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Plotinus against the Gnostics

by Paul Kalligas

When, in the year AD 244, Plotinus established himself in Rome and started to teach, initially 'admitting people to study with him, but writing nothing',¹ it seems that he did not encounter any serious competition. In the capital of the Empire, at least during the second and the third centuries, there had not been any formally institutionalised philosophical schools with traditions and organisation comparable with those in Athens and Alexandria. Those of its inhabitants – usually coming from the wealthier classes of society – who had some spiritual interests or needs could satisfy them either in the amphitheatres, where famous orators, like Maximus of Tyre² and the Diophanes mentioned in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*,³ would perform their epideictic declamations, or in the lecture rooms of diverse representatives or exponents of 'wisdom' imported from the eastern provinces of the Empire.⁴ Among these were some teachers whose prominence and popularity had increased dramatically during this period and, although they posed as being proper Christians,⁵ propounded in a variety of versions a fusion made up of diverse complicated cosmological myths, occult symbolisms, exotic magico-religious doc-

¹ See Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* (= *VP*) 3.35.

² Whose *Lectures* (*dialexeis*) were delivered in Rome, during his first visit to the city, in the reign of Commodus: see G.L. Koniaris, 'On Maximus of Tyre: Zetemata I', *ClAnt* 1 (1982), 90-102.

³ See *VP* 15.6-12.

⁴ A more or less typical instance must have been one Alcibiades who, according to Hippolytus, *Ref.* IX 13.1, 'used to live in Apamea, in Syria, ... but then came to Rome bringing with him a (sacred) book ... claiming that it had been obtained from the Chinese of Parthia by a just man called Elchasaï'.

⁵ The question whether Gnosticism was from the beginning a deviant Judaeo-Christian trend, or developed independently, has not yet received a definitive answer. There can be no doubt, however, that during the second century it had acquired a strongly Judaeo-Christian character, and that the Gnostics known to Plotinus professed to be Christians. See R. McL. Wilson, 'Gnosis, Gnosticism and the New Testament', in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Le origini dello Gnosticismo*, Leiden 1970, 276-8 and *VP* 16.1-2 with J. Igal, 'The Gnostics and the "Ancient Philosophy" in Porphyry and Plotinus', in H.J. Blumenthal & R.A. Markus (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in honour of A.H. Armstrong*, London 1981, 138-9.

trines and some strongly antic cosmic beliefs which, all together, were supposed to lead, on the one hand, to a radically non-rational 'knowledge' (*gnosis*) or insight into the nature of an essentially supra-rational, therefore inscrutable by our ordinary cognitive powers, and so 'unknown', supreme God and, on the other, to the realization and re-evaluation of the 'real' human condition, namely, of the fact that man is an offshoot of divine nature, an exile from his supra-celestial homeland encaged in the material universe by a malevolent or, at least, simply ignorant and stupid Demiurge.

The arrival in Rome of the heresiarch Valentinus, around the year 140, and his stay there for more than two decades, when he was nearly appointed to the Episcopal see of the city, but was eventually outvoted by a colleague with stronger credentials as a martyr,⁶ symbolizes, one might say, the beginning of a process of crystallization of this theosophical movement into a more or less philosophically structured theological system, based on Platonic and Pythagorean principles. Valentinus himself is commonly described in our sources as a Platonist, and Hippolytus maintains, not without some plausibility, that his system was based on a famous passage from the *Second* pseudo-Platonic *Epistle*,⁷ which we know had inspired several other Pythagorising Platonists of the time, like for instance, Numenius. Within the following century, the process continued and acquired considerable momentum through the contribution of numerous disciples of Valentinus, some of whom, like Heracleon and Ptolemaeus, were, according to the testimony of Hippolytus, also active in Italy.⁸ A sure indication of the amount of Gnostic material that was circulating in Rome a few years before the arrival of Plotinus is given by the fact that Hippolytus, while compiling his massive *Attack Against the*

⁶ See Tertullian, *Adv. Valent.* 4.1 and H. Leisegang, 'Valentinus, Valentinianer', *RE* II 7 (1948), 2261-2.

