

# **The descent of the soul in Macrobius and William of Conches**

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# The Descent of the Soul in Macrobius and William of Conches

L. Gregory Bloomquist

## Introduction

Though speculation on the beginnings of the human composite, body and soul, did not begin with the Athenian Academy, it is in Plato's work, and particularly the *Timaeus*, that we find a departure point for much later speculation. In *Tim.* 41d - 42e Plato reports the neo-Pythagorean myth of the creation of the individual human souls in stars and the fact that souls are eventually deposited in the various planets, with the promise that, depending on how their lives are lived, they shall one day return to their original abodes (εις τὸ τῆς πρώτης καὶ ἀρίστης εἶδος ἕξῃως, 42d). Timaeus then discusses how God entrusted the keeping of these souls to the "lesser gods (τοῖς νέοις ... θεοῖς, 42d) for the cares and governing of the soon-to-be individuals.

The *Timaeus* dialogue left its readers with many unanswered questions which later commentators were to discuss: how did God make the individual soul? out of what material did he make it (since 36b notes that the *anima mundi* material has been extinguished in total use)? how did God put the souls in stars? how did the souls that were placed in stars as chariots (ἐμβιβάσας ὡς ἐξ ὄχημα, 41e) arrive at the planets?<sup>1</sup> and once their arrival there how were they found clothed in what we see is human form?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See R. C. Kissling, "The OXHMA - ΠΙΝΕΥΜΑ of the Neo-Platonists and the *De Insomniis* of Synesius of Cyrene," *American Journal of Philology* 43 (1922): 318–30.

<sup>2</sup> Brisson does not deny the questions posed by the *Timaeus*, especially in regard to "l'espèce mortelle de l'âme humaine" (Luc Brisson, *Le même et l'autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon: Un commentaire systématique du Timée de Platon* [Publications de l'Université de Paris X: Nanterre. Lettres et Sciences Humaines. Série A: Thèses et Travaux, No 23; Paris: Klincksieck, 1974], 417).

## Macrobius

Macrobius is a writer whose significance for the Middle Ages remains to be totally understood; for our purposes, however, he is a noteworthy tradent for speculation on the descent of the soul, in particular as he reflects on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*.<sup>3</sup> Since much of Macrobius's "commentary" is actually developed from excerpts that Macrobius takes from Cicero and that Macrobius uses for his own discourse,<sup>4</sup> we can discuss Macrobius's reflections on the descent of the soul without having to contextualize the reflections within Cicero's own work. In fact, as we shall see, Plato's *Timaeus* and various tradents are in play.

As a case in point, Macrobius's discussion of the descent of the soul in his commentary is actually a discussion on the immortality of the soul.<sup>5</sup> He starts with the words of Cicero's text:

immo vero hi vivunt, qui e corporum vinclis tamquam e carcere, evolaverunt: vestra vero quae dicitur esse vita mors est (I.10.7).<sup>6</sup>

For Macrobius this is crucial for his own argument because Cicero's words suggest that what we call "life" is actually death; however, if that is so, then, what we call "death" is actually not death since it

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<sup>3</sup> Macrobius's work can be found in Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* (ed. Iacobus Willis; Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum; Leipzig: Teubner, 1963). The cited English edition of Macrobius's work remains Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (translated with an introduction and notes by William Harris Stahl; Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies; New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Cicero's commentary is found in his *De re publica* VI.9-26. For a recent discussion of Macrobius's work, with particular attention to its importance in the history of medieval cosmology, see Barbara Obrist, "*La cosmologie médiévale: textes et images* (Micrologus' Library; Firenze: SISMEL/Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2004), 171-94.

<sup>4</sup> So Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, 95 n.2.

<sup>5</sup> Though Obrist emphasizes the moral nature of Cicero's treatise (Obrist, "*La cosmologie médiévale: textes et images*, 176), she is also correct and clear in noting that the properly ordered moral life, one that benefits the polis, will result in the politician's immortality: "La récompense qui attend l'homme soucieux de promouvoir un gouvernement juste est l'immortalité bienheureuse de son âme..." (Obrist, *La Cosmologie Médiévale: Textes et Images*, 176.).

