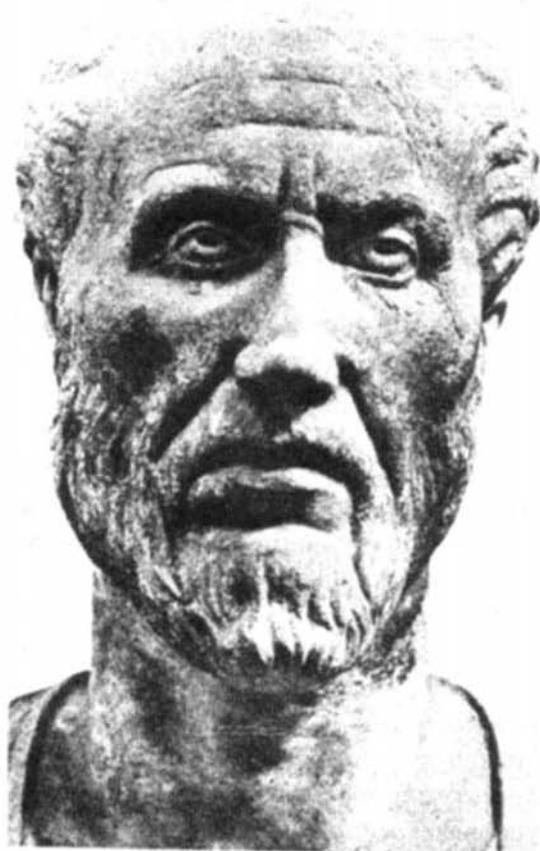


PLOTINUS

AGAINST THE GNOSTICS



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BOOKS



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NINTH TRACTATE

AGAINST THOSE THAT AFFIRM THE CREATOR OF THE KOS-
MOS AND THE KOSMOS ITSELF TO BE EVIL: [GENERALLY
QUOTED AS "AGAINST THE Gnostics"]

1. We have seen elsewhere that the Good, the Principle, is simplex, and, correspondingly, primal- for the secondary can never be simplex- that it contains nothing: that it is an integral Unity.

Now the same Nature belongs to the Principle we know as The One just as the goodness of The Good is essential and not the outgrowth of some prior substance so the Unity of The One is its essential.

Therefore:

When we speak of The One and when we speak of The Good we must recognize an Identical Nature; we must affirm that they are the same- not,

it is true, as venturing any predication with regard to that [unknowable] Hypostasis but simply as indicating it to ourselves in the best terms we find.

Even in calling it "The First" we mean no more than to express that it is the most absolutely simplex: it is the Self-Sufficing only in the sense that it is not of that compound nature which would make it dependent upon any constituent; it is "the Self-Contained" because everything contained in something alien must also exist by that alien.

Deriving, then, from nothing alien, entering into nothing alien, in no way a made-up thing, there can be nothing above it.

We need not, then, go seeking any other Principles; this - the One and the Good- is our First; next to it follows the Intellectual Principle, the Primal Thinker; and upon this follows Soul. Such is the order in nature. The Intellectual Realm allows no more than these and no fewer.

Those who hold to fewer Principles must hold the identity of either Intellectual-Principle and Soul or of Intellectual-Principle and The First; but we have abundantly shown that these are distinct.

It remains for us to consider whether there are more than these Three.

Now what other [Divine] Kinds could there be? No Principles of the universe could be found at once simpler and more transcendent than this whose existence we have affirmed and described.

They will scarcely urge upon us the doubling of the Principle in Act by a Principle in Potentiality. It is absurd to seek such a plurality by distinguishing between potentiality and actuality in the case of immaterial beings whose existence is in Act- even in lower forms no such division can be made and we cannot conceive a duality in the Intellectual-Principle, one phase in some vague calm, another all astir. Under what form can we think of repose in the Intellectual Principle as contrasted with its movement or utterance? What would the quiescence of the one phase be as against the energy of the others?

No: the Intellectual-Principle is continuously itself, unchangeably constituted in stable Act. With movement- towards it or within it- we are in the realm of the Soul's operation: such act is a Reason-Principle emanating from it and entering into Soul, thus made an Intellectual Soul, but in no sense creating an intermediate Principle to stand between the two.

Nor are we warranted in affirming a plurality of Intellectual Principles on the ground that there is one that knows and thinks and another knowing that it knows and thinks. For whatever distinction be possible in the Divine between its Intellectual Act and its Consciousness of that Act, still

all must be one projection not unaware of its own operation: it would be absurd to imagine any such unconsciousness in the Authentic Intelligence; the knowing principle must be one and the selfsame with that which knows of the knowing.

The contrary supposition would give us two beings, one that merely knows, and another separate being that knows of the act of knowing.

If we are answered that the distinction is merely a process of our thought, then, at once, the theory of a plurality in the Divine Hypostasis is abandoned: further, the question is opened whether our thought can entertain a knowing principle so narrowed to its knowing as not to know that it knows- a limitation which would be charged as imbecility even in ourselves, who if but of very ordinary moral force are always master of our emotions and mental processes.

No: The Divine Mind in its mentation thinks itself; the object of the thought is nothing external: Thinker and Thought are one; therefore in its thinking and knowing it possesses itself, observes itself and sees itself not as something unconscious but as knowing: in this Primal Knowing it must include, as one and the same Act, the knowledge of the knowing; and even the logical distinction mentioned above cannot be made in the case of the Divine; the very eternity of its self-thinking precludes any such separation between that intellectual act and the consciousness of the act.

The absurdity becomes still more blatant if we introduce yet a further distinction- after that which affirms the knowledge of the knowing, a third distinction affirming the knowing of the knowledge of the knowing: yet there is no reason against carrying on the division for ever and ever.

To increase the Primals by making the Supreme Mind engender the Reason-Principle, and this again engender in the Soul a distinct power to act as mediator between Soul and the Supreme Mind, this is to deny intellection to the Soul, which would no longer derive its Reason from the Intellectual-Principle but from an intermediate: the Soul then would possess not the Reason-Principle but an image of it: the Soul could not know the Intellectual-Principle; it could have no intellection.

2. Therefore we must affirm no more than these three Primals: we are not to introduce superfluous distinctions which their nature rejects. We are to proclaim one Intellectual-Principle unchangeably the same, in no way subject to decline, acting in imitation, as true as its nature allows, of the Father.

And as to our own Soul we are to hold that it stands, in part, always in

the presence of The Divine Beings, while in part it is concerned with the things of this sphere and in part occupies a middle ground. It is one nature in graded powers; and sometimes the Soul in its entirety is borne along by the loftiest in itself and in the Authentic Existent; sometimes, the less noble part is dragged down and drags the mid-soul with it, though the law is that the Soul may never succumb entire.

The Soul's disaster falls upon it when it ceases to dwell in the perfect Beauty- the appropriate dwelling-place of that Soul which is no part and of which we too are no part- thence to pour forth into the frame of the All whatsoever the All can hold of good and beauty. There that Soul rests, free from all solicitude, not ruling by plan or policy, not redressing, but establishing order by the marvellous efficacy of its contemplation of the things above it.

For the measure of its absorption in that vision is the measure of its grace and power, and what it draws from this contemplation it communicates to the lower sphere, illuminated and illuminating always.

3. Ever illuminated, receiving light unailing, the All-Soul imparts it to the entire series of later Being which by this light is sustained and fostered and endowed with the fullest measure of life that each can absorb. It may be compared with a central fire warming every receptive body within range.

Our fire, however, is a thing of limited scope: given powers that have no limitation and are never cut off from the Authentic Existences, how imagine anything existing and yet failing to receive from them?

