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The Hermetic Asclepius's Middle Platonist Teaching on Fate

Burns, D.M.

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Celebrating Arthur Darby Nock

Choice, Change, and Conversion

Edited by

Robert Matthew Calhoun, James A. Kelhoffer,
and Clare K. Rothschild

Mohr Siebeck

Robert Matthew Calhoun is Research Assistant to the A. A. Bradford Chair, Texas Christian University (USA).
orcid.org/0000-0001-5056-2050

James A. Kelhoffer is Professor of New Testament Studies at Uppsala University (Sweden).
orcid.org/0000-0001-7942-6079

Clare K. Rothschild is Professor of Scripture, Department of Theology, Lewis University (USA) and Professor Extraordinary, Department of Ancient Studies at Stellenbosch University (South Africa).
orcid.org/0000-0002-6572-8604

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The Hermetic *Asclepius*'s Middle Platonist Teaching on Fate

Dylan M. Burns

A. Introduction: Fate in Hermetic Literature, Nock, and the *Asclepius*

The standard critical edition of the Byzantine compilation of ancient Greek discourses starring the Hellenistic Egyptian culture hero Thoth-Hermes – the *Corpus Hermeticum* – was edited, together with the Latin *Asclepius* and two volumes of fragments and testimonia, by Arthur Darby Nock. Nock's Greek text and apparatus were rendered into French by the scholar of later Platonism and Hellenic religion, the Dominican André-Jean Festugière.¹ New Hermetic texts have since been discovered – most notably the Coptic Hermetica in Nag Hammadi Codex VI, and the Armenian *Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* – and new translations have appeared, but at the time of writing, the edition of Nock and Festugière remains unsurpassed.²

The Hermetic *Perfect Discourse* (*Logos Teleios*), although originally written in Greek, survives in the form of a complete tractate in its famed Latin translation, the *Asclepius*. The Greek version appears to have been a relatively popular text, since it was quoted by Lactantius and Stobaeus. The Latin

¹ Arthur Darby Nock, ed., and Andre-Jean Festugière, trans., *Hermès Trismégiste / Corpus Hermeticum*, 4 vols., Budé (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1945–1954); now also Jean-Pierre Mahé, ed. and trans., *Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 5: *Paralipomènes grec, copte, arménien; Codex VI de Nag Hammadi; Codex Clarkianus 11 Oxoniensis; Définitions hermétiques; Divers*, Budé (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2019), hereafter NFM.

² For recent discussion and translation of Hermetic texts and fragments that have appeared since Nock's and Festugière's edition, see M. David Litwa, trans., *Hermetica II: The Excerpts of Stobaeus, Papyrus Fragments, and Ancient Testimonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–2, 161–174; Mahé, NFM 5:71–342. Christian Wildberg is at work on a new edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum*; for a discussion of some of the problems and possible new ways forward in such an endeavor (including respectful critique of Nock's editorial strategy), see Wildberg, "Corpus Hermeticum, Tractate III: Genesis of a Genesis," in *Jewish and Christian Cosmogony in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lance Jenott and Sarit Kattan Gribetz, TSAJ 155 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 139–166; idem, "Astral Discourse in the Philosophical Hermetica (Corpus Hermeticum)," in *Hellenistic Astronomy: The Science in Its Contexts*, ed. Alan Bowen and Francesca Rochberg, Brill's Companions to Classical Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 580–604.

translation was known to Augustine and later Latin authors, and from around the ninth century onwards preserved in the corpus of works attributed to Apuleius of Madaura.³ Meanwhile, a lengthy excerpt in Coptic of its description of the postmortem fate of the soul as well as the “Egyptian apocalypse” (chs. 21–29) also was copied into Nag Hammadi Codex VI, pp. 65–78. Happily, the evidence includes some overlap between the Latin, Greek, and Coptic versions, which shows that the Coptic hews more closely to the Greek than the Latin, and that the text was relatively unstable.⁴ The Latin text of the *Asclepius* alone

³ Useful discussions of the Greek *Perfect Discourse* and its ancient witnesses include Walter Scott, ed. and trans., *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924–1936), 1:77–78; Nock, NFM 2:275–277; Claudio Moreschini, *Dall’Asclepius al Crater Hermetis: Studi sull’ermetismo latino tardo-antico rinascimentale*, Biblioteca di studi antichi 47 (Pisa: Giardini, 1985), 72–73; Stephen Gersh, *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition*, 2 vols., Publications in Medieval Studies 24/1–2 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 1:329–330 n. 1, 333–34; idem, “Theological Doctrines of the Latin Asclepius,” in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. Richard T. Wallis and Jay Bregman, Studies in Neoplatonism 6 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 129–166, 129–130; Brian P. Copenhaver, trans., *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 213–214; Mahé, NFM, 135. The *terminus ante quem* for the Latin translation of the *Asclepius* remains the witness of Augustine, *Civ.* 8.23–26 (see now Litwa, *Hermetica II*, 236–244). On the translation of the work into Latin and the spurious attribution of the work’s authorship to Apuleius, see Scott, *Hermetica*, 1:78–81; Nock, NFM 2:264–275, 277–284; Moreschini, *Dall’Asclepius al Crater Hermetis*, 71; Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 218. All manuscripts of the Latin *Asclepius* are medieval (the earliest, Bruxellensis 10054–10056, is from the 11th c. CE) and ascribe the authorship of the text to Apuleius, including it in collections of the latter author’s works (sometimes also accompanying some of those of Seneca). In many of the manuscripts, the *Asclepius* is between *De deo Socratis* and *De Platone et eius dogmate*. On the manuscripts of Apuleius’s philosophical works, including the Latin *Asclepius*, see Scott, *Hermetica*, 1:49–51; Nock, NFM 2:259–264; and especially Claudio Moreschini, ed., *Apulei Platonici Madaurensis Opera omnia supersunt*, vol. 3: *De philosophia libri*, BSGRT (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1991), iii–ix. It is to my regret that the following title only appeared once this essay was already in press: Dorothee Gall, ed., *Die göttliche Weisheit des Hermes Trismegistos*, SAPERE 38 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

⁴ Peter A. Dirkse and Douglas M. Parrott, “*Asclepius* 21–28,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI, with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott, NHS 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 395–452, 396; Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, 2 vols., Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section “Textes” 3, 7 (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1978–1982), 2:54–56; Jens Holzhausen, trans., *Corpus Hermeticum Deutsch*, part 1: *Die griechischen Traktate und der lateinische Asclepius*, Clavis Pansophiae 7/1 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2008), and part 2: *Exzerpte, Nag-Hammadi-Texte, Testimonien*, Clavis Pansophiae 7/2 (1997), 1:233. Key evidence is the “Prayer of Thanksgiving” closing the *Asclepius* (ch. 41), preserved as an independent textual unit in Greek (PGM III.591–609) and Coptic (NHC VI 7), on which see Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, 1:137–155.

gives the impression of a compilation of various pre-existing sources, since it tends to repeat and, some maintain, contradict itself.⁵

Important evidence regarding the problem of the compositional history of the *Asclepius* is the text's discussion of fate, a topic which comes up in several notoriously difficult passages. Their difficulty owes to many factors. There is no single "Hermetic doctrine of fate," since Hermetic literature was produced by multiple authors probably belonging to a plurality of ancient religious circles.⁶ Moreover, the terminology of fate and necessity is often conflated and confused in ancient sources, rendering the study of them tricky,⁷ and this is the case with the *Asclepius*. Walter Scott defends his partition of the *Asclepius* into three distinct theological tractates ("Asclep. I, II, and III") in part on the basis of their ostensibly mutually-exclusive treatments of human autonomy, evil, and fate.⁸ As Stephen Gersh writes, "the principle of Fate seems therefore to have an especially ambivalent status within the metaphysical system of this treatise [the *Asclepius*], since it is described in different passages both as possessing a status not independent of God and also as possessing a status which is thus independent."⁹

