

SIX LECTURES ON PLOTINUS AND GNOSTICISM

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
I EMANATION	5
II MYSTICISM	14
III THE SOUL'S RETURN TO HER ORIGIN IN ALEXANDRIAN LITERATURE . .	26
A. Basilides (floruit ca. 120-145, Alexandria)	28
B. Valentinus (floruit ca. 135-160)	35
C. Clement (floruit ca. 150-215 AD)	40
D. Origen (floruit ca. 185-254 AD)	42
IV THE CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PLOTINUS' THEORY OF SOUL	48
A. The early treatises	49
B. Discussions within the school. Analytical methods	61
C. The Gnostic discussions	65
V CONVERSION. THE LATE TREATISES	75
A. Conversion	75
B. The late treatises	78
VI THE HUMAN PERSON	86
SUMMARY	101
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	106
INDEX	109

PREFACE

In the chapters of this book a series of problems is condensed that for decades has haunted the literature on Plotinus and Neoplatonism. A tradition of seeing everything in a Platonic perspective was and is still alive and at work, but increasingly a different paradigm makes itself felt in our days under the influence of a growing interest in Gnosticism. Gathering the evidence for Gnostic views, I read the *Enneads* in chronological order. This had the unexpected effect of making periodization possible. I hope the short track of my arguments may be sufficiently clear for the reader to see the landscape in which Gnostic and other influences find their place.

At several places, where quotations from the *Enneads* are given in translation, single words or short expressions are added in Greek. This is done in order to avoid the argument being diverted as a consequence of the different linguistic context. The translation of *Noûς* as “Intellect” is chosen in accordance with a prevailing tradition, but with the proviso that no adequate rendering is possible for a concept that in one word carries so much fundamental theory.

INTRODUCTION

In the chapters of this book a series of problems is condensed that for decades has haunted the literature on Plotinus and Neoplatonism. A tradition of seeing everything in a Platonic perspective was and is still alive and at work, but increasingly a different paradigm makes itself felt in our days under the influence of a growing interest in Gnosticism. Gathering the evidence for Gnostic views, I read the *Enneads* in chronological order, analyzing the relevant texts. What came out clearly is not only that Gnostic views are present in the *Enneads*, in most cases adapted and corrected by Plotinus. It was also clear that in the *Enneads* Gnostic doctrines or myths are criticized in wordings that unmistakably were in common use between Plotinus and his adversaries and that even in several texts within the *Enneads* are used by Plotinus without reserve and as a matter-of-course. It seems better not to speak of Gnostic influence, as if Plotinus could have found in the Gnostic systems some theories that were apt to be inserted into the architecture of his own system. Rather these doctrines seem to have been part of the “spirit of the age” (E.R. Dodds). In our chapter 3 short extracts are given from the works of four Alexandrian authors, roughly contemporary to Plotinus, showing that many theories need not be considered as specifically Gnostic. They form part of a whole of generally accepted patterns of thought in the Alexandrian schools of philosophy.

Chronological study of the *Enneads* made me rediscover a thesis I defended in a former publication.¹ A theory of inward contemplation as showing the way to one’s own Self and to the All, is present in the whole of the *Enneads*. In the early treatises it is presented with a striking frequency and a special ardour. When Plotinus wrote these early treatises he had followed the lectures of Ammonius Saccas for eleven years. I consider this as an argument for ascribing the origin of the theory to Ammonius, the more so if we take in consideration that there is

¹ David Runia (ed.), *Plotinus amid Gnostics and Christians*, (Symposium held at the Free University) Amsterdam 1984, 73-92.

no precedent in any Greek tradition (*pace* H.R. Schwyzer in RE s.v. Plotin, col. 580: “im griechischen Denken kaum vorgebildet”) (see our chapter IV A p. 58).

I have coupled this suggestion to acceptance of Porphyry’s account of Plotinus’ interest in Indian philosophy (*Vita* 3). I see no sufficient reason to consider Porphyry’s statements as sheer fantasy, rooted in romantic feelings. The textual parallels between Plotinus’ theory and what we find in the Upanishads appear to give assistance to a reconsideration of the thesis, till now dismissed as old-fashioned, of a rather profound affinity of Plotinus’ thought to Indian traditions. In our chapter 4, p. 58-59 texts from Greek authors are quoted attesting the presence of Indian philosophers in Alexandria.

In Plotinus’ works I distinguish roughly three periods. The arguments for this view are given in the extensive textual analyses in chapters 4 A B C and 5, illustrating respectively Plotinus’ first period of writing, before Porphyry’s arrival in Rome ([1-21]); the problems of Soul; texts pertaining to the Gnostic crisis (the “long treatise”), and in chapter 5 the analysis of the theory of conversion. The grouping together of these clusters of texts, in combination with the chronological sequence of the *Enneads*, makes it possible to observe significant differences in the method of the discussions, the style of writing and the emphasis Plotinus gives to some of his fundamental theories. This should not be understood as an attempt at describing changes or even a development in the theories themselves. Between the three periods, as I try to distinguish them (early treatises 1-21; Porphyrian period, roughly 22-45; and late treatises 46-54) changes in emphasis and method make their appearance.

Another issue, fundamental in the *Enneads*, but not always recognised as such, is mysticism. Its presence in Plotinus’ philosophy is unmistakable, but most scholars seem to consider it as a casual addition to the theoretical architecture of the system, and consequently leave it aside in their analysis of Plotinus’ metaphysics. My view is that mystical experience was the vital centre of Plotinus’ thought, from which came not only his inspiration, but even some of the fundamental patterns of the philosophical system. One of the most important patterns is a theory of conversion being built in into the theory of emanation. When the creative light leaves the One, it must turn around to its origin in order to receive its own form as Intellect. This mechanism repeats itself at every stage of the ongoing emanation. It is at work even in the artist who must within himself find the forms to be projected in matter. On the part of the human person it appears as the principle that the origin of universal life can only be found in the depths of one’s own mind, the famous principle of “finding the All within yourself”. This principle of the individual’s inner centre being identical to the centre of the

All was fundamental in the mind of Plotinus, and probably rooted in his inner experiences.

I make a distinction between two kinds of mystic experience. The one is of a cognitive type: reaching knowledge or enlightenment is the aim of the journey. This is the way of Plato's philosopher, who may reach his goal after long years of study and training. The sudden enlightenment, coming at the end of the journey (*ἐξαιφνης*, *Symp.* 210 E, Ep. VII 341 D), is often interpreted as mystical, but we should bear in mind that Plato's experience is essentially a process of attaining to knowledge, and as such reserved to the trained philosopher. Another example of intellectual mysticism is Stoic monism, a system built on rational foundations. Monism is a philosophy, not mysticism.

The other type is that of a mystical experience involving the whole of the human person. The most obvious example is the medieval tradition of mystical love taking possession of all of our human faculties, but it is also the type of mysticism that we find in Plotinus. I consider the complete involvement of the whole of the human person as the decisive criterion of authentic mysticism, calling it accordingly the "existential" type.

In the field of Plotinian studies as a rule no methodical distinction is made between mysticism (in the existential sense) and metaphysics. Even in the handbooks of history of mysticism the explanations are currently given in the terminology of a theological or philosophical system. In a recent work the distinction is made valid to a certain degree. Bernard McGin writes: "The constant compenetration in Plotinus' thought between metaphysics and mysticism makes it necessary to give a short outline of Plotinus' metaphysics, before passing on to a more detailed discussion of the concepts of contemplation and mystical union." (Bernard McGin, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. Vol. I, New York 1994, quoted from the Italian translation: *Storia della Mistica Cristiana in Occidente*, Marrietti Genova 1997, p. 60). (Vol. I 57-73 Plotino). The distinction is also applied, but in the reversed direction, in the voluminous dissertation by Jens Halfwasser, on the "ascent to the One" (*Der Aufstieg zum Einen*, Stuttgart 1992). In his introduction (p. 15) Halfwasser states that for methodical reasons he restricts his study to the metaphysical aspect of the ascent, being this the only element susceptible of being explained philosophically.

At several places, where quotations from the *Enneads* are given in translation, single words or short expressions are added in Greek. This is done in order to avoid the argument being diverted as a consequence of the different linguistic context. The translation of *Νοῦς* as "Intellect" is chosen in accordance with a prevailing tradition, but with the proviso that no adequate rendering is possible for

a concept that in one word carries so much fundamental theory. I must apologize for using the pronoun “She” when speaking of the World-Soul. Of the complete English translations of the Enneads by K.S. Guthrie (1918), Stephen McKenna (1927-1930) and A.H. Armstrong (Loeb-ed.) the first has consistently “She”, the other two have “it”. “It” has the sound of concepts and mechanisms, too abstract, as I feel it, for Soul as a living and life-giving divinity.

Chapter I

EMANATION

Bonum est diffusivum sui.
It is in the nature of the Good to make other beings share in it.

In medieval scholasticism the Latin proverb quoted above was fundamental in the theological doctrine of creation: the Good, by its very nature, communicates itself. In its pregnant shortness the adage bears an inheritance from neoplatonic metaphysics. The principle is in fact found in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. In a chapter belonging to one of his early treatises he explains how the creative Spirit or Intellect (*Noûs*) engenders the world soul. Kronos, symbol of the universal Intellect, eats his children, that is keeps them inside himself, until, being saturated and having become full-grown Intellect, he generates Zeus, that is Soul. Indeed, says Plotinus, when a being comes to perfection, it must have offspring, and when it is such an immense power it cannot be without children (V 1 [10] 7, 32-38)¹

The mythological symbolism, not a very happy one, is found already in Plato's *Cratylus* (396 B). Plotinus is careful to give the doctrine a metaphysical status. In the same chapter and in the *Enneads* throughout he states it in the recurrent formula: "every being that has reached perfection brings forth, and what is eternally perfect brings forth always and eternally" (V 1 [10] 6, 37-38). Elsewhere he says: "when a being reaches its perfection, we see that it brings forth and cannot endure to stay alone with itself, so how could it be that the most perfect and first Good should be confined within itself?" (V4 [7] 1, 28-35). In another chapter, where the discussion is about the sequence Good, Intellect, Soul, we read:

¹ Quotations are given as follows:

V 1 [10] 1, 1-16

V 1 = fifth *Ennead*, first treatise;

[10] = chronologically the tenth treatise

1, 1-16 = first chapter, lines 1-16

In shorter quotations only chapters and lines are given. The number of lines may differ slightly in the various text-editions.

“Everything necessarily gives out from itself to others, otherwise the Good would not be Good, nor would the Spirit be Spirit, and Soul would not be herself” (II 9 [33] 3, 7-9).

In the Plotinian system all things have their first origin in a principle called the One or Good. This first and highest principle imparts being and life in a never ending downward stream throughout the universe. The life-giving impulse is inherent in its nature. Just for being good and perfect it inevitably communicates itself to other beings. This metaphysical necessity is found in every degree of being, which means that the stream of emanation propagates itself throughout the universe down to the lowest degree of material being.

Plotinus considers himself a commentator of Plato and for most of his doctrines lays a claim to Plato’s authority. The question may however be raised whether the structure of reality in the form of emanationism can legitimately be considered as an inheritance from Plato.

In Plato’s philosophy two ways of explaining the origin of the universe are found: the demiurgic explanation in the *Timaeus*, and the metaphysical theory of the one-and-many, to be found in the unwritten doctrines and also, in slightly different form, in the *Philebus*.

In the *Timaeus* Plato introduces a divine builder of the universe, who, like a good architect, traces a plan for the coming into being of this world, and when he brings it into existence, wants the universe to be as good as possible (29 E). The condition “as good as possible” is an allusion to the unwritten doctrines, where the first and highest supra-essential being is called the One or the Good. The architect is called the Demiurge. He goes to work according to a pre-conceived plan, just as the human artist or architect must work out a plan before setting out to realize it in visible materials. The mechanism by which the universe comes into existence is described on the same pattern on which, as Plato sees it, human creative work develops. The process is currently called a “demiurgic process”, and is essentially a rational procedure.

In order to explain why some of the results do not conform to the intentions of the maker, Plato introduces the principle of Necessity (*Ἀνάγκη*), indicating the resistance of matter to the formative principles, just as the material used by the sculptor may not yield to all his intentions. The principle of *Ἀνάγκη* probably came to Plato from Anaxagoras, or in general from the tradition of Ionian philosophy. It represents the laws inherent in the material substrate, which dominate to a certain extent the behaviour of material bodies. As an *analogon* we find in Plato the *ἄπειρον* of the *Philebus* and the indefinite principle of the unwritten doctrines.

In the unwritten doctrines this indefinite principle is the counterpart of the One. The theory is a metaphysical one, developed by Plato on the basis of Pythagorean speculation about unity and plurality. In Plato's written work it cannot be found in any explicit formula, but from Aristotle onwards the whole philosophical tradition bears testimony that in Plato's teaching the problem of unity and plurality was fundamental. It is stated in terms of the opposition "one-ness" vs. "indefinite two-ness" (ἕν-δυσὸς ἀόριστος).

The structure of the theory makes it clear that it was not conceived as a theory of creation, as was the theory of the *Timaeus*, but rather as a metaphysical analysis of reality. The first principle from which all things receive their being, is in the Republic called *the Good* (508E–509A), and in the unwritten doctrines is described as a perfect one-ness. In order to explain how a plurality of things may receive being and existence from this absolute one-ness, Plato introduces the Indefinite Dyad. The interaction between Dyad and the One generates the Forms, which in their turn generate all existing beings in the spiritual world and in this world. Aristotle mentions Plato's indefinite principle as the formless Great and Small. Plato's theory was the immediate precursor of Aristotle's matter-and-form theory, both of them intended as a universally valid analysis of being.

The couple of a definite and an indefinite principle is found also in the *Philebus* (16 and 23–26), where it has the names of ἄπειρον and πέραις (16C) and also μᾶλλον καὶ ἥττον (24A). It is accompanied by a causal instance (αἰτία), described as a cosmic Intellect or creative Spirit (*Noûs*). This principle of causality does not stand at the top of a developing universe in an emanationist sense, but, as in the *Timaeus*, there is a cause, working on rational principles and calling things into existence (i.e. causing a γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν, 26E). This is rather an analysis of an established state of things, not containing any hint of a spontaneous evolution, as emanationism has it. As a matter of fact, Plato's metaphysics of the one-and-many does not go beyond the limits of a conceptual theory. What is absent is just the distinctive feature of emanationism: that of a stream of creative vitality breaking forth from the One and First. When compared to the system of the *Enneads*, Plato's system lacks the stress on the spontaneous coming forth of the universe as a vital whole.

The problem stated at the beginning of this chapter was whether a theory of emanation as found in the *Enneads* of Plotinus is to be found already in Plato's philosophical system, either in a well-developed or in a rudimentary state.

Plotinus considers himself as a follower of Plato and he is in the habit of indicating where in Plato's work lie the sources for his own doctrines. But just for the principle of emanationism there are no references to doctrines of Plato.

Plotinus accepts emanationism as self-evident. He does not feel the need to argue about it by appealing to Plato. The doctrine is so fundamental to the system of the Enneads that it is everywhere explained and nowhere doubted or criticised.

The overall features are:

1. All existence has its origin in a first principle which is perfectly One.
2. A stream of creative energy flows out from the One, creating and penetrating the universe to its utmost limits. The first duality is found in Intellect, which surrounds as it were the One. Then follows the All-Soul, and from these onwards the life-giving force manifests itself in the infinite multitude of living beings.
3. The mechanism of emanation has a double phase: there is an indefinite flow of energy issuing from the first One. This outflowing energy becomes aware that it is leaving its origin, and turning around contemplates its origin. In the act of contemplation it receives light from the One and First, and by that light is given its Form.
4. The creative mechanism repeats itself throughout the universe down to the lowest level of existence. Even there every being receives existence and Form as a consequence of its conversion to the creative light coming from the origin. The light-image is in the Enneads the current way of referring to the creative process. Plotinus stresses everywhere that it is not the One itself that descends to the created being, but the light emanating from it: "the origin itself stays above".

Only the first of these points can be explained by reference to Plato. The other points contain the specific features of Plotinus' theory of emanation.

Doubts have been raised about the importance of emanationism within the philosophical system of the Enneads. Armstrong (*Mind* 1937) calls it an "incur-sion of metaphor and confusion into the middle of a rational and well-worked out philosophy". He does not make it very clear what his objections are against the use of metaphor. The solution he proposes to the problem lies in the theory of the immateriality of light, inherited by Plotinus from the Stoics. This, in Armstrong's view, made it possible to receive the Stoic materialistic doctrine. The principle of emanationism is regarded by Armstrong as a form of Solar Theology.²

Armstrong's argument leans heavily on the conviction that metaphors are to be avoided in philosophical discourse. Avoiding metaphors is considered by Armstrong as a self-evident methodical principle. Before Armstrong the principle was at work in the studies published by H.F. Müller, editor and translator of the Enneads. In an essay published in *Hermes* 1913 he argues that it is an error to describe the philosophy of the Enneads as a system of emanation. The study is

² A.H. Armstrong, *The architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, Cambridge 1940, p. 53-55.

well-documented, and even those texts in the *Enneads* which seem to give full scope to a theory of emanation, are discussed carefully. But, according to H.F. Müller, these texts serve only didactical purposes. They are a way of explaining things, for want of better, because metaphysics is metaphysics and should be described by abstract argument. Emanationism, he says, consists of metaphors and images, so it should be left aside to leave room for genuine philosophy: “dialectics first, after that come images and metaphors.” This way of seeing things seems to depend on personal preference in the author of the study. There is no sound argument for the view that images or metaphors cannot be a useful vehicle to convey thoughts, most of all if these thoughts would lose their importance when clad in the abstract formulas of conceptual reasoning.

As a fundamental principle Plotinus states that the first cause of the universe “remains above” in its majesty and uniqueness, and does not communicate itself to the universe. But if the universe should be separated from the first source of life (as the Gnostics thought it was), the whole theory of creation breaks down. If there is no outflow of all-powerful creative energy, there is a break between the One and the universe. But the One is not isolated, and it is, by its very nature, sending forth creative energy. The necessity of this creative process is stressed by Plotinus on metaphysical grounds. The shortest formula is: “all beings that reach perfection generate; and what is eternally perfect generates always and eternally” (V 1 [10] 6, 37-38). In the next chapter the statement is repeated, and the text leaves no doubt as to the question whether the argument is about the One and First: “from this ancestry comes Intellect (*ταύτης τοι γενεᾶς ὁ νοῦς*) — for as it is perfect it must create, and being so immense a power it could not be without offspring”. (V 1 [10] 7, 27-38) A longer text, lyrically inspired like most of the early treatises, is IV 8 [6] 6, 11-18: “what comes after it is generated out of the unspeakable power that was in it in all its immensity, a power we should not bring to a stop keeping it in the bounds of jealousy as it were; on the contrary, it must be constant in its course for ever, until the universe reaches the farthest possible limit, pressed forward by the immeasurable power that sends forth from itself to all things, and that is unable to allow anything whatever not to have a share of itself. For there was nothing that could have forbidden anything whatever to share in the nature of the Good, in as far as things were capable of participating.”

The imagery in this passage has the unmistakable ring of a system of emanation: generating, having a constant course forever, giving a share of itself to everything up to the farthest limits. Texts of this kind do not appear only in the first period of Plotinus’ writing. In the middle period e.g. we find: “It is necessary that every being gives from its own to other beings, otherwise the Good would not be the

Good, nor Intellect Intellect” (II 9 [33] 3, 7-9). The mention of jealousy as a possible reason for withholding the flow of energy is an allusion to *Timaeus* 29E.

The One and First, described as generating power of the universe, is found both in the early and later treatises. “It brings into existence the creative Intellect, and its nature is such that it is the fountainhead of the highest forms of existence, and a power generating all beings while remaining by itself” (VI 9 [8] 5, 36-37, and V 1 [10] 7, 9). The fountainhead or source is repeated in III 8 [30] 10, 4-5 together with the image of a gigantic tree drawing life from a hidden centre in the roots (VI 7 [38] 12, 23 and VI 8 [39] 14, 31-35). In these texts we read: “all things are full of life and as it were over-boiling; they form up a stream coming from one source. — All this came from one source, — which is the source of being.” The image of the source is often accompanied by the expression “generating power of all things”, and it persists in expressions like ἐξεργούη (V 1 [10] 6, 7-8), τὸ ὑπερπλήρες αὐτοῦ (V 2 [11] 1, 9), ὑπερζέουσαν ζωῆ (VI 5 [23] 12, 9), ἐκ τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ ρύνετα (V 5 [32] 5, 22).

The imagery of emanation cannot be disposed of, as H.F. Müller does, as an incidental occurrence of poetical language, used for didactical purposes. We find it from first to last in the chronological series of treatises. The inspired language of most of the very early treatises may not be used as a pretext for denying their philosophical importance. The fundamental theories are developed already in the early works, a fact which, by the way, has contributed to the impossibility of finding a real development in Plotinus’ works. Probably his attention shifted somewhat in the course of the years and maybe the style of his arguments took on a more technical and abstract turn. The imagery of source and river more or less gave way to a similar image, running on parallel lines and more open to the use of metaphysical terms: the image of the creative light (φῶς). This imagery is found also in the early period. In IV 8 [6] 4, 2-5 where the situation of the individual souls is discussed, we read: “The souls follow a spiritual aspiration when they turn round to the origin out of which they were born, but they also possess a power over the world here, just as the light in the higher spheres remains dependent on the sun but is generous enough and without envy in leading the dance for what comes after it.”

The light of the sun was in antiquity considered as a kind of immaterial outflow. It seemed impossible to admit that by radiating light the sun does indeed lose material substance. This made the image quite appropriate to convey the idea that the source of light “remains above” (the standard expression in the *Enneads*) while the light fills the space between the sun and the earth, imparting life to the created beings without being separated from the sun, its source.

In a treatise of a later period we read: “In the One and First there was not a Spirit and its Thought [as was the case in Aristotle’s theology] but a radiance engendering these to exist next to Him and granting them to exist in his presence. But He himself was only that radiance engendering Intellect” (VI 7 [38] 36, 22-24). In the same treatise the imagery of the outflowing source comes through: “All things are full of life and as it were over-boiling. They form up a stream coming from one source.” (VI 7 [38] 12, 23). (About this text H.F. Müller, p. 416, says that though the wording is that of emanationism, appearances are deceptive.)

The critics who reject the concept of emanation do so mostly because they suppose it to run counter to the metaphysical architecture of the system of the Enneads. The central point in this criticism is that in a theory of emanation the principle of the One and First cannot be maintained in its perfection and uniqueness, because emanation implies outflow of being from the One. But this is just the point Plotinus is careful to correct. In the numerous texts where the theory is explained or even mentioned in passing, he adds the precaution: do not think the outflow of energy does in any degree diminish the perfection and completeness of the One. In a text e.g. about the source of life, the source of Intellect, the origin of being, the cause of the good, the root of soul, he adds: “All these are not poured out from Him (= the One) and do not by that act diminish him, because they are not a material mass.” (ὄγκος, VI 9 [8] 9, 1-4). He wants to avoid every possible doubt about the spiritual sense of his theory and the unattainable majesty of the One. As a rule he uses the clause *μένοντος ἐκείνου* in various forms, e.g. I 6 [1] 7, 25-26; V 4 [7] 2, 20-40.

Numerous texts can be adduced to confirm the view that no part of the One is outflowing in the process of emanation. The emphasis Plotinus lays on this principle supposes by itself the presence of a process of emanation, otherwise there would be no sense in stressing the fact that the One does not undergo any diminution. If any creative act could take away part of the One and First, that would be contradictory to its very one-ness, but it would also be contradictory to the perfection of the One if no creative act at all should come forth from it. Plotinus insists on the principle that the One and First does not in the creative act communicate itself to the created things. What is emanating is not the One itself, but its creative energy (*δύναμις*) or creative light (*φῶς*). The formulas are found from the first to the last treatise (in the chronological order) (e.g. V 2 [11] 1, 9-11; V 3 [49] 12, 40-44; τὸ ἐν δύναμις πάντων, V 1 [10] 7, 9).

To the imagery of light is added the vital formula of turning to the origin and by that act becoming receptive to the creative powers emanating from the first origin. “The first principle was as it were overflowing and its more than fullness brought

into existence otherness; what was generated turned back to it, was brought to fullness and became seeing towards it. By that act it became Intellect”. (V 2 [11] 1, 8-11) This mechanism of emanation is expressed in Aristotelean terms. The emanating energy by turning round to the origin receives form: “Intellect is by itself indeterminate, being vision only, but it receives determinateness from the object of vision (i.e. from the One and First)”. (V 4 [7] 2, 6-7) Receiving form (*μορφοῦται*, V 1 [10] 5, 17) is the result of an act of contemplation turned back towards the emanating light: “this act of seeing is Intellect”. (V 1 [10] 7, 6) Most explicit as to the Aristotelean terminology is the eleventh chapter of IV 8 [30]: Intellect is a kind of vision, that is seeing vision, so it is a potentiality coming to actuality. — For the seeing of the Spirit the Good is what brings completion”. In a late treatise (V 3 [49] 11, 4-12) we read:

“Intellect sought to attain to the One-and-First not as being Intellect but as a faculty of sight that is not yet seeing. — The Intellect possesses an outline of this sight, otherwise Intellect could not have accepted to receive it within itself, and this outline became a many out of a One, Knowing in this way it contemplated the One, and so became actualised vision. This is what Intellect is, when it possesses and possesses as Intellect; before that it was only aspiration and not yet actualised vision.” (*ἀτύπωτος ὄψις*).

The arguments used by H.F. Müller in his 1913 article are repeated, curiously enough, by Giovanni Reale in his otherwise very well-written *Storia della Filosofia Antica* (vol. IV, Milano 1989, p. 606 ff.). He dryly summarizes his arguments against admitting any kind of emanation in the philosophy of the Enneads, arguments which, as in the studies by H.F. Müller, arise from a general mistrust in the use of metaphorical language. On p. 520 Reale speaks about: “images which remain dubious if no conceptual explanation is given.” The richness of well-reasoned arguments in the extensive metaphysical treatises makes this statement very much questionable. Moreover, two out of the four points made by Reale are completely beside the mark. On p. 606 it is claimed that (a) emanation means that all existing things flow out from the substance itself of the first Principle, and that (b) in this flowing out there is a gradual and uninterrupted loss of the creative power within that same substance.” The first of these two statements, besides being conceptualised in terms of materialism, flies in the face of the numerous texts where Plotinus explains that the first Principle remains above”. Plotinus is careful to avoid every possible misunderstanding as to the spiritual sense of his doctrine. The second statement ignores the mechanism of emanation. There is not simply an uninterrupted and ever-diminishing flow of substance from the first One downwards, but on every level of existence a creative

act in two steps: turning back to the origin in order to see the light, and by that act receiving form.

To quote only one text (VI 9 [8] 5, 36-37):

“The One brings Intellect into existence. Its nature is such that it is the source of all that is best, and a power that brings forth the existing things *without going out from itself and without being diminished*, and not being within the beings that are brought forth by it.” The text in the clearest possible way gives expression to the two sides of the problem: the One does not diminish when creating, nor is it mixed up with creatures, and nevertheless it is a power bringing forth the existing things.

The use of the term “power” (*δύναμις*), so many times stressed by Plotinus, is a sure sign that the creative activity is seen as something emanating from the One. At the same time the explications added to the statement are intended to secure the absolute transcendence of the One and First. The two aspects, transcendence and emanation, cannot be separated although they may seem to contradict one another. We may notice in passing that the absolute transcendence of the One is described with so much religious fervour because the awareness of its majesty rests on a personal mystical experience of Plotinus, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Chapter II

MYSTICISM

*κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα
by a presence stronger than knowledge*

Mysticism is a difficult subject to write about, because it cannot be observed in its vital presence or in the way it works. We can only rely on the accounts given by the mystics themselves. The problem then arises how to find intrinsic criteria by which we may distinguish true mysticism from counterfeit.