It is of the essence of things that each gives of its being to another: without this communication, The Good would not be Good, nor the Intellectual-Principle an Intellective Principle, nor would Soul itself be what it is: the law is, "some life after the Primal Life, a second where there is a first; all linked in one unbroken chain; all eternal; divergent types being engendered only in the sense of being secondary."

In other words, things commonly described as generated have never known a beginning: all has been and will be. Nor can anything disappear unless where a later form is possible: without such a future there can be no dissolution.

If we are told that there is always Matter as a possible term, we ask why then should not Matter itself come to nothingness. If we are told it may, then we ask why it should ever have been generated. If the answer comes that it had its necessary place as the ultimate of the series, we return that the necessity still holds.

With Matter left aside as wholly isolated, the Divine Beings are not everywhere but in some bounded place, walled off, so to speak; if that is not possible, Matter itself must receive the Divine light [and so cannot be annihilated].

4. To those who assert that creation is the work of the Soul after the falling of its wings, we answer that no such disgrace could overtake the Soul of the All. If they tell us of its falling, they must tell us also what caused the fall. And when did it take place? If from eternity, then the Soul must be essentially a fallen thing: if at some one moment, why not before that?

We assert its creative act to be a proof not of decline but rather of its steadfast hold. Its decline could consist only in its forgetting the Divine: but if it forgot, how could it create? Whence does it create but from the things it knew in the Divine? If it creates from the memory of that vision, it never fell. Even supposing it to be in some dim intermediate state, it need not be supposed more likely to decline: any inclination would be towards its Prior, in an effort to the clearer vision. If any memory at all remained, what other desire could it have than to retrace the way?

What could it have been planning to gain by world-creating? Glory? That would be absurd- a motive borrowed from the sculptors of our earth.

Finally, if the Soul created by policy and not by sheer need of its nature, by being characteristically the creative power- how explain the making of this universe?

And when will it destroy the work? If it repents of its work, what is it waiting for? If it has not yet repented, then it will never repent: it must be already accustomed to the world, must be growing more tender towards it with the passing of time.

Can it be waiting for certain souls still here? Long since would these have ceased returning for such re-birth, having known in former life the evils of this sphere; long since would they have foreborne to come.

Nor may we grant that this world is of unhappy origin because there are many jarring things in it. Such a judgement would rate it too high, treating it as the same with the Intelligible Realm and not merely its reflection.

And yet- what reflection of that world could be conceived more beautiful than this of ours? What fire could be a nobler reflection of the fire there than the fire we know here? Or what other earth than this could have been modelled after that earth? And what globe more minutely perfect than this, or more admirably ordered in its course could have been conceived in the image of the self-centred circling of the World of Intelligibles? And for a

sun figuring the Divine sphere, if it is to be more splendid than the sun visible to us, what a sun it must be.

5. Still more unreasonably:

There are men, bound to human bodies and subject to desire, grief, anger, who think so generously of their own faculty that they declare themselves in contact with the Intelligible World, but deny that the sun possesses a similar faculty less subject to influence, to disorder, to change; they deny that it is any wiser than we, the late born, hindered by so many cheats on the way towards truth.

Their own soul, the soul of the least of mankind, they declare deathless, divine; but the entire heavens and the stars within the heavens have had no communion with the Immortal Principle, though these are far purer and lovelier than their own souls- yet they are not blind to the order, the shape-ly pattern, the discipline prevailing in the heavens, since they are the loudest in complaint of the disorder that troubles our earth. We are to imagine the deathless Soul choosing of design the less worthy place, and preferring to abandon the nobler to the Soul that is to die.

Equally unreasonable is their introduction of that other Soul which they piece together from the elements.

How could any form or degree of life come about by a blend of the elements? Their conjunction could produce only a warm or cold or an intermediate substance, something dry or wet or intermediate.

Besides, how could such a soul be a bond holding the four elements together when it is a later thing and rises from them? And this element- soul is described as possessing consciousness and will and the rest- what can we think?

Furthermore, these teachers, in their contempt for this creation and this earth, proclaim that another earth has been made for them into which they are to enter when they depart. Now this new earth is the Reason-Form [the Logos] of our world. Why should they desire to live in the archetype of a world abhorrent to them?

Then again, what is the origin of that pattern world? It would appear, from the theory, that the Maker had already declined towards the things of this sphere before that pattern came into being.

Now let us suppose the Maker craving to construct such an Intermediate World- though what motive could He have?- in addition to the Intellectual world which He eternally possesses. If He made the mid-world first, what end was it to serve?

To be a dwelling-place for Souls?

How then did they ever fall from it? It exists in vain.

If He made it later than this world- abstracting the formal-idea of this world and leaving the Matter out- the Souls that have come to know that intermediate sphere would have experienced enough to keep them from entering this. If the meaning is simply that Souls exhibit the Ideal-Form of the Universe, what is there distinctive in the teaching?

6. And, what are we to think of the new forms of being they introduce- their "Exiles" and "Impressions" and "Repentings"?

If all comes to states of the Soul- "Repentance" when it has undergone a change of purpose; "Impressions" when it contemplates not the Authentic Existences but their simulacra- there is nothing here but a jargon invented to make a case for their school: all this terminology is piled up only to conceal their debt to the ancient Greek philosophy which taught, clearly and without bombast, the ascent from the cave and the gradual advance of souls to a truer and truer vision.

For, in sum, a part of their doctrine comes from Plato; all the novelties through which they seek to establish a philosophy of their own have been picked up outside of the truth.

From Plato come their punishments, their rivers of the underworld and the changing from body to body; as for the plurality they assert in the Intellectual Realm- the Authentic Existent, the Intellectual-Principle, the Second Creator and the Soul- all this is taken over from the Timaeus, where we read:

"As many Ideal-Forms as the Divine Mind beheld dwelling within the Veritably Living Being, so many the Maker resolved should be contained in this All."

Misunderstanding their text, they conceived one Mind passively including within itself all that has being, another mind, a distinct existence, having vision, and a third planning the Universe- though often they substitute Soul for this planning Mind as the creating Principle - and they think that this third being is the Creator according to Plato.

They are in fact quite outside of the truth in their identification of the Creator.

In every way they misrepresent Plato's theory as to the method of creation as in many other respects they dishonour his teaching: they, we are to understand, have penetrated the Intellectual Nature, while Plato and all those other illustrious teachers have failed.

They hope to get the credit of minute and exact identification by setting up a plurality of intellectual Essences; but in reality this multiplication lowers the Intellectual Nature to the level of the Sense-Kind: their true course is to seek to reduce number to the least possible in the Supreme, simply referring all things to the Second Hypostasis- which is all that exists as it is Primal Intellect and Reality and is the only thing that is good except only for the first Nature- and to recognize Soul as the third Principle, accounting for the difference among souls merely by diversity of experience and character. Instead of insulting those venerable teachers they should receive their doctrine with the respect due to the older thought and honour all that noble system- an immortal soul, an Intellectual and Intelligible Realm, the Supreme God, the Soul's need of emancipation from all intercourse with the body, the fact of separation from it, the escape from the world of process to the world of essential-being. These doctrines, all emphatically asserted by Plato, they do well to adopt: where they differ, they are at full liberty to speak their minds, but not to procure assent for their own theories by flaying and flouting the Greeks: where they have a divergent theory to maintain they must establish it by its own merits, declaring their own opinions with courtesy and with philosophical method and stating the controverted opinion fairly; they must point their minds towards the truth and not hunt fame by insult, reviling and seeking in their own persons to replace men honoured by the fine intelligences of ages past.