Nonetheless, Nock argued that the Latin *Asclepius* has a "substantial unity" as a literary work, given how often its author repeats himself and alludes to other sections of the text, as well as thematic and stylistic consistencies. For these reasons, he thought that we ought to try to understand the work as a whole rather than break it down into independent parts.¹⁰ In honor of Nock's manifold contributions to our understanding of ancient Mediterranean religion,

⁵ A quadripartite division of the text into four sources was proposed by Thaddeus Zieliński, "Hermes und die Hermetik, I. Das Hermetische Corpus," *ARW* 8 (1905): 321–372, 369–370; a tripartite division, by Scott, *Hermetica*, 1:51 (see further *infra*). Mahé has suggested rather two separate sources (NFM 5:136–137; he had put forth rather three in *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, 2:62). For further discussion and bibliography, see Alexander S. Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:x; André-Jean Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, 4 vols., Études bibliques (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1944–1954), 2:18; Moreschini, *Dall'Asclepius al Crater Hermetis*, 75–78; Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 214; Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 336–337; idem, "Theological Doctrines," 131.

⁶ Claudio Moreschini, "Providence, Fate, and Freedom of the Hermetic Sage," in *Fate, Providence, and Free Will: Philosophy and Religion in Dialogue in the Early Imperial Age*, ed. René Brouwer and Emmanuele Vimercati, *Ancient Philosophy and Religion* 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 196–210, 198.

⁷ Festugière, NFM 2:397 n. 335; similarly Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies*, NHMS 81 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 119–120.

⁸ E.g., Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:246: "It seems that in his two accounts of Heimarmene (19b and 39) the writer was following two different authorities, and took no pains to harmonize them."

⁹ Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 370; also (verbatim) at idem, "Theological Doctrines," 146.

¹⁰ Nock, NFM 2:292–94, followed by Moreschini, *Dall'Asclepius al Crater Hermetis*, 77; Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 337; Holzhausen, *Corpus Hermeticum Deutsch*, 1:233–234.

particularly Hermetism and later Platonism, I will address some neglected or misunderstood passages regarding fate, providence or divine care, and necessity in the Latin *Asclepius*, specifically in chs. 16–17, 19, and 38–40. I will argue that while the Hermetic work’s discussions of these subjects can appear to be both incommensurate with one another and philosophically untenable, they actually present – in a haphazard, fragmented fashion – a consistent doctrine that is completely comprehensible in terms of Middle Platonic thought. *Pace* Scott, the *Asclepius*’s teaching on providence and fate serves as evidence not of any clumsy stitching together of preexisting sources, but of the author/compiler’s care in crafting a text with what Nock rightly termed substantial unity.

B. A Stoic or Platonic Spirit in *Asclepius* 16–17?

In ch. 16, Hermes poses the rhetorical question of how it is that God cannot banish evil from the world. His answer:

It was a providential and circumspect thing (*provisum cautumque est*) – the utmost of rationality – on the part of the supreme God when he deigned to endow human minds with consciousness, learning, and understanding ... Anyone who evades these things (i.e., evil and vice) on sight before getting wrapped up in them is someone who has been fortified by divine understanding and care (*prudentialia*);¹¹ for the foundation of learning depends on the highest good. Nevertheless, by spirit (*spiritu*) is everything in the world supplied and invigorated; like an instrument or a mechanism it is subject to the will of the supreme God (*summi dei voluntati subiectus est*) ... By spirit (*spiritu*) are the forms in the world truly stirred and directed (*gubernantur*), each according to the nature allotted it by God. Now, *hulē* – that is, matter – is the receptacle of them all, while (spirit)¹² stirs and concentrates them all, and God governs them, apportioning to all things in the world as much as each one needs. He fills them all with spirit, breathing it into each thing according to the quality of its nature.¹³

This explanation for the coexistence of evil and divine administration owes much to Stoicism, in two ways. First, we read here the notion that divine *spiritus* (*πνεῦμα) permeates all things and orders them well, “as much as each one needs.” The identification of passive matter animated by an active, pneumatic principle is deeply Stoic,¹⁴ and Chrysippus argued that while providence

¹¹ *Intelligentia prudentiaque*; for discussion, see *infra*.

¹² The insertion is Scott’s (*Hermetica*, 3:195), followed by Nock in his *apparatus criticus* (NFM 2:316; cf. also 2:373 n. 144); Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 229.

¹³ *Ascl.* 16–17 (ed. NFM 2:315–316, trans. [modified] Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 76).

¹⁴ Scott, *Hermetica*, 1:59–60; Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 362; idem, “Theological Doctrines,” 143. On the relationship between spirit and matter in Stoic doctrine, see Diogenes Laertius, 7.134; Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 297. For a sensitive discussion of this evidence regarding the question of Stoic “dualism,” see Jean-Baptiste Gourinat, “Les stoïciens et le dualisme,” *Chōra hors-série* (2015): 165–184, 172–180; also Dylan M. Burns, *Did God*

inhabits the whole, it dwells in some parts more than others.¹⁵ Second is the identification of divine care (*prudentia*) as what allows humans to avoid vice. *Prudentia* sometimes renders the Greek concept of *πρόνοια* (“forethought, providence”) in early Latin philosophical literature.¹⁶ For Chrysippus, human reason is a divine gift that gives humanity a special place in the cosmos.¹⁷ The coincidence of individual responsibility for one’s actions and with God’s care *qua* the divine gift of human foresight is good Stoicism too, per Epictetus’s remarks that the divine is most present where human beings are acting in accordance with reason.¹⁸

What sticks out is the subordination of “spirit” to “will.”¹⁹ While some Stoic sources personify the divine as a monarchial figure, they tend to identify God, spirit, and providence, rather than rank them.²⁰ What we have in the *Asclepius* sounds more like Chrysippus, in a fragment preserved by the fourth-century CE writer Calcidius in his commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*:²¹

Some, then, suppose that a difference between providence and fate is presumed, when in fact it is one reality: for providence is the will of God (*providentiam dei ... voluntatem*), and his

Care? Providence, Dualism, and Will in Later Greek and Early Christian Philosophy, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 31–34, 104–105.

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius, 7.138–139 (*SVF* 2.634; Long/Sedley 470). For additional references, see Burns, *Did God Care?*, 60 n. 21.

¹⁶ Rightly Festugière in NFM 2:372 n. 137; see also Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:86, 90; Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 229. A good example is Cicero, *Acad.* 1.29.

¹⁷ *Apud* Cicero, *Nat. d.* 2.147; see also Manilius, *Astr.*, 2.105–116; 4.896–897.

¹⁸ Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.8; 4.12.11–12 (cf. also 1.14.11–14); Burns, *Did God Care?*, 62–63. I am inspired here by the treatment of Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils, “Seneca’s Platonism: The Soul and Its Divine Origin,” in *Ancient Models of Mind: Studies in Human and Divine Rationality*, ed. Andrea Nightingale and David Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 196–215, esp. 204. This Stoicizing perspective may explain the apparent dissonance between Hermes’s statement in this passage that the spirit permeates “all the forms” – i.e., the universals – and his remarks elsewhere in the text concerning divine omnipresence and providence; see *Ascl.* 22 (“the gods also show concern for all things human,” trans. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 80); 27 (“god is everywhere and surveys everything all around,” trans. *ibid.*, 83).

¹⁹ The discussion of divine will in *Ascl.* 26 (a version of which is preserved in Coptic at NHC VI 8, 74) has, as far as I can tell, little bearing on this question.