⁷ See Tertullian, *De praescr. haer.* 7.3 and 30.1, *De carne Chr.* 20, Hippolytus, *Ref.* VI 29.1 and 37.1-6. Anthimus of Nicomedia refers to a work by Valentinus entitled *On Three Natures* (see Leisegang, above n. 6, 2262), which sounds almost like a commentary on the crucial passage from the *Second Epistle* (312e1-4). J. Mansfeld, *Heresiography in Context*, Leiden 1992, 204-7, seems to me to be over-skeptical here.

⁸ *Ref.* VI 35.5-6.

Heresies, was able to collect there the immense material of Gnostic provenance that is used in this work.⁹ Further fascinating testimony on the presence and the activities of Gnostic sects in Rome during the first half of the third century is provided by the famous *hypogaeum* of the Aurelii, with the imaginative depiction of Gnostic allegorical scenes on its murals.¹⁰

At the same time, Valentinianism influenced some other, related branches of the now rapidly expanding movement of Gnosticism, such as the Sethians¹¹ or Barbelognostics, who had originally been a strictly Judaic heresy, but by now were incorporating Christian and philosophical, *i.e.* Platonic, doctrines into their teaching, and so developed a most intricately complex theological system, expounded in the format of a somewhat melodramatic narration of the origin of the Universe. Its main characteristics were the following:

1. A meticulously apophatic characterization of the incomprehensible supreme Deity, sometimes described as a 'Monad' or a 'Father', but which was thought to transcend any attempt of determination or categorization.

2. This first principle is surrounded by a luminous emanation from it, in which the divinity is reflected, so that a whole system of divine beings, usually arranged in couples and called 'Aeons', emerge, forming a kind of supra-celestial divine kingdom called Pleroma.

3. One of the main figures in these mythical narratives is Sophia, last born of the Aeons, who transgresses the divine order and thus conceives and brings forth the imperfect and foolish

⁹ For Hippolytus' activities in Rome, see M. Marcovich's 'Introduction' to his edition, pp.10-2.

¹⁰ See J. Carcopino, *De Pythagore aux Apôtres*, Paris 1956, 85-221 and Chr. Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung in der Schule Plotins*, (Berlin /New York 1975) (RGVV 34), 28-30.

¹¹ So called because they considered themselves as descendants of the third son of Adam (see *infra*). On Sethian Gnosticism, see H.-M. Schenke, 'Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften', in P. Nagel (ed.), *Studia Coptica*, Berlin 1974, 165-74; 'The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism', in B. Layton (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism II*, Leiden 1981, 588-616; and K. L. King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God*, (Santa Rosa CA 1995) 34-40.

¹² The etymology of this Aramaic name is given by G. Scholem, 'Jaldabaoth Reconsidered', in *Mélanges H.-Ch. Puech*, (Paris 1974) 420-1, as

Demiurge of the sensible world, sometimes named Ialdabaoth.¹² The figure of Sophia is obviously based on that of Divine Wisdom which appears in some of the books of the Old Testament,¹³ and whose wanderings between heaven and earth were sometimes thought to have far-reaching cosmogonical consequences, described for example in Chapter 42 of the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*. Her Judaic provenance is confirmed by the name Achamoth, commonly ascribed to her, at least in her lower, descended appearance. Such an hypostatization of divine wisdom and its interpretation as the principle informing the world can be traced at least as far back as Philo of Alexandria,¹⁴ but while being a characteristic trait of the system of Valentinus, can also be found in some of the Sethian tracts discovered in Nag Hammadi.

4. The 'conversion' and the 'repentance' of Sophia initiates a huge cosmic enterprise on the part of the Aeons, to bring back the divine 'power' which had outflowed and been dispersed on matter during the creation of the world. The plan includes the liberation of an elite part of humanity from the bonds of their fleshly captivity, and the overcoming of Fate or *heimarmene*, which represents the oppressive rule of the planetary Archons governing the Universe.

The continuing tendency to formulate such speculations in ever more theoretical terminology, their formidable complexity and the effort to support or embellish them by employing philosophical concepts or even forms of argumentation led to the production of treatises where, under the guise of phantasmagoric allegories of a revelatory character and the intricacies of a complicated symbolism, one can discern an effort to tackle theological

indicating 'the progenitor of (celestial) powers'. The figure of Sophia is usually connected with Valentinian Gnosticism, although the Nag Hammadi find has shown that she had a prominent role also in the Sethian systems.

