

Angels and Henads:  
How Aquinas' Angelology Draws Upon  
Proclus' Henadology<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Proclus and Aquinas envision a plurality of divine beings organized hierarchically under the aegis of a first principle: respectively, the One and the henads, and God and His angels. While the differences rule out a wholesale application of Procline henadology to Thomas' angelology, Aquinas, nevertheless, incorporates Proclus' henadology into his angelology in two ways. First, Aquinas borrows from Procline henadology when explaining the differences between angels: these can be known in an approximate way from their observable effects. Second, Aquinas incorporates Proclus' understanding of henadic hierarchy, which focuses on power and activity over ontology, into his conception of angelic hierarchy.*

**Keywords:** Angels, Angelology, Henads, Henadology, gods, The One, Aquinas, Proclus.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Until relatively recently, scholars generally did not consider the Neoplatonic henads to play any significant role within Neoplatonic metaphysics. According to Edward Butler, most scholars, with the exception of Thomas Whittaker (1918), thought that the henads were the result of a perceived Neoplatonic tendency to needlessly multiply metaphysical entities.<sup>2</sup> This perception led scholars either to overlook the importance of the henads, or, when they did address them, to treat them as super-transcendent forms rather than divinities surpassing ontology altogether. Interest in the Neoplatonic henads, however, has grown in recent decades, generating scholarly debate about their nature, relation to and distinction from one another, and alterity from the One Itself. Many of the important contributions have appeared in the present journal.

Scholars have also advanced our understanding of Neoplatonism's influence, and in particular, the thought of Proclus, on Thomas Aquinas.<sup>3</sup> This essay aims to contribute to this work by examining how Proclus' henads and henadology influence Aquinas' angelology. At first glance, Proclus' henads and Thomas' angels seem to have something in common. Proclus argues in the *Elements of Theology* that there is a multiplicity of entities at the level of the One, sharing in the character of the originative monad of its series,

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2 See Edward Butler, "Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold," *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 83-104 and Edward Butler, "The Gods and Being in Proclus," *Dionysius* 26 (2008): 93-114.

3 See, for example, Wayne Hankey, "Divine Henads and Persons: Multiplicity's Birth in the Principle in Proclus and Aquinas," *Dionysius* 37 (Dec. 2019): 164-181. The introduction to the essay and corresponding notes cite scholarship that has examined the relation between Neoplatonic and Christian thought over the past forty years.

which is unity (ἐναΐόν).<sup>4</sup> These ‘ones’ or ‘henads,’ Proclus claims, are gods – the first appearance of multiplicity ‘after’ the One.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas argues that the first alterity external to God is found in the angels, the pinnacle of God’s creation. Both Proclus and Aquinas envision a plurality of divine beings nearest to and organized hierarchically under the aegis of a singular first principle: the One and the henads, and God and His angels.

How, if at all, does Proclus’ henadology influence Aquinas’ angelology? There are at least three broad possibilities: 1) the henads, what they are, what they do, and why they are necessary for Proclus, disappear altogether in Aquinas: they play no role at all; 2) the nature and role of the henads is pulled down into the next level of beings, which, in Thomas’ scheme, are the angels, and 3) the henads are drawn up into the Christian Godhead, namely, into the Trinity. The first option has been convincingly, in my view, demonstrated to be untenable.<sup>6</sup> Wayne Hankey, for example, concludes in a recent article, which takes a further “step in bringing Aquinas and Proclus closer by considering the primary differentiation in both: the divine Henads and the Persons of the Trinity,” that the similarities between Aquinas and Proclus are the result of more than “mere influence,” but are, perhaps, the outcome of

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4 Proclus bases his claim on the principle that, “... every originative cause introduces its proper manifold, which resembles it and is akin to it” (*ET* P113). The relation between the originative causes and their respective manifolds in the other taxeis – the intellectual and psychological – also applies to the level of the One itself. See *ET* P21 and P97, as per Dodds’ references. I use the text in Proclus, *Elements of Theology: A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, trans. E.R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

5 See *ET* P114.3.

6 Although this seems to be the position of Eric Perl in his article, “Proclus’ Multi-Level Ontology: The Meaning of Monads vs. A Tale Told by Thomists,” *Dionysius* 38 (2020): 143-167, the henads are not explicitly mentioned therein. Nevertheless, Perl’s account of Aquinas appears to leave no place for the henads.

theological or philosophical necessities.<sup>7</sup> The second option, which argues the similarities between the henads and the angels, has been proposed by Sheldon-Williams, and a version of the position has recently been advanced by Casas.<sup>8</sup> The third approach goes in the opposite direction, drawing in various ways Proclus' henads into the Persons of the Christian Trinity. This view has been advanced by, for example, Hankey and Riggs.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I first explain why Aquinas' angels are radically distinct from Proclus' henads, thereby favouring option three. The fundamental differences rule out a wholesale application of Procline henadology to Thomas' angelology. However, I then show how Aquinas, nevertheless, incorporates Proclus' henadology into his angelology in two ways. First, Aquinas borrows from Procline henadology when explaining how the differences and distinctions between angels can be known in a relative way by the human being. Proclus claims that we can begin to understand the henads by examining their observable effects in the world – something akin to the thesis that *operatio sequitur esse* – what a thing does, follows from what it is, or, in this case, *operatio sequitur super-esse*. So too does Aquinas argue that the differences

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7 Hankey, "Divine Henads and Persons," 180.

8 See I.P., Sheldon-Williams, "Henads and angels: Proclus and the ps.-Dionysius" in *Studia Patristica* 11 (Berlin, 1972), 65-71, and Ghislain Casas, "Ontology, Henadology, Angelology: The Neoplatonic Roots of Angelic Hierarchy," in *Neoplatonic Demons and Angels*, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition, vol. 20, ed. Luc Brisson, Seamus O'Neill, and Andrei Timotin (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 231-268.

9 See, for example, Hankey, "Divine Henads and Persons." See also Wayne Hankey, "Ab uno simplici non est nisi unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas' Doctrine of Creation," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev'd Dr. Robert Crouse*, ed. Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten and Walter Hannam (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 309-333, and Timothy Riggs, "Erôs, the Son, and the Gods as Metaphysical Principles in Proclus and Dionysius," *Dionysius* 28 (2010): 97-130.

between angels can be known by the human being in an approximate way from their effects. Second, Aquinas incorporates Proclus' understanding of hierarchy, as it pertains to the henads, into his conception of angelic hierarchy. For Proclus, hierarchy among the henads, insofar as they transcend the forms, has not to do with being and ontology, but rather, with power and activity. While Aquinas' angels are beings, in the *Summa Theologiae* he too explains the differences between them and their choirs not according to ontological categories, but rather, consonant with their various roles and missions.<sup>10</sup> As does Proclus, Aquinas employs a conception of hierarchy distinct from ontology. I argue that this application of hierarchy in Aquinas' angelology, mediated to Aquinas through Dionysius, derives from Proclus' henadology.

