ἀπουσίας ἅπασι παρισταίτο ῥήματι (*ICP* 2.10.2 p.184.29-33). The gloss is intended to defend Plato's orthodoxy in Christian eyes.

⁸⁶³ *Ita Plato perspicue manifesteque divinam providentiam praedicat naturamque universi ac motum illi adnectit et subiicit, cum scilicet appetitu innato et desiderio divinitatis ad summum illud bonum spectare moverique perpetuo et aequabiliter fatetur* (*ICP* 2.10.4 p. 185.25-29).

⁸⁶⁴ *ICP* 2.10.4 p.184.27-8. The Latin text translated τὸ καλὸν as *summum bonum* at this point. *Cum scilicet appetitu innato et divinitatis hoc ad summum bonum spectare moverique perpetuo et aequabiliter fatetur* (*ICP* 2.10.4 p. 185.27-9).

⁸⁶⁵ *Et divinus Plato ait: mundum totum secundum se ipsum consideratum sine intelligentialibus diis tamquam corporeum revolvere fatum et complantatam concupiscentiam* (*de Providentia* 11 ed Boese p.118.19-21).

⁸⁶⁶ See Steel (2007) 76 n.51.

⁸⁶⁷ *ICP* 2.10.4 p.184.39-p.186.8.

he restrains souls in the underworld. He restrains them with the power of desire for virtue which is stronger than necessity (οὕτω ἄν κατέχοι αὐτοῦς δῆσας τῆ περι ἀρετὴν ἐπιθυμία 404a3-4). He has no dealings with souls when they are joined to the body but only souls which are free of all bodily evils and desires. While they are subject to the emotional passion of the body no constraint can hold them, not even the bonds of Cronos. Proclus in his commentary on this passage of the *Cratylus* wrote that not even God can fight against the combination of love and will with necessity (τῷ ἔρωτι τῶν θεῶν καὶ τῷ βουλευμάτι αὐτῶν συντρέχει ἡ ἀνάγκη αὐτῶν, πρὸς ἣν οὐδὲ θεὸς μάχεται (CLVII ed. Pasquali p.88.12-13)). He describes the souls in Hades dancing round the god (περιχορεύουσι τὸν θεὸν ὑπὸ τῶν ἐκεῖ Σειρήνων θελγόμεναι (CLVIII *ibid.* p.88.25-6)).⁸⁶⁸ Bessarion uses similar language of the blameless soul's yearning for the good as it dances round it with a divine compulsion (ἀμεταβλήτως τε αὐτοῦ ἐφίεσθαι καὶ περὶ αὐτὸ διηνεκῶς περιχορεύειν ἀνάγκη θεϊοτοσύνη (ICP 2.10.4 p.186.5-6)). Duvick says: 'The necessity to which Proclus here refers is the bond of desire which Socrates says is the strongest restraint in the world'.⁸⁶⁹ Although Bessarion only quotes one sentence from the *Cratylus* ("Which is the stronger bond upon any living being to keep him in any one place, desire, or compulsion?" "Desire (ἐπιθυμία), Socrates, is much stronger"(translation Fowler (1963))' it is difficult to believe that he did not have the whole passage in mind to support his thesis.⁸⁷⁰ The sentence which he quotes demonstrates no more than that desire can be more potent than 'necessity'.

⁸⁶⁸ Proclus also used περιχορεύοντος at *in Tim.* I.248.4 where he said: 'the *logos* contemplates the intelligible object by circling round it and focusing on a central point (translation Runia and Share (2008))'. The circle and focal point is a common metaphor in Plotinus for the relation between soul, intellect and the One (see, for example, VI.8.18.4ff).

⁸⁶⁹ Duvick (2007) 166 n.378

⁸⁷⁰ ICP 2.10.4 p.185.33-35.

In addition he quotes a sentence from the *Epinomis* to demonstrate that Plato also used the word ἀνάγκη for this ἐπιθυμία.⁸⁷¹ His point must have been that the ἐπιθυμία ζυμύτος καὶ ἔφεσις τοῦ θεοῦ is an ἀνάγκη. As with the quotation from the *Cratylus* knowledge of the context strengthens the import of the quotation. In the *Epinomis* (982a4-e6) the Athenian stranger says that creatures that act in an orderly and heavenly fashion prove their intelligence but those without intelligence are disorderly. The unalterable state of order is the product of mind. ‘The necessity of the soul which has intelligence is the greatest of all necessities for it lays down laws as the ruler’. Novotný comments that the necessity of the rational soul of which Plato speaks here is closest to the θεῖαι ἀνάγκαι of *Laws* 818b3 against which not even God fights and different from the physical necessity in matter of the *Timaeus* (47e3-48a1) from which the universe is generated jointly with reason, and from the Mythical spindle of necessity in the *Republic* (616c4).⁸⁷²

The purpose of Bessarion’s two quotations from Plato is to show that, according to Plato, the innate desire for the good is stronger than any necessity but it is stretching the sense of Plato’s texts to apply them to desire for the *summum bonum* in the way which he does. It is hard to find in Plato the idea of the innate desire for the *summum bonum*. But the idea of a desire for the good inbuilt in creation as if hard wired occurs in Plotinus where the whole universe speaks of itself as seeking the good.⁸⁷³ It is as likely that Bessarion was influenced by a Scholastic view that the will necessarily seeks the good.⁸⁷⁴ This is further evidence that Bessarion was interpreting Plato in a way to fit his Christianising thesis.

⁸⁷¹ *ICP* 2.10.4 p.184.38-9 quoting: ἡ ψυχῆς δὲ ἀνάγκη νοῦν κεκτημένης ἀπασῶν ἀναγκῶν πολὺ μεγίστη γίγνοιτ’ ἂν. ἄρχουσα γὰρ ἄλλ’ οὐκ ἀρχομένη νομοθετεῖ (982b5-7).

⁸⁷² Novotný (1960) 131.

⁸⁷³ πάντα δὲ τὰ ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐφίεται μὲν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, τυγχάνει δὲ κατὰ δύναμιν τὴν ἐαυτῶν ἕκαστα· ἐξήρηται γὰρ πᾶς μὲν οὐρανὸς ἐκείνου, πᾶσα δὲ ἐμὴ ψυχή καὶ οἱ ἐν μέρεσιν ἐμοῖς θεοί, καὶ τὰ ζῷα δὲ πάντα καὶ φυτὰ καὶ εἴ τι ἄψυχον δοκεῖ εἶναι ἐν ἐμοί (III.2.3.31-36).

⁸⁷⁴ There are close parallels between Bessarion and Aquinas: *Unde si proponatur aliquod objectum voluntati quod sit universaliter bonum et secundum omnem considerationem, ex necessitate voluntas in illud tendet, si aliquid velit: non enim poterit velle oppositum* (*S.T.* Ia IIae q.10 a.2). Aristotle also held the good to be an

He faced two challenges. The first was the apparent contradiction between what he had said about the determination of the soul towards the good with immutable constancy and the reality of human inconstancy. The second was to account for the influence of the heavenly bodies without falling into the errors of astrological determinism. In addressing these questions he depended heavily on Aquinas. He was trying to explain how we do wrong. He distinguishes reason, mind and will and ‘corporeal instruments’ (*instrumenta corporea*).⁸⁷⁵ Reason is divine and not subject to fate.⁸⁷⁶ Corporeal bodies are subject to the movement of the heavenly bodies and, therefore, to fate but accidentally. The essence of his argument is that either reason which is not subject to the necessity of fate controls our recklessness (*temeritatem/ τὸ χεῖρον*) or recklessness gets the better of reason. In this case reason becomes subject to fate and is led by the movement of the heavenly bodies and is subject to the necessity which it shares with the lower creatures.⁸⁷⁷ Although the heavenly bodies have no power over human mind or will they can act *per accidens* through *phantasmata* on the senses which Bessarion describes as ‘the inferior powers of the body’ (*inferiores virtutes quae instrumentorum corporeorum actus sunt*). He says that the Christian doctors and the Platonists supported his view.⁸⁷⁸ He does not specify the

end e.g. ἅπαν ὁ ἄν ἧ ἀγαθὸν καθ’ αὐτὸ καὶ διὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν τέλος ἐστὶν καὶ οὕτως αἴτιον ὅτι ἐκείνου ἔνεκα καὶ γίγνεται καὶ ἔστιν τᾶλλα (*Metaphysics* 996^a23-26). But unlike Bessarion and Aquinas he denied the possibility of an absolute good (*Metaphysics* 996^a27-8).

⁸⁷⁵ Aquinas used an equivalent of *instrumenta corporea*. See *ipsa phantasmata quae sunt in organis corporeis* (*S.T.* Ia q.76 a10).