¹³ See *Proverbs* 8.22-31 and *Wisdom of Solomon* 7.12-29, 9.1 ff.; also, G.C. Stead, 'The Valentinian Myth of Sophia', *JThS* 20 (1969), 75-104, G.W. Macrae, 'The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth', *NT* 12 (1970), 86-101, J. Zandee, 'Die Person der Sophia in der vierten Schrift des Codex Jung', in Bianchi (ed.), above n. 5, 203-12.

¹⁴ Cf. Zandee, above n. 13, 208-9, and J. Dillon, 'Female Principles in Platonism', *Itaca* 1 (1986), 117-8.

¹⁵ See, e.g., J. Mansfeld, 'Bad World and Demiurge: a "Gnostic" Motif from Parmenides and Empedocles to Lucretius and Philo', *Studies presented to G. Quispel*, Leiden 1981, 261-314.

issues that had preoccupied Greek philosophy since the time of the Presocratics.¹⁵ To this category seem to belong at least two of the treatises mentioned by Porphyry in Chapter 16 of his *Life of Plotinus*, which have miraculously emerged again among the codices found buried in a jar, near the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi. These are the 'Revelations' of Zostrianus and Allogenes, which contain some of the most theoretically pretentious passages in the whole library. Other Sethian texts included in the collection are the ones under the titles *Apocryphon of John*, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, *The Three Steles of Seth*, *Marsanes* and the treatise entitled *Trimorphic Protennoia*. However, we have to note that although Porphyry explicitly characterizes those who circulated these texts in Rome as 'Christians', the only one of them which bears any distinctively Christian elements is the *Apocryphon of John*.¹⁶

It appears that, at first, Plotinus preferred not to engage directly in any kind of polemic with this spiritual movement, with some of the doctrines of which he might even feel a certain sympathy.¹⁷ One can hardly fail to notice some obvious similarities between the theological structure outlined above and the Plotinian system of the three so-called hypostases.

1. The distinctive and uncompromising transcendence of the supreme principle in respect of the rest of the Pleroma leads to a kind of 'negative theology' which reminds us of the negative expressions Plotinus is employing, most of the time, in order to refer to his own highest principle, the One. Furthermore, the

¹⁶ On the other hand, scholars are now becoming more alert to the possibility that these works had undergone substantial changes in the period separating Plotinus' teaching in Rome from the time when the Nag Hammadi library was deposited. See, e.g., H.W. Attridge, 'Gnostic Platonism', *BACAP* 7 (1991), 22-3, and R. Majercik, 'The Existence-Life-Intellect Triad in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism', *CQ* 42 (1992), 475-6.

¹⁷ There are several instances in the early treatises of Plotinus, where he seems to allude to Gnostic imagery: see, e.g., I 6.5.51-8, 8.9-16, 18-21, I 9.1-2 and Th. G. Sinnige, 'Gnostic Influences in the Early Works of Plotinus and Augustine', in D.T. Runia (ed.), *Plotinus amid Gnostics and Christians*, Amsterdam 1984, 81-9. H.-Ch. Puech formulated the hypothesis that Plotinus' attitude towards Gnosticism underwent a serious change after 263, during the discussion following the presentation of his paper in *Vandoeuvres*: see *Entretiens Hardt* 1960, 183-4.

terms God (*theos*) and Father (*pater*) are repeatedly employed by both Plotinus and the Gnostics as designators for this principle.

2. The Pleroma itself displays obvious similarities with the Platonic and the Plotinian world of Ideal Forms.¹⁸

3. The most interesting case, though, is that of Sophia, whom Plotinus himself considers as equivalent with his own World Soul. She displays a similarly ambivalent attitude by being both fervently engaged in her contemplation of the Father, and also in some way concerned with the vicissitudes of the material universe, and her duplication in some Gnostic texts into a higher 'unfallen' Sophia and a lower 'passionable' emanation, usually called Achamoth, finds a parallel in the distinction sometimes drawn by Plotinus between his World Soul and the lower and less obviously impassible *Physis*.¹⁹

These and some other existing analogies, however, are of a rather superficial and formal character, and should not blur the fact that there are many deeper, although perhaps more subtle, dissimilarities between the metaphysical structures of the two systems. It would possibly be of some interest, although – in my view – not of any particular importance, to try to describe these discrepancies in detail. It is – I believe – one of the merits of Plotinus' treatment of the Gnostics that he does not indulge in disagreeing with them at the theological level, as that would lead to a dogmatic dispute of little broader significance. He realizes that his distance from Gnosticism is mainly due to their fundamentally different world-views and, consequently, to their radically opposed attitudes towards the world, society and history. But to this issue I shall return in a moment.