## 2. PROCLINE HENADOLOGY AS DISTINCT FROM THOMISTIC ANGELOLOGY

Working out the relation between Proclus' henads and Aquinas' angels involves a number of difficulties. While the problem of saying anything affirmative about the One is familiar to those acquainted with Neoplatonism, the henads introduce a score of additional and similar problems insofar as they are a plurality of 'things' that are similarly beyond all ontic categories and relations. Edward Butler has provided a directive for Proclus scholars by calling attention to the fundamental difference between forms and henads, and

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<sup>10</sup> Shandon L. Guthrie also points out that the term 'angel' refers to an angelic being's mission, not its ontological character. 'Angels' are named according to what they *do*, and not according to what they *are*. See Shandon L. Guthrie, *Gods of this World: A Philosophical Discussion and Defense of Christian Demonology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 4-17.

between ontology and henadology. Because the henads surpass, and indeed, are constitutive *of* the forms and being, one cannot “overlook [the] unique logical and structural characteristics of the henadic manifold which set it apart from any *ontic* manifold.”<sup>11</sup> Any attempt to understand the henads must “recognize a special logic of supra-essential existence in Proclus.”<sup>12</sup> However the alterities between the One and the henads and between the henads themselves are to be conceived, these must differ in character from alterities among beings. But how do we think, speak, philosophize, or theologize about things beyond the very categories that we typically employ to engage in these pursuits? And if the nature of Proclus’ henads is itself elusive, it is doubly difficult to compare what Proclus says about them to Aquinas’s angels.

The first, and perhaps greatest, difference, therefore, between Proclus’ henads and Aquinas’ angels is that henads *transcend* being, whereas angels *are* beings. Angels, for Aquinas, even if “supreme among creatures,” are entities or substantial forms, not divinity.<sup>13</sup> *All* things save God are created and are thereby fundamentally different from Him.<sup>14</sup> The angels, though not limited from below, that is, by matter, are still limited from above; angels are not self-constituted in the ways in which even certain intelligible realities are for

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11 Butler, “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” 83. See also Riggs, “*Erôs*, the Son,” 101-2.

12 Butler, “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” 85. On this particular aspect of Butler’s position, see also Jonathan Greig, “Proclus on the Two Causal Models for the One’s Production of Being: Reconciling the Relation of the Henads and the Limit/Unlimited,” *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 14 (2020): 1-26, at 16-17.

13 *ST I*, q. 108, a. 1, ad. 1. I use the text in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, Inc., 1948).

14 See James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications), 2011, 115-16.

Proclus.<sup>15</sup> The creator/created distinction is foundational: the alterity between God and creation is greater than the alterities between any one creature and another. Although an ant and an elephant are more alike to one another than the archangel Michael is to Raphael, still, the angel Gabriel is more akin to the ant than he is to God.

Despite the topographical similarity between the henads, forms, and souls, as each multiplicity is suspended from its originative cause within its taxis, the henads are not, as Butler has emphasized, simply 'more transcendent' forms. The logic and principles that apply to forms and ontology are surpassed by the henads, and thus, the henads cannot be restricted by or expected to conform to the relations imposed by these. Participation, for example, does not occur among the henads as it does among forms. Forms participate in one another, which is what allows one to recollect.<sup>16</sup> The henads, however, as Proclus states, are 'all in all' – they do not participate in one another, or in anything, for that matter.<sup>17</sup> As Butler puts it, "The two most salient characteristics of the henads are, first, that they are 'all in all,' which is to say all in each, and, second, their consummate individuality and autarchy."<sup>18</sup> One of the great difficulties in understanding the henads is in establishing how they are unique and differentiated (such that

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15 See *De ente et essentia* 92. I use the text in Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, trans. Joseph Kenny, O.P. (1965). On the self-sufficiency of certain intelligences in Proclus, see *ET* P40-51. The self-constituted has "the power of furnishing its own being, is self-sufficient in respect of its existence ..." (*ET* P40). This is not so for Aquinas' angels. See also Marilena Vlad, "Dionysius the Areopagite on Angels: Self-Constitution versus Constituting Gifts," in *Neoplatonic Demons and Angels, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition*, vol. 20, ed. Luc Brisson, Seamus O'Neill, and Andrei Timotin (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 269-290.

16 See, for example, *Meno* 82-86d.

17 See *ET* P103 and *ET* P2: "Now if it be nothing else but its own unity, it is a bare 'one' and so cannot participate unity but must *be* pure unity." See also Butler, "The Gods and Being," 96 ff.

18 Butler, "The Gods and Being in Proclus," 100.

there is a multiplicity of them) if they are ‘all in all.’ While the relations between forms allow for discursive intellective movement between them, no form contains all forms in their entirety. Things participate in the forms, and the forms in one another; things participate in the henads, but the henads do not participate in anything – certainly not the One itself, since the monad of any taxis is unparticipated. Further, Butler writes, “The polycentric henadic organization, because it is an organization of unique individuals, is irreducible to ontology for the latter only treats of forms, that is, of universals.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Aquinas’ angels, insofar as they are substantial forms participating Being, are not analogous to Procline henads.<sup>20</sup>

A second difference between Proclus’ henads and Thomas’ angels concerns each multiplicity’s relation to the principle above it: the henadic relation to the One, and the angelic relation to God. For Aquinas, God’s external procession generates something utterly distinct from Himself; the One’s procession within its taxis, for Proclus, does not. Let us start with Aquinas. He distinguishes between the inner divine processions that constitute the Trinity and the external divine procession that creates the universe.<sup>21</sup> For Aquinas, creation is the proper act of God.<sup>22</sup> No matter the extent of their power

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19 Butler, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” 95.

20 Klitenic-Wear and Dillon also point this out in Dionysius, Aquinas’ main non-Scriptural authority on angels. See Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (England: Ashgate, 2007): “From a Neoplatonic perspective, the triads of intelligible (angelic) entities set out in the Celestial Hierarchy should not properly be classed as henads. For Syrianus and Proclus (and likely for Iamblichus before them), the class of beings known as henads or ‘unities’ (henades) are inhabitants of the realm of the One, not properly that of Intellect” (72).

21 Wayne Hankey observes that “Aquinas defines creation as ‘the emanation of the whole actuality of being from the universal being’” (Hankey, “*Ab uno simplici*,” 312).