As a matter of fact the ancient doctrine of the Divine Essences was far the sounder and more instructed, and must be accepted by all not caught in the delusions that beset humanity: it is easy also to identify what has been conveyed in these later times from the ancients with incongruous novelties- how for example, where they must set up a contradictory doctrine, they introduce a medley of generation and destruction, how they cavil at the Universe, how they make the Soul blameable for the association with body, how they revile the Administrator of this All, how they ascribe to the Creator, identified with the Soul, the character and experiences appropriate to partial beings.

7. That this world has neither beginning nor end but exists for ever as long as the Supreme stands is certainly no novel teaching. And before this school rose it had been urged that commerce with the body is no gain to a Soul.

But to treat the human Soul as a fair presentment of the Soul of the Universe is like picking out potters and blacksmiths and making them war-

rant for discrediting an entire well-ordered city.

We must recognize how different is the governance exercised by the All-Soul; the relation is not the same: it is not in fetters. Among the very great number of differences it should not have been overlooked that the We [the human Soul] lies under fetter; and this in a second limitation, for the Body-Kind, already fettered within the All-Soul, imprisons all that it grasps.

But the Soul of the Universe cannot be in bond to what itself has bound: it is sovereign and therefore immune of the lower things, over which we on the contrary are not masters. That in it which is directed to the Divine and Transcendent is ever unmingled, knows no encumbering; that in it which imparts life to the body admits nothing bodily to itself. It is the general fact that an inset [as the Body], necessarily shares the conditions of its containing principle [as the Soul], and does not communicate its own conditions where that principle has an independent life: thus a graft will die if the stock dies, but the stock will live on by its proper life though the graft wither. The fire within your own self may be quenched, but the thing, fire, will exist still; and if fire itself were annihilated that would make no difference to the Soul, the Soul in the Supreme, but only to the plan of the material world; and if the other elements sufficed to maintain a Kosmos, the Soul in the Supreme would be unconcerned.

The constitution of the All is very different from that of the single, separate forms of life: there, the established rule commanding to permanence is sovereign; here things are like deserters kept to their own place and duty by a double bond; there is no outlet from the All, and therefore no need of restraining or of driving errants back to bounds: all remains where from the beginning the Soul's nature appointed.

The natural movement within the plan will be injurious to anything whose natural tendency it opposes: one group will sweep bravely onward with the great total to which it is adapted; the others, not able to comply with the larger order, are destroyed. A great choral is moving to its concerted plan; midway in the march, a tortoise is intercepted; unable to get away from the choral line it is trampled under foot; but if it could only range itself within the greater movement it too would suffer nothing.

8. To ask why the Soul has created the Kosmos, is to ask why there is a Soul and why a Creator creates. The question, also, implies a beginning in the eternal and, further, represents creation as the act of a changeful Being who turns from this to that.

Those that so think must be instructed- if they would but bear with cor-

rection- in the nature of the Supernals, and brought to desist from that blasphemy of majestic powers which comes so easily to them, where all should be reverent scruple.

Even in the administration of the Universe there is no ground for such attack, for it affords manifest proof of the greatness of the Intellectual Kind.

This All that has emerged into life is no amorphous structure - like those lesser forms within it which are born night and day out of the lavishness of its vitality- the Universe is a life organized, effective, complex, all-comprehensive, displaying an unfathomable wisdom. How, then, can anyone deny that it is a clear image, beautifully formed, of the Intellectual Divinities? No doubt it is copy, not original; but that is its very nature; it cannot be at once symbol and reality. But to say that it is an inadequate copy is false; nothing has been left out which a beautiful representation within the physical order could include.

Such a reproduction there must necessarily be- though not by deliberation and contrivance- for the Intellectual could not be the last of things, but must have a double Act, one within itself and one outgoing; there must, then, be something later than the Divine; for only the thing with which all power ends fails to pass downwards something of itself. In the Supreme there flourishes a marvellous vigour, and therefore it produces.

Since there is no Universe nobler than this, is it not clear what this must be? A representation carrying down the features of the Intellectual Realm is necessary; there is no other Kosmos than this; therefore this is such a representation.

This earth of ours is full of varied life-forms and of immortal beings; to the very heavens it is crowded. And the stars, those of the upper and the under spheres, moving in their ordered path, fellow-travellers with the universe, how can they be less than gods? Surely they must be morally good: what could prevent them? All that occasions vice here below is unknown there evil of body, perturbed and perturbing.

Knowledge, too; in their unbroken peace, what hinders them from the intellectual grasp of the God-Head and the Intellectual Gods? What can be imagined to give us a wisdom higher than belongs to the Supernals? Could anyone, not fallen to utter folly, bear with such an idea?

Admitting that human Souls have descended under constraint of the All-Soul, are we to think the constrained the nobler? Among Souls, what commands must be higher than what obeys. And if the coming was uncon-

strained, why find fault with a world you have chosen and can quit if you dislike it?

And further, if the order of this Universe is such that we are able, within it, to practise wisdom and to live our earthly course by the Supernal, does not that prove it a dependency of the Divine?

9. Wealth and poverty, and all inequalities of that order, are made ground of complaint. But this is to ignore that the Sage demands no equality in such matters: he cannot think that to own many things is to be richer or that the powerful have the better of the simple; he leaves all such preoccupations to another kind of man. He has learned that life on earth has two distinct forms, the way of the Sage and the way of the mass, the Sage intent upon the sublimest, upon the realm above, while those of the more strictly human type fall, again, under two classes, the one reminiscent of virtue and therefore not without touch with good, the other mere populace, serving to provide necessaries to the better sort.

But what of murder? What of the feebleness that brings men under slavery to the passions?

Is it any wonder that there should be failing and error, not in the highest, the intellectual, Principle but in Souls that are like undeveloped children? And is not life justified even so if it is a training ground with its victors and its vanquished?

You are wronged; need that trouble an immortal? You are put to death; you have attained your desire. And from the moment your citizenship of the world becomes irksome you are not bound to it.

Our adversaries do not deny that even here there is a system of law and penalty: and surely we cannot in justice blame a dominion which awards to every one his due, where virtue has its honour, and vice comes to its fitting shame, in which there are not merely representations of the gods, but the gods themselves, watchers from above, and- as we read- easily rebutting human reproaches, since they lead all things in order from a beginning to an end, allotting to each human being, as life follows life, a fortune shaped to all that has preceded- the destiny which, to those that do not penetrate it, becomes the matter of boorish insolence upon things divine.

A man's one task is to strive towards making himself perfect - though not in the idea- really fatal to perfection- that to be perfect is possible to himself alone.

We must recognize that other men have attained the heights of goodness; we must admit the goodness of the celestial spirits, and above all of

the gods- those whose presence is here but their contemplation in the Supreme, and loftiest of them, the lord of this All, the most blessed Soul. Rising still higher, we hymn the divinities of the Intellectual Sphere, and, above all these, the mighty King of that dominion, whose majesty is made patent in the very multitude of the gods.

It is not by crushing the divine unto a unity but by displaying its exuberance- as the Supreme himself has displayed it- that we show knowledge of the might of God, who, abidingly what He is, yet creates that multitude, all dependent on Him, existing by Him and from Him.

This Universe, too, exists by Him and looks to Him- the Universe as a whole and every God within it- and tells of Him to men, all alike revealing the plan and will of the Supreme.

These, in the nature of things, cannot be what He is, but that does not justify you in contempt of them, in pushing yourself forward as not inferior to them.

The more perfect the man, the more compliant he is, even towards his fellows; we must temper our importance, not thrusting insolently beyond what our nature warrants; we must allow other beings, also, their place in the presence of the Godhead; we may not set ourselves alone next after the First in a dream-flight which deprives us of our power of attaining identity with the Godhead in the measure possible to the human Soul, that is to say, to the point of likeness to which the Intellectual-Principle leads us; to exalt ourselves above the Intellectual-Principle is to fall from it.

