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## Aspasius on Providence

*David Lefebvre*

It has often been noted that the idea of a Peripatetic theory of providence is, at the very least, odd—if not outright paradoxical.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's theology (if we take this to refer to the teachings of Book XII of the *Metaphysics* on the prime mover), insofar as it implies a rejection of the anthropomorphic view of divine action and an artisanal model of causation, seems to make providence impossible—and yet, Aristotle's philosophy is not devoid of the foundations needed to build a *sui generis* conception of providence.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that Aristotle deliberately avoided making explicit references to providence, thus distancing himself from Plato and Xenophon.<sup>3</sup> According to our sources, Alexander of Aphrodisias was the first to develop a systematic teaching on providence (and fate) within the Peripatetic school. However, he was not the first Peripatetic to attribute a theory of providence to Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> On this point as on others, Stoicism and Middle Platonism put pressure on the Peripatos to update its doctrines, albeit in a minimal—or, one might say, “superficial”—manner. That said, we possess very little information on this subject from the Hellenistic and imperial Peripatos. In this context, Aspasius, writing in the second century CE, represents an important case study. He is the earliest extant commentator whose work has come down to us: apart from doxographers and Adrastus,<sup>5</sup> no other Peripatetic text on providence from this

1 Moraux (1970), 41; Sharples (1999), 159, and (2010), 206.

2 From the recent contemporary literature, see Babut (1974, 2019), 138–152; Bodéüs (1992), 191–281; Brodie (1993), 396, and Horn (2016) from *Metaph.* XII 10, 1075a11–25; and Sharples (2010), 206 n. 28. Sharples (2002a), 4–12 offers a still valuable *status quaestionis* on Aristotle's theology.

3 On the providence of the god (or gods) in Plato, see *Timaeus* 30c and 44c, as well as *Laws* x, 899d4–905d6; and Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I 4, 11–19, and IV 3.

4 See Fazzo (1999), 10 and 24 n. 27 (who quotes our passage from Aspasius) and Sharples in Moraux (2001), 524.

5 See Petrucci (2015) and Fazio and Petrucci in this volume. We should consider the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *De mundo* dated “between the second half of the third century BCE and the first half of the first century BCE, though a later date cannot be excluded” by Gregorić and Karamanolis (2020), 8. See below n. 18.

period is available to us.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Aspasius demonstrates an extensive and detailed knowledge of Aristotle's corpus, particularly the treatises that are most relevant to the problem of providence.<sup>7</sup> We also know that Alexander was familiar with Aspasius' commentaries.<sup>8</sup> While it may seem surprising that a discussion of providence survived in his sole extant work—his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*)<sup>9</sup>—he briefly addresses the topic in his commentary on a passage from *NE* III 3, which deals with the objects of deliberation.<sup>10</sup>

This stretch of text is not an isolated instance, which can be explained by the fact that providence is a topic of concern to both ethics and physics. There are several passages in both of his ethical treatises in which Aristotle introduces themes closely tied to providence. Commentators often point to *NE* X 7, 1177b26–31 (on the divine nature of the human intellect) and 9, 1179a24–26 (on the existence, ὡσπερ δοκεῖ, of care, ἐπιμέλεια, on the part of the gods for human affairs), as well as *EE* VII 10, 1242a32–35, and 12, 1244b7–10 (on the *philia* between god and human being).<sup>11</sup> As Aspasius' extant commentary covers books I–IV and VII–VIII of the *NE*, nothing has been preserved of his commentary on these passages. In other sections where Aspasius might have detected allusions to providence, he remains notably circumspect: regarding *NE* I 9, where, in the context of the discussion of the claim that happiness is “a gift of the gods” (1099b11–18), Aristotle affirms that the study of this question would be “more appropriate to another kind of investigation” (b14), Aspasius merely notes that Aristotle refers to a “more physical” type of enquiry (25.33).<sup>12</sup>

6 See Dragona Monachou (1994) for the period before Alexander; Moraux (1970), 41–65; Sharples (2010), 196–210. On the period from 80 to 250 for the Platonic philosophers, see Boys-Stones (2018), 323–343.

7 See Becchi (1994), 5368–5369; Barnes (1999), 8–13, attributes to Aspasius a commentary on the *Categories*, *De interpretatione*, *Physics*, *De caelo*, *De sensu*, *Metaphysics* and possibly the *Topics*, as does Kupreeva (2016), 140–141. Moraux (1984) 240 does not believe that Aspasius commented on the entire *De caelo*. The passage to be examined indicates that Aspasius had a thorough familiarity with the *De caelo* and the *Metaphysics*.

8 Barnes (1999), 9–11.

9 Aspasius' *Commentary* is dated shortly after 131 by Barnes (1999), 3.

10 I follow Bywater (1894) for the division of the *NE* into chapters.

11 See Moraux (1970), 51; Thillet (2003), 18–26; Fazzo (1999), 26–31; and Bodéüs (1992), 229–242. In *NE* VIII 7, 1158b11–14, Aristotle examines friendships involving superiority without mentioning the relationship between gods and humans. However, Aspasius uses this example (178.30–179.1) to affirm that there is no friendship between god and human beings, because the distance is too great. The gods can be “favourable” to human beings without any *philia*.

12 I quote the Greek text of Aspasius' commentary from Heylbut's edition (1889). I use the translation by Konstan (2006) unless otherwise indicated.

Aspasius does not elaborate further, but this clarification is significant:<sup>13</sup> as Moraux aptly put it, Aristotle's metaphysical conception of god implies that providence belongs exclusively to physics, since god's relation to the world is that of the mover to the moved.<sup>14</sup> Raising the question of whether the gods might grant happiness as a gift is, therefore, an inappropriate way of analysing god's relationship to the world. Any sound examination of divine intervention in the world must necessarily fall within the scope of physics. In his commentary on *NE VIII 1*, 1155a16–22, Aspasius offers a more explicit treatment of the quasi-providential aspects of nature. Aristotle explains here that there is a form of friendship that exists “by nature” (φύσει), as seen in the reciprocal *philia* between parents and offspring in humans as well as most animals, and that a natural friendship similarly exists between individuals of the same species, including human beings. Aspasius emphasises the teleological role of nature in this context, stating: “Nature has necessarily organised things so that there is friendship towards the little ones not only in human beings but also animals” (ἡ φύσις πρὸς τὰ ἔγγωνα φιλίαν μηχανᾶται ἀναγκαίως, οὐ μόνον ἐν ἀνθρώποις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις ζώοις, 159, 26–27); he adds that nature “necessarily made those who are of the same species feel friendship with each other” (καὶ τοῖς ὁμοεθνέσι δὲ ἀναγκαίως ἡ φύσις ἐνεργάσατο πρὸς ἀλλήλους φιλίαν, 159, 30–31). While the analogy between nature and a craftsman is not unusual in Aristotle's physics,<sup>15</sup> Aspasius' commentary is noteworthy for making explicit, in this ethical context, nature's role as an agent that acts through conditional necessity. In Aristotle's original text, nature merely appears in the dative, without a corresponding explication. While Aspasius does not talk explicitly about providence in these passages, we can see that where it does emerge, it is in a *physical* context.

The handful of lines from Aspasius' commentary on *NE III 3* reflect this general outlook. Despite the context, they do not involve any reference to the ethical dimension of providence (the individual care exercised by the gods to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked). Instead, Aristotle's explanations of the objects of deliberation, which are more on the order of physical

13 This is discussed in *EE VII 14*. Commentators have thought that Aristotle only wanted to get rid of a question that he thought belonged to the poets. See Burnet (1900), 46 ad loc., according to whom the question belongs to a “theological” study, and Gauthier-Jolif (1970), 72–73.

14 Moraux (1970), 51–52, writes: “It was not by studying the relationship of God to man but that of God to the world that the Peripatetics built their theory of providence” (my translation).

15 *PA I 5*, 645a9, *II 9*, 654b32; *IA 711a18*; *GA II 1*, 731a24, etc.

or ontological considerations, prompt Aspasius to digress briefly into physics and theology. He appears to rely on two key texts to clarify the role of providence within a Peripatetic framework: *Metaphysics* XII 7 and the treatise *De caelo*. From Aspasius' perspective, however, this is hardly a digression, but rather a response to an exegetical difficulty in Aristotle's text. His commentary at this point reflects, if not a misunderstanding, at least an over-interpretation of a passage where Aristotle likely intended to maintain some level of ambiguity or openness. Aspasius gives a strong doctrinal interpretation of a statement by Aristotle that could have been understood in a weaker (i.e. doxographic) sense. We can reasonably infer that this bears witness to a conception of providence developed by Aspasius elsewhere or, at the very least, to a conception that was probably common *doxa* in the Hellenistic and imperial Peripatos before Alexander of Aphrodisias. Put simply, this conception holds that providence operates first in the heavenly regions of the cosmos and then extends into the sublunary world, albeit in a "diminished" way.<sup>16</sup>

In the following sections, I will: (1) place Aspasius' position in its Peripatetic context, (2) outline the difficulties in the Aristotelian passage from *NE* III 3 regarding the objects of deliberation, and (3) examine Aspasius' commentary.

## 1 The Peripatos on Providence before Alexander

Sharples has summed up the standard view that providence is confined to the heavenly regions of the cosmos with the slogan "No Sublunary Providence" (NSP). In Alexander's words, providence "stops at the moon"<sup>17</sup> and does not extend below it into that part of the cosmos composed of the four elements and subject to generation and corruption.<sup>18</sup> Sharples identifies this as the central tenet of the Peripatetic position on providence during the Hellenistic and imperial periods before Alexander. The origin of this claim (at least chronolo-

<sup>16</sup> I borrow the expression from Kupreeva (2009), 146.

<sup>17</sup> In the *De providentia* (59.6–12), Alexander attributes this claim to Aristotle, which is nowhere to be found in the Aristotelian corpus. Sharples (2002a), 30, and (2007a), 603.

<sup>18</sup> See Sharples (1982); Sharples (2002a), 14–18, 22–30; Sharples (2003) and (2007a); Moraux (1949), 33; Festugière (1981), 221–263. Moraux (1984), 571 n. 33, sees in this claim a simplification due to the doxographic tradition. I leave aside here the *De mundo*, whose conception of providence does not fall under NSP and whose date is uncertain (n. 5 above). See Sharples (2002a), 15, 25–26, Betegh and Gregorić (2020), 207–208, and Gregorić in this volume.

gically) is thought to be Critolaus of Phaselis, the scholarch of the Lyceum, as reflected in fragment 15 W:<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle, son of Nicomachus, was a Macedonian from Stagira according to some, but a Thracian in race according to others. He said that there are two principles, god and matter, and that the things above the moon are objects of divine providence, but the things below the moon exist without providence and are borne along in some irrational way as chance has it. He says that there are two world orders, that above and that below, and that which is above is imperishable, but that which is below is subject to passing away. And he says that the soul is the continuous activity of the body. [...] Critolaus of Phaselis held the same opinions as Aristotle.<sup>20</sup>

The value of this testimony has been contested, as the opinions are not directly attributed to Critolaus.<sup>21</sup> This fragment forms part of a series in which Epiphanius, having summarised the doctrine he attributes to Aristotle, asserts that Theophrastus shared Aristotle's views and Praxiphanes shared those of Theophrastus, while Critolaus, in turn, aligned himself with Aristotle. Critolaus' position is characterised by its proximity to Stoicism (acknowledging two principles: god and matter) as well as by its resistance to Stoic cosmological monism and its conception of providence.<sup>22</sup> The fragment attributes a strongly dualistic cosmological position to the Peripatetic school: the part "above" the moon, which is incorruptible, is the object of "divine providence", while the part "below" the moon is corruptible and "ignored by providence" (ἀπρονόητα). Moreover, sublunary motions are described as irrational and random, which explains why they are not, in fact, "foreseeable" (taking ἀπρονόητα literally here).<sup>23</sup> Critolaus represents the most robust version of this cosmolo-

19 Wehrli (1969), 66.

20 Critolaus of Phaselis, Fr. 15 W (ap. Epiphanius, *Adv. Haereses* III, 31 and 35): Ἀριστοτέλης ὁ Νικομάχου κατὰ μὲν τινὰς Μακεδῶν ἀπὸ Σταγείρων, ὡς δὲ ἔνιοι Θραξῆς ἦν τὸ γένος. ἔλεγε δὲ δύο ἀρχὰς εἶναι, θεὸν καὶ ὕλην, καὶ τὰ μὲν ὑπεράνω τῆς σελήνης θείας προνοίας τυγχάνειν, τὰ δὲ κάτωθεν τῆς σελήνης ἀπρονόητα ὑπάρχειν καὶ φορᾶ τινὶ ἀλόγῳ φέρεσθαι ὡς ἔτυχεν. εἶναι δὲ λέγει δύο κόσμους, τὸν ἄνω καὶ τὸν κάτω, καὶ τὸν μὲν ἄνω ἀφθαρτον, τὸν δὲ κάτω φθαρτόν. καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐνδελέχειαν σώματος λέγει. [...] Κριτόλαος ὁ φασηλίτης τὰ αὐτὰ τῷ Ἀριστοτέλει ἐδόξασε. Translation Sharples (2010), 202–203, Text 22 O; with apparatus FHS&G Fr. 162, 326–327.