⁸⁷⁶ *Ratio, qua nescio quid in nobis divinius est, et quae fatali necessitati nequaquam subiecta est* (*ICP* 2.10.5 p.187.12-14). Compare Boethius: *quaedam vero, quae sub providentia locata sunt, fati seriem superent; ea quae prima divinitati propinqua, stabiliter fixa, fatalis ordinem mobilitatis excedunt* (*De consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.14) and Proclus: τῶν μὲν γὰρ εἰμαρμένων νόμων οὐ μόνον θεοὶ κρείττους, ἀλλὰ καὶ ψυχὰι μερικαὶ ζῶσαι κατὰ νοῦν καὶ τῷ τῆς προνοίας ἐαυτὰς ἐπιδοῦσαι φωτί (*Plat. theol.* IV.17 edd. Saffrey and Westerink p.52.11-14). The idea of divinised reason is found in Plotinus (I.6.6) where the purified soul becomes λόγος καὶ πάντη ἀσώματος καὶ νοερά καὶ ὅλη τοῦ θείου.

⁸⁷⁷ *ICP* 2.10.5 p.187.12-39. *Superatur enim hoc modo et vincitur a motu superioris corporis, hoc est dei, atque ita fato subiicitur, ut a motu caelesti ducatur et necessariam subiectionem rerum inferiorum communem patiatur. Ducit haec secum eam animae partem, quam superavit, mentem dico, et voluntatem, quae suae naturae ratione actioni caelestium corporum subiectae non sunt.*

⁸⁷⁸ οἱ ἡμέτεροι καθηγηταὶ συγχωροῦσι καὶ οἱ περὶ Πλάτωνα συμφώνως παραδιδόασιν (*ICP* 2.10.5 p.186.20-1). Here as in a number of other places the Latin text has *Plato* rather than *Platonici* as if in the Latin

Christian doctors but his argument is taken from Aquinas.⁸⁷⁹ The way in which this indirect influence of the heavenly bodies operates was elaborated in Thomistic psychology, drawing on Aristotle. The problem was to explain how external and physical objects could affect the intellect (*nihil corporeum imprimere potest in rem incorpoream*). Aquinas held the active intellect (*intellectus agens*) abstracted *phantasmata* from the senses.⁸⁸⁰

The Platonist to whom Bessarion refers is Iamblichus whom he quotes in support of his interpretation.⁸⁸¹ Iamblichus, whom he describes as τῶν Πλατωνικῶν ὁ κλεινότετος, defended free will against the astrological determinism of the Egyptians. He was of the same view as ‘the Christian doctors’ although he used different words.⁸⁸² Iamblichus postulated two souls, an intelligible (ὁ νοῦς καὶ τὸ νοητὸν) and a sensitive soul (αἰσθητικὴ ψυχή). The first descends from the first intelligible and unites us with God when we transcend the cycle of generation and fate. The second soul binds us to earth and is determined by the periods of the world. The latter is fate.⁸⁸³ There is no suggestion that

redaction Bessarion wished to emphasise the congruence with Plato himself or he simply made no distinction between Plato and his followers.

⁸⁷⁹ *Corpora caelestia in corpora quidem imprimunt directe et per se. In vires autem animae quae sunt actus organorum corporeorum, directe quidem sed per accidens; quia necesse est huiusmodi actus harum potentiarum impediri secundum impedimenta organorum, sicut oculus turbatus non bene videt...Sciendum est tamen quod indirecte et per accidens impressiones corporum caelestium ad intellectum et voluntatem pertinere possunt; in quantum scilicet tam intellectus quam voluntas aliquo modo ab inferioribus viribus accipiunt, quae organis corporeis alligantur....Nam intellectus ex necessitate accipit ab inferioribus viribus apprehensivis: unde turbata vi imaginativa vel cogitativa vel memorativa, ex necessitate turbatur actio intellectus (S.T. Ia q115 a4). See also in *Metaphysicam* lib.VI lect. 3.1.213. For Bessarion’s access to and use of Aquinas even before he came to Italy in 1440 and before he could read Latin see Monfasani (2011b) 61-81. See page 24 above.*

⁸⁸⁰ *Illud superius et nobilius agens quod vocat [sc. Aristotle] intellectum agentem facit phantasmata a sensibus accepta intelligibilia in actu per modum abstractionis cuiusdam. Secundum hoc ergo ex parte phantasmatum intellectualis operatio a sensu causatur (S.T. Ia q.84 a6). See also Aristotle: τῆ δὲ διανοητικῆ ψυχῆ τὰ φαντάσματα οἷον αἰσθήματα ὑπάρχει, ὅταν δὲ ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακὸν φήσῃ ἢ ἀποφήσῃ, φεύγει ἢ διώκει· διὸ οὐδέποτε νοεῖ ἄνευ φαντάσματος ἢ ψυχῆ (De Anima 431^a14-17).*

⁸⁸¹ ICP 2.10.6.

⁸⁸² ICP 2.10.6 p.187.41-189.1.

⁸⁸³ ICP 2.10.6 p.188 1-10 referring to Iamblichus *De mysteriis* VIII.6. Iamblichus attributed the doctrine of the two souls to Hermetic concepts. It occurred in Numenius (frs. 43-4). See *De mysteriis* Clarke et al. edd. (2004) p.319 n.440. Compare with Porphyry *On the Faculties of the Soul* in Stobaeus 1.49.24: ‘Aristo [of Chios] posits an apprehensive faculty of the soul analysed into two parts. He says one of these parts, which

Bessarion actually believed in two souls but he was making a connection between Plato and the Platonists and orthodox Christian teaching in their shared rejection of astrological determinism. He reports the text of Iamblichus with some minor modifications. He explains Iamblichus' words about the first soul (ἡ μὲν ἐστὶν ἀπὸ τοῦ πρώτου νοητοῦ, μετέχουσα καὶ τῆς τοῦ δημιουργοῦ δυνάμεως) as our noetic intellect (τὸν νοῦν δηλαδὴ καὶ τὸ νοητὸν ἡμῶν). In the same way he glosses Iamblichus' second soul (ἡ δὲ ἐνδιδομένη ἐκ τῆς τῶν οὐρανίων περιφορᾶς) with the sensitive soul dependent on bodily organs (τὴν ὀργάνοις σωματικοῖς πάντως χρωμένην καὶ τὴν αἰσθητικὴν ψυχὴν). He quoted a second text from Iamblichus to the same effect.⁸⁸⁴

In arguing Plato's rejection of astrology Bessarion had to make significant interpretations of selected Platonic texts reading into them insights from Aquinas and the Neo-Platonists. In fact what he wrote was more a commentary on Plato rather than a presentation of the Platonic texts. In making the soul subject to fate in so far as it departs from rationality he left unresolved questions about whether evil actions are determined by fate.

Providence and free will

But he did address the apparent conflict of divine foreknowledge and providence with free will. This was not a problem that occurred to either Plato or Aristotle but it was a thorny question in the fifteenth century.⁸⁸⁵ Bessarion had to read back into Plato from contemporary debate. He set out to show that the divine foreknowledge and predestination

he calls the sense faculty, is mostly moved along with one of the sense organs, and is the starting-point and source of the various sense organs. The other is always by itself and separate from all organs....In beings gifted with reason and speech it is labelled 'mind'(translation adapted Fortenbaugh and White (2006) 129)'.⁸⁸⁴ *ICP* 2.10.6 p.18.12-20 quoting from *De mysteriis* VIII.7.

⁸⁸⁵ See Apuleius ed. Beaujeu (1973) 272-4 for a summary history of the question from Plato to the Neo-Platonists. See also Pine (1976).

are compatible with free will and contingency and he claimed that this was the view of Plato.

He states the issue clearly. What God foreknows must come to pass otherwise his foreknowledge would be in vain and the divine knowledge wrong. Similarly what is predestined must come to pass. But if the eternal knowledge and providence of God is the necessary cause of all things everything must happen necessarily. But that is not the case.⁸⁸⁶ Bessarion's formulation of the problem is similar to that of Aquinas and they both refer to the same text from Aristotle *Metaphysics* 6.⁸⁸⁷ It is difficult to find in Aristotle the precise equivalent of Bessarion's (or Aquinas') phrase: *posita causa per se ac necessaria cuiuscumque rei generabilis et corruptibilis necessario omnia erunt*.⁸⁸⁸ Aristotle distinguished the necessary (ἐξ ἀνάγκης) from the accidental (τὸ κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς ὄν). Most things happen usually rather than always, so the accidental must exist otherwise everything would happen necessarily (ἐπεὶ δὲ γίγνεται ποτε, κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς ἔσται· εἰ δὲ μὴ, πάντ' ἔσται ἐξ ἀνάγκης).⁸⁸⁹ If nothing happened accidentally everything would happen necessarily. Bessarion (and Aquinas) derive their propositions from this argument of Aristotle.⁸⁹⁰ Bessarion points out that Aristotle in the same passage left room for

⁸⁸⁶ *Nam quod a deo praescitum est, sic fieri oportet, alioquin frustra esse praescisse diceremus, falsaque esset divina cognitio. Simili modo, quod praedestinatum est, ita ut praedestinatum est, necesse est evenire. Etenim posita causa per se ac necessaria cuiuscumque rei generabilis et corruptibilis necessario omnia erunt, quem ad modum Aristoteles quoque libro sexto de rebus divinis ostendit. Quodsi rerum omnium causa per se ac necessaria atque aeterna cognitio ac providentia dei est, profecto necessaria omnia fient. Verum non ita est (ICP 2.10.8 p.191.5-12).*

⁸⁸⁷ *Omnis enim effectus, qui habet aliquam causam per se, quae iam est vel fuit, ad quam de necessitate sequitur, provenit ex necessitate, ut Philosophus probat in VI Metaphys. Sed providentia Dei, cum sit aeterna, praeexistit; et ad eam sequitur effectus de necessitate; non enim potest divina providentia frustrari. Ergo providentia divina necessitatem rebus provisum imponit (S.T. Ia q.22 a.4 1). See also Valla *De libero arbitrio* ed. Anfossi pp.17-18 and Boethius *De consolatione Philosophiae* V.3.6 for similar statements.*

⁸⁸⁸ In Bessarion's Greek: αἰτίας γὰρ καθ' αὐτό τε καὶ ἀναγκαίως παντὸς τοῦ γιγνομένου καὶ φθειρομένου ὑποθεσίσης ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἔσται πάντα (p.190.7-9).