<sup>6</sup> Macrobius, *Somm. Scip.* (Willis), 2.43. All Latin quotations cited are from Willis's edition.

brings us not to death but to actual life. For our purposes, what is most interesting is that it is in what follows that Macrobius expands on this brief statement found in Cicero by developing traditions that have come to him from the philosophical tradition regarding the descent of the soul.

Though the sources for these traditions are not clear, scholars agree that Macrobius is actually drawing on a neo-Platonic heritage that centers on commentaries by various authors on the *Timaeus* rather than on Cicero's work itself.<sup>7</sup> The controversy has raged, in particular, among authors like Franz Cumont,<sup>8</sup> Paul Henry,<sup>9</sup> Hermann de Ley,<sup>10</sup> E. Tuerk,<sup>11</sup> with Courcelle attacking both Cumont and Henry.<sup>12</sup> Finally, however, the controversy appears to have concluded with an agreement that Porphyry is likely Macrobius's source for knowledge of Plato, though whether, as Elferink believes, it is his *Timaeus* commentary is still debated.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, we can safely conclude that since Macrobius had read so widely, there were many works available to him, and no one source may have been the one that he used. As such, we may safely conclude that Macrobius did not create the notion of the soul's descent with which he works but rather tapped into an extended tradition that probably began with Plato's distillation of the

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<sup>7</sup> A concise study of the various proposals as to Macrobius's sources can be found in M. A. Elferink, *La descente de l'âme d'après Macrobius* (Philosophia Antiqua 16; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> See the development in Cumont's work from Franz Cumont, "Comment Plotin détourna Porphyre du suicide," *Revue des études grecques* 32 (1919): 113–20 to Franz Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (Conferences faites au Collège de France; Annales Du Musée Guimet 24; Paris: P. Geuthner, 1929).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Henry, *Plotin et l'Occident: Firmicus Maternus, Marius Victorinus, Saint Augustin et Macrobe*. (Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense 15; Louvain: "Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense" Bureaux, 1934).

<sup>10</sup> Hermann de Ley, "Le traité sur l'emplacement des enfers chez Macrobe," *L'antiquité classique* 36 (1967): 190–208.

<sup>11</sup> E. Tuerk, "A propos de la bibliothèque de Macrobe," *Latomus* 37 (1968): 433–35.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Paul Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and Their Greek Sources*. (trans. Harry E. Wedeck; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Elferink, *La descente de l'âme d'après Macrobius*, 40–41. John Norris, for example, highlights scholars who believe that Macrobius was dependent on Plato's *Republic* (John M. Norris, "Macrobius: A Classical Contrast to Christian Exegesis," *Augustinian Studies* 28, no. 2 [1997]: 81–100).

neo-Pythagorean philosophers and was extended broadly in subsequent centuries.

Evidence of this breadth of sources can be seen in the fact that, even before he adduces the philosophical debate traditions in his commentary, Macrobius presents pre-philosophical, religious opinion:

antequam studium philosophiae circa naturae inquisitionem ad tantum vigoris adolesceret qui per diversas gentes auctores constituendis sacris caerimoniarum fuerunt (I.10.9).

Pre-philosophical fables and stories are the work of *theologi* writing about the Underworld but which, as the philosophers will show, are actually stories about the human body (I.10.10).<sup>14</sup> As such, these fables point to a transcendental meaning that cannot be gained in a reading *ad litteram*.<sup>15</sup> According to Macrobius it is only with the philosophers (I.11.1), whether they be Pythagoreans and Platonists in common beliefs, or the latter only,<sup>16</sup> that we actually understand, as Cicero had, the truth, namely, that this life really is the underworld of death. Religion and fables cannot bring us to this conclusion; only philosophical reflection, backed by observation of nature, can. Ancient authors should only be used to confirm that conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

As to how this world of death has come about Macrobius points to the soul's descent as understood by philosophers; however, he notes disagreement among the philosophers. Though he identifies three groups, they are not clearly identified and themselves disagree as to the

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<sup>14</sup> On the importance of fables, see the seminal work by Peter Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations Into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Mittellateinische Studien und Texte 9; Leiden: Brill, 1974). Dronke seeks to "observe some of the counter-moves to the deprecation of the fabulous that were evolved in the earlier Middle Ages" (Dronke, *Fabula*, 4).