Now, after the arrival at the school in Rome of Porphyry, who is well-known for his strong anti-Christian feelings, it appears that Plotinus' attitude against Gnosticism became much more outspoken. Porphyry reports that, in his lectures, his master would often engage in severe criticism of certain Gnostic tenets while, around

¹⁸ This has been amply shown by J. Dillon in his 'Pleroma and Noetic Cosmos: a Comparative Study', in R.T. Wallis (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (Albany 1992) 99-110.

¹⁹ See, e.g., *Enn.* II 3.17.15-25, IV 8.2.31-5 and F. Romano, 'Natura e anima in Plotino', in M.-O. Goulet-Cazé *et al.* (eds), *Σοφίης Μαιήτορες: Hommage à J. Pépin* (Paris 1992) 275-95.

the year 265, he composed a massive work, which is full of implicit anti-Gnostic polemic, whereas in its last part it becomes much more explicit and denounces the Gnostics with unprecedented severity. This writing was subsequently divided²⁰ into four parts of approximately the same length, and these were dispersed in different books of the *Enneads*, namely, as numbers III 8, V 8, V 5 and II 9 of the collection. In an influential article, R. Harder²¹ has convincingly indicated not only the continuity of thought, but also the coherent organic structure that underlies these pieces and so reconstructed what has been known in recent years as Plotinus 'Great Book'.

The way Porphyry chooses to express himself in the *Life* gives us the impression that the title which had already prevailed among Plotinus' disciples while referring to this larger treatise was *Against the Gnostics*.²² This, however, need not imply that its exclusive, or even its main objective had been polemic. For its polemical aspect is only a concomitant of the philosopher's radical dissent with them on some really fundamental theoretical issues. The doctrines of the Gnostics had obviously provided him with a motive to rethink his whole philosophical system and to try to find out and render more explicit those elements that contributed to its coherence. One such element is his doctrine of contemplation or *theoria*, which establishes a strong vertical connection between the different layers of his metaphysical hierarchy and thus emerges as a key concept in his philosophy. Other concepts with a similar function are those of Beauty, which is the most powerful manifestation of intelligible reality into the psychic and the corporeal level, and cognition, which extends from the pure identification between knower and known object – at the level of the Intellect – to the more diversified and mediated sympathy which is required for the perception of sensible objects. In this way, his polemic against the Gnostics is focused, from the very beginning, in the direction of

²⁰ Either by Porphyry, for his edition of the collected works of his teacher, or possibly before him, by some other editor.

²¹ 'Eine neue Schrift Plotins', *Hermes* 71 (1936), 1-10. Harder's theory has been almost universally accepted. See, however, A.M. Wolters, 'Notes on the Structure of *Enneads* II, 9', in *Life is Religion: Essays in honour of H.E. Runner*, (Ontario 1981) 83-7.

²² See Igal, above n. 5, 147, n. 18.

the theoretical presuppositions of their doctrines, and thus is transposed to the level of philosophical analysis.

Porphyry states that Plotinus' opponents, although known to be Christians, were nevertheless different from the great mass of ignorantly credulous believers, which he had denounced in his extensive treatise against them, by the fact that they presented their doctrines in a guise that was at least reminiscent of a philosophical *hairesis*, or school of thought.²³ The fact that they professed to derive their doctrines from the 'ancient philosophy' – as they called it –, even if they distanced themselves from it, caused serious concern to Plotinus, who considered himself as an authentic exponent of the best tradition in ancient Greek philosophy. Under this perspective, they appeared to him as a serious threat for the tradition he represented, a threat of a purely doctrinal nature. Moreover, if, as it has been recently suggested,²⁴ the writings by Alexander of Libya, Philocomus, Demostratus and Lydus mentioned by Porphyry as being 'possessed' by the Gnostics and used by them in order to produce their own 'Apocalypses', were actually handbooks of a philosophical or doxographic character and 'had nothing to do with either Christianity or Gnosticism', then Plotinus' preoccupation to confront them on the philosophical rather on the theological level is even better understood. He was interested in the complexities of their theological constructions only to the extent that these had definite philosophical pretensions.

