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PLOTINUS AND THE GNOSTICS: *ENNEADS* 2.9

Enneads 2.9 is numbered 33 in the chronological order of Plotinus' writings. According to Robert Harder, "Eine neue Schrift Plotinus", *Hermes* 71 (1936), 1-10, it should be considered as the last part of a larger work, which Porphyry has divided into *Enneads* 3.8 (30), 5.8 (31), 5.5 (32) and 2.9 (33). See also V. Cilento, *Paideia antignostica*, Florence (Firenze): Le Monnier 1971. The title *Against the Gnostics*, with the subtitle *Against those who say that the demiurge is evil* (κακός) is given, like all the titles of Plotinus' treatises, by Porphyry as editor.

Who were the Gnostics?

Gnostic is a term used chiefly by Christian heresiologists to designate a group of second-century heretics, without a named leader, who were alleged to be the ancestors of the groups which were known as Valentinians and Marcionites. The name is not generally used by the Fathers themselves to cover the Valentinians and Marcionites, but modern scholars have often applied it to all second-century thinkers who denied that the physical cosmos was created by the deliberate act of the highest deity.

Whereas Valentinus and Marcion were professing Christians, in the sense that they accepted Jesus as redeemer and made free use of St Paul, if not of the gospels, the modern usage covers apparently non-Christian thinkers such as the authors of the Hermetic Corpus and Chaldaean Oracles, and even perhaps Numenius of Apamea, a philosopher who influenced both Plotinus and his pupil Porphyry.

Porphyry, however, says explicitly that the opponents of Plotinus in *Enneads* 2.9 are "Christians but heretics" who departed from (or took as their starting-point) the ancient philosophy, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the bathos of the intellectual world (*Life of Plotinus* 16). Their authoritative texts included *Zostrianus, Allogenes, Nicotheus, Marsanes* and *Zoroaster.* Amelius (the foremost student of Plotinus, perhaps even his colleague) wrote at length against the *Zostrianus*, while Porphyry demonstrated that the Zoroaster was not the true work of the Iranian prophet.

In 1945, a hoard of unknown manuscripts (including some hermetic texts and a fragment of Plato's *Republic*) was discovered by Egyptian peasants at Nag Hammadi, near the monastery of Chenoboskion, and the eleven codices slowly made their way into the hands of European and American scholars. The majority of texts were clearly by professing Christians, and many of the texts are in the names of apostles. The collection includes, however, a *Zostrianus* (also entitled *The Book of Zoroaster and Zostrianus*), an *Allogenes* and a fragmentary *Marsanes*.

None of these is manifestly Christian; they are notable in fact for anticipating the triad Being-Life-Mind which figures in Neoplatonic analysis of the Noetic realm from the time of Iamblichus if not of Porphyry. (Iamblichus, in his *De Anima*/*On the Soul*, is the only other pagan to refer to the Gnostics, apparently treating them as philosophers if not as Platonists.

Scholars tend, however, to associate these three texts with the *Apocryphon of John*, a work which appears in two versions at Nag Hammadi, and in the Berlin Codex (known since 1896). In its longest version (Nag Hammadi II.1) it appeals to a Book of Zoroaster; the shortest known version of it is a summary in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.29 (c. 180 A.D.), which attributes it to Gnostic Barbelo. The fact that it is in the name of John, that his adversary is a Pharisee and that it alludes to Genesis 1.2 (spirit moving on the face of the waters) all suggest that it is the work of a Christian, despite lack of explicit reference to the New Testament.

Modern scholars tend to sue the term Sethian to characterize the authors of all these texts, because Theodoret gives that appellation to the Gnostic Barbelo.

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Plotinus, Porphyry, and Christianity.

Plotinus himself does not show any knowledge of Christianity, here or elsewhere. At *Enneads* 2.9.10 he expresses diffidence (αἰδώς) because some of the adherents of the false doctrine are "friends". The wording is reminiscent of Plato, *Republic* 595 ("despite our reverence for Homer, we cannot allow him into the ideal city"), and of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a, where truth is to be preferred even to friends. Aristotle was speaking of men who had been his fellow-pupils under Plato; Plotinus is perhaps speaking of men who had bene his fellow-pupils under Ammonius Saccas. The allusion is all the more pungent because Aristotle was rejecting the Platonic theory of forms, whereas Plotinus is upholding the true understanding of Plato against his detractors.