From the outset two ways are open, broadly speaking. There is a mysticism built upon the desire of knowledge and aiming at a state of bliss in which the soul may know her first and divine origin. This state of bliss is reached at the end of a long journey of detachment and philosophical meditation. The other kind of mysticism is not built upon desire of knowledge in the first place. It takes the human heart as its home with its ineradicable desire of real and eternal existence. What it strives after is a state of union-in-love with God, lover of the soul. In the course of this chapter I shall follow this distinction between a cognitive type of mysticism, in which reaching knowledge or enlightenment is the aim of the journey, and an existential type in which the whole person is involved.

The first of the two ways may be called the rational method, and is best exemplified in Plato. Contemplating the many manifestations of goodness and beauty in the visible world, the philosopher becomes aware that all of them represent a unique principle of perfection (*Symposium*). Rising above these visible instances he may come to see what is above the visible Forms and even at the other side of the principles of existence and “at the other side of Being” (Republic VI 509).

Different from this intellectual mysticism is the mysticism of love. This mysticism is characteristic, though not exclusively, to medieval Christianity. Its dis-

tinguishing mark, contrasting it with the Platonic mysticism of knowledge, is the individual being involved existentially in the process of seeking God, and being pushed forward on his quest by love, the knowledge of the heart. This means that there is a person to be loved. The western medieval mystics tirelessly give evidence of this ruling force, the deep affection for their suffering Lord. No philosophy is needed. The loving heart finds its way to the beloved by unfailing intuition.

The difference with the mysticism of knowledge is all-pervading, and implies two features not to be found in the tradition of antiquity. As the person to be loved is God himself, the meditating mystic cannot by force of his own endeavour establish a direct communication. The union with the object of his love can only come to the mystic as a grace received. He must hope and wait that this be granted to him by God's grace, though he must prepare himself by forsaking all things, this world as well as his own faculties of perception and thinking, in order to be open to the coming of his Lord. The mystic experience has by definition a receptive character. In the mysticism of love it is out of the question that the training of the philosopher's mind could ever lead to the final initiation. It is not enlightenment that is sought after, but wholeness and union.

As the loving involvement of the human heart is in this tradition of mysticism the central source of energy, the heart is also the place where creature and creator, the lover and the beloved, meet each other. This is the second of the distinctive features in the mysticism of love, as we find it in Eckhart, Tauler, Ruysbroeck and Juan de la Cruz. In this point there is a remote analogy to be found in the mysticism of the Enneads. For Plotinus there is no Saviour who as a living person may be loved by the meditating mystic, when he tries to realize the presence of the living God in the soul. But a clear affirmation is found of the principle that "in the centre of our own being" the presence of the ultimate and universal Self is to be found.

One of the specific points in the philosophical system of Plotinus is the importance of the judgements and feelings of the individual person. In this point the Stoic philosophers were his remote forerunners. But Stoicism had left the individual at the mercy of a Providence that ruled the world on general lines. The individual had to find his peace of mind by submitting to what Providence or Fate had decided. In Plotinus we find a new development of the Stoic theory of the human person (see our Chapter 6). The individual person and his inward experience now come into their own right. In the technical sense Plotinus' theory of the autonomous human person is a necessary preliminary to his doctrine of mystical experience.

The human soul has descended from the spiritual realm under the impulse of a desire to create. She wanted to manifest herself as exercising power of free will over a realm of her own (V 1 [10] 1: τὸ ἀυτεξούσιον). This would have no sense if there were no human persons to make this claim valid. In late treatises, with their carefully worked out discussions on the Stoic theories of Providence and Faith (III 2-3 = [47-48]) Plotinus stresses the individual's autonomy in giving form to his own way of life. A Providence having absolute power to determine the individual's actions would annihilate the individual's will as such. The World Soul ordering the universe surely has her rules of government, but within the rules which govern the universe the individual has to make his decisions. If it were otherwise *we* as such could not exist, neither could we be ourselves (III 2 [47] 9, 2: ὥστε μηδὲν ἡμᾶς εἶναι). We are not a superficial addition to the universe, but we are a part of the universe as the individuals that we are (III 3 [48] 3, 3: ἡρίθμησαι ὁ τοιόσδε).

In an early treatise the problem is stated already: "In which sense are we humans? Well, insofar as our origin is in the universe we are part of it, but insofar as we are *ourselves*, we are a complete being on our own" (οἰκεῖον ὄλον, II 2 [14] 2, 4). At the very beginning of Plotinus' writing career we find: "If everything in the universe were determined by a causal chain, causality would wipe itself out, and the All would be one whole. In that case *we* would not be *we*, and nothing would be a work done by *ourselves*. We just would be without any reasoning faculty, and our deliberations would be a reasoning by someone other." (III 1 [3] 4, 20-22 and 5, 18-20). Not having our own share in our plans and feelings, we could only be left with an existence of stones being pushed about, not of humans who exercise an activity by themselves and according to their own nature.

Plotinus' arguments as to our individual and autonomous personality are accompanied by an appeal to our elementary feelings of being essentially free. There is no room for any absolute rule of Providence or Fate, just because that would go against our consciousness of being free and active subjects. Plotinus' arguments may be seen as an expression of his inner experience. There is an inner consistency between the awareness of our autonomous inner self and the inner experience of a divine presence which he describes with so much warmth in his early treatises. Both kinds of description: our innermost self and the experience of a divine presence bear testimony to what Plotinus considered to be the ultimate sense of life.

There can be no doubt about the question if in the Enneads descriptions are found of personal mystical experiences. They are given mostly in the context of

discussions about the soul's nature. One of the most significant testimonies is given at the opening of the first chapter of the treatise on the soul's descent:

“Often, when I awake to myself from the body and come to be outside all other things and inside myself, I have a vision of immeasurable beauty. I feel sure that, if ever, I then inhabit the better part of myself, bringing to life the best of all lives and being united with the divine life and firmly established therein. I am taking part in that supreme energy, raising myself above all the rest of the intelligible world. When, having dwelt in that divine world, I come down from the light of Intellect to the level of reason, I wonder and do not understand how I could now or could ever have descended, and how my soul could have entered and taken abode in the body, if, even being within that body, she is of a nature such as was manifest when she was with herself.” (IV 8 [6] 1, 1-11)

This is not an isolated instance:

VI 9 [9] 9, 47-49: “Whosoever has had the vision he knows what I am talking about: that the soul then receives a different kind of life, approaching Him and communicating with Him.”

Ib. 11, 22-25: “This indeed was not seeing, but a different kind of vision, ecstasy and unification, surrender of oneself, reaching out for contact.”

There are many texts in the Enneads where the personal involvement of the philosopher is unmistakable, in the sense that what he describes is his own experiences.¹

For philosophy's sake most of these descriptions are given the form of theoretical expositions about the life of Intellect and the soul's return to the One and First. The mystical experience cannot be the result of teaching, for there is more to it than rational arguments. In the background the experience of having passed through the realities themselves is manifest: “The perception of that First One

¹ The first attempt to mark out mysticism from theology and philosophy alike was made by William James (1842-1910) in his work on *The Variety of Religious Experience* (1902), Lectures XVI and XVII. James stated that mystical experiences cannot be observed from the outside. The evidence we have at our disposal is descriptions given by the mystics themselves. To this is added the fact that, when setting out to explain, the mystic invariably stresses the impossibility of giving adequate descriptions. Accordingly, James tried to find criteria for authenticity. Two of his most important ones are: first, the constant stress laid by the mystic himself on the inexpressability of the experience. The vision into which he has been taken up on the other side of the borderline is out of reach for any wording. Secondly, the experience must have had an impact such as to bring about a lasting change in the personality of the mystic.

The criteria and distinctions formulated by William James are clearly recognizable throughout the long series of treatises written by Plotinus. A few examples. Enn. V 3 [49] 13,1: the experience is *ἄρρητον*, not within reach of words. Enn. VI 9[9] 9, 48: the soul receives a *different kind of life* thanks to which she knows that He who bestows life is present, and that nothing more is wanted (also: I 6[1] 7,2-3). Enn. VI 9[9] 10,15: having entered into *an other existence* and as it were not being himself any more.

The criteria established by William James do not attribute any importance to “bliss” or “rapture” on the part of the mystics.

does not come through philosophy or processes of thought, as is the case with the other objects of knowledge, but it comes in the form of a presence superior to philosophy.” (*κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα*, VI 9 [9] 4, 1-3). “And what is seen, (if we are to speak of two things, the seer and the object of his vision, – as if the two were not one, – for the argument oversteps itself) the seer does not see it or discern it, nor does he visualize it by way of duality; he *is transformed as it were into a different person* and is no longer himself nor does he belong to himself, but he is taken up into yonder world, – and being part of that world he is one with it, having united centre to centre.” (VI 9 [9] 10, 12-17). The text gives clear evidence of the existential character of Plotinus’ mysticism.

The personal experience is foremost in the mind of the philosopher and more or less dominantly in the early treatises. The authentic ring of a vital experience makes itself heard: “So we should return to and reascend to the Good, which every soul strives to attain. If one has seen it, he will know what I am trying to say: that it is beauty — At the end one leaves behind everything that is not God, seeing by oneself Himself only, crystal-clear, simple and pure. — If one sees that first Good, what feelings of love shall he not have, what homesickness, because he wants to flow over into Him, what kind of rapture shall not be his?” (I 6 [1] 7, 1-14).

The vital experience, however, did not pass away in silence in the treatises of the middle and late period. In the so-called long treatise (chronol. 30-31-32-33) Plotinus attempts to give an exposition of his most essential doctrines, in order to bring out the difference between his own philosophical system and some opinions of the Gnostics. Even in this theoretical build-up the appeal to personal experience is made valid: “If one has been ravished by yonder God and has thrown away what is only image, however beautiful it may be, he will enter into unity with Him, yonder God, who in silence is present.” (V 8 [31] 11, 1-6)

In a somewhat later treatise (VI 7 [38] ch. 34) we find another description of an ecstasy, analogous to the description in IV 8. In a note to this chapter Bréhier states that it embodies the most complete description of the experience of the mystic (though he calls it “l’attitude mystique” as if the description could be the outcome of accurate outward observation). Here also we find unmistakably the expressions of an inner experience (line 16): “she (the soul) is no more aware of the body, because she is in Him.” She feels sure that this is what she has striven after, and that (lines 27-28): “deceiving oneself is impossible in yonder regions, because: where could she find a more real reality?” For our point one of the expressions, used here by Plotinus, is especially noteworthy: “she sees the One and First instead of herself, but during that vision she has not even a moment free

to become aware of what she is by herself.” This last statement could not have been made by a philosopher who had not gone himself through the experience (VI 7 [38] 34, 21).

Bréhier in a note to Enn. I 6, ch. 7 mentions Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* as the sources of the imagery. In formal respect this is surely correct, but the vital experience into which the imagery is taken up could not have been imagined by Plato. What we find in Plato’s dialogues is descriptions of an intellectual process of ascent. There is no reference, as in Plotinus, to the personal experience of being caught up into another form of existence. What Plotinus describes is a movement of transformation in which the existence of the whole individual person is implied, not simply a development of philosophical knowledge. Plato’s philosophical system and Plotinus’ description of mystical surrender move in different worlds. The stress on getting away from the senses is found in both, but it has a different meaning. In Plato the way out is through knowledge and philosophy. It is a rational process. In Plotinus it is an existential process, which has its roots in the deepest of human emotions, not in theoretical distinctions.

In Plotinian mysticism there are two major specific features. The first of these is the vital certainty of a divine presence. This is a personal certainty bound up essentially with the emotions of the individual, and for that reason indifferent to the distinction between immanence and transcendence. This distinction had been paramount in Plato’s system in which it runs parallel to the distinction between universal truth and personal opinion. As a consequence only the trained philosopher could partake in the contemplation of the transcendent world. The great mass of non-intelligent citizens were scornfully placed by Plato in the category of useful servants. In Plotinus the divine creative power of the universe is omnipresent, and every human being may find the way to contemplate it. Plotinus says that this is due to a faculty that is in the possession of everyone, though few do use it (I 6 [1] 8, 26-27). The borderline can be crossed because there is a vital relationship between the human soul and the life-giving force in the universe.

The second characteristic consists in the identity of the knowledge of the self with knowledge of the godhead. The journey inward in the human soul coincides with the spiritual journey to the origins. This is one more theory that is not found in Plato’s philosophy. In the context of Plato’s views it would have been an impossible doctrine because the rational mysticism of Plato is not about the vital experience of the individual soul, but about realizing philosophical contemplation. The most explicit treatment of the identity of the human Self with the universal Self is found in Enn. VI 9 [9], but it comes through in most of the early treatises

and in fact throughout the Enneads. Enn. VI 9 is the final treatise in the long sequence of Enneads as Porphyry ordered them. He placed it at the end as the crowning jewel of what the Enneads were about, but in chronological order it belongs to the first period. The central texts in this first period are: I 6 [1] on beauty; V 9 [5] on the landscape of the spiritual world where the soul has to find her way; IV 8 [6] on the soul's fate in this world, her dual character and her return to a life in the world of universal Intellect; VI 9 [9] on mysticism; V 1 [10] on the architecture of the spiritual universe and the position of our soul in it.

VI 9 forms part of a series of about 12 early treatises, the first ever written by Plotinus. They reveal one fundamental concern: guiding the soul to her final destination. Characteristically, the first of all, I 6, gives a kind of program for reaching this destination, which is what all the struggle is about (*ὅπερ οὖν καὶ ὁ πᾶς πόνοσ, I 6 [1] 7, 31*). In VI 9 reaching the final union is described as finding the end and aim of the journey (*τέλος ἂν ἔχου τῆς πορείας, VI 9 [9] 11, 45*). It may be remarked in passing that the treatises in question reveal a much more intense Gnostic colouring than most of the later ones.

The program in I 6 has the following outlines. The way to union is implicitly given in the nature of the soul herself, but for most of us the way lies hidden because of the heavy burden of the body and the mundane concerns. These are like clothes (ch. 7, line 5) which the soul has wrapped around herself when she descended from the spiritual home down to this world. Being submerged in mortal and vulgar thoughts, the soul gets crooked and degraded, and the impure pleasures make her accept her disgrace as an enjoyment (lines 5, 29-30). They are like an unnatural beautiful addition to the soul (32: *ἐπακτὸν καλόν*). Taking in such things as injustice, desires, fears, jealousy and petty-mindedness, she acquires alien features (45: *προσθήκη τοῦ ἀλλοτρίου*). This improper addition makes it impossible for her to abide by herself (37). She has assimilated into her own being the charms of the material world, falsifying her own form (42). In order to return to her own nature she must wash away what is alien. Thus the process of purification, being necessary to prepare the way to union, is essentially a process of finding back her own cosmic and universal nature. Being purified means having eliminated everything that is in disaccordance with the soul's nature (57: *τὸ παρὰ τῆς ἐτέρας φύσεως*).

The way to the mystical union is described as a journey to a homeland (I 6 [1] 8, 16-21). The expression has a Gnostic ring,² as also in line 21: "coming home the soul finds her Father." Gnostic literature often makes use of images of family

² In the text a line from Homer Iliad 2, 140 is quoted, but this does not diminish the Gnostic preference for images of home-coming.

relationship. In the preparation of the ultimate vision the initiate shall come to understand “how great this father is and the brothers who abide by Him” (V 8 [31] 12, 10-12).

So how to realize the journey? The answer is: by acquiring a different way of seeing, awakening a different vision, that is within the reach of everyone of us, though very few make use of it (I 6 [1] 8, 26). Contemplation in the mystic sense is understood by Plotinus as being essentially unlike the knowledge or intuition we acquire by scientific or even philosophical reasoning, because the contemplation of the mystic lacks the distinction between the contemplating subject and the object of contemplation. It has an existential character, and needs an inward movement in order to find our inmost self (*ἴτω δὴ εἰς τὸ εἶσω*, I 6 [1] 8, 4). From the outset Plotinus dissociates himself from the mysticism of knowledge as described by Plato and reserved by Plato for the privileged class of philosophers. He stresses the involvement of the whole person, who must find his way to the inmost depths of the soul, instead of climbing out from a dark cavern to where indubitable truths are seen.

In the series of early treatises the necessity of finding oneself in order to find God is repeated in a wealth of expressions: “abide within that temple and follow inwardly the lead of that immense beauty” (I 6 [1] 8, 4). “Retire into yourself and do as a good sculptor does: take away what is superfluous, till a beautiful face comes out from the stone, and do not cease from working at your own statue” (I 6 [1] 9, 7-13). “When you have become one with yourself in a purified sense, there is no further obstacle to being unified, contemplating by only yourself that One and First God on whom the universe depends” (I 6 [1] 7, 9-10 and 9, 15-17).

Plotinus stresses the autonomy of the contemplating soul when she has left behind the moorings that bind her to the senses. Freeing yourself from these attachments means finding yourself with your authentic self alone, uniting your own centre to the centre of the universe (VI 9 [9] 8, 19-20). This is the most central point in Plotinus’ mysticism, a point constantly repeated throughout the long series of Enneads. Our personal experience of finding our real self when we become free from the senses is just one instance of the general law of all being: “that is what every nature strives to attain, its own self”. (VI 5 [23] 1, 18-19) One of the maxims of Heraclitus is quoted by Plotinus as expressing the same conviction: “I was in search of myself” (V 9 [5] 5, 31; DK 22 B 101).

Contemplation is described by Plotinus in metaphors of light, but as an explanation he adds that we should not understand the image as if the contemplation were that of a subject seeing the light as an object. In the same early outline of a program for the spiritual life he says: “you must throw off every material image,

close your eyes, and awake and adopt another kind of vision". (I 6 [1] 8, 25-26) When a soul has reached the undefiled presence of herself, she will have become true light herself, being at the same time light and vision. "In that light you shall be yourself the vision without any need of a guide to show you the way." (I 6 [1] 9, 15-24) This last remark may have been meant as a warning against the spiritual leadership of so many guru's who offered their services in the town of Alexandria where Plotinus found his first philosophical inspiration. What Plotinus alludes to is the natural kinship of the soul to the spiritual world.

In the treatise on the descent of the soul into the body he explains that, though bound up with the body, the soul always keeps part of herself above it. This higher part lives on a superior level, so the soul has as it were a life in two worlds (IV 8 [6] 4, 31). Our soul is not completely submerged in the body. Some part of her is uninterruptedly in the noetic sphere (ib. 8, 3). By that higher part, which has not been submerged in the descent, we lift ourselves up and make contact between our inmost centre and the centre of the universe (VI 9 [8] 1620).

Summarizing we may say that in Enn. I 6, the first treatise in the chronological order, the central elements of Plotinus' mysticism are present: the Self is in the mystical union identified with the First Good. Reaching the union implies being involved in the union by one's very existence. If the term knowledge may still be used, it is a knowledge different from philosophical ways of knowing. Taken in this mystical sense, knowledge of the Self coincides with the knowledge of the First Good. This knowledge of the first Good can be realized thanks to the actual presence of the First Good to everyone's contemplation.

Enn. VI 9 begins with a metaphysical analysis of the concept of One-ness. "All existing things have their being thanks to their one-ness" says the opening line. The title of the treatise as well as the theoretical introduction in the first two chapters may suggest that a systematical exposition of metaphysical theory is to follow. But the doctrine is a preamble to the living experience. The point of the argument is that for metaphysical reasons the One can only be object of mystical contemplation. Due to the structure of our knowing faculties, all our ways of knowing must fail to bring about the union. An analysis of the mechanisms of our knowledge must be undertaken in order to develop any metaphysics, and what is analyzed is essentially a plurality, whereas the "one" cannot possibly be a many, and cannot be analysed into parts. Even the universal Intellect cannot be the One itself, because it possesses a vision which is focused upon the One, and a consciousness focused upon itself. If even the universal Intellect cannot have the vision of the One, and at the same time the consciousness of its own being, how could the soul have any knowledge of what is formless and first?

In our current way of knowing, forms are the basis of knowledge. But when the soul tries to find what is without form (that is, to find the supertranscendent First and One), she finds herself unable to grasp it because no definite concepts can be formed and in the soul no sense-impressions are received. So the soul loses the track, fearing that she is just coming to nothing. She is content to let herself down to the level of sense-perception, which gives her the idea of resting on firm ground. When the soul tries to see by herself, that is, to see by being united and being one because the One is present to her, then she feels as if she does not possess what she was in search of, because the object of the vision was not distinguished from herself. One has to dissociate oneself from the life of the senses, in order to make the One the object of seeing (VI 9 [9] 3, 1-14).

The last sentence brings us back to the program of preparation for the mystical vision. It is noteworthy that Plotinus takes care to outline an analysis of our faculties of perception and processes of knowledge in order to bring out what is essential in the mystical experience. What emerges from the analysis is the fact that in the mystical experience the distinction between subject and object must disappear. This is the fundamental point in the rest of the treatise. The argument makes it clear why finding one's inmost self is a process moving on the same track as finding the One. From ch. 4 onwards the description of this experience becomes dominant.

Knowledge of the first One cannot be reached by thinking, as is the case with every other object of thought, but by "a presence stronger than argument" (*κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα*, ch. 4, 13).

The whole of ch. 4 is about the necessity of experiencing a presence, and this can only be realized by a personal act of surrender. Doctrine and teaching, says Plotinus, are about the road and the journey, but the vision is an act of willingness to see. If the traveller is unable to reach the vision, or if his way of seeing does not have the imprint of love, or if he has within himself what stands in the way to the vision, he must blame himself. The First One is nowhere absent, but it is indeed only there for those who are prepared to receive Him, so as to share his nature and as it were touch and feel Him (27: *ἐφάψασθαι καὶ θιγεῖν*). This happy expression of erotic love must have accompanied Plotinus throughout his philosophical career, for it is found as late as chronol. 49 (V 3 [49] 10, 42). It is not reading too much into the text if we suppose that the expression came to Plotinus just from his own and very personal experience of the mystical life.

The inborn likeness and capacity of the soul to realize this meeting or vision, has come from the One, and to find the presence of the One the soul must be in the same condition as when she came forth from that One and First (VI 9 [9]

4, 28-29). In order to open the inward space of the soul to this experience the soul must leave aside, or better expel, everything that is alien to her real nature. She must be pure and solitary, having returned to her own and inmost being. The necessity of asceticism has been argued in chapters 1-2-3 on the basis of the theory of perception. The One has no form, no qualities, no characteristics, and therefore can enter the soul only when the soul is without forms or imprints.

The existential character of the act of surrendering to our ultimate goal is most clear in chapter 9. Plotinus states that we do not live in isolation, and that we do not have a separate existence as if the One had given us our being and after that had remained aloof, keeping distance from the humans (line 10). But neither must we imagine the soul remaining what she is when entering into the mystical experience. The process is a complete transformation: “we receive a higher degree of being when we move towards Him (9, 11-12). The appeal to the personal experience is repeated: “whoever has had the vision, he knows what I am talking about, that the soul receives a different life” (9, 47-49; also ch. 10, 15). Having arrived yonder the soul becomes what she was by herself (*ib.* 22).

In the final chapters of *Enn.* VI 9 the proximity of the end and aim of the soul’s journey makes itself felt in the growing predominance of the argument about the soul’s identity with the One. The human self, if set free from its unessential additions inherent in a life in this world, reveals the identical nature of the universal Self, the omnipresent One. To the soul it is unavoidable to be in love with Him. When she lives in accordance with her true nature and inmost self she wants to become one with Him (9, 27: ἐρᾷ αὐτοῦ ἐξ ἀνάγκης, 9, 34: ἐνωθῆναι θεῷ). (9, 34: ἐνωθῆναι θεῷ).

The conviction of the unity of our inmost Self with God and the universe fits in well with Plotinus’ theory of the metaphysical structure of reality. In the process of emanation the emanating vital force must turn round to its origin in order to receive its form. Striving back to one’s origin is the necessary condition for coming into possession of one’s own being and existence. Moreover, there is no real separation between the origin and the created beings. The unity between the two is often explained by the image of circle and centre. The radii connecting the points of circumference with the centre represent the movement of the return. Eliminating the concept of distance, the created being comes to be united with its origin (VI 9 [9] 8, 19-27).

In *Enn.* V 8 [31] (“on spiritual beauty”), the second of the four essays of the so-called “long treatise”, the problem is developed on the same lines as in I 6 [1]. The vision of the One and First is described as a vision of transcendent beauty. Talking about beauty (in V 8) may suggest that the argument is not about union

with the One and First, but about our knowledge of Intellect. To the point under discussion, however, this distinction is not essential, because in the context it is the mechanism of our knowing faculties which is being analyzed. The all-important distinction is between a vision which is that of onlookers, an activity coming from a subject and focusing on an object, and a vision in the existential sense, where the object of contemplation comes to be interiorized and taken up into the contemplating soul (V 8 [31] 10, 35-42).

The union between the centre of the soul and the centre of the universe is described in a variety of images. The contemplating mystic must place the vision within himself and see it as his own self, realizing the vision of the godhead within himself. Still, that vision is vision of an image. Making the next step he becomes one with himself, and, not being divided any more, he is one with the godhead who now is present in silence (V 8 [31] 11, 4-6).

The famous short formula at the end of Enn. VI 9, “the escape to the One of the soul in her one-ness”, is found throughout the Enneads in a fair number of analogous expressions. In the same treatise we find: “making contact within our own centre with the centre of the All” (VI 9 [9] 8, 18-20). Belonging to Him, she has become one, joining as it were, centre to centre (*ib.* ch. 10, 17). In the supreme vision there is no distinction between seer and seen, – the seer sees the object of the vision as being one with himself (ch. 10, 21: *ἐν πρὸς ἐαυτόν*).

In the treatise on beauty we find: “seeing by oneself Himself only” (*αὐτῷ μόνῳ ἀπὸ μόνου* I 6 [1] 7, 8-9). In V 1 [10] 6, 10-11 Plotinus says that we should reach out with our soul to Him, because only then shall we be able to pray *μόνους πρὸς μόνου*. In VI 7 [38] 34, 1-8 we read about the loving soul. She does away with every form she has in herself, even the forms of the contemplated Intellect, in order to receive Him only by herself only (*ἵνα δέξηται μόνη μόνου*). This is the same formula that was placed by Porphyry at the end of Enn. VI 9, the crowning formula of Plotinus’ mystical contemplation.

Chapter III

THE SOUL'S RETURN TO HER ORIGIN IN ALEXANDRIAN LITERATURE

Introduction

The human soul, her fate and destination, was at the heart of virtually every school of thought in the Alexandrian world, where Plotinus lived and received his philosophical training. The different world-views current in the Alexandrian metropolis have a wide field of theories and methods of thinking in common. This means that the problem if and in how far Gnostic influences may have been at work in the philosophical system of the Enneads must be restated in another context, wider than the traditional constructions of one-to-one influences.

As a first demarcation we have traced in chapters I and II some doctrines, fundamental in the Enneads, which cannot possibly have been derived from Plato's works, whether written or unwritten. In the chapter now at hand we shall focus upon four Alexandrian authors, Platonists, Gnostics and Christians, who may be taken to be representative of the current ways of thinking in the Alexandrian world where Plotinus lived for 39 years. We shall see that many characteristic doctrines in the Enneads have their ample correspondence in Alexandrian literature before and contemporaneous with Plotinus. Placing Plotinus within the Alexandrian horizon should make us aware of the many family relations that intertwine between the Enneads and the Alexandrian philosophical schools. This will put us in a position to better understand Plotinus' originality and at the same time to see how deeply he shared the religious convictions of his century.

Three points call for attention. Throughout the Enneads we find passages where Plotinus expresses his doctrines in an unmistakably Gnostic form. He does so without restraint and as a matter of course. In many chapters moreover the similarity of the doctrine to certain Gnostic views is easily recognizable, but Plotinus has adapted and complemented the Gnostic views to make them fit in with his own system. In a third category of texts Plotinus rejects Gnostic doctrines

by allusion or with fierce criticism. The first and second category often overlap, most manifestly in the doctrine about the fall of the soul, a doctrine rejected in its Gnostic form in II 9 [33], but elsewhere adapted so as to form the vital inspiration of his philosophy (see the analysis in our chapter 4).