²⁰ See e.g., Aëtius, *Plac.* 1.7.33 (*SVF* 2.1027 = Long/Sedley 46A); Seneca, *Nat.* 2.45 (discussed in Reydams-Schils, “Seneca’s Platonism,” 211); for additional references see Long/Sedley 1:274–275; Burns, *Did God Care?*, 32–33.

²¹ On the (still mysterious) figure of Calcidius and the dating of his work, see John Magee, ed. and trans., *Calcidius: On Plato’s Timaeus*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 41 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), viii–xvii; Christina Hoening, *Plato’s Timaeus and the Latin Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 160–162; Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils, *Calcidius on Plato’s Timaeus: Greek Philosophy, Latin Reception, and Christian Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 9–20.

will is a series of causes, and it is called providence because his will *is* foresight [*providentia*] (*et ex eo quidem quia voluntas providentia est, (providentiam)*) but fate because it is also a series of causes, from which it results that the things which are according to fate are also from providence and likewise that the things which are according to providence are from fate, as Chrysippus supposes.²²

As is well-known, Platonists of the early Imperial period (usually known today as the “Middle Platonists”) attempted to synthesize remarks from Plato’s various dialogues into coherent, doctrinal statements on the philosophical issues of their day, often incorporating or appropriating the thought of philosophers who came after Plato.²³ As Mauro Bonazzi has argued, while Middle Platonism is well-known for its utilization of Aristotle, there is also a strong inclination among its adherents to counter Stoic teachings by co-opting and transforming them in the service of Platonic dogma.²⁴ Calcidius here enlists Chrysippus’s identification of *πρόνοια*, the will of God, and *εἰμαρμένη* in the service of explicating *fatum* as a series of causes which carries out the divine will – *providentia* – although Calcidius himself wishes to distinguish between providence and fate.²⁵

Such “Stoicizing Platonist” maneuvering is often visible in Middle Platonic reflection on fate and human autonomy. A fine example presents itself in an exposition of Middle Platonist doctrine entitled *On Plato and his Teaching* (*De*

²² Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 144 (trans. Magee, *Calcidius*, 357, 359).

²³ A handy recent discussion presents itself in Mauro Bonazzi, “Plato Systematized: Doing Philosophy in the Imperial Schools; A Discussion of Justin A. Stover (ed.), *A New Work by Apuleius*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 53 (2017): 215–236, 219–221. On the term “Middle Platonism” and its shortcomings, see recently Harold Tarrant, “Platonism before Plotinus,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1:63–99, 75–79; for *Forschungsbericht* and bibliography, see now George R. Boys-Stones, *Platonist Philosophy, 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation*, Cambridge Source Books in Post-Hellenistic Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 12–22.

²⁴ Bonazzi, “Plato Systematized,” 228–229, with bibliography; more generally, see Mauro Bonazzi and Christoph Helmig, “Introduction: The Dialogue between Stoicism and Platonism in Antiquity,” in *Platonic Stoicism – Stoic Platonism: The Dialogue between Platonism and Stoicism in Antiquity*, ed. eidem, *Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* 1/39 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), vii–xv.

²⁵ Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 143 (trans. Magee, *Calcidius*, 355): “... And for this reason providence, according to Plato, comes into being first, and so although we do say that fate is from providence, nevertheless we do not say that providence is from fate”; see also Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 145, 147, 189, and cf. Nemesius, *Nat. hom.* 38; Claudio Moreschini, *Apuleius and the Metamorphoses of Platonism*, *Nutrix* 10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 282; Ryan C. Fowler, *Imperial Plato: Albinus, Maximus, Apuleius; Text and Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2016), 173 n. 130; Hoenig, *Plato’s Timaeus*, 198–199; Reydamas-Schils, *Calcidius*, 107.

Platone et eius dogmate), attributed to Apuleius of Madaura (120s to late second century CE).²⁶

All things that are conducted naturally – and for that reason, rightly – are directed by the guardianship of providence (*providentiae custodia gubernantur*); we cannot ascribe the cause of any evil to God. For this reason, Plato believes that one cannot blame everything on the lot of fate. For he defines it in this way: providence is divine will (*providentiam esse divinam sententiam*), preserver of that prosperity for the sake of which it undertook such an office; and a divine law is fate through which the inevitable thoughts of God and things begun by him are fulfilled (*divinam legem esse fatum, per quod inevitabiles cogitationes dei atque incepta completer*). So, if anything is done by providence, it is also done by fate, and that which is completed by fate should appear to have been initiated by providence.²⁷

Here, Apuleius attempts to offer a set of doctrines systematizing Plato's remarks about fate and human responsibility in his various dialogues.²⁸ Apuleius concludes that Plato envisioned three causal forces at work in human affairs: the regular rules ("laws") of fate; what is up to us; and chance or fortune.²⁹ The importance of fortune we will return to below; for our purposes in this section,

²⁶ On Apuleius's life, see Stephen Harrison, *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1–10; Fowler, *Imperial Plato*, 135–136. On dating and authorial ascription of the *De platone*, see Harrison, *op. cit.* (preferring a date in the years after 177 CE), widely followed; for further discussion and bibliography, see Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 218–219; John F. Finamore, "Apuleius on the Platonic Gods," in *Reading Plato in Antiquity*, ed. Harold Tarrant and Dirk Baltzly (London: Duckworth, 2016), 33–49, 33, 43–44 nn. 1, 2; Fowler, *Imperial Plato*, 136 n. 6; Bonazzi, "Plato Systematized," 217 n. 7. In any case, the validity of the argument of the present article is not incumbent upon firm attribution of the *De platone* to Apuleius, or even to an author of the 2nd c. CE; the work is simply illustrative of the Imperial Platonism to which the *Asclepius* is indebted.

²⁷ Apuleius, *Plat. dogm.* 1.12.1–11 (ed. and trans. [slightly modified] Fowler, *Imperial Plato*, 254–255, 172–173, respectively).

²⁸ Central prooftexts for the Middle Platonists were: God is blameless for evil (*Resp.* 2, 379b–c; 10, 617e; *Tim.* 42d; cf. *Leg.* 10, 900e); there is a basic law (*νόμος*) and order (*τάξις*) undergirding the workings of the cosmos (*Phaedr.* 248c–d; *Tim.* 41e), and they are good; there are some actions for which human beings are responsible and which merit praise or blame ("what is up to us," *Phaed.* 114e–115a; *Resp.* 10, 617e; *Leg.* 10, 904c; 12, 959a) and still other events which are simply the product of chance or luck (*τυχή*, *Leg.* 4, 709a–d). For citation and discussion of many of these texts, see Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 282–284; Jan Opsomer, "The Middle Platonic Doctrine of Conditional Fate," in *Fate, Providence, and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Studies in Honour of Carlos Steel*, ed. Pieter d'Hoine and Gerd Van Riel, *Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* 1/49 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 137–167, 140–141; Mauro Bonazzi, "Middle Platonists on Fate and Human Autonomy: A Confrontation with the Stoics," in *What Is Up to Us? Studies on Agency and Responsibility in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Pierre Destrée, Ricardo Salles, and Marco Zingano, *Studies in Ancient Moral and Political Philosophy* 1 (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2014), 283–294, 284; Michael Chase, "Porphyre sur la providence," *Chōra* 13 (2015): 125–147, 127–129; Fowler, *Imperial Plato*, 172 n. 128, 174 n. 136.

²⁹ Apuleius, *Plat. dogm.* 1.12.28–38; cf. also Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 145.

the crucial detail is that Apuleius denotes the highest God a “divine will” (*divina sententia*), identical with *providentia*.³⁰ Calcidius’s evidence shows this to be an appropriation of Chrysippus.³¹ This divine will is carried out by the divine law, called fate.