21 And, of course, due to the two other doctrines attributed to Critolaus: the two principles and the definition of the soul. We cannot go any further into these questions here. See Moraux (1970), 55; Sharples (1998), 101–105, and (2002a), 22–23; Hahm (2007), 85–89, against Wehrli's skepticism. The fragment is discussed in Kupreeva (2009), 142–150.

22 Diogenes Laertius VII 134, 1–8 (SVF I 85).

23 See Festugière (1981), 226, and, e.g., *MM* II 6, 1203a31.

gical dualism. However, alongside this cosmological fragment, there is another fragment, which suggests that, according to Critolaus, the action of providence might extend to nature and human beings considered in general.<sup>24</sup>

A similar view can be found in Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Aristotle*, albeit with a potentially less pronounced dualism.<sup>25</sup> In his account, earthly bodies are said to be "organised" according to their "sympathy" with celestial bodies. It should also be noted that, for Diogenes, the idea that the god exercises providence in Aristotle does not prevent him from being considered "incorporeal" and "immobile". Things are somewhat different again in Adrastus' fragment,<sup>26</sup> which emphasises that sublunary beings can only follow noble and divine beings "by accident" (τῶν δ' ἐνταῦθα κατὰ συμβεβηχὸς ἐκείνοις ἐπομένων, 149.14–15). In this view, earthly beings are therefore not the intentional end of the divine providence, but benefit from it "by accident".<sup>27</sup>

The NSP label thus conceals a range of positions that are challenging to reconstruct.<sup>28</sup> The relative caution of the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic Peripatos in elaborating a doctrine of providence is somewhat surprising, given the potential of the materials found within Aristotle's corpus to address such questions.<sup>29</sup> This apparent minimalism did, however, allow the Peripatos to assert a distinctive position relative to other philosophical schools. This position can be situated in relation to four contemporary conceptions in the Hellenistic and

24 This is the hypothesis of Mayhew (Forthcoming), based on two texts by Plutarch, *Political Precepts*, 42.15, and *Pericles* 7.7 (Frs. 35a and 35b W; Texts 22 K and L in Sharples 2010, 201). Both texts use political analogies that can be given a theological meaning. The first (which quotes two lines from Euripides) can be understood within the framework of the NSP doctrine, but the second seems likely to imply the god's use of intermediaries. See Kupreeva (2016), 147–148, and also Donini (1974), 112–113, based on the notion of "theoretical justice" in Aspasius, 2.2–4.

25 Diogenes Laertius V 32, 3–6: τὸν δὲ θεὸν ἀσώματον ἀπέφαινε, καθὰ καὶ ὁ Πλάτων. διατείνειν δὲ αὐτοῦ τὴν πρόνοιαν μέχρι τῶν οὐρανίων καὶ εἶναι ἀκίνητον αὐτόν· τὰ δ' ἐπίγεια κατὰ τὴν πρὸς ταῦτα συμπάθειαν οἰκονομεῖσθαι. Things are slightly different in Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, VII 19.2, who explains that under the moon there is neither order nor providence, "nature alone suffices".

26 Adrastus, *ap. Theon, De utilitate mathematicae*, 149.4–15.

27 See the same reference to accident in Aëtius (II 3.4). On the meaning of this expression, see Fazio and Petrucci here p. 311–312.

28 See Sharples (2002a), 22–26.

29 In addition to the references cited above from the *Ethics* and *Metaphysics*, one might add *GC* II 10, 336b30–32; *DC* I 4, 271a33, and II 9, 291a18–26. In this passage, Aristotle explains that everything happens *as if* nature had foreseen what would have happened (ὥσπερ τὸ μέλλον ἔσσεσθαι προνοούσης τῆς φύσεως, 291a24–25), if the heavenly bodies moved in a mass of air or fire: the sound produced would be transmitted to earth and produce violent destruction.

imperial periods before Alexander:<sup>30</sup> (i) Epicurean anti-providentialism, which flatly denies divine care or intervention in the world;<sup>31</sup> (ii) Middle Platonic providentialism, as seen in figures like Atticus, who argued that a transcendent god, creator of the cosmos according to the artificialist model of the *Timaeus*, demonstrates, through the world's soul, moral and retributive concern towards the world and human beings;<sup>32</sup> (iii) Stoic pan-providentialism, which assumes that *pronoia* penetrates and governs the entire cosmos, extending individual and benevolent care to (almost) all particular phenomena and human beings;<sup>33</sup> (iv) Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic Peripatetic providentialism, which maintains that an immobile and non-demiurgic god exercises a purely kinetic and non-intentional providence, confined to the heavenly regions within an eternal cosmos.<sup>34</sup> This providence is transmitted to the sublunary world through a series of intermediaries, such as the celestial spheres and the motions of the sun and moon. However, it is impossible to claim in this context that generation and corruption on earth are the *purpose* of the first unmoved mover, let alone that moral providence or divine justice exists in the sublunary world. Adrastus reflects this view with his assertion that natural realities “follow” an order, but only “by accident”.

This background explains the criticism of Atticus, who equates Aristotle with Epicurus on the grounds that neither of them offers divine care for human affairs, divine justice, or fear of the gods among the wicked.<sup>35</sup> The doctrine Alex-

30 In his *Discourses* 1.12, Epictetus distinguishes five positions on providence. Sharples (2003) identifies them.

31 Cic., *ND* I VIII, 18–20.

32 See Boys-Stones (2018), 324; Burns (2020), 26–30; Chiaradonna (2023), 29–41. A full account of the different nuances in Middle Platonic conceptions of providence—especially in Apuleius and Pseudo-Plutarch—goes beyond the scope of this discussion. On this see Sharples (2003). On Atticus, in particular, who was a proponent of a literal reading of the *Timaeus*, see Michalewski (2024), 46–62. It is perhaps worth outlining here how Atticus portrays Aristotle's cosmology (see Frs. 3.1, 7–11, and 8.12, 2–4 *Des Places*). His interpretation constitutes another version of the broader NSP doctrine. According to Atticus, what defines the Aristotelian cosmos is the absence of governance by a soul, as in Plato's system. Instead, celestial realities are governed by fate, earthly realities by nature and human affairs by reason, prudence and the soul. Atticus distinguishes between a primary (non-psyche) principle, which serves as a source of motion, and nature, which functions as a final (non-animate) cause. Thus, while celestial realities follow a certain order, no divine providence oversees human affairs.

33 SVF I 176 and II 528, 933 and 937. However, the scope of providence remains unclear (i.e. everything including the details or just the main things). On this, see Sharples (2003), 110–112; Algra (2014), 119–126.

34 See Critolaus' arguments on this point (Frs. 12 and 13 W) and Falcon in this volume.

35 Fr. 3.7–10 *Des Places* and Text 22 N in Sharples (2010), 202. See Michalewski (2017) and

ander presents in his treatise (lost in Greek) on *Providence* and in his *Quaestiones* (I 25, II 19 and 21) is a response to Atticus' criticisms and the limitations of the earlier Peripatetic views.<sup>36</sup> Alexander addresses these issues within a purely physical or cosmological framework embedded in a set of theoretical constraints that are distinctively Peripatetic: the heavenly regions do not require providence (as they are eternal and inherently well-ordered),<sup>37</sup> while the sublunary world cannot benefit from providence either primarily (as this would make it the purpose of what is superior to it) or accidentally (as this would no longer constitute providence in the true sense).<sup>38</sup> For Alexander, providence, via the regularity of celestial motion, especially that of the sun, relates only to the sublunary part of the cosmos, insofar as it ensures the reproduction of living species, following *Physics* II 2, 194b13, and does not concern individuals. In this sense, Alexander takes Aristotle to mean that "things here below are not alien to providence" (οὐκ ἀπρονόητα κατ' αὐτὸν τὰ τῆδε).<sup>39</sup>

## 2 *Nicomachean Ethics* III 3

The starting point for Aspasius' development with regard to providence is a passage from *NE* III 3, in which Aristotle examines the types of objects about which there is deliberation (βουλευτόν) and distinguishes between various causes of natural phenomena. It is no surprise, then, that this section sparked discussion during Hellenistic period. The passage reads as follows:

Well, no one deliberates about eternal things, as for example about the universe or about the fact that the diameter and side of a square are incommensurable. But for that matter neither does anyone deliberate about things which involve change, but which always occur in the same pattern, whether from necessity, or also by nature,<sup>40</sup> or through some

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(2024), 58–59. As a rule, Atticus opposes any attempt to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. He therefore emphasises the doctrinal differences between them in every part of their philosophy, particularly ethics. It is therefore as a result of the supposed proximity between Aristotle's ethics and that of Epicurus that Atticus associates the two philosophers.

36 Sharples (1987), 1216, and (2007a), 602; Guyomarc'h (2015), 289–291.

37 *De Providentia* 59.13–63.1; *Quaest.* I 25.41.4–19 and II 19.63.10–15.

38 *De Providentia* 53.1–13 and 63; *Quaest.* II 21.68.19–69.31. On this dilemma, see Sharples (1982), 204–208, and Sharples (2002a), 30.

39 Alexander of Aphrodisias, *In Meteor.* 83.9–9. On the Alexandrian doctrine of providence in a broader context, see Rashed (2007), 294–304, and Rashed (2011), 142–161.

40 The καί (translated by "also") in 112a24 is found only in K<sup>b</sup>, not in Aspasius (71.23) or the *Anonymous Commentary*.

other cause, e.g. turnings and risings of celestial bodies; nor about things that happen sometimes one way, sometimes another, like droughts and rainstorms; nor about things that happen from chance, like discovering a cache of treasure. But there is no deliberation, either, about all human affairs, as for example no Spartan deliberates about how Scythians might best manage themselves politically—for none of these things will come about through our agency. What we do deliberate about are the things that depend on us and are doable, and these are in fact what is left once we have been through the rest. For the causes of things seem to be nature, and necessity, and chance, and then, in addition to these, intelligence and everything that occurs through human agency [...].<sup>41</sup>

The end of the text (1112a31–32) shows that Aristotle proceeds by elimination, drawing from a list of four causes inherited from the tradition:<sup>42</sup> nature, necessity, chance and intellect (and everything that comes from human beings). While the standard lists of causes in Plato's and Aristotle's works typically distinguish between nature, art and chance,<sup>43</sup> the list given here—nature, necessity, chance and intellect (or the human being)—is less common.<sup>44</sup> Notably, Aristotle omits art, but includes intellect, which encompasses all practical and technical human activities. On this basis, he excludes four groups of entities from the scope of deliberation:

Group 1: Eternal beings, exemplified by the world and the incommensurability of the diagonal to the side of a square.

Group 2: Beings in motion that always occur in the same way. Aristotle gives three causes for this type of phenomena: εἴτ' ἐξ ἀνάγκης εἶτε καὶ φύσει ἢ διὰ τινὰ αἰτίαν ἄλλην (1112a24–25). He also lists two examples: the solstices and the rising of the stars.