<sup>15</sup> William of Conches will utilize a similar approach to read the philosophical tradition and perhaps gains a hermeneutical clue here as to how to read ancient texts. Dronke believes that William relies on Macrobius for this clue (Dronke, *Fabula*, 5). Dronke's entire study is a profound reflection on Jeaneau's development of the notion of *integumentum* in William.

<sup>16</sup> This distinction is made in Macrobius, *Somn. Scip.* (*Willis*), I.11.1 and then again in Macrobius, *Somn. Scip.* (*Willis*), I.11.4. Dronke notes that Macrobius is driven to this position by his confrontation with Epicureans who insist that *fabula* are completely unbecoming to philosophers (so I.2). See Dronke, *Fabula*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> For a full understanding of Macrobius's and William's approaches to *fabula*, see Dronke, *Fabula*, 13–67.

spatial determination or location of the souls' fall.<sup>18</sup> Two of these groups agree that the souls have fallen from the ἄπλανης through a succession of deaths finally to become individuated human beings. But a third group, which Macrobius identifies by the phrase *amicior est ratio* (I.11.11), holds that the souls themselves long after bodily existence and through this longing begin a deathly fall to earth:

animae beatae ab omni cuiuscumque contagione corporis liberae caelum possident, quae vero appetentiam corporis et huius quam in terris vitam vocamus ab illa specula altissima et perpetua luce despiciens desiderio latenti cogitaverit, pondere ipso terrenae cogitationis paulatim in inferiora delabitur. (I.11.11)

In light of his encomium of this third group, it is not surprising that Macrobius concludes similarly to them (I.12.1-14) that it is by the souls' own desire that the fall occurs and thereby the soul, which is individual and perfect, is conjoined to matter. Macrobius's description of the conjoining reflects his powerful use of language in the service of philosophical reflection: for Macrobius this conjoining is a process whereby the soul loses its pristine beauty, being literally overwhelmed by matter (I.12.7):

anima ergo cum trahitur ad corpus, in hac prima sui productione silvestrem tumultum id est ὄλην influentem sibi incipit expereri. (I.12.7)

The result, Macrobius notes with Plato (I.12.7, cf. *Phaedo* 79c) is the intoxication of oblivion that presses the soul downwards and induces a forgetfulness that all men strive to overcome.

At this point, Macrobius returns to his earlier comments on fables to point out how the fables of the ancients also pointed to a "drinking deeply of the river of forgetfulness." Macrobius's use of the fables reveals a soul which has lost its lofty position; it is not extinguished or dead (*non extinguitur*) but only overcome for a time (*ad tempus*

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<sup>18</sup> Macrobius identifies three groups successively in I.11.5-7; I.11.8-9; I.11.10-12. The discussion arises in light of Plato's notion that "the creator of the universe ... divided the whole mixture [of the soul of the universe and the elements] into souls equal in number to the stars and assigned each soul to a star" and then proceeds to instruct them (*Tim.* 41d-e tr. Jowett). For a fuller discussion of Macrobius's views on the individual soul and the eventual import of these views for William of Conches, see Tullio Gregory, *Anima mundi: La filosofia di Guglielmo di Conches e la scuola di Chartres* (Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1955), 123-74.

*obruitur*) in this material world. From the writings of the ancients, then, and from the philosophers' observation of physical reality, Macrobius believes he has shown clearly the process of the descent of the soul:

plene ut arbitror de vita et morte animae definitio liquet, quam de adytis philosophiae doctrina et sapientia elicit. (I.12.18)

His conclusion is that man knows only the *inferos* of this world.

What is Macrobius's purpose in this discussion? His purpose in discussing the souls' descent is, like that of Cicero, clearly ethical, not first of all cosmological (cf. I.12-13-15). For in what follows he goes on to identify the powers of man that are lost in his successive falls and regained as man merits to return to the highest plane of reality. As such Macrobius's Porphyrian reflections on the descent of the soul seek not simply to address and confirm the soul's immortality, as he had initially stated, but also its morality, as he goes on to show.<sup>19</sup>

### William of Conches

We find a very different approach in the twelfth-century Chartrain commentator, William of Conches.<sup>20</sup> He, too, discusses the question of the descent of the soul but for a different purpose in his *Glosae super Platonem* (117—126).<sup>21</sup> That purpose is well described by Jauneau:

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<sup>19</sup> Like Porphyry, Macrobius here is far removed from any reflection that might be deemed magical. On Porphyry, see Luc Brisson, "Plotinus and the Magical Rites Practiced by the Gnostics," in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner* (ed. Kevin Corrigan and Tuomas Rasimus; Nag Hammadi and Manichaeic Studies; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 443–58.