The second and third centuries of our era are often described as a period dominated by pessimism.¹ A more realistic description probably is to say that the century was dominated by religious problems. There were three mainstreams: Platonism, which had taken the form of a metaphysical religion, Christianity and Gnosticism, and outside these three there was a multitude of sects and cults, most of them imported from the East. Platonism was as vigorous as ever, but the emphasis had shifted from theoretical metaphysics to religion. The principles of traditional Platonism were used as a foundation for building a religious world-view. In general, knowledge for its own sake, as Aristotle had defined it, had lost its importance, in favour of the problems of the human individual. In this development Stoicism had prepared the way. The Stoics saw the universe as kept together by a world-soul and governed by a divine *Logos* which also exercised a perfect Providence over the movements of the material cosmos as well as over human actions. Within this framework, how could the individual's freedom be maintained? Are we to consider ourselves as completely determined by cosmic powers, or was there any hope of developing an existence of one's own?

An early form of this existential problem is found in Plato's work, in the wake of the Pythagorean theories about the pre-existence of human souls. In *Republic* X the Armenian Er, resuscitated from death, describes how in the nether world he saw the souls being sent upwards to be reborn in this world. In a ritual a prophet states that every soul has to choose its own fate, that will determine its future status and behaviour (617 DE).

As a consequence of the shift of interest from theoretical knowledge to giving sense to human existence, the question of what philosophy was about had to be considered from a completely different outlook. In the Stoic theory the sage could follow a way of life undisturbed by fear and anxiety. Their world view was meant as a kind of *consolatio philosophiae*, even before the expression came into use. Peace of mind could be found by believing in an benign world-order.

In late antiquity the problem was above all that of the soul's position in this world and her redemption. Why had the soul been sent down to bear the burden of a material body with all its passions? What is her origin and what her destination? How are we to distinguish the soul's inmost reality from the

¹ E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Cambridge 1963.

overload of misfortune and distress she has to bear in her earthly existence? And as a related problem: what is the build-up of the human person?

In the following paragraphs we shall summarize doctrines of four Alexandrian authors: the Gnostics Basilides and Valentinus, and the Christian authors Clement and Origen. In many points a close affinity to Plotinian theories will be manifest. This may open a new perspective to the problem of the presence of Gnostic doctrines the Enneads. Theories that seemed to have a Gnostic origin may have been part of a common Alexandrian heritage.

A. Basilides (floruit ca. 120-145, Alexandria)

About Basilides' doctrines we have a rather extensive account in the *Refutatio omnium haeresium* by Hippolytus (170-236). This account is remarkable in more than one respect. According to Hippolytus the heretic doctrine was developed in servile dependence on Greek philosophy. Curiously enough, Greek philosophy is in his account restricted to only Aristotelean logic. Hippolytus makes the highly improbable statement that Basilides had compounded his heresy by piecing together scraps of the Aristotelean theory of categories. The description of the doctrines, however, is unmistakably framed in the concepts of the Platonist tradition.²

Basilides lived about one century before Plotinus. In the sources at our disposition we find a couple of metaphysical theories which show a more than superficial likeness to Plotinian themes. In the text of the Enneads no direct quoting is found of doctrines of Basilides, though it is not to be excluded that in his Alexandrian years Plotinus may have read or heard about Basilidean metaphysical theories in a more direct way.

The text as given by Hippolytus has the ring of a direct quotation (chapters 20-21), The first and most absolute origin of the universe is a not-being God, who cannot even be said to have perception, thought and will. No name can be given Him. He is completely ineffable, and even the word ineffable is only used for the sake of explanation. The first origin can only be grasped by a kind of wordless intuition (τῆ διανοίᾳ, ἀρρήτως, ch. 20). Explanation is given in metaphysical terminology, reminding of Plato's theory of transcendence "on yonder side of being" (Rep. 509) and, more vaguely, of the negative theology developed by Philo. Hippolytus offers the reader a curious interpretation in terms of Aristotelean logic, in order to show that the Basilidean mythology was appropriated from Greek

² The text may be found in the edition by P. Wendland, *Hippolytus, Werke*, III (1916), VII 20-27; (easily accessible in W. Völker, *Quellen zur Geschichte der christlichen Gnosis*, Tübingen, 1932).

philosophy. The “universal seed” (πανσπερμία), produced by the not-existing God as more or less a principle of emanation and from which the multifarious universe comes forth, is in Hippolytus’ view nothing else than the Aristotelean *genus* with its infinite multitude of subordinated *species* (ch. 22).

In the further development from the *panspermia* onwards mythical entities are introduced, mostly personified abstractions, such as three sonships, a cosmic tree of life and a cosmic seed as image of the emanating vital force. Within the cosmic system, more or less that of an emanation, the visible universe also is offspring of a not-being universe. From this second level of not-being comes a threefold sonship. Without delay the more ethereal of the three takes refuge in its origin, the not-being God, the more heavy ones need wings when they try to follow. The wings, says Hippolytus, are those of the soul in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. But Basilides identifies them, quoting Deut. 32, 4, with the Holy Spirit.

In the explanations added to the exposition of Basilides’ system the logical formulas were introduced by Hippolytus himself, as well as the example of the bird’s egg (ch. 21). The text does not make it clear whether the other images came from Basilides or were added by Hippolytus, so the simile of a tree (ch. 21) developing from a mustardseed (Mat. 13, 31; Marc. 4, 31; Luc. 13, 19).

Three fundamental doctrines of the *Enneads* have their predecessors in Basilides’ system: the extreme transcendence of the first origin, an elementary form of emanation in the image of a spiritual seed from which all things derive their existence, and the omnipresent impulse of all things to return to their origin. The mention of this last point is made by Hippolytus in the form of a textual quotation: “he (Basilides) says that all things are in an upward struggle from a lower to a better existence” (ch. 22: σπεύδει γάρ, φησί, πάντα κάτωθεν ἄνω, ἀπὸ τῶν χειρόνων ἐπὶ τὰ κρείττονα).

The declaration of principle by Basilides as to the not-existing first origin is framed in terms of theoretical metaphysics without any mixture of mythology. It invites comparison with Plotinus’ doctrine of the First and One as beyond being and beyond the reach of conceptual thinking. In both systems its absolute transcendence is repeatedly stressed and insisted upon. Both Basilides and Plotinus say that it is only for want of better that we make use of the formulas of human thought, just in order to designate what we are talking about. The One and First does not think, has no previous deliberation or conscious will in creating the universe, and cannot be described in terms of human understanding. This being stated, the system is developed by Plotinus in a direction opposite to Basilides. Plotinus wants to maintain the omnipresence of the One and First in every being in the universe, and, just for the sake of his theory of mysticism, in the most inward

recesses of the human soul. Plotinus makes no use of the principle of not-being in the sense in which it is so excessively stressed by Basilides. The negation of being does play a role in the philosophy of the *Enneads*, but only at the other end of the process of emanation, that is, in the theory of matter, in combination with the problem of evil. Not-being ($\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$) is found at the outermost border of the emanating universe, where the light fades and vanishes into darkness. That is where matter has its place, farthest away from the life-giving origin. In matter the element of not-being is also the element of evil.³

In an early treatise Plotinus says, using the terminology of Plato's *Parmenides* (139E and 142A):

“There must be, before all things, something that is absolutely simple and different from everything that comes after it, standing on its own and not involved in what receives existence from it, *though in another sense it has the power to partake in their existence*. It must be something essentially One, not being first some other thing and then being One. —It would be even a falsehood to say that it is One, because no argument or science can designate it.” (V 4 [7] 1, 4-9)

The shortness of the remark about “partaking in their existence” may give the impression of a remark made in passing and not essential to the doctrine. But in the same period we find the theme of the omnipresence of the One fully developed in a description of mystical experiences. This is in VI 9 [9], the well-known treatise placed by Porphyry at the end of his edition of the *Enneads*:

“To none of all beings God is on the outside. He is present to all of them, even if they are not aware of Him.” (VI 9 [9] 7, 28-29).

In the same treatise we read (9, 7-12):

“We are not cut off or far from Him, though our bodily nature may interfere and draw us onto its side. — But when we turn to Him, we have the fuller way of being.”

The texts quoted may leave us somewhat in doubt whether the God whose omnipresence is described should not be identified with Intellect rather than the One, but the uncertainty disappears when we read in V 5 [32]:

³ See I 8 [51], ch. 3, and VI 9 [9] 11, 38 where the expression $\pi\alpha\nu\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\varsigma\ \mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$ may be a reminder of Basilides.

“The One was present before all other things, even before Intellect manifested itself. (8, 17) — The One cannot be outside whatever there is. (9, 22)”

The paradox is summarized in the same chapter:

“— for what is not in any place, there cannot be a place where it is not” (9, 18-19). So it [the One] is there and is not there (*ὥστε ἔστι καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν* (9, 13).

The One is free from every outward pressure and for that reason must be supposed to be present everywhere.

In Basilides' system the first origin is so far-off that its importance to the world in which we live disappears. The not-existence of the first origin is hammered out to such a degree that not much more than abstract theory remains. The unfathomable mystery may inspire us with awe, but no real relationship is established between the fountainhead of being and our human existence. For Plotinus the One is not far-off and there is no cleavage between this universe and its origins. The unmistakable reason for this doctrine is evident: there can be no separation between ourselves and the divine transcendent world, if we and all things are to strive back to the first origin. Plotinus nowhere speaks about a hypostatized Not-Being, as Basilides has it. The spiritual entities are within this universe and within ourselves, or better, we are them. Metaphysically, the One remains absolutely One and without any relation to other things. To the mystic, however, any sense of mysticism gets lost if the One and First should be out of reach for the human soul. In VI 5 [23] 1, 20-23 we read: “Quite correctly we say that the Good is in our own nature (*οἰκεῖον*). Where else could it be if it had its place outside our being? Or how could one find it in the field of not-being?” An allusion to Basilides seems to be implicit in the text, as also in VI 9 [9] 11, 36-38. The difficult problem remains, how the One can be absolutely One, without any relation to other things, and nevertheless not be absent from whatever comes into existence outside it. It is discussed in the context of the long argument of VI 5 [23] chapters 1-2-3-4.

Right at the beginning of this discussion Plotinus points out what is, for our concept of God, “the most solid principle, which is like the very voice of our souls”:

“It may seem that the One and First (*τὸ ἐν τοῦτο*) must become multiple when it exteriorizes itself (in as far as exteriorizing itself is possible for

the One), and in a certain sense indeed it might be a multiplicity. But our deepest nature (*ἡ δ' ἀρχαία φύσις* 1, 16) and our yearning for the Good in itself leads up to what is really One, and to this One every nature aspires, that is, tries to come to its own (1, 8-9 and 14-18)."

What is fundamental in this argument is the fact that it is anchored in human experience. Plotinus points to the inward experience of all humanity as the most solid principle, a principle not reached as a calculated conclusion from separate premisses, but revealing itself in advance of any premiss, even previous to the principle that all things strive after the first Good. Plotinus invokes the testimony of inner awareness, the same testimony that is called upon in his descriptions of mystical theory. Our ultimate certainties cannot be established on the basis of strict arguments only. Our soul is member of a spiritual family, and even the most absolute principles are part of the soul's life itself. Every soul has the spiritual universe within itself.⁴

In the next two chapters the metaphysical argument is given (VI 5 [23] 3-4). First the idea of causality is eliminated. This idea cannot be brought into play in relation to the One, because, if the One is involved in the being of other things, there would be a duality between the One in itself and the One as present in other things. That would imply a material image of place and distance in a doctrine about God. We cannot say that God is in some place and in another place is not (4, 1-2). If that is impossible, we are bound to acknowledge that, for human thought, admitting that there is a God implies that He is present everywhere entirely and undividedly (3, 19-20).

Basilides and Plotinus belong to the same spiritual tradition in Alexandrian philosophy. Their roots lie only partially in the Platonic tradition with its doctrine of transcendency. Their development of this doctrine goes in opposite directions: in Basilides a far-away transcendence, in Plotinus a One and First that is present in the whole universe and present to the human soul.

In Basilides' doctrines several more points may be noted which offer a striking affinity to doctrines of the *Enneads*. Basilides has the universe develop from a seed like a tree. He uses the simile of the large tree growing from the smallest of all seeds, the mustard seed (Mt. 13, 31; Hipp. ch. 21). The image has a vague similarity to the doctrine of emanation, described in the *Enneads* in the image of an ever-flowing river, and once (III 8 [30] 10, 10) in the image of a tree.

⁴ Parallel places: III 4 [15] 3, 23: *καὶ ἕσμεν ἕκαστος κόσμος νοητός*, every one of us is a spiritual universe; VI 9 [9] 3, 11: *μόνον ὁρῶσα τῷ συννεῖναι*, to become seeing through being at one; *ib.* 4, 1-5: *κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα*, in virtue of a presence stronger than argument.

The parallelism comes closer in two expressions, used by Basilides when he explains that generating a universe is a process that does not imply any consciousness or design on the part of the creator (Hipp. ch. 21). When creation began, it came about *ἀνοήτως*, without conscious reasoning, and *ἀβούλως*, without any act of will, as a natural process. Both of these concepts are extensively commented upon in Enn. V 6 [24] (“what is on yonder side of being does not think”) and in VI 8 [39] (“about freedom and the will of the One”).

One more point to be noted is that of the universal return to the source of Being. Hippolytus explains (ch. 22) that according to Basilides the most ethereal of the three sonships instantly returned to its origin (*ἀνέδραμε κάτωθεν ἄνω*), that is, to the Not-Being to which all existing things strive back because of its superabundance of beauty and attractiveness (*δι ὑπερβολὴν κάλλους καὶ ὡραιότητος*). The statement is a bit paradoxical if it is just Not-Being that is sought after because of its beauty, but what it is intended to convey is clear: to the living beings the moving force in their aspirations is the desire for beauty. This is what Plotinus explains at large in his first treatise chronologically (I 6). In the same chapter of Hippolytus' text we read: “all things strive on high, from a lower state to a better one”. In V 5 [32] 12, 7-8 we read: “all things aspire to Him in virtue of their nature”.

Basilides' ethical theory was commented upon by Clement in his *Stromateis* (II 20, 112-114, ed. Stählin II 174-5). In Basilides' opinion virtue and vice are dependent upon or determined by the soul's situation in this world. The human passions come from additions to the rational soul, grown together with her as a consequence of primeval disorder and confusion. The accretions have the characteristics of dangerous animals, a wolf, a monkey, a lion or a buck. People bearing this unwelcome company in their souls are prone to imitating the behaviour of the animals. Basilides calls them additions (*προσηρητημένα*), and his son Isidorus even wrote a book “about the accreted soul” (*περὶ προσφυοῦς ψυχῆς*). Isidorus went so far as to say that we are inhabited by two souls.

The image of an alien and added soul is taken up by Plotinus. In an early treatise he says: “in the soul evil is an addition and alien, but when the soul is purified her virtues remain as part of her own being, and the soul has returned to herself (IV 7 [2] 10, 11-14). Before our birth we dwelt in yonder world, as a different kind of humans or even a kind of gods. Now a *second man* has encroached upon that first human, seeking existence and finding us. He wraps himself around us, adding himself to that first human all of us have been, which made us to become a compound personality. Just as in Basilides' view, the accretion to the soul is allegorized as an inimical being (VI 4 [22] 14, 18-26). In the treatise on the human

person we find the same views about our having a double existence, according as we reckon the animal as part of ourselves, instead of considering only our higher part. To find out what is the reality of our soul, we must shake off the added elements. The addition came about in the process of birth (ἐν τῇ γενέσει ἢ προσθήκῃ) (I 1 [53] 12, 14-20).

In VI 5 [23] 12, 18-22 we read, in a summary of the conditions of mystical progress:

“When you have cast off all things, you have become united with the universe, though surely you were already united before that; but because something different from the All was also with you, you were diminished just by the addition (τῇ προσθήκῃ); the *addition* came from not-being.” The last line is a reminder of Basilides, though in a changed perspective.

* * *

W. Völker, *Quellen zur Geschichte der christlichen Gnosis*, Tübingen 1932, p. 38-44: Fragmente, p. 44-46. Basilides nach dem Bericht des Irenaeus, p. 46-56, id. nach Hyppolyt. P. Hendrix, *De Alexandrijnse haeresiarch Basilides*, Diss. Leiden, Amsterdam 1926.

J. Kennedy, Buddhist Gnosticism, the system of Basilides, *Journal Royal Asiatic Society*, 1902, 377-415.

G. Quispel, L’homme gnostique, la doctrine de Basilide, *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1948*, Zürich 1949, 89-139.

Montserrat Jufresa, Basilides, a Path to Plotinus, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 35, 1981, 1-15.

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As an addendum a short note may be added about a remarkable tradition within Sufi mysticism. As is well known, the Arabs were the first inheritors to the traditions of Greek science and philosophy. At first Muslim mysticism moved within the doctrines and spirit of the Koran, but in later centuries the mystical theory integrated many central doctrines of Neoplatonic philosophy. In a study of the mystical doctrines of Ibn Musarra of Córdoba (883–931) and of Ibn Arabī of Murcia (1165-1240), the Spanish arabist Asín Palacios traces the filiation of their doctrines back to Neoplatonic sources⁵

⁵ Miguel Asín Palacios, *Tres estudios sobre pensamiento y mística hispano-musulmanes*, Madrid 1992, Ediciones Hiperión, p. 54-55: una amalgama sincrética de neoplatonismo gnóstico, forjada ya quizá por los alejandrinos.

The central points in Asín's investigations are the following: there was a theory of spiritual matter grafted upon the Plotinian theory of Enn. II 4 and II 5 (Asín, p. 82-88); both Ibn Arabī and Ibn Musarra describe the final and supreme vision of the mystic as an intuition of God's absolute simplicity (p. 89-91, 101-102), in the same terms that are used by Plotinus about the One (Enn. VI 9); and at one point Asín Palacios (p. 68) quotes a text in which a far echo from Basilides seems at work. The text states that "both Being and Not-Being were created", implying that about God not even Not-Being can be affirmed, which sounds as a criticism of Basilides' Not-Being as the first origin of all things. A striking piece of survival of Alexandrian expressions is given by Asín on p. 86, where we find Basilides' typical expression for the alien elements or overgrowths in the human soul. They are named here "*una corteza de herrumbre*", a layer of rust upon the soul.

B. Valentinus (floruit ca. 135-160)

When we come to Valentinus we find a world-view steeped in mythology, as in Basilides, but with very few traces of theoretical metaphysics. What the scarce fragments and the long drawn-out accounts by Irenaeus and Hippolytus tell us is more like a system of mythological religion. Plotinus' treatise "against the Gnostics" is generally considered as resulting from a conflict with members of the Valentinian school. But what is discussed in the treatise is a general picture of current Gnostic ideas. The only text where it is restricted to the views of one special Gnostic author is II 9 [33] ch. 10-11-12, where extensive and sarcastic commentary is given on the Sophia myth. This part of the discussion is clearly aimed at the Valentinian doctrines.

The story of a divinity Sophia, taking part in the creation of this world through her son the Demiurge, is considered by Plotinus as a misleading caricature of the problem that in his own thought was dominant: the situation of the lost soul in this human world. Valentinus begins, as does Basilides, with a far-away and unknowable first God, but without Basilides' web of metaphysical theory about the not-being of this first origin. In Valentinus' doctrine the first God, called Father and Abyss (*Βυθός*) has human features: he has a partner, called Silence (*Σιγή*). From this first marital couple descends a family of 30 divinities, arranged in three groups of respectively eight, ten and twelve *Aeons* (*αἰῶνες*) and together forming up the divine world or *Pleroma*. Every Aeon has a partner. A detailed

Claude Addas, *Quest for the red sulphur; the life of Ibn Arabī*, (transl. from the French *Ibn Arabi ou la quête du Soufre Rouge*), Cambridge 1993.

account of the complex family relations is given by Irenaeus (I 1-8, ed. Harvey, p. 8-75) and Hippolytus (Ref. VI 29-36, ed. Wendland, p. 155-166), and shorter versions are found in various other sources including some of the Nag Hammadi texts. Some names of the Aeons are highly artificial, as if they had to be invented in order to fill up the open places in a given project. Logos, Intellect, the Unmoved are taken from the philosophical tradition, Love, Hope and Belief from the New Testament and Mixture, Ageless, Self-Natured, Enjoyment, Happiness and others were added to complete the number. At the end of the hierarchy of Aeons the story of *Sophia* begins.

Sophia wanted to find the Father for love of Him, but this turned out to be a deed of recklessness (*τόλμα*). She got into danger of being swallowed up in the Father's unfathomable abyss. Then a universal Power, called Horus (the Limit) came to her rescue and made her understand that the Father is beyond knowledge. He can only be known by the Only-Begotten (*μονογενής*), a prototype of the Plotinian Intellect (*Νοῦς*). Sophia then comes to herself and is purified of her passion, which is described as "anxiety" (*ἐνθύμησις*) and has caused her to remain outside the Pleroma. There she is helpless and formless until Christ comes to her with his healing power and restores her to her own being, but only in the sense of "being" and not yet of "having knowledge" (*γνώσις*). In order to make her feel what better desires she ought to have, Christ now retires to his place within the Pleroma, taking with him the healing light. From then on there are two Sophias in the story: the heavenly Sophia who is re-established to her full existence as Sophia-Aeon by the aid of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the lower Sophia or Sophia-Achamoth who with her passions stays in the nether world. She is striving eagerly after the Light that has left her. From this conversion to the Light (*ἐπιστροφή*) the individual souls come into existence, from her tears the waters of the ocean, from her laugh the daylight, and from her sorrow and panic the material elements.

Sophia's story is followed by the story of the Demiurge, her misshapen son, who fancies being the highest God and must be brought to reason and educated by Sophia (cap. 36 Hipp. = Völker, p. 135) until at the pre-ordained time the Saviour comes (Irenaeus, Völker, p. 119, Harvey, I 64)

In the myth Sophia represents the Soul, descending from the heavenly regions to go creating. There are quite a number of parallels in Plotinus' doctrine of the Soul. In the Enneads there are, notwithstanding the stress on the principle that the number of hypostases should not be multiplied, virtually two kinds of Souls: the All-Soul, steeped in contemplation and without perturbation from the material world, and the individual souls, distributed over the numberless living

beings. Striving back to the Father is in the *Enneads* expressed as a metaphysical law, working in the universe and predisposing everything to strive back to the One. The conversion of Sophia to the Light is in the *Enneads* translated into the metaphysics of contemplation: Soul cannot create unless she stands converted to her origin and by contemplation of the emanating Light receives the forms she is to project in the material world. The mythological system of Valentinus as well as Plotinus' doctrine of the Soul were obviously built on an existing paradigm. During the "Gnostic crisis" (*Enn.* II 9) the outlines of the problem were the same for the Gnostic sectarians as for Plotinus, but for Plotinus the irritating feature was their fanciful and chaotic way of handling the problem. The root of the problem was in the obsessive preoccupation of the age: how to explain the soul's descent to this evil world and how the soul is to find a way back to her own life in a spiritual world.

The doctrine about the Soul is in the *Enneads* intimately bound up with the system of emanation and return, and on the other side with the problem of evil. The two points are found in mythical form in Valentinus' doctrine of Sophia, the fallen divinity on the lower border of the Pleroma, creating this evil world through her misshapen son the Demiurge. The outlines of the myth, and of Plotinus' metaphysical system, make the question unavoidable whether the ultimate cause of evil had been a decision taken or an event occurring within the Pleroma. That would mean that Soul, or, in the myth, Sophia, had been guilty of a transgression even before creation began. The outlines of this Gnostic problem are the same in the *Enneads*, but important adaptations and corrections are introduced by Plotinus. A complete analysis of the problem is given in *Enn.* IV 8 [6] chapter 5, an early text, which shows that probably even before he started writing Plotinus had worked out his view of the problem. In his very first written treatise he had stated already what had been the cause of the soul's going astray (I 6 [1] 8, 26): the soul's attention is absorbed by the beauty of this world. She fails to awaken that other faculty of seeing, that is in the possession of everyone of us, though very few do use it. At the end of his career, shortly before his death, he wrote: "being in the body is in itself harmful to the soul, but through virtue she participates in the Good, if she does not accommodate herself to the compound but already disengages herself." (I 7 [54] 3, 21). In another late treatise, explaining where evil comes from, he says: "It is the unhappy condition of the soul being in charge of the body" (I 8 [51] 4).

This was, from first to last, the real problem Plotinus found himself involved in: the human person failing to set free its innermost and real existence.

The clearest expositions of the complicated cluster of problems around Soul

are found in the early treatises. In the process of emanation, the World-Soul, and after her the individual souls, have wandered away from the One and First, to take care of the universe and, in the case of the individual souls, to take care of a human or an animal body. In the idiom of metaphysical theory (in later treatises) the process is described as a break of primordial unity. The souls have left the happy position of being with the One and have become multiple. To the souls this caused detriment and distress, because they became forgetful of their own real being. The misguided souls have lost the awareness of their own Self. Being in charge of a body became a source of evil for us humans. Metaphysics apart, this was the human situation Plotinus was involved in.

In the Gnostic view the descent constituted, already within the Pleroma, a guilty transgression. Plotinus says that not every preference for what is less is voluntary: necessity may even be master of our free will (IV 8 [6] 5, 8). Rather than find a solution in the ethical sense he stresses the metaphysical necessity (*ib.* 6, 1-9). If the One were to keep to itself, no world of souls could have emanated and everything would have remained hidden and formless within the One. The same applies to the world of souls. If the souls kept to themselves alone no offshoots could have emanated. That would contradict the creative powers of the soul. Without the soul's initiative to leave the spiritual world, she would have failed to manifest her creative energies (5, 34). As an added point of view, an adaptation of the Gnostic theory about a twofold Sophia, Plotinus says that not the whole Soul has come down (ch. 8). Her higher part always 'stays above' in contemplation. In later treatises Plotinus prefers changing the downward impulse into an emission of light (I 1 [53] 12, 25-28), which avoids her being guilty.

As to the problem of evil, Plotinus says that there is no contradiction between the descent as a free decision and the descent as a necessity. There is a kind of universal law (*ἀνάγκη*), not to say *Fate*, that makes use of the free decision of the souls to realize the intended development of a universe (*ἔχει γὰρ τὸ ἐκούσιον ἢ ἀνάγκη*). Neither is there a contradiction between the vocation of the souls perfecting the universe, and their being prisoner in the cavern and "being punished". This is the unavoidable consequence of bending down to a lower level, but what is done to the benefit of other beings must have been ordered by a divinity (IV 8 [6] 5, 1-14). The descent is necessary for the perfection of the universe (*εἰς τελείωσιν τοῦ παντός*), as a result of a metaphysical law: in every nature an impulse is at work to create what comes after her (6, 1-9).

In Plotinus' treatment of the problem, allusions to Gnostic mythology come through. The soul is called "the last of the divine beings", as was Sophia in the Valentinian Pleroma. Her free decision to descend is called an inclination

downward (ρόπή), reminding of the *νεῦσις* in the Gnostic theory. She comes to know what evil is (*γνῶσιν κακῶν*), but, Plotinus says, she does not suffer detriment thanks to her virtuous life (IV 8 [6] 5, 24-28).

There is in the early treatises a recurrent use of the word “Father” for the first and highest God, as being the final aim of the soul’s craving. This is an unmistakable reminder of the Valentinian myth (or maybe of the underlying paradigm). In the later treatises the image of the Father is found in a few places, where it is used to illustrate the loftiness of the first origin of emanation (the Father of Intellect V 8 [31] 1, 3, VI 7 [38] 29, 28; Father of Being VI 8 [39] 44, 38).