22 See Hankey, “*Ab uno simplici*,” 309.



and knowledge, no beings 'create', *per se* – not even angels or demons.<sup>23</sup> Hankey explains that "Creation for Aquinas requires three emanations of two distinct kinds."<sup>24</sup> The first kind of emanation involves the processions of the Persons within the Trinity. This unique type of alterity within God does not involve inequality or ontic multiplicity. Nevertheless, these internal emanations or processions within the divine essence produce real distinctions and relations within God.<sup>25</sup> This first kind of procession comprises two emanations: the first is the emanation of the Word, which is the necessary and natural result of God's knowing Himself, the second is the emanation of the Spirit, which is the necessary and natural result of divine self-love. Explaining the processions of the Son from the Father, and of the Holy Ghost from them both, Aquinas emphasizes that "procession exists in God, only according to an action which does not tend to anything external, but remains in the agent itself."<sup>26</sup> The third (and

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23 This limitation marks another difference between Aquinas' angels and the various permutations of Neoplatonic angels and other intelligible beings which *are* involved in the generative activities of the first principle. Aquinas' angels, do, however, like the henads, exercise providential roles. On the providential role of the henads, see *ET* 120. On providence in Dionysius and Proclus, see Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London and New York: Compendium, 1989), 93-94.

24 Hankey, "Ab uno simplici," 329.

25 See Hankey, "Divine Henads and Persons," 177-178.

26 *ST I*, q. 27, a. 3, co. See *ST I*, q. 93, a. 6, co. Similarly, in rational creatures "we find a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of the love in the will." In this way, rational beings image the Trinitarian life. Aside from God, only an intellect is capable of "an inward procession corresponding to the act remaining within the agent" (*ST I*, q. 27, a. 1, co); and again, "This applies most conspicuously to the intellect, the action of which remains in the intelligent agent" (*ST I*, q. 27, a. 1, co.). On how bodily processions culminate in something external and thereby fail to image the Trinity, see *ST I*, q. 93, a. 3 co. and *SCG* 4.10.18. See also Seamus O'Neill, "Why the *Imago Dei* is in the Intellect Alone: A Criticism of a Phenomenology of Sensible Experience for Attaining an Image of God," *The Saint Anselm Journal* 13, no 2 (Spring, 2018): 19-41, at 27-28. On possible similarities in Proclus, see Butler "Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold," 93 ff., Timothy Riggs, "Eros as Hierarchical Principle: A

second kind of) emanation is creation.<sup>27</sup> In distinction from the first kind, this procession must necessarily be “multiple, diverse, and unequal.”<sup>28</sup> The creation of the angels, for Aquinas, occurs within this third emanation, producing, for the first time, ontic multiplicity and inequality external to God. The angels, therefore, despite their closeness to God and the place they enjoy at the apex of creation, are the product of a divine emanation rather different from the Trinitarian processions.<sup>29</sup>

For Proclus, the emanation from the One that produces the henads is unlike the divine emanation that creates the angels in Aquinas, and where one first finds similar multiplicity and inequality in Proclus’ system is a matter of debate: do these occur within the henadic realm or below it?<sup>30</sup> The henads are multiple (there is a finite number of them), but they are somehow equal to one another. Butler has argued that the

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Re-evaluation of Dionysius’ Neoplatonism,” *Dionysius* 27 (2009): 71-96, at 83-84, and Hankey, “Divine Henads and Persons,” 170, n. 32.

27 Aquinas writes, “The processions of the divine Persons are the cause of creation” (*ST* I, q. 45, a. 6, ad 1). See Wayne Hankey, “Making Theology Practical: Thomas Aquinas and The Nineteenth Century Religious Revival,” *Dionysius* 9 (1985): 85-127, at 109.

28 Hankey explains, “What proceeds out of God must be multiple, diverse, and unequal. Only thus can what is outside the divine substance receive his goodness so that the universal order is both as good as it can be in itself and will also represent him as adequately as possible” (Hankey, “*Ab uno simplici*,” 328-29).

29 The first emanations within God are necessary, while the third emanation, which creates the universe, is voluntary. See Hankey, “*Ab uno simplici*,” 330. See also John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 55-56. God could have made eternal creatures, but did not. Creation, therefore, was the result of divine will. Thus, the contingency of creation, in which we find the angels, is distinct from the necessary Trinitarian emanations.

30 See Butler, “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” Butler, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” and Lankila’s assessment of Butler’s position in Tuomo Lankila, “Henadology in the Two Theologies of Proclus,” *Dionysius* 28 (2010): 63-76.

procession of the henads is unlike the processions in the lower taxeis, that is, “the ‘procession’ from the One to the henads cannot be like that from, e.g., the intelligible to the intelligible-intellective Gods.”<sup>31</sup> One wonders, however, how there comes to be a multiplicity of henads at all, especially given that the primary character of the taxis is unity.<sup>32</sup>

A key and contested feature of Butler’s interpretation is that it effectively collapses the One, as a monad distinct from or above the henads (as one finds in the lower taxeis), into the henads. Butler argues instead that the One *is* each henad. That is, there is no ‘monotheistic’ One presiding over and producing the ranks of the gods: the One is not to be thought of as a separate monad, but rather, “the most appropriate way of conceiving of the first principle is as standing for *each God*, rather than for the class of Gods, as would be the case for an ordinary monad.”<sup>33</sup> The position re-focuses on Proclus’ positive theology as distinct from ineffable mystical union.<sup>34</sup> Further, for Butler, the henads do not proceed in a way analogous to the processions in the lower taxeis: rather, he attributes the causal agency of the One directly to the henads themselves.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the question of how the multiplicity of henads derives from the One disappears, since one already begins with them: “procession in the primary sense is from one *mode of unity* to another: namely, from the polycentric manifold of autarchic individual henads to the monocentric unity of forms.”<sup>36</sup> Butler notes, rightly, that this interpretation is rather controversial.

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31 Butler, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” 94.

32 See *ET* P113 and P127.

33 Butler, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” 98.

34 See Butler, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” 102.

35 See Butler, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” 94.

36 Butler, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” 94-95.

Gregory MacIsaac has argued against Butler's position, writing, "I find less persuasive his thesis that the One is nothing other than the henads ... Indeed, Butler's own promising thesis that each henad's simplicity lies in an *idiotes* which is not reducible to ontological oppositions argues against his removal of the One as something distinct from the henads."<sup>37</sup> Precisely *because* each henad has a unique and irreducible character to bestow, the One cannot be sublimated into the henads.<sup>38</sup> Tuomo Lankila also argues that Butler's reading of Proclus "goes too far and effaces the concept of the primal God in Proclus. This surely is not in agreement with the word of Proclus and probably not with Proclus' meaning either."<sup>39</sup> Despite my sympathy for Butler's emphasizing the distinctions between ontology and henadology, forms and henads, and his rigorous inquiries into the positive philosophical and theological 'work' that the henads do beyond 'gap-filling,' I think MacIsaac and Lankila are right to criticize an interpretation that would either collapse the One into the henads or the henads into the One.