<sup>20</sup> I will assume, with Otten, that William may more likely be associated with Chartres than with Paris. See Willemien Otten, *From Paradise to Paradigm: A Study of Twelfth-Century Humanism* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 127; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 83 n.3. In fact, as Jolivet notes, quoting Michel Lemoine, William is "le 'chartrain' type" (Jean Jolivet, "La création de l'homme chez Abélard, Guillaume de Conches, et Alain de Lille," in *Guillaume de Conches: Philosophie et science au XIIIe siècle* [ed. Barbara Obrist and Irene Caiazzo; Micrologus' Library; Firenze: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011], 259, citing Michel Lemoine, *Théologie et platonisme au XIIIe siècle* [Initiations Au Moyen Age; Paris: Cerf, 1998], 79).

<sup>21</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem* (ed. Edouard A. Jauneau; Corpus Christianorum. 203; Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 209–30. Ground-breaking studies of the topic can already be found in the work of Brisson, *Le même et l'autre*, as well as in the work already cited by Jolivet, "La création de l'homme".

“les *integumenta* des gloses sur le Timée visent plutôt à enseigner la cosmologie qu’à prêcher la morale”.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as we shall see, William’s methodology is not dissimilar from that of Macrobius in that he, too, uses the ancients, including Plato, and probably also Macrobius himself; however, he does so for a different reason. His purpose and hermeneutic are both novel. His purpose is to explain the place of those secondary agents which bring about and care for life as we know it, agents which for Plato, as for Macrobius, appear to be self-governing. Thus, where Macrobius’s work was an ethical treatise, William’s work is one of natural theology that will have ethical implications. And his hermeneutic is novel in that he applies a similar tool for the reading of Plato that we find Macrobius having used to read fables.

The device that allows William to use the work of Plato explicitly (and, implicitly, the works of other ancient philosophers) is what he calls *integumentum*,<sup>23</sup> a way first of all of reading non-biblical authors, including philosophers. It is modeled on the approach for reading biblical texts as *allegoria*, one of the senses of Scripture common among the Chartrain authors,<sup>24</sup> but differs somewhat from allegory in

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Unfortunately Jolivet only hints at the profound significance of William’s hermeneutical novelty (Jolivet, “La création de l’homme,” 264–65).

<sup>22</sup> William of Conches, *Glosae Super Platonem* (ed. Edouard Jeuneau; Textes philosophiques du moyen âge 13; Paris: J. Vrin, 1965), 59. Brisson concludes astutely in his analysis of the human soul in the *Timaeus* that for Plato “là naît la loi morale” (Brisson, *Le même et l’autre*, 420). The most recent, thorough study of the notion of *integumentum* can be found in Frank Bezner, *Vela Veritatis: Hermeneutik, Wissen und Sprache in der Intellectual History des 12. Jahrhunderts* (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 85; Leiden: Brill, 2005). See also his earlier work, some of which laid the foundation for his dissertation and subsequent book: Frank Bezner, “Simmistes veri: Das Bild Platons in der Theologie des zwölften Jahrhunderts,” in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach* (ed. Stephen Gersh and Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 93–138.

<sup>23</sup> Edouard Jeuneau, “L’usage d’*integumentum* à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 32 (1957): 64. See also Jeuneau’s “Introduction” in William of Conches, *Glosae*, 19–20 and more recently Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, xlii–lvii.