In I 6 [1] 8, 16-21 we read:

“We must flee from the enchanting world, as Ulysses did when he fled from Circe and from Calypso. He had no pleasure in staying with the sorceresses, where he had plenty of entertainment for the eyes and was surrounded by abundant beauty. Our native land is yonder, from where we came, and there our Father is to be found.”

In Enn. V 1 [10] 1 the discussion opens with a dramatic description of the soul’s perilous decision:

“What was it that made the souls forget God their Father, and, though participating in yonder world and having originated from Him, to be without knowledge as well of themselves as of Him? The misfortune began by their recklessness, by partaking in generation and otherness, by their desire to decide for themselves. — They went the opposite way, going a long distance and losing all knowledge about themselves and their origin.”

The dramatic form of the description is a typical Gnostic feature, as also the image of exiled children who do not know their parents nor themselves, and the loss of knowledge as the determining factor in their tragedy (*ἄγνοια*, referred to at five places in the chapter).

In the treatise where the final return of the soul to her origin is described, the same imagery is used: “a child that is alienated from himself and has fallen prey to delusion will not have knowledge about his father” (VI 9 [9] 7, 32); by nature the soul is in love of her Father and is driven by a desire to be at one with Him, a beautiful love of a young woman for a lovely Father (*ib.* 9, 33-40). In this text the Gnostic Father is accompanied by Plato’s heavenly Aphrodite.

In addition to the Gnostic parallels and prototypes specified above, another source of inspiration may be present in the early treatises of the Enneads. When Plotinus began writing, he may have acted under the still vivid impact of a shock, maybe a kind of awakening to a new awareness. Porphyry tells us the story of

Plotinus' first encounter with Ammonius Sakkas, who became his master for eleven years (*Vita* 3). Plotinus' reaction was: "this is the man I was seeking". Porphyry stresses the lasting effect by adding that as a result Plotinus wanted to make a personal acquaintance with Persian and Indian philosophy and afterwards took part in the emperor Gordian's unsuccessful expedition. The text leaves no room for doubt as to the presence of Indian and Persian elements in the teachings of Ammonius. More on this point in chapter IV.

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C. Clement (floruit ca. 150-215 AD)

In Clement of Alexandria we see an attempt at work to incorporate personal piety into a traditional world-view on Platonic and Stoic foundations. Just as had been the case for Philo within the Jewish faith, so within the Christian community the problem arose of finding harmony between the Christian message and the philosophical tradition. One of the central points for Clement was the doctrine of the Logos. Clement develops this doctrine on the basis of the theology of the fourth Gospel, but the Stoic inheritance is unmistakable. Christ is the incarnation of the universal Logos, representing the immanent order of the universe, and at the same time he is the outspoken Word of God's Wisdom. In the first sense Clement

is following the Stoic doctrine of the pre-established world-order, but he does so with caution because Stoic views could lead to a doctrine of a pantheistic Christ. Moreover, any theory of a pre-ordained world-order, in which even the details of human activity are pre-disposed, would have entailed a diminished moral responsibility of the human individual. Clement prefers describing the Logos not as a principle of a commanding and inescapable order of things, requiring our humble submission, but rather as an invitation to wisdom and a guide to a better way of life. Because in Christ the Logos has become manifest, we are able through him to know the Father (*ὅτι δι' υἱοῦ ὁ πατήρ γνωρίζεται*, *Stromateis* V 12, 3 = ed. Stählin II 334, 8). He is the archetype of the Father's wisdom (*ἀρχικώτατος λόγος τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ σοφία αὐτοῦ*, *ib.* VII 7, 12 = St. III 7, 12).

When, however, the transcendence and incomprehensibility of the First Cause are discussed, the Stoic terminology is abandoned, and Clement has resort to traditional Platonic arguments. The first and highest God is beyond the reach of intellect (*ἀναπόδεικτος*, *Strom.* IV 25, 156 = St. II 317, 22). He is not only superior to the whole universe, but even beyond the intelligible sphere (*ἐπέκεινα τοῦ νοητοῦ*, *ib.* V 6, 38 = St. II 352, 13). In his *Paedagogus* Clement stresses the unknowability and transcendence: God is One and even beyond unity and the One (*ἓν δὲ ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἐπέκεινα τοῦ ἑνὸς καὶ ὑπὲρ αὐτῆν μονάδα*, St. I 131, 18). The sharp distinction between Intellect and the highest God is not everywhere strictly maintained. Next to God comes the Wisdom of the Son in whom the intelligible world has its place, but at some places Clement says that God may be identified with this Intellect, which is the "field of ideas" (*νοῦς δὲ χώρα ἰδεῶν, νοῦς δὲ ὁ θεός*, *Strom.* IV 155, 2 = St. II 317, 11). Comparison with the *Enneads* shows that Plotinus is working on the same framework. A vague outline of a system of degrees of being, and a theory of a universal Intellect, more or less as a hypostasis, was already in existence as an accepted view in Alexandrian philosophy, prefiguring the Plotinian system of emanation.

There is a certain ambiguity in Clement's expressions, as if Clement did not feel sure about the question whether Intellect had to be placed within the first God, or should be considered as an emanation. The ambiguity surfaces when the creative and cosmic Intellect is identified with Christ. If Christ is the outspoken Word of the Father, he is second, but he must be God as well.

The question whether Intellect should be given a separate existence between the One and Soul seems to have been a general problem in the Alexandrian schools. Plotinus takes a firm stand on this point, most of all in his criticism of the Gnostic multiplication of hypostases: it is unacceptable to identify either Soul

with Intellect, or Intellect with the One (II 9 [33] 1), and there is not more than one Intellect.

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D. Origen (floruit ca. 185-254 AD)

In Origen's thought the Platonic background is easily recognizable, but the parallelism to Plotinian theories is equally prominent. This is most of all true in two central doctrines: the divine Unity as the ultimate source of all things, and the soul's descent from this Unity, with its ethical problems of antecedent guilt and self-determination. The two theories are dealt with by Origen as related to each other. We shall give a short analysis of the outlines of both problems.

In *περὶ ἀρχῶν* (*de principiis*) (I 1, 6 = K 21 = GK 108-110⁶) Origen says that the human mind cannot on its own strength see God as He is, so we have to understand Him as Father of the universe on account of the beauty of his creation. He is a perfectly uncompounded nature, admitting of no determining addition, so as to be absolutely One (*μονάς* or *ένάς*). At the same time He is the principle and source from which flows the whole intelligible universe. The problem now arises how God can be perfectly One and at the same time be creator of the universe.

The problem is solved by the introduction of the concept of Intellect coming forth from or being within the first and perfect One. The distinction between coming forth from and being within the One is not clearly drawn. Origen says: "God must be in every respect a One (*μονάς*), and so to say a Unit (*ένάς*), and at the same time Intellect and primary source from which the intelligible nature takes its origin." (*ut sit ex omni parte μονάς, et ut ita dicam ένάς, et mens ac*

⁶ Origen's texts are quoted from: H. Görgemanns und H. Karpp, *Origenes, Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, Darmstadt 1976 (Texte zur Forschung, 24). In this edition the text is accompanied by references to the edition by P. Koetschau, Leipzig 1913. GK = Görgemanns-Karpp, K = Koetschau.

fons, ex quo initium totius intellectualis naturae vel mentis est." (GK 110, 13-14). With the exception of the failing distinction between the One and Intellect, the argument is strikingly similar to the arguments used by Plotinus.

In the famous early treatise *Enn.* VI 9, where the architecture of the hypostases is explained as a preliminary to showing the way for the individual's journey upwards, Plotinus says (VI 9 [9] 3, 39-40): "It is the nature of the One that it generates all things, and for that reason it is not one of them." In ch. 5, 35-37 we read: "It [the One] brings Intellect into existence. It is a power generating all beings, but staying within itself." On this last point, the absolute transcendence of the One, Plotinus is emphatic. In the treatises of the fifth Ennead in many places stress is laid on the principle that "because He is on yonder side of Being, He must also be on yonder side of thinking". (V 6 [24] 6, 30-31, the treatise as a whole is dedicated to this principle.) The First and One is not mixed up with the intelligible world or Intellect (*Noûς*), which is generated by it (V 5 [32] 4-5). In *Enn.* II 9 [33] 1, 18 the distinction between the One and Intellect is part of the criticism of the Gnostic theories: "it has been shown on many occasions that they are different from each other". In V 9 [5] 14, 4 the problem is stated in the same terms as in Origen's argument: "how can plurality exist alongside the One?", and in V 1 [10] 6, 3-6 the problem is qualified as the "endless debate even among the sages of olden times, how from this One as we describe it, anything can have come into existence, be it plurality or duality or number." In V 3 [49] 11, 19-29 we read: "it is not one amidst other things, it is before all things — you may not even give it the name of Intellect — What is absolutely simple and before all things must be on yonder side of Intellect."

Origen is less careful than Plotinus in separating the characteristics of a conscious Mind (Intellect) from the first and highest principle. In Origen's text the One as first origin and the first emanation or intelligible nature are both referred to as a Mind. Plotinus is unconditional and emphatic: the One and First does not think (*Enn.* V 6). The One and First has no properties and no knowledge or consciousness, because that would imply duality. The first stage where consciousness emerges in the process of emanation is the Plotinian Intellect (*Noûς*). The difference between the metaphysics of Plotinus and Origen only underlines the fact that the respective philosophical systems are built upon the same architectural principles. Origen is not free to separate Intellect from the One in an all too outspoken way, because he identifies Intellect, which is emanated light, with Christ, the *unigenitus filius*, who for theological reasons is not to be subordinated to the first origin.

Origen finds a way out to the problem by appealing to the timelessness of

the relation of the first One to the emanated Wisdom (GK 124, 14-19 = K 29-30), and by introducing the image of a source surrounded by radiating light. Wisdom did not have a beginning which implied a certain lapse of time, nor even an instantaneous beginning such as can be conceived by abstract thought. Nevertheless, the *unigenitus filius*, identified by Origen with God's Wisdom, has as such his own 'substantial existence' (*subsistentia*, Rufinus' translation of ὑπόστασις). The image of the emanated light is added to bring the absolute Oneness of the Father in harmony with the eternal coexistence of the Son. In antiquity light was not considered as coming from the sun in a steady movement covering astronomical distances, but as a standing *aura*, consubstantial with its source or centre. The coming forth of Wisdom from the Father is like the splendour coming forth from and standing around the sun (GK 130, 22 *sicut splendor generatur ex luce*, item GK 136, 7-8). In this setting Christ has in Origen's system the same place as Intellect in the Neoplatonic triad.

Plotinus uses the same image when he tries to explain the timeless generation of Intellect from the One (V 1 [10] 6). He adds a note about the unavoidable use of language in any theory of causality and order of generation. The generation of Intellect is timeless, even if, in the terminology of emanation, it is described as a streaming out (ἐξερρύη). The radiation (περίλαμψις), just as the beautiful light that stands around the sun, is generated eternally from the unmoved One. But whereas Origen more or less leaves the question open, Plotinus is careful in stressing that the radiated light is a hypostasis in its own right (ὑπόστασις 6, 33), even if it remains in unbroken connection with its origin.

The similarity of texts should not lure us into a web of philological and terminological discussions about origins and influences. For our present purpose it suffices to have shown that the architecture of the spiritual realm is fundamentally the same in Origen and Plotinus. In what we may call the Alexandrian worldview there were a number of generally accepted theories, forming a philosophical landscape within which the philosophers developed their theories. It may be remarked in passing that a conclusion about Ammonius Saccas as the originator of the system is hardly avoidable. Both Origen and Plotinus were dedicated students of Ammonius' and followed his lectures for many years.

The second book of Origen's *De principiis* (περὶ ἀρχῶν) opens with a discussion of the immense variety of living beings observable in this world. To explain this variety no other cause can be found than the variety of impulses leading to the descent of the souls. The souls have fallen down from the original unity of which they formed part (GK 286, 2 = K 107): *qui ab illa initii unitate deciderunt*.

Origen incorporates the problem into the fundamental opposition of the One and Many.

The variety of living beings is explained by the greater or smaller depth of their fall, but this does not imply that the descent by itself is cause of evil. It was not a guilty fall. In the Creator's economy freedom was given to the descending souls in order to ensure that an appropriate and immense variety of beings should come into existence. The descent was not ordered by the will of the Creator. It was undertaken by the souls on their own initiative and decision. (GK 412 = K 170: *propriae libertatis arbitrio*). The argument has a partial affinity to the Gnostic theory of a guilty fall, according to which an evil decision was taken in the heavenly spheres even before the souls entered this world.

Origen starts his treatment of the soul's fate by stating that all her troubles began when she separated herself from the first Unity. Plotinus starts from exactly the same premiss (IV 4 [28] 3, 1-3: "when the soul takes leave from the spiritual world, being unable to put up with unity (*οὐκ ἀνασχομένη τὸ ἕν*), she follows her self-love and wants to be different. Leaning downward as it were she develops a remembrance (*μνήμην*) of what she was before." This remembrance or awareness of what she was before is a kind of negative and unavoidable result of the fall. It is the originating principle of her earth-born personality and self-consciousness, but also an awakening remembrance of her origin and real being.

Because she has given up the One, she has to cope with the burden of attending to an individual existence (IV 8 [6] 4, 18-21). In the description a Gnostic colouring comes through: she took the risk to stand away from the One (*ἀποστῆναι τοῦ ἑνὸς πολήσας*, VI 9 [9] 5, 29). That was an act of self-will and as such an act of transgression. By her own decision she indulges in the impulse to descend, but the impulse is given her by divine decree (*θεσμῶν θείων*, IV 8 [6] 5, 21-26). A possible allusion to Origen is found in the same context (5, 9-13): *θεὸν εἴ τις λέγει καταπέμψαι*, "if someone should say that it was a God who sent her downward, he would not be far-off from the truth nor from his own principles." The guilty self-sufficiency of the descending souls is at the same time a display of divine generosity. Plotinus is aware of the problem how to reconcile the two views, as was Origen. "How could it be denied that the inclination downward is a transgression? But if the inclination is illuminating the nether world, we cannot call it a transgression." (I 1 [53] 12, 24-25). We may be sure that the seeming shadow of evil is not an offence to the light. The soul descends in order to make beautiful everything that in the emanation comes after her.

Still another problem remains: that of a transgression committed before the descent and within the spiritual world. The most explicit wording of the problem

is found in *Enn.* II 9, where it is fundamental in the discussion with the Gnostics. Plotinus states that “if the creative radiation is contrary to nature, then in the spiritual realm also will there be something contrary to nature, and evil will exist even before this universe comes into existence. In that case it is not this cosmos which is the cause of evil, but on the contrary yonder world causes evil to this world.” (II 9 [33] 12, 34-39). For this last expression McKenna has a brilliant translation: “in that case the Supreme is the evil to us,” picturing exactly the feeling the Gnostics had about the case: humanity is at the mercy of a higher and evil power that takes away all of our freedom of decision. This is the view Plotinus criticises so insistently.

In the later treatises Plotinus more or less avoids the problem by declaring that it is not soul but the radiation sent out by soul (ἔλλαμψις), which gets mixed up with matter. (*Enn.* I 1 quoted above, ch. 8 and 12; *Enn.* I 8 [51] ch. 14).

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The similarity of various theories in the philosophical systems of Origen and Plotinus has suggested that the similar theories could have had their origin in Ammonius:

K.H.E. de Jong, *Plotinus of Ammonius Saccas?*, Leiden 1941.

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Chapter IV

THE CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PLOTINUS' THEORY OF SOUL

In the Alexandrian world the Platonic tradition was received and fostered in all its aspects, but the prevailing interest had shifted from theoretical metaphysics to the vital questions of man's condition in this life and his alienated situation in the universe. The metaphysical structures survived the change, but they came to serve as a vehicle for vital and religious preoccupations. Between the numerous sects and schools there was, within the diversity of doctrines, a large measure of similarity in general outlook, and there was a free exchange of opinions and doctrines between the different creeds. As we have seen, the Church Fathers Clement and Origen shared with the Gnostics Basilides and Valentinus a general groundwork for important parts of their theology. Exchange and adaptation seem to have been a self-evident issue.

The most important problem was the soul's fate. This problem was developed within a wide field of special theories or even myths. The souls had lived in union with God, but had broken this unity when they chose to go their own way and govern the life of a universe. As the souls went a greater or lesser distance they received different forms of existence. Origen says that the egotism of the souls was made good by a decree of benevolence whereby God authorized the different souls to occupy different places in the universe (*De principiis*, GK 412, K 170-171). The outlines of the theory have the flavour of traditional Platonism: the soul stands in opposition to the body, the philosopher having the task of liberating soul and guiding her back to heaven. But metaphysical theory did not dominate that other field where the soul's situation had become a vital and dramatic problem. The human souls had taken the initiative themselves. They had lived in union

with God but had broken that union. Explanation in Platonic terms of unity and multiplicity was unable to solve the vital problem of guilt and self-will. The contrast was bridged by Origen by assuming a special decree of benevolence given by God. This eliminated the guiltiness of self-will, incurred when the souls set about their task of creating life and forgot their land of origin.

When the soul left the unity with her Father she became victim to a contagion with alien and humiliating powers: biological needs in the service of the body, animal efforts in the defence of life, passions which obscured her spiritual awareness. All these elements together formed a kind of unwanted addition to the soul's being, a crust of misleading forces overgrowing the soul. The descent developed into a journey on a false track, the alien wandering of a lost soul. A burden of unwelcome forces predetermines the soul to a life not her own. The special Gnostic form of this issue could find expression in the desperate question, quoted by Clement from a Valentinian source: *τί γεγόναμεν*; "what's the sense of being born?". (Exc. ex Theod. 78)

The cluster of problems about the soul's descent, with their religious overtones, and about a guilty fall combined with a mission of creating, is likewise at the root of Plotinus' theories. Wherever in the *Enneads* the problem of the soul shows up, the discussions have an unmistakable Gnostic colouring. In the early treatises the problem is dominant, and also in the treatises chron. 26-27-28-29, which are immediately anterior to the Gnostic crisis of chron. 30-31-32-33. In what follows we shall examine the theory of the soul as it is developed in the very first period of Plotinus' works, alike as to its theoretical form and as to the Gnostic way of feeling. We shall concentrate on I 6 [1], IV 7 [2], IV 2 [4], IV 8 [6] and V 1 [10].

A. The early treatises

Enn. I 6, chronologically the first of the 54 treatises of the *Enneads*, has a twofold argument. In the first part (chapters 1-6) Plotinus follows the outlines of Plato's description in the *Symposium* (209E - 211D). There is a scale of values in our perception of beautiful objects: beauty in material things, bodily beauty, virtues in the soul, the beauty of spiritual life. On all these levels the soul perceives beauty by an uncomplicated look, i.e. not as a result of reasoning (*βολῆ τῆ πρώτῃ*, 2, 1). The vision makes her aware of a kind of affinity, because seeing beauty reminds her of her own being. The visible things and music are recognized as beautiful because of the presence in them of the (Platonic) Forms, but the immaterial beauties bear an affinity to the divine Intellect which illuminates it all. All these kinds of beauty have the effect of bringing about in the soul an awareness of finding back her true self (*ἀναμνησκεται εἑαυτῆς*, 2, 10), and

as a consequence awakening a desire that is characteristic for those who are in love (ἐρωτικοί, 5, 8). How could she not be in love? What homesickness would she not feel, what desire to be united? The homesickness and the longing for union are a prelude to the religiously inspired second part of the treatise (from chapter 7 onward) where Plotinus' own voice takes over.

Plato had described the ultimate Good as the object of a superior kind of seeing (ὄψις, Rep. 507-509), in his view reserved for the privileged caste of well-trained philosophers. Plotinus introduces his description by stating that the vision is the result of an inward experience: "whoever has seen it, he will know what I mean" (εἴ τις οὖν εἶδεν αὐτό, οἶδεν ὃ λέγω, 7, 2; the same expression at VI 9 [9] 9, 47). The vision must be realized by a faculty "which is in everyone's possession, though very few use it" (8, 27).

The text of the chapters 7-8-9 abounds in expressions about taking the inward road, about awakening to one's self and reaching union. Being unified to one's own self is at the same time being united to the centre of the All. In the whole series of early treatises (chron. 1-12) this principle is present as a kind of program. In the Enneads throughout it is at the root of Plotinus' mysticism. If the earliest treatises were written under the abiding impact of Ammonius' teaching, the insistence on this point just in the earliest treatises may have been due to Ammonius' charisma. The doctrine has a striking similarity to a central doctrine of the Upanishads, as was noted already by Bréhier. The relation of the doctrine to Indian philosophy may not be dismissed off-hand, because it is not found in any Hellenic tradition, and because of the text of the *Vita* itself. In fact, Porphyry says (*Vita* 3, 17) that Plotinus' conversion to philosophy came about when he heard Ammonius lecturing, adding in the same breath that Plotinus' desire to know more about Indian philosophy was a direct result of Ammonius' teaching. More about the "Indian question" in the course of this chapter.

In I 6 [1] the chapters 7-8-9 may be read as a preface to the many descriptions of the soul's condition and destination throughout the Enneads. How shall one come to see the infinite Beauty? How to realize the journey? Starting the journey is described as an awakening to awareness of our real self (9, 1). Withdraw into yourself, eliminate what is dark and superfluous in your soul's statue, and you will be in a purified state and in the presence of yourself (9, 7-22, *σαυτῷ καθαρῶς συνηγμένου*). You will be no more divided between the spiritual realm and the burdens of earthly life, in order to reach union (*πρὸς τὸ εἰς οὕτω γενέσθαι*, 9, 17). Making the journey is compared to Ulysses' escape from the enchantments of Circe. Our homeland is where we came from and our Father is there. Let us flee to this our land of origin (8, 16-21).

The second and the fourth treatise in the chronological order form a unity (IV 7 [2] and IV 2 [4]). The greater part of IV 7 [2] is filled with criticism of the Stoic theory of the soul as a material being (chapters 2-8³). The Aristotelean ἐντελέχεια is discussed in 8⁴-8⁵. In chapters 9 and 10 Plato's formula of the soul as the source of light (*Phaedrus* 245 C 9) is amplified into the doctrine, specific for the Enneads, about the soul losing her self-knowledge in the descent and being covered with a burden of unwanted additions (προσθήκῃ, 10, 11), and inessential passions. These additions must be shaken off by a purifying process. Once this has been done the soul will recognize herself as being of divine origin and immortal. The argument depends on inward experience. Taking away the addition and looking inward you will be sure of your being immortal, contemplating your own self within the realm of Intellect (10, 30-38). Not by going outward (10, 43) as Plato has it (*Phaedrus* 247 D), will the soul see equanimity and righteousness, but within herself and by her very self-knowledge she will know them. She comes to see these essential virtues as statues representing her original being, but statues covered by a layer of rust (λοῦ πειληρωμένα, 10, 47-49). As long as this terrestrial crust is not purified away, the soul is in ignorance about herself. After the long chapters of criticism of Stoic and Aristotelean theories, this is the answer to the problem stated at the beginning of the treatise: what is it that constitutes the real "we", that is: the human person as such (IV 7 [2] 1, 20-25: ἡμεῖς, αὐτὸς ὁ ἄνθρωπος). The wording is an early form of the problem of the human person (see our chapter 6).

Worth noting is the fact that already in this early treatise the soul's descent is integrated into the mechanism of emanation. The soul follows and tries to reproduce what she has contemplated in Intellect (ἄ ἐν νῶ εἶδεν 13, 6). Other standard formulas are found: the higher part of the soul 'staying above' (13, 12-13) and the paradigm of emanation as a vital process (13, 6-7). The soul is not completely dominated by her function of governing a body. She keeps part of herself outside it. This issue is in the later treatises an element in the discussion with the Gnostics. In the soul's constitution, as different from Intellect, an impulse is added which makes her go forth to create and reproduce what she contemplated in Intellect. This is an inborn vital process, comparable to generation and giving birth (13, 6-7).

Enn. IV 2 [4] starts with a short remark about the argument as developed in IV 7 [2]. The problem is now treated by another method, the Platonic distinction between divisible and indivisible being (*Timaeus* 35 A). Soul as such has indivisible being. Without being split into parts she is present everywhere in the universe and everywhere in the body. Maintaining her indivisible unity she is at

the same time divided in the functions of the body (IV 2 [4] 1, 62-64). In chapter 2 the Stoic “ruling principle” is analysed.

Enn. IV 8 [6] begins with a personal testimony:

“Often, when I awake to myself from the body and come to be outside all other things and inside myself, I have a vision of immeasurable beauty. I feel sure that, if ever, I then inhabit the better part of myself, bringing to life the best of all lives and being united with the divine life and firmly established therein. I am taking part in that supreme energy, raising myself above all the rest of the intelligible world. When, having dwelt in that divine world, I come down from the light of Intellect to the level of reason, I wonder and do not understand how I could now or could ever have descended, and how my soul could have entered and taken abode in the body, if, even being within that body, she is of a nature such as was manifest when she was with herself.”

There can be no doubt that in this text an ecstasy is described. A parallel passage in a later text is VI 7 [38] chapters 34 and 35, where, just as here, Plotinus is unmistakably speaking from personal experience. At the same time the text contains a detailed analysis of the central problem of the soul’s nature. All the elements of Plotinus’ doctrine of soul are in the description: the vision of absolute beauty coinciding with finding one’s own most real self; the soul is a citizen of two worlds, but her better part always dwells above, merged in contemplation; and the descent from that better world where she feels at home, “inhabiting the better part of myself”. Armstrong, in his Loeb-translation (Vol. IV, 394, Introduction to IV 8) calls this a “pessimistic and dualistic beginning”, in opposition to any sane positive Hellenic view”. This appreciation has its roots in an interpretative tradition in which the Platonic face of philosophy is what makes metaphysics worth while. In Plato’s philosophy the supreme vision reached by the philosopher may be described as a cognitive process (Rep. 504D: *μέγιστον μάθημα*; 506 B: *ἐπιστήμη*). In Plotinus’ view personal experience must be taken as a valid testimony. In fact, in Plotinus’ description the vision of absolute Being is quite different from the well-prepared knowledge of Plato’s philosopher in the Republic (509B). What it all is about is the return of the soul to her own life, finding her own self. Realizing the return is entering upon a new existence rather than achieving knowledge. To call Plotinus’ description a pessimistic beginning is misreading the text. The introductory chapter of IV 8 is more than a casual reminder of a past experience.

In the next chapter (IV 8 [6] 2) the elements of the problem are set out as follows. There is first a short note about the difference between the All-Soul and the individual soul governing respectively the universe and the human body. The All-Soul has an uncomplicated royal authority, whereas the activity of the human soul is subject to the laws of the material world and hampered by the passions of the body (2, 28-46).

As a kind of prelude to the later discussions with the Gnostics, the vital problems are summed up as follows. Is it in accordance with the soul's nature to be united to a body? Was it a free decision for the soul to descend and organize a body, or did she go under compulsion? Is the descent a guilty fall, caused by self-will?

It is not an evil to the soul when she gives to the body the power to do good and to exist, if taking care of the lower level does not overrule her ability of "staying above" (*ἐν ἀρίστῳ τὸ προνοοῦν μένειν*, 2, 27). The question whether the soul's dwelling in a body is in accordance with or against her nature is treated in a personal form: did the maker (*ποιητῆς*, 2, 6) do well or do wrong when he made the souls inhabit a body that claims all her attention? The question has the ring of the discussions of later centuries about the justification of God's providence. It may have been a current issue in the Alexandrian world, as are so many expressions in the *Enneads*. Rather than to Stoic theology the mention of a personal creator may be an allusion, if it is one, to Christian or Gnostic-Christian discussions.