Yet imbeciles are found to accept such teaching at the mere sound of the words "You, yourself, are to be nobler than all else, nobler than men, nobler than even gods." Human audacity is very great: a man once modest, restrained and simple hears, "You, yourself, are the child of God; those men whom you used to venerate, those beings whose worship they inherit from antiquity, none of these are His children; you without lifting a hand are nobler than the very heavens"; others take up the cry: the issue will be much as if in a crowd all equally ignorant of figures, one man were told that he stands a thousand cubic feet; he will naturally accept his thousand cubits even though the others present are said to measure only five cubits; he will merely tell himself that the thousand indicates a considerable figure.

Another point: God has care for you; how then can He be indifferent to the entire Universe in which you exist?

We may be told that He is too much occupied to look upon the Universe, and that it would not be right for Him to do so; yet, when He looks down

and upon these people, is He not looking outside Himself and upon the Universe in which they exist? If He cannot look outside Himself so as to survey the Kosmos, then neither does He look upon them.

But they have no need of Him?

The Universe has need of Him, and He knows its ordering and its indwellers and how far they belong to it and how far to the Supreme, and which of the men upon it are friends of God, mildly acquiescing with the Kosmic dispensation when in the total course of things some pain must be brought to them- for we are to look not to the single will of any man but to the universe entire, regarding every one according to worth but not stopping for such things where all that may is hastening onward.

Not one only kind of being is bent upon this quest, which brings bliss to whatsoever achieves, and earns for the others a future destiny in accord with their power. No man, therefore, may flatter himself that he alone is competent; a pretension is not a possession; many boast though fully conscious of their lack and many imagine themselves to possess what was never theirs and even to be alone in possessing what they alone of men never had.

10. Under detailed investigation, many other tenets of this school- indeed we might say all- could be corrected with an abundance of proof. But I am withheld by regard for some of our own friends who fell in with this doctrine before joining our circle and, strangely, still cling to it.

The school, no doubt, is free-spoken enough- whether in the set purpose of giving its opinions a plausible colour of verity or in honest belief- but we are addressing here our own acquaintances, not those people with whom we could make no way. We have spoken in the hope of preventing our friends from being perturbed by a party which brings, not proof- how could it?- but arbitrary, tyrannical assertion; another style of address would be applicable to such as have the audacity to flout the noble and true doctrines of the august teachers of antiquity.

That method we will not apply; anyone that has fully grasped the preceding discussion will know how to meet every point in the system.

Only one other tenet of theirs will be mentioned before passing the matter; it is one which surpasses all the rest in sheer folly, if that is the word.

They first maintain that the Soul and a certain "Wisdom" [Sophia] declined and entered this lower sphere though they leave us in doubt of whether the movement originated in Soul or in this Sophia of theirs, or whether the two are the same to them- then they tell us that the other Souls

came down in the descent and that these members of Sophia took to themselves bodies, human bodies, for example.

Yet in the same breath, that very Soul which was the occasion of descent to the others is declared not to have descended. "It knew no decline," but merely illuminated the darkness in such a way that an image of it was formed upon the Matter. Then, they shape an image of that image somewhere below- through the medium of Matter or of Materiality or whatever else of many names they choose to give it in their frequent change of terms, invented to darken their doctrine- and so they bring into being what they call the Creator or Demiurge, then this lower is severed from his Mother [Sophia] and becomes the author of the Kosmos down to the latest of the succession of images constituting it.

Such is the blasphemy of one of their writers.

11. Now, in the first place, if the Soul has not actually come down but has illuminated the darkness, how can it truly be said to have declined? The outflow from it of something in the nature of light does not justify the assertion of its decline; for that, it must make an actual movement towards the object lying in the lower realm and illuminate it by contact.

If, on the other hand, the Soul keeps to its own place and illuminates the lower without directing any act towards that end, why should it alone be the illuminant? Why should not the Kosmos draw light also from the yet greater powers contained in the total of existence?

Again, if the Soul possesses the plan of a Universe, and by virtue of this plan illuminates it, why do not that illumination and the creating of the world take place simultaneously? Why must the Soul wait till the representations of the plan be made actual?

Then again this Plan- the "Far Country" of their terminology - brought into being, as they hold, by the greater powers, could not have been the occasion of decline to the creators.

Further, how explain that under this illumination the Matter of the Kosmos produces images of the order of Soul instead of mere bodily-nature? An image of Soul could not demand darkness or Matter, but wherever formed it would exhibit the character of the producing element and remain in close union with it.

Next, is this image a real-being, or, as they say, an Intellection?

If it is a reality, in what way does it differ from its original? By being a distinct form of the Soul? But then, since the original is the reasoning Soul, this secondary form must be the vegetative and generative Soul; and then,

what becomes of the theory that it is produced for glory's sake, what becomes of the creation in arrogance and self-assertion? The theory puts an end also to creation by representation and, still more decidedly, to any thinking in the act; and what need is left for a creator creating by way of Matter and Image?

If it is an Intellection, then we ask first "What justifies the name?" and next, "How does anything come into being unless the Soul give this Intellection creative power and how, after all, can creative power reside in a created thing?" Are we to be told that it is a question of a first Image followed by a second?

But this is quite arbitrary.

And why is fire the first creation?

12. And how does this image set to its task immediately after it comes into being?

By memory of what it has seen?

But it was utterly non-existent, it could have no vision, either it or the Mother they bestow upon it.

Another difficulty: These people come upon earth not as Soul-Images but as veritable Souls; yet, by great stress and strain, one or two of them are able to stir beyond the limits of the world, and when they do attain Reminiscence barely carry with them some slight recollection of the Sphere they once knew: on the other hand, this Image, a new-comer into being, is able, they tell us- as also is its Mother- to form at least some dim representation of the celestial world. It is an Image, stamped in Matter, yet it not merely has the conception of the Supreme and adopts from that world the plan of this, but knows what elements serve the purpose. How, for instance, did it come to make fire before anything else? What made it judge fire a better first than some other object?

Again, if it created the fire of the Universe by thinking of fire, why did it not make the Universe at a stroke by thinking of the Universe? It must have conceived the product complete from the first; the constituent elements would be embraced in that general conception.

The creation must have been in all respects more according to the way of Nature than to that of the arts- for the arts are of later origin than Nature and the Universe, and even at the present stage the partial things brought into being by the natural Kinds do not follow any such order- first fire, then the several other elements, then the various blends of these- on the contrary the living organism entire is encompassed and rounded off

within the uterine germ. Why should not the material of the Universe be similarly embraced in a Kosmic Type in which earth, fire and the rest would be included? We can only suppose that these people themselves, acting by their more authentic Soul, would have produced the world by such a process, but that the Creator had not wit to do so.

And yet to conceive the vast span of the Heavens- to be great in that degree- to devise the obliquity of the Zodiac and the circling path of all the celestial bodies beneath it, and this earth of ours - and all in such a way that reason can be given for the plan - this could never be the work of an Image; it tells of that Power [the All-Soul] next to the very Highest Beings.

Against their will, they themselves admit this: their "outshining upon the darkness," if the doctrine is sifted, makes it impossible to deny the true origins of the Kosmos.

Why should this down-shining take place unless such a process belonged to a universal law?

Either the process is in the order of Nature or against that order. If it is in the nature of things, it must have taken place from eternity; if it is against the nature of things, then the breach of natural right exists in the Supreme also; evil antedates this world; the cause of evil is not the world; on the contrary the Supreme is the evil to us; instead of the Soul's harm coming from this sphere, we have this Sphere harmed by the Soul.