An interesting example of this is presented by his treatment of the Gnostic doctrine of divine Reflection or *epinoia*. In some Gnostic systems, like e.g. the one of the Valentinian Ptolemaeus,²⁵ the Pleroma is produced by a couple of Aeons, Depth or Forefather and his first offspring, Silence or *Ennoia*. Now, the latter was thought to emanate from the Forefather as a reflection of him upon himself. Plotinus takes issue with this doctrine²⁶ by pointing

²³ See *VP* 16.1-9 and cf. *Contra Christianos* fr. 49.15 and 89.5 Harnack.

²⁴ By M. Tardieu, 'Les Gnostiques dans la *Vie de Plotin*', in L. Brisson *et al.* (eds.), *Porphyre, La Vie de Plotin* II, (Paris 1992) 516-7.

²⁵ Described by Irenaeus at the very beginning of his *Against the Heresies*, I 1.1. Cf., e.g., *NHC* II 1, 4.27-5.5, VIII 1, 82.23-83.22, 87.14-20.

²⁶ See *Enn.* II 9.1.33-57.

out that, even if the Forefather is considered as an Intellect, his self-thinking could never occur anywhere outside himself since, according to his own considered view (defended at length in the third part of his great anti-Gnostic tetralogy), the objects of the intellect are not outside it. His use of the term *epinoia*, instead of *ennoia*, probably indicates that he had in mind a system like the one contained in the Simonian *Apophysis*, mentioned by Hippolytus,²⁷ but also helps to bring out the arbitrariness and the redundancy that such a concept would, in his mind, involve.

Somewhat similar is the case of his treatment of the Gnostic concept of *logos*. This is reported, for example, to have been an important element in the system of the so-called Peratics,²⁸ where it denoted an entity mediating between the Intellect and the Cosmic Soul, transferring noetic imprints from the former to the latter. Plotinus' objection to this is that the World Soul, being by its nature connate with the Intellect, needs no intermediaries in order to come in contact with it.²⁹ For him *logos* can only function at a lower level, transferring the Soul's commands to the material universe.

Another instance is his criticism of the well-known Gnostic doctrine according to which mankind was, since its origin, divided into three separate groups, descending respectively from the three sons of Adam, namely, Caïn, Abel and Seth. The first group, called the 'sarcs' or 'fleshly' were forever doomed, beyond any hope of salvation. The second, the 'psychics', had the chance to elevate themselves to the 'middle' region of the universe, located in the outermost part of the celestial sphere. Only the third group, however, the 'pneumatics', were saved, as having in them the divine spark of the Father.³⁰ Plotinus is willing to relate these three groups with his own classification of mankind into what he calls 'the vulgar crowd', 'those who remember virtue' and 'the wise'. But for him these three categories of people are by no means rigidly separated from each other by some preordained divine will;

²⁷ *Ref.* VI 18.3-7. Cf. NHC VIII 1, 82.1-22 and XIII 1, 35.12-36.25.

²⁸ See Hippol., *Ref.* V 17.1-2 and cf. NHC VII 5, 123.6-11.

²⁹ See, e.g., *Enn.* IV 4.2.27-9, V 1.3.12-23.

³⁰ See *Enn.* II 9.9.6-11 and cf. Clem. Alex., *Exc. ex Theod.* 54, Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I 7.5, Hippol., *Ref.* V 6.6-7, X 9.1-3, NHC I 5, 118.14-119.24, II 5, 117.28-118.5, 122.5-16.

they rather represent different stages in one continuous process, which leads from the ordinary preoccupation with bodily existence to the attainment of perfection through philosophical life. These stages are represented in his treatise *On Dialectic* by the musician, the lover and the philosopher.³¹