An ample description of the "fall" is given in chapter 4. The description is Plotinian in every detail. The individual soul has migrated from the All in order to be apart (*μονοῦται*, 4, 14) and to belong to herself (*ἐαυτῶν εἶναι*, 4, 11). She has become a dissident (*ἀποστᾶσα*, 4, 13), deeply drowned in things outside. She has fixed her attention upon her very fetters (*πρὸς τῷ δεσμῷ οὐσα*, 4, 26), even though she has always a superior part on high (*ὑπερέχον τι*, 4, 31). She is leading an amphibious life (*ἀμφίβιοι*) to be redressed by conversion to her origin (*ἐπιστροφῇ*, 4, 2). Some Platonic concepts are added, in order to show that the description is not at variance with authoritative scripture: loss of wings (*πτερορρυῆσαι*, *Phaedrus* 246 C), the body as a grave or cavern (*Rep.* 514 A).

The landscape of Plotinus' theory corresponds perfectly to what the Gnostics had in mind, and there is no special criticism of Gnostic views. The details are given with a quiet self-evidence as of currently accepted theory. Only one correction is given to any possible pessimistic view: the soul has not descended completely. Part of her always stays above (4, 31).

In chapter 5 follows the mention of the guilty decision (*ἀμαρτία*, 5, 16)

and the self-willed “gliding downward” (ρόπῃ ἀντεξουσίῳ, 5, 26) towards the lower sphere of existence, but as a correction to the Gnostic views an extensive *apologia* is given. The guilty decision, taken even before the descent, was to form the desperate core of the problem at the time of the Gnostic crisis (II 9 [33] 10 and 11). In the early treatise which we are now analysing (IV 8 [6]), the arguments in favour of an optimistic view appear already well-developed. Though there is the inclination to the lower sphere (ρόπή, 5, 26 = the Gnostic *νεῦσις*), the soul did not go under compulsion. The free decision she made was not a guilty one, but ordered by the creator to the benefit of the universe (5, 27). There were good reasons for choosing the downward path: it was unavoidable under the eternal law of nature, and served the needs of other beings (5, 11-12). This leads up to the paradox that the divine decree implied a free decision on the part of the soul (ἔχει τὸ ἐκούσιον ἢ ἀνάγκη, 5, 4 cf. 3, 30). The descent was necessary within the order of the universe, and presupposed the soul’s free decision. Without the descent the soul would not have known her own creative power, which would have remained hidden in the spiritual realm (5, 30-35). The divergence between Plotinus’ optimistic and the Gnostic’s tragic vision of the soul’s desperate condition is clearly marked out. The doom of the soul’s being punished and lost is transformed into a landscape of hopeful creation where the way back may be found.

A metaphysical argument follows in chapter 6. It is inherent in every nature that reaches its own perfection to produce what comes after her (6, 7-9; also V 1 [10] 6, 37-38). This is true likewise for the First and One when generating Intellect, and for the Soul when generating a universe. There is an analogy between the soul’s “staying above” and the stress laid on the absolute transcendence of the One, sending forth a powerful creative light. The first principle remains in its own seat and what comes after it is generated by the unbounded power of the creative light. The soul’s creative work follows this general law.

The inevitability of creation (IV 8 [6] 6, 21: ἐξ ἀνάγκης) finds expression also by means of the metaphysical theory of the one-and-many. It could not be that only the One existed, keeping all things hidden within itself. That would imply that no multiplicity of beings could have emanated (6, 1-7). Every nature has within itself a power beyond expression, which we should not set bounds to or circumscribe in narrow margins (6, 11-12). This unbounded power sends its radiance out to the whole universe, and there is nothing that can prevent other beings taking part in the nature of the Good (6, 16-27). The mention of the good as decisive power in the process of creation of a multiplicity of beings is a reminder of Plato’s statement in the *Timaeus* (29E): the supreme Creator was good and

could not deny existence to whatever could receive existence, because there was no envy in Him.

The closing chapters of the treatise (IV 8 [6] 7 and 8) contain some notes about details. There is a vague air of discussion, possibly with Gnostic opponents or simply with current opinions. The descent of the soul brings her into a condition wherein she experiences the effects of evil. To strong souls this experience will give a better awareness of the good (*γνώσις ἀγαθοῦ*, IV 8 [6] 7, 15-16). The point is already touched upon in 5, 28 where Plotinus says that taking knowledge of evil does not necessarily damage the soul if she is quick enough to escape. The word *γνώσις* carries the suggestion that Plotinus has the Gnostics in mind.

In 7, 1-5 once more an allusion is made to the problem of the free decision of the souls and their guilty fall: "it is better for the soul to dwell in the spiritual world, but we should not blame her if not everything is done to the best of all possibilities." The expression "not to blame her" seems to view current more pessimistic opinions of people who indeed felt wronged by a mistaken providence. Plotinus gives a kind of justification of the soul's conduct: she is in the middle between the spiritual life and dedication to her offspring, the humans. She governs the bodily existence at the risk of her own safety (7, 9), and may sometimes in excessive zeal come too far down. Even then she has the possibility of re-emerging, having gained wisdom by the contrast. In 8, 1-4 the allusion to the Gnostics comes out more clearly: if we may be bold enough (*τολμησαι*) to state our opinion more openly in the face of other people's convictions, not even our soul is completely submerged." The expression is a reminder of the Gnostic theory of the soul's guilty fall. The fall came about as a result of boldness, *τόλμα*. The friendly irony of Plotinus' remark has not yet the ring of the violent discussions in the later treatises.

Enn. V 1 opens with a description of a vital and tragic problem.

"Why is it the souls have forgotten God their Father and, though originating from yonder and there having their home, have lost all knowledge (*ἀγνοῆσαι*) about themselves and Him? Their evil had its beginning in boldness (*τόλμα*), desire for procreation, self-will and the first otherness. Enjoying their freedom and making their own decisions, the souls went astray and far-off on a long journey, ignoring even that from yonder they came. They are like children torn away from their parents and brought up in a far-away land for a long time, who do not know either themselves or their parents. Having lost sight of Him and of themselves, and holding themselves in contempt as a result of ignorance about the family they belong to, their affection and admiration are guided towards all other things. Under

that spell they are without any regard for themselves, are lost in passion and wonder, and turn away from what they have left behind. So their regard for things here and disregard for themselves turn out to be the cause of their complete ignorance about Him.” (V 1 [10] 1-17).

The dramatism of this description has an unmistakable Gnostic ring. The soul on earth is wandering in an unreal landscape, estranged from herself, and does not know how to find the way back. The description moves in the context of a tragic situation as we find it depicted by Valentine and in other Gnostic literature. It is much more at home in Gnostic mythology than in abstract Platonic metaphysics. In the Greek text expressions for ignorance (the Gnostic ἄγνοια), occur five times (lines 3, 8, 10, 12, 16). As in I 6 [1] the highest God is called Father. The only Platonic expression used in this chapter is “the first otherness” (ἡ πρώτη ἐτερότης, 1, 4), reminding of *Timaeus* 35 B and 37 A. This seems to be a slip of the pen, because it would imply that evil has its origin in the divine world, a view not accepted by Plotinus. Moreover, the “first otherness” if we take it strictly, has its place between the One and Intellect, not between Intellect and Soul. The whole description represents rather a Gnostic view than a Platonic doctrine. Plato does not talk about loss of knowledge as a cause of the soul’s distress. In the *Timaeus* the souls are assigned their task and place in the universe according to the Demiurg’s designs (41 E, 42 D). In Plotinus’ description the problem is seen not from the creator’s point of view but as a result of a decision taken by the souls themselves, and there is a tragic element in their confusion and despair, lost as they feel themselves in this world. Not knowing their origin they lose all self-respect. A twofold argument, says Plotinus, is needed to bring them back to awareness of their genealogy, one argument showing the emptiness of what occupies the soul’s attention, the other reminding them of their value and their family (V 1 [10] 1, 22-27).

The message is aimed not so much at metaphysical theory as rather at opening a perspective as to the soul’s destination. In the text a series of imperatives is addressed to a supposed audience. One must turn round and lift up oneself to what is the One and First (1, 24). The soul should realize her being source of life (2, 1). She must meditate on her being present everywhere, governing a universe and filling it with life (2, 27-30). Our human soul is akin to the soul of the universe. Once purified of the overgrowth (τῶν προσελθόντων, 2, 45) she will be found to have a value much higher than anything material. Why should you leave out yourself and pursue what is alien?

The argument is built upon the doctrine of the unity of the human soul with the soul of all living beings and with the soul of the universe. “Admire soul in every

other being and you admire yourself" (2, 50). This doctrine is a meeting-point of various theories: (1) the human soul must find within herself the source of universal Being; (2) in order to recognize this presence within herself, the soul must be purified of what is inessential to her, that is, of the inevitable overgrowth of her earthly existence; (3) when the purified soul has come to know her real Self, she will know by experience that her Self is identical with the universal Self.

There is, apart from the Enneads, only one system of philosophy where this doctrine is found and is fundamental, and that is Buddhism, and in Buddhism it is a mystical doctrine. Plotinus cannot have read it in Plato (see our chapter 2), nor even in Stoicism. In Stoicism there is a rationalistic theory, which must give peace of mind to the man who accepts his being determined by divine decrees. It is a far cry from a rationalist doctrine to a way of life in which the individual soul merges into the life-giving origin of the universe. Looking inward to find your real Self, this Self being identical with the cosmic Self, is a doctrine that has no precedent in any Hellenic tradition. If Indian philosophy was the source, there can have been no other channel through which it came to Plotinus than just the teaching of Ammonius Saccas, whose dedicated student Plotinus was for more than ten years.

The parallelism may be clear from a comparison of the doctrine of the Enneads to chapters of the Upanishads (quoted from Radhakrishnan's translation), In Enn. VI 5 [23] 12 we read: "when you have shaken off what is inessential, the All will be with you"; and the reverse in V 8 [31] 7: "as a result of the descent, the soul has renounced being with the All." In the supreme ecstasy one reaches unity with oneself, and, being undivided, is united to the One-and-All (V 8 [31] 11, 4-5) (see also 4, 3-7 and 10, 41-44). In the Upanishads the identity of the human and the universal Self is affirmed in numerous chapters, so e.g.: Brhad-Aranyaka II 5, 15 (Radh. p. 205): "this Self, verily, is the Lord of all beings — in this Self all the selves are held together"; and in Chandogya Up. III 13 (Radh. p. 205 and 390): "now the light which shines above this heaven, above all, above everything, — that is the same as the light which is here within the person. In Brhad-Aranyaka III 7 (Radh. p. 225-228) a long series of sentences is given, all of the form: "he who dwells in the earth, in the water — etc., he is your self." The last of the series is: "He who dwells in all being, he is your self, the inner controller, the immortal." Mundaka Up. II 1 (Radh., p. 680): "He is the Self of all beings."

In the early treatises of the Enneads there is a recurrent insistence on this principle, most of all in VI 9 [9] where the mystical union is described. The

insistence on this fundamental principle may have been inspired by the charisma of Ammonius' lectures.

In the field of ancient philosophy a kind of sacred tradition exists, in force of which it is considered sacrilegious to doubt Plato's authority or to admit any non-Hellenic influences. There is a resolute rejection of whatever has the ring of Persian or Indian theories or Gnostic mythology, because such would diminish the brilliance of the Hellenic genius. The force of this tradition becomes manifest by the sometimes curious arguments that are constructed in order to prove the impossibility of these eastern origins. An example is the treatment of the question by H.R. Schwyzer in the *Realencyclopädie*, s.v. Plotinos, col. 580. Quoting Bréhier's views on the presence of Indian theories in the Enneads, especially as to the doctrine of the identity of the One and Absolute with the soul's inner Self, Schwyzer states (correctly) that no Hellenic precursor of this doctrine can be found. But he adds a nonsensical argument to make it clear that it was impossible that Plotinus should have made acquaintance with any form of Indian theory. From the *Vita* (3, 16) we know that Plotinus took part in the military expedition under the emperor Gordianus, with the aim, says Porphyry, of being informed about Indian philosophy. But the expedition came to ruin and never reached India, so as a consequence Plotinus remained uninformed. The argument presumes that this had been the one and only occasion for Plotinus to know more about Indian ways of thinking. This flies in the face of a wealth of archaeological and literary evidence about Alexandria as a cosmopolitan town visited by traders and travellers from all over the world. Navigation through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean with the help of the monsoon winds (Pliny NH VI 96-100) is attested in literature and by archaeology, and trade was extensive in both directions.

There are more than a few texts in Greek literature that make it clear beyond any doubt that not only traders but also Indian philosophers had made their way to Alexandria. Flavius Philostratus (ca. 170-245 AD) has a long story about Indian sages and Brahmans in his *Life of Apollonius*. His hero is a dedicated traveller, exploring the habits and opinions of peoples on the borderline of the Hellenic world. In book III chapters 15-50 (Loeb-ed p. 254-336). Philostratus gives a detailed account of Apollonius' meeting with a community of Brahmans, where the eldest of the sages, Iarchas by name, enters upon a conversation with their visitor. The story has all the characteristics of popularized hagiography: levitation, second sight, walls and roofs against the rain being built by the sheer force of prayer, but it is unmistakably Indian and could not have been written unless some Indian tradition had penetrated to the West. It may be objected that

in the text there is no reference to written philosophical doctrines, but the long drawn-out story at any rate makes it clear that in the Hellenic world the ways of life of Indian philosophers were well-known. Other sources even mention the presence of Indians in Alexandria. Schwyzer's argument about the impossibility of Plotinus' having learnt about Indian philosophy, or even having known some Indian philosopher, is self-defeating. We may safely assume that in Alexandria there was ample occasion to meet Indian sages. Moreover, if Plotinus thought it worth while to make the long journey with Gordianus' expedition, he must have known more and better about Indian philosophy than what he could have found in a popularized tradition.

The Christian author Clement, who lived in Alexandria at the end of the second century (ca. 150-213 AD) mentions Indian sages and their way of life at various places in his *Stromateis*. At *Strom.* I 15, 71 (Stählin 45, 4 and 46, 5) there is a reference to the Indian *γυμνοσοφισταί* or naked philosophers, and the Brahmins, whom Clement considers as precursors of Greek philosophy. Some Indian peoples, he adds, follow the precepts of Buddha (*Βούττα*), whom they adore as a god by sheer excess of veneration. At *Strom.* III 7, 60 (St. 223, 25) he praises the Brahmins for their chaste and vegetarian way of life, and mentions their doctrine of metempsychosis. At *Strom.* IV 4, 17 (St. 256, 18) he describes death by fire as practised by the naked philosophers, condemning it as a false attempt at winning the favour of martyrdom. Clement also mentions some products of Indian trade. In his *Paedagogus* (II 10, 107, St. 221, 14) he criticizes the excessive luxury of the well-to-do Alexandrian ladies, who wear Indian silken sarongs.

Finally, the presence of Indian travellers in Alexandria may be illustrated by a passage of Dio Chrysostomus' *Oratio* 32, 40 (Loeb-ed. vol. III, p. 210). Dio was a rhetorician of the second sophistic movement, much-travelled in the Hellenistic world. In a long address to the Alexandrians, rather packed with moral lessons, he sums up the peoples represented among the audience: "not only Greeks and Italians but also — Bactrians, Scythians, Persians and even some Indians."

The doctrine of our soul's relation to universal Being is in the early treatises developed with great force of persuasion and personal concern. In the later treatises the lyricism of the early texts gives way to a more quiet and more theoretical structure. Even then the doctrine of the human soul's unity with the ever-present One stands out as the root and substructure of the whole system. Even in the drawn-out theoretical explanations of the middle and late period references to the vital core of the theory are found, and the treatises are mostly concluded upon a note about the soul's condition and her final destination. The

emanation as life-giving force, the conversion to the origin, and contemplation as pre-condition for creating appear to be structural elements in the description of the soul's situation in the universe.

Enn. V 1 [10] may be considered as fundamental to the whole of Plotinus' development in the treatises that were still to be written. We can see from the text that it was intended as such. The opening chapter describes the tragic decisions of the souls when they leave their home to go creating. The specifically Plotinian doctrines follow. The highest part of the soul is contiguous to the universal Intellect (3, 5). For every hypostasis the mechanism of emanation consists in contemplation and conversion (7, 5-6; 7, 41). To ensure the link with the Hellenic tradition, theoretical explanation is given in Platonic and Aristotelean formulas (*ὑποκείμενον* 5, 14; *εἰδοποιούμενον* 7, 40; *ἕτερότης – ταυτότης* 4, 33; *μέριστον – ἀμέριστον* 7, 17). The Presocratics: Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles are adduced as confirming the theory or having an intuition of it.

The treatise ends upon a note about the interior disposition we should adopt to awake the awareness of a divine presence within us (V 1 [10] 12, 12-20). It is the repeated message: in order to perceive this kind of presence you must turn inwards. When a man is waiting for a voice he wants to hear, he withdraws his attention from every other sound and awakes his ear to the best of all sounds. In that way we must leave aside the noise that reaches the ear (unless necessity commands us), and safeguard the soul's power to perceive what is essential, ready to hear the voices from on high (*ἔτοιμον ἀκούειν φθόγγων τῶν ἄνω*).

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B. Discussions within the school. Analytical methods

In the *Vita* (3, 24) Porphyry mentions a mutual promise between friends, by which Plotinus was under obligation not to divulge Ammonius' doctrines. This compromise may have been the reason why Plotinus in the first ten years after his arrival in Rome (244 AD) did not put down in writing any systematic argument. Porphyry is rather outspoken on this point. He states that later the mutual agreement was broken and that Plotinus started writing "in the first year of Gallienus' reign" (i.e. 253/254 AD). Until that year he had lectured, or rather had organized philosophical discussions, on the basis of Ammonius' teaching (*Vita*, 3, 33-37). This may be understood either as meaning that Plotinus lectured with the aid of notes he had put down in the school of Ammonius, or simply that in general he followed the lead of Ammonius' doctrines. When he started writing he may have felt free enough to insist on some vital points of Ammonius' doctrines, as we find them still in the recurrent themes of the early treatises.

Ten years later (in 263 AD), when Porphyry arrived on the scene, Plotinus had written 21 treatises. (*Vita* 4, 66). Porphyry mentions the interest he and Amelius took in the philosophical topics that were proposed for discussion and analysis. They persuaded Plotinus to write down the result of the discussions (5, 5-7). Porphyry states with pride (5, 54) that in the six years he spent in Rome twenty-four treatises were written by Plotinus (chronol. 22-45). The subjects to write about were taken ἐκ προσκαίρων προβλημάτων, that is, from the discussions being held within the school.

At two points in the *Vita* there is a clear indication about what were the burning issues. At *Vita*, 13, 10-17 we read the story of a protracted discussion between Porphyry and Plotinus himself. After three days' debating a listener in the audience lost his patience and asked for a well-ordered argument, such as could be written out in a book. Plotinus answered that if no solution were found to the problems put forward by Porphyry, there simply would be nothing worth writing in a book. The issue in question was how to explain the soul's being united to the body.

The second of the two places is *Vita*, 18, 7-23, where the story is told of an organized debate between Amelius and Porphyry. The subject under scrutiny was Porphyry's opinion that "the intelligibles (τὰ νοητά) have an independent existence outside Intellect." He wrote a book about it and Amelius answered by writing another book. In a second round Amelius and Porphyry again exchanged their written views, and at last Porphyry gave in and composed a recantation which he read out to the audience. The result of the discussion may be read in *Enn V 5* [32]; a treatise with the title: "that the Intelligibles are not outside Intellect."

It appears that, when Porphyry entered the school, the two most hotly debated issues were the condition of the soul when embodied, and the architecture of the intelligible world. Two series of treatises are well recognizable as the result of the debate on these two topics: the "problems about the soul" in *IV 3-4-5* [27-28-29] and *VI 4-5* [22-23] about the omnipresence of Intelligible Being. In both cases the extensive arguments as well as the final paragraphs and conclusion demonstrate that Soul was the central and vital problem. In the series of problems about the soul [27-28-29] the dry tone of theoretical analysis dominates, but the account of the discussions in the *Vita* (13, 10-17) is clear enough as to the involvement and concerns of the debating philosophers. In the series [22-23] the arguments converge on the program of living to be followed by the philosopher in order to set his soul free for the ultimate contemplation.

Enn. VI 4 [22] has at the beginning a formal statement of the problem, and in the course of the text the typical repetitions are found that are characteristic of discussions being held. The arguments are carefully worked out and an extensive analysis is given of the metaphysical principle in question. This principle is stated in the terms used by Plato in the *Timaeus*, as the distinction between divisible and indivisible being. Soul partakes of both. She is not spatially determined, which means that she is omnipresent in the universe, but at the same time is divided over the multitudinous beings to which she gives life. Up to this point the argument moves within the Platonic conceptual scheme. In chapter 15 the theme comes up

of the soul's forlorn condition. She is in need of light. Within herself she has a host of carnal desires and anxieties as alien additions to her own real being (VI 4 [22] 15). In chapter 16 her descent and possibilities of return are discussed. In both these chapters the divisible-indivisible problem is absent. The last chapter of the series (VI 5 [23] 12, 18-36) returns to the original inspiration and lyrical style of the early treatises, about the soul's condition in this our human life and her return to the One:

“Throw away being an individual and you have become the All though it is true that even before this you were the All. But alien elements have been added to your being, in addition to the All, and the addition has diminished your existence, because it did not come from being but from not-being (for to the All nothing can be added) (18-22) — As long as you are with alien things, He will not appear, nor was there any need for Him to come in order to be there. It is you who turned away when His presence was not felt (25-27). — To Him the townships, the earth and the universe stand converted (*ἐπιστρέφονται*), all of them abiding with Him and in Him, having their existence from Him and moving towards the One (*εἰς ἐν ἰόντα*, 33-36).”

In Enn. IV 3-4-5 [27-28-29] we have a big cluster of technical explanations based on discussions within the school. The discussions turn around problems of psychology. First comes the question whether the universal Soul is divided over multiple beings, or present everywhere with all of herself (IV 3 [27] 1-8), and accordingly whether human souls are only parts of or rather sisters of the universal soul (chapter 6). Then a new subject comes up: how does soul move into body? (9, 1) It is introduced by a statement of the problem and the different ways of dealing with it. Plotinus specifies the question by stating that the discussion shall not be about metempsychosis, but about the soul's moving into a body from her former existence as an immaterial being (9, 1-12). This question branches off in two directions, according as the theory is about the universal soul or about human souls. The All-Soul never had any existence without a universe as her body, nor any place other than her own to dwell in. The human souls have gone spontaneously to find a body that is adequate to their nature (13,1 *ἵεναι*; 13, 8 *κἀτεισι*; 13, 18-19 *ἴασι, πηδᾶν*). They are subject to a universal law that is innate in the souls and prompts them by a kind of inner voice to go and follow the call (IV 3 [27] 13, 18-33). The universal soul is discussed in chapters 9-1011, the human soul in chapters 12-19.

The organization of the arguments in the series [27-28-29] is rather loose and the arguments themselves are dry and theoretical, much in contrast to the inspired

lyrical tone and the dramatic description of the soul's fate in the early treatises IV 8 and V 1. In IV 3 the description of the soul's descent is factual and in the text a neutral expression is used: "going when the right moment comes." There is no talk of arrogance and self-will on the part of the souls, or of a guilty decision. The only expression that may carry a faint allusion to Gnostic views is that of the inner voice that prompts them, but the impulse to create is simply part of the soul's nature, not a transgression. What is set forth is metaphysical theory. The difference marks a new situation within the school, when analytical methods had been introduced by Porphyry.

The progress of the discussions in IV 3-4 can be followed easily by means of the short introductions to the various sections of the debate. In IV 3 [27] chapter 9 a new topic is introduced: "we should now inquire about the soul's relation to body." In chapter 20 the same kind of introduction is given: "the question confronts us whether soul is in a place." This discussion covers the chapters 20-24 and is followed in chapter 25 by the question of the soul's memory (25, 4: *ζητεῖν ὁμοίως ἄξιον*, is equally worth investigating), which fills the chapters IV 3 [27] 25-32 and IV 4 [28] 1-17. The discussion of memory is split up into various complementary questions. Is memory a natural component of the soul, or does it only accompany our existence as long as our soul is in the body? If memory is only a function in the embodied soul, the question arises whether there is any remembrance of our earthly existence once the soul, or the soul's higher part, has returned to the life of Intellect. This topic is amply discussed in one of the chronologically last discussions, I 1 [53], where the problem of the human person (*ἡμεῖς*) and its survival in the spiritual realm is analysed (see our chapter 6).

It may be that memory is bound up with and conditioned by other faculties such as perception and imagination, or by the passions, such as desire, anger, temperament. Nevertheless, even in this embodied existence our faculties are capable of acquiring knowledge of the spiritual world (IV 3 [27] 28, 1-3 and IV 4 [28] chapters 5 and 7).

In IV 4 [28] 12, 40-41 a short allusion is made to the opinion of "some people" that the administration of the universe is a mischievous one. The quiet wording of the remark suggests that on this point no acrid debate was going on at the moment. The problem in question became one of the central issues in the Gnostic crisis, reflected in II 9 [33].

In IV 4 [28] 18-21 and 28 the problem of the passions and emotions is taken up again. In between is a curious digression about the soul of the earth: does the earth's soul have perception without having organs of hearing and seeing? The

topics appear to have been proposed for discussion by the audience or maybe by Porphyry.

The closing chapters of this long collection of technical dissertations have astrology, magic and prayer as their subject-matter (IV 4 [28] 30-45). Do the stars have perception and memory, so they can know our needs and answer our prayers? (Chapter 30). Plotinus is sceptical about heavenly bodies being occupied with our personal needs and wishes and prefers seeing prayer as an impulse propagating itself through the universe, thanks to the unity of the cosmos. The celestial gods come to know our prayers by a kind of contact (*κατὰ οἶον σύναψιν*, 26, 1). About astrological prediction he says that the stars may give signals of things to come, but do not determine our actions (38, 25). Magic was in Plotinus' age an awkward topic because of the multiple and widespread forms of superstition. In line with what was said about prayer the possibility of cosmic forms of magic could not be eliminated on beforehand. Plotinus is reluctant to leave too much space for the extravagance of "some people" who pray to the stars in the firm belief that through the stars benefits can be obtained, or even that the gods may give help in erotic disorders (30, 10). In contrast to the violent attacks on Gnostic doctrines about the origin of evil, which at a short distance in time follow the treatises on the soul, Plotinus here speaks in a rather neutral and mildly ironic tone: "if we may believe those who maintain that the heavens can be cast a spell on by insolent people's witchcraft" (30, 28-32). As an appendix to these long drawn-out discussions, Porphyry placed in his edition of the *Enneads* a treatise on eyesight and visual perception (IV 5 [29]). We cannot be far off the mark in supposing that the heterogeneous explanations were the written proceedings of what had been investigated in the meetings of the school. They were the result of Porphyry's and Amelius' insistence on writing down what had been said (*Vita*, ch. 13, ch. 18).

C. The Gnostic discussions

The so-called "long treatise", consisting of *Enn.* III 8, V 8, V 5 and II 9 (chron. 30-31-32-33), is generally considered as an anti-Gnostic document in its entirety. This, however, is a distortion of the perspective. The greater part of the long treatise is a quiet and well-balanced exposition of Plotinus' metaphysical theory, and not a discussion of Gnostic problems. The first of the four parts, III 8 [30], "On Contemplation" even has in the introduction a playful approach to the question by asking whether even in playing a kind of contemplation (*θεωρία*) is at work, and in the fourth chapter Nature is introduced explaining allegorically her silent

way of creating. The second part, V 8 [31] “On Spiritual Beauty”, follows in the same track.

First come several chapters explaining ideas about beauty, mostly in the form of a commentary on Plato’s theory of the ascent to superior beauty (Phaedrus 248, *Symposium* 210 E - 211 D). After that Plotinus gives the outlines of his own system, with its central issue of individual self-awareness being identical with awareness of universal being (4, 6-7: ἔχει πᾶς πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ). When seeing oneself as unbounded, one is living up to one’s own nature (4, 33-34). Knowing the first origin is a kind of wisdom which is not a result of reasoning (4, 36). If we do not understand this, it is because we suppose knowledge to consist in theories and in a mass of propositions (4, 48-49). Plotinus states that Plato must have had a first sight about what knowledge is in the space of Intellect, but “has left it to us to investigate and find out” (4, 54-56), which, by the way, is clear proof that Plotinus had a full awareness of the independence of his views.