⁸⁸⁹ *Metaphysics* 1027^a8-15.

⁸⁹⁰ ὅτι δ' εἰσὶν ἀρχαὶ καὶ αἰτία γενητὰ καὶ φθαρτὰ ἄνευ τοῦ γίγνεσθαι καὶ φθείρεσθαι, φανερόν. εἰ γὰρ μὴ τοῦτ', ἐξ ἀνάγκης πάντ' ἔσται, εἰ τοῦ γιγνομένου καὶ φθειρομένου μὴ κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς αἰτιόν τι ἀνάγκη εἶναι (*Metaphysics* 1027^a29-32).

contingency.⁸⁹¹ He says that Plato was of the same view.⁸⁹² He gave no Platonic reference for this assertion but in the following sentences expands on what he claims Plato said. Divine providence leads all things to their proper end and good. Some are subject to necessity but others not. The perfection of the universe is the sum of all things (*summa et caput rerum omnium*). This perfection would not be achieved unless every degree of existence was found in being. So some things are subject to necessity and others subject to contingency. It is difficult to find this argument in Plato but the argument appears in Aquinas.⁸⁹³ There is also a resonance with Plotinus (III.2.3-4) view that the universe is created by God to be perfect in its variety; there is disorder in the universe because its order comes from outside itself and it may fail to match this order because of its own will or from being driven by something else i.e. contingency.⁸⁹⁴

By way of explanation Bessarion says that according to Plato providence had two senses.⁸⁹⁵ The first is the order and disposition of all things and the ultimate cause of that order. The second is the actualisation of the order in beings where particular and secondary causes occur. In these cases secondary causes can intervene to prevent the proper order in

⁸⁹¹ *Metaphysics* 1027^a29-1027^b16 is an analysis of what it means to be contingent.

⁸⁹² *ICP* 2.10.8 p.191.12-14. In the Greek version it is 'the Platonists'.

⁸⁹³ *Providentia divina quibusdam rebus necessitatem imponit, non autem omnibus. Ad providentiam enim pertinet ordinare res in finem. Post bonitatem autem divinam, quae est finis a rebus separatus, principale bonum in ipsis rebus existens, est perfectio universi: quae quidem non esset, si non omnes gradus essendi invenirentur in rebus. Unde ad divinam providentiam pertinet omnes gradus entium producere. Et ideo quibusdam effectibus praeparavit causas necessarias, ut necessario evenirent; quibusdam vero causas contingentes, ut evenirent contingenter, secundum conditionem proximarum causarum* (S.T. Ia q22 a4). Compare with Bessarion: *Siquidem res universas divina providentia geri ducique ad suum finem et bonum existimat [sc. Plato], sed non omnes necessitate astringi; verum esse aliquas, quae in potentia sunt contradictionis. Et quoniam summa et caput rerum omnium perfectio universi est, haec autem non in simplicem rerum naturam, sed multiplicem, variam ac multiformem consumitur, ideo aliquibus rebus causas necessarias, quibus necessario essent aut fierent, datas esse, aliquibus non necessarias, sed contingentes, ut contingenter pro suae naturae ratione evenirent* (*ICP* 2.10.8.p.191.14-22).

⁸⁹⁴ ἐμὲ [τὸν κόσμον] πεποιήκε θεὸς κάγω ἐκεῖθεν ἐγενόμην τέλειος ἐκ πάντων ζώων καὶ ἰκανὸς ἐμαυτῷ καὶ αὐτάρκης οὐδενὸς δέομενος (III.2.3.20-22). ἔστι δὲ οὐ διὰ τὴν ἀταξίαν τάξις οὐδὲ διὰ τὴν ἀνομίαν νόμος, ὡς τις οἶεται, ἵνα γένοιτο ἐκεῖνα διὰ τὰ χεῖρω καὶ ἵνα φαίνοιτο, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὴν τάξιν ἐπακτὸν οὐσαν....τὸ γὰρ ἐπακτῷ χρώμενον τάξει τοῦτο ἂν οὐ τύχοι ἢ δι' αὐτὸ παρ' αὐτοῦ ἢ δι' ἄλλο παρ' ἄλλου· πολλὰ δὲ ὑπ' ἄλλων πάσχει καὶ ἀκόντων τῶν ποιούντων καὶ πρὸς ἄλλο ἰεμένων (III.2.4.26-36).

⁸⁹⁵ *Duobus modis providentiam accipit [sc Plato]* (*ICP* 2.10.8 p.191.22).

which case the outcome is contingent or chance.⁸⁹⁶ He cites as his Platonic source for this distinction Plato's *Timaeus* 41a3-d3 from the myth of the creation of the cosmos. The Demiurge has created the body and soul of the living world and the heavenly gods to whom he gave a promise of indissolubility. He then invites the lesser gods to create the lesser living creatures. If he were to create them himself they would be equal to gods but, by being created by the lesser gods, they will be mortal. Bessarion quotes from Plato's text: θεοῖς ισάζοιτ' ἄν (41c2) and: τρέπεσθε ὑμεῖς ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν θνητῶν ζῶων δημιουργίαν (41c4-5). He glosses these texts by adding 'so that there would be want, corruption, loss and chance and the whole would be perfect'.⁸⁹⁷ The idea of completion implying a variety of causalities has echoes of Plotinus and Aquinas.⁸⁹⁸ Bessarion concludes that Plato rejected the belief that everything was necessary.⁸⁹⁹ The text of Plato took the form of myth and invited interpretation. Bessarion's gloss was an interpretation of Plato based on Plotinus and Aquinas.

Like Boethius, he escaped from Aristotle's causal determinism by adopting a Neo-Platonic view of God's timeless knowledge. He quotes the whole of proposition 124 from Proclus' *Elements of theology*.⁹⁰⁰ According to this the Gods' knowledge is not determined by the

⁸⁹⁶ *Uno modo pro ordine ipso rerum ac dispositione aut etiam ordinis ipsius dispositionisque causa quae prima et princeps causa omnium entium est, altero pro actus secundi executione et quasi perfecto absolutoque officio, proficiente a causis secundis et mediis atque etiam singularibus. Quem actum non semper aut necessario consequi effectum, cum fieri aliquando possit, ut causa secunda impediatur* (ICP 2.10.8 p.191.22-28).

⁸⁹⁷ ἴν' οὖν μὴ τοῦθ' ἔποιτό φησιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔνδεια καὶ φθοραὶ καὶ στερήσεις καὶ τὸ συμβεβηκὸς καὶ ἐνδεχόμενον χώραν ἔχει, καὶ ἵνα τὸ πᾶν φησιν ὄντως τέλειον ἤ- τέλειον δ' ἂν εἴη πάντως, εἰ πάντας τοὺς ἐνδεχομένους τῶν ὄντων βαθμούς τε καὶ εἶδη γενόμενα σχοίη (ICP 2.10.9 p.190.32-5).

⁸⁹⁸ See notes [893893](#) and [894894](#) above.

⁸⁹⁹ *Plato ab ea opinione quam longissime abest, ut omnia fieri necessario arbitretur* (ICP 2.10.9 p191.38-193.1).