41 NE III 3, 1112a21–33 (Bywater): περὶ δὴ τῶν αἰδίων οὐδεὶς βουλευέται, οἷον περὶ τοῦ κόσμου ἢ τῆς διαμέτρου καὶ τῆς πλευρᾶς, ὅτι ἀσύμμετροι. ἀλλ' οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν ἐν κινήσει, αἰεὶ δὲ κατὰ ταῦτ' ἀγνομένων, εἴτ' ἐξ ἀνάγκης εἶτε καὶ φύσει ἢ διὰ τινὰ αἰτίαν ἄλλην, οἷον τροπῶν καὶ ἀνατολῶν. οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν ἄλλοτε ἄλλως, οἷον ἀνύχμων καὶ ὄμβρων. οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τύχης, οἷον θησαυροῦ εὐρέσεως. ἀλλ' οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἀπάντων, οἷον πῶς ἂν Σκύθαι ἄριστα πολιτεύοντο οὐδεὶς Λακεδαιμονίων βουλευέται. οὐ γὰρ γένοιτ' ἂν τούτων οὐθὲν δι' ἡμῶν. βουλευόμεθα δὲ περὶ τῶν ἐφ' ἡμῖν καὶ πρακτῶν ταῦτα δὲ καὶ ἔστι λοιπά. αἰτίαι γὰρ δοκοῦσιν εἶναι φύσις καὶ ἀνάγκη καὶ τύχη, ἔτι δὲ νοῦς καὶ πᾶν τὸ δι' ἀνθρώπου. Translation Rowe in Broadie and Rowe (2002) with minor changes.

42 See the δοκοῦσιν (1112a32).

43 Gauthier-Jolif (1970) 199. See Plato, *Laws* x 888e; Aristotle, *Metaph.* VII 7, 1070a6; *Phys.* II 6, 198a9–10; *APo.* II 11, 95a7, etc.

44 See *EE* II 6, 1223a11–13; *Protreptic B* II Düring and somewhat differently *Rhet.* I 10, 1368b32–37.

Group 3: Phenomena that occur irregularly, such as droughts and rains.<sup>45</sup>

Group 4: Events that happen by chance (ἀπὸ τύχης).

What remains is the domain governed by intellect and dependent on human beings, in which Aristotle locates the objects of deliberation. While Aristotle's reasoning is clear and straightforward, it is essential that we delve into the physics or ontology underlying this argument, as this is the aspect that is of particular interest to Aspasius. The relationship between the three causes mentioned at the end of the text (necessity, nature and chance, 112a32) and the four excluded groups of beings is not entirely transparent. The four groups do not correspond directly to the three causes, with two of the three causes being assigned to group 2 (112a24–25): the cause of the first group of entities is unspecified (but is undoubtedly necessity); the second group has at least two causes (necessity and nature), but another unnamed cause (which cannot be chance) is also mentioned; no explicit cause is assigned to the third group (presumably nature); and the fourth group encompasses everything related to chance.

Given Aspasius' focus, the discussion can be narrowed down to the three causes mentioned in the second group: "either by necessity, or also by nature, or by some other kind of cause" (112a24–25). The three words are coordinated (εἴτ' ἐξ ἀνάγκης εἴτε καὶ φύσει ἢ διὰ τινὰ αἰτίαν ἄλλην, 112a24–25), and Aristotle adds an unnamed "other cause". This lack of specificity raises interpretative issues. Notably, Aristotle's statement confirms that all three terms refer to *causes*. Aristotle later reiterates that nature and necessity are among the causes (112a31–32). While Aristotle's definition of nature as a principle and cause is well-established,<sup>46</sup> things are different with necessity. The expression ἐξ ἀνάγκης generally denotes events that "always" occur (the two terms are convertible) and is often contrasted with ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ, which refers to how *natural* phenomena typically occur, rather than a causal explanation.<sup>47</sup> Now, in our text, necessity seems to be understood not as a *modality* according to which phenomena occur, but as a *cause* in its own right. It is placed alongside nature and framed as a distinct causal principle. The phrase concludes with the mention of "some other cause" (διὰ τινὰ αἰτίαν ἄλλην), reinforcing the notion that necessity

45 On the explanation of droughts (when dry exhalation becomes more important than wet exhalation) and rains, see *Meteor.* II 5, 360a33–b26, and 8, 366a33–b14.

46 *Phys.* II 1, 192b20–23.

47 *Phys.* II 5, 196b10–17; *APr.* I 13, 32b9–10; *Metaph.* V 30, 1025a15; *GA* IV 4, 770b10–11; *GC* II 9, 335a34–b4.

is indeed presented as a cause, although Aristotle does not provide a precise definition of it. As we will see, this point is of central importance in Aspasius' commentary.

Before addressing Aspasius, let us examine how commentators have interpreted this passage. Broadly speaking, two main approaches emerge:

(1) The standard interpretation: Modern commentators have generally understood Aristotle to be distinguishing two classes of exclusive phenomena. On the one hand, there are those moved in a necessary manner (i.e. celestial bodies). On the other, there are all *natural* sublunary phenomena, such as the motions of simple bodies and biological phenomena, which occur "most of the time".<sup>48</sup> This interpretation suggests that the four groups excluded from deliberation follow a top-down order, from the outermost to the innermost regions of the cosmos, and from the most necessary to the most random:

Group 1: Eternal and necessary phenomena, such as the world and the properties of mathematical entities.

Group 2.1: Beings always moved in the same way *by necessity*: celestial bodies.

Group 2.2: Beings always moved in the same way *by nature*: sublunary beings.

Group 3: Natural phenomena that occur irregularly, such as droughts and rains.

Group 4: Events that occur by chance.

This interpretation subdivides Group 2 by distinguishing between what belongs to necessity and what belongs to nature. However, it also raises several issues. The two examples provided at 112a25–26 at the end of the description of Group 2 (the solstices and the rising of the stars) do not support this subdivision, since they pertain to astronomical phenomena, even though they are supposed to illustrate all the phenomena in this group. Moreover, as Stewart has noted, necessity and nature are not mutually exclusive in Aristotle's philosophical framework: celestial bodies, whose motions are necessary, also move "according to nature", and necessity is not absent from motions occurring according to nature.<sup>49</sup> Finally, it is false to claim that natural *sublunary* phenomena always occur in the same way, as is required for inclusion in Group 2. Natural phenomena display a regularity that prevents them from fitting neatly into either Group 2 or Group 3. As Aristotle famously states: "Everything that is

48 See Stewart (1892), 253–259; Burnet (1900), 126; Tricot (1959, 1987), 133 n. 2 ad loc. Frede (2020), 474, brings the three causes together by speaking of what is "naturally necessary".

49 See *APo.* II 1, 94b37–95a3, and Stewart's lengthy commentary cited in the previous note. This likely accounts for the  $\kappa\alpha\iota$  in  $K^b$  at 112a24:  $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\tau\epsilon \kappa\alpha\iota \phi\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\epsilon\iota$ .

by nature occurs either always or for the most part.”<sup>50</sup> Yet phenomena occurring “for the most part” are not explicitly accounted for here.

Furthermore, this interpretation largely overlooks the third, unnamed cause mentioned in the passage. Commentators have mostly remained silent on this point. Within an Aristotelian context, this other cause could refer to the separate substance (the prime mover of the motion of the heavenly bodies)<sup>51</sup> or to the matter of celestial bodies (the fifth element or aether). Both interpretations are supported by the astronomical examples at the end of the sentence, but it is unlikely that these two astronomical examples were given by Aristotle to illustrate *only* the last cause left anonymous by Aristotle.

As a result, an alternative reading of this passage emerges. Group 2 likely refers to phenomena that always occur in the same way, specifically all astronomical phenomena. These phenomena are described as occurring “either by necessity, or by nature, or by some other cause”. The “third cause” could plausibly refer to either the prime mover or the material cause of celestial bodies—points on which Aristotle deliberately avoids taking a position in this ethical context. A significant implication of this interpretation is that natural sublunar beings are ultimately excluded from mention in any of the four groups.

(11) A contextual interpretation: In this ethical context, Aristotle may be deliberately refraining from becoming embroiled in a controversy over the precise physical causes of these phenomena. Whether these phenomena are explained by necessity, nature or some other cause is irrelevant for his purposes, as they are excluded from deliberation in any case. The essential point is that no deliberation is possible concerning the uniform motion of celestial bodies, which serves as the paradigmatic case of an eternally moving object. This perspective aligns with the interpretation offered in the *Anonymous Commentary*, which was written after Aspasius. The Anonymous suggests that Aristotle’s primary aim is not to specify the exact causal hierarchy, but to underline the absence of deliberation regarding such phenomena in the context of ethical enquiry.<sup>52</sup>

50 *Phys.* II 8, 198b34–36.

51 This is the solution adopted by Thomas Aquinas, one of the few commentators, to my knowledge, to attempt to identify the unnamed third cause (*Commentary* on Book III, *Lectio* VII, § 461).

52 On the date of the anonymous commentator, see Eliasson (2013), 200, and Natali (2023), 1–4 and 18–20, for a comparison between him and Aspasius. Like Eliasson, I refer to the author of this commentator as “the Anonymous”.

(1) “About eternal things no one deliberates”, e.g. about whether the world or god is or is not, no one in his right mind deliberates, because these things exist always and by necessity, nor [no one deliberates on the fact] that the diameter is incommensurable with the side of a square (for this too is necessary); (2) and [no one deliberates] either “about moving beings”, for these things, without being eternal, always occur in the same way, and they too possess a necessary and definite generation and movement. But, since these things occur according to some, in one way, according to others, in another, and the object was not now to speak of this, he said “by nature or by some other cause.” (3) But there is no deliberation either about things that do not always occur in the same way but most often, by nature, e.g. canities or teething; (4) [no one deliberates] “either about what happens by chance” and rarely, as about the discovery of a treasure (for it was not discovered by prior deliberation), “or about all human things”.<sup>53</sup>

The Anonymous comments on each Aristotelian expression:

Group 1: Necessity is identified as the cause of eternal beings (the world and geometric properties). The Anonymous adds god to this list.

Group 2: He sets apart from the rest of the expression the phrase “either by nature or by some other cause.” His description of the phenomena belonging to this second category is vague, but the entities in question are most likely celestial phenomena—beings that are all in motion yet whose motion exhibits a definite regularity. He explains that this open formulation reflects Aristotle’s indifference, in this context, to giving the correct causality. Since the causes of these phenomena are debated and not the subject of enquiry at this point (οὐκ ἦν δὲ νῦν τὸ προκειμένον), there is no need to investigate what “by nature” means here, nor to identify the “other cause”.

53 *Anonymous commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, CAG XX, 149.14–25: <Περὶ δὲ τῶν αἰδίων οὐδεὶς βουλευέται.> οἷον περὶ τοῦ κόσμου ἢ θεὸν εἶναι ἢ μὴ εἶναι οὐδεὶς νοῦν ἔχων βουλευέται, ὅτι ἔστιν αἰεὶ καὶ ἐξ ἀνάγκης τὰ τοιαῦτα, οὐδὲ ὅτι ἀσύμμετρος ἢ διάμετρος τῇ πλευρᾷ (ἀναγκαῖον γὰρ καὶ τοῦτο), οὔτε <περὶ τῶν ἐν κινήσει.> ταῦτα γὰρ οὐκ αἰεὶ μὲν ἐστὶν ἀλλ’ ὁμοίως γίνεται, καὶ ἀναγκαῖαν καὶ αὐτὰ ὠρισμένην ἔχει τὴν γέννησιν τε καὶ κίνησιν. ἐπεὶ δὲ τινες μὲν οὕτως, τινὲς δὲ ἐκείνως αὐτὰ λέγουσι γίνεσθαι, οὐκ ἦν δὲ νῦν τὸ προκειμένον περὶ τούτων λέγειν, εἶπε τὸ <εἴτε φύσει ἢ δι’ ἄλλην αἰτίαν.> ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν οὐχ ὁμοίως μὲν αἰεὶ γινομένων ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλεῖστον, φύσει δὲ, οἷον τοῦ πολιούσθαι ἢ ὀδοντοφρεῖν, <οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τύχης> καὶ ἐπ’ ἔλαττον, οἷον εὐρέσεως θησαυροῦ (οὐ γὰρ διὰ τὸ προβουλευθῆναι εὐρέθη) <οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπικῶν πάντων.> My translation. I have inserted the numbers.