In fine, the theory amounts to making the world one of the Primals, and with it the Matter from which it emerges.

The Soul that declined, they tell us, saw and illuminated the already existent Darkness. Now whence came that Darkness?

If they tell us that the Soul created the Darkness by its Decline, then, obviously, there was nowhere for the Soul to decline to; the cause of the decline was not the Darkness but the very nature of the Soul. The theory, therefore, refers the entire process to pre-existing compulsions: the guilt inheres in the Primal Beings.

13. Those, then, that censure the constitution of the Kosmos do not understand what they are doing or where this audacity leads them. They do not understand that there is a successive order of Primals, Secondaries, Tertiaries and so on continuously to the Ultimates; that nothing is to be blamed for being inferior to the First; that we can but accept, meekly, the constitution of the total, and make our best way towards the Primals, withdrawing from the tragic spectacle, as they see it, of the Kosmic spheres- which in reality are all suave graciousness.

And what, after all, is there so terrible in these Spheres with which it is sought to frighten people unaccustomed to thinking, never trained in an instructive and coherent gnosis?

Even the fact that their material frame is of fire does not make them dreadful; their Movements are in keeping with the All and with the Earth: but what we must consider in them is the Soul, that on which these people base their own title to honour.

And, yet, again, their material frames are pre-eminent in vastness and beauty, as they cooperate in act and in influence with the entire order of Nature, and can never cease to exist as long as the Primals stand; they enter into the completion of the All of which they are major Parts.

If men rank highly among other living Beings, much more do these, whose office in the All is not to play the tyrant but to serve towards beauty and order. The action attributed to them must be understood as a foretelling of coming events, while the causing of all the variety is due, in part to diverse destinies- for there cannot be one lot for the entire body of men- in part to the birth moment, in part to wide divergencies of place, in part to states of the Souls.

Once more, we have no right to ask that all men shall be good, or to rush into censure because such universal virtue is not possible: this would be repeating the error of confusing our sphere with the Supreme and treating evil as a nearly negligible failure in wisdom - as good lessened and dwindling continuously, a continuous fading out; it would be like calling the Nature-Principle evil because it is not Sense-Perception and the thing of sense evil for not being a Reason-Principle. If evil is no more than that, we will be obliged to admit evil in the Supreme also, for there, too, Soul is less exalted than the Intellectual-Principle, and That too has its Superior.

14. In yet another way they infringe still more gravely upon the inviolability of the Supreme.

In the sacred formulas they inscribe, purporting to address the Supernal Beings- not merely the Soul but even the Transcendents - they are simply uttering spells and appeasements and evocations in the idea that these Powers will obey a call and be led about by a word from any of us who is in some degree trained to use the appropriate forms in the appropriate way- certain melodies, certain sounds, specially directed breathings, sibilant cries, and all else to which is ascribed magic potency upon the Supreme. Perhaps they would repudiate any such intention: still they must explain how these things act upon the unembodied: they do not see that the power they attrib-

ute to their own words is so much taken away from the majesty of the divine.

They tell us they can free themselves of diseases.

If they meant, by temperate living and an appropriate regime, they would be right and in accordance with all sound knowledge. But they assert diseases to be Spirit-Beings and boast of being able to expel them by formula: this pretension may enhance their importance with the crowd, gaping upon the powers of magicians; but they can never persuade the intelligent that disease arises otherwise than from such causes as overstrain, excess, deficiency, putrid decay; in a word, some variation whether from within or from without.

The nature of illness is indicated by its very cure. A motion, a medicine, the letting of blood, and the disease shifts down and away; sometimes scantiness of nourishment restores the system: presumably the Spiritual power gets hungry or is debilitated by the purge. Either this Spirit makes a hasty exit or it remains within. If it stays, how does the disease disappear, with the cause still present? If it quits the place, what has driven it out? Has anything happened to it? Are we to suppose it thrives on the disease? In that case the disease existed as something distinct from the Spirit-Power. Then again, if it steps in where no cause of sickness exists, why should there be anything else but illness? If there must be such a cause, the Spirit is unnecessary: that cause is sufficient to produce that fever. As for the notion, that just when the cause presents itself, the watchful Spirit leaps to incorporate itself with it, this is simply amusing.

But the manner and motive of their teaching have been sufficiently exhibited; and this was the main purpose of the discussion here upon their Spirit-Powers. I leave it to yourselves to read the books and examine the rest of the doctrine: you will note all through how our form of philosophy inculcates simplicity of character and honest thinking in addition to all other good qualities, how it cultivates reverence and not arrogant self-assertion, how its boldness is balanced by reason, by careful proof, by cautious progression, by the utmost circumspection- and you will compare those other systems to one proceeding by this method. You will find that the tenets of their school have been huddled together under a very different plan: they do not deserve any further examination here.

15. There is, however, one matter which we must on no account overlook- the effect of these teachings upon the hearers led by them into despising the world and all that is in it.

There are two theories as to the attainment of the End of life. The one proposes pleasure, bodily pleasure, as the term; the other pronounces for good and virtue, the desire of which comes from God and moves, by ways to be studied elsewhere, towards God.

Epicurus denies a Providence and recommends pleasure and its enjoyment, all that is left to us: but the doctrine under discussion is still more wanton; it carps at Providence and the Lord of Providence; it scorns every law known to us; immemorial virtue and all restraint it makes into a laughing stock, lest any loveliness be seen on earth; it cuts at the root of all orderly living, and of the righteousness which, innate in the moral sense, is made perfect by thought and by self-discipline: all that would give us a noble human being is gone. What is left for them except where the pupil by his own character betters the teaching- comes to pleasure, self-seeking, the grudge of any share with one's fellows, the pursuit of advantage.

Their error is that they know nothing good here: all they care for is something else to which they will at some future time apply themselves: yet, this world, to those that have known it once, must be the starting-point of the pursuit: arrived here from out of the divine nature, they must inaugurate their effort by some earthly correction. The understanding of beauty is not given except to a nature scorning the delight of the body, and those that have no part in well-doing can make no step towards the Supernal.

This school, in fact, is convicted by its neglect of all mention of virtue: any discussion of such matters is missing utterly: we are not told what virtue is or under what different kinds it appears; there is no word of all the numerous and noble reflections upon it that have come down to us from the ancients; we do not learn what constitutes it or how it is acquired, how the Soul is tended, how it is cleaned. For to say "Look to God" is not helpful without some instruction as to what this looking imports: it might very well be said that one can "look" and still sacrifice no pleasure, still be the slave of impulse, repeating the word God but held in the grip of every passion and making no effort to master any. Virtue, advancing towards the Term and, linked with thought, occupying a Soul makes God manifest: God on the lips, without a good conduct of life, is a word.

16. On the other hand, to despise this Sphere, and the Gods within it or anything else that is lovely, is not the way to goodness.

Every evil-doer began by despising the Gods; and one not previously corrupt, taking to this contempt, even though in other respects not wholly bad, becomes an evil-doer by the very fact.

Besides, in this slighting of the Mundane Gods and the world, the honour they profess for the gods of the Intellectual Sphere becomes an inconsistency; Where we love, our hearts are warm also to the Kin of the beloved; we are not indifferent to the children of our friend. Now every Soul is a child of that Father; but in the heavenly bodies there are Souls, intellective, holy, much closer to the Supernal Beings than are ours; for how can this Kosmos be a thing cut off from That and how imagine the gods in it to stand apart?

But of this matter we have treated elsewhere: here we urge that where there is contempt for the Kin of the Supreme the knowledge of the Supreme itself is merely verbal.

What sort of piety can make Providence stop short of earthly concerns or set any limit whatsoever to it?