Proclus maintains the supremacy of the One 'over' the henads in a number of ways. Aside from various explicit propositions in the *Elements*, such as P126, P132, and P133, in which Proclus writes, "For not all the gods together may be matched with the One, so far does it overpass the divine multitude," John Dillon made an important contribution to this

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37 Gregory MacIsaac, "The Origin of Determination in the Neoplatonism of Proclus," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev'd Dr. Robert Crouse*, ed. Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten, and Walter Hannam (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 148, n. 27.

38 See also Lankila, 66.

39 Lankila, 72. See also Riggs' recent objections in the Appendix to Hankey, "Divine Henads and Persons," 181.

debate over fifty years ago.<sup>40</sup> In a 1972 article, Dillon discusses certain Neoplatonic interpretations concerning what the hypotheses of the *Parmenides* refer to: some claim that the first hypothesis includes the One *and* the gods, while others contend that it refers to the One alone. Dillon asserts that Iamblichus is the first to add 'the gods in general' (the divine henads) to the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, which, for Porphyry, referred to the One only.<sup>41</sup> Proclus, in the *Parmenides Commentary*, rejects Iamblichus' inclusion of the gods in the first hypothesis. According to some Platonists, Proclus writes, "The first hypothesis they declare to be concerned with God and the gods – for the discussion is not only about the One, but about all the divine henads."<sup>42</sup> Proclus provides various reasons for rejecting this view. For one, the One, like all other monads of a taxis, is unparticipated, whereas the henads are participated. If the One were nothing other than the henads or vice versa, then, according to Proclus, "we would have to allot one and the same hypothesis to all of them: for we would have to say that the discussion concerned the primal One in no way more than it concerned all the rest of the henads."<sup>43</sup> But he explicitly denies this: "It follows necessarily, then, that the First Hypothesis is about God alone, in so far as he is the generator of the plurality of gods, he himself being transcendent over their multiplicity and unconnected with those gods who have proceeded forth from him."<sup>44</sup> Proclus concludes, "beyond the multiplicity of

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40 See John Dillon, "Iamblichus and the Origin of the Doctrine of Henads," *Phronesis* 17, no.2 (1972): 102-106.

41 Dillon, 103: "It was Porphyry, as we have seen, who declared Hyp. I to be about 'the first god', and Iamblichus who chose to add '(all) the gods.'"

42 *In Parm.* 1054. I use the text in Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, trans. Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987).

43 *In Parm.* 1066.

44 *In Parm.* 1069.

participated henads there is the unparticipated One, transcendent, as has been said, over all the divine realms.”<sup>45</sup>

Dillon also maintains the difference between the henads and the forms: the henads transcend beings, but they are not distinct from the One according to any *ontological* categories which they surpass. Dillon writes, “The henads, which may be equated with the traditional gods on their highest level, are not then simply ‘illuminations’ of the One, but they are not to be regarded as properly distinct from it either. Such distinction would be intolerable, after all, in the henadic realm.”<sup>46</sup> However, Proclus objects to the “the idea of associating these participated entities too closely (i.e. in the same Hypothesis) with the imparticipable One.”<sup>47</sup> Again, the distinction between the One and the henads is of a special kind, but they are distinct nonetheless. Stephen Gersh has noted that, “The status attributed by the *Elements of Theology* to the henads is ambivalent in that they are sometimes more closely associated with the One but sometimes more closely associated with beings.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps this ambivalence stems from a systemic conflict between Proclus’ religious polytheism and the Platonic tendency to derive all multiplicity from a prior unity. If anything, Butler’s work has emphasised how difficult it is to conceive of the monad and its distinction from the members of its series at the level of the One. How one approaches these questions has various ramifications for the present inquiry regarding the possible relation between Proclus’ henads and Aquinas’ angels.

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45 *In Parm.* 1070.

46 Dillon, 104.

47 Dillon, 105.

48 Stephen Gersh, “Proclus as Theologian,” in *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Gersh (Cambridge UP, 2014), 93.

In a recent article, Eric Perl discusses Proclus' monads in relation to Aquinas' thought.<sup>49</sup> According to Perl, Aquinas 'telescopes' (one imagines the collapsing of a spyglass) Proclus' monads into God, who, as *ipsum esse*, is absolutely simple. He writes,

“[Aquinas'] difference with the Platonists lies in the ontological status of these 'ones.' As if folding up a telescope, Aquinas collapses Proclus' many-tiered system of terms and levels into God as *ipsum esse*. Like Proclus' first principle, the God of Aquinas is subsistent one and good, since these perfections are common to absolutely all things. But he also, without distinction, subsumes the role of the Procline triad of being, life, and intellect.”<sup>50</sup>

The problem, as Perl sees it, is that while Proclus and Aquinas agree on the absolute simplicity of the first principle, Aquinas fails to understand the role of the distinct monads in Proclus' metaphysics. According to Perl, Aquinas subsumes these principles into a God, who, due to divine simplicity, can no longer meaningfully maintain these distinctions within Himself. If the monads cease to remain distinct, they cannot ground the distinct orders, species, images and classes in the world we experience.<sup>51</sup> That is, one cannot maintain both absolute simplicity *and* the distinct grounds for difference in the emanated world within the same divine principle. The monads must, therefore, as Perl explains Proclus, remain 'outside' the first, lest they vanish within divine simplicity (although, he concludes that they are, in the end, all the same

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49 See Eric D. Perl, "Proclus' Multi-Level Ontology: The Meaning of Monads vs. A Tale Told by Thomists," *Dionysius* 38 (2020): 143-167.

50 Perl, 147. See also Perl, 143: "... the greatest difference between Aquinas and Proclus in this regard is that for Proclus the pattern of unparticipated monad and participated multiplicity repeats itself at many ontological levels, while Aquinas locates all Proclus' monads in God, where they are not really distinct from each other or from *ipsum esse*" (143).

51 See Perl, 155-156.

thing considered under different perspectives).<sup>52</sup> Aquinas, according to Perl, violates this rule by doing just this: by sublimating the monads into divine simplicity, Aquinas purportedly obliterates the distinct differences between them, and thereby, the necessary metaphysical work they perform.<sup>53</sup> The result is that these monads can no longer be the pre-conditions of their participated existences, a role that they perform in Proclus' account by remaining separate from the first principle.<sup>54</sup>

While Perl is right to stress the importance of the alterity among the monads, the picture becomes more complex from both sides (internally within Proclus and concerning Aquinas' relation to him) when one throws Proclus' henadology into the mix. While Perl's criticisms of Aquinas might hold against Thomists who 'tell the tales' he critiques, Aquinas has been shown to be more astute in his understanding and incorporation of Proclus than these exponents of Thomas realise. First, as Butler as shown, there is a strong case to be made that Proclus 'pluralizes' the One Itself. Within the taxis of the One, even the participated terms (the henads) must remain distinct and separate from one another. Because the character that each henad bestows to the cosmos through its causal chain is unique, the henads cannot be reduced to one another.<sup>55</sup> Perl makes a similar point concerning the lower monads in Proclus' metaphysics. How the character appears in the participated is not precisely how it resides within itself:

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52 See Perl, 161, 164.