Group 3: In Group 3 of *NE* III 3, the Anonymous places natural phenomena, things that occur not always in the same way, but most of the time and by nature; he gives the examples of the greying of hair and the growth of teeth.<sup>54</sup>

Group 4: Finally, he also recognises the group of phenomena that occur by chance.

A defining feature of the *Anonymous Commentary* is that Group 2 unifies necessary motions of the heavenly regions, while natural phenomena are assigned to Group 3, with both occurring “by nature”. Furthermore, the Anonymous applies a sound exegetical principle: since the precise explanation of these phenomena falls outside the domain of ethics, there is no need to identify the unnamed third cause. Instead, he views Aristotle’s discussion as a dialectical development, in which various opinions are enumerated without a definitive stance being taken.<sup>55</sup> That is why I call this interpretation contextual. Unlike the Anonymous, Aspasius takes the entire passage seriously, so to speak. I suggest that he has a rather systematic or unified conception of Aristotle’s philosophy, a view likely reinforced by his comprehensive perspective on his entire philosophical system. He adopts a Type I interpretation, but one that diverges from the standard reading.

### 3 Aspasius on *Nicomachean Ethics* III 3

To fully grasp Aspasius’ commentary, we must return to the Greek text. The passage is presented here as it appears in Heylbut’s edition, with section letters added for clarity, followed by my translation (71.16–34):

(71.16) τῶν δὴ πραγμάτων

(71.17: a) τὰ μὲν ἐστὶν αἰδία καὶ αἰεὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχοντα, οἷον ὁ κόσμος· ἀγέννητος γὰρ καὶ αἰδῖος, καὶ ἡ διάμετρος ἀσύμμετρος τῆ τοῦ τετραγώνου πλευρᾶ.

54 This distinction is found in Aspasius (see below p. 277) and has its origins in Aristotle (*EE* I 1, 1214a15–18; II 8, 1224b31–35).

55 This does not prevent the Anonymous from commenting a few lines below on the enumeration of the four causes (1122a32–33). He then specifies (although it may well be a gloss) that “according to these men, what is called fate would belong to nature because what belongs to fate is neither inevitable nor necessary” (εἶη δὲ ἂν καὶ ἡ εἰμαρμένη λεγομένη κατὰ τοῦσδε τοὺς ἄνδρας ὑπὸ τὴν φύσιν. οὐ γὰρ ἀπαράβατον τὸ εἰμαρμένον οὐδ’ ἀναγκαῖον, 150.2–4). On this passage see Sharples (2007a), 596. As Sharples (2007a), 598, notes, Aspasius refers to fate and necessity further on, too. We return to this below p. 282.

περί δὴ τῶν τοιούτων οὐδεις βουλευεται, οὐδὲ πῶς ἂν γένοιτο ἢ διάμετρος σύμμετρος, ἀλλ' εἴπερ ἄρα, ζητεῖ εἰ ἀσύμμετρός ἐστι, βουλευεται δὲ οὐδαμῶς.

(71.20: b) ἄλλα δ' ἐστίν, ἃ οὐκ αἰεὶ μὲν ἐστί, γίνεται δὲ αἰεὶ ὡσαύτως, οἷον ἀνατολὴ ἄστρον καὶ δύσις καὶ τροπαί· τούτων γὰρ οὐδὲν μὲν αἰεὶ ἐστί, γίνεται δὲ ὡσαύτως· οὐδὲ περὶ τῶν τοιούτων βουλή ἐστίν. ἐξ ἀνάγκης δ' εἴτε φύσει ἢ διὰ τινα ἄλλην αἰτίαν τὰ τοιαῦτά φησι γίνεσθαι ὡσαύτως, ἀνάγκην λέγων οὐ τὴν βιαστικήν· οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ βία γίνεται· ἀλλ' ἀνάγκην ὠνόμακε τὴν πρόνοιαν τοῦ αἰεὶ ὡσαύτως κινούντος διὰ τὸ πάντη πάντως κινεῖν καὶ μηδέποτε ἄλλως ἐνδέχεσθαι. ἀναγκαῖον γὰρ λέγεται τὸ μὴ ἐνδεχόμενον ἄλλως ἔχειν. τῇ τοιαύτῃ γοῦν ἀνάγκῃ αἰ κινήσεις τῶν ἄστρον καὶ αἰ ἀνατολαὶ δύσεις καὶ τροπαὶ ἢ φύσει ἢ κατὰ φύσιν· κατὰ φύσιν γὰρ κινεῖται τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἢ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις τῇ γὰρ φύσει τῶν φερομένων συμφωνοτάτη ἐστίν ἢ τοῦ κινούντος πρόνοια.

(71.31: c) ἔνια δὲ ἐστίν ἃ γίνεται μὲν κατὰ φύσιν, ἀτακτοτέραν δέ, οἷον αὐχμοὶ καὶ ὄμβροι. οὐδὲ περὶ τούτων βουλεύονται ἄνθρωποι.

(71.32: d) ἄλλα δὲ ἐστίν ἃ ὡς ἔτυχε συμβαίνει, οἷον τὰ ἀπὸ τύχης· δηλον δὴ ὅτι οὐδὲ περὶ τούτων εἰσὶ βουλαί· οὐδεις γὰρ βουλευεται περὶ θησαυροῦ εὐρέσεως.

Among things,

- (a) some are eternal and are always the same, like the world (indeed, it is ungenerated and eternal) and the diameter incommensurable with the side of the square; no one deliberates about this kind of thing, nor how the diameter would be commensurable, but if it is true that the geometer makes something, he investigates whether it is incommensurable, but he in no way deliberates.
- (b) But there are other things which, without being eternal, always occur in the same way, such as the rising and setting of the stars and the solstices (indeed, none of these things are eternal, but they eternally occur in the same way); nor is there any deliberation about them. He says that it is “by necessity or by nature or by some other cause” that these kinds of things occur in the same way, by “necessity” he means not forcible necessity (indeed, none of the things in the heavens occur by force) but he has called “necessity” the providence of that which always moves in the same way by the fact that it moves absolutely, i.e. it is not possible for it ever to do anything else (for that is said to be necessary which cannot be otherwise). It is therefore by such a necessity that [occur] the motions of the stars (sunrises, sunsets, and solstices) either by nature or according to nature (for the things in the heavens move according to nature)

or also by both<sup>56</sup> (for the providence of what moves is perfectly in harmony with the nature of the things transported).

- (c) But there are certain things which, while occurring according to nature, occur according to a more disorderly nature, such as droughts and storms. Human beings do not deliberate on these things either.<sup>57</sup>
- (d) But certain things happen as they happen, such as things that happen by chance. There is obviously no deliberation about this either, because nobody deliberates about the discovery of a treasure.

Aspasius gives a linear commentary on Aristotle's text, closely following its structure. It identifies and comments on the four *NE* III 3 groups. He adds parenthetical explanatory clauses with γάρ, he clarifies Aristotle's statement on the eternity of the world (explaining that it is "ungenerated")<sup>58</sup> and he differentiates between deliberation and investigation in the case of the geometer. Most notably, Aspasius highlights the ontological framework underpinning Aristotle's argument. He elucidates the underlying reasoning by showing that Aristotle distinguishes between things based on two key variables: (1) whether they are eternal or not; (2) whether they always behave in the same way or not. The distinction between these two criteria lies in the fact that ungenerated beings (e.g. the world itself and mathematical entities) are eternal, whereas astronomical motions, while not identical and eternal in themselves, nonetheless always occur in the same way (e.g. the rising of the stars). Aspasius approaches the text in a different way than the Anonymous, interpreting it within what he perceives as its physical (or cosmological) and metaphysical framework, drawing on *De caelo*, the *Meteorologica* and the *Metaphysics*. As will be seen, Aspasius does not treat ethics in isolation from the rest of the corpus; instead, he draws on

56 Konstan has suggested a correction to Heylbut's text, taken up by Sharples (Konstan 2006, 72, 194 n. 153, and Sharples 2010, 200): ἡ φύσει is added in line 28 to justify the ἡ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις in line 30. The text then reads: κατὰ φύσιν <ἡ φύσει> γὰρ κινεῖται τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἡ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις. This insertion is not required. As I read it, this proposition is a parenthetical clause that justifies the introduction of the κατὰ φύσιν just before it; and the phrase ἡ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις does not designate the pair "by nature" and "according to nature" but "by nature" (or "according to nature") and "by necessity". I will return to this point below.

57 Reading ἀτακτοτέρων (71.31) *pace* Konstan (xiii and n. 154).

58 "Ungenerated" is to be taken in its strict sense as defined in *DC* I 11, as that from which it is impossible for there to be generation (280b11–12; I 12, 282a27–28). See also *NE* VI 3, 1139b24 (eternal beings are ungenerated and incorruptible). Since the world is ungenerated, there can be no deliberation about it—and therefore no providence, if providence presupposes prior deliberation. The Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the world makes providence impossible on principle.

his expertise as a commentator on Aristotle's physics and metaphysics to elucidate this text. There is, for example, a close parallel between his commentary and *Metaphysics* VI 2, 1026b27–31.<sup>59</sup>

Since, among things which are, some are always in the same state and are of necessity (nor necessity in the sense of compulsion but that which means the impossibility of being otherwise), and some are not of necessity nor always, but for the most part, this is the principle and this the cause of the existence of the accidental [...].<sup>60</sup>

His most extensive commentary focuses on the second group of phenomena (70.23–31, my (b) above), corresponding to Aristotle's discussion of Group 2 in *NE* III 3. This analysis leads to a cosmological and theological excursus, in which Aspasius references providence twice. In examining this passage, I will distinguish three key points: (1) the interpretation of necessity as providence of the prime mover; (2) the distinction between “by nature” and “according to nature”; and (3) the meaning of the harmony between the prime mover and the nature of the celestial bodies moved.

### 3.1 *Necessity as Providence of the Prime Mover*

Lines 23–31 of Aspasius' commentary focus on the three causes mentioned in *NE* III 3, 112a24–25: there is no deliberation about the motion of celestial bodies, for they occur “by necessity, by nature, or by some other cause”. Aspasius begins by clarifying the meaning of necessity. Unlike the Anonymous, who associates necessity with the world or geometrical properties, Aspasius links it specifically to the motions of celestial bodies, which occur eternally in the same manner. This interpretation is grounded in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where everything that is “by necessity” is also “eternal”.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Aspasius had already noted earlier in his commentary that celestial bodies move “by necessity”.<sup>62</sup> Yet Aspasius' interpretation here contains an important nuance:

59 *Metaph.* VI 2, 1026b27–31 (Ross): ἐπει οὖν ἐστὶν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς τὰ μὲν αἰεὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχοντα καὶ ἐξ ἀνάγκης, οὐ τῆς κατὰ τὸ βίαιον λεγομένης ἀλλ' ἢν' λέγομεν τῶ μὴ ἐνδέχασθαι ἄλλως, τὰ δ' ἐξ ἀνάγκης μὲν οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδ' αἰεὶ, ὡς δ' ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ, αὕτη ἀρχὴ καὶ αὕτη αἰτία ἐστὶ τοῦ εἶναι τὸ συμβεβηκός. See also *Metaph.* X 8, 1064b32–36.

60 Translation Ross in Barnes (1984).

61 *NE* VI 3, 1139b23–25.