⁹⁰⁰ πᾶς θεός ἀμερίστως μὲν τὰ μεριστὰ γινώσκει, ἀχρόνως δὲ τὰ ἐγχρονα, τὰ δὲ μὴ ἀναγκαῖα ἀναγκαίως καὶ τὰ μεταβλητὰ ἀμεταβλήτως καὶ ὅλως πάντα κρειττόνως ἢ κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν τάξιν. εἰ γὰρ ἅπαν, ὅτιπερ ἂν ἦ παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς, κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ιδιότητα, δῆλον δῆπουθεν ὡς οὐχὶ κατὰ τὴν τῶν χειρόνων φύσιν ἐν τοῖς θεοῖς οὐσα ἢ γνῶσις αὐτῶν ἐστὶν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν ἐκείνων ἐξηρημένην ὑπεροχὴν. ἐνοειδὴς ἄρα ἀπαθὴς ἢ γνῶσις ἐστὶν τῶν πεπληθυσμένων καὶ παθητῶν. εἰ ἄρα καὶ τὸ γνωστὸν εἴη μεριστόν, ἀλλ' ἢ θεία γνῶσις ἀμερίστος καὶ ἢ τῶν μεριστῶν, καὶ εἰ μεταβλητόν, ἀμετάβλητος, καὶ εἰ ἐνδεχόμενον, ἀναγκαῖα, καὶ εἰ ἀόριστον, ὠρισμένη. οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀπὸ τῶν χειρόνων εἰσδέχεται τὸ θεῖον τὴν γνῶσιν, ἵνα οὕτως ἢ γνῶσις ἔχη, ὡς

nature of the things known but in accordance with their own superior nature. The gods have a timeless knowledge of things in time and know things that are contingent necessarily. This proposition had an important later history. It influenced the Areopagite and Aquinas.⁹⁰¹

Bessarion bases his account of God's providential knowledge on these sources, particularly Proclus.⁹⁰² He works from the principle of Proclus that the nature of knowledge is determined by the knower rather than by the object known. Thus the gods' foreknowledge of the indefinite and contingent is definite.⁹⁰³ The divine knowledge is necessary so all things are known necessarily in God. But this does not negate the nature of particular things. What is contingent retains its contingent nature.⁹⁰⁴ 'God's foreknowledge or providence is the divine cause in itself that one thing is necessary and another contingent'.⁹⁰⁵ God does not know anything as a future event but sees all things as immediately present to him from all eternity. But this does not diminish contingency and

τὸ γνωστὸν ἔχει φύσεως· ἀλλὰ τὰ χεῖρονα περὶ τὸ ὀρισμένον τῶν θεῶν ἀορισταίνει καὶ περὶ τὸ ἀμετάβλητον μεταβάλλει καὶ τὸ ἀπαθὲς παθητικῶς ὑποδέχεται καὶ τὸ ἄχρονον ἐγγρόνως. τοῖς μὲν γὰρ χεῖροσιν ἀπὸ τῶν κρειττόνων παρεκβαίνειν δυνατόν, τοῖς δὲ θεοῖς εἰσδέχεσθαι τι παρὰ τῶν χειρόνων οὐ θέμις (text as quoted in ICP 2.10.9 p.190.40-p.192.15). Mohler's reference ((1927) p.191) to Proclus *Plat. theol.* I.21 ed. Saffrey and Westerink p.98.5-12 is misleading. It is a parallel passage but not the one used by Bessarion. Proclus gave a similar account of God's knowledge at *in Tim.* I.352.5-27.

⁹⁰¹ See Dionysius *De divinis nominibus* 7.2 ed. Suchla p.197.3-16 and Aquinas : *Oportet igitur dicere quod alia a se cognoscat [sc. Deus] propria cognitione; non solum secundum quod communicat in ratione entis sed secundum quod unum ab alio distinguitur...Et, sic omnia in Deo praeexistunt, non solum quantum ad id quod commune est omnibus, sed etiam quantum ad ea secundum quae res distinguuntur* (S. T. Ia q14 a6).

⁹⁰² ICP 2.10.10 p.193.21-34.

⁹⁰³ See Proclus *de Providentia* 63.1-5 and *Elements of theology* prop. 124 quoted in note ~~900900~~ above. The point is made by Aquinas: *Quando in antecedente ponitur aliquid pertinens ad actum animae, consequens est accipiendum non secundum quod in se est, sed secundum quod est in anima: aliud enim est rei in seipsa, et esse rei in anima* (S. T. Ia q14 a13 ad2). Ammonius attributed the same observation to Iamblicus in *In Aristotelis de Interpretatione Commentarius* p.135.12-32. This distinguished Proclus and Iamblichus from Alexander of Aphrodisias for whom there can only be definite knowledge of what is predetermined (Alexander *De fato* XXX 200.28-201.2). See Sharples (1983) 28 and n.197. According to Alexander the Gods' foreknowledge only extended to the fact that I have free will but not to the way in which I will choose to exercise it (See Sharples (1983) 165). Cicero (*De fato* 33) attributed the same view to the sceptic Carneades.

⁹⁰⁴ *Etsi enim divina cognitio necessaria est, naturam tamen singulis distributam non aufert. Itaque quod contingens est, suam naturam servat, quamquam in deo nihil contingens, sed cuncta necessaria et sint et intellegantur* (ICP 2.10.10 p.193.22-25).

⁹⁰⁵ *Praescientia enim sive providentia divina causa per se est, ut hoc necessario, illud contingenter fiat* (ICP 2.10.10 p.193.27-28).

the possibility of choosing the lesser and lower causes which are obstacles to achieving one's proper end. God has foreknowledge and whatever he knows will necessarily happen. But the things he knows preserve the nature with which they were endowed whether that is necessary or contingent.⁹⁰⁶ Bessarion's conclusion restates the problem with which he began in *ICP* 2.8.8 but now denies its validity: *Qua propter non sequitur, si a deo reguntur gubernanturque universa, aut necessario omnia effici pessumdarique arbitrii libertatem aut frustra pleraque a rerum conditore provideri* (*ICP* 2.10.10 p.193.31-4).

The Greek text of Bessarion's argument about God's necessary knowledge is significantly different and fuller than the Latin text (see note ~~906906~~ below). There is nothing in the Latin text equivalent to καὶ εἰ τουτὶ γενησόμενον προήδει, καὶ γενήσεται πάντως, εἴ γε οὐχ ὡς γενησόμενον οὐδ' ὡς μέλλον, ἀλλ' ὡς γεγονὸς αὐτὸ καὶ παρὸν ἤδη ὄρᾳ [ὁ θεός]. ἐπὶ πάντα γὰρ ἐξ αἰδίου ἢ νόησις αὐτοῦ φέρεται, καθ' ὅσον εἰσὶν ὡς παρόντα αὐτῷ. This is an elaboration of Proclus' πᾶς θεός...γινώσκει, ἀχρόνως δὲ τὰ ἐγγχρονα (*Elements of theology* prop. 124). But it owes much to Boethius. For Boethius God's 'ever is' is God's present; his 'now' is unmoving and refers to his eternity.⁹⁰⁷ God's eternity is always present to

⁹⁰⁶ καὶ εἰ τουτὶ γενησόμενον προήδει, καὶ γενήσεται πάντως, εἴ γε οὐχ ὡς γενησόμενον οὐδ' ὡς μέλλον, ἀλλ' ὡς γεγονὸς αὐτὸ καὶ παρὸν ἤδη ὄρᾳ. ἐπὶ πάντα γὰρ ἐξ αἰδίου ἢ νόησις αὐτοῦ [θεοῦ] φέρεται, καθ' ὅσον εἰσὶν ὡς παρόντα αὐτῷ. οὐ μέντοι διὰ τουτο καὶ αὐτὰ εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖα· μένει δὲ ἐνδεχόμενά τε καὶ μέλλοντα, καὶ δυνάμενα ἂν καὶ μὴ γενέσθαι, εἴ τις πρὸς τὰς δευτέρας καὶ κατωτέρω αὐτῶν αἰτίας ἀπίδοι, αἱ καὶ κωλυθῆναι δύναιντ' ἂν εἰς τὴν τοῦ οἰκείου ἀποτελέσματος ἐκβασιν. ὅθεν οὐθ' ὁ προορισμὸς ἢ ἡ θεία πρόνοια ἀνάγκην τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐπιτίθησιν, ἢ γε καθ' αὐτὴν ἐστὶν αἰτία, τοδὶ μὲν ἀναγκαῖον, τοδὶ δ' ἐνδεχόμενον εἶναι, οὔτε μάτην ὁ θεός τι γινώσκει. ἔσται γὰρ ὁ γινώσκει ἐσόμενον σωζομένης ἐκάστω τῆς φύσεως, ἣν αὐτοῖς παρέσχευ, ὡς τὰ μὲν ἀναγκαῖα, τὰ δ' ἐνδεχόμενα εἶναι (*ICP* 2.10.10. p.192.25-36). Compare this with the Latin text which is significantly different: *Praescientia enim sive providentia divina causa per se est, ut hoc necessario, illud contingenter fiat. Nec deum frustra praescisse aliquid aut praedestinasse dicendum est. Erit enim quod novit, futurum servata tamen natura, quam rebus quibusque sive necessariis sive contingentibus dederat, siquidem deo non modo effectus rerum, sed etiam causae ipsae et omnes essendi modi subjecti sunt. Qua propter non sequitur, si a deo reguntur gubernanturque universa, aut necessario omnia effici pessumdarique arbitrii libertatem aut frustra pleraque a rerum conditore provideri* (p.193.26-34).