<sup>24</sup> Jeuneau, “L’Usage d’*Integumentum*,” 36. See one of the still most helpful explanations of the senses of Scripture in Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale les quatre sens de l’écriture* (Théologie: Études Publiées Sous la Direction de la Faculté de Théologie S.J. de Lyon-Fourvière 42.59; Paris: Aubier, 1959–64) and

that it seeks a philosophical or rational theological explanation for something that appears either non-philosophical or unable to be used for rational, Christian theological reflection.<sup>25</sup> Nor is it a universally valid hermeneutic. Again Jeauneau writes:

L'interprétation d'un '*integumentum*' ne se réalise pas grâce à l'application matérielle de certaines formules universellement valables. Le sens qu'il convient d'attribuer à une légende dépend du contexte dans lequel elle se trouve et aussi pour une bonne part, de la fantaisie du maître qui commente.<sup>26</sup>

As such it is not only ideally suited to interpreting fables but also philosophical texts like the *Timaeus* and, as Jeauneau has shown, it also had implications for reading both other non-Christian authors like Virgil,<sup>27</sup> and any non-biblical Christian author.

As to its origins, William was, as already noted, probably inspired by Macrobius for developing the notion of *integumentum*; nevertheless, he probably did not draw the notion of *integumentum* directly from Macrobius or at least not uniquely so. As Jeauneau writes:

Au maître de grammaire incombait le soin de repérer de tels mythes et de discerner la vérité philosophique qui s'y cachait. ... En commentant Boèce, Macrobe, Platon ou Martianus Capella, Guillaume rencontrait maintes allusions à la mythologie, et il ne manquait pas de les exploiter.<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly in terms of the actual use of *integumentum* for reading Plato and the descent of the soul, we find ourselves in a similar situation to our brief overview of Macrobius: where Macrobius concludes that he has learned about the soul from Cicero's recounting of Scipio's dream, William begins by indicating that he learns cosmology from Plato's account of the *Timaeus* myth, specifically

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one of the best resources for interpretation in this period remains Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964).

<sup>25</sup> See the helpful comparison of this philosophical hermeneutics with the Christian practice of allegory in Dronke, *Fabula*, 30–32. Dronke, too, concludes “yet the differences should not be minimized” (Dronke, *Fabula*, 32).

<sup>26</sup> William of Conches, *Glosae*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, liv-iv.

<sup>28</sup> William of Conches, *Glosae*, 19–20.

through development and then employment of the exegetical tool of *integumentum*. So in chapter 118 he proposes to discuss the creation of the soul using Plato's terms but using an approach that actually can be found in Plato, that is, *more suo deserviens integumento*.<sup>29</sup> Such a discussion, he believes, will allow him to transcend the myth "grâce à la notion d'*integumentum*" and arrive at a philosophical basis for the creation, existence, and well-being of the natural man and for God's provision for that man through secondary causation.

### Primary causation and secondary agency: Macrobius and William

According to Jauneau a reading of Plato using the hermeneutical tool of *integumentum*

à fourni à notre auteur (Guillaume) le cadre idéal dans lequel il a inséré ses idées sur la causalité des agents naturels. La nature est considérée par Guillaume comme un principe d'activité, jouissant sous le haut domaine de la Providence d'une relative autonomie.<sup>30</sup>

Macrobius, like Plato and the neo-Platonic tradition generally, is concerned with the soul that finds itself in an unfortunate state of affairs but that can, through right action, be brought back to its rightful and true life. As noted above, William's concern is otherwise. For him God creates the individual soul *ex nihilo* in the same receptacle as He has created the *anima mundi*,<sup>31</sup> but even if it is not of the same perfection as the *anima mundi* the individual soul is still of such a nature as to receive the divine laws concerning what is immutable

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<sup>29</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 211. I am here following the lead of those like Jauneau in showing how William's use deftly intertwines the rhetorical reading of texts that he has gained from several sources, including among others, Boethius, with the language employed for a different reason by philosophers like Plato. In this William is part of a broader, intellectual movement that seeks to develop appropriate hermeneutical tools for the reading of ancient texts. I have sought to show how the Bolognese legal philosopher, Irnerius, an only slightly younger contemporary of William, was developing similar hermeneutical tools for use in the legal profession. See my "The Legal Art of Irnerius: The Hermeneutics behind the Medieval Renaissance of Roman Law," *Studia Canonica* (2020), *forthcoming*.

<sup>30</sup> William of Conches, *Glosae*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 211–13 (chapter 118).

through direct instruction from God.<sup>32</sup> The soul has thus received direct instruction from God concerning its bodily abode, its ethical comportment therein, and its reward or punishment concerning the comportment.<sup>33</sup> So far William accurately reflects the narrative of the *Timaeus*, though in Christian language.