Yet Plotinus attacks the Gnostics on grounds that could also be urged against Christians in general. For example, they imagine that they are superior to the heavens (2.9.9) and choose to be ἰδιῶται, i.e. to opt out of the business of the world. They deny the eternity of the cosmos (2.9.7), pretend that diseases are evil spirits who can be expelled by incantations (2.9.14), claim that providence cares for them individually (2.9.16), yet claim that to earn divine favour one must simply "look to God" without cultivating virtue (2.9.15). At 2.9.8 Plotinus sneers that if they do not like the world they can leave it when they wish – a jibe that the rhetorician Celsus had made against the Christians in the second century. Even the implied comparison with the Epicureans, who deny that the gods care for the world, reminds us of Lucian, *Alexander or the False Prophet*, where Alexander of Aboneutichus denounces Christians and Epicureans as atheists since they reject his miracles.

"Catholic" Christians were anti-Epicurean because they held that the material cosmos is the creation of a benign God. The opponents of Plotinus, by contrast, hold that sin is the cause of the world's existence. They assert that Sophia or Wisdom was ensnared when she looked down at matter, shedding her own reflection on the darkness and engendering a reflection of this reflection (εἴδωλον εἰδώλου) which they call the Demiurge. Can this be a Christian view?

In the *Apocryphon of John* almost exactly the same scenario is described, including the reflection of a reflection. A similar account, though now corrupt, appears in the *Zostrianus*. Hence the modern tendency to identify the Gnostics of Plotinus with Sethians (G. Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung,* Leiden: Brill 1975), against H.-C. Puech, "Plotin et les Gnostiques", in *Les Sources de Plotin* (Fondation Hardt 1960), who argued that they are Valentinians. Valentinians, however, believed that matter is a product of the fall of Sophia, not the cause of it.

Somewhat less similar is the narrative in *Hermetica* I (*Poimandres*) of the seduction of the heavenly *Anthropos* by his reflection in the underlying matter. There is also a cognate passage in Numenius (Fr. 16 Des Places, Paris 1973), in which the Second God (Second Mind) undergoes a schism as a result of looking away from the First Mind and towards matter. Numenius was also familiar with Genesis 1.3 (spirit on face of waters), and seems to believe in a special providence as well as some form of bodily resurrection. He has been suspected of echoing Philo, and may have been part of an intellectual milieu in the second century which did not yet draw clear lines between Christians, Gnostics and Platonists. See Dylan Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2014; Tuomas Rasimus, "Porphyry and the Gnostics", in J. D. Turner and K. Corrigan (eds), *Plato's Parmenides and its Heritage* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2010).

Should the treatise *Against the Gnostics* also be seen, as E.R. Dodds proposed, as a farewell to Numenius? Does he develop a more positive view of matter as a consequence of his break with the Gnostic "friends"? Compare his twelfth treatise (*Enneads* II.4), where matter is prime evil, with *Enneads* 1.8 (his 51st).

The *Grossschrift*.

While not all scholars agree that *Enneads* 30-33 originally constituted one treatise, a continuity of argument is generally acknowledged.

Enneads* 3.8 (30): *On Nature, Contemplation and the One.

Here Plotinus, taking the "Aristotelian" belief in the eternity of the world as the true platonic one, argues that a logos, or reason principle, acts as the instrument of an idea by contemplating that idea. Nature (*phusis*) may be regarded as a soul which brings forth the physical order by contemplation, but her contemplation (in silence) is less perfect than that of the soul in a human, and this in turn is less perfect than that of the intellect. The highest form of contemplation is one that unites the intellect with its object in an exalted mode of life.

Silence is a key term in "Sethian" texts, e.g. in the *Marsanes*, where the Unknown Silent One is superior even to the aeon Barbelo (*bara Elohim*, "God founded"), and in the *Three Steles of Seth*, where it represents the climax of ascent by contemplation. The triad Existence, Vitality, Mentality is the basis of a progressive ascent in the *Zostrianus*. Plotinus may therefore be inscribing within his own philosophy a number of terms that were in common use among his opponents.

Enneads* 5.5 (31): *That the Intelligibles are not outside the Intellect

Plotinus develops the argument, already adumbrated in *Enneads* 3.8, that the perception of any object by the intellect is a uniting with its form, and therefore the demiurgic Intellect (*Nous* itself) must be coextensive with the ideas that it contemplates. The literal interpretation of the *Timaeus*, which makes the Demiurge other than, and perhaps inferior to, the Paradigm which contains the Ideas, is thus rejected. Hence we have the paradox that *Nous* and the Ideas are one, and yet the Ideas themselves are many. Here, as elsewhere, *Nous* is One-Many, and cannot be the source of its own unity. Thus we must posit the One as the source of that unity, raising it above existence, Intellect and even Goodness (5.5.13).