⁹⁰⁷ *Quod vero de deo dicitur 'semper est', unum quidem significat, quasi omni praeterito 'fuerit', omni quoque modo sit praesenti 'est', omni futuro 'erit'....Semper enim est, quoniam 'semper' praesentis est in eo temporis tantumque inter nostrarum rerum praesens, quod est nunc, interest ac divinarum, quod nostrum 'nunc' quasi currens tempus facit et sempiternitatem, divinum vero 'nunc' permanens neque movens sese atque consistens aeternitatem facit* (Boethius *de Trinitate* IV.235-45). *Aeternitas est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio* (*De consolazione Philosophiae* V.6.4). See also Plato *Timaeus* 37e5-38b5 where he argues that only 'is' is appropriately predicated of God: τὸ ἔστι μόνον κατὰ τὸν ἀληθῆ λόγον προσήκει.

itself and holds the infinity of moving time in its present.⁹⁰⁸ Aquinas articulated the idea in the *Summa contra Gentiles*.⁹⁰⁹ Nor does Bessarion's Latin text include the idea contained in the Greek of the contingency of free will: μένει δὲ ἐνδεχόμενά τε καὶ μέλλοντα, καὶ δυνάμενα ἂν καὶ μὴ γενέσθαι, εἴ τις πρὸς τὰς δευτέρας καὶ κατωτέρω αὐτῶν αἰτίας ἀπίδοι, αἱ καὶ κωλυθῆναι δύναιντ' ἂν εἰς τὴν τοῦ οἰκείου ἀποτελέσματος ἕκβασι. The idea also occurs in Boethius that human beings are determined by providence to seek the good and only free will can turn them from that course.⁹¹⁰ And the same idea that the will is determined by the good is found in Aquinas.⁹¹¹

Bessarion's argument had close parallels with Aquinas who argues that God knows contingent events infallibly in their eternal presence to him but he knows them as future events in relation to their causes (*Contingentia et infallibiliter a Deo cognoscuntur, in quantum subduntur divino conspectui secundum suam praesentialitatem: et tamen sunt futura contingentia, suis causis comparata* (S.T. Ia q14 a13)). The difficulty for both Bessarion and Aquinas is the precise significance of Proclus' phrase: πᾶς θεὸς γινώσκει τὰ μὴ ἀναγκαῖα ἀναγκαίως. This does not remove the fact which both Bessarion and Aquinas

⁹⁰⁸ *Sui compos praesens sibi semper adsistere et infinitatem mobilis temporis habere praesentem* (Boethius *De consolatione Philosophiae* V.6.8).

⁹⁰⁹ *Contingens enim certitudini cognitionis non repugnat nisi secundum quod futurum est, non autem secundum quod praesens est. Contingens enim, cum futurum est, potest non esse: et sic cognitio aestimantis ipsum futurum esse falli potest; fallitur enim si non erit quod futurum esse aestimavit. Ex quo autem praesens est, pro illo tempore non potest non esse, sed hoc non iam pertinet ad contingens prout praesens est, sed prout futurum est...Omnis igitur cognitio quae supra contingens fertur prout praesens est, certa esse potest. Divini autem intellectus intuitus ab aeterno fertur in unumquodque eorum quae temporis cursu peraguntur prout praesens est. Relinquitur igitur quod de contingentibus nihil prohibet Deum ab aeterno scientiam infallibilem habere* (C.G. I.67). See also S.T. Ia q14 a13.

⁹¹⁰ *Quo fit ut, temetsi vobis, hunc ordinem minime considerare valentibus, confusa omnia perturbataque videantur, nihilo minus tamen suus modus ad bonum dirigens cuncta disponat. Nihil est enim quod mali causa ne ab ipsis quidem improbus fiat; quos, ut uberrime demonstratum est, bonum quaerentes pravus error avertit, nedum ordo de summi boni cardine proficiens a suo quoquam deflectat exordio* (*De consolatione Philosophiae* IV.6.21-2).

⁹¹¹ *Unde si proponatur aliquod objectum voluntati quod sit universaliter bonum et secundum omnem considerationem sit bonum, ex necessitate in illud tendet si quid velit: non enim poterit velle oppositum. Si autem proponatur sibi aliquod objectum quod non secundum quamlibet considerationem sit bonum, non ex necessitate voluntas fertur in illud...Finis ultimus ex necessitate movet voluntatem, quia bonum est perfectum. Et similiter illa quae ordinantur ad hunc finem, sine quibus finis haberi non potest, sicut esse et vivere et huiusmodi. Alia vero, sine quibus finis haberi potest, non ex necessitate vult qui vult finem* (S.T. Ia. q.10 a2 corpus and ad 3).

acknowledge that what God foreknows must come to pass as he knows it which implies that contingent effects must necessarily come to pass as they are foreknown by God in the eternal present. Bessarion argues that contingent events are contingent and are known by God as contingent. The point was more fully expressed by Aquinas who drew a distinction between a contingent event as it happens which is known in the present and a contingent event which is known in its causes and thus as a future event which is not yet determined: *Contingens aliquod dupliciter potest considerari. Uno modo, in seipso, secundum quod iam in actu est. Et sic non consideratur ut futurum, sed ut praesens: neque ut ad utrumlibet contingens, sed ut determinatum ad unum...Alio modo potest considerari contingens, ut est in sua causa. Et sic consideratur ut futurum, et ut contingens nondum determinatum ad unum: quia causa contingens habet se ad opposita (S.T. Ia q14 a3)*. In other words God intuites events that are spread in time in an eternal present. As human knowledge of an event as it happens does not make it necessary so God's knowledge of future events seen in the eternal present does not negate their contingency.

In addressing the question of free will and God's providence, Bessarion had come a long way from the text of Plato. He made some links with the *Timaeus* but they are heavily interpreted and not compelling. He drew on Proclus but his primary sources appear to be Boethius and Aquinas. He treated them as authentic interpreters of Plato and in so doing he made Plato appear consistent with Christian orthodoxy. The root of his problem was that he could not avoid addressing a question that was very much alive in the fifteenth century but had not been addressed by Plato.

Aristotle and Plato on Providence and Fate

Trebizond wrote in *Comparatio* that Aristotle had accepted divine providence.⁹¹²

Bessarion challenged this interpretation.⁹¹³ According to him Aristotle had little to say about providence; one had to depend largely on the evidence of Alexander of Aphrodisias for his views.⁹¹⁴ Not only Alexander and other pagans but also many Christian doctors thought, because of what Aristotle says in the *Metaphysics* (1074^b25-7 and 33-8) where he excludes divine intelligence from human and natural affairs, that Aristotle denied God's providence.⁹¹⁵ Aristotle affirmed none of these things can be known to the divine mind because it knows only itself. If it knew any other it would be changed for the worse. But without knowledge there cannot be providence.⁹¹⁶ This latter statement is not in the text of Aristotle but is a deduction from it.

⁹¹² *Quis est qui vere poterit asserere providentiam, aut omnino negari ab Aristotele, aut usque globum lunae solummodo concedi? Id enim a nonnullis platonice ad ipsum reuocatur. Ubi hoc receperunt nescio.... Quoniam paucissimi Aristotelem penitus intelligebant, pro vero posse mendacium recipi crediderunt (Comparatio 2.17).*

⁹¹³ *Adversarius...Aristotelem ita laudare [sc. de providentia], quasi non secus de ea senserit quam nostra religio (ICP 2.9.12 p.179 27-8).*

⁹¹⁴ *Quo in loco quid Aristotelis de iisdem rebus senserit, iudicare difficile est. Nihil enim tale ab eo scriptum legitur, ut Alexander Aphrodisiensis testatur, qui librorum ejus diligentissimus indagator fuit. Hic cum de providentia disserendum esset, difficilem sibi eam materiam dixit, quod nihil de ea certi ab Aristotele cognitum haberet (ICP 2.9.2 p. 167.28-32). Atqui Platonici illud imprimis Aristoteli obiicere consueverunt, quod male de providentia iudicaverit, qua in re, dum Aristotelem tueri Peripatetici volunt, non audent dicere Platonem negasse- quis enim in in re tam aperta mentiri ausit?- sed Aristotelem modo quodam posuisse providentiam conantur ostendere. Quippe Alexander, Peripateticorum facile post Aristotelem princeps, ita loquitur: "Conabor ostendere eos, qui Platonis disciplinam sequuntur sibi que persuasum habent nihil ab Aristotele de providentia dici, parum explore de hoc philosopho iudicare" (ICP 2.9.12 p.179.28-32). Bessarion says that he was going to set out the explanation of Aristotle by Alexander for the Latins *qui Graecos libros non legerint* (ICP 2.9.3 p.169.5-7). Alexander's *De fato* had been available in Latin translation from sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries but the *Quaestiones* were not translated into Latin until 1516 and then only partially. See Kristeller ed. (1960) I 107-8 and 115-116.*

⁹¹⁵ *ICP 2.9.2 p.167.32-36.*

⁹¹⁶ *Quodsi humana nequaquam intellegit, ne providere quidem his posse dicendum est. Nemo enim ea curare potest, quae ignorat (ICP 2.9.2 p.169.2-4).*