53 Perl includes the idea that this is an advancement to the "tale told by Thomists": "According to the story as regularly told by Thomists, Aquinas thus 'corrects' Proclus and the Platonists by eliminating any ontologically intermediate terms" (148). See also the summary from Guagliardo in Perl, 148, n. 17.

54 See Perl, 154. Indeed, Perl avers that Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*, foresees this move that Aquinas purportedly makes (*Ibid.* 155).

55 See Part III of the present essay.



“So too, the unparticipated monad ‘man’ is precisely not the character ‘man’ as it appears and is known in any and every human being, but is rather the principle or source of that character, the paradigm of which ‘man’ in every human being is an image. Thus Proclus explains that we neither know nor ask what a monad is in itself, but only infer it as the source, or “fount” (πηγή), of the many participated terms ...” (153)

But here too in Proclus’ henadology, we see that the point applies also to the henads themselves. Insofar as the henads are the fonts of the characters that appear in the other *taxeis*, they must remain distinct and cannot be reduced to an absolute simplicity, *even within the One*. The simplicity of the first principle, therefore, is not so simple for Proclus.

Nor is God so simple for Aquinas. Proclus’ henadology and Aquinas’ Trinitarian theology complicate the picture of the divine simplicity. Perl points to the separation and distinction between the monads in Proclus’ system as a difference between Proclus, who maintains these separations to preserve difference in the cosmos, and Aquinas, whom he describes as ‘telescoping’ these monads into God – indeed, into a divine simplicity within which there can be no difference or alterity. He writes,

“But these ideas are not really distinct from one another in God, and so do not violate the necessary simplicity of the first principle: each of them just is God, the divine essence or *esse* itself, known to himself as the exemplar of this or that being.”<sup>56</sup>

However, far from distinguishing Aquinas and Proclus, the Procline reasons for separating the monads (and henads) bring Aquinas and Proclus *together*. It has been argued that Aquinas does *not* obscure Procline alterity within divine simplicity, but rather, he follows Proclus by incorporating henadological

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56 Perl, 147.

distinctions within God in the Persons of the Trinity to articulate an internal, divine alterity. The Procline One is more pluralized on the one hand, and God is not so simple on the other. It is not quite the case that “Proclus’ first principle or one itself, therefore, no less than Aquinas’ *ipsum esse* or God, is all the monads without distinction.”<sup>57</sup> Further, it has been argued that Aquinas learns why there must be alterity within the first principle precisely *from Proclus*.<sup>58</sup>

The Persons of the Trinity are distinct in God for Aquinas, not according to a ‘real distinction,’ but neither is it merely ‘conceptual.’ Like each henad, each Person contains the whole of divinity. So too is each Person, like each henad, an agent, or point of origin of an effect within the levels of the cosmos: it is *as a Person* that God acts. The Divine Persons in Aquinas, according to Hankey, are known through their effects, just as Proclus’ henads are, and as Perl argues the other Procline monads are.<sup>59</sup> We cannot know the ‘fonts,’ to use Proclus’ term, of these effects, but we can infer from them things about their aboriginal causes. Neither the Persons of the Trinity nor the henads can be reduced to one another. Not only does Aquinas draw up Proclus’ henadology into his Trinitarian theology, but further, similar principles appear in his angelology as well: the angels are similarly irreducible and distinct and play an essential role in the mediation of divine causality, as we shall see. These points support Perl’s conclusion that “Proclus and Aquinas are much closer together than the standard Thomist story allows.”<sup>60</sup> Henadic alterity, whereby there is distinction between a multiplicity of henads, but no loss of unity or equality is present more conformably

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57 Perl, 166.

58 See Hankey, “Divine Henads and Persons,” 180.

59 See Hankey, “Divine Henads and Persons,” 175.

60 Perl, 166.

within the distinctions and relations between the Persons of the Trinity, for Aquinas, than it is within creation, which latter includes the angels.<sup>61</sup> The angels, being unequal to God, are in a separate category, distinct from both the Trinitarian Persons for Aquinas, and the henads within the realm of the One for Proclus.

A final point of distinction between Thomistic angels and Procline henads: for Aquinas, creation (material and immaterial) is composite according to the distinction between essence and *esse*. A thing's quiddity or essence, that is, *what* a thing is, is distinct from its act of existing or *esse*, that is, whether or not it *exists*. Existence is added to an essence.<sup>62</sup> The essence of any creature is in potency to its act of existence. Material beings therefore have a 'double potency': of matter to form and of essence to *esse*. As Serge-Thomas Bonino notes, this latter imperfection in creatures is more radical than the form/matter distinction.<sup>63</sup> And thus even immaterial substances like angels and demons, who possess no material bodies, are fundamentally composite.

For Aquinas, in distinction from many of his Christian and Platonic predecessors, angels and demons are incorporeal, or separated, substances. That is, angels and demons do not have bodies. Although Thomas cites Dionysius as his philosophical authority on the incorporeality of the angels, he takes this angelic feature further.<sup>64</sup> According to Bonino,

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61 See Hankey, "Divine Henads and Persons."

62 See *De ente et essentia* 77 ff.

63 Serge-Thomas Bonino, *Angels and Demons: A Catholic Introduction*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 118.

64 See *De sub. sep.* 99-100. Aquinas states that "Dionysius ... excelled all others in teaching what pertains to spiritual substances" (*De sub. sep.* 17.91) and treats him as the primary non-Scriptural authority on angels. I use the text

“It was left to St. Thomas Aquinas to take the decisive step, thanks to a more in-depth understanding of the metaphysical structure of created being, which enabled him to assert the strict spirituality of an angel without thereby attributing to him absolute simplicity, which belongs to God alone.”<sup>65</sup>

Angels and demons, as subsistent forms separated from matter, are in potency to their act of *esse* – they could have not existed. Aquinas explains, “Although substances of this sort are forms alone without matter, they are not utterly simple so as to be pure act. They have an admixture of potency.”<sup>66</sup> The existence of all things, thereby, is participatory insofar as they participate in God, in whom “essence does not differ from existence.”<sup>67</sup> The *esse* of creatures comes from without – from God.<sup>68</sup> This marks a fundamental distinction between God, for whom essence and *esse* are identical, and His creation.<sup>69</sup>

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in Thomas Aquinas, *De substantiis separatis*, trans. Francis J. Lescoe (West Hartford CN: Saint Joseph College, 1959).