There is some ambiguity as to whether the One is the Good or superior to the Good (strictly speaking, it has no properties, and is called both one and good because it is the *cause* of these properties). It is clear, however, that the Good must be omnipresent in the cosmos because without the Good there would no final cause, no reason for any existence, hence nothing would exist. Likewise, the One must be present to all things if they are to possess any kind of unity tough their unity will always be mixed in some sense with plurality.

Hence the Gnostics are wrong to suppose that the cosmos, which unifies all sensible existents, can be radically evil in its origin.

Enneads* 5.8 (32): *On Intellectual Beauty

Although the Beautiful was pronounced inferior to the Good at 5.5.12, the Beautiful (καλόν) is the inevitable manifestation of the Good (ἀγαθόν), since the higher always overflows or superabounds to the lower level. Beauty too therefore must be omnipresent in the physical cosmos. Wisdom (Σοφία) is to be identified with Nous, insofar as Nous is the demiurgic principle, working through Soul.

Hence there can be no question of the world originating from the transgression or folly of Sophia; there can be no question of a Demiurge creating this world as an ugly simulacrum of a superior world that he has never contemplated directly.

***Enneads* 2.9 (33): synopsis**

2.9.1. We must posit neither more nor less than three transcendent principles. The First, called the One or the Good, is not really part of any series, but these designations express its extreme simplicity. Nous, which is one-many, cannot be identical with the One; neither can Soul, the principle of motion, be identical with Nous, which is always at rest. Hence we have three: do we need four? No, because intercalating Logos between Nous and Soul (as Christians do?) would deprive Soul of its capacity for intellection.

2.9.2-4. Soul (not Wisdom) is capable of falling if it ceases to fix its attention on Beauty. The proper function of Soul (which the World-Soul never fails to perform) is to dispense the illumination of the higher realm to the lower. Matter too must always exist (even if, as some texts imply, it is the offspring of soul) because, if it could be annihilated, there is no reason why it should come to exist again. We cannot equate the World-Soul's illumination with the individual soul's loss of its wings.

2.9.5-9. Our opponents pine for a new Earth because they fail to recognise the beauty of the present one. They introduce novel talk of pilgrimage and repentance (again standard Christian terms) because they have plagiarised Plato's myths of the afterlife without understanding them. They expect the soul of the universe to mirror the infirmities of an individual soul, and they ask why the world-soul crates because they fail to see that it cannot do otherwise. Our souls descend as part of the universal economy, and every individual exists for the good of the all. The opponents who imagine themselves to be specially favoured of god, yet living in a hostile world, should ask why God should care for them and not for the whole.

2.9.10-12. They can give no reason for the alleged fall of Wisdom or for the existence of the darkness into which it fell, unless Wisdom or Soul created the darkness itself. (On Plotinus' view, Soul generates matter, but its duty is to animate and beautify matter, not to succumb to its charms).

2.9.13-18. Those who denounce the cosmos fail to perceive that the beings who administer the whole must be superior to us, and hence we cannot expect all things to exist for our sake. To personify diseases as evil spirits is to misunderstand the place of death in the order of being; to despise virtue is worse than to deny providence. It is equally impious to suppose that providence cares only for one species n the cosmos; is not its beauty and its kinship to the intellectual gods apparent to anyone who contemplates the heavens? If they feel no such awe, they should consider the possibility that the fault is with their own faculties; they must awaken to the kinship between the individual soul and its sister, the soul of the world (see *Enneads* 4.4.).

Note on Porphyry.

Socrates Scholasticus, *Church History* 3.23, asserts that Porphyry was a renegade Christian. He is the first pagan to use the phrase "three hypostases" (title of *Enneads* 5.1; cf Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.10) and his description of the One as "God above all" (*Life of Plotinus* 23) is anticipated about 80 times in Origen. If he is the author of the anonymous *Commentary on the Parmenides*, where this phrase occurs (Hadot, *Porphyrye et Victorinus*, Paris: Vrin 1968; see however, the edition of G. Bechtle, 1999), he introduced the Being-Life-Mind triad into Platonic parlance. At *Letter to Marcella* 24, he reproduces a tetrad of virtues (faith, hope, love, truth) which is first attested in a Valentinian text, the *Gospel of Philip*, *Nag Hammadi Codices* II.78.24-25. Did he come to Plotinus from heterodox Christian, or perhaps Numenian, circles?