Bessarion drew on Alexander's *Quaestiones* as his source for Aristotle's view on providence.⁹¹⁷ Alexander had professed to be reporting Aristotle's views.⁹¹⁸ Bessarion says that Alexander excluded from the sphere of providence intelligible and immaterial forms, and restricted it to beings which were subject to change.⁹¹⁹ He quotes as evidence from *Quaestiones*: 'These things being so, then, if someone wanted to say that everything was an object of providence which in any way possesses change and movement on account of something and deriving from it, all corporeal being, both that which is eternal and that which is subject to coming-to-be and passing-away, would be an object of the providence of the primary being, which is eternal and unmoved and incorporeal'.⁹²⁰ He further quotes Alexander to show that, according to him, divine providence extended to the regularity of the heavenly bodies and the continuation of the sublunary species but not to the care of individuals.⁹²¹ Alexander posed the question whether the providence exercised over the sublunary species was primary or *per accidens*. He explained that if providence intended by its actions a beneficial effect on sublunary species, it was primary but if the beneficial effect was incidental it would be *per accidens*. His response in the *Quaestiones* was that it was neither. It cannot be primary because it would not be an appropriate action for a divinity any more than it would be to say that masters were for the benefit of their slaves and that they acted for the well-being of their slaves.⁹²² Bessarion quotes this passage but

⁹¹⁷ Bessarion described Alexander as *eius expositor* (ICP 2.10.12 p.195.29). For Alexander on providence see Sharples (1982) and (1983) 25-7. Alexander's position on providence was set out most fully in his *de Providentia* which was only available in Arabic at the time of Bessarion. Bessarion drew on the more limited accounts in *Quaestiones* I ch. 25 (εἰς τὰ περὶ προνοίας τινὰ συντελοῦντα) and II ch. 21 (ὅτι μὴ κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς ἢ πρόνοια κατὰ Ἀριστοτελή).

⁹¹⁸ *Quaestiones* I ch. 25 p.41.10, II ch. 21 p.65.19 ff. and p.70.24 ff.

⁹¹⁹ *Hic nullam substantiam intelligibilem et immaterialem provideri ne improprie quidem dicta providentia existimat* (ICP 2.9.4 p.169.32-3).

⁹²⁰ ICP 2.9.4 p.168.28-32 quoting *Quaestiones* I ch.25 ed. Bruns p.41.4-8, translation Sharples (1992).

⁹²¹ ICP 2.9.4 p.168.35-170.4 quoting: εἰ δὲ τις ταῦτα μόνα προνοεῖσθαι λέγοι, ὧν χάριν τὸ προνοεῖν αὐτῶν λεγόμενον ἐνεργεῖα τινὰς ἐνεργείας κινούμενον, μόνον ἂν εἴη [κατ' Ἀριστοτέλη] τὸ ὑπὸ σελήνην σῶμα προνοούμενον, τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ ἔνυλον τε καὶ ἐν γενέσει καὶ ἐν φθορᾷ (*Quaestiones* I ch. 25 ed. Bruns p.41.8-11). This contrasted with the view of Diogenes Laertius (5.32) and others that according to Aristotle divine providence extended only to the heavenly bodies and any effect on sublunary bodies was *per accidens*.

⁹²² *Quaestiones* II.21 ed. Bruns p.68.19-25.

says that Alexander never explained how providence over sublunary species was exercised because he did not complete the work.⁹²³ He says, however, that it was apparent from another passage in the *Quaestiones* (II ch.19), which he quotes, that Aristotle rejected divine providence (*negat eam quam nos in praesentia quaerimus providentiam*).⁹²⁴ According to this account: ‘The world will derive its ordering from its own nature....The whole world does not need some [being] to exercise providence [over it], neither for its being nor for its well-being, but the providence that comes about in the world does so by a certain part in the world exercising providence, and another being the object of providence.’⁹²⁵

With regard to fate Bessarion’s position is that both Aristotle and Plato believed in it but not all things were determined by fate.⁹²⁶ He notes that Aristotle had little to say about fate but that he seemed to hold that nature was fate, a position very different from Plato. But he acknowledges that there are only passing references to fate in Aristotle.⁹²⁷ He turns to Alexander’s *Mantissa* and *De fato* for enlightenment.⁹²⁸ He gives what he says is a summary of Peripatetic teaching on fate.⁹²⁹ Fate does not apply to eternal substances or things that are unchanging but to things which are subject to generation and corruption and liable by their nature to change; it does not comprise nature as a whole but only adheres to

⁹²³ *Nullam enim aliam providendi rationem scriptam ab eo legimus* (ICP 2.9.6 p.171.16-17). Bessarion’s source (*Quaestiones* II.21) was written in the form of a dialogue but it broke off at the point where Alexander was about to set out Aristotle’s position.

⁹²⁴ ICP 2.9.6 p.171.22-3 quoting *Quaestiones* II ch. 19 ed. Bruns p.63.10-28.

⁹²⁵ Sharples (1994) translation of *Quaestiones* II ch.19 ed. Bruns p.63.11-12 and 15-18.

⁹²⁶ ICP 2.10.1 p.181.3-7 see note ~~811844~~ above.

⁹²⁷ *Aristoteles autem usus quidem nomine fati est, sed quid fatum sit, minime declaravit. Videtur tamen ipse quoque naturam fatum vocare, sed longe aliter quam Plato* (ICP 2.10.12 p.195.27-29). References to fate in Aristotle are in *Physics* 230^a31-^b2 and in *Meteorologica* 352^a28-32.

⁹²⁸ For Alexander on fate see Sharples (1983) 22-8 and 128-31. For Bessarion’s careful study of Alexander see Thillet (1984) cxxxii-cxxxiv.

⁹²⁹ ICP 2.10.12. Compare Bessarion: καὶ ταύτην εἶναι κατὰ τοὺς ἀπὸ τοῦ Περιπάτου ὡς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ εἰπεῖν περὶ εἰμαρμένης ῥησὶ δόξαν (ICP 2.10.12 p.196.8-9) with Alexander: καὶ αὕτη μὲν ἡ περὶ εἰμαρμένης ὡς ἐπὶ κεφαλαίων εἰπεῖν κατὰ τοὺς ἀπὸ Περιπάτου δόξα (*De fato* 6 ed. Bruns p.171.16-17). His sources were *Mantissa* 25 ed. Bruns pp.179-186 but especially p.181.20- p.183.12 and *De fato* 2-6 ed. Bruns p.165.14-p.171.31.

individuals; art, reason and choice are outside the sphere of fate; neither fate nor nature are necessary; just as many things occur that are contrary to nature so many things occur that are contrary to fate.⁹³⁰ His main point is that Aristotle, according to Alexander, regarded nature and fate as the same.⁹³¹ According to Alexander fate is not a universal applying in general to creatures or humankind but it resides in the individual; it is the particular nature of each individual.⁹³²

Bessarion quoted Aristotle's two texts on fate (*Physics* 230^a31-^b2, *Meteorologica* 352^a28-32) as evidence of Aristotle's belief that nature and fate were not necessary.⁹³³ Alexander quoted them in the *Mantissa* but as evidence that Aristotle held fate and nature to be the same.⁹³⁴ Bessarion also quoted the story of Socrates and Zopyrus from Alexander's *De fato*. In Alexander's account Zopyrus had made strange comments about Socrates' mode of life and was made fun of by Socrates' friends. Socrates rebuked them and said that Zopyrus would indeed have been right if he had given way to his nature rather than

⁹³⁰ Bessarion's Latin summary (p.195.29-p.197.3) is shorter than the fuller summary in the Greek text (p.194.36-p.196.7). The Greek follows closely wording from Alexander e.g. compare Alexander: διὸ τῶν μὲν ἀϊδίων ἢ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως αἰεὶ γιγνομένων οὐθενὸς αἴτιον ἢ εἰμαρμένη, δοκεῖ δὲ ἐν τοῖς ἐν γενέσει καὶ φθορᾷ τῆς εἰμαρμένης ἔργον εἶναι. ἐν γὰρ τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύουσιν ὅσον ἐπὶ τῇ φυσικῇ παρασκευῇ πρὸς τὰ ἀντικείμενα τῆς εἰμαρμένης ἰσχύς εἶναι δοκεῖ, ἐν θατέρῳ τῶν ἀντικειμένων κετέχουσα αὐτὰ καὶ φυλάττουσα κατὰ τινὰ τάξεως ἀκολουθίαν (*Mantissa* 25 ed. Bruns p.181.20-5) with Bessarion: οὕτω γὰρ ὁ ἐξηγητῆς αὐτοῦ Ἀλέξανδρος βούλεται, οὔτε ἐν τοῖς ἀϊδίοις οὔτε ἐν τοῖς γινόμενοις μὲν, αἰεὶ δὲ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχουσιν, ἀλλ' ἐν τοῖς ἐν γενέσει καὶ φθορᾷ καὶ τοῖς πρὸς τὰ ἀντικείμενα ἐπιτηδεύουσιν ἰσχύειν τὴν εἰμαρμένην τιθέμενος (*ICP* 2.10.12 p.194.38-42).