Asclepius 16 then engages in the kind of Platonizing appropriation of Stoic doctrine we see in Platonism of the first centuries CE, as the examples of Calcidius and Apuleius make clear.³² In describing the divine *spiritus* as an “instrument or mechanism,” the *Asclepius* does not regard “spirit” as the first principle, but the (literally) animating causal force at work in the cosmos and carrying out divine will – much like *fatum* for Calcidius and Apuleius. *Asclepius* 16 also appears to embrace the identification of God’s thought and will with providence, an identification, Calcidius shows us, that is also an appropriation of Chrysippus’s thought. Its description of the “will of the supreme God” that commands *spiritus* in its work on the cosmos closely recalls those offered by Apuleius and Calcidius about *providentia*, and in any case immediately follows upon a discussion of God’s *prudentia* (viz. *πρόνοια*) at work.³³

These parallels invite a closer look at how the *Asclepius*’s teaching on providence and fate beyond ch. 16 may recall other aspects of Middle Platonist teaching on these subjects. Like other Middle Platonists such as pseudo-Plutarch, Alcinous, and Calcidius, Apuleius systematized Plato’s remarks about these questions into a “Middle Platonic teaching on fate.” Its precise

³⁰ Also noted by Hoenig, *Plato’s Timaeus*, 151.

³¹ Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 144 (*SVF* 2.933; trans. Magee, *Calcidius*, 357, 359, quoted immediately *supra*); see also Fowler, *Imperial Plato*, 173 n. 131. For appropriation of Chrysippus’s identification of providence with God’s thought-will as a feature common to Apuleius and Calcidius, see Moreschini, *Apuleius and the Metamorphoses of Platonism*, 280–281; Hoenig, *Plato’s Timaeus*, 198. Ferguson rightly observes that a Platonic proof-text presents itself in *Tim.* 30a, βουλευθεις γαρ ο θεος αγαθα μεν παντα, φλαυρον δε μηδεν ειναι κατα δυναμιν (in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xxi).

If the *De Platone* is indeed of Apuleian authorship, its emphasis on divine will is striking for a 2nd-c. CE Platonist text; most other sources regarding divine will commonly adduced for the “Middle Platonist” milieu cannot be firmly dated to the 2nd c. (in addition to Calcidius, see e.g., Alcinous, *Epit.* 10.4; [Plutarch], *Fat.* 573B; *Corp. herm.* IV.1; an exception is Atticus, *Fr.* 4, ed. and trans. Édouard Des Places, *Atticus, Fragments*, Budé [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1977]). For discussion of these latter sources, see Burns, *Did God Care?*, 270 n. 2.

³² On a similar note, see also Moreschini, *Dall’Asclepius al Crater Hermetis*, 105. The interlacing of both Platonist and Stoic teaching in the *Asclepius* is a leitmotiv of Gersh, “Theological Doctrines,” 132, *passim*; see also Scott, *Hermetica*, 1:53; Moreschini, *Dall’Asclepius al Crater Hermetis*, 96.

³³ The passage also reminds us that the emphasis on divine will in Hermetic literature need not necessarily be read as a Christianizing touch, *pace* the remarks of Holzhausen, *Corpus Hermeticum Deutsch*, 1:161–162, re *Corp. herm.* XIII.2, 4, 13, 18, 19–20.

origins remain unclear and the details differ slightly in the various sources,³⁴ but its contours may be outlined as follows, as by Michael Chase:³⁵

- (1) some kind of distinction between providence and fate;
- (2) the distinction between fate in its essence (*οὐσία*) and fate in its activity or effect (*ἐνέργεια*);
- (3) some kind of human responsibility meriting praise or blame for one's actions;
- (4) necessary consequences for our actions in accordance with fate's law ("conditional fate");
- (5) a doctrine of three permutations of providence.

Now, we have argued in this section that the *Asclepius*'s distinction between the divine will and the spirit that implements this will in the cosmos closely recalls that made by Apuleius and Calcidius between the divine will, which they identify as providence, and its implementation, which they identify as fate. One may conclude, then, that *Asclepius* 16's description of the divine will and the spirit amounts to a distinction between providence and fate, a distinction whose point is to explain how universal divine care (*prudentia*, viz. *πρόνοια*) is consonant with the human responsibility for good and evil deeds. Already in ch. 16 of the *Asclepius*, we see features 1 and 3 of the Middle Platonic teaching of fate: the distinction between providence and fate, and the emphasis on human responsibility meriting praise or blame for one's actions.

C. Providence *versus* Fate, Fortune, and the Ousiarchs in *Asclepius* 19

A few chapters later, *Asclepius* asks about the gods that are first principles (*vel rerum capita vel initia primordiorum*).³⁶ Hermes begins by differentiating the

³⁴ The *terminus ante quem* is Tacitus, who mentions the notion that fate determines the results of human actions in accordance with universal laws (*Ann.* 6.22); see Willy Theiler, "Tactius und die antike Schicksalslehre," in idem, *Forschungen zum Neuplatonismus, Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie* 10 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966), 43–103, esp. 82, 93; George R. Boys-Stones, "'Middle' Platonists on Fate and Human Autonomy," in *Greek and Roman Philosophy 100 BC–200 AD*, ed. Richard Sorabji and Robert W. Sharples, 2 vols., BICSSup 94 (London: Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, 2007), 2:431–447, 433 n. 7; idem, *Platonist Philosophy*, 356. There are many fine studies of this doctrine and its antecedents (see nn. 28 and 35).

³⁵ Chase, "Porphyre sur la providence," 130. Similar typologies are offered by Boys-Stones, "'Middle' Platonists," 435–436; Opsomer, "Middle Platonic Doctrine," 140. See also Bonazzi, "Middle Platonists," esp. 285, and more widely, Boys-Stones, *Platonist Philosophy*, 344–356.

³⁶ *Ascl.* 19 (ed. NFM 2:318).

intelligible and sensible deities, i.e., gods who are apprehensible by the mind, or by the physical senses. The intelligible gods are “principles of all the forms” (*omnium specierum principes*), while each sensible god is a “principle of substance” (*princeps οὐσία(ς)*) that rules over a particular domain of the sensible realm.³⁷ The head of these deities is the principle that rules heaven, Jupiter, whom Hermes denotes an “ousiarch” (*οὐσιάρχης*), an obscure term that here appears to connote something like “ruler of a particular substance”:³⁸ the ousiarch of the sun is light, while the thirty-six decans have as their ousiarch a being called “omniform” (*παντόμορφος*).³⁹ Finally, “[t]he so-called seven spheres have the *ousiarchai* – that is, heads – called *fortuna* and *heimarmenē*, by which all things change according to the law of nature (*lege naturae*) and a completely fixed order that is in flux, owing to eternal motion (*stabilitateque firmissima sempiterna agitatione variata*).”⁴⁰ Hermes does not elaborate on *fortuna* and *heimarmenē*, going on to describe the ousiarch of air, before the discussion is cut off and the subsequent passages move on to a discussion of God’s unity and namelessness.⁴¹

Fortunately, the sixth-century CE scholar John Lydus preserves some Greek from a version of the *Perfect Discourse* for us here, in *On Months* 4.7:

The name of Chance and Fate is put forth in reference to birth. Hermes testifies to this in the so-called *Perfect Discourse*: “The so-called seven spheres have a principle called Chance or Fate, which changes all things and does not permit them to remain in the same state. Fate is the fated activity (*ἡ δὲ εἰμαρμένη ἐστὶ καὶ ἡ εἰμαρτῆ ἐνέργεια*) or God himself or the order arrayed after it, joined with Necessity and spread throughout all things in heaven and on earth. Fate gives birth to the very principles of things, and Necessity compels their end results. Order and law follow in turn, such that there exists nothing unordered.”⁴²

³⁷ *Ascl.* 19 (ed. NFM 2:318).