Contemplation must begin by praying that a god may come to reveal the vision (θεὸν καλέσας, 9, 13). Beauty has its seat in the contemplator’s mind, but the happiness of the vision is not the happiness of philosophical onlookers (θεαταῖς μόνον, 10, 35), “because onlookers contemplate from the outside”, but the more piercing sight has within itself the object of seeing (10, 36-38). The space for this vision is within oneself, and the contemplation must see it as being it himself (βλέπειν ὡς αὐτόν, 10, 40-45).

Here the explanations move over from Platonic theory of forms to Plotinian inward meditation. Abandoning the image (ἀφείς τὴν εἰκόνα, 11, 4) the contemplator is unified to himself, and, nevermore duplicating himself (σχίσας) he is One and All (ἐν ὁμοῦ πάντα, 11, 5) together with that god who in silence is present. This is the essence of Plotinus’ theory of mystical vision: the supreme vision coincides with finding one’s self. If the contemplator could doubt the vision, he would have to doubt his own very existence (11, 37-38). The aim and end of the vision is unifying oneself to the One and All. The description of the ascent to supreme beauty is in the *Enneads* not a discussion of cognitive processes, as it was in Plato’s philosopher, but a description of the inward contemplation as an existential process in which the soul of the contemplator merges into the All-Soul. This is the fundamental theory in the metaphysical framework of the *Enneads*. Its most salient feature is the identity of Self and the One.

In the third part of the long treatise, (V 5 [32] “the Intelligibles are not outside Intellect”), hardly an allusion to Gnostic theories is found. The treatise seems to be rather a didactic document, devoted to the instruction of beginners. It may have been intended by Plotinus as a necessary introduction to his metaphysics, for the

use of those who were still unaware of its dominant characteristics. If the Gnostics were willing to be taught about the first principles, they could find here in rather simple form the most important points. References to Plato's doctrines are few, in comparison to the specifically Plotinian theories. The One and First, being transcendent in the most absolute sense (ch. 6) is at the same time omnipresent (ch. 8 and 9). The whole universe depends on this One and First for its very existence (9, 29-38) and in the universe nothing was left out that could have received existence. The One cannot be found as a result of human concepts (ch. 11). All things strive back to the One by the sheer imperative of their nature (ch. 12). All this has nothing to do with criticism of Gnostic theories or even discussion. The treatise may be seen as a patient explanation of a theory which lay at the heart and centre of Plotinus' philosophy: the absolute transcendence and at the same time the omnipresence of the supreme One.

The fourth part of the "long treatise", Enn. II 9 [33], was marked out by Porphyry as special criticism of Gnostic theories. He edited the text with the formal heading "Against the Gnostics". It is the result of a crisis within the school, described by Porphyry in *Vita* 16 and by Plotinus himself in II 9 [33] ch. 9 and 10. The "Gnostic crisis", as it is called, has given rise to voluminous studies on Gnostic presence in the works of Christian authors and in the Enneads themselves. The problem has long been obscured by the predominance of the Platonic paradigm in scholarly interpretations of Plotinus' philosophy, and the prevailing mistrust of any Eastern or Indian or in general any mythological ingredient in Plotinus' doctrines. The problem surfaced when Hans Jonas in 1934 wrote that in his view the Plotinian system should be explained in a Gnostic rather than a Platonic perspective, because fundamentally it was a Gnostic system of philosophy¹ An easy definition marking out Gnostic from Platonic doctrines is not available, because Gnostic authors were eager to adopt elements from the Platonic tradition, amalgamating them with their mythology. At the time Hans Jonas' opinion appeared somewhat overdone, and in 1934 it was indeed shocking to the established opinions, but the parallelism and sometimes the falling together of Plotinian and Gnostic views is too obvious to escape the question being put. In more than a few texts of the Enneads a Gnostic colouring is unmistakable,

¹ H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, Vol. I: Die mythologische Gnosis, Göttingen 1934, 2nd ed. 1954, p. 375.

H. Jonas, The Soul in Gnosticism and Plotinus, in: *Le Néoplatonisme, Colloques Royaumont*, 1969, Paris, 1971, p. 45-53.

Chr. Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltlehre in der Schule Plotins*, Berlin-New York, 1975.

H.J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik*, Amsterdam 1964, 2. Aufl. 1967, p. 223-264: Die Gnosis.

and we must ask whether that is just a casual coincidence or a sign of a deeper affinity. What is in question in these texts is time and again the problem of the soul's position in this universe.

The parallelism of the two systems has its roots in problems widespread in the spiritual atmosphere of the age. Both Plotinus and the Gnostics worked on a program of escape from this world. Both wanted to show a way out, in the one system by bringing a message clothed in mythical form, in the other by working out a system of metaphysics and mystical contemplation. The underlying problems were in a large measure the same.

When interpreting the philosophical system we must try to make clear what is the part played by Gnostic or even Indian theories and what are the Platonic elements. Some theories are easily recognized as Platonic, mostly those in the field of theoretical metaphysics. Dramatic descriptions of the soul's descent and creative activity bear the stamp of a Gnostic origin. The mystical theory and the identity of personal Self and universal Self have no precedents in any Hellenic tradition. When stating origins and searching for the Gnostic or Indian or Platonic examples we should be aware of the overwhelming authority of Plato as a patriarch of philosophy. It was a kind of religious duty to Plotinus to show that his views did not deviate from those of Plato. At many places he tries to make fast to Plato's authority, even where the evidence of the system shows that the theory was Plotinus' own. When searching for Gnostic components we should not be misled by Plotinus' use of Platonic language. The traditional theoretical expressions are often only chosen as vehicle for a different inspiration. Where the vital issue of the soul's fate comes to the fore, the developments are, as a rule, specifically Plotinian, most of all where the soul's identity with the omnipresent One is explained.

There are four points at which a comparison between the *Enneads* and the Gnostic doctrines is unavoidable.

(1) The One is directly present to all the emanated beings in the universe. Having supreme and absolute Being, the One is nevertheless everywhere present (*πᾶρεστι χωριστὸν ὅμως ὄν* VI 4 [22] 3, 12). The theory is in its theoretical form developed extensively in VI 4-5 [22-23], and in its implications for the return of the human soul to union in VI 9 [9] ch. 5-9. In this process of return no mediator is needed, nor is there any necessity to introduce a great number of intermediate powers or intermediate hypostases, as did the Gnostics. The treatise "Against the Gnostics" begins with criticism of the Gnostic habit of multiplying the divinities in the Pleroma. This would imply introducing separation or distance between our world and the omnipresent One. There is not even a necessity of

admitting a twofold Intellect, one in contemplation of the First Origin, the other occupied with creation in the lower spheres (II 9 [33] ch. 1).

(2) The human soul must find her real Self in the One as the universal Self. We must find it in the depths of our own existence, and there is no need to make a long journey. (*πάντως που οὐ πόρρω ἐπιβαλεῖς οὐδὲ πολλὰ τὰ μεταξύ* V 1 [10] 3, 3-4; *μεταξὺ γὰρ οὐδέν, VI 7 [38] 34, 13*). The “light within the person” is identical with absolute Being.

The principle of identity with the universal Self and consequently of inward contemplation as the way to be followed stands in opposition to the complicated mythology of the Gnostics. The multitude of intermediaries creates insuperable distance between the individual and the One and First, and indeed means fleeing from Him as well as from oneself (VI 9 [9] 7, 30). Plotinus' theory is in this point un-hellenic and may be considered, in the absence of other points of reference, as having an Indian pedigree. It may have been the doctrine which caused Plotinus to be captivated by the charisma of Ammonius and to stay with him and hear his lectures for eleven years.²

(3) The All-Soul, when coming down from the divine realm to go creating, does not commit a transgression as the Gnostics had it. Though she acts by deliberate choice and under the impulse of self-will, her descent is not a fall. Plotinus states that the Father, when sending her, had pre-ordained her to have this self-will, in order that her full creative powers should be manifest. This is even a metaphysical necessity, because, as Plotinus often stresses, every perfect being cannot but create. There may seem to be an element of correction in the way Plotinus joins the two aspects of the theory: transgression and self-will on the one side and the manifestation of a divine decree on the other. The contrast between the two elements of the theory was what gave rise to the Gnostic's conviction that evil intent had played the fundamental part, either in the soul's decision or even in the divine decree. Plotinus bridges the paradox by stating that the real soul “stays above”, and what descends is the creative light, thereby coming on the brink of duplicating one of his own hypostases. The descending light is a correction to Gnostic pessimism about this misshapen world. The world lies basking in the creative light which lends her a divine beauty. The despair of the Gnostics is due to a faulty apprehension of reality, or even a delusion of their senses, incapable of seeing beauty in the world around us.

(4) The evil in this world cannot be explained by a decision taken within the divine realm. The Gnostics had introduced an evil-doer at the lowest border of the Pleroma, the malicious Demiurge, son of Sophia. Plotinus' answer to

² See pp. 39-40, 50, 57-58.

this way of presenting the situation is to be found in his theory of emanation, where the creative mechanism is determined by contemplation. Intellect must contemplate the One in order to receive its existence and form. In her turn the World-Soul must find the principles and forms of the beings to be created in her contemplation of Intellect. In human workmanship contemplating is an analogon to the mechanism of emanation in the World-Soul. The creative artist must find the forms to be expressed in matter in his inner contemplation. The presence of beautiful forms in this world and in Nature signals the presence of Soul and Intellect. The omnipresence of these spiritual powers, together with the mechanism of contemplation make a correction to the forlornness of the Gnostic soul. In Gnostic mythology the human soul is left to her fate and a prey to the evil government of the Demiurge. In the philosophical system of the Enneads Ammonius' principle of contemplation of a divine Self within our souls was integrated into the process of emanation, thereby saving the possibility for the human individual to find his way back to the spiritual world.

When surveying the landscape the first thing to be noticed is that every one of these four issues has its analogies in current Gnostic views. Secondly, that all four topics had already received full treatment in the written work that is chronologically prior to the "long treatise", which means prior to the Gnostic crisis. The basic architecture of the theory of soul is the same in Gnostic thought and in Plotinus' system. It may be added that Plotinus did not simply accept the Gnostic formulas. He added independent developments in his theory of emanation and its metaphysical substructure, developments that go far beyond the Gnostic horizon. But the salient and decisive feature in both systems is the effort to find the way back to the soul's salvation.

This is immediately clear in the opening chapters of the anti-Gnostic treatise (II 9 [33]). In chapter 1 the firm foundation is established of not admitting more than one Intellect and more than one universal Soul. The polytheism of the Gnostic Pleroma constitutes an insuperable barrier for the soul's return to her origin. From chapter 2 onwards the human soul is in the centre of the argument. The better part of our soul is always in contemplation of supreme Being, though her lower part may be dragged down and bound up with a material body. The soul is caught in that unhappy condition because she did not remain in the most beautiful of all regions (2, 11). The universal soul is always absorbed in contemplation, receiving illumination from Intellect and illuminating the lower world by her creative light. Her standing conversion to Intellect makes any talk of an inclination downwards or a "fall" impossible. The strongest expression of this principle is given in the famous line: "the creative factor was not a downward

inclination, but just the reverse: the absence of such an inclination.” (*ὄν νεῦσίν φραμεν τήν ποιούσαν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον μὴ νεῦσιν* 4, 6-7). If the soul did not stay immersed in contemplation (= *θεωρία* as in III 8 [30]) she would lose her creative power.

The “inclination downwards” to the darkness of the material world and the consequent irreversibility of evil are the main targets of Plotinus’ irritated criticism. His reaction comes in a tone as if he is dealing with a perversity. Just at this point he attacks the Gnostic mythology with unusual violence and bitter irony:

“We could have left it at that, were it not for the one doctrine that surpasses all the rest in absurdity, if absurdity it may be called. Having said that the World-Soul and also one Sophia felt an inclination downwards, whether on the initiative of Soul or because Wisdom (= Sophia) prompted her that way, - or maybe they say that the two are one and the same -, they make the other souls come down with her as members of Wisdom (= Sophia) and take abode in bodies, human bodies for instance. But then, whereas the individual souls undertook the descent for the sake of Wisdom, they contradict themselves by saying that Soul herself did not come down, - a kind of not-declining -, but only illuminated the darkness, as a result of which an image was generated in matter.” (II 9 [33] 10, 17-26).

A remark at the end of chapter 10 seems to suggest that Plotinus when writing this chapter had a specific Gnostic treatise in mind or before him. He pours out his scorn over that author (*ὁ τοῦτο γράψας*) and his doctrines which he considers as sacrilegious fantasies or maybe as a kind of attack on his personal integrity. The Gnostic author may have been one of Valentinus’ sectarians or Valentinus himself, whose school was dominant in Rome.

It is difficult not to see that even in this violent criticism Plotinus describes the Gnostic mythology on the lines of his own system. The chapter that contains the most personal and heated criticism of Gnostic arrogance and misjudgement at the same time offers a clear survey of the parallels between the Gnostic views and those of Plotinus.

The chapters 10-11-12-13 are densely laden with indignation, focused upon the inextricable disarray of Gnostic mythology, its “tragedy of cosmic horrors”, and its Demiurge being relegated to an abyss of absolute evil, a doctrine that “exceeds every possible degree of absurdity” (10, 8). The criticism is at its sharpest at points where there is a parallelism with the system of the *Enneads*. A comparison gives us occasion to observe at the same time the parallels and the corrections introduced by Plotinus.

Gnostic doctrines as reported and criticized by Plotinus

a. II 9 [33] 10, 19-33.

The descent of Sophia

b. II 9 [33] 4, 1-10

The descent is a “fall” (σφάλμα)

— or a *sin*

(ἀμαρτία, σφάλμα)

c. II 9 [33] 10, 25

Sophia (or the World-Soul) did not incline or come down (μὴ καταλθεῖν, μὴ νεῦσαι), but only illuminated the darkness

d. II 9 [33] 12, 7-16

Sophia, when creating, acted on a remembrance of the intelligible beings (ἐνθυμηθῆναι, ἔννοια).

Plotinus' own views

IV 8 [6]

Full exposition of the soul's mission in accordance with divine mandate and metaphysical laws; creation is possible just because the soul “stays above”.

II 9 [33] 4, 6-7

There is no fall or coming downwards, on the contrary the creative process requires the absence of any fall (μὴ νεῦσαι, item V 1 [10] 10, 26, τῇ μὴ νεύσει)

V 1 [10] 1, 1-10

Self-will and arrogance of the souls when they separate themselves from their Father

IV 8 [6] 4, 31 has a half-way adaptation: the souls are ἀμφίβιοι.

In II 9 [33] chapters 10 and 11 the Gnostic version of fall and illumination is covered with ridicule, but in the middle and later treatises a nearly identical theory is proposed:

VI 4 [22] 16, 45

IV 3 [27] 9, 24 and 12, 4-5

I 8 [51] 14, 41-44

I 1 [53] 7, 4; 8, 15-17; 12, 22-28.

Plotinus takes peculiar care to make sure that the soul shall “stay above”.

III 8 [30] chapter 4: Nature speaking: “I was born out of *θεωρία* and I have a contemplative nature.”

VI 7 [38] 17, 32: *the vision of the One* is the generating power of all things (ἡ δὲ ὄρασις ἡ ἐκεῖθεν).

The parallels, together with the added corrections, cover virtually the whole field of the central doctrines about Soul. The comparison shows convincingly the similarity of the two paradigmata and at the same time the numerous and far-reaching corrections introduced by Plotinus. In the Enneads the self-will is

ordered by divine decree, whereas the Gnostics saw only guilt and wantonness as an explanation of this world's evils. Instead of being lost in this material world, as the Gnostics saw it, in the *Enneads* the soul's task and mission is to make known the beauty and perfection of the divine world of origin. Instead of having originated from the wanton behaviour of Sophia and her son the Demiurge, the universe came into existence by metaphysical necessity: every perfect being necessarily creates. The Gnostic illumination of the darkness receives correction in the statement that not the entire soul comes down. Her best part "stays above", receiving the creative light from her Father. As a counterpart to the Gnostic mythology with its tragedy of cosmic horrors stands the doctrine of creation as implicit in the mechanism of emanation. The essential condition for the creative act consists in contemplation of the origin. Creation begins with conversion (*ἐπιστροφή*) to Intellect or to the One, resulting in vision of the emanating light (*ὄψις, ὄρασις, θεωρία*). The principle that a previous contemplation or vision is required to ensure that form shall be given to a material universe is integrated by Plotinus into that brilliant theory of creative contemplation that is valid for every level of generated being, up to the workings of the human artist's mind.

The first and second points of comparison (*a* and *b*) turn on the issue of reconciling a descent, which diminishes the soul's status, with a creative mission ordered by the God who sent her. In IV 8 [6] chapters 4 and 5 the description of the soul's descent is unrestrictedly Gnostic: the flight from being the All to being a part is an apostasy and a fall (*ἀποστᾶσα* 4, 13; *πεσοῦσα* 4, 26). It was a guilty decision (*ἀμαρτία* 5, 16) made by free-will (*ῥοπή ἀντεξουσίῳ*, 5, 26). The same description is found in V 1 [10] chapter 1: the soul's taking leave from her Father is due to a loss of self-knowledge, to arrogance and self-assertion. In the late treatise I 8 [51] 14, 44 the descent is called a fall (*πτῶμα*), but only in the sense that the soul is immersed in matter, the principle of evil.

As to the third point of comparison (*c*): the illumination of the darkness by Sophia is covered with ridicule by Plotinus, but in the middle and late treatises a nearly identical theory is proposed. In IV 3 [27] 9, 23-26 we read: "Soul has her rest in unshakeable identity (*στάσις*, this one term is Platonic) and from Soul an immense light shines out, which only at the farthest borderline changes into darkness (= matter)." The Soul, seeing this darkness, imparted form to it. When the souls came down from the higher region, they were not severed from their origin, that is from Intellect. Their power reached out as far as the earth, but the head remained fixed above the heavens (*ib.* 12, 1-5). This is the recurrent stress laid by Plotinus on the soul's better part always "staying above", a reaction against the desperate Gnostic theory of soul being completely drowned in matter and evil.

In the last-but-one treatise I 1 [53] a fairly complete exposition of the theory is given: “the soul sends her light to the bodies, making them into living beings, not as a mixture of herself and body, but by imparting images of herself, while she herself stays above (ἐλλάμπουσα, 8, 15; εἶδωλα, 8, 17). If the inclination is illumination of what is below, it is not a guilty transgression (οὐχ ἁμαρτία, 12, 24-25).

The fact of the correspondences should not give rise to a misconception as if the mutual relation between Plotinus and Gnostics could be described as a form of dependence of the one on the other. The comparable theories rather formed part of generally accepted ideas in the world in which Plotinus and the Gnostics lived. However, the comparison highlights the originality and consistency of Plotinus’ work. The metaphysical architecture within which the theory of soul is finally established surpasses by far any Gnostic attempt at a mythological superstructure.

Chapter V

CONVERSION. THE LATE TREATISES

A. Conversion

In the philosophy of the Enneads the process of emanation has at its centre a mechanism of conversion (*ἐπιστροφή*). This mechanism has two complementary movements: the descending outflow of creative light, and the turning round to the origin in order to receive being and form. Both movements and their interactions are described as a vital process. The One is called the generating power of the universe (V 1 [10] 7, 9 *δύναμις πάντων*). Intellect, as the first Being, emanates in the wake (*ἵχνος*) of the One. Taking as it were a step forward from that First One, it did not want to go any further, but turning inward halted its step, and by that act became Being and home of the Universe (V 5 [32] 5, 12-18). The emanating power must turn round to receive the light that will confirm Intellect in its existence. The description of the process itself is that of a more or less conscious decision arising from the awareness that causing distance from the One means being separated from the source of all Good. Creation is in the universe directed by an all-pervading consciousness. “All things reach out to Him and aspire to Him by necessity of their nature, guided by the awareness that they cannot exist without Him.” (V 5 [32] 12, 7-9).

The act of conversion is the same at every stage of emanation and consists essentially in contemplation. The first point where conversion is at work is where Intellect is generated from the First and One. At a second stage Soul receives her Form and Being from the universal Intellect. A complete description is found as early as V 1 [10] ch. 6 and 7: “How does the One generate Intellect? Intellect turned round to the First and One, and contemplated it; this contemplation is Intellect. — Soul is an image of Intellect and must for that reason contemplate Intellect, just as Intellect, in order to be Intellect, must contemplate the One.” In V 2 [11], which is a kind of appendix to V 1 [10], a short summary is given: “The First and One overflowed as it were. Its superabundance generated another

existence, which, turning back upon it (*ἐπεστράφη*), fastened its regards upon the One and in that act came to be Intellect (1, 8-11).

In V 4 [7] 2, 4-7 stress is laid on the principle that Intellect is not the First and One, because the act of Intellect is thought (*νόησις*). Thought has its gaze turned upon the object of thought and is brought into existence thanks to this conversion (*ἐπιστραφείσα*). Thought was in itself without form, being vision only (*ὄψις*), receiving its form from the object of thought.

The theory of conversion is found not only in the early works. The mechanism of the descending creation is stressed throughout the *Enneads*, up to the chronologically last treatises. In V 6 [24] 5, 7-10 we read: “the Good moved Intellect towards itself and by this impulse (*ἔφεσις*) Intellect became seeing.” In VI 7 [38] 16, 13-32 the conversion is described as induced by light coming to Intellect from the First and One. It was not yet Intellect when it looked to the One, and its vision was without Intellect. Being filled with light it came into existence and it maintained its existence because it was being fulfilled. To be seeing implied receiving the perfection of its being. Turning round in that vision it knew the One and only then it was Intellect in the full sense (*ib.* 37, 21). Intellect moved towards the One not being yet Intellect but being a vision not yet seeing. The mechanism of conversion and contemplation in order to receive one’s own specified existence, as we found it in the early treatises, maintains its fundamental status in the metaphysics of Plotinus’ last years: “Intellect moved towards the One not being yet Intellect but being a vision not yet seeing. Before that, Intellect is just desire and unspecified vision (*ἔφεσις καὶ ἀτύπωτος ὄψις*, V 3 [49] 11, 4-12).

In the texts quoted above there are no echoes of discussions with the Gnostics. Any corrective use of Gnostic vocabulary is absent. The doctrine is specifically Plotinian, having the form of a contemplative view of the emanating universe, in which the creative impulse comes through thanks to conversion to and contemplation of the origin. It may be noticed in passing that the doctrine has an Aristotelean flavour: a universe moved by love for its divine origin, and receiving form by being illuminated. The presence of the theory in the “long treatise” may have had the aim of making sure that divine and beautiful principles are present and being contemplated everywhere in the universe, thus making superfluous every attempt at vilifying the world in which it is our misfortune to live.

In the first part of the “long treatise” (III 8 [30]¹), the theory of conversion is taken up and analyzed playfully within the two areas of Nature’s generating power and of human artistic creation. In what sense are we to say that Nature

¹ The unity of [30-31-32-33] as one “long treatise” was discovered by Richard Harder in 1936 (*Hermes* 71, 1-10). See also Vincenzo Cilento, *Paideia Antignostica, ricostruzione d'un unico scritto da Enneadi III 8, V 8, V 5, II 9*, Firenze 1971

has contemplation within her, and that she creates whatever she creates through contemplation? The answer comes in a beautiful monologue, in which Nature herself is introduced speaking:

You ought not to ask, but understand in silence instead of asking, as I myself am silent and not in the habit of speaking. What is it you are to understand? It is that what comes to life is the contemplated vision which I in silence contemplate, and which is mine by nature. I myself was born out of contemplation, and I have it in my nature to go in search of vision. My very act of seeing produces the object of the vision — I have my mother's (= Soul's) and my parent's disposition. They also were born out of contemplation, and my birth came about without their being active. I received birth because there were higher creative principles (*λόγοι*) that were in contemplation of themselves. (III 8 [30] 4, 3-14)

In chapters 5 and 6 this is explained by the analogue of human artistic creation. When an artist or craftsman gives form to his material, the generated form is born out of *θεωρία* and gives shape to a previous vision, which means that all human action is directed by contemplation (6, 1-10). Nature as well as the artist work with a view to reproducing the object of their contemplation.

The second section (V 8) of the “long treatise” has in the opening chapter a statement of the aim to be pursued. In our search for a first awareness of the “Father of all spiritual beauty”, who is beyond Intellect, we must try and come to see, and make it clear in our discussions how one is to acquire the vision of the beauty of Intellect and of yonder world (V 8 [31], 1, 1-6). The statement is like a program for the soul's journey to the spiritual world.

Beauty is recognizable by the effect it has on one's soul (2, 22). In human artefacts beauty is derived from the artist's soul, and in his soul it has its origin in Intellect, if the human intellect is purified and made receptive (3, 9-17). Everyone has the universe within himself. One doesn't walk in an alien region; much on the contrary: the place where he is, is to him even that what he is (4, 16). In that region he finds the source of life and of Wisdom, the same Wisdom that is present in all things and at one with them (4, 46-47).

The mention of Wisdom (*Σοφία*) may be seen as a friendly wink towards the Gnostics in the audience. At the origin of all things there is no special divinity at work, by the name of Sophia, as the Gnostics had it, but the universal Intellect, as a metaphysical principle and mainspring of existence. Wisdom's relation to or rather identity with intelligible Being and universal Intellect is carefully commented upon (chapters 4 and 5). This is a criterion for real existence:

“Any Beings which do not possess Wisdom are beings in fact, by reason of their having been generated by Wisdom, but because of their not possessing Wisdom in themselves they are beings without reality” (5, 18-19). The explanations focus upon the difference between a mythical divinity and a metaphysical principle. The repeated expressions: “if that is what they say”, “if their argument goes that way”, may be seen as remnants of discussions within the school. A further allusion to Gnostic views is found in chapter 8, 22 where the sectarians are mentioned “who hold this universe in contempt”. The friendly tone is much in contrast with the furious attack on the mythological Sophia in II 9 [33] chapters 10-11-12.

As a whole, Enn. V 8 [31] is dedicated to the explanation of the “journey of the soul”, that is of the ascent to the origin, which the human soul and all beings are to follow. The explanation is continued through the third section of the “long treatise”, where also the mechanism of conversion comes into play (V 5 [32] 5, 16).

Conversion is at work at every level of emanation. The emanating creative power of the First and One must convert to the origin to receive the light and thereby its existence as Intellect. In the same way Soul receives her Being from Intellect. Here there is an even greater stress on conversion. The All-Soul has conversion as her standing act. She is always in contemplation and is eternally filled with light. In the human soul this is only true for her higher part, which always “stays above”. The mechanism repeats itself in the human artist and in the works of Nature, down to where emanation reaches its outermost limits, where the light gives way to darkness. Before this far end everything was generated in a formless state and received form by its turning round upon the generating hypostasis (*τῷ ἐπιστρέφειν*, III 4 [15] 1, 8-12). Only at the farthest border the generated hypostasis (if it may be called an hypostasis), is without life. This is matter, or complete formlessness (*ἀοριστία παντελής*).

It appears that, just by his metaphysical doctrine in the “long treatise”, Plotinus moved world-wide away from every Gnostic world-view, in spite of the many parallels in his doctrine about the soul’s fate, signalled above. If the “long treatise” as a whole was indeed written with the aim of opposing the Gnostic doctrines, the real clash came only when in the fourth part (II 9 [33]) the dreary mythology of the soul’s being lost in an evil world came into perspective.

B. The late treatises

In the so-called “late treatises” [46-54] ethics is more or less dominant. Not only the subjects to be treated, but also the style of writing and the well-balanced structure of the arguments offer a marked difference from the Porphyrian period.