⁹³¹ Compare Alexander: τὸ τε γὰρ εἰμαρμένον κατὰ φύσιν καὶ τὸ κατὰ φύσιν εἰμαρμένον (*De fato* 6 ed. Bruns p.169.20) with Bessarion: δοκεῖ δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς [Ἀριστοτέλης] τὴν φύσιν εἰμαρμένην καλεῖν, ἄλλως μέντοι ἢ ὡς οἱ περὶ Πλάτωνα, τὴν τε γὰρ φύσιν μόνον, καὶ ταύτην γε τὴν μερικὴν ἴσως (*ICP* 2.10.12 p.194.36-8).

⁹³² λείπεται ἄρα τὴν εἰμαρμένην μηδὲν ἄλλο ἢ τὴν οἰκείαν εἶναι φύσιν ἐκάστου. οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἐν τῷ καθόλου καὶ κοινῷ τὸ τῆς εἰμαρμένης, οἷον ἀπλῶς ζώων, ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλ' ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἕκαστα, Ζωκράτη τε καὶ Καλλία. ἐν δὲ τούτοις ἡ ἰδία φύσις ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία, τοιάδε οὖσα, τῆς κατὰ ταῦτα γιγνομένης τάξεως (*Mantissa* 25 ed. Bruns p.185.11-15). διὸ καὶ λέγοι τις ἂν εὐλόγως τὴν οἰκείαν φύσιν ἀρχὴν ἐκάστου καὶ αἰτίαν εἶναι τῆς τῶν γινομένων ἐν αὐτῷ κατὰ φύσιν τάξεως. ἀπὸ ταύτης γὰρ ἐπὶ τὸ πλεῖστον οἷ τε βίῳ τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὴν τάξιν καὶ αἰ καταστροφῆι λαμβάνουσιν (*De fato* 6 ed. Bruns p.170.9-12).

⁹³³ *Unde fit, ut etiam praeter fatum possit aliquid fieri, videlicet in iis rebus, quae generationi dantur...Quin etiam alibi augmenta, quae praeter naturae ordinem fiunt, augmenta praeter fatum appellat* (*ICP* 2.10.12 p.197. 9-11 and 15-17).

⁹³⁴ Δι' ὧν πάλιν, ὅτι τῷ τῆς εἰμαρμένης ὀνόματι ἐπὶ τῶν κατὰ φύσιν γιγνομένων χρῆται, γνώριμον (*Mantissa* 25 ed. Bruns p.186.23-4).

disciplining himself with philosophy.⁹³⁵ Bessarion, without reference to Alexander as his source, used the story as evidence that not everything is determined by fate and necessity, the point Alexander was making.⁹³⁶

Bessarion draws a contrast between Aristotle for whom, as Bessarion understood him, fate was inherent in individuals and Plato for whom fate is οὐ τὴν τάξιν αὐτήν, ἀλλὰ τὴν τῆς τάξεως αἰτίαν.⁹³⁷ For Plato (or the Platonists) fate was the cause of the unity of the cosmos because of which in different times and places there is unity in generation and a confluence of everything with the blessed circle which encompasses all things: οἱ καὶ τοῦ ἐν διαφόροις χρόνοις καὶ τόποις πολλάκις συμβῆναι, τῆς τε περι ἡμᾶς γενέσεως τὴν τε τοῦ κόσμου ἐνότητα, τό τε σύμπουν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἄλληλα συμπάθειαν τῶν μερῶν καὶ τὸ κύκλω κινούμενον μακάριον κατ' αὐτὰ σῶμα ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς γε ὄν αἰτιῶνται (*ICP* 2.10.13 p.196.27-30). In other words so far from being inherent in individuals fate was the unifying power of all within the universe *ab extra*.⁹³⁸ Bessarion is usually at pains to demonstrate the conformity of Aristotle and Plato. He acknowledges agreement between them on the existence of fate and that not everything is determined by fate (*ICP* 2.10.1 p.181.1-7) and on contingency (*ICP* 2.10.8 p.191.12-14). But in the case of the relationship between providence and fate he acknowledges differences between them (*ICP* 2.9.2-7).

⁹³⁵ *ICP* 2.9.1 p.167.15-21 and Alexander *De fato* 6 ed. Bruns p.171.11-16.

⁹³⁶ Bessarion *ICP* 9.9.1 p.167.14-21 (*patet igitur non omnia fato subiecisse Platonem nec fieri necessitate omnia voluisse*). Alexander *De fato* ed. Bruns p.171.7-16 (μὴ πάντα τὴν φύσιν ἐκάστου καὶ τὴν εἰμαρμένην εὐδοεῖν, ἀλλὰ γίνεσθαι τινα καὶ παρ' αὐτήν).

⁹³⁷ *ICP* 2.10.13 p.196.26-7. Here again the Greek text refers to Platonists where the Latin text refers to Plato.

⁹³⁸ Bessarion was not explicit about his Platonist sources but see, for example: *fatum autem connectentem omnia nata talem connexionem habere insinuat* (Proclus *de Providentia* 7.14-15 ed. Boese p.113-4). εἰ οὖν μὴ μόνον ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ζώοις καὶ φυτοῖς, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷδε τῷ παντὶ κόσμῳ πρὸ τῶν σωμάτων ἐστὶν ἡ μία τοῦ κόσμου φύσις, συντεκτικὴ οὕσα τῆς τούτων συστάσεως καὶ κινητικὴ.... ἀναγκαῖον τὴν φύσιν αἴτιον εἶναι τῶν συμπλεκόμενων, καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ ζητεῖν τὴν [καλουμένην] εἰμαρμένην...τούτῳ τοίνυν [ἠῤῥηται, τίς ἢ εἰμαρμένη καὶ πῶς] ἢ τοῦδε τοῦ κόσμου φύσις οὐσία τις οὕσα ἀσώματος, ὡς τῶν σωμάτων προστάτης....πάντα κατὰ χρόνον κινούσα καὶ συμπλέκουσα τὰς πάντων καὶ τῶν χρόνοις καὶ τῶν τόποις διεστώτων κινήσεις· καθ' ἣν καὶ τὰ θνητὰ συμπλέκεται τοῖς ἀϊδίοις καὶ ἐκεῖνοις συγκυκλεῖται, καὶ ταῦτα ἀλλήλοις συμπάσχει (*de Providentia* 11.11-12.5 ed. Boese p.117-119).

Chapter seven

Conclusion

Bessarion was no stylist. The coherence of his chapters is often difficult to detect. He moved from one matter to another without, apparently, a clear sequence of thought, which makes him difficult to unravel. Unlike his teacher, Plethon, he does not appear to have made any attempt to be original. Nearly everything that he wrote in book two can be traced back to his sources. His originality lay in the way he arranged and presented the arguments drawn from his sources to achieve his purposes.

He set out to present an unfamiliar Plato to the Latins. They did not have access to most of Plato's dialogues and they were vulnerable to what Bessarion regarded as misrepresentations by Aristotle and adverse propaganda by Trebizond. He feared that Trebizond was exploiting the Latins' ignorance of Plato. His aim was to show that, although Plato was not a Christian, his philosophy was closer to Christianity than Aristotle's. *Doctrinam Platonis magis quam Aristotelis nostrae religioni consentaneam esse demonstrabimus.*⁹³⁹ This was a radical idea at a time when Scholastic Aristotelianism dominated in the Universities and religious orders. How successful was he in the task which he had set himself? Did he present Plato or a heavily interpreted version of Plato? The truth is that according to standards of scholarship which seek to return as far as possible to the original texts and their meaning Bessarion's version of Plato was heavily interpreted. Book two is a mixture of reporting what Plato said, interpreting what Plato wrote and a philosophical commentary on either what Plato wrote or Bessarion's interpretation of what Plato wrote. We should not judge Bessarion by the standards of our

⁹³⁹ *ICP* 2.1 p.82.16-17.

contemporary scholarship. He must have been conscious of the fact that much of what he attributed to Plato was taken from later commentators. But this was regarded as a legitimate way of presenting an ancient author.