³⁸ The obscurity of the term *οὐσιάρχης* is reflected in the fact that the Latin translator of the *Perfect Discourse* deigned to translate it, and many modern translators follow suit (Festugière, NFM 2:318). The stab “head-(of)-ousia” is Scott’s only slightly less obscure rendering, and while subsequent translators have flirted with it, it does not seem to stick (Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:412; Festugière, NFM 2:375 n. 159; Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, 77, 233; but cf. Holzhausen, *Corpus Hermeticum Deutsch*, 1:277 and n. 118, “Urheber”). The term appears otherwise only in the *Hermetic Disc.* 8–9 (NHC VI 6, 63, ll. 16–19), appearing to be something of a Hermetic *terminus technicus*; see further Christian H. Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom*, RGRW 186 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 132 n. 159, 337; Wildberg, “Astral Discourse,” 599.

³⁹ *Ascl.* 19 (ed. NFM 2:318–319). Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:120, supposed the title *παντόμορφος* to here refer to the entire “visible Zodiac itself, regarded as a god who presides over births, and operates through the agency of the Decani”; see now also Bull, *Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*, 284–285; Wildberg, “Astral Discourse,” 599.

⁴⁰ *Ascl.* 19 (ed. NFM 2:319, trans. [significantly modified] Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, 78).

⁴¹ *Ascl.* 20.

⁴² *Herm. fr.* 37b (trans. [slightly modified] Litwa, *Hermetica II*, 228).

Walter Scott argued long ago that Lydus has extracted and corrupted the Greek from several passages of the *Perfect Discourse*, and so the passage may not be read simply as a Greek *Vorlage* of our Latin text – indeed, the first sentence Lydus has Hermes utter (“the so-called seven spheres ...”) is from *Asclepius* 19, but the second (“fate is the fated activity ...”) is found in ch. 40.⁴³ Lydus’s Greek parallel to the description of fate in ch. 19 contributes little to our understanding of the Latin text, but the parallel to the definition of Fate in the following sentence (“Fate is the fated energy or God himself ... joined with Necessity ... Order and law follow”), paralleling the Latin text of *Asclepius* 40, is notable insofar as it expresses the latter part of the common Middle Platonic distinction between fate in its substance or essence (οὐσία) and its activity or effect (ἐνέργεια) – the second in our list of the five main features of Middle Platonic teaching on fate. We will discuss this below.

Asclepius 19 and its description of the “ousiarchs called Fortune or *Heimarmenē*” alludes to other aspects of Middle Platonist teaching about fate as well. Stephen Gersh states rightly that “it is undeniable that Fate is intended to be a principle independent of the highest God.”⁴⁴ This is true, but we can be more specific. First, recalling the distinction in ch. 16 between divine will and its implementation in the cosmos as fate, we may understand the description of fate as personified by the ousiarchs at work in the cosmos to be an extrapolation of the Middle Platonic distinction between divine will/*providentia* and its implementation as a causal chain in the cosmos. Secondly, while ch. 16 described the causal chain which is animated by divine spirit (viz. *fatum*), ch. 19’s account of the ousiarchs – the beings who govern the various elemental forces that comprise the cosmos, permitting change to occur in accordance with unchanging laws – provides the necessary mechanism for a doctrine of consequences for actions and events that govern worldly change. The tying of fate to a set of laws that governs the natural cosmos is a conspicuous feature of Middle Platonic discussions of the subject, and a boldly Platonizing interpreter may recall our fourth part of the Middle Platonic teaching on fate, the so-called “doctrine of conditional fate”: that while certain decisions may be “up to us,” the consequences for the decisions made are fixed – fated – in accordance with the eternal laws mentioned by Plato (*Phaedr.* 248c–d; *Tim.* 41e).⁴⁵ Out of the five constituent parts of the Middle Platonic teaching on fate, we have now identified three in the *Asclepius*, in ch. 16 (parts 1 [the distinction between

⁴³ Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:121–122. “Lydus extracted from the Λόγος τέλειος two different passages concerning εἰμαρμένη, and wrote them down consecutively, but either he omitted to mark where one ended and the other began, or the mark of division has been omitted by a transcriber” (122). Copenhaver refers to the splitting of the passage as simply “related material” (*Hermetica*, 233).

⁴⁴ Gersh, “Theological Doctrines,” 145.

⁴⁵ For discussion, see the literature cited *supra*, nn. 34 and 35.

providence and fate], 3 [some notion of human responsibility]) and ch. 19 (parts 1, perhaps 4 [conditional fate]).

D. The Terrestrial Gods of *Asclepius* 38 and Tertiary Providence

In a remarkable discussion at the end of the treatise, chs. 38–40, Hermes’s focus shifts to how fate relates to individuals. In ch. 38, Hermes famously describes how human creation of idols serves as a medium for human interaction with the lower, terrestrial gods, who become present in the statues made by priests:

And do not think that the effects achieved by the terrestrial gods are by chance (*fortuitos*), dear Asclepius. The celestial gods inhabit the highest reaches of heaven, each in the rank it inherits, occupying and taking charge of it; while our (terrestrial gods) offer help as if they were family – truly caring about details (*singillatim quaedam curantes*), predicting the future in lots and divination, providentially caring for matters (*quaedam providentes*) and helping out human beings, each in his own way.⁴⁶

Festugière rightly surmises that Hermes’s statement that the workings of the terrestrial gods is not “by chance” (*fortuitos*) probably renders Greek τύχη. The passage espouses that divine order extends throughout the cosmos through the administration of the *di terreni*, who are operative in part through the mediation of the hieratic human beings who make idols.⁴⁷ Chance will come up again in the ensuing discussion (ch. 40; see *infra*), but it is clear that Hermes here shifts the topic from the purpose of idols to the relationship between divine care, terrestrial events, and human activity – i.e., providence and fate.

As Moreschini notes, the passage alludes to the Middle Platonic doctrine “of several providences that depend upon the god and demons,”⁴⁸ discussed by

⁴⁶ *Ascl.* 38 (ed. NFM 2:349, trans. [significantly modified] Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 90–91).

⁴⁷ See Festugière in NFM 2:396–397 n. 329, re the claim in *Ascl.* 40 that *euentus autem uel fors insunt omnibus permixta mundanis*: “Ordre et hasard s’opposent comme les deux principes du § 14: *fuit Deus* et ὕλη. Les *di terreni* sont du côté de l’Ordre, puisqu’ils sont l’un des chaînons qui nous reliant au Dieu suprême. On rejoint ainsi le thème initial du σύνδεσμος, de *coniunctione deorum (et hominum)*, § 7 ... Le but de cette conclusion générale est de montrer que tout ce qui se rapporte au σύνδεσμος ... dépend de la Loi divine ..., y compris l’action des *di terreni*.” See also Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xxx–xxxii.

⁴⁸ Moreschini, “Providence,” 202–203, *pace* Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 117: “these authors resisted Middle Platonist concepts of a fragmented *pronoia* ...” Moreschini argues that the *Asclepius*’s allusion here to the role played by demons in the doctrine of tripartite providence serves as additional evidence that the Greek *Perfect Discourse* may be best understood as a product of the 2nd or 3rd c. CE – the period of the flourishing of Middle Platonism (*ibid.*, 203 n. 27). The present article is plainly in agreement, and adduces additional evidence consonant with such a reading. Cf. also Gersh’s reading of chs. 37–40 as

Apuleius in *On Plato and His Teaching*. Apuleius denotes “primary providence” the domain of the “highest and most transcendent of all the gods” who empowers the “heaven-dwelling gods” and mortal, terrestrial deities (i.e., *daimones*).⁴⁹ The “rest of the gods” carry out their duty of the “secondary providence” to manage “the remaining affairs that must be done daily,” while the *genii* and *lares* “are subordinates of the gods, and protectors and interpreters for men whenever they should want anything from them” – i.e., the tertiary providence.⁵⁰ The teaching clearly resembles that discussed by ps.-Plutarch’s *On Fate* and the fourth-century Christian bishop Nemesius,⁵¹ wherein a supreme, divine will is the first providence; the regular rules and laws of the cosmos are fate or secondary providence; and the semi-divine, lower deities at work in the world and human cultic life exercise a tertiary providence. The *Asclepius* already discussed the primary providence (“will of the supreme God”) in ch. 16, and the regular, natural laws of cosmic events, in ch. 19. With its allusion to the operations of the terrestrial gods who “care about details” and are operative in “lots and divination,” *Asclepius* 38 recalls the fifth constituent part of the Middle Platonic teaching on fate – threefold providence – in addition to parts 1 and 3 (discussed in ch. 16) and parts 1 and 4 (ch. 19).