And what consistency is there in this school when they proceed to assert that Providence cares for them, though for them alone?

And is this Providence over them to be understood of their existence in that other world only or of their lives here as well? If in the other world, how came they to this? If in this world, why are they not already raised from it?

Again, how can they deny that the Lord of Providence is here? How else can He know either that they are here, or that in their sojourn here they have not forgotten Him and fallen away? And if He is aware of the goodness of some, He must know of the wickedness of others, to distinguish good from bad. That means that He is present to all, is, by whatever mode, within this Universe. The Universe, therefore, must be participant in Him.

If He is absent from the Universe, He is absent from yourselves, and you can have nothing to tell about Him or about the powers that come after Him.

But, allowing that a Providence reaches to you from the world beyond-making any concession to your liking- it remains none the less certain that this world holds from the Supernal and is not deserted and will not be: a Providence watching entire is even more likely than one over fragments only; and similarly, Participation is more perfect in the case of the All-Souls as is shown, further, by the very existence of things and the wisdom manifest in their existence. Of those that advance these wild pretensions, who is so well ordered, so wise, as the Universe? The comparison is laughable, utterly out of place; to make it, except as a help towards truth, would be impiety.

The very question can be entertained by no intelligent being but only by one so blind, so utterly devoid of perception and thought, so far from any vision of the Intellectual Universe as not even to see this world of our own.

For who that truly perceives the harmony of the Intellectual Realm could fail, if he has any bent towards music, to answer to the harmony in sensible sounds? What geometrician or arithmetician could fail to take pleasure in the symmetries, correspondences and principles of order observed in visible things? Consider, even, the case of pictures: those seeing by the bodily sense the productions of the art of painting do not see the one thing in the one only way; they are deeply stirred by recognizing in the objects depicted to the eyes the presentation of what lies in the idea, and so are called to recollection of the truth- the very experience out of which Love rises. Now, if the sight of Beauty excellently reproduced upon a face hurries the mind to that other Sphere, surely no one seeing the loveliness lavish in the world of sense- this vast orderliness, the Form which the stars even in their remoteness display- no one could be so dull-witted, so immoveable, as not to be carried by all this to recollection, and gripped by reverent awe in the thought of all this, so great, sprung from that greatness. Not to answer thus could only be to have neither fathomed this world nor had any vision of that other.

17. Perhaps the hate of this school for the corporeal is due to their reading of Plato who inveighs against body as a grave hindrance to Soul and pronounces the corporeal to be characteristically the inferior.

Then let them for the moment pass over the corporeal element in the Universe and study all that still remains.

They will think of the Intellectual Sphere which includes within itself the Ideal-Form realized in the Kosmos. They will think of the Souls, in their ordered rank, that produce incorporeal magnitude and lead the Intelligible out towards spatial extension, so that finally the thing of process becomes, by its magnitude, as adequate a representation as possible of the principle void of parts which is its model- the greatness of power there being translated here into greatness of bulk. Then whether they think of the Kosmic Sphere [the All-Soul] as already in movement under the guidance of that power of God which holds it through and through, beginning and middle and end, or whether they consider it as in rest and exercising as yet no outer governance: either approach will lead to a true appreciation of the Soul that conducts this Universe.

Now let them set body within it- not in the sense that Soul suffers any

change but that, since "In the Gods there can be no grudging," it gives to its inferior all that any partial thing has strength to receive and at once their conception of the Kosmos must be revised; they cannot deny that the Soul of the Kosmos has exercised such a weight of power as to have brought the corporeal-principle, in itself unlovely, to partake of good and beauty to the utmost of its receptivity- and to a pitch which stirs Souls, beings of the divine order.

These people may no doubt say that they themselves feel no such stirring, and that they see no difference between beautiful and ugly forms of body; but, at that, they can make no distinction between the ugly and the beautiful in conduct; sciences can have no beauty; there can be none in thought; and none, therefore, in God. This world descends from the Firsts: if this world has no beauty, neither has its Source; springing thence, this world, too, must have its beautiful things. And while they proclaim their contempt for earthly beauty, they would do well to ignore that of youths and women so as not to be overcome by incontinence.

In fine, we must consider that their self-satisfaction could not turn upon a contempt for anything indisputably base; theirs is the perverse pride of despising what was once admired.

We must always keep in mind that the beauty in a partial thing cannot be identical with that in a whole; nor can any several objects be as stately as the total.

And we must recognize, that, even in the world of sense and part, there are things of a loveliness comparable to that of the Celestials- forms whose beauty must fill us with veneration for their creator and convince us of their origin in the divine, forms which show how ineffable is the beauty of the Supreme since they cannot hold us but we must, though in all admiration, leave these for those. Further, wherever there is interior beauty, we may be sure that inner and outer correspond; where the interior is vile, all is brought low by that flaw in the dominants.

Nothing base within can be beautiful without- at least not with an authentic beauty, for there are examples of a good exterior not sprung from a beauty dominant within; people passing as handsome but essentially base have that, a spurious and superficial beauty: if anyone tells me he has seen people really fine-looking but interiorly vile, I can only deny it; we have here simply a false notion of personal beauty; unless, indeed, the inner vileness were an accident in a nature essentially fine; in this Sphere there are many obstacles to self-realization. In any case the All is beautiful, and there can

be no obstacle to its inner goodness: where the nature of a thing does not comport perfection from the beginning, there may be a failure in complete expression; there may even be a fall to vileness, but the All never knew a childlike immaturity; it never experienced a progress bringing novelty into it; it never had bodily growth: there was nowhere from whence it could take such increment; it was always the All-Container.

And even for its Soul no one could imagine any such a path of process: or, if this were conceded, certainly it could not be towards evil.

18. But perhaps this school will maintain that, while their teaching leads to a hate and utter abandonment of the body, ours binds the Soul down in it.

In other words: two people inhabit the one stately house; one of them declaims against its plan and against its Architect, but none the less maintains his residence in it; the other makes no complaint, asserts the entire competency of the Architect and waits cheerfully for the day when he may leave it, having no further need of a house: the malcontent imagines himself to be the wiser and to be the readier to leave because he has learned to repeat that the walls are of soulless stone and timber and that the place falls far short of a true home; he does not see that his only distinction is in not being able to bear with necessity assuming that his conduct, his grumbling, does not cover a secret admiration for the beauty of those same "stones." As long as we have bodies we must inhabit the dwellings prepared for us by our good sister the Soul in her vast power of labourless creation.

Or would this school reject the word Sister? They are willing to address the lowest of men as brothers; are they capable of such raving as to disown the tie with the Sun and the powers of the Heavens and the very Soul of the Kosmos? Such kinship, it is true, is not for the vile; it may be asserted only of those that have become good and are no longer body but embodied Soul and of a quality to inhabit the body in a mode very closely resembling the indwelling of the All-Soul in the universal frame. And this means continence, self-restraint, holding staunch against outside pleasure and against outer spectacle, allowing no hardship to disturb the mind. The All-Soul is immune from shock; there is nothing that can affect it: but we, in our passage here, must call on virtue in repelling these assaults, reduced for us from the beginning by a great conception of life, annulled by matured strength.

Attaining to something of this immunity, we begin to reproduce within ourselves the Soul of the vast All and of the heavenly bodies: when we are come to the very closest resemblance, all the effort of our fervid pursuit

will be towards that goal to which they also tend; their contemplative vision becomes ours, prepared as we are, first by natural disposition and afterwards by all this training, for that state which is theirs by the Principle of their Being.

This school may lay claim to vision as a dignity reserved to themselves, but they are not any the nearer to vision by the claim- or by the boast that while the celestial powers, bound for ever to the ordering of the Heavens, can never stand outside the material universe, they themselves have their freedom in their death. This is a failure to grasp the very notion of "standing outside," a failure to appreciate the mode in which the All-Soul cares for the unensouled.