62 On a subject far removed from cosmology, Aspasius writes (26.6–11): “the things that result from nature and art and similarly also those that result from necessity, such as the things that are in the heavens (<τὰ> κατὰ ἀνάγκην, οἷον τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ), these things are all the most excellent they can be.”

necessity is not only the modality of eternal beings' motions, but also an independent causal principle on a par with nature. As we saw above, Aristotle's wording permits this reading. Thus, Aspasius' interpretations can be explained as follows: Aspasius, building on Aristotle's formulation that equates necessity with a cause, and no doubt under pressure from Stoicism, which makes necessity one of Zeus' names, elevates necessity from a modality to an autonomous causal principle governing the necessary motions of celestial bodies.<sup>63</sup> As we will see, this interpretation also echoes Aristotle's description of the prime mover in *Metaphysics* XII 7, and we can assume that Aspasius relies on it. However, within the Aristotelian framework, it must be stressed that necessity is *not* a metaphysical principle. Strangely enough, Aspasius' recourse to providence serves to clarify how necessity operates as a causal principle.

Aspasius' explanation addresses an exegetical challenge. He takes Aristotle's threefold causal distinction in 1112a24–25 seriously and does not follow the Anonymous' deflationary approach, which treats Aristotle's formulation as noncommittal in an ethical context. Instead, Aspasius assumes that Aristotle's thought possesses a systematic unity, or, at the very least, he works with a unitary conception of the Aristotelian thought, interpreting passages in the *NE* through the lens of physics and metaphysics.<sup>64</sup> However, if, following Aspasius, necessity is to be understood as a distinct causal principle, its precise nature must be clarified, as, according to Aristotle, necessity is not the cause of the heavenly bodies' motions. In *De caelo*, Aristotle emphatically explains that the circular motion of the heavens and celestial bodies is "by nature" or "according to nature" and not "by force" (βία).<sup>65</sup> If Aristotle affirms in *NE* III 3 that celestial bodies move by necessity, then necessity cannot be a force that constrains them from outside. That is the reason why, as in the passage quoted above from *Metaphysics* VI 2, Aspasius specifies that this is not a coercive necessity (βίαστικ-

63 SVF II 913 and 937; Cicero, *ND* I 39; see also Cicero, *Academica* I 6.29 and Kupreeva (2016) 141–142. On the polynomy of the Stoic god, see Diogenes Laertius VII, 135.9–136.1 (SVF I 580). Similarly, in chapter 7 of *De mundo* (401b8), necessity is one of the names of god, insofar as god is a cause that cannot be defeated (ἀνίκητον αἰτίαν ὄντα, 401b9).

64 Aspasius knows that the discussion of physical difficulties has no place in ethics. See 160.24–26, his commentary on *NE* VIII 1, 1155b8–10, on the difference between ethical and physical difficulties. But here we are dealing with a physical issue (the cause of celestial phenomena), not an ethical one. It is therefore legitimate to have recourse to texts from outside ethics.

65 See *DC* I 2, 268b15–16, 269a5–9, 269b1–2; II 1, 281a18–35; II 3, 286a12, 16–17; II 7, 289a16; II 12, 293a9.

κίνη, 71.24):<sup>66</sup> celestial motion does not result from external force.<sup>67</sup> By pointing out the dual meaning of necessity, a distinction frequently made in Aristotle, Aspasius references one of the central claims of the *De caelo*. There, Aristotle argues that celestial bodies are moved neither by external compulsion nor by a soul (not even their own soul) exerting force upon them, but rather by their own nature—the nature of the aether.<sup>68</sup>

Now, instead of referring to it simply as necessity (a not forcible necessity), Aspasius calls it providence (*pronoia*), explicitly claiming that what Aristotle calls necessity is “the *pronoia* of that which always moves in the same way” (ἀνάγκη ὡνόμαξε τὴν πρόνοιαν τοῦ αἰεὶ ὡσαύτως κινούντος, 71.25–26). Aspasius behaves like a true commentator;<sup>69</sup> he clarifies Aristotle’s terminology, replacing necessity with what he considers a clearer term, providence, and then explaining this name: “Aristotle has called necessity the providence of what moves always in the same way, because it moves absolutely and can never do otherwise” (διὰ τὸ πάντῃ πάντως κινεῖν καὶ μηδέποτε ἄλλως ἐνδέχασθαι, 71.26–27).<sup>70</sup> The defining characteristic of *pronoia* is that it cannot do anything other than move eternally in a certain way. So, providence, in this context, is best understood as the outcome of two intersecting interpretive moves: (i) necessity is not an external compulsion; admittedly, Aspasius retains an Aristotelian modal understanding of necessity, as that which “cannot be otherwise”; yet, following Aristotle’s suggestion in *NE* III 3, he interprets necessity by giving it a strong causal status; thus, necessity is the cause of what cannot be otherwise. (ii) The point is that such a necessity taken as a moving cause does not correspond to any principle formally recognised within Aristotle’s theory;

66 Aspasius defines force as a principle of external or unnatural motion (59.30–60.10) in his commentary on *NE* III 1, 1109b30–111b3. The adjective βιαστικός is of Platonic origin. It occurs in Aristotle (*Top.* I 12, 105a18; *PA* II 9, 655a12, and III 1, 662b3; *MA* 10, 703a22) and the Stoics (SVF II 976 = Aëtius I 27.3) in a definition attributed to Chrysippus: “they say that necessity is an immobile and constraining cause.”

67 Aspasius does not distinguish here between all the meanings of the necessary. Given the context, he draws a contrast between “necessary” in the sense of external constraint and “necessary” as that which cannot be otherwise, without mentioning conditional necessity. For the latter sense, see, e.g., *PA* I 1, 639b21–24.

68 See the criticism of the explanation of the motion of celestial bodies by necessity in *DC* II 1, 284a15 (the heavens do not need a “forceful necessity”—βιαίας ἀνάγκης) and 284a18–35. The positions criticised are those of the ancient poets (Atlas), Empedocles, the atomists and Plato. On the double meaning of necessity (according to nature and against tendency), see *APo.* II 11, 94b37–95a3; *Metaph.* v 5, 1015a26–31 and 1015a34.

69 See also 53.11, 104.24, etc.

70 The phrase πάντῃ πάντως is an emphatic formula used by Plato, which was later adopted by Aristotle and Alexander.

this leads Aspasius to claim that what Aristotle calls here “necessity” actually is the providence of what moves always in the same way—that is, though Aspasius does not make it explicit, the providence of the first unmoved mover. Put briefly, the first unmoved mover causes the heavenly bodies to move necessarily, and Aspasius chooses to name this causal role its providence.

These two occurrences of *pronoia* (71.26 and 71.31) are the only ones in Aspasius’ commentary. He does not use either the noun or verb elsewhere. The term *pronoia* is primarily associated with human foresight. As Mayhew correctly notes, it signifies “the ability to know the future and to what that knowledge makes possible: a long-range concern for and care of the objects of this knowledge”.<sup>71</sup> This creates an apparent tension: if something is necessary and eternal (as the prime mover), how can it exercise *pronoia* over something equally necessary and eternal (as the world)? There can be no form of anteriority, foresight or deliberation on the part of the mover about what it moves. Similarly, if this providence is synonymous with necessity, the mover cannot possess the slightest dimension of contingency, unlike the notion of providence (if deliberation presupposes that the god is thinking about the best way to create the world). Since, for Aristotle, the causality of the prime mover is not artisanal causation, it must be some other form of providence. Rather than denoting intentional governance, *pronoia* expresses the absolute, unchanging causal role of the prime mover; what is “providential” is the unwavering necessity of the motion moved by the first unmoved mover.

The use of *pronoia* raises both a translation issue and a more fundamental issue regarding its application, as the usual notion of providence suggests more than what Aspasius intends—namely to confer necessity on the motion of the moved.<sup>72</sup> Instead of attempting to find a new, more appropriate translation of *pronoia*, it is better to refine our (traditional) understanding of providence, viewing it as the ultimate principle of a good for something, where the “good” in this case is the necessity or eternity of the motion of the mover. Boys-Stones explains that Platonists like Atticus criticise Aristotle not for the meaning he assigns to providence, but for the limited scope of its application: for the Peripatetics, providence is not care for human beings. That said, a broader concept of *pronoia* seems to have been shared by both the Middle Platonists and the Aristotelians. According to this general notion, providence is the impersonal

71 Mayhew (Forthcoming), n. 8, and Fazzo (1999), 26–31.

72 See Sharples (2002a), 30. It is preferable to retain the translation “providence” rather than adapting it to the context, as Longpré, for instance, does (1997), 63: she renders it in French as “caractère prévisible”, because she insists that the motion produced by the prime mover is predictable, since it is necessary.

principle of benefit.<sup>73</sup> It is in this sense that we must interpret the *pronoia* of the mover: it does not imply foresight or even attention on the part of the mover toward the moved. The use of the term *pronoia* therefore suggests that what the mover does (i.e. moving necessarily) provides non-intentional benefit to what is moved. In an Aristotelian context, it would be inconceivable to attribute intention or concern to the prime mover, but such an attribution is not directly implied by Aspasius. What he conveys is that the *pronoia* of the mover guarantees the necessity and eternity of the motion of the moved. This does not mean that the mover has an intention or purpose. By using the term “providence”, Aspasius refers to what the mover does well in relation to the moved.

But we can go further. The term *pronoia* remains relevant because the mover has ontological rather than chronological priority over the moved. If the providence of the mover guarantees the eternity and necessity of the motions of celestial bodies, then what is called the “mover” is not the first moved (i.e. the first heavens), but the first unmoved mover. In Aristotle, the prime mover is, in fact, distinguished by its necessity, among other characteristics. Another passage from the *Metaphysics* might provide the basis for Aspasius’ comment. In *Metaphysics* XII 7, while examining the relationship between the prime mover and the first moved, Aristotle states:

Now if something is moved, it can also be otherwise than it is, so that the primary motion is indeed in actuality, in that it is moved; but in this way it can be otherwise—i.e. in respect of place—even though it cannot be otherwise in respect of substance. But since there is something which causes motion but is itself unmoved, and which exists in actuality, this thing cannot in any way be otherwise. For locomotion is the first of the kinds of change, and of this the first kind is locomotion in a circle; and this is the motion which this [the first mover] causes. It exists, then, of necessity; and inasmuch as it exists of necessity, it does so well, and in this way it is a principle. For the necessary is spoken of in this number of ways: that which is by force, because it is contrary to impulse; that without which things are not good; that which cannot be otherwise, but is necessary without qualification. On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and nature.<sup>74</sup>

73 Boys-Stones (2018), 324: “The question of whether god can be provident (insofar as that is not just a question about terminology) is quite distinct from the question of whether he is a ‘personal’ or ‘impersonal’ principle. To be ‘provident’, as far as this goes, may require no more than to be the ultimate source of *benefit*—as Aristotle’s first unmoved mover is.”

74 *Metaph.* XII 7, 1072b4–14: εἰ μὲν οὖν τι κινεῖται, ἐνδέχεται καὶ ἄλλως ἔχειν· ὥστ’ ἡ φορὰ ἢ πρώτη

Aristotle defines the prime mover in terms of its necessity. As an immaterial, pure actuality, it cannot be otherwise than it is: it is absolutely necessary. The first moved differs from the prime mover in that, while it cannot be otherwise in substance (as it is ungenerated and incorruptible), it is still capable of being moved. From a spatial standpoint, the first moved possesses a potentiality that prevents it from being absolutely necessary. In contrast, the unmoved mover is absolutely necessary in both substance and place, as it is immaterial. The prime mover causes the first moved to move eternally in a circular motion, which aligns with Aspasius' use of "ὡσαύτως" (71.21, 22, 26).