E. The Essence and Effects of Fate in *Asclepius* 39–40

All of these Middle Platonist elements are teased out and developed in an idiosyncratic way, alongside our final, “missing” part of the Middle Platonist teaching on fate – the distinction between fate in its essence and its activity (part 2 in our list) – in *Asclepius* 39–40. In ch. 39, Asclepius asks Hermes:

“So, what part of *logos* (*rationalis*) does *heimarmenē* or fate inhabit, dear Trismegistus? Do the celestial gods rule over the wholes (*catholicorum*), and the terrestrial inhabit particulars (*singula*)?”

“What we dub *heimarmenē*, dear Asclepius, is the necessity that manages all things, which are always bound to one another by the links of a chain. So it is either the causal agent

principally concerned with the dual nature of humanity (mortal/immortal) and its role (also dual) in creating terrestrial gods: the celestial gods preside over universals, while the terrestrial gods preside over human affairs (“Theological Doctrines,” 131).

⁴⁹ Apuleius, *Plat. dogm.* 1.12.11–20.

⁵⁰ Apuleius, *Plat. dogm.* 1.12.20–27.

⁵¹ [Plutarch], *Fat.* 573A; Nemesius, *Nat. hom.* 38; on the doctrine of “triple providence” see Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xx–xxi; Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 228; Michael A. Williams, “Higher Providence, Lower Providences, and Fate in Gnosticism and Middle Platonism,” in Wallis and Bregman, *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, 483–507; Robert W. Sharples, “Threefold Providence: The History and Background of a Doctrine,” in *Ancient Approaches to Plato’s Timaeus*, ed. idem and Anne D. R. Sheppard, BICSSup 78 (London: Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, 2003), 107–127; Burns, *Did God Care?*, 49–50.

(*effectrix*) of things or the highest god, or it is the second god who is created by that (first) god, or the system of all celestial and terrestrial things, as fixed by the divine laws. Thus, both *heimarmenē* and necessity are bound together, sequentially, by a sort of bond; *heimarmenē*, first, brings forth the beginnings of all things, (and) necessity then brings into effect the results that depend on her beginning them. Order results – the interweaving and temporal arrangement of everything that has to happen (*dispositio temporis rerum perficiendarum*). In fact, nothing is separate from the system of order. This world is perfect, in every respect! Indeed, this world is conveyed with order, and the entirety of it is established from order.”⁵²

The passage can appear confusing because it seems to equate fate (*heimarmenē*) with all kinds of abstract things:⁵³ the highest god, the second god, the “system of all things,” or “necessity”; thus Gersh sees a tension between Stoic and Platonic elements.⁵⁴ Several interpreters have emphasized its Stoic undertones: as Scott and others have observed, the etymology of *heimarmenē* from the “links” – a kind of chain – is of Stoic provenance.⁵⁵ One could understand *heimarmenē* as “the causal agent (*effectrix*) of things” or equated with necessity in a Stoic sense as well, as have Scott and Moreschini, respectively.⁵⁶ Scott struggles with reconciling this reading of the chapter with his reading of ch. 19: in the latter, fate is the personal deity of change according to nature’s rules as ordained by the planets; but here in ch. 39, it looks like a mere abstraction.⁵⁷

Yet as Ferguson ascertained, the passage as a whole “is a piece of *Timaeus* exegesis”;⁵⁸ we can go further and state that it is replete with elements of Middle Platonic exegesis of the *Timaeus*, and consistent with the descriptions of fate given in chs. 16 and 19. The equation of fate with both the “unyielding necessity and blind luck” produced by the seven planets recalls the description of fate administered by the ouoiarchs in ch. 19, or the *spiritus* effecting the

⁵² *Ascl.* 39 (ed. NFM 2:350–351, trans. [significantly modified] Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, 91).

⁵³ “In this document, which is extremely confused, the main theme is the divine law (*νόμος* or *λόγος*), which is said to have ‘parts’” (Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xix).

⁵⁴ Gersh, “Theological Doctrines,” 145.

⁵⁵ Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:248; Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 117. For Chrysippus’s etymology of *εἰμαρμένη* from *εἰρομένη* (“what is linked together”), see *inter alia* Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 6.8.8 (*SVF* 2.914); [Plutarch], *Fat.* 570B; Robert W. Sharples, “The Stoic Background to the Middle Platonist Discussion of Fate,” in Bonazzi and Helmig, *Platonic Stoicism*, 169–187, 172–173; esp. Susan Suavé Meyer, “Chain of Causes: What Is Stoic Fate?,” in *God and the Cosmos in Stoicism*, ed. Ricardo Salles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 71–89.

⁵⁶ Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:248. Moreschini, “Providence,” 205 sees the passage as “in line with the Stoic position. Everything depends upon the law that God has firmly established, with rationality not alien to such inescapable necessity,” referring as well to *Stob. herm.* 11.2.46–47, which sets down a gradation of providence, necessity, and luck (see also *idem*, *Dall’Asclepius al Crater Hermetis*, 95). The comparison of the teaching on fate in the *Asclepius* to *Stob. herm.* 11 has its limits – see *infra*, n. 74.

⁵⁷ Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:246.

⁵⁸ Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xix; see also the following notes.

“will of the supreme God” in ch. 16 – fate or second providence contrasted with a supreme, primary providence.⁵⁹ In ch. 39, what *heimarmenē/necessitas* creates is conditions under which chance (*fortuna*) can coexist in the cosmos with “order” (*disciplina*), which seem to render *τύχη* (cf. Plato, *Leg.* 4, 709a–d) and *τάξις* (cf. *Phaedr.* 248c–d; *Tim.* 41e), respectively.⁶⁰ Finally, the passage’s reference to fate as *effectrix* also recalls the Middle Platonist distinction between fate in its essence or substance (*οὐσία*) and its activity or effect (*ἐνέργεια*), an allusion that is particularly acute in the Greek quoted by Lydus: “Fate is the fated activity (*ἡ δὲ εἰμαρμένη ἐστὶ καὶ ἡ εἰμαρτὴ ἐνέργεια*).”⁶¹ This of course is the second constituent part of the Middle Platonic teaching on fate.

Chapter 40 supplies the other end of this distinction, the description of fate in its essence or substance (*οὐσία*), as Hermes proposes a tripartition of causal forces:

Therefore, these three – *heimarmenē*, necessity, and order – are, one could venture to say, without any doubt at all effects (*effecta*) of the will of God (*maxime dei nutu*), who governs the world with his law and divine reason (*qui mundum gubernat sua lege et ratione divina*). So, from these things, God has turned them entirely away from willing or not willing anything. They are not moved by anger nor are they turned by praise; rather, they serve the constraint (*necessitati*) of the eternal, rational order (*rationis aeternae*) that is eternity – inevitable, immovable, indestructible.