No: it is possible to go free of love for the body; to be clean-living, to disregard death; to know the Highest and aim at that other world; not to slander, as negligent in the quest, others who are able for it and faithful to it; and not to err with those that deny vital motion to the stars because to our sense they stand still- the error which in another form leads this school to deny outer vision to the Star-Nature, only because they do not see the Star-Soul in outer manifestation.

Ennead II

Ninth Tractate: 6-9

AGAINST THE GnostICS

This treatise is only the concluding section of a single long text which Porphyry divided into four parts and put into different *Enneads*, the other three being III.8, V.8, and V.5. The title *Against the Gnostics* is given by Porphyry himself. The alternative title is *Against those who Say that the Maker of the Universe is Evil and the Universe is Evil*. Plotinus regarded the teachings of the Gnostics (who belonged to the religious trend of thought designated as “Gnosticism” both by later Christian and modern writers) as untraditional, irrational, and immoral. Plotinus considers absurd the Gnostic claim of the possibility of being good while yet despising all human virtues and hating the whole world and its numerous gods. The Gnostics also despise and revile the Platonic teaching, which stands in accord with the much older paradigms of ancient civilizations. In this sense, Gnosticism is a kind of revolution, or spiritual revolt, which takes on truly cosmic dimensions. Thus, in his anti-Gnostic polemic, Plotinus provides a defense of Hellenism and Hellenic philosophy, which by that time was threatened by the irrational and hubristic claims of both Gnosticism and Christianity. As Christos Evangeliou says:

The Gnostic cosmology should be rejected, according to Plotinus, not only because it is fanciful and strange but also for the reason that its hubristic and blasphemous doctrines would have deleterious effects on the morals of the people. He was well aware of the vulnerability of human beings to the Gnostic revolutionary and immoral teaching, especially when that sort of teaching is followed by talk like this: “You yourself are to be nobler than all else, nobler than men, nobler than even gods”.³

³ Christos Evangeliou, “Plotinus’ Anti-Gnostic Polemic and Porphyry’s ‘Against the Christians,’” in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. R.T. Wallis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 119.

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Plotinus thinks that the Gnostics are worse than the Epicureans, who denied Providence, and he seeks to defend traditional values, asserting that the sensible cosmos as a whole is the best possible copy of the noetic cosmos, therefore it is beautiful:

For Plotinus, even man's life on earth can become beautiful if it is guided by reason and crowned with virtue and true wisdom. For him, as for Socrates, the first and highest duty of man is to fulfill Apollo's command: "Know thyself". The true Platonists, no less than the Gnostics, are convinced that their real abode is elsewhere. The basic difference between the two is their attitude towards this life.⁴

6. And, what are we to think of the new forms of being they introduce—their "Exiles" and "Impressions" and "Repentings"?

If all comes to states of the Soul—"Repentance" when it has undergone a change of purpose; "Impressions" when it contemplates not the Authentic Existences but their simulacra—there is nothing here but a jargon invented to make a case for their school: all this terminology is piled up only to conceal their debt to the ancient Greek philosophy which taught, clearly and without bombast, the ascent from the cave and the gradual advance of souls to a truer and truer vision.

For, in sum, a part of their doctrine comes from Plato; all the novelties through which they seek to establish a philosophy of their own have been picked up outside of the truth.

From Plato come their punishments, their rivers of the underworld, and the changing from body to body; as for the plurality they assert in the Intellectual Realm—the Authentic Existent, the Intellectual-Principle, the Second Creator, and the Soul—all this is taken over from the *Timaeus*, where we read:

"As many Ideal-Forms as the Divine Mind beheld dwelling within the Veritably Living Being, so many the Maker resolved should be contained in this All."

⁴ Ibid., p. 121.

Misunderstanding their text, they conceived one Mind passively including within itself all that has being, another mind, a distinct existence, having vision, and a third planning the Universe—though often they substitute Soul for this planning Mind as the creating Principle—and they think that this third being is the Creator according to Plato.

They are in fact quite outside of the truth in their identification of the Creator.

In every way they misrepresent Plato's theory as to the method of creation as in many other respects they dishonor his teaching; they, we are to understand, have penetrated the Intellectual Nature, while Plato and all those other illustrious teachers have failed.

They hope to get the credit of minute and exact identification by setting up a plurality of intellectual Essences; but in reality this multiplication lowers the Intellectual Nature to the level of the Sense-Kind: their true course is to seek to reduce number to the least possible in the Supreme, simply referring all things to the second Hypostasis—which is all that exists as it is Primal Intellect and Reality and is the only thing that is good except only for the First Nature—and to recognize Soul as the third Principle, accounting for the difference among souls merely by diversity of experience and character. Instead of insulting those venerable teachers they should receive their doctrine with the respect due to the older thought and honor all that noble system—an immortal Soul, an Intellectual and Intelligible Realm, the Supreme God, the Soul's need of emancipation from all intercourse with the body, the fact of separation from it, the escape from the world of process to the world of essential-being. These doctrines, all emphatically asserted by Plato, they do well to adopt: where they differ, they are at full liberty to speak their minds, but not to procure assent for their own theories by flaying and flouting the Greeks: where they have a divergent theory to maintain they must establish it by its own merits, declaring their own opinions with courtesy and with philosophical method and stating the controverted opinion fairly; they must point their minds towards the truth and not hunt fame

by insult, reviling and seeking in their own persons to replace men honored by the fine intelligences of ages past.

As a matter of fact the ancient doctrine of the Divine Essences was far the sounder and more instructed, and must be accepted by all not caught in the delusions that beset humanity: it is easy also to identify what has been conveyed in these later times from the ancients with incongruous novelties—how for example, where they must set up a contradictory doctrine, they introduce a medley of generation and destruction, how they cavil at the Universe, how they make the Soul blamable for the association with body, how they revile the Administrator of this All, how they ascribe to the Creator, identified with the Soul, the character and experiences appropriate to partial beings.

7. That this world has neither beginning nor end but exists for ever as long as the Supreme stands is certainly no novel teaching. And before this school rose it had been urged that commerce with the body is no gain to a soul.

But to treat the human Soul as a fair presentment of the Soul of the Universe is like picking out potters and blacksmiths and making them warrant for discrediting an entire well-ordered city.

We must recognize how different is the governance exercised by the All-Soul; the relation is not the same: it is not in fetters. Among the very great number of differences it should not have been overlooked that the We (the human Soul) lies under fetter; and this in a second limitation, for the Body-Kind, already fettered within the All-Soul, imprisons all that it grasps.

But the Soul of the Universe cannot be in bond to what itself has bound: it is sovereign and therefore immune of the lower things, over which we on the contrary are not masters. That in it which is directed to the Divine and Transcendent is ever unmingled, knows no encumbering; that in it which imparts life to the body admits nothing bodily to itself. It is the general fact that an inset (as the Body) necessarily shares the conditions of its containing principle (as the Soul), and does not communicate its own conditions where that principle has an independent life: thus a graft will die if the

stock dies, but the stock will live on by its proper life though the graft wither. The fire within your own self may be quenched, but the thing, fire, will exist still; and if fire itself were annihilated that would make no difference to the Soul, the Soul in the Supreme, but only to the plan of the material world; and if the other elements sufficed to maintain a Cosmos, the Soul in the Supreme would be unconcerned.

The constitution of the All is very different from that of the single, separate forms of life: there, the established rule commanding to permanence is sovereign; here things are like deserters kept to their own place and duty by a double bond; there is no outlet from the All, and therefore no need of restraining or of driving errants back to bounds: all remains where from the beginning the Soul's nature appointed.