From that point on, however, William differs from Plato and the Platonic tradition generally, namely, in his discussion of the descent of the soul as found in the *Timaeus*. In Calcidius's rendering of *Tim.* 42d, we find the soul described as *sementem fecit eius modi deus*.<sup>34</sup> Calcidius follows this with

Ea porro officia quae sementem sequuntur factis a se diis iniunxit, ut dixeram, maximeque formandorum corporum curam mortalium.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, God hands over the remaining work to the lesser (or younger) gods to configure bodies and until such time as the souls return to their natural abode.

In William's *Glosses*, however, it is clear that he views such a conception as beneath the Christian conception of God. For him the work of God has never been needful of mediation that God might be protected from the material world or that it might not be the perfection which God is (cf. *Tim.* 41c). In William's *Glosses* the work of God neither ends at the *sementem* nor does the work of the intermediary gods begin there. Instead William posits three fundamental works of these secondary agents (the lesser gods in Plato; the planets and stars in William's work): (1) to establish a life-span for man, (2) to sustain bodily life on the earth (and there alone), and (3) to perfect the soul's power of bodily sense through provision of external qualities.

For William the stars or constellations are the sources of man's life here.<sup>36</sup> Confirming Jauneau's understanding of the centrality of

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<sup>32</sup> William differentiates laws that concern what is immutable with those that can be learned later through the senses. See Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 218–20 (chapter 121).

<sup>33</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 220–27 (chapters 122–24).

<sup>34</sup> Calcidius, *Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus* (ed. and trans. Jan Hendrik Waszink; Plato Latinus 4; London: Warburg Institute and E. J. Brill, 1975), 37 (22) - 38 (1).

<sup>35</sup> Calcidius, *Timaeus*, 38 (2–4).

<sup>36</sup> This is his answer to the accusation that Plato in *Tim.* 41d-e had provided only for the creation of a fixed number of souls, as over against the orthodox view that

William's notion of *integumentum*, William does not affirm that Plato's teaching is orthodox but rather that one finds there

profundissimam philosophiam integumentis verborum tectam.<sup>37</sup>

According to William Plato did not intend to say that God put (Calcidius reads *deligere*) only as many souls into as many stars as exist but rather that

Delegit ergo Deus animas pares numero stellarum ut implerent et non excederent numerum habitandi in corporibus quem contrahunt ex constellatione.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, God's provision of man's lifespan is what is involved in the work of these secondary agents.

The language of William in this chapter (119) is reminiscent of Macrobius's treatment. But William reads Plato as an *integumentum* in order to answer the questions left unanswered by Macrobius and also to establish a Christian position over against Macrobius who is not adverse to seeing our lives as controlled and determined as to their fate by the stars. William himself is not adverse to an understanding of secondary causation in which human beings contract their life-span from constellations but specifies their work more carefully.

He argues that if planets provide what is necessary for vegetative and animal life and growth ("si enim verum est quod planete calorem et siccitatem, frigus et humiditatem conferunt terris, si vitam herbis et arboribus si temperiem vel distemperiem humanis corporibus..."), then

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God creates new souls individually and all not at once. The orthodox view can be found in context of a discussion of opposing views in Jerome's *Epistula* 126 (*ad Marcellinum et Anapsychiam*), *CSEL* 56, pt. 3, and again in either his *Contra Johannem Hierosolymitanum, ad Pammachium*, 22 (PL 23, 389 a,b ) or *Contra Rufinum* III.29,31 (PL 23, 500-502). William notes that he takes the passage from Augustine (*Philosophia* IV.33 [PL 172, 98 c,d] and again in *Dragmaticon* VI [1567 ed., p. 306]). Tullio Gregory traces this reference to the work by "Gennadius Massiliensis" called *De ecclesiasticis dogmatibus* 14 (PL 58, 984), which Gregory says was once attributed to Augustine ( Gregory, *Anima Mundi*, 159). Elsewhere I hope to pursue the question of the relationship between early Christian theological reflection on the Genesis creation account's placing of the creation of planets within the realm of the waters above the firmament and discussions of the creation of the human soul in relation to these planets in the realm of their birthing waters.