First then is *heimarmenē*, which, having been thrown like seed, begets the “posterity” of all future events. Next comes necessity, the force that constrains everything to creation. Third, order maintains the weaving of these things which *heimarmenē* and necessity arrange. And so this is eternity, which does not ever begin or cease to exist, (and) which spins round with perpetual motion under the fixed law of its unchanging cycle, always rising and falling in succession throughout its parts, so that as the times change, it rises and falls in the same parts. The circularity in turn amounts to a pattern of turning, so that everything is pushed together and you are not able to know of the beginning of the turning – if there is one – since everything appears to always precede and follow itself! However, accident and chance (*eventus ... vel fors*) are also mixed into all worldly things.⁶²

⁵⁹ Bull, *Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*, 394. Cf. also Wildberg, “Astral Discourse,” 600: “these confused identifications [of *heimarmenē* and *necessitas* – DMB] are quite bizarre but they may well be of a piece with the earlier astrological metaphysics of §19.”

⁶⁰ Pace Scott’s suggestion (*Hermetica*, 3:249) that *disciplina* renders *σύνταξις* (a body of science).

⁶¹ Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xx, xxii; Gersh, *Middle Platonism*, 366–367; idem, “Theological Doctrines,” 144, re [Plutarch], *Fat.* 568D–E; Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 143; and Nemesius, *Nat. hom.* 38. For discussion of the Middle Platonic distinction between fate in its substance versus its activity, see Boys-Stones, “‘Middle’ Platonists,” 435; Opsomer, “Middle Platonic Doctrine,” 145.

Scott regards the word *εἰμαρτή* in the phrase *ἡ δὲ εἰμαρμένη ἐστὶ καὶ ἡ εἰμαρτὴ ἐνέργεια* quoted by Lydus as serving “no purpose here,” perhaps a corruption introduced by an interpolator attempting to introduce Chrysippus’s etymology for *εἰμαρμένη* (Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:249; the phrase *καθ’ ἣν μέμαρπται* [πάντα] ostensibly became *καὶ ἡ εἰμαρτή*).

⁶² *Ascl.* 40 (ed. NFM 2:351, trans. [significantly modified] Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, 91).

There is a great deal embedded in this dense passage, but its import for the present discussion should already be clear: the idiosyncratic description of “heimarmenē, necessity, and order” as “effects (*effecta*) of the will of God,” and their relationship to divine “law,” “order,” and finally, “accident and chance.”

All this, too, is consonant with Middle Platonic teaching on fate. In a typical flash of erudition, Scott recognized that the tripartition of the effects of divine will into “heimarmenē, necessity, and order,” which govern the future, present, and past, respectively, is an allusion to Greek philosophical reflection on the mythological figure of “the three fates” and their concomitant temporal domains.⁶³ Scott offers an extensive list of parallels where Greek philosophers link the three fates and/or governance of the past, present, and future to necessity or *heimarmenē*: the etymology of “fate” (*heimarmenē*) as deriving from the “links of a chain” recalls the weaving of the three maidens.⁶⁴ The *locus classicus* is a scene from Plato’s Myth of Er (*Resp.* 10, 617b–c) where the three *moirai* are called the “daughters of Necessity.”⁶⁵ According to Johannes Stobaeus, in the chapter *On Fate* from book 2 of his *On Seasons* and in various works, Chrysippus uses a variety of definitions for fate, among them “the rationale in accordance with which past events have happened, present events are happening, and future events will happen.”⁶⁶ In keeping with Chrysippus, the

⁶³ Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:251–253, widely followed, as by NFM 2:397–398 n. 336; Gersh, “Theological Doctrines,” 144–146; Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 257–258; Bull, *Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*, 394.

⁶⁴ Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:251–252, summarized presently.

⁶⁵ “And there were three other beings sitting at equal distances from one another, each on a throne. These were the Fates, the daughters of Necessity: Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos. They were dressed in white, with garlands on their heads, and they sang to the music of the Sirens. Lachesis sang of the past, Clotho of the present, and Atropos of the future” (trans. G. M. A. Grube, “Republic,” rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997], 971–1223, 1220). Porphyry of Tyre commented upon this passage in his work *On What is Up to Us*, asking how much personal responsibility an incarnate soul can have given its own choice prior to birth and the subsequent “fixing” of its fate by Clotho (Stobaeus, *Anth.* 2.8.39 = Porphyry, *Fr.* 269F, ed. Andrew Smith, *Porphyryii philosophi fragmenta*, BSGRT [Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993]).

⁶⁶ Stobaeus, *Anth.* 1.5.15 (*SVF* 2.913; ed. and trans. Long/Sedley 55M). Stobaeus appears to rely here on Aëtius, *Plac.* 1.28.3 = [Plutarch], *Plac. philos.* 1.28 (Hermann Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* [Berlin: Reimerus, 1929], 323). Stobaeus relates further that Chrysippus’s etymology of the three Fates has to do with their respective temporal domains (past, present, and future). Finally, cf. Diogenes, *apud* Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 6.8.8 (*SVF* 2.914). Scott also recalls Posidonius (*apud* Cicero, *Div.* 1.55), but more apposite may be the same work’s account of Chrysippus’s theory of divination at *Div.* 1.125–126 (*SVF* 2.921; trans. Long/Sedley 55L): “By ‘fate,’ I mean what the Greeks call *heimarmenē* – an ordering and sequence of cause, since it is the connexion of cause to cause which out of itself produces anything. It is everlasting truth, flowering from all eternity. Consequently nothing has happened which was

ps.-Aristotelian author of *On the Cosmos* and the Stoic Cornutus attempt to assign each of the three Fates an etymology that has to do with their respective temporal domains (past, present, and future).⁶⁷ “The writer of Ascl. III,” Scott concludes, “has substituted abstract and impersonal names for the names of the three Moirai, but has retained the distinction of their functions ... He probably did not get the notion of the three Fates directly from Plato or Chrysippus, but followed the lead of some later writer who was influenced by them.”⁶⁸

Scott is right, but not in the way that he intended: the passage is evidence of a consistent approach to fate in the work, whose author followed the lead of later writers whom we today call Middle Platonists, and who incorporated *Resp.* 10, 617b–c into their discussions of Plato’s views about human autonomy and fate – particularly, their discussions of fate in its substance as opposed to its activity.⁶⁹ In his work *On Fate*, ps.-Plutarch remarks:

As described in the *Republic* it [fate] is a “divine law determining the linking of future events to events past and present.” For this is what Lachesis, in very truth the “daughter of Necessity,” performs, as we learned before, and as later, in the lectures in the school, we shall know yet better. This, then, is the fate in the sense of activity ... Fate as a substance appears to be the entire soul of the universe in all three of its subdivisions (ἡ δὲ κατ’ οὐσίαν ἔοικεν εἶναι σύμπασα ἢ τοῦ κόσμου ψυχὴ τριχῆ διανεμηθεῖσα), the fixed portion, the portion supposed to wander, and third, the portion below the heavens in the region of the earth. And of these the highest is called Clotho, the next Atropos, and the lowest Lachesis, who is receptive to the celestial activities of her sisters, and combines and transmits them to the terrestrial regions subject to her authority.⁷⁰

Similarly Calcidius in his work on Plato’s *Timaeus* explains:

Thus we can indeed interpret the “inevitable decree” as an immovable law, originating from an “inevitable” cause, and the laws that God proclaimed to the souls *concerning the nature of the universe* [*Tim.* 41e] as the law which is consequent upon the nature of the world and by which all things in the world are ruled, and the speech of Lachesis, i.e., of the daughter of Necessity (*hoc est Necessitatis <filiae>*), as the divine law by which future events are linked

not going to be, and likewise nothing is going to be of which nature does not contain causes working to bring that very thing about. This makes it intelligible that fate should be, not the ‘fate’ of superstition, but that of physics, an everlasting cause of things – why past things happened, why present things are now happening, and why future things should be.”