The natural movement within the plan will be injurious to anything whose natural tendency it opposes: one group will sweep bravely onward with the great total to which it is adapted; the others, not able to comply with the larger order, are destroyed. A great choral is moving to its concerted plan; midway in the march, a tortoise is intercepted; unable to get away from the choral line it is trampled under foot; but if it could only range itself within the greater movement it too would suffer nothing.

8. To ask why the Soul has created the Cosmos, is to ask why there is a Soul and why a Creator creates. The question, also, implies a beginning in the eternal and, further, represents creation as the act of a changeful Being who turns from this to that.

Those that so think must be instructed—if they would but bear with correction—in the nature of the Supernals, and brought to desist from that blasphemy of majestic powers which comes so easily to them, where all should be reverent scruple.

Even in the administration of the Universe there is no ground for such attack, for it affords manifest proof of the greatness of the Intellectual Kind.

This All that has emerged into life is no amorphous structure—like those lesser forms within it which are born night and day

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out of the lavishness of its vitality—the Universe is a life organized, effective, complex, all-comprehensive, displaying an unfathomable wisdom. How, then, can anyone deny that it is a clear image, beautifully formed, of the Intellectual Divinities? No doubt it is copy, not original; but that is its very nature; it cannot be at once symbol and reality. But to say that it is an inadequate copy is false; nothing has been left out which a beautiful representation within the physical order could include.

Such a reproduction there must necessarily be—though not by deliberation and contrivance—for the Intellectual could not be the last of things, but must have a double Act, one within itself and one outgoing; there must, then, be something later than the Divine; for only the thing with which all power ends fails to pass downwards something of itself. In the Supreme there flourishes marvelous vigor and therefore it produces.

Since there is no Universe nobler than this, is it not clear what this must be? A representation carrying down the features of the Intellectual Realm is necessary; there is no other Cosmos than this; therefore this is such a representation.

This earth of ours is full of varied life-forms and of immortal being; to the very heavens it is crowded. And the stars, those of the upper and the under spheres, moving in their ordered path, fellow travelers with the universe, how can they be less than gods? Surely they must be morally good: what could prevent them? All that occasions vice here below is unknown there—no evil of body, perturbed and perturbing.

Knowledge, too; in their unbroken peace, what hinders from the intellectual grasp of the God-Head and the Intellectual Gods? What can be imagined to give us a wisdom higher than belongs to the Supernals? Could anyone, not fallen to utter folly, bear with such an idea?

Admitting that human souls have descended under constraint of the All-Soul, are we to think the constrained the nobler? Among souls, what commands must be higher than what obeys. And if the coming was unconstrained, why find fault with a world you have chosen and can quit if you dislike it?

The Enneads

And further, if the order of this Universe is such that we are able, within it, to practice wisdom and to live our earthly course by the Supernal does not that prove it a dependency of the Divine?

9. Wealth and poverty, and all inequalities of that order are made ground of complaint. But this is to ignore that the Sage demands no equality in such matters: he cannot think that to own many things is to be richer or that the powerful have the better of the simple; he leaves all such preoccupations to another kind of man. He has learned that life on earth has two distinct forms, the way of the Sage and the way of the mass, the Sage intent upon the sublimest, upon the realm above, while those of the more strictly human type fall, again, under two classes, the one reminiscent of virtue and therefore not without touch with good, the other mere populace, serving to provide necessaries to the better sort.

But what of murder? What of the feebleness that brings men under slavery to the passions?

Is it any wonder that there should be failing and error, not in the highest, the intellectual, Principle but in souls that are like undeveloped children? And is not life justified even so if it is a training ground with its victors and its vanquished?

You are wronged; need that trouble an immortal? You are put to death; you have attained your desire. And from the moment your citizenship of the world becomes irksome you are not bound to it.

Our adversaries do not deny that even here there is a system of law and penalty: and surely we cannot in justice blame a dominion which awards to every one his due, where virtue has its honor, and vice comes to its fitting shame, in which there are not merely representations of the gods, but the gods themselves, watchers from above, and—as we read—easily rebutting human reproaches, since they lead all things in order from a beginning to an end, allotting to each human being, as life follows life, a fortune shaped to all that has preceded—the destiny which, to those that do not penetrate it, becomes the matter of boorish insolence upon things divine.

The Heart of Plotinus

A man's one task is to strive towards making himself perfect—though not in the idea—really fatal to perfection—that to be perfect is possible to himself alone.

We must recognize that other men have attained the heights of goodness; we must admit the goodness of the celestial spirits, and above all of the gods—those whose presence is here but their contemplation in the Supreme, and loftiest of them, the lord of this All, the most blessed Soul. Rising still higher, we hymn the divinities of the Intellectual Sphere, and, above all these, the mighty King of that dominion, whose majesty is made patent in the very multitude of the gods.

It is not by crushing the divine into a unity but by displaying its exuberance—as the Supreme himself has displayed it—that we show knowledge of the might of God, who, abidingly what He is, yet creates that multitude, all dependent on Him, existing by Him and from Him.

This Universe, too, exists by Him and looks to Him—the Universe as a whole and every god within it—and tells of Him to men, all alike revealing the plan and will of the Supreme.

These, in the nature of things, cannot be what He is, but that does not justify you in contempt of them, in pushing yourself forward as not inferior to them.

The more perfect the man, the more compliant he is, even towards his fellows; we must temper our importance, not thrusting insolently beyond what our nature warrants; we must allow other beings, also, their place in the presence of the Godhead; we may not set ourselves alone next after the First in a dream-flight which deprives us of our power of attaining identity with the Godhead in the measure possible to the human Soul, that is to say, to the point of likeness to which the Intellectual-Principle leads us; to exalt ourselves above the Intellectual-Principle is to fall from it.

Yet imbeciles are found to accept such teaching at the mere sound of the words “You yourself are to be nobler than all else, nobler than men, nobler than even gods.” Human audacity is very great: a man once modest, restrained, and simple hears, “You, yourself, are the child of God; those men whom you used to venerate,

those beings whose worship they inherit from antiquity, none of these are His children; you without lifting hand are nobler than the very heavens"; others take up the cry: the issue will be much as if in a crowd all equally ignorant of figures, one man were told that he stands a thousand cubic feet; he will naturally accept his thousand cubits even though the others present are said to measure only five cubits; he will merely tell himself that the thousand indicates a considerable figure.

Another point: (you hold that) God has care for you; how then can He be indifferent to the entire Universe in which you exist?

We may be told that He is too much occupied to look upon the Universe, and that it would not be right for Him to do so; yet when He looks down and upon these people, is He not looking outside Himself and upon the Universe in which they exist? If He cannot look outside Himself so as to survey the Cosmos, then neither does He look upon them.

But they have no need of Him?

The Universe has need of Him, and He knows its ordering and its indwellers and how far they belong to it and how far to the Supreme, and which of the men upon it are friends of God, mildly acquiescing with the cosmic dispensation when in the total course of things some pain must be brought to them—for we are to look not to the single will of any man but to the universe entire, regarding every one according to worth but not stopping for such things where all that may is hastening onward.

Not one only kind of being is bent upon this quest, which brings bliss to whatsoever achieves, and earns for the others a future destiny in accord with their power. No man, therefore, may flatter himself that he alone is competent; a pretension is not a possession; many boast though fully conscious of their lack and many imagine themselves to possess what was never theirs and even to be alone in possessing what they alone of men never had.

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 Elchasai'.

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 anticosmic 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 engaged 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 Protennaio*. 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 Μαιήτρος: 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 than 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 'sarcics' 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.

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