Although Aspasius in this passage does not engage with the speculative depths of *Metaphysics* XII 7, his commentary on *NE* III 3 accords with the conception of the prime mover as necessity.<sup>75</sup> Both texts present the prime mover as necessary, or as necessity itself, eternally conferring on the first moved a circular motion. The first moved is not, however, necessary in the same way as the prime mover. This distinction implies that the prime mover has ontological priority, as pure actuality, and allows for a providential dimension in its relationship to the first moved.<sup>76</sup>

This passage from *Metaphysics* XII 7 also clarifies another aspect of Aspasius' commentary. As it will be seen, Aspasius emphasises the "harmony" between the *pronoia* of the prime mover and the "nature" of the celestial bodies (συμφωνοτάτη, 71.30–31). One could infer that this "harmony" points to the ontological proximity between the prime mover and the first moved: the prime mover has

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καὶ ἐνεργεῖα ἐστὶν ἢ κινεῖται· ταύτη δὲ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν, κατὰ τόπον, καὶ εἰ μὴ κατ' οὐσίαν· ἐπεὶ δὲ ἔστι τι κινουὺν αὐτὸ ἀκίνητον ὄν, ἐνεργεῖα ὄν, τοῦτο οὐκ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν οὐδαμῶς. φορὰ γὰρ ἢ πρώτη τῶν μεταβολῶν, ταύτης δὲ ἢ κύκλω· ταύτην δὲ τοῦτο κινεῖ. ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἄρα ἐστὶν ὄν· καὶ ἢ ἀνάγκη, καλῶς, καὶ οὕτως ἀρχή. τὸ γὰρ ἀναγκαῖον τοσαυταχῶς, τὸ μὲν βίβη ὅτι παρὰ τὴν ὀρμὴν, τὸ δὲ οὐ οὐκ ἄνευ τὸ εὖ, τὸ δὲ μὴ ἐνδεχόμενον ἄλλως ἀλλ' ἀπλῶς.—ἐκ τοιαύτης ἄρα ἀρχῆς ἤρτηται ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ φύσις. Translation and Greek text by Judson (2019). I understand that the prime mover assumes the third sense of necessity (τὸ δὲ μὴ ἐνδεχόμενον ἄλλως ἀλλ' ἀπλῶς, 1072b13). See also Baghdassarian (2019), 260.

75 As said above, it is known from Alexander's references in his *Commentary* that Aspasius composed a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (cf. 41.27, 59.6, 379.3). For pedagogical reasons, Aspasius does not employ technical ontological terminology. See Barnes (1999), 24–27, on Aspasius' work as a "beginner's" commentary that does not presuppose "background knowledge". Moreover, according to Aspasius (1.8), ethics is prior to first philosophy in the order of knowledge. Any explicit reference to first philosophy or theology would therefore be premature.

76 See also *Metaph.* IX 8, 1050b18–19. We cannot discuss here (*a fortiori* on the basis of this passage from Aspasius alone) the problem of how that which is in potential (as celestial bodies are) is also eternal and endowed with eternal motion. See, e.g., Frey (2015). In any case, Aspasius assumes that the nature of the prime mover alone does not allow it to move eternally and necessarily.

no potentiality or matter, which makes it absolutely necessary, while the first moved can be moved with a circular motion, but only possesses “local matter”.<sup>77</sup> This point will be considered in more detail. Building on these similarities, it can be assumed that Aspasius retains an Aristotelian cosmological framework that accounts for the motion of celestial bodies through a twofold causal scheme: (i) the specific nature of the celestial bodies, i.e. the fifth element or aether (although neither these terms is used in this ethical context), and (ii) the prime mover. Against Xenarchus, but like Adrastus, Aspasius would therefore remain a proponent of the doctrine of the fifth element.<sup>78</sup>

Regarding the celestial bodies, Aspasius’ commentary stays within the limits outlined in *NE* III 3, referring only to the rising and setting of the stars and the solstices. It can be assumed that this refers primarily to the motions of the sun and moon. Although Aspasius mentions “the things in the heavens” (71.25, 29), he does not specifically address the prime mover or the celestial spheres, suggesting that he views the providence of the prime mover as extending, through intermediaries, across the entire heavens, *reaching as far as the moon*.<sup>79</sup> However, he does not specify where providence ends, and further clarification may come later in the text.

Aspasius’ strategy in this passage appears to involve focusing on the interpretation of “necessity”, which plays a key role in the various doctrines underlying his commentary. (1) By distinguishing in a typically Aristotelian fashion between necessity and force, Aspasius aims to avoid attributing to Aristotle the idea that the motion of celestial bodies results from an external force, which would imply motion against nature. This distinction allows Aspasius to emphasise that what is “by necessity” is also “according to nature” (71.29–31), distancing his account from atomist positions, as well as from interpretations that align with Empedoclean or Platonic conceptions criticised by Aristotle in *De caelo* II 1. This accounts Aspasius’ later insistence that what is “by necessity” is also “according to nature” (71.29–31). (2) Necessity also plays a role in Middle Platonism. According to the dualistic exposition of principles found in *Timaeus* 48a, it is one of the two principles (along with reason) responsible for the creation of the cosmos. Although this understanding of necessity differs from that of Aristotle, Aspasius’ clarifications and his use of the term

77 *Metaph.* VIII 1, 1042b6, 4, 1044b8, and IX 8, 1050b20–24.

78 See Petrucci (2015), 196 n. 75. Barnes (1999), 8, emphasises the orthodoxy of Aspasius’ Aristotelianism. See Falcon (2012), 35–36, on Xenarchus’ critique and his own explanation of the motions of the heavens.

79 The description given by Boys-Stones (2018), 325–326, of a “providence exercised by proxy” from the prime mover to the sphere of the moon fits perfectly here.

*pronoia* may represent an attempt to distance himself from the Middle Platonic position.<sup>80</sup> (3) Moreover, by interpreting necessity as the providence of the prime mover, Aspasius comes close to a Stoic conception, in which necessity and providence are interchangeable names for Zeus.<sup>81</sup> However, necessity is seen here as a principle that sets heavenly bodies in motion according to their nature, meaning that the scope of Peripatetic providence is much narrower than that of Stoic providence. Nevertheless, Aspasius makes clear that providence is not exclusively Stoic, agreeing on this point with Middle Platonists such as Atticus.<sup>82</sup> (4) Finally, Aspasius emphasises that the motion of celestial bodies is not self-sufficient, but requires a cause. Indeed, Aspasius wants to show that the fact that the Aristotelian cosmos is eternal (he has just said that it is ungenerated, 71.17–18) does not mean that it does not need a first principle. For Aspasius, as for Aristotle, eternal motion still requires an absolutely necessary first principle.<sup>83</sup> Even in a non-creationist cosmology, providence guarantees the necessity and eternity of the motions of celestial bodies. To this extent, the supralunary world needs providence. The prime mover assumes the role of a demiurge, much like the demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus* (41b2–6), ensuring the eternity of the world.<sup>84</sup> According to Aspasius, there is, therefore, a Peripatetic providence that is not that of the craftsman who creates the world in time and takes care of his work, but rather that of the prime unmoved mover who guarantees the necessity and eternity of movement and, in this, ensures its good. This seems to be the strategy behind the interpretation that the necessity that causes the eternal motion of the stars is the providence of the prime mover.

The paradoxical aspect of Aspasius' passage lies in the introduction of providence as necessity in the context of a discussion on deliberation. While Plato's *Timaeus* maintains that providence includes deliberation, Aspasius clearly indicates that the providence he describes does not involve deliberation, as the world is eternal and ungenerated. It is noteworthy that Aspasius does not develop this aspect further, even though the absence of deliberation about the

80 Atticus refers to the necessity that would have "forced" the divine designs in Fr. 4. 16 Des Places. For the dualistic interpretation of the *Timaeus* principles in Atticus and Plutarch, see Michalewski (2024), 118–128.

81 See above n. 63.

82 On the "polemical resemantization" against an agonistic philosophical background, see Annas (1990), 81, and Bonazzi (2007), 126.

83 See Judson (2019), 227, and *Metaph.* IX 8, 1050b18–19.

84 On the contrary, Atticus argues that providence exists only for a created world. See Michalewski (2024), 47–48. On a non-literal reading of the *Timaeus*, such as Taurus' interpretation, to say that the world is generated is to say that it depends ontologically on a principle (Michalewski 2024, 70–71).

world suggests a different conception of providence than what might be expected from a god reasoning about what is best for the world.<sup>85</sup>

### 3.2 “By Nature” and “According to Nature”

The providence of the prime mover does not simply cause motion, but moves necessarily and ensures the necessity and eternity of the circular motion. This passage addresses the objection that the heavenly regions do not require *pro-noia*. In line with the argument in *Metaphysics* XII 7, Aspasius demonstrates a lack of necessity in the motion of the sphere of the fixed stars while the prime mover is necessarily, the outmost sphere, as it is moving, can be otherwise than it is with respect to place; it therefore requires an absolutely necessary being.

The following sentence clarifies how this providence operates: τῆ τοιαύτῃ γούν ἀνάγκῃ αἱ κινήσεις τῶν ἄστρων καὶ αἱ ἀνατολαὶ καὶ δύσεις καὶ τροπαὶ ἢ φύσει ἢ κατὰ φύσιν (71.28–29). Aspasius coordinates the two types of causality that Aristotle distinguished in *NE* III 3: while Aristotle writes “necessity or nature” (1112a24–25), Aspasius shows that celestial bodies are moved by both. It is through the providence of the prime mover that the motions of the stars occur. Aspasius identifies three types of motions using examples: the rising, the setting and the solstices of the celestial bodies (such as the sun and moon). The conclusion of the sentence specifies that these motions occur “either by nature or according to nature” (ἢ φύσει ἢ κατὰ φύσιν, 71.29). This implies that what is “by nature” or “according to nature” is also by necessity. Thus, the causality of nature is coordinated with the absolute necessity of the prime mover. We have to understand that, in reality, there is only one cause, not two or three, as presented in Aristotle’s passage. The three alternative causes in *NE* III 3 are replaced by the coordination of nature with necessity alone, i.e. with the providence of the prime mover.<sup>86</sup> Through this exegetical and philosophical move, Aspasius explicitly links together causes that Aristotle had distin-

85 Does the claim we find in *NE* III 3 to the effect that there is no deliberation about the world because it is eternal have an anti-Platonic meaning for Aristotle? The Anonymous is sensitive to this dimension, claiming that the gods do not deliberate about what they do because there is no deliberation of what there is science of, yet the gods have the science of what they do (*Anonymous commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, 150.8–9).

86 Sharples (2010), 200 n. 15, rightly states that “Aristotle in fact treats necessity, nature and some other cause as three co-ordinate possibilities. But the sequel shows that Aspasius treats the second and third as two alternative explanations of the first.” It is questionable whether Aspasius identifies the unnamed third cause of *NE* III 3. In the following passage, he states that there is no cause other than necessity and nature. If there is a third cause, then it must be “according to nature”, but Aspasius himself makes no distinction here between “by nature” and “according to nature.”

guished, subordinating nature to necessity. Aspasius thus seems to erase or reduce the distinction between heavens and nature, as noted at the end of the passage from *Metaphysics* XII 7: “On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and nature” (1072b13–14).

Unlike modern commentators, Aspasius finds no room for biological phenomena in Aristotle’s typology from *NE* III 3, i.e. for those things that Aristotle believes occur “most often”: what occurs “by nature or according to nature” are the motions of the heavenly bodies, *not natural phenomena*. Aspasius’ commentary is limited to the heavenly regions or sublunar meteorological phenomena. In the context of Aristotle’s discussion on the objects of deliberation in *NE* III 3, however, Aspasius’ exclusion of sublunary biological phenomena is problematic, as we do not deliberate about natural phenomena like the growth of teeth or hair.