Otherwise, Plotinus refrains from examining Gnostic mythological narrations in detail, and disregards any discrepancies between them. He even refuses to name his opponents, being content to refer to them by more or less vague descriptive expressions like, for example, 'those who know' or, even more ironically, as 'the listeners of cultivated and melodious knowledge'.³² He shows little interest in the specific forms they gave to their visionary cosmological scenarios or to the ritual processes through which they hoped to achieve their liberation from the bonds of the cosmos. This is the reason why it is so difficult for us today to identify precisely the exact variety of Gnosticism to which his opponents belonged. But, as it becomes obvious from a powerful passage in which he addresses his audience directly, his main concern was with members of his own circle – 'friends', as he calls them – who presumably gave signs of being corrupted by those aberrant teachings.³³ Then, by displaying remarkable insight, he proceeds to identify at the core of their extravagant doctrines about the world, its history and the moral constitution of man three corresponding forms of alienation:

1. *Alienation from the world.* Anticosmism, the disparagement of the world and its creator, was – as we already said – one of the main characteristics of Gnosticism,³⁴ which regarded the whole visible universe as a temporary lodging, as a place of exile, or even as a prison for the 'pneumatic' man, who is by his nature and his provenance a complete stranger in it. The Gnostics believed that the creation of the world is the work of a foolish, blind and arrogant god, who governs it like a tyrant through the power of *heimarmene*, exercised by his associates, the planetary Archons. By contrast, the supreme God is completely transcendent, unknow-

³¹ See *Enn.* I 3.1.9 ff.

³² *Enn.* II 9.15.23 and 13.10.

³³ See *Enn.* II 9.10.3-14.

³⁴ See H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* I, Göttingen 1954, 148-56.

able, unnamable and hidden, and he does not participate in any way with the governing of the universe, nor does he attempt to make it better. His only interest in the world concerns the liberation of the particles of divine light which have been trapped in it. Such a world-view appeared, of course, completely preposterous to a Platonist like Plotinus, who believed that the very idea of a world (*cosmos*) is intimately connected with harmonious order and beauty, and that such a structure must be governed by a divine Providence continuously aspiring at its best possible arrangement. According to him, the world is everlasting and created only in the sense of being causally dependent on higher realities. Therefore, corporeal existence is not something inherently pernicious, to be condemned or escaped from, but rather the result of an outflow from the Good, that calls for a re-orientation of the soul and the rectification of its attitude towards the body, without involving any real rejection of the material universe as a whole.

2. *Alienation from history.* Gnostic soteriology was based on an apocalyptic view about time and history. These were considered as resulting from the activity of the cosmic Demiurge, and therefore as symptoms of degradation and fall, as no more than a procession of lies and disgrace. The salutary 'knowledge' that was supposed to bring about the salvation of man, his liberation from the bonds of his earthly existence and, finally, his return to his supra-celestial Father, is by its nature non-temporal; however, because of the fallen state and the ignorance of the human race as a whole, it is always revealed as something radically new.³⁵ Even the Gnostics, of course, were ready to accept that, in the course of human history, there had been exceptionally insightful and 'prophetic' figures, who in fact had preached the liberating truth, but their appearance was not conceived as part of a consistent, organized and acknowledged tradition; it was in no way embedded in the historical process, but rather constituted a reaction or rebellion against it. On the other hand, the cosmic 'wisdom' that is being transmitted in the course of history as culture is no more than

³⁵ *Novum*, as in Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* I 8.1. See the important analysis of H.-Ch. Puech, 'Gnosis and Time', in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (Princeton 1957) 56-84.

foolishness, obscuring the truth revealed to them alone. This is why even those exponents of traditional philosophy considered by them as having some value – for example Plato – were thought to have achieved only a partial and, anyway, insufficient approach to the truth, and not to have ‘penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality’.³⁶ In the eyes of Plotinus, such a view was just a further indication of the selfishness of the Gnostics, of their arrogance, their megalomania and their vain wish to present themselves as an independent and novel school of thought. It came into sharp contrast with his own attitude towards philosophical tradition. He believed that the ‘blissful men of older times’³⁷ – as he called the philosophers of the classical period – had indeed endowed mankind with crucial and revealing insights into the nature of things and man’s position in the world, but their teachings had to be continuously examined and evaluated on the basis of one’s own experience and reasoning, in order to be correctly interpreted. They provided clues and inspiration that had to be understood within the context of a historical tradition of exegesis, not as god-sent revelations of an otherwise inscrutable hidden ‘truth’.³⁸