65 Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 116, and see also 120-21. Aquinas received the essence / *esse* distinction from Avicenna, whom he credits in the *De ente et essentia*. Though see also Kevin Corrigan, “A Philosophical Precursor to the Theory of Essence and Existence in Thomas Aquinas,” *Thomist: a Speculative Quarterly Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, (Apr 1, 1984): 219-240. See Wippel, 44 ff., 278. See *Aquinas’ Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics IV*, c. 2.

66 *De ente et essentia* 76. Aquinas concludes, “And because the quiddity of an intelligence is, as has been said, the intelligence itself, its quiddity or essence is identically that which it itself is; and its existence received from God is that whereby it subsists in reality” (*De ente et essentia* 83). See also *De ente et essentia* 92 ff.

67 *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4, co. Aquinas attributes this doctrine to Plato and Aristotle in *De sub. sep.* 48.

68 Aquinas writes, “Therefore that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another” (*ST I*, q.3, a. 4, co.). See also Bonino, *Angels and Demons*, 120 and *De ente et essentia* 80: “It is therefore necessary that every such thing, the existence of which is other than its nature, have its existence from some other thing.”

69 On the identity of essence and *esse* in God, see Hankey, “Making Theology Practical.” He writes, “... the principle of the finite, in which essence and *esse* are divided, is the identity of *esse* and *essentia*. So *esse* would be (as Thomas says it is) ‘*per se forma*,’ ‘*per essentiam suam forma*,’

No such difference pertains between the One and the henads, for Proclus argues that the henads are “perfectly unitary” and “completely self-sufficient.”<sup>70</sup> The henads need “nothing extraneous,” nor are they dependent even on anything that they might give to themselves. The only possible differentiating principles that Proclus mentions at the henadic level are Limit and Infinity, and even the order, nature, identity, and role of these is contested by scholars.<sup>71</sup> The henads, unlike the angels, do not participate in Being: they are participated, but do not participate.

Given these three fundamental differences (and there are others): a) angels as beings are distinct from henads that transcend beings; b) the divine procession that creates the angels is different from the processions of the henads within the taxis of the One (however conceived); and c) angels participate being whereas the henads are absolutely self-sufficient, one cannot liken Aquinas’ angels to Proclus’ henads. To confuse Thomas’ angels, which are subsistent forms participating existence, with the henads would perpetuate the confusion between ontology and henadology. Whatever influence henadology has on Aquinas’ angelology, it cannot be directly on angelic ontology. Nevertheless, Aquinas appears to draw on Proclus’ henadology in his angelology despite these differences, particularly in his understanding of angelic alterity and how the human being

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self-individuated and self-subsistent form. This is not to say he is ‘a form’” (105).

<sup>70</sup> *ET* P127.

<sup>71</sup> See *ET* P159: “Every order of gods is derived from the two initial principles, Limit and Infinity; but some manifest predominantly the causality of Limit, others that of Infinity.” Scholars debate whether or not these principles come ‘before’ or ‘after’ the henads (see *ET* P102). For a survey and critique of the main scholarly positions on the nature of Limit and Unlimited in Proclus along with a novel suggestion of his own, see Greig, “Proclus on the Two Causal Models.”

comes to know the angels in their individuality. With the radical differences in mind, we now (cautiously) turn to these similarities.

### 3. HOW AQUINAS' ANGELOLOGY DRAWS FROM PROCLUS' HENADOLOGY

Ultimately, neither henads nor angels can be known in themselves by the human intellect. Proclus lists three ways in which humans know, corresponding to three kinds of reality: we can have opinion of the sensible, intellection of true being, and discursive reason of things between them.<sup>72</sup> The gods, residing beyond being, are inaccessible to human comprehension. We have neither opinion, discursive understanding, nor intellection of their nature. Though not all is lost. For Proclus, any cause transmits something of itself to its effect – a character (*idiotes*) or likeness, which is received in the manner in which the effect is disposed to receive it. There is a traceable resemblance within a series of causes and effects, the participated and participants, according to which they are akin. Because of this connection, divine nature is not entirely inaccessible to human understanding. Proclus explains, “from the beings dependent upon [the gods] the character of their distinctive properties may be inferred, and with cogency.”<sup>73</sup> Because the character of the participant is determined by the distinctive properties of the participated, something of the participated can be gleaned from the participant in any series.<sup>74</sup> Proclus refers to this as the “continuity of procession in the universe,” whereby in the

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72 See *ET* P123.

73 *ET* P123.

74 See, for example, *ET* P127.

participants, “the distinctive character of their being thus appears as a reflection of their priors.”<sup>75</sup>

The principle extends to the gods too. Proclus argues that “all deity is in itself unspeakable and unknowable, being of like nature with the unspeakable One; yet from the diversities of the participants may be inferred the peculiar attributes of the participated.”<sup>76</sup> And so, the henads are “secret as conjoined with the One, intelligible as participated by Being.”<sup>77</sup> That is, while the gods are unknowable in themselves, we can glean certain things about them and differentiate between them according to their effects and the particular characters that each bestows upon their participants. We understand Dionysus by observing the actions of the soul that participates in the god. Its differences from an Apollonian soul suggest the differences between the very gods themselves.<sup>78</sup> If the henads cannot be thought of as ontologically distinct from one another, their differences can still be known according to their divine functions and the ‘especial individuation of goodness’ that they communicate to the cosmos.<sup>79</sup>

So too does Aquinas explain that the angelic nature in itself is unknown to us, though the reasons for this obscurity differ from those pertaining to the henads.<sup>80</sup> Although the angel’s essence is separate from its existence, angels still have a genus, a species, and a difference, but “their proper differences are hidden from us.”<sup>81</sup> That is, we know that the

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75 *ET* P112.

76 *ET* P162.

77 *ET* P162.

78 See also *ET* P133.

79 The One, however, being unparticipated, cannot be known even in this way. Only the One itself is absolutely secret. See *ET* P162 and *ET* P123.

80 On this point, see Serge-Thomas Bonino, “Aristotelianism and Angelology According to Aquinas,” in *Aristotle in Aquinas’s Theology*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015).

81 *De ente et essentia*, 94.

angels are multiple and ordered, but we cannot know what, exactly, distinguishes Gabriel from Raphael.<sup>82</sup> Aquinas invokes a way in which angelic alterity *can* be discerned, however, which is similar to Proclus' account of the human access to divine differences. He writes, "he who knows a thing in an imperfect manner can only distinguish it in a general way, and only as regards a few points."<sup>83</sup> Everyone can distinguish between a dinosaur and a daffodil, but the paleontologist and the biologist can differentiate between different orders within the groups themselves: between the Apatosaurus and the Allosaurus, the Paperwhite and the Poet's Narcissus. More perfect knowledge penetrates the further differences within a species, which are hidden to one who knows imperfectly. Aquinas applies the distinction to our knowledge of angels:

"Now our knowledge of the angels is imperfect, as Dionysius says (*Cael. Hier.* vi). Hence we can only distinguish the angelic offices and orders in a general way, so as to place many angels in one order. But if we knew the offices and distinctions of the angels perfectly, we should know perfectly that each angel has his own office and his own order among things, and much more so than any star, though this be hidden from us."<sup>84</sup>

While we might distinguish between "assisting" and "administering" angels, and angels who exercise an "interior" versus an "external ministry," Aquinas suggests that the

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82 The proper accidents of immaterial substances are unknown to human beings. Behind this view is Aquinas' position that all things are known, not as they are in themselves, but according to the mode of the knower. See Wayne Hankey, "*Secundum rei vim vel secundum cognoscentium facultatem: Knower and Known in the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius and the Proslogion of Anselm,*" in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis (Richmond [England]: Curzon Press, 2002), 126-150.