Aspasius makes a seemingly puzzling distinction, at first glance, between “by nature” and “according to nature”. We must now return to the tricky part of this digression. Heylbut’s text reads as follows:

τῇ τοιαύτῃ γοῦν ἀνάγκῃ αἱ κινήσεις τῶν ἄστρον καὶ αἱ ἀνατολαὶ δύσεις καὶ τροπαὶ ἢ φύσει ἢ κατὰ φύσιν· κατὰ φύσιν γὰρ κινεῖται τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἢ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις· τῇ γὰρ φύσει τῶν φερομένων συμφωνοτάτη ἐστὶν ἢ τοῦ κινούντος πρόνοια. (71.28–31)

Aspasius argues that if the motions of the stars occur “by nature” or “according to nature,” it is due to necessity as it has been defined—not as an external force, but as the necessity of what cannot be otherwise (τῇ τοιαύτῃ [...] ἀνάγκῃ). As we have seen, this implies that, for Aspasius, there are not two coordinated causes, but only one: necessity. But what exactly does the distinction introduced here by Aspasius between φύσει and κατὰ φύσιν signify? This legitimate question is further complicated by Konstan’s emendation, which introduces an additional ἢ φύσει to account for ἢ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις. The resulting text and translation read as follows:

τῇ τοιαύτῃ γοῦν ἀνάγκῃ αἱ κινήσεις τῶν ἄστρον καὶ αἱ ἀνατολαὶ καὶ δύσεις καὶ τροπαὶ ἢ φύσει ἢ κατὰ φύσιν· κατὰ φύσιν γὰρ (<ἢ φύσει>) κινεῖται τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἢ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις· τῇ γὰρ φύσει τῶν φερομένων συμφωνοτάτη ἐστὶν ἢ τοῦ κινούντος πρόνοια. (71.28–31)

By such a necessity, surely, occur the motions of the stars and their risings and settings and turnings, whether by nature or in accord with nature. For the things in the heavens move in accord with nature [or by nature] or

even by both. For the providence of the one that moves them is entirely in harmony with the nature of the things that are borne along. (Transl. Konstan)

In the passage reproduced above, I have enclosed in square brackets the addition proposed by Konstan in line 29.<sup>87</sup> Since Aspasius distinguishes two modes of natural causality and concludes with ἢ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις, Konstan inferred that a missing ἢ φύσει should be restored in the second part of the sentence. The overall meaning would then be: “It is thus by such necessity that the motions of the stars [occur], either by nature or according to nature; celestial bodies move according to nature, by nature, or by both.” If we adopt this correction, we might also modify ἀμφοτέροις to ἀμφοτέρως. However, this does not resolve the issue of the distinction between φύσει and κατὰ φύσιν. That said, this difficulty disappears if we arrange the passage as I proposed:

τῇ τοιαύτῃ γοῦν ἀνάγκῃ αἱ κινήσεις τῶν ἄστρον καὶ αἱ ἀνατολαὶ δύσεις καὶ τροπαὶ ἢ φύσει ἢ κατὰ φύσιν (κατὰ φύσιν γὰρ κινεῖται τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ) ἢ καὶ ἀμφοτέροις (τῇ γὰρ φύσει τῶν φερομένων συμφωνοτάτη ἐστὶν ἢ τοῦ κινουόντος πρόνοια). (71.28–31)

It is therefore by such a necessity that the motions of the stars (sunrises, sunsets, and solstices) [occur] either by nature or according to nature (for the things in the heavens move according to nature) or also by both (for the providence of what moves is perfectly in harmony with the nature of the things transported). (My translation)

When the passage is punctuated in this way, Aspasius’ reasoning becomes clearer: the motions of celestial bodies occur by necessity, understood in this specific sense. Following Aristotle’s text in *NE* III 3, Aspasius then adds “or by nature or according to nature”. However, to justify this last addition—“or according to nature”—which does not appear in Aristotle’s original text, he reiterates that celestial bodies move “according to nature” (a point already mentioned in 71.25). The key element of Aspasius’ thesis follows: he asserts that the motion of celestial bodies takes place ἀμφοτέροις, meaning both under the effect of necessity and by nature. The subsequent explanatory sentence (71.30–31) leaves no doubt about the meaning of ἀμφοτέροις: to say that celestial bodies move “by nature”, “according to nature”, or by necessity (understood in this

87 There is nothing in Heylbut’s apparatus.

way) amounts to the same thing. This is because necessity—identified with the providence of the prime mover—is “entirely in harmony with the nature of the bodies moved” (i.e. the nature of celestial bodies). Due to this harmony, there is ultimately no distinction between saying that celestial bodies move *by their nature* or by necessity. I will return to the significance of this “harmony” later.

For now, let us examine how Aspasius interprets the pair of terms “by nature” and “according to nature”. In *Physics* II 1, Aristotle writes: “So we have explained what nature is and what is by nature and according to nature.”<sup>88</sup> While Aristotle never explicitly clarified the distinction,<sup>89</sup> later commentators, such as Alexander, Themistius and Simplicius, showed increasing interest in it.<sup>90</sup> Aspasius himself provides a detailed discussion on the meaning of “by nature” in his commentary on *NE* II 1, 1103a18–26, where he identifies four distinct meanings:

In order that it may become clear in what sense he says that they do not occur by nature, one must distinguish the several senses in which “by nature” is said.

- (i) For those things are said to exist by nature that are always co-present, for example everything heavy is said to be constituted by nature to be borne downwards and every light thing upwards.
- (ii) In another way, what is not co-present from the beginning, but after a certain time comes for the most part to be present, even though we do not busy ourselves about it whether through habit or through instruction, is said to be by nature, for example the natural growth of teeth or beards.
- (iii) In yet another way, that to which we are susceptible is said to be by nature. In this way even contraries are said to occur to the same object by nature, for example disease and health to a susceptible body.
- (iv) Further, that toward which what is susceptible is by nature more inclined and toward which it rather has impulses from its nature, is said to be by nature. Thus, health again is by nature, but disease becomes contrary to nature, since it is a kind of privation of health

88 *Phys.* II 1, 193a1–2: τί μὲν οὖν ἐστὶν ἡ φύσις, εἶρηται, καὶ τὸ φύσει καὶ κατὰ φύσιν.

89 The two expressions are synonymous according to Bonitz's *Index aristotelicus*, 837A18. See, *contra*, Ross (1936), 501 and 524.

90 Following Aspasius, Alexander in his *Ethical Problems* 5 (125, 24–26) and 29 (160, 32–37), Themistius, *In Phys.* 37.7–10, and Simplicius, *In Phys.* 271.9–22, make similar distinctions. See Sambursky (1962), 93–98. I concentrate on these texts in Lefebvre (2026).

and the body is constituted by its nature more in the direction of health than of disease. In the same way virtue too is more in accord with nature, and vice contrary to nature, and in general what is good is more in accord with nature, what is evil contrary to nature.<sup>91</sup>

Aspasius distinguishes four senses of “by nature”. According to the third sense, what is by nature is the capacity to receive opposites, whereas according to the fourth sense, only what is “according to nature” aligns with a substance’s “resources” or “natural tendencies” (ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως ἀφορμᾶς, 38.17 and 29). From this perspective, health, virtue and goodness are more “according to nature” than disease, vice and evil, which are “against nature”. Thus, while everything “according to nature” is also “by nature”, not everything “by nature” is necessarily “according to nature”. In our passage, Aspasius seems to suggest that when Aristotle states that celestial bodies move “by nature”, we must understand this as necessarily “according to their nature”—and not contrary to it. As we saw earlier, and as Aspasius reiterates, celestial bodies move not “by force”, but “according to nature”. In other words, they move by nature, but also—since no external force constrains them—according to their nature.

Aspasius’ innovation lies in how he coordinates nature with the necessity of the prime mover, redefining this necessity as the “providence of the mover”. This implies that Aspasius wants to emphasise the providential dimension of nature—particularly the nature of celestial bodies, and perhaps even nature as a whole—through the necessity of the prime mover. More precisely, thanks to this necessity, nature is self-sufficient, at least in the sense that the nature of celestial bodies is endowed with necessary and eternal motion, requiring no external demiurgic intervention. The rest of the text may also suggest that nature as a whole is self-sufficient, insofar as it serves as a principle of motion.<sup>92</sup>

91 Transl. Konstan. Aspasius, 38.9–22: ἵνα δὲ δῆλον γένηται, πῶς λέγει μὴ παραγίνεσθαι φύσει, διαιρετέον ποσαχῶς τὸ φύσει. φύσει γὰρ λέγεται ὑπάρχειν ὅσα αἰεὶ συνυπάρχει, οἷον φύσει πᾶν τὸ βαρὺ κάτω πέφυκε φέρεσθαι καὶ τὸ κοῦφον ἄνω· καθ’ ἕτερον δὲ τρόπον λέγεται φύσει καὶ ὁ μὴ ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν συνυπάρχει, ἀπὸ δὲ τίνος χρόνου παραγίνεται ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλείστον, μηδὲν ἡμῶν πολυπραγμονούντων μῆτε δι’ ἔθους μῆτε διὰ διδασκαλίας, οἷον ὀδόντων φύσις καὶ γενείων. ἄλλως δὲ λέγεται φύσει, οὐ ἐπιδεικτικοὶ ἐσμὲν οὕτως καὶ τὰ ἐναντία τῷ αὐτῷ γίνεται φύσει, οἷον νόσος καὶ ὑγίεια τῷ δεκτικῷ σώματι. ἔτι δὲ λέγεται φύσει, πρὸς ὃ μᾶλλον τὸ δεκτικὸν πέφυκε καὶ πρὸς ὃ ἔχει ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως ἀφορμᾶς μᾶλλον. οὕτως δὲ καὶ ἡ ὑγίεια μὲν φύσει, ἡ δὲ νόσος παρὰ φύσιν γίνεται, στέρησις τις οὕσα τῆς ὑγείας καὶ διὰ τὸ τὴν φύσιν συστήσαι τὸ σῶμα μᾶλλον πρὸς ὑγίειαν ἢ πρὸς νόσον. τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ ἀρετὴ μᾶλλον κατὰ φύσιν, παρὰ φύσιν ἡ κακία, καὶ ὄλως τὸ μὲν εὖ κατὰ φύσιν, τὸ δὲ κακὸν παρὰ φύσιν. I add the subdivisions. The passage from *NE* II 1 was used by Alexander as part of an argument on providence (see Fr. 2 Grant in Thillet 2003, 58–59).

92 Aspasius draws on this reference to nature to highlight the distinctiveness of providence

### 3.3 *The Harmony between the Providence of the Prime Mover and the Nature of the Celestial Bodies*

Let us turn now to the last parenthesis in 71.30–31: “the *pronoia* of the mover is most in harmony [or perfectly in harmony] with the nature of the moved bodies” (τῇ γὰρ φύσει τῶν φερομένων συμφωνοτάτη ἐστὶν ἢ τοῦ κινούντος πρόνοια). Aspasius employs the superlative form of the adjective σύμφωνος to designate this harmony, which can be understood either absolutely or relatively. This is a very common term that appears in a variety of contexts, including music, arithmetic and astronomy, and implies that the two terms thus connected are not inherently in harmony or might not be.<sup>93</sup> The term is also frequently used in Aristotle’s *Ethics* to discuss the relationship between desire and reason,<sup>94</sup> and it is found with the same meaning in Aspasius’ commentary.<sup>95</sup> Since this word appears only four times in Aspasius, and the other three occurrences are all in an ethical context, it might be tempting to assume that the meaning here is the same. However, the relationship is not identical. In an ethical context, it is the appetitive or irascible part that is (or should be) in harmony with the rational part: achieving perfect harmony is regarded as the goal of educating the appetitive part, since, in the moderate person, desire is perfectly in harmony with reason.<sup>96</sup> In a cosmological context, by contrast, Aspasius states that provid-

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in Aristotle. This may be a reference to the debate in the Atticus fragment between two conceptions of providence: a Peripatetic view, in which nature itself is providence as a principle of sufficient order, and Atticus’ view, which is modeled on craft causality, in which providence involves deliberation and reasoning. See Atticus Fr. 3.81–85 Des Places, where Atticus reproaches Aristotle for having left human things governed “by a certain nature and not by the reason of the god” (φύσει τινι καὶ οὐ θεοῦ λογισμῷ διοικούμενα).