The style is expository and quietly flowing, without interruptions due to the discussions within the school. The central issues of the early treatises are present in the background, but have hardly a function in the architecture of the ethical theory. The principles of emanation and conversion, that were fundamental in the discussions about the soul's situation, the omnipresence of Intellect and of the One and First, and the identity of individual and universal Self have receded into the quiet status of unshaken principles. The soul's initiative in separating herself willingly from her origin is left out of account, and, rather, stress is laid on the reception by Intellect and by Soul of the creative light.

Of the ethical treatises the most important are I 4 [46] on happiness, III 2-3 [47-48] on Providence, I 8 [51] on evil, and I 1 [53] on the human person. The first of these opens with a statement of the problem whether living well and being happy coincide. Living well may be defined in the Stoic sense as living according to nature, or, on Aristotelean lines as realizing one's own specific potentialities.

The text gives evidence that Plotinus' attention has shifted from the soul's descent and situation in the universe to the vital problems of life in this world. He begins the argument by stating that happiness and well-being should be acknowledged also in the animal world. As an example he mentions the song-birds, who sing because they feel happy, fulfilling at the same time the special requirements of their nature (I 4 [46] 1). Even plants may be said to be happy, though in this case the question arises whether they possess perception and awareness of their happiness. At the end of the treatise the musician is taken as an example. When playing on the lyre, it is not the instrument that causes the song. The player may lay it aside and sing without instrument. The example is used as part of an explanation of the wise man's indifference to outward circumstances (ch. 15-16). Inwardly he has built up perfect self-reliance and a certainty that no harm can be done him. If sometimes he should be surprised by fear coming to him before it may be judged, he will face it and drive the fear away, soothing by menace, by argument and mild reproach the child within him, that is crying out against what seems to be pain. Fears and phantasies are part of the "added overgrowth" in the soul. The wise man may lay them aside as the musician lays aside his lyre. His song is now without the instrument (I 4 [46] 16, 22-27).

Enn. I 4 [46] is the first in the series of treatises written after Prophyry left Rome. Plotinus had observed in Porphyry a growing deep depression, in the *Vita* (ch. 11) called a "morbid condition of melancholy". He urged Porphyry to desist from his depressive plans and to seek relief by travelling. Enn. I 4 gives an idea of Plotinus' clear-sightedness and persuasive strength. At one place in this treatise a kind of unconscious projection seems to come through, in line with the

description of Plotinus' character given by Porphyry: "the wise man is affable, has a quiet temperament and an amiable character, and is not shaken by what currently are called evils" (I 4 [46] 12, 8-10).

The treatise on happiness is closely followed by III 2-3 [47-48] on Providence. The doctrine of Providence had been amply developed in Stoicism, but it was also a burning issue in the Gnostic theories about the ruling powers in the universe. In Plotinus' handling of the matter the complicated analyses of the Porphyrian period have melted down. The searching debates within the school seem to have vanished from the moment when Porphyry embarked on his voyage to Sicily. The problem of the soul's position in a disappointing universe gives way to that of achieving wisdom and realizing human values.

More or less in the background some remarks are made referring to "people who got the idea that the universe was the product of an evil demiurge." (1, 7-8). The beauty of the universe is affirmed against "those who hold this universe in contempt." (3, 1-2). The universe itself is introduced speaking: "It was a God who made me, and from Him I received my being a perfect universe for all living beings. I am self-sufficient and self-ruling, and not in need of any other being, because within me I have every plant and animal and the nature of everything created, even a great number of Gods and divine Powers, of good souls and humans, happy in their integrity" (III 2 [47] 4, 21-25).²

In the following chapters the arguments move in the footprints of the Stoic tradition, but with a greater openness to human values. Everything has its place and function within the established order, imperfections as well as misfortunes and even wickedness. This cannot be otherwise in a universe where living beings possess movements of their own. If they are to have the power of free decision, they may incline now to better now to worse (4, 36-38). In a sense evil is unavoidable, but it is also unavoidable that retribution should follow in order to redress the balance. Even wickedness has useful effects in the whole of things. It keeps us on the alert and awakens our understanding to find ways to face it and resist (5, 16-19). Evildoers mostly are prompted by a desire to reach some good, and being powerless to realize their desire they behave aggressively against each other (4, 20-22). In general evil should be seen as a deficiency in the good (5, 26).

The Stoic resignation under the dispositions of Fate is far from earning Plotinus' sympathy. In its place we find a vigorous optimism in the affirmation of our freedom in making decisions and of our power to resist evil. The human person also is an $\alpha\rho\chi\eta$, an autonomous principle. The movements of the heavens are not such as to take away all our powers of acting. We have our own field where

² Other allegories: III 8 [30] 4, Nature; III 7 [45] 11, Time.

we ourselves are active on issues that fall within our competence (*ἐφ' ἡμῶν*, 10, 12-19). Our freedom implies that we are not completely determined from outside, and Providence should not be such as to reduce our existence into nothingness (9, 1).

In chapters 8 and 9 there are some striking allusions to the persecution of the Christians under the emperor Decius (AD 284-251). Plotinus must have known about the mass-executions in the arena. The Christian virtue of humility did not commend itself to the philosopher. He says that these people should defend themselves rather than surrender to being slaughtered like sheep. There is no need of a god coming up to save people who behave in such a defenceless way (III 2 [47] 8, 25-38). The cosmic law says that being saved in battle should be achieved by courage, not by prayer. If one behaves cowardly he should not expect others to come to his rescue at the risk of their own lives (9, 10-12).

The discussion is again taken up in chapter 8, where even a mild irony comes through. The humans have their place in the midst between gods and animals. They should not be too cock-sure about their convictions when they are astonished at the extent of human injustice, as if nothing more perfect than man could be imagined (8, 8-10).

In III 2-3 there is no allusion to the theory, so prominent in early treatises, of our Self being identical with the universal Self. Instead, a quite different problem is developed, that of the value and values of the human person. In the theory of Soul (see our chapter IV) apology was made for the soul's coming down from the superior world. Plotinus had argued that making a free choice was programmed in the order of the universe. He consequentially stresses that it is really *we* who are responsible for our deeds and our character (III 3 [48] 3, 1-6), a prelude to the treatise I 1 [53].

The treatise "On Evil" (I 8 [51]) may be seen as a sequel to the treatises on Providence. The problems of Evil and of Providence are related subjects, more or less complementary to each other. The method of treatment is, however, in the treatise "on evil" quite the opposite of the anterior one. The analysis of the problem is now developed in terms of metaphysical theory.

The first chapter opens with a disproportionate series of theoretical problems about evil. Is investigation of evil at all possible and by which faculty do we know it? Intellect and Soul have Forms as object of their knowledge, but evil is by definition without form, so how are we to know it? Plotinus suggests that we should consider it as an absolute contrary to the Good, so we must study the Good in order to know evil by its opposition to the Good. Evil may paradoxically be described as the Form of not-being (3, 3-9). What follows is

a catalogue of negative qualities: evil is the unlimited as opposed to limit, the formless as opposed to form, the deficient as opposed to the self-sufficient, it is the undetermined, the unstable, the completely passive, the insatiable, the absolute poverty, all these qualities taken not as accidents, but as its very substance. The essential evil is in the substance underlying all these qualities, that is in matter, a qualityless being that has beautified itself with stolen decoration (3, 36). The qualityless substance is of Stoic descent. The well-known Stoic term is found in the text at 10, 1: *ἄπυρος οὐσία*.

Can a soul be called bad? (chapter 4). In the human soul there is good and bad, good in the soul's essential being, bad because the creative principle (logos) is bound up with matter (4, 8-12). This gives rise to the question what may be the cause of this badness. The answer is: badness consists in the soul's having inclined herself to matter, fixing her gaze on darkness (I 8 [51] 4, 17-21).

In chapter 5 the analysis takes a different turn, starting from a negative principle, the absence of good. This principle is even prior to matter. Evil is caused by deficiency of the good, and absolute deficiency is absolute evil (5, 4-6). This leads up to a dialectical argument about the necessity of evil (chapters 6-7). In the human soul badness is always relative, because the presence of matter is mixed up with the essential goodness of soul. But absolute evil has no relation whatever to the Good and maintains the farthest possible distance (6, 55). The existence of an absolute opposition to the Good is necessary as a consequence of emanation (*ἐξ ἀνάγκης* 7, 21). Absolute evil is found at the farthest limit of the universe, where the creative light is weakened and fades into darkness. In the last lines of chapter 7 the distinction between absolute evil, prior to matter, and matter itself is dropped and matter itself is the ultimate evil.

In a number of places Plotinus' humanism comes through in added reflections. We are not bad by ourselves, evil is prior to us. Some humans indeed are dominated by unwanted behaviour, not according to their will. They are defenceless in the presence of evil, because their bodily disposition is in many respects not within reach of their will (14, 24-27). The soul's essence is good, evil is accidental (12, 6). It always needs the Good to manifest itself, it never walks alone. In Plotinus' own words: evil is like a wicked prisoner enveloped in golden clothes which hide him from sight (15, 23-28).

A discussion of the problem of evil in the human soul may easily touch on Gnostic viewpoints. The extensive analyses of the problem may make us expect some reminders of the violent discussions with the Gnostics in II 9 [33] where it was the mischievous immoralism of some Gnostic sects that aroused Plotinus' indignation, together with the Gnostic idea that evil had its origin in the celestial

regions. But only a few remarks in passing are found. The issue was no longer burning in this late period of Plotinus' life. There are some weak allusions to a sin committed by the fallen souls even before the descent (I 8 [51] 14, 21-44), but in the whole of the treatise evil is not the result of a tragic fall caused by the soul's self-assertion. Evil is the inevitable consequence of the soul's being bound up with matter: an alien element has been added, of which the human soul must free herself. The mention of a fall in chapter 14 is part of a correction of the cosmic tragedy of the Gnostics: "if we take the fall in a correct sense, it is just the coming into the material world" (14, 44-45).

In the series of late works there is only one treatise where the analytical method of the Porphyrian period is still at work (V 3 [49]). The title is somewhat vague: "on the knowing hypostases and on what lies yonder". Perhaps we should understand the title as meaning: "on the process of knowledge in the different hypostatical levels". In the treatise a conceptual analysis is attempted of the principle of self-knowledge. A comparable attempt was made in the Porphyrian period when the principle of free will was under discussion (VI 8 [39]). The question there was whether making conscious decisions could be admitted in the First and One. Was an act of free will to be assumed in the One without introducing duality?

In the early treatises self-knowledge is integrated in the emanative process of conversion. By contemplating our real self we must achieve awareness of our real being, which leads us to identify with universal being. Contemplation means turning round to the origin and this is for all beings the essential condition for receiving their existence and form. The inward mystical contemplation runs on parallel lines to the creative mechanism of emanation. In the late treatise V 3 [49] on self-knowledge the analysis moves on conceptual lines. Plotinus is reluctant to draw definite conclusions.

Is self-knowledge possible at all, and, more specifically, may we credit the human soul with self-knowledge? (V 3 [49] chapters 1-5). There is a parallel between sense-perception and intellectual knowledge (3, 36-37). In both cases there is a knowing or perceiving subject and, distinct from the knowing subject, an object of knowledge. In the same way self-knowledge is a compound process: with one part of ourselves we form a conceptual image of the other parts (1, 6-7). This dualism applies to every kind of thought-process. Just as the sense-perceptions come to the soul from outside, so do the imprints coming to the soul from intellect (2, 9-11). So we must ask whether intellect in the soul is restricted to knowing the incoming forms only, or is capable even of knowing itself (2, 14-15). This calls for a second question: in how far is the process of self-knowledge in the

human soul different from the noetic process in the universal Intellect? By tracing this parallelism we may find out (2, 19-20) what it means for our intellect to know itself. The analysis is further developed in chapters 3-4-5, until in chapter 6 some doubt emerges about the efficiency of the method. “Did we prove our thesis well enough to carry conviction? Or should we say that the conclusion is consistent but does not convince, because logical necessity is in intellect, but persuasion has her place in soul?” (V 3 [49] 6, 8-10). At this point a different method of investigation is started and developed in the remaining chapters, until in chapter 17 the same question appears: “Will this suffice to round off the argument? Well, the soul still has her pangs, and even more than at the start of the argument.” (17, 15-16).

The analysis given in chapters 6-16 is chiefly about seeing being identical to the object of seeing. As to the One: it has necessarily self-knowledge, because it is absolutely simple and is present only to itself, so its self-knowledge is identical to its own being. This in a sense is true also for Intellect. The self-knowledge of Intellect is identical to Intellect’s being because Intellect is universal and cannot be outside itself (6, 30-31). In Intellect also there is a one-ness, but it is a unity of subject and object of knowing (i.e. of Intellect and One). Therefore Intellect is not the absolute One. It is ἐν-πολλά, a one and a duality at the same time. The existence of self-knowledge in Intellect is in chapters 7 and 8 explained by its reception of the One’s life-giving light, which causes the Intellect to know the One and to be merged into unity with the One. Plotinus insists upon the principle that in the knowledge of Intellect the seer and what he sees merge into one. The essence of Intellect’s being is vision and its act of vision is identical with its object. The problem of the nature of human self-knowledge vanishes in this ultimate contemplation. Knowledge on this highest level cannot be described as a duality of seer and object of seeing. It is a kind of touching upon and making contact, without concepts or consciousness (V 3 [49] 10, 42).

At the end of chapter 17 Plotinus reaches the point where he may say what it was all about, and to what final aim our desire for knowledge is directed:

“Only then may our soul feel sure of having received the vision, when she is illuminated quite of a sudden. — Receiving light (φωτισθεῖσα) she has what she was searching for, and this is her veritable final destination: finding that light and by that light contemplating Him. It is not an alien light through which she receives the vision, but He himself, and thanks to Him she becomes seeing. The light that irradiated her, just that is what must be her vision. It is as with the sun: no need of other light to see Him. How may this condition be achieved? Eliminate everything.” (V 3 [49] 17, 28-37).

The closing imperative in two words is a reminder of the doctrine about the embodied soul. When coming down from the heavenly regions the soul has acquired a burden of additions, unessential to her real being. On the way of return she must free herself from the overgrowth that has come to dominate her.

The last of the more systematic treatises in the chronological order is, significantly, Enn. I 1 [53] "on the human person". It was placed by Porphyry at the head of the whole series of the *Enneads*, maybe because he considered it a good introduction. It represents Plotinus' interests in the last period of his life. The mystical rapture of the beginning, the burning problems of the Gnostic sectarians, the lyrical style have given way to the quiet tone of the teaching master explaining the essentials of his doctrine. The problem of the human person will be analyzed in the next chapter in its connection with earlier theories found throughout the *Enneads*, as a testimony to Plotinus' concern not only with the theory of soul, but with human life as such.

Chapter VI

THE HUMAN PERSON¹

1

The problem of being an autonomous person in one's own right is as old as Greek philosophy. In a text by Anaximander, given as a literal quotation by Simplicius (DK 12 B 1), being an individual is described as a rebellion against the Infinite. All things are generated from the Infinite, and, when they are dissolved, are taken up again into the Infinite. It is cosmic law which has ordered this. The generated beings pay penalty to each other for their injustice. The separate existence, maintained by individuals in the face of their divine origin, is seen as a transgression of cosmic laws.

The image and its cosmic landscape is recognizable in Plotinus' doctrine about the fate and condition of the human soul. In a different terminology his explanations reproduce the basic concepts of Anaximander's theory. The souls have separated themselves from the divine world when they descended and went creating. The cause of this was their audacity and self-affirmation (*τόλμα* V 1 [10] 1, 1-5; VI 9 [9] 5, 29; II 9 [33] 11, 22). By alienating themselves from their origin they committed a transgression, and they must bear the penalty (IV 8 [6] 5, 16-27), but they are acquitted of guilt because cosmic law had ordered the descent for the benefit of the universe (*ib.*, *cf.* I 1 [53] 12, 24-25). Plotinus' cosmic law is milder than Anaximander's.

For the human soul the essential pursuit in this world is to realize the return journey. A call comes to everyone to flee to the beloved homeland (I 6 [1] 8, 16; V 9 [5] 1, 21). The problem now arises as to how the journey is to be realized. Being dependent on sense-perception and being bound up with a material body, the soul is leading a life which is not her own. The foreign elements which get mixed up in

¹ This chapter is a slightly revised reprint of the fifth chapter in: Th.G. Sinnige, *Neoplatonisme en Spaanse Mystiek*, 1994 (in Dutch), with kind permission of the publisher Van Gorcum, Assen.

her existence are being interiorized even to the degree of being indistinguishable from her own authentic nature (I 6 [1] 5, 38-58). She gets involved in alien desires and passions, and considers these forces as being of her own province. As a result of these additions she takes on another aspect. She has grown weaker, says Plotinus, not because something was taken away from her, but because of the presence of something not her own (I 8 [51] 14, 24). At our birth an alien element has been added to the soul (I 1 [53] 12, 20). This alien element is the organic body, over which she has to exercise a troublesome kind of providence. Even in this condition of being taken up into an alien existence, she is not completely a prisoner. In some of his earlier treatises (e.g. IV 8 [6] 3, 10-22), Plotinus comes near to representing the world-soul as a kind of soul-substance, diffused through the whole universe, more or less as the Presocratics saw it. The individual soul is a sister of this world-soul and stays in contact with the contemplation of the world-soul. Unfortunately, we are not aware of this higher contemplation, because all the knowing faculties of the soul have become dependent on sense-perception, occupied as they are by the outward activity in this world. But, says Plotinus, some part of the soul always stays back in the spiritual realm (III 4 [15] 3, 24; IV 8 [6] 4, 31 and 8, 3-7; IV 7 [2] 13, 1013).²

There is an inverse relation between the soul's knowledge of her real self and the soul's consciousness of this knowledge. In V 8 [31] 11, 20-35 Plotinus compares the consciousness of our bodily state when we feel ill with our consciousness when in good health. When we are ill, we have a very acute perception of the blows our senses have to endure, and accordingly there is a heightened bodily awareness. When the suffering of the senses no longer dominates, we can have a more quiet and better knowledge of ourselves, because we are more in the presence of ourselves. The same comparison should be made between the soul in her embodied condition and the soul's real self. When occupied by the world outside her and dominated by the sense-impressions, the soul is highly conscious of her outward activity, but has little or no knowledge of her real self. The result may seem somewhat paradoxical: consciousness is bound up with

² The argument given here is part of a theory which has received small attention in the literature on the Enneads. The activity of thinking is, according to this theory, not necessarily bound up with our being conscious of thinking. In IV 3 [27] 30, 13-16 Plotinus says that our processes of thinking are going on uninterruptedly, but we are not at every moment aware of these processes. He may have had in mind the autonomous character of thought going on in our minds even during sleep, or the well-known phenomenon of a problem being solved as a result of unconscious energies when we have put it "off our minds". The point is that, to Plotinus, the analysis of our acts of knowing and thinking makes us discover an independent activity of our mind, going on even without our intervention. Elsewhere he says that any consciousness of our spiritual activities requires their being reflected in the mirror of our faculties of perception. But even without the mirror, or when the mirror is not quiet and clear, thought is going on (I 4 [46] 10, 6-19, cf I 1 [53] 11, 5-6). Consciousness may even be detrimental to the energy of thinking (*ib.* 28-29).

sense-perception, whereas knowledge of the real self is an inward movement, away from the senses, and so away from consciousness. Self-knowledge in the higher sense cannot be identified with the self-consciousness that is provoked by the sense-perceptions. On the contrary, when knowledge of the self is reached, consciousness as provoked by the senses is left behind, because it is only a function of our presence in this world. Plotinus says (*ib.* 33-34) that, when our knowledge is on the spiritual level (the level of Intellect), we may have a feeling of not knowing, because we keep looking for the kind of awareness that goes with sense-impressions. Plotinus' argument is remarkable because it is in line with the experiences described in the literature of the mystics, and because it is founded on an analysis of the act of knowledge.

So the human soul has a divided existence. Part of the soul is always in the spiritual realm, emerging as it were from the inhabited world, part of her is occupied with the body and its functions. Hers is an 'amphibious' life, and the cause of this divided existence must be attributed to the body. This, however, is not the only reason why the soul in this world is only half herself. The soul has come down from the spiritual realms through her own decision. That gives rise to one of the most fundamental problems in the philosophy of Plotinus: should the soul be deemed guilty for having undertaken this downward journey, and is her embodied existence to be explained as a punishment, or was the soul driven by a noble creative impulse? The process, and accordingly the problem, is described in many places in the *Enneads*, on one occasion in the form of an inner experience of the philosopher (IV 8 [6] 1), in a passage which serves as introduction to the famous treatise on the downward journey of the soul. Plotinus here describes his return from what must be called an ecstasis, and how he is amazed at finding that his soul, while being what she appeared to be when in the spiritual realm, takes up abode in the body.³ Another description, this time in dramatic form, is found at the beginning of V 1 [10].

The souls have left the region where they were with the universal soul, and have moved into a body as into a prison. The description is modelled on Plato's *Timaeus* and on the image of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*, where the soul cannot maintain herself in the higher spheres and falls down, losing her wings. Between Plato and Plotinus there is, however, a fundamental difference in the use of the image. In the *Phaedrus* the ascent of the soul by means of philosophical contemplation is described. Those failing in their purpose are like the mythical Phaethon, crashing down with his chariot. In the *Enneads* the image serves to

³ The problem has a Gnostic colouring, as may be clear from the expressions used. On this point see the author's contribution on "Gnostic influences in Plotinus and Augustine" in: David Runia (ed.), *Plotinus amid Gnostics and Christians*, Amsterdam 1984, p. 73-90.

explain, not a failing ascent, but just the reverse, the descending creativity of the soul and the problem of her coming down from the higher regions in order to give life to a body. The descent implies a diminishing of status and happiness, and the description abounds in expressions stressing the humiliated condition of the soul. Some have a Gnostic flavour, such as: “being severed from the Whole” (IV 8 [6] 4, 13 and 18), reminiscent of the Gnostic *pleroma*, and: “her sin is twofold: going the downward journey, though being a god, and being given to evil-doing in this world”, reminiscent of the self-willed fall and creative activity of the Gnostic *Sophia* (IV 8 [6] 5, 16-27). This is the condition in which the soul, the human as well as the world-soul, finds herself when she descends from her heavenly life, driven by the impulse to create. Within the context of this situation the human person finds its place. How, then, is the human person to be defined?

Plotinus rather often raises this question, and always in the form: “what are we (*ἡμεῖς*)?” or “what are the things that are in our reach (*ἐφ’ ἡμῖν*)?”. The absence of a proper term for the concept of personality is an indication that hitherto the problem had not been a fundamental one in ancient philosophy.

Antiquity did not possess any clear terminology for our concept of ‘person’ or ‘personality’,⁴ though the idea is present in a number of ethical theories. The Stoic school was the first to work out a theory of the human person. This was a natural consequence of their philosophical position, because the Stoics were essentially occupied with the problem of man’s place in this world. The Platonic and Aristotelean schools had worked with a superabundance of abstract and generic distinctions. The question where we are to locate our true personality is found already in the dialogue *Alcibiades* (129E-133C), possibly a work not by Plato himself, but at any rate coming from his school. In the dialogue, as a topic of conversation the problem is introduced of how we should take good care of ourselves. If we do so, the result should be that we make better men of ourselves. This, however, implies that we must know what we are as human beings, a knowledge also hinted at in the Delphic maxim “know yourself”. The discussion proceeds on the lines of Plato’s established philosophical position. The two friends, Socrates and Alcibiades, agree on the conclusion that the body should be considered as our possession and as a thing we use, whereas our real self is identical with our soul, and indeed with the best part of our soul, our mind or reason. Plato’s view on this point is repeated by Aristotle in the tenth book of

⁴ C.J. de Vogel, *The Concept of Personality in Greek and Christian Thought*, in: *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* 2, 1963, 20-60 (Washington DC). C.J. de Vogel, *Plotinus’ Image of Man*, in: *Studia Verbeke*, Leuven 1976, 147-168. A.H. Armstrong, *Form, Individual and Person in Plotinus*, *Dionysius* 1, 1977, 49-68. Danièle Letocha, *Le statut de l’individualité chez Plotin ou le miroir de Dionysos*, *Dionysius* 2, 1978, 76-99.

the *Nicomachean ethics*. Aristotle speaks of our reason as the most important and central part of ourselves, and even as a “god within us”. The expression has been variously interpreted, but in the context of Aristotle’s text we should probably understand it in the sense that, of all that is within us, reason is the priceless highest faculty and therefore in the highest sense characteristic of our human person. Reason reigns as a god in our smaller universe.

Both the Platonic and the Aristotelean view leave little room for attention to individual characteristics. They give a definition of a general rule, valid for all human beings. It may be objected that in the *Nicomachean ethics* several books are devoted to special virtues and to descriptions of individuals exercising these virtues. But even these descriptions are given as explanations of an ideal valid within a certain area. In the tenth book we read about the most general and ultimate goal to be attained by human beings, contemplation. This ideal is described in a general form, and as a rule valid for every human person. The highest perfection is in the activity of contemplation. The term itself should not put us on the wrong track. For Aristotle contemplation does not denote a kind of religious meditation, as it does for Plotinus. Aristotle is most happy when he exercises his intellectual faculties.

To the end of antiquity the trend persists of defining the human person in general terms, valid for every human being. There is no indication that individual characteristics may imply individual duties or responsibilities. The famous definition by Boethius of the human person as *naturae rationabilis individua substantia*⁵ is given in the context of a theoretical discussion on the problem what should be understood by “person”. Though Boethius has the intention of defining the individual person, there is no indication that he saw any special task or design laid down by the Creator in every individual person as such. There is, however, one philosophical school in antiquity where the concept of an individual did get its due attention.

When, only a few years after Aristotle’s death, Stoicism took the field, new prospects opened. A kind of elementary genetic psychology was developed. In the analysis of human behaviour attention was paid to the biological instincts, first of all that of self-preservation⁶

In their ethical theory the Stoics brought into play the qualities which could be empirically observed in the society of human beings. The first clear statement of

⁵ Boethius, *Contra Eutychem et Nestorium*, ed. E.K. Rand and S.J. Tester, London-Cambridge Mass 1973, Ch. III, (Loeb Class. Libr. Nr. 74, p. 84).

⁶ Diog. L. VII 85-87. S.G. Pembroke, *Oikeiosis*, in A.A. Long (ed.), *Problems in Stoicism*, London 1971, 114-149. Th.G. Sinnige, *Eigenheid en saamhorigheid in de stoische ethica*, *Lampas* 11, 1978, 24-42.

the importance of the individual features in human persons is found in Cicero's account of Panaetius' philosophy.⁷ Panaetius distinguished two types of *persona*: person in a general sense, defined by reason, common to all humans and distinguishing them from animals; secondly person taken as the characteristic quality of an individual. The distinction gave rise to an interesting development in the field of ethics. Panaetius, and Cicero in his trail, consider it as everyone's first duty to follow his individual nature rather than try to conform to a general pattern of perfection. "We must be careful not to offend against our universal nature, but, safeguarding in this general sense our humanity, we must, when taking action, keep to the standard of our individual nature."⁸

The theory of individual responsibility stood in opposition to the Stoic's fundamental conviction about the divine guidance of the universe. There was a conflict between the all-pervading power of Fate and Providence on the one hand, and the necessity of having our own power of decision, if a personal responsibility was to be developed. Having a personality of our own becomes uninteresting when individual decisions are being precluded by a superior power. This argument may have been a factor in a development, even within Stoicism, in which general ideals of humanity came to prevail over the importance of being an individual. Plotinus was well acquainted with Stoic literature, as may be seen from the discussions on morality in his later works.⁹

To a certain extent he continued the Stoic line of thought, but with a difference as to the theoretical description of what a human person is. In this respect Plotinus is decidedly a Platonist. When describing the inner ascent to the realms of Soul and Intellect he leaves our individual features aside as simply unimportant. These features mark us off from our fellowhumans, but they play no role in the contemplation by means of which we must reach the goal of our most essential vocation. He stresses, however, our personal responsibility, and he does so, significantly, in the treatises where he criticizes and opposes the excessive stress laid by some Stoics on the inescapable power of Fate. Plotinus sees the return to our origin as our most essential responsibility. We should give all our energies to authenticating our existence by finding the right way back to our origins. As

⁷ Cicero, *De off.* I 30-31, 107-114. See C.J. de Vogel, *Greek Philosophy*, Vol. III, Leiden 1973, Nr. 1163.