<sup>37</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 214 (chapter 119).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

there is nothing odd if (“quid mirum si...”) bodies contract the same qualities either before birth, at birth, or during life.<sup>39</sup> But then where Calcidius’s translation literally contends that God has sown souls on all the planets,<sup>40</sup>

ut partim in terra, partim in luna generis humani iacerentur  
exordia,

William reads the philosophical truth of these words to mean that just as the plants and animals need ground on which to live and heat, water, and air in which to grow, so human life is to be supported by the same. He writes in commenting on the text in Plato:

voluit Plato exordia humani generis fuisse in terra et planetis  
quia sine sustentatione et fructibus terre, sine calore planetarum,  
corpus non esset idoneum vite, nec sine vita anima esset (125).<sup>41</sup>

In other words when Plato himself writes of God giving the souls over to the care of the lesser gods, William understands him to have been adducing secondary agency:<sup>42</sup> the human composite having been formed, the secondary agents now govern the *corporei sensus*, which, though in the soul, cannot exist without the body. It is this, not the soul or the body, that the stars and planets are called to administer as the sensual power exercises its ability: “ad regimen enim hominis serviunt stellae et ministrant angeli.”<sup>43</sup>

Though William does not fully expound this position, it is possible to conjecture that he here envisions the secondary agents as providing, through natural life and the four elements, all that man needs to learn to make him complete (for God has not taught him all things) and in this completeness to be harmonious within himself. This has ethical

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 215 (chapter 119).

<sup>40</sup> Calcidius, *Timaeus*, 38 (1).

<sup>41</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 227–28. For an expansion of this point see the chapter entitled “Opening the Universe: William of Conches and the Art of Science,” in Otten, *Paradise to Paradigm*, 83–128. Otten insightfully proposes that it is William’s combined interest in the natural sciences and the philosophers who came before him that together provide the impetus toward his novel hermeneutic.

<sup>42</sup> Though the agents never rule alone, as in some forms of Gnosticism, for William the case is clear: “sed quia illa esse non possunt per daemones nec per stellas, quibus hoc erat iniunctum sine divino auxilio perfici, divinum praetendit auxilium” (Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 227 [chapter 125]).

<sup>43</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 229 (chapter 126).

implications but more importantly for William it has cosmological implications precisely because it has physical implications.<sup>44</sup> In fact this suggestion fits well given William's closing words to this particular discussion:

Exigit autem ut quemadmodum sunt quaedam rationalia sine sensu ut angeli, quaedam sensibilia sine ratione ut bruta animalia, sit quoddam medium quod est rationale sit et sensibile ut homo.<sup>45</sup>

The soul is uniquely in harmony within this composite being, man.

The *philosophus* gives voice to this same unique harmony in William's *Dragmaticon* — William's subsequent writing following the *Glosae*<sup>46</sup> — when he notes that, though all bodies are comprised of four elements, the soul, conjoined to the body, provides for harmony in the human body:

corpora vero humana ex quatuor elementis proportionaliter et concorditer coniunctis sunt constituta: sed proportio et concordia animam allicit et corpori coniungit et in corpore retinet et si vere et proprie velimus loqui, diceremus, animam non corpus, non corporis qualitates, sed proportionem et concordiam, quibus partes corporis coniunctae sunt, deligere.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, secondary agency is necessary in William's economy for man must have an allotted time of life, a provision so as to be complete. The *Timaeus* text contains none of these necessary provisions for the human composite as it stands because its concern is

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<sup>44</sup> I believe that this approach found in the *Glosae* actually provides William with the impetus to develop the notion of human responses to sin later in the *Dragmaticon* as understood by Otten, *Paradise to Paradigm*, 121–23.

<sup>45</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Glosae Super Platonem*, 229 (chapter 126).