- 93 The word is found in the *De mundo* (396b7–11) in connection with the way in which opposites harmonise in the cosmos. See Gregorić in Gregorić and Karamanolis (2020), 154–155.
- 94 *EE* II 8, 1224a24–26 (Rowe): ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἀψύχοις ἀπλή ἢ ἀρχή, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἐμψύχοις πλεονάζει, οὐ γὰρ αἰεὶ ἢ ὀρεξις καὶ ὁ λόγος συμφωνεῖ. “If, in inanimate beings, the principle is simple, on the other hand, in animate beings, it is superabundant, for desire and reason do not always agree.” *NE* III 12, 119b15–16 (Bywater): διὸ δεῖ τοῦ σώφρονος τὸ ἐπιθυμητικὸν συμφωνεῖν τῷ λόγῳ, σκοπὸς γὰρ ἀμφοῖν τὸ καλόν [...]. “This is why the appetitive part must agree with reason, because for both of them, the noble is the goal” (my translation).
- 95 Aspasius, 70.14: “the desire being in harmony with such reasoning” (σύμφωνον τῷ τοιοῦτῳ λογισμῷ ἔχων τὴν ὀρεξιν); 94.14–16: “The appetitive part of a moderate person is in harmony with reason and is not carried away by being tyrannized like that of the self-controlled person” (τοῦ δὴ σώφρονος τὸ ἐπιθυμητικὸν σύμφωνόν ἐστι τῷ λόγῳ καὶ οὐ καταδυναστευόμενον ἄγεται ὡσπερ τὸ τοῦ ἐγκρατοῦς); 119.19–21: “the high-tempered part of the soul must be educated so as to do nothing contrary to reason, but rather to sally forth along with reason, being in harmony with it” (χρὴ τὸ θυμοειδὲς μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς πεπαιδευθῆαι ὡς μηδὲν παρὰ τὸν λόγον πράττειν ἀλλὰ συνεξορμᾶν τῷ λόγῳ, σύμφωνον αὐτῷ ὄντα).
- 96 In *NE* I 13, 1102b28, Aristotle uses ὁμοφωνεῖ, which belongs to the same family, and Aspasius uses the word again in his commentary (35.34).

ence is “most in harmony with the nature of the transported bodies.” Therefore, there is no direct analogy between *pronoia* and reason, or between the nature of the moved bodies and the appetitive part. In an ethical context, the relationship flows from bottom to top, while, in a cosmological context, it flows from top to bottom. This is because in an ethical context it is assumed that a rapprochement between the two terms (the desiring part and reason) is both possible and desirable. There is no inherent agreement between them, but the goal is for the appetitive part to be brought into alignment with reason. In a cosmological context, however, the situation is different. Aspasius means to say that the mover is in harmony with the nature of the celestial bodies in the sense that they are doing the same thing. To say that there exists perfect harmony between the *pronoia* of the mover and the nature of the celestial bodies means that the mover does not impose any external constraint on them. It is in the nature of the celestial bodies to move as the *pronoia* of the prime mover directs them to. They are not moved by force, but by the providence of the mover without any external compulsion, because the mover’s providence is in harmony with their nature. This harmony allows us to understand that necessity does not function as an external force, but as the actualisation of an inherent potentiality—that of local matter.

The suggestion could also be made that, in the relationship between the providence of the prime mover and the celestial spheres, the connection is downward in nature, implying that necessity gradually diminishes. The providence of the mover is “most in harmony” or “nearly perfectly in harmony” with the nature of the celestial spheres, but it is less in harmony with the nature of the bodies in the lower strata of the cosmos. This is why Aspasius does not claim that providence is *absolutely* in harmony with the bodies it moves. As we have seen, based on the passage from *Metaphysics* XII 7, the harmony is ontological: the necessity of the prime mover perfectly aligns with the nature of the celestial spheres, as the mover is absolutely necessary (it cannot be otherwise), while the celestial spheres can be otherwise depending on their location (they possess local matter). Thus, there is a very great ontological proximity between the two, but not an equality of ontological levels (the prime mover is immaterial, whereas the bodies moved are material). The use of the superlative *συμφωνοτάτη* could suggest that, according to Aspasius, there is a scale of harmony between the prime mover and the moved bodies. While Aspasius does not specify this in detail, it is almost certainly the *matter* of the celestial spheres that the *pronoia* of the prime mover is in nearly total harmony with. This is confirmed by the following sentence, if it is interpreted as building on what was just said:

τῇ γὰρ φύσει τῶν φερομένων συμφωνοτάτη ἐστὶν ἢ τοῦ κινούντος πρόνοια, ἕνια δὲ ἐστὶν ἃ γίνεταί μὲν κατὰ φύσιν, ἀτακτοτέραν δὲ, οἷον ἀύχμοι καὶ ὄμβροι.  
(71.30–32)

For the providence of what moves is perfectly in harmony with the nature of the things transported, but there are certain things which, while occurring according to nature, occur according to a more disorderly nature, such as droughts and storms.

It is remarkable that Aspasius directly quotes, in the very middle of his commentary on the *Ethics*, a phrase from the opening of the *Meteorologica*.<sup>97</sup> This confirms his unitary conception of the Aristotelian corpus, in which the *Meteorologica* naturally finds its place within an ethical commentary. Moreover, this reference indicates that Aspasius situates his analysis at the boundary between the supralunary and sublunary parts of the cosmos. From this, we may infer that in the first part of the sentence, when Aspasius refers to the nature of moving bodies, he has in mind “the first element of bodies” or aether. In the final passage quoted (71.30–32), Aspasius shifts his focus from the primary spheres, which are made of a specific nature, to the irregular phenomena of the sublunary regions. These phenomena, while irregular, are initially described by Aspasius as occurring “according to nature”, meaning “by necessity” and through the “providence of the mover”. To clarify this point, he then provides two contrasting examples of irregular yet relatively common meteorological phenomena: droughts and storms. By doing so, he underscores the distinction between supralunary nature and the more disorderly nature of sublunary occurrences. This leads him to differentiate at least two types of nature: that of celestial bodies and that of sublunary meteorological phenomena. While all these movements ultimately stem from the necessity of the mover, this necessity is not equally in accord with all natures, since some align with it more closely than others. For this reason, the motions of celestial bodies occur by necessity, by nature and according to nature, whereas sublunary movements

97 *Meteor.* I 1, 338a25–b21 (Fobes): λοιπὸν δ' ἐστὶ μέρος τῆς μεθόδου ταύτης ἔτι θεωρητέον, ὃ πάντες οἱ πρότεροι μετεωρολογίαν ἐκάλουν· ταῦτα δ' ἐστὶν ὅσα συμβαίνει κατὰ φύσιν μὲν, ἀτακτοτέραν μὲντοι τῆς τοῦ πρώτου στοιχείου τῶν σωμάτων [...]. “There remains for consideration a part of this inquiry which all our predecessors called meteorology. It is concerned with things that happen according to nature, though according to a more disorderly nature than that of the first of the elements of bodies.” Translation Webster in Barnes (1984), with modifications. The same term ἀτακτοτέραν is used by Theophrastus in his *Metaphysics* (4a4).

occur according to nature, but not the same nature as that of celestial bodies. Rather, they follow a “more disorderly nature”.<sup>98</sup>

The use of the superlative *συμφωνοτάτη* may also suggest that the *pronoia* of the prime mover does not terminate in the heavenly regions, but extends to quadri-elemental nature, albeit in a weakened form. This implies that there is no absolute break between the two natures Aspasius has just distinguished—that of celestial bodies and the “more disorderly” nature composed of the four elements. Aspasius thus avoids positing a radical discontinuity, even if an ontological dualism remains. Contrary to the strict dualistic interpretation of the NSP, the *pronoia* of the prime mover extends beyond the supralunary sphere, exerting an influence within the realm of corruptible nature and remaining the primary cause of motion.<sup>99</sup> However, necessity is progressively diluted due to the differences between these natures. If we acknowledge two levels in the causality of necessity—one in which the prime mover is “fully in accord with the nature of the bodies moved” and another where it is less so due to the “more disorderly nature” of the sublunary realm—Aspasius’ passage reveals a two-tiered conception of providence. By tempering the necessity of the prime mover in the sublunary world, Aspasius avoids a Stoic determinism, as evidenced by his remark in the commentary on *NE III 3, 1112b15–16*: “The human being is always the principle of his own actions, and all things are not determined by necessity or fixed by fate.”<sup>100</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

This extract from Aspasius’ commentary, though brief and allusive, proves to be particularly valuable and significant. Indeed, it is the only extant Aristotelian text on providence from this period before Alexander, apart from a quotation from Adrastus. What distinguishes Aspasius’ account is that (a) while he operates within the broader NSP framework, (b) he identifies necessity (also referred to as providence) as the sole first principle of motion and (c) he subordinates to this necessity/providence the motion “by nature” or “according

98 Like Aristotle, Aspasius uses the word φύσις to refer to the nature both of celestial bodies (in which case it means the aether) and of sublunary beings. In both cases, the bodies move “by” or “according to their nature”. See Frey (2015), 99–125.

99 We might wonder whether the version of the NSP doctrine found in Aspasius is not closer to the one echoed by Diogenes Laertius when he says that earthly things are “organised” according to their *sympatheia* (κατὰ τὴν πρὸς ταῦτα συμπάθειαν, v 32.6).

100 74.11–12: ἀνθρώπος ἀεὶ ἀρχὴ τῶν ἰδίων πράξεων καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ὤρισται πάντα οὐδ’ εἴμαρται. See Sharples (2007a), 599.

to nature” of celestial bodies, and possibly even that of natural beings in the sublunary realm. We can only speculate as to whether Aspasius expounded a fully developed doctrine of providence in his lost commentaries on the *Metaphysics* or *De caelo*. However, certain considerations in his commentary on this passage of *NE* III 3 suggest that he may be drawing upon a broader doctrinal framework. The cosmological micro-passage in *NE* III 3, with its reference to necessity taken as a cause, compels Aspasius to extend his analysis beyond the ethical domain. In this passage, Aristotle makes (or appears to make) necessity a cosmological principle, which leads Aspasius to reinterpret Aristotle’s theory of principles: this necessity is, in fact, the providence of the first mover. The significance of Aspasius’ interpretive move lies in its attempt to delineate the specificity of a Peripatetic model of providence—one that is not previsionist, demiurgic, intentional, creationis, or moral. Instead, Aspasius presents a conception of providence that is purely kinetic: the prime mover exercises providence insofar as, in virtue of its ontological priority, it serves as a causal principle for the first heaven and guarantees the eternity and necessity of its motion. Seen in this way, necessity itself is providence, since it is the source of benefit for what is moved. This designation is reinforced by Aristotle’s own characterisation of the prime mover as “the good”, in precisely the same passage where its necessity is emphasised.<sup>101</sup>

Aspasius further articulates the relationship between necessity and the nature of eternal bodies, specifically aether: moving eternally in a circle *by nature* and *according to their nature*, celestial bodies remain subject to the necessity of the prime mover. The reference to nature in his quotation from the *Meteorologica* suggests that the causal influence of necessity extends into the sublunary realm via the circular motions of the sun and moon. However, motions become increasingly disorderly, because the nature of what is moved is no longer the same: i.e. no longer aether, but the composite nature of the four elements. At this level, the *pronoia* of the prime mover is less in harmony with the nature of what is moved. The regularity of generation and corruption in living beings thus derives indirectly from necessity, offering a more nuanced view of Aristotelian cosmological dualism.<sup>102</sup>

What we find here is an instance of what Kupreeva has termed “diminished” providence: all natural motion, however contingent or disorderly, ultimately bears the imprint of the prime mover’s necessity or providence. From this perspective, nature—whether supralunar or sublunar—exhibits a certain order,

101 See Broadie (1993) and Baghdassarian (2019), 259, with reference to *Metaph.* XIV 4, 1091b16–19.

102 See Aristotle’s *GC* II 10, 336b27–337a17, and *GA* IV 10, 778a5–9.

since its principle of motion remains dependent on the prime mover's providence. A final distinctive feature of this Peripatetic conception of providence is that, in the absence of an intention on the part of the prime mover, the benefit that nature receives remains accidental. The fact that *pronoia* designates the necessity of the prime mover does not imply that the good received by the moved bodies (i.e. the eternity and necessity of their motion) is anything other than an *accidental* good. From the standpoint of both the Stoics and Alexander, this constitutes a fundamental weakness in the Peripatetic model.<sup>103</sup> It is likely that the use of the term *pronoia* to describe the necessity of the prime mover serves, at least in part, to mitigate this non-final and accidental character. That said, we should not expect too much from this brief passage in Aspasius. In just a few lines, he could hardly have set out his full conception of Aristotle's theology, and he remains silent on many critical issues, most notably the precise mode of causality exercised by the prime mover.<sup>104</sup>

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103 For Alexander, there is no providence if its effect is accidental: *De providentia* 63.2; *Quaest.* II 21, 65.18–66.2.

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