3. *Alienation from society.* For at least some of the Gnostics, the realization of the fundamental distance which separates man’s real nature from the material world he lives in signified also that he should feel free from all social and moral obligations or restrictions. If the only presupposition for his salvation is his individual conversion towards the supreme deity and the adherence to that reality alone, then all the rest, not only material goods and pleasures, but also the practical way of properly living one’s life as a whole, would appear as totally insignificant and indifferent (*adiaphora*), in the Stoic sense of the term. Irenaeus, for example, reports the view of Simon Magus according to which ‘men are saved by the grace of God, not according to their just actions. Therefore, the just character of human actions is not determined by nature, but by convention’.³⁹ If the only reasonable attitude

³⁶ *VP* 16.8-9.

³⁷ See *Enn.* II 9.6.27-8 and III 7.1.13-4.

³⁸ See A. Eon, ‘La notion plotinienne d’exégèse’, *RIPh* 24 (1970), 277-82.

³⁹ See Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I 23.3 and 25.5, with *SVF* III 117 and 118. Cf. also R.M. Grant, ‘Charges of “Immorality” against various religious groups in Antiquity’, in *Studies presented to G. Quispel*, Leiden 1981, 164-8, and H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, ed.2 (Boston 1963) 267-72.

towards the world is total detestation and repulsion, then any sort of care and involvement in morally righteous conduct within its framework could only result in disorientating and enmeshing one further in his fallen state. Finally, if salvation is preordained only for an elite group of naturally endowed 'pneumatics', then, as Irenaeus was quick to point out,⁴⁰ 'it is impossible for the rest to overcome their miserable state, even if they engage in activities of the most noble kind', while, on the other hand, the members of the elite would lack any motive to adhere to virtuous conduct or to make themselves any better. Now, Plotinus might perhaps have agreed that virtuous conduct should in fact not be among the main concerns of the wise man. But that would by no means imply that virtue itself is meaningless or indifferent. On the contrary, he believed that virtuous actions were a necessary concomitant, a sort of inadvertent by-product, of philosophical contemplation focused on eternal reality.⁴¹ This is because the intelligible beings are archetypes determining the basic theoretical attitude of the contemplating soul in such a way as to induce virtuous behaviour, as a kind of expression or image of them on the level of practical living. For Plotinus, the anomian views of his opponents provided the best proof of their hypocrisy. He believed that their extreme individualism, their disparagement of the beauty and the orderliness of the universe, their disregard for virtue and any kind of moral value could only lead people astray from the true goal of every human being, and that they undermined the very foundations of the culture to which he felt to belong. This, of course, is not to deny that – as Hans Jonas has perceptively remarked⁴² – they perhaps represent an attitude still entangled in the roots of our own culture.

Let me sum up. Plotinus' stance towards Gnosticism is one of deep concern not for the doctrinal differences it presented in respect with his own philosophical system, but for the effects its world-view could have on people who might possibly lose their

⁴⁰ *Adv. haer.* I 6.2. Cf. Clem. Alex., *Strom.* III 4, 30.1-32.1.

⁴¹ See *Enn.* I 2.7.1-13 and cf. *VP* 9.5-22. See further my article 'Living Body, Soul, and Virtue in the Philosophy of Plotinus' *Dionysius* 18 (2000), 35-7.

⁴² *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* I, 172.

confidence in the unlimited and uncompromised goodness of the origin of all. The derivation of the whole of reality from a single source, identified as the Good itself, necessitates the emergence of deficiencies and imperfections as the complexity of the total structure and the distance from its source increase. But for him this should not blind us to the fact that the unlimited power of this ultimate source of Being encompasses even the remotest reflections of it and provides them with an, ever dimmer perhaps, but nevertheless redeeming aspiration towards itself.⁴³

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⁴³ A version of this paper was presented at a seminar, sponsored by the Dublin Centre for the Study of the Platonic Tradition, in November 1998. In it I have used some material from my Introduction and Commentary on *Enn.* II 9, published in M. Greek (*Plotinus: Second Ennead*, Athens 1997, 327 ff.), but I have expanded considerably its conclusions. I wish to thank Prof. John Dillon, for inviting me there, as well as all the participants for a stimulating discussion.