83 *ST I.* q. 108, a. 3, co.

84 *ST I.* q. 108, a. 3, co.



angelic roles that differentiate between them are, in reality, meticulously precise, and perhaps unique, though obscure to us.<sup>85</sup> We can, nevertheless, glean real differences between Gabriel and Raphael from their actions as revealed and observed in Scripture: one announcing to Mary that she will conceive, the other expelling from Sara's presence the demon Asmodeus. There is, therefore, a similarity between henadic and angelic alterity: although the true and precise differences that constitute the multiplicities within both categories are hidden to human knowing, one can, nevertheless, garner from their effects, which we can observe according to the human mode, characteristics by which henads and angels are actually differentiated.

The second point of similarity involves Aquinas' understanding and application of the notion of hierarchy in his angelology, which derives from Proclus through Dionysius. We tend to think hierarchy ontologically – vertically stratified levels of being, with the 'higher' being more comprehensive and generally 'better,' and so on. However, as Ghislain Casas points out, when Dionysius coins the term 'hierarchy,' he does not use it in this ontological sense at all. The term 'hierarchy' "means 'sacred power'."<sup>86</sup> In fact, Casas writes, for Dionysius, "There is, properly speaking, no such thing as a hierarchy of being, since 'hierarchy' precisely means an order

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85 See *ST I*, q. 108, a. 3, ad. 2: "That special distinction of orders and offices wherein each angel has his own office and order, is hidden from us." On the distinction between administering and assisting, see, for example, *ST I*, q. 112, a. 3. co.

86 Casas, 247. See also Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 21 ff. See also Wayne Hankey, "Dionysian Hierarchy in Thomas Aquinas: Tradition and Transformation," in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident, Actes du Colloque International Paris, 21-24 septembre 1994*, ed. Ysabel de Andia, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 15 (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 426 ff.

of knowledge and activity, i.e., a practical order, not an ontological one.”<sup>87</sup> According to Casas, Dionysius adopts Procline henadology and adapts it to his own angelology – not ontologically, but rather, in terms of power, action, and office:

“The order according to which angels are ranked has nothing to do with the emanative or causal order of the Neoplatonic hypostases (One, Intellect, Soul, etc.). This means that ps.-Dionysius modelled the angelic hierarchies on the orders of gods, or henads, [...] following a theological pattern and not a metaphysical one.”<sup>88</sup>

Angelic differences for Dionysius, according to Casas, do not involve metaphysical facts about their existence or the ontological categories of participation, identity, difference, and so on. Rather, angels are differentiated according to their “practical and official relations of power,” that is, “hierarchy is not natural, but institutional.”<sup>89</sup> This differentiation among the angels according to office and activity mirrors Proclus’ distinctions among henads, which are differentiated not by the ontological categories which they surpass, but rather, by their particular character or goodness and unity that they bestow in a unique and irreplaceable way to the cosmos in their participants.

If Casas is right about how Dionysius employs henadology in the distinctions between angels, we might interpret certain passages of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* along similar lines. Aquinas’ discussion on the ordering and distinctions among angels depends there not on angelic ontology and composition, as it does elsewhere, but rather, on angelic *operation*, that is, ‘hierarchy’ as conceived by Dionysius via Proclus. According

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87 Casas, 248.

88 Casas, 252.

89 Casas, 251.

to Aquinas, “hierarchy is nothing but a sacred principality.”<sup>90</sup> He argues that “we find in each angelic hierarchy the orders distinguished according to their actions and offices.”<sup>91</sup> Lacking such an order, angelic action would be confused.<sup>92</sup> On the one hand, “all things are possessed in common by the angelic society.”<sup>93</sup> Yet, on the other, the differences between them are constituted by how some of those things are “held more excellently by some than by others.”<sup>94</sup> Some angels communicate a common possession more perfectly than do others.<sup>95</sup> Thus, the angels are not differentiated by anything that one possesses and another lacks, for they possess all things in common; the difference lies in how fully and what exactly they communicate. Aquinas draws a rather astonishing conclusion: “By this similitude we can reckon the diversity of grades or orders among the angels, according to their different

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90 *ST I*, q. 108, a. 1, arg.1. Principality requires two things: the prince and the multitude ordered under it. In one sense, all of creation is a hierarchy insofar as God is the prince and all things are ordered to Him. But, Aquinas argues, different aspects of creation can be ordered to and governed by the one prince in various ways, just as the one king has different levels of administrators and laws in different cities.

91 *ST I*, q. 108, a. 2, co.

92 Aquinas does not say how many angels are within each hierarchy, but there are as many as are required according to the offices required. This view might originate in the position of Augustine and Anselm that human procreation will continue until such time as the angelic places left vacant by the fallen angels are filled by human souls. See Seamus O’Neill, “*aequales angelis sunt*: Angelology, Demonology, and the Resurrection of the Body in Augustine and Anselm,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 12. no. 1 (Fall 2016): 1-18.

93 *ST I*, q. 108, a. 2. ad. 2.

94 *ST I*, q. 108, a. 2. ad. 2.

95 See *ST I*, q. 108, a. 2. ad. 2: “All things are possessed in common by the angelic society, some things, however, being held more excellently by some than by others. Each gift is more perfectly possessed by the one who can communicate it, than by the one who cannot communicate it [...]” He continues, “And the more perfectly anyone can communicate a gift, the higher grade he occupies; as he is in the more perfect grade of mastership who can teach a higher science.” Again, activity, not ontology, is the differentiating category.

offices and actions.”<sup>96</sup> It is by a similitude (*secundum hanc similitudinem*) that the diversity among the angels can be discerned. Possessing all things in common, angelic diversity arises from *what they do* and *how they do it*.