<sup>46</sup> So William of Conches, *Glosae*, 14–16, cited by Irene Caiazzo, “The Four Elements in the Work of William of Conches,” in *Guillaume de Conches: Philosophie et science au XIIIe siècle* (ed. Barbara Obrist and Irene Caiazzo; Micrologus' Library; Firenze: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Guillelmus de Conchis, *Dragmaticon Philosophiae* (Library of Latin Texts. Series A; Turnhout, Belgium: Centre Traditio Litterarum Occidentalium, CETEDOC / Brepols, 2000), 6.25.4. On the *Dragmaticon*, see especially Otten, *Paradise to Paradigm*, 111–26. At the outset of her work on the subject Caiazzo notes that “The theory of the four elements occupies a central place in William of Conches' philosophy of nature” (Caiazzo, “The Four Elements in the Work of William of Conches,” 3).

not with man but with the soul. William, however, can read the Platonic truth which underlies the myth and see 'Plato's' insight into God's provision for man naturally, a striking way in which Plato's metaphysical foundation, transmitted through neo-Platonic speculation, becomes the ground for a truly incarnational Christianity and a philosophical cosmology that seeks to find a place for man in his wholeness within the cosmos.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, if we agree with Jeuneau that the Chartrain masters first knew not only some works of the ancients and late antiquity but in particular *Timaeus* and the *Commentary on Cicero's Dream of Scipio*,<sup>49</sup> and that William's glosses on Macrobius probably predated those on the *Timaeus*,<sup>50</sup> we may be able to conclude that William developed his doctrine of secondary agency as a result of reading Macrobius and seeking to answer the questions that were not answered there and to reconfigure some of the answers that he did find.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Such a reading makes it all the more surprising that William was attacked for his orthodoxy by William of St. Thierry. See the overview of this accusation and possible reasons for it in Otten, *Paradise to Paradigm*, 84–85. Otten reaches a similar conclusion to mine regarding William of Conches's theological orthodoxy: though William held that "knowledge of creation eventually leads to knowledge of the creator," it was "precisely on the point of this final *conjunctio*" that William was misunderstood. However, I do not share Otten's premise that William operated "on the Platonic premise that unseen reality ranks higher in the hierarchy of nature than visible manifestation" (Otten, *Paradise to Paradigm*, 93) for this very reason. William's Platonism is governed by his Christian incarnationalism.

<sup>49</sup> As well as Boethius and Martianus Capella. So Edouard Jeuneau, "Macrobe source du platonisme chartrain," in *Lectio philosophorum: Recherches sur l'Ecole de Chartres* (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1973), 281–83.

<sup>50</sup> Edouard Jeuneau, "Gloses de Guillaume de Conches sur Macrobe," in *Lectio philosophorum: Recherches sur l'Ecole de Chartres* (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1973), 275–79.

<sup>51</sup> Though it is true that the *integumentum* shows up in the *Glosses* on Macrobius, especially in consideration of the descent of the soul, Jeuneau cautions against a strict use of Macrobius as a sole source. Edouard Jeuneau, "La lecture des auteurs classiques à l'Ecole de Chartres durant la première moitié du XIIe siècle," in *Lectio philosophorum: Recherches sur l'Ecole de Chartres* (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1973), 305–7. Jeuneau cites William from MS Bern, Burgerbibliothek 266, folio 9va-9vb. Gregory had already noted the clear use of

Nevertheless, I believe that we can even more firmly conclude that it is William's development of the hermeneutical tool of reading by *integumentum* — a hermeneutical tool that is drawn from William's broad readings from several different sources — that ultimately allowed him to read Plato to gain the philosophical reflection and notion of secondary causation which would lead him as a Christian philosopher to a deeper knowledge of man by utilizing the resources of non-Christian philosophy. As such, we can see both a continuation of the work of Macrobius but also the creative use and refinement of a hermeneutical tool that will make further reading of Plato, and others, possible in the Christian tradition.<sup>52</sup>

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the passages from Macrobius which here concern us by the anonymous author of *De mundi constitutione* (Tullio Gregory, *Platonismo Medievale: Studi e ricerche di Tullio Gregory* [Roma: Nella Sede dell'Istituto, 1958], 97–98 note 3). See also Pseudo-Bede, *De mundi celestis terrestrisque constitutione* (ed. and trans. Charles Burnett; Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts; London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1985).

<sup>52</sup> This paper is grounded in the work of and indebted to time spent with my teacher, Prof. Edouard Jauneau, at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto. He remains one of the earthly luminaries of my time at PIMS. And though I have been constrained in completing this article by the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 crisis of 2020, especially in having limited access to requisite bibliography, I could not have completed the paper without the invaluable and profoundly generous contribution of an anonymous reviewer who provided me with outstanding direction in bringing the bibliography and sources up to date. I remain in that reviewer's debt and repay it as I only can with my heartfelt thanks.

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