I have demonstrated Bessarion's heavy dependence on the commentators especially Proclus. He placed himself in the tradition of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus and Olympiodorus and this was recognised by Ficino. This was no surprise in a Greek with his educational background. He managed to find in this pagan tradition philosophical tools in support of Christian orthodox thought. But he also drew on Eusebius and the Latins, particularly Boethius and Aquinas. Although he cited Aquinas only twice by name in book two, the parallels with Aquinas' arguments and thought are numerous. Did he think that in his extensive use of commentators and others he was presenting the authentic Plato? Perhaps the question never occurred to him in that form. But he made a revealing comment on the authority of the commentators in filling in gaps left by Plato. *In Timaeo quoque diffusius explicatur productam a deo animam esse, tum nostram tum mundi universi, substantiaeque et virtutis eius ratio redditur. Qui locus etsi non facile percipitur, tamen ingenii bonitate et ope scriptorum, qui libros Platonis exposuere, satis intellegi potest* (ICP 2.8.14 p.153.7-10). By using the commentators he built on what was sometimes a meagre base in the Platonic texts as, for example, in the case of Plato on fate. His interpretation of Plato could be perverse as in his attribution to Plato of an innate desire for the *summum bonum* in souls. He was not above massaging Plato's views so he made two glosses to his account of the nature of the soul in Plato to make it compatible with Christianity. Neither was he above attributing to Plato views which Plato did not hold. His whole argument regarding the conflict between God's providence and free will was an attempt to read back into Plato an argument which was not there in the first place in order

to find common ground between Plato and Christianity. The set of propositions demonstrating that matter is both generated and ungenerated, which he attributed to Plato, is hard to find in Plato but is present in the commentators. He was also selective in the way in which he used his sources in order to support his case that Plato was close to Christianity. He distorted Proclus' interpretation of the 'One' in the *Parmenides* to bring it closer to Christianity. His whole argument about Plato's belief in *fides* and trust in established authority is another such case. The way in which the use of Πλατωνικοί in the Greek text becomes *Plato* in the Latin text might be a piece of propaganda to bolster Bessarion's thesis. But it might suggest that he drew no distinction between Plato and his followers. The likelihood is that he was presenting the Plato of a particular tradition which he believed authoritative. He would have learnt from Plethon who said that Plato, like the Pythagoreans, did not write down his teachings but left it to his followers to fill in the gaps and give a fuller account.⁹⁴⁰ Bessarion was also commenting on Plato in a way that would lend philosophical muscle to what he interpreted Plato's position to be. So he wrote when he came to deal with fate and providence in Plato: *Quid Plato de divina providentia et fato senserit, explicare decrevi, ut non modo opinio eius, sed etiam ratio, cur providentiam cum fato coniunxerit, intellegatur* (ICP 2.9.1 p.167.25-7).

Bessarion's view about the relationship of Aristotle and Plato is ambivalent, not to say contradictory. In a letter to his friend, William Fichet (1433-c.1480), Chancellor of the University of Paris, he said that he had written a work on Plato 'in which he showed that Aristotle, whom he had admired from his earliest years, had followed his teacher, Plato, so that it could be easily judged that where Plato's teaching had been right Aristotle had

⁹⁴⁰ *Contra Scholarii objectiones* 5 ed. Maltese p.4.20-30. See Karamanolis (2002) 260-1.

learnt much and had developed it by his genius'.⁹⁴¹ In places he seems to go into contortions in order to demonstrate that Aristotle and Plato were in agreement even projecting opinions onto Aristotle which he never expressed. But he was insistent that Plato was closer to Christianity than Aristotle. There is a subject here and in the controversy between the Platonists and Aristotelians between 1439 and 1458 for a whole further detailed study.

Bessarion repeatedly stressed the congruence of Plato and Christianity. So he glossed the passage in the *Statesman* where the Athenian stranger described how God withdrew his guiding hand from the cosmos to explain that the presence and absence of God should not be interpreted literally. He explicitly demonstrated the Platonic base of early Christianity and the convergence of Plato with the Greek fathers. In book two he cited Cyril of Alexandria, Basil, Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa.⁹⁴² He revealed his theological purpose by pointing out in *ICP* 2.4.4 the close parallels between the text of the *Laws* and passages in the Christian scriptures (*Psalms* 10.7, *Romans* 12.15, *Proverbs* 3.4 and *I Peter* 5.5). But when faith and philosophy came into conflict, faith for Bessarion overrode philosophy.

He lived for only three years after publication of *ICP* in 1469. His controversy with Trebizond continued after publication of *ICP* but inevitably petered out with his death. What was his legacy? Hankins observes that in the second third of the fifteenth century the torch of Plato passed from Rome to Florence.⁹⁴³ Bessarion's role in the transmission of Plato has been overshadowed by the reputations of Ficino and Pico. Gibbon dismissed the enduring legacy of the work of Bessarion and his circle: '[Cardinal Bessarion's]

⁹⁴¹ Letter from Bessarion to Fichet December 1470 in Mohler (1942) 554-6.

⁹⁴² See Hankins (2004) II 423.

⁹⁴³ Hankins (2004) II 423-4.

ecclesiastical honours diffused a splendour and pre-eminence over his literary merit and service: his palace was a school; as often as the cardinal visited the Vatican, he was attended by a learned train of both [Latin and Greek] nations; of men applauded by themselves and the public; whose writings, now overspread with dust, were popular and useful in their own times.⁹⁴⁴

There is indeed evidence of wide interest in Bessarion's work immediately after its first appearance. Three editions of the work appeared within fifty years. It was first published in Rome in 1469 and then in Venice in 1503 and in 1516. But Del Soldato and Monfasani have shown that the work continued to be plagiarised or quoted, not always with approval, over the next two centuries.⁹⁴⁵ As late as 1594 the Jesuit Giovanni Battista Crispo in his *de ethnicis philosophis caute legendis disputationum quinarius primus* referred to Bessarion's proof for the immortality of the soul in *ICP* 2.8.6 which Bessarion derived from Plato's argument from self-movement in *Laws* X. Crispo criticised Bessarion's comment that *ulteriore progressu essentiam divinitatis ex his demonstrat* on the grounds that the logical implication was that our soul is God.⁹⁴⁶

In 1655 the Dutch historian of philosophy George Horn although holding that Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus were corrupters of Christianity, praised Ficino and Bessarion.⁹⁴⁷

The Dutch humanist Johannes Vossius, friend of Archbishop Laud, in his work *de*

⁹⁴⁴ In Edward Gibbon J.B.Bury ed. (1914) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (London) Ch. 66 p.129.

⁹⁴⁵ Del Soldato, E. (2010) and Monfassani 2013 (359-60).

⁹⁴⁶ See Del Soldato *loc. cit.* 338. Hankins ((2004) 39) cites Crispo's work as evidence of a counter-reformation crack down on the Platonic challenge to the supremacy of Aristotle.

⁹⁴⁷ Tigestedt (1974) 50-1 and n.388.

Philosophorum Sectis of 1657 bracketed Bessarion, Plethon and Ficino among the *Platonici*.⁹⁴⁸

Despite the advocacy of Bessarion and others it took a long time for Platonism to penetrate European Universities, which even into the seventeenth century were in the grip of Aristotelianism. Kristeller notes that unlike Aristotelianism the philosophical aspects of Renaissance Platonism had a weak institutional base.⁹⁴⁹ The first Professor in the University of Paris to teach Plato was Jérôme Aléandre from 1508 to 1515. From 1547 Adrien Turnèbe was teaching the *Timaeus* and *Phaedo* in Paris. The Rector of the University, Pierre Gasland, criticised a colleague of Turnèbe, Omer Talon, for abandoning the dogmatic Aristotelian method of teaching for the Socratic method of the Platonic dialogues. The statutes of the University of Oxford of 1549 and 1564 allow the teaching of Plato's *Republic* as a text for moral philosophy.⁹⁵⁰ There was a concerted movement in the sixteenth century to defend and propagate the Platonic reform of Christian theology with the establishment of chairs in Platonic philosophy in Bologna, Pisa, Ferrara and then Rome.⁹⁵¹

The contribution of Bessarion to the transmission of Plato to the West has, perhaps, been understated. In his life he stood astride two worlds, the Greek East and the Latin West, and united them in his person. The breadth of his interests and the extent of achievements is

⁹⁴⁸ Tigstedt (1974) 51-2.

⁹⁴⁹ Kristeller (1956) 27. He also says: 'If the increasing anti-Aristotelian tendencies of the [Renaissance] period failed to have any tangible effect on the curriculum of the Universities, the reason was not merely academic inertiabut also the fact that by the end of the sixteenth century the new movements had not yet produced a sufficiently solid body of teachable doctrine that might have been substituted for Aristotle in philosophical instruction' (*ibid.* 22).

⁹⁵⁰ See Schmitt (1976). See also Kristeller (1996) 92: 'We have some indication that courses on Platonic philosophy were given informally at Ferrara and Pisa at the end of the fifteenth century. Only during the last quarter of the sixteenth century do we find official university courses on Platonic philosophy given at Pisa and, perhaps, Pavia.'

⁹⁵¹ See Hankins (2005) 397.

astonishing. This thesis has sketched out a part of them but the full story is waiting to be told. When Niccolò Capranica preached Bessarion's funeral oration before the Pope and papal court the breadth of Bessarion's life reminded him of Aeneas' description of the mighty expanse of sea and sky: *caelum undique et undique pontus*.⁹⁵²

⁹⁵² Mohler (1942) 405 and *Aeneid* III.193.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the thesis:

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C.G. Pera, C., Petro, M. and Caramello, P. edd. (1961) *Aquinas: Liber de veritate Catholicae fidei seu Summa contra gentiles* (Turin and Rome).
Comparatio. George of Trebizond *Comparationes phylosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis* (1523 Venice).
DBF. *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française.*
DBI. *Dizionario Biografico Degli Italiani.*
Ep. *Epistula.*
ICP Mohler, L. ed. (1927) *In Calumniatorem Platonis* (Paderborn).
in Tim. Diehl, E. ed. (1903-5) *Proclus: In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* (Leipzig).
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Prop. Proposition.
S.T. Editiones Paulinae edd. (1962) *Aquinias: Summa Theologiae* (Rome and Alba).

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