⁶⁷ [Aristotle], *Mund.* 7.5, 401b. On the authorship of this work, see Jill Krayer, “Disputes over the Authorship of De mundo between Humanism and *Altertumswissenschaft*,” in *Cosmic Order and Divine Power: Pseudo-Aristotle, On the Cosmos*, ed. Johan C. Thom, *SAPERE* 23 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 181–197. Cf. also Cornutus, *Theol. gr. comp.* 13.

⁶⁸ Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:252.

⁶⁹ On the distinction between fate as regards its substance and fate as regards its activity, see *supra*, n. 61. Scott does not refer to any of the sources discussed in this paragraph, but Ferguson does (Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xx–xxi).

⁷⁰ [Plutarch], *Fat.* 568D–E (text and trans. Phillip H. De Lacy and Benedict Einarson, LCL 405:312–315).

with past and present ones. As understood with respect to its substance, however, fate is the world soul divided into its three parts, the nonwandering sphere, the one held to be wandering, and, third, the sublunary one, and of these the one raised to the heights he says is called Atropos, the middle one Clotho, the lowest Lachesis: Atropos, because the *aplanēs* admits of no deviation; Clotho, because of the varying complexities in its spiraling whorl, by virtue of which there come to pass the things which the deviant movement of the nature of the Other introduces; and Lachesis, as though having been allotted the task of taking up all of the works and effects of those just mentioned.⁷¹

Asclepius 40 does indeed adapt a form of Greek philosophical speculation upon the relationship between the three *moirai* and fate or necessity: specifically, the form wherein the three fates governing past, present, and future are names for fate with respect to its effects, rather than its essence or substance – the second part of our “Middle Platonist teaching on fate.”⁷²

A final detail of the teaching on fate in *Asclepius* 40 also recalls the Middle Platonists: its inclusion of chance as a causal factor (“accident and chance [*eventus ... vel fors*] are also mixed into all worldly things”). This statement was foreshadowed by Hermes’s introduction of the greater subject of fate and the interaction between human and divine beings at the end of ch. 38, when he remarked that the work of the terrestrial gods are not “by chance” (*non ... fortuitos*).⁷³ While many commentators skip over it without mention,⁷⁴ *Asclepius* ch. 40’s inclusion of chance into its schema of causes is conspicuous, given the repeated, fatalistic emphasis in various Stobaeian Hermetic fragments that minimize the role of chance or fortune.⁷⁵ Yet, as noted above, the Middle Platonists

⁷¹ Calcidius, *Comm. Tim.* 144 (trans. Magee, *Calcidius*, 357).

⁷² A careful reader will note that the ordering of the three fates and the relation of their functions to their respective names varies considerably in the sources (Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:251–252, recognized this with respect to the largely Stoic sources he had under purview; for the Middle Platonists discussed here; see Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 257–258; Boys-Stones, “‘Middle’ Platonists,” 435 n. 20; Sharples, “Stoic Background,” 173). I hope to address in a future study the question of how the names of the fates may relate to their respective domains of influence in these various sources and how this may help us better understand *Ascl.* 39–40, but in this article it suffices to observe the broad treatment of the motif in Middle Platonist discussions of fate and necessity. It is worth adding that when Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:252–353, equates *heimarmenē* with Lachesis (past), *ordo* with Clotho (present), and *necessitas* with Atropos (future), he reverses the order of the latter two entities in the text of *Ascl.* 39, which gives and repeats the order *heimarmenē*, *necessitas*, *ordo*.

⁷³ See the discussion in the previous section.

⁷⁴ Rightly noted by Bull, *Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*, 394, re Gersh, “Theological Doctrines,” 144–146; Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 117–118; Moreschini flags the passage but omits mention of the fact that the *Asclepius* includes chance as a cause next to providence and fate (in agreement with Apuleius and other Middle Platonists), while several Stobaeian fragments oppose precisely this position (“Providence,” 204; see following note).

⁷⁵ *Stob. herm.* 11.2.47 (on chance as a causal force that is weak, if that); 23.40; and 25.5 (the fates of souls are not up to chance). On the all-encompassing power of fate (with no

argued that there are three, major causal forces at work in the various Platonic dialogues: the regular rules and laws governing the cosmos, called “fate”; what is up to us; and chance or fortune.⁷⁶ Here too, Scott wrestles with Hermes’s statement that chance is a causal factor, given the rest of the passage’s emphasis on the unyielding character of fate and its eternal laws.⁷⁷ Here too, a reading of the passage in the context of Middle Platonism, rather than Hellenistic Stoicism, offers an intelligible reading that is in harmony with the preceding discussions of fate in chs. 16, 19, and 38–39.

F. Conclusions

While commentators have struggled with interpreting the *Asclepius*’s teaching on fate, with respect to Stoic, Platonic, or other Hermetic literature – a difficulty that led Scott to propose that the supposed incommensurability of the discussions of fate in chs. 16, 19, and 38–40 is a sign of the text’s composite nature – close examination of the relevant passages shows striking parallels with all five of the constituent parts of “the Middle Platonic teaching about fate” reconstructed by modern scholarship.

Two objections come to mind: first, while most of the parallels drawn here are solid, the fourth one – “conditional fate” – is something of a stretch, given that “what is up to us” does not appear to be the question *Asclepius* 19 is trying to answer. Even here, though, ch. 19’s focus on fate as a set of eternal laws governing causation that nonetheless permit change in the natural world are close indeed to the Middle Platonist paradigms from which the doctrine of conditional fate emerges. A second objection is that the fivefold scheme summarizing Middle Platonic teachings of fate, against which our Hermetic passages have been compared, is itself a modern reconstruction. Yet it is a good reconstruction. Each part of it is clearly and explicitly grounded in multiple ancient sources, and while different scholars offer differing typologies of this schema, the variance between them is minor. There is virtually no dissent to the view that the Middle Platonists had a coherent, systematizing teaching on fate, and even if one prefers a different summary of it than that proposed by Chase, one

mention of chance), see *Stob. herm.* 8.7; 12.2; 13, discussed by Moreschini, “Providence,” 204; Wildberg, “Astral Discourse,” 601.

⁷⁶ See *supra*, n. 29.

⁷⁷ According to Scott, the central question of chs. 38–40 is: if *heimarmenē* (the activity of the celestial gods) is immutable, what is the point of the terrestrial gods and the cults and temples that serve them? The author of the *Asclepius*, Scott hypothesizes, must “have proceeded to explain that there are after all some things which are not immutably predetermined. The single sentence on *fors* which has survived is not sufficient for this purpose ... His immediate business was to find room for freedom of action on the part of the *di terreni*” (*Hermetica*, 3:255; similarly Ferguson in Scott, *Hermetica*, 4:xxv).

finds more or less the same features in the same sources – and the same parallels to the Latin *Asclepius*.

These parallels evince a coherent, if idiosyncratic, teaching on fate in the *Asclepius* that is completely intelligible in the context of the philosophical literature of its day, particularly the early Latin Platonist tradition. Now, the extremely close relation between the doctrines on fate related by Apuleius, Pseudo-Plutarch, Calcidius, and Nemesius (and to a lesser extent, Alcinoüs), shows that these writers shared some kind of source. The *Asclepius* is likely dependent on the same source common to these Middle Platonists, or a similar one treating the subject of fate in the Platonic dialogues; consequently, it merits treatment from historians of Roman philosophy examining Platonist teachings on fate and providence. The coherence of this teaching undergirds a reading of the *Asclepius* as a unified text, as defended by Nock against Zielinski and others, especially Scott. Finally, the strong consonance of the *Asclepius*'s teaching on fate with that of Apuleius in the *De Platone* – a work that it often precedes in the medieval manuscript tradition – invites further reflection upon the incorporation of the Hermetic text into the corpus of Apuleius's philosophical works.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ On the manuscript tradition of the *Asclepius*, see *supra*, n. 3.