Further, Aquinas is adamant that the number of angels is not superfluous. While there is inequality among them, no angel is redundant: each executes a unique, irreducible, and irreplaceable assignment. Although we collect the angels into various choirs according to the roles that we discern and are revealed in Scripture, in reality, Aquinas argues, the distinctions are uniquely precise for each angel. Contrary to the apparent redundancy in the number of angels, seeing as they hold all things in common anyway, each has a role to play, a job to do, that is not re-produced (nor, perhaps, reproduceable) by another.<sup>97</sup> A similar understanding moves Proclus to write, “For the several henads and the excellences of the several gods are distinguished by their several divine functions, so that each in respect of some especial individuation of goodness renders all things good [...]”<sup>98</sup> Each henad possesses and bestows its own character, which distinguishes it from the other gods. Whatever their similarity consists in, the henads are unique in the goods that they providentially bestow.

Unity is the common characteristic of the henadic realm, and the more unified a henad is, rather than being more *like* other henads through a reduction of differences, the more it confirms its *uniqueness*. Each henad is just as much a henad as

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96 *ST I*, q. 108, a. 2, ad. 2.

97 The apparent superfluousness comes from our inability to understand angelic acts, powers, and nature with clarity. See Aquinas’ arguments against the number of angels being superfluous in *ST I*, q. 108, a. 3.

98 *ET P*133. No one henad, it seems, can lay claim to the title “the Good” since only the “unitary cause” of all the particular goods bestowed by the henads is worthy of this name.

another, but there is no common unity to which the differences among henads can be reduced: these are no degrees among gods.<sup>99</sup> Though people often speak this way, things can't be 'more' or 'less' *unique*: uniqueness, or 'one-of-a-kind-ness' cannot be qualified. In this way, the "Gods are profoundly different from beings."<sup>100</sup> Whereas the higher is more universal, or general, in the ontic realm, the opposite pertains at the level of the One. For Aquinas, while angelic being and unity arise from participation in the divine being and unity, the irreducible uniqueness of the angels resembles more Proclus' henadic unity than it does a reduction of differences to sameness. If it were the latter, then the lower angels would, in a sense, be redundant, and angelic agency confused, which Aquinas explicitly denies.<sup>101</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In his article, "Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI.6," Hankey examines Aquinas' solution to a particular biblical tension.<sup>102</sup> In Isaiah, the prophet is purified by a seraph, an angel of the highest order. Aquinas concludes that "It was impossible that one from among the superior orders of angels, and the seraphim were in fact the highest order, could minister immediately and directly to a creature below the

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99 See Butler, "Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold," 93.

100 Butler, "Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold," 90.

101 Also, both the henads and the angels are finite in number. Cf. *ST I*, q. 108, a. 3, ad. 3 and *ET* P149, which latter, Butler writes, "demonstrates on the one hand that the total number of Gods must be *finite*, but on the other hand that there can be no absolute determination of *how many* Gods there are. It is not a question, to phrase it in modern terms, upon which ontology can have any purchase" (Butler, "The Gods and Being," 107).

102 Wayne Hankey, "Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI. 6," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 64 (1997): 59-93.

angelic hierarchy. No seraph flew to Isaiah.”<sup>103</sup> His reasoning hinges on the thesis that purification is mediated.<sup>104</sup> Yes, the seraph might initiate the movement, but the act is mediated throughout the hierarchy and administered by a lower angel. Thereby, the seraph purifies, maintaining Biblical authority, but not immediately, upholding the philosophical principle. The solution has Iamblichean, Procline, and Dionysian roots.<sup>105</sup> Following the thread further, Aquinas writes, “the action performed by the angel who is sent, proceeds from God as from its first principle, at Whose nod and by Whose authority the angels work; and is reduced to God as to its last end.”<sup>106</sup> That is, *God*, not the seraph, is the initiator of purification. One might ask, then, whose action *is it* exactly? The seraph’s? The lowest angel’s? God’s? If the distinctions between the angels are according to their functions and actions, this seems like a rather important question.

The conundrum applies, however, to any hierarchy or principality. Who builds the hospital: the builders, the construction company, the government, the taxpayer? Who forgives the penitent in confession? From the perspective of the lower, the distinctions among the angels is blurred by the mediated nature of the action. The same issue obtains between the henads and the One. Does every divine series terminate in a particular henad? At what level? Or in the One Itself?<sup>107</sup>

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103 Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys,” 60.

104 See Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys,” on a key principle for Dionysius and Aquinas that “hierarchical action is always mediated” (80). See, for example, *ST I*, q. 122, a. 2, co: “Thus with Dionysius (Cael. Hier. xiii) we must say, without any distinction, that the superior angels are never sent to the external ministry.”

105 See also Hankey, “Dionysian Hierarchy in Thomas Aquinas,” 423 ff.

106 *ST I*, q. 112, a. 1, co.

107 The method of distinction is similar. Proclus writes, “Each of the gods reveals himself in the modes proper to those orders in which he makes the revelation, and thence proceeds even to the last regions of being – such is the

Regardless of the origin of the effect, each intermediary has a role to play in the act's completion. There is a common tension between Proclus' assertion that the henads are 'all in all' yet unique, and Aquinas' assertion that the angels hold all things in common, yet are irreplaceable. Further inquiry into the one case might shed light on the other.

The requirement that differences among henads and angels must be learned through their effects highlights the need for practical engagement. Perhaps theurgy, ritual, and revelation pick up where reason finds its limit. This is why, on the one hand, revelations about the gods in Homer, or about the angels in Scripture aid philosophy by providing content for its reflections. Plotinus' guardian demon is revealed to be a god in the ritual. The exorcist collects data about demons during the struggle. And while one shudders to imagine what Iamblichus saw when he differentiates between various 'bloodthirsty' demons by the appearances of their auras, the confrontation reveals the natures of things otherwise beyond our grasp.

Perl writes of the angels: "since they play no ontological or causal role in relation to sensible things, [they] can be conveniently dismissed or ignored by those Thomists who find angels an embarrassment to the Angelic Doctor."<sup>108</sup> However, those who would disregard the angels would also overlook elements of Aquinas' astute incorporation of Proclus. The foundational differences between them notwithstanding, how Aquinas distinguishes between the angels in terms of power and activity is similar to how Proclus differentiates between the henads. Whereas Aquinas' treatises *On Essence and Existence* and *On Separated Substances* focus on the

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generative power of first principles" (ET P125). On this issue in Proclus, see Dodds' commentary on the *Elements of Theology*, 282 ff.

108 Perl, 144, n. 2.

ontological distinctions between angels, in Question 108 of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas determines angelic alterity according to power and function: not by what they *are*, but by what they *do*. Similarly for Proclus, differences among henads can be gleaned from their effects. In both cases, the human being approaches understanding of things transcending human intellect by observing their roles and effects rather than by ‘doing ontology’. Aquinas’ explanation of the alterity among the angels in terms of hierarchy is influenced by Proclus’ henadology. The angels are not distinct according to a universalizing character that would reduce their individuality; quite the contrary: the distinctions between the angels are directly correlated to the specificity and uniqueness of their office, as among the henads, even if the degree of precision is beyond human divining.



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