⁸ *De off* I 31, 110: *ut contra universam naturam nihil contendamus, ea tamen conservata propriam nostram sequamur.*

⁹ Enn. III 2 and 3 ([47-48]), to be compared with the early treatise III 1 [3]. Willy Theiler. Plotin zwischen Plato und Stoa, in: *Les Sources de Plotin, Entretiens sur l'antiquité, tome V*, Vandoeuvres-Genève 1960, p. 65-103. A.H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge 1967, p. 129-131 (Ph. Merlan). A. Graeser, *Plotinus and the Stoics*, Leiden 1972. P. Boot, *Plotinus over voorzienigheid*, Amsterdam 1984 (diss.).

we shall see, the danger of making the individual personality disappear occurs in Plotinus' philosophy at the opposite end of the spectrum, when we compare his theory to the Stoic one. In the world-view of the Stoics our initiatives in this world are in danger of being paralyzed by the doctrine of Fate. In the *Enneads* it is not on the level of this world that the human person has a precarious existence. When the soul finds her way back to the One, the question arises if she will not lose her individuality just because of her identification to the universal Intellect.

The description of what a human person is coincides in the *Enneads* still to a large extent with the description of what man essentially is. Plotinus recognizes the problem of individuality, and even develops a short argument on the question whether there are forms of individuals in V 7 [18], a treatise which has only three chapters. The point is touched upon in passing in a few other texts, so at V 9 [5] 12 and II 4 [12] 4, 1-5. It is interesting that he does not consider the individual characteristics to be a result of the resistance of matter to the perfection of the form. In his view, when there are differences in the realization of a form, and if the differences are in themselves good, the explanation should be that more than one form is at play (V 7 [18] 2, 15: οὐχ ἔν τὸ ἐίδος). The resistance of matter to the form can at most explain the disfigurement or ugliness of an individual, not his positive qualities. This theory, though quite an original one, is not any further developed or made into a fundamental statement.

At first sight, an argument to affirm the role of matter as *principium individuationis* seems to be present at various places in the *Enneads*, where Plotinus says that the existence in a body causes the soul to be divided and to fall short of her perfections, so e.g. IV 2 [4] 1, 55-57. But the argument does not follow the trail of the Aristotelean theory.¹⁰ Plotinus does not even mention matter, but he does mention bodies. When Soul gives herself to bodies, she acquires a condition which she did not experience before. She now has a divided existence, distributed as it were over many bodies, but nevertheless she does not leave behind her oneness. Plotinus sees the body as an unwelcome addition, hemming in the soul as an obstacle to her proper activity. He does not use the Aristotelean argument of matter entering into a metaphysical union with the soul and so hemming in her very being.

What he does use is the Platonic terminology: the soul (or: Soul) is, at the same time, divided in the bodies and indivisible. By herself she has no dimension, but nevertheless she is present in every dimension (IV 2 [4] 1, 62-70). The terminology comes from Plato's *Timaeus* (35 A). In Plato's text soul is seen as

¹⁰ For the many perplexities arising from Aristotle's theory, see W.D. Ross, *Aristotle*, London 1949, pp. 169-173. John Rist, Forms of Individuals in Plotinus, *Classical Quarterly*, 13, 1963, 223-231.

the universal life-giving force, distributed by the Creator in unequal parts to the various kinds of being. Undivided being (i.e. pure Form) and the divided being which is split up into the existence of many bodies, these two ingredients go into the mixture from which the universal soul-stuff is to emerge. Plato's explanation proceeds on theoretical lines and is intended to bring the metaphysical categories of the *Parmenides* and the *Sophistes* into play. It still lacks the features which were added to the picture by Plotinus, features intended to make it clear that creation was a vital process, set in movement by a personal decision of the soul. More or less in the whole of his work, but predominantly in the early treatises, Plotinus describes the beginning of the creative process as being due to the soul's desire to be on her own and by herself. She starts on a journey of descent and leaves her heavenly fatherland, urged on by this (more or less) deplorable impulse to go and seek independence. So she comes to live in a lower sphere, being bound up with the body in a divided existence as a part of this universe. She has "ceased to be all in order to be human", as Plotinus puts it (V 8 [31] 7, 33).

So it is because of the soul's decision that a partial existence and individual characteristics are given to her. Inevitably the explanation makes use of the argument of the bodily nature, but it is not matter in the Aristotelean sense that is summoned to account for the soul's captivity in this lower world. It is not very probable that Plotinus saw the problem in terms of a form receiving individuality through matter as *principium individuationis*. Moreover, he more than once stresses that with her higher part the soul "stays above", though our consciousness may fail to realize this (IV 8 [6], 8, 2-7 and 16-24). In a veiled manner, even the descended soul maintains her universal existence. Our very being is universal: "we *are*, all of us, the spiritual world; when we are united to the universe of being, then we *are* that universe; so we are at the same time all things together and one being" (VI 5 [23] 7, 7-8).

With the above theories in the background we could hardly expect to find in the *Enneads* a description of the human person in terms of character-formation or adaptation to the social environment. Plotinus does give a description of the human person, but the human character and social adaptation to be achieved are not those of his citizenship in this world. Our real home is "yonder", our most real personality, the "we" as Plotinus calls it, is in our spiritual existence. He points out in many places that even in our own inner experience we may find sure signs that the better half of our existence stays away from our consciousness. However, once we open our minds to the spiritual world, it is impossible that our real nature should remain hidden to us (IV 4 [28] 45, 17-18).

In the edition of the *Enneads* by Porphyry the order of the books was established

in the form in which we still have it. As a kind of entrance to the building, Porphyry placed as number one in the first Ennead a late treatise on the question how to define the human person. The same question underlies the argument at the end of the last treatise of the sixth Ennead, where the soul, striving to realize her most essential being, is described as in search of herself (VI 9 [9] 9, 22 and 10, 17). Obviously Porphyry thought it a central problem. The message of the whole of the Enneads could not be well understood unless the reader is aware that his human person in the deepest sense was involved. Realising our real self is dependent on the inward journey back to the life of mind and to the origin, the One.

The treatise that stands at the beginning of the Enneads is chronologically one of the last. It offers remarkable parallels to a really early one, IV 7 [2], a parallelism which indeed proves that some of the theories remained unchanged through the whole of Plotinus' writing career. In the late treatise, I 1 [53], the distinction is stressed between the body with its sense-perception, and the principal and dominant part of our being. The argument makes use of an Aristotelean concept about the soul's essence (Met. H.). Plotinus says (*ib.* 2.8) that the soul possesses within herself her own actuality, i.e. the soul is for her existence not dependent on other beings. The soul is eternally what she is in herself (*ib.* 2, 24). This is, in Aristotelean concepts, Plato's doctrine of the soul as the ultimate creative force, giving life to all beings, and herself not in need of higher powers for her subsistence.¹¹ In passing Plotinus mentions the theory corresponding to the second phase of development of Aristotle's doctrine of the soul: the soul makes use of the body as an instrument (*ib.* 3, 3). He adds that, when using a tool, the craftsman is not affected by what the tools experience, so soul stays free from the passions of the body. He also uses his favourite light-metaphor. Radiating through a material universe, the light itself is not subject to change (*ib.* 4, 16). Soul does not really give up herself to a union with the body. What she gives is a kind of creative light, which, together with a well-disposed body, calls to life the living being (the animal or "ζῷον") (*ib.* 7, 4).

Having explained all this, more or less in the form of a discussion, Plotinus comes to the central point, that of the human person. The human person is where argument and intuition are found. In that part of ourselves our conversation is with the forms, undisturbed by what the senses bring in from the world around us. Here is our most real "we" (ἡμεῖς). What is on this side is just *ours*, but from

¹¹ To be sure, this is the earlier version of Plato's doctrine of the soul, as found in the Phaedrus. In the Timaeus, which is a late work, the souls are a product of a kind of metaphysical process of mixing, and distributed by the Demiurge to the various parts of the universe.

that point onwards (i.e. in the world of thought) our real self is found, holding supervision over the animated body (the “living being”) (I 1 [53] 7, 14-21).¹²

In the early treatise, IV 7 [2], the discussion also moves on Aristotelean lines. The real man may be considered as a form in opposition to matter, or as user to tool, but in either case “the soul is the self” (*ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτός*, *ib.* 1, 22-25). An analysis is given of sense-perception and knowledge, ending in a beautiful description of the inner experience as the surest ground for our certainty as to the spiritual nature of the human soul (IV 7 [2] 10, and cf. VI 4 [22] 14 and 15). Both the late and the early treatise have the arguments started from Aristotelean distinctions, and both have the formula “the soul is the self”. The expression is found at various places in the *Enneads*, so e.g. II 3 [52] 9, 21-30, where Plotinus says that we should try to exist according to what we are in reality, and “not to be the compound”. In II 1 [40] 5, 21 and in I 1 [53] 10, the expression is accompanied by a remark on the use of the term. The terms “we” and “the man” (*ἡμεῖς*) have two meanings, accordingly as we include the beast or take only what is above it. But “man” in the true sense is the man who has freed himself from the animal passions and possesses the intellectual virtues (I 1 [53] 10).

Plotinus does not show much interest in a theory of individual differentiation caused by matter. He says repeatedly that the human soul, when coming into this world, suffers an addition (*προσθήκη*), which prevents her becoming conscious of her original nature (IV 7 [2] 10, 29. Also II 3 [52] 9, 30-31; VI 4 [22] 14, 25; VI 5 [23] 12, 21; I 1 [53] 12, 20).

It is as if at birth we were overpowered by a body (VI 9 [9] 9, 8). The individual substance of the human person as appearing in this world is not the result of the interference of matter in the projection of a form. Already in the spiritual realm and before our birth we existed as human beings. We were even as a kind of gods, because we were pure souls and intellect, and as such in union with universal being (VI 4 [22] 14, 16-31). But now a second human person, a “second man” has associated himself to that original human being, investing with itself our real self. The addition has diminished our real being, because, instead of partaking in universal life, one has become an individual (VI 5 [23] 12, 22: *γενόμενός τις*).

The real human self is virtually identical with our intellectual and spiritual characteristics. The “real man” and the reasonable soul always “walk together” (I 1 [53] 7, 21). In the spiritual world, where our origin lies, pure souls live in union with the universal Intellect (VI 4 [22] 14, 19-20). The human intellect,

¹² Plotinus is rather drastic in his expressions. The “living being”, our bodily existence, is in this context no more than an “animal”. In 7, 20-21 his words contain an allusion to Plato’s *Republic* (588 CD): “the lion-like part and the composite monster”, descriptions used by Plato for the inferior part of our human existence.

with which the essential human person is identified, is called in one place the “god within us” (VI 5 [23] 1, 3), in clear allusion to Aristotle’s view on man’s highest faculty (*EN* X 7, 1177a 12-1178a 8 and *EE* VIII 2, 1248a 26; VIII 3, 1249 b 15-23). Even when the lower part of the soul is absorbed in this world of sense-perception, the higher part stays above, in contemplation of the spiritual world (IV 7 [2] 13, 8-18; IV 8 [6] 8, 3; III 4 [15] 3, 24).

The higher contemplation is a function of the higher part of our soul. It does not enter into our consciousness because the lower part is not taken up into this higher way of life. Sometimes the difference between the two is emphasized to such a degree that it seems that Plotinus is talking about two souls, so e.g. IV 3 [27] 27, 1-3. Nevertheless, the union between the two parts of soul is strong enough to make it possible for us to withdraw into the better part of ourselves. When we do so, we know by experience that contemplation cannot be led astray. In contemplation it becomes unmistakable where our real nature lies (IV 4 [28] 44, 1 and 45 10-18).

In the constitution of our personality a wide range of variations is possible, depending on the level of existence of each individual. Persons living the life of the senses have forgotten their origin and homeland (V 1 [10] 1, 1-17). But every soul has within herself the creative principles of all things (V 7 [18] 1, 7-10). Every soul is an intelligible universe (III 4 [15] 3, 23). The value of any personality is proportional to the place where he is living in the great chain of being. He is tied to the lower world by his bodily life, and to the higher world he stands in union through his intellectual faculties. He should try to reach the level which is immediately superior to the level where he finds himself. In one of the few treatises where Plotinus makes use of the traditional symbols of Greek mythology, he calls this contiguous level a person’s *daemon* (III 4 [15]). Everyone should try to live up to the standards of his *daemon*, because, as the text has it:

“We must take the view that in our soul not only there is an intelligible universe, but even an inner disposition of the same kind as that of the world-soul” (III 4 [15] 6, 22-24).

The parallelism between the microcosmos of our soul and the macrocosmos of the world-soul reaches back to Plato’s *Timaeus*. We may note that Plato’s rather theoretical explanation of the soul’s inner structure here becomes the ground-pattern for her inner ascent.

The description of the independent self of the human person is not without its ethical component. The definition of the human person is at the same time a program of living. It points out what human beings have to do in order to fully

realize their human existence and set it free from unwanted additions. The human person is a being of two worlds, living more or less as an amphibian, as Plotinus drastically puts it in one place (IV 8 [6] 4, 31). We should strive to live with that better part of our human person which is, through knowledge and contemplation, in union with the intelligible universe. Maintaining this union means at the same time realizing one's own most real personality.

This last point is made by Plotinus in practically every treatment of the question. In V 9 [5] 5, explaining the contemplative act of the Intellect, he points out that the Intellect thinks all things and by doing so makes them exist. So Intellect is itself all beings. This is, says Plotinus, what was meant by Parmenides, when he stated the identity of knowing and being, as well as by Aristotle, who said that the knowledge of immaterial things is identical with the object of that knowledge. (*De An.* III 4, 430a 3). All this, says Plotinus, amounts to the same thing as Heraclitus' *dictum* (B 101) "I was in search of myself".

Finding the intelligible universe is the same as finding one's true self. This is the key-note in the treatise that was placed at the end of the *Enneads* by Porphyry, in order to bring out what it was all for. When a person turns in upon himself, he turns in upon his origin (VI 9 [9] 2, 35). God is omnipresent to every part of the universe, though most people have no awareness of his presence. They flee away from him, or, more correctly, they flee away from themselves. If a man comes to know himself, he comes to know also from where he is. Part of our self is dominated by the body, but with that part of us which is not submerged ($\tau\tilde{\omega}$ μὴ βαπτισθέντι), we may rise up into the spiritual world, making the centre of our being become one with the centre of universal being (VI 9 [9] 8, 16-20). In a treatise of the middle period the same note is heard. Every nature hastens to where it shall find its own self (VI 5 [23] 1, 17).¹³

There is one point at which the mysticism of the *Enneads* seems to contradict the ideals of a personal development. When reaching the level of spiritual existence where our truest being is found, we are identified to and absorbed into the universal Intellect. The self in its ascent to the intelligible universe gains wider visions and is identified more and more to the object of its vision. Shall not its individuality gradually lose its special marks and finally disappear? As W.R. Inge put it in his work on the *Philosophy of Plotinus* (vol. I, p. 250), "personality aspires to be all-embracing and is potentially all-embracing; but if it could realize this aspiration, it would cease to be individual".

¹³ This again has a Gnostic ring. In the Mandaean *Ginza* and in the *Hymn of the Pearl* the soul on returning to her homeland is welcomed by her spiritual counterpart: "my own self comes to greet me". See for further parallels my remarks in D.T. Runia (ed.), *Plotinus amid Gnostics and Christians*, p. 79-81, Amsterdam 1984.

The problem in this form probably did not occur to Plotinus. It is never mentioned as a problem, and as to a possible annihilation of our personality we find just the opposite. In the treatise on our ascent to the spiritual realm, at the end of the sixth Ennead, Plotinus says that, though standing in union with the intelligible universe, we do not always contemplate it. It is only by turning inward that we enter into contact with the universe, sharing in the chorus of the creation and finding the “still point of the dance” (T.S. Eliot). Then the text has: “when we cease to be turned towards Him, that will mean the end of us” (VI 9 [9] 8, 41-42). A modern reader may remark that the opposite question is not asked: when we are turned towards Him, is that the end of us as individuals?

The answer could possibly be found in some remarks in the treatise on the liberty and will of the One, VI 8 [39]. The problem in discussion there is, in a sense, analogous to the problem about the human person’s individuality. If the One can only desire what is perfect and best, it has no liberty, and so, if we want to be perfect, we have no individuality. The One, in this view, is doomed to be the One and perfect. Now Plotinus gives an argument which also for our problem can show a way out:

“Every being, in its search for the Good, wants to be rather that Good than what it is itself. It feels that it has the highest degree of being only when it partakes of the Good, because it is plain that the nature of the Good is by far and foremost preferable” (VI 8 [39] 13, 12-17).

It sounds as a paradox if one should suppose a gradual disappearance of individuality as the soul climbs higher in the hierarchy of being. It is just the reverse. The soul’s individuality is only heightened by the intense joy which she experiences on this way of return to her own self. What could she possibly wish at that moment, except to be what she is, says Plotinus (*ib.* 13, 32). The dominant joy does not leave room for afterthoughts. It may be compared to the experience we have when we are intensely occupied with thought or with work of art, and being absorbed in it because it makes us happy. In the experience the reflexive consciousness ceases and we forget ourselves. So Plotinus writes:

“Whosoever has had the vision, he knows what I say, that our soul then receives another kind of life as she goes further and comes nearer and partakes of Him” (VI 9 [9] 9, 47).

There is a ring of personal experience in the description of this inner state. These descriptions are predominantly found in the earlier treatises. In a treatise already mentioned, the same appeal to personal experience is found:

“Everyone of us who has attained to this state is hardly on a lower level than the spiritual beings. — If everybody, or a great mass of people, should

have a soul with this quality, then everybody would feel certain about the soul's immortality" (IV 7 [2] 10, 14-31).

There is still another context in which Plotinus stresses the independent quality of the human person together with the certainty to be found in our inner consciousness. This context is not the other-worldly one of the soul's ascent. The problem is now stated in the field of our consciousness as human persons in this world. In the early ethical treatise 'On destiny' and the late ones 'On Providence' (III 1 [3] and III 2-3 [47-48]) we find a wealth of arguments against the Stoic doctrine of Fate. The first of these is a logical one. If all our actions were completely determined by some kind of Providence, the very concept of causality would have to be abolished. Then follows an appeal to an elementary experience. The absolute rule of Providence cannot be taken for granted because it runs counter to our consciousness of being active subjects when doing things and making decisions (III 1 [3] 4, 21-28).

The argument is remarkable because its value is made to rest upon the irrefutable certainty of personal experience. We feel certain about our personal involvement when making decisions. We have no doubts about our being responsible as human persons. If it were otherwise, Plotinus says, the *we* would not be *we*, and no action could be said to be our own (*ib.* 21-22). The reasoning contains a kind of *cogito* which is exceptional in the history of ancient philosophy. With it goes the ethical component. We should allow every individual to be an individual in his own right. Our individual soul must be considered as a primordial cause, not to be subordinated to other powers (*ib.* 8, 7-9). This argument is developed throughout the early treatise and is found again in the late treatise on Providence (III 2-3 [47-48]). The parallelism between a very early and a very late treatise is once more a point to be noted, as it was in the case of I 1 [53] and IV 7 [2].

In III 2 [47] 9, 2 a fine remark is found:

"We should not suppose Providence to be of a kind such as to make our existence dwindle away. If Providence should be all, there would be no need of Providence because there would be no individuals to be guided by Providence".

There is an English proverb about the necessity of there being a parish if being a clergyman is to have any sense: "If everyman should be the clergyman, who would be the parish?" With a variation on the proverb we could say: "If Providence should be All, who would be the individual?"

Our conclusions can be summarized as follows. In the Enneads the human personality is a variable entity, depending on the level of existence (in the meta-

physical sense) on which the individual is living. The metaphysical description of the levels of being is at the same time an ethical scale of values. The human person is measured on this scale of values and defined as the best part of ourselves. We should try to live in accordance with what is best in us, taking guidance from the guardian spirit representing the spiritual level immediately superior to ours. In the field of ethics there is a peculiar stress on an independent personal responsibility.

* * *

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* * *

SUMMARY

In the past decades two paradigms have been followed in describing the philosophical system of the *Enneads*, either conceiving it as a completely Platonic structure, or trying to establish its character as a more or less Gnostic world-view, a philosophical edition of religious Gnosticism. The presence of Gnosticism in the *Enneads* is unmistakable, not only in the negative sense as a mistaken mythology to be refuted and rejected but also in more than a few fundamental theories resembling the Gnostic doctrines.

In the first and second chapter I have tried to show, by way of a first demarcation, that at least two of Plotinus' fundamental doctrines cannot have been derived from Plato: emanation and mystical theory. In the third chapter I have brought together texts by two Gnostic authors, Basilides and Valentine, and two church-fathers, Clement and Origen. The texts put it beyond doubt that the apparent Gnostic colouring of many chapters and passages in the *Enneads* simply is due to generally accepted views in the Alexandrian world, where Plotinus had received his philosophical training. The problems discussed in the *Enneads* have a large part in common with what may be called the "problems of the age". This is most of all apparent in the fundamental discussions of the soul's descent to this world, and the problem of her maintaining contact with her origin.

When scrutinizing the *Enneads* for texts relevant to the Gnostic problem I followed the chronological order of the treatises. This opened the way to mark out different periods in Plotinus' philosophical work. Broadly three periods can be distinguished, each of them having its own special landscape as to method and inspiration. However, I found no evidence of a development in the usual sense of original doctrines being criticized and amplified and growing together into a definite system. The fundamental doctrines are found in a well-developed state already in the early treatises. It seems quite clear that no substantial change of doctrine between the different periods can be found. This could hardly be otherwise, because Plotinus started writing when he was already in his fifties. However, the method of the arguments and the focus of interest clearly change in the different periods.

The first period is that of the so-called "early treatises" ([1-21]). The forlornness

of the human soul and the problems of her descent to this world are treated with a kind of lyrical emotion as an invitation to “flee to our homeland”. The central doctrine is about inward meditation, finding within ourselves union with the universal Self. This doctrine has no predecessor in Greek traditions, but it bears a noticeable similarity to fundamental doctrines of the Indian Upanishads. In the wake of Émile Bréhier’s early attempt at establishing a relationship, a short excursus is made on this parallelism and on the possibility of Ammonius having introduced the theory into Alexandrian philosophy. Contemporary Greek texts are adduced in order to show that India was not a *terra incognita* to the Alexandrians. Porphyry is quite outspoken (Vita 3) about the persisting charisma of Ammonius, and he leaves no doubt as to the fact that Plotinus’ desire to know more about Indian philosophy was due to Ammonius’ lectures which he attended for eleven years.

The second period ([22-45]) starts with Porphyry’s arrival in the school. In the Vita Porphyry mentions his and Amelius’ insistence that Plotinus should write down what had been discussed in the philosophical meetings. Accordingly the treatises take the form of summaries of discussions. The method is analytical. Exceptions are a few treatises where the personal involvement of the philosopher makes itself felt in the lyrical style, so e.g. in the first section of the “long treatise”, III 8 [30], on contemplation.

Enn. II 9 [33], the fourth section of the “long treatise”, is clearly marked by its background of discussions, this time with stubborn debaters, members of a Gnostic sect (Vita 16). Analysis of the text shows that Plotinus’ irritation was aroused not only by the sectarian behaviour of the debaters, but most of all by their incoherent mythology. In the same treatise, however, in the very context of his criticism, he adduces several of his own theories which present an obvious parallelism with the Gnostic myths. This is the same parallelism that may be observed at many places throughout the first and second period. The parallels between Gnostic doctrines and those of Plotinus mostly move within the theories about the soul’s descent and her fate in this world. The situation is different in the field of metaphysical theology, where Plotinus develops his own theories.

The analytical method dominates in the exhaustive problem-analyses of VI 4-5 [22-23] “on the omnipresence of Being”, and IV 34-5 [27-28-29] “on Soul”, which are discussed in our fourth chapter; and in VI 1-2-3 [42-43-44] “on the categories of being”.

In the Porphyrian period the Platonic character of the arguments comes to the fore in a number of quotations from Plato’s metaphysical dialogues, possibly also here and there from the tradition of the unwritten doctrines. Some treatises have

final chapters which may be seen as an attempt to give metaphysical support to the message of the early treatises: to the meditating mind the One and First is not far-off.

In the third period, that of the “late treatises” ([46-54]), ethics is dominant. There is no change in the fundamental doctrines, but they have receded into the background. Discussions with Gnostic theories are absent.

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INDEX

- Alexandria 1
 Alexandrian world-view 44
 travellers from India 58
- Allegories 80
- Amelius 62, 65
- Ammonius 1, 2, 40, 57, 61, 70
 charisma 50
- Anaxagoras 6, 60
- Anaximander 86
- Arabī Ibn 34-35
- Aristotle 27
 Aristotelean concepts 12, 51, 60, 76,
 90, 95, 96
 matter as *principium individuationis*
 92-93
 concept of soul 94
 knowledge of immaterial things 97
- Armstrong, A.H. 8, 28, 34, 52
- Asín Palacios 34
- Basilides 28-34
- Boethius 90
- Bréhier, Ém. 18, 58
- Buddhism 57
- Βούττα 59
- Cicero 91
- Chrysostomus, Dio 59
- Clement 33, 40-42, 59
- Consciousness 87-88
 and knowing 88
- Contemplation (θεωρία) 12, 21, 25
 in the human artist 77
- Conversion (ἐπιστροφή) 11, 12, 53,
 75-78
- Dodds, E.R. 1, 27
- Ecstasy 17, 52, 57, 88
- Eliot, T.S. 98
- Emanation 5-13, 37, 75
 and soul 51
 not in Plato 7-8
- Empedocles 60
- Evil 46, 81-82
- McGin 3
- Gnosticism
 problem of evil 37-38
 the soul's transgression: *see* Soul
 evil demiurge 80
 tragic views 56-57
 coming home 20, 50
 γνώσις 36, 55
 ἄγνοια 39, 56
- Gnostic crisis 67,78
- Gnostic presence in the Enneads 72-74
 γυμνοσοφισταί 59
- Guthrie, K.S. 4
- Halfwasser 3
- Heraclitus 60, 97
- Hippolytus 28, 35
- Homer 20, 39
- Indian philosophy 40, 50, 57-58, 67
 see Alexandria, Bréhier, Schwyzer,
 Ammonius, Self

- Individual personality 90
 and ethics 91
 caused by addition 95
- Inge, W.R. 97
- Intellect (*Noûs*)
 generated by the One 75
 conversion makes it seeing 76
- Irenaeus 35
- James, William 17
- Jonas, Hans 67
- Juan de la Cruz 15
- McKenna 46
- Müller, H.F. 8, 10, 11, 12
- Mysticism
 intellectual 3
 existential 3
 personal experience of Plotinus 17, 52
see James, William
- Not-being
 a Not-being God 28
 a Not-being universe 29
 not-being as "matter" 30
 not-being as evil 30, 81
 not-being was created 35
- Noûs* translated "Intellect" *passim*
- One, the
 absolute transcendence 9, 10, 13, 43, 67
 omnipresent 30-31, 62-63, 67
 generates Intellect 43, 75
 first source of life 9-10
 not diminished by outflow of light 44
- One-and-Many 54
- Origen 42-47
- Panaetius 91
- Parmenides 60, 97
- Person, the human person
ἡμεῖς *we* 81, 86-100
 in Stoicism 15
 autonomy 16, 80, 81
 freedom 27, 81
- Philo 28, 40
- Philostratus, Flavius 58
- Plato
Alcibiades 89
Cratylus 5
Ep. VII 3
Parmenides 30, 93
Phaedrus 19, 29, 51, 53, 66, 88, 94
Philebus 6, 7
Republic 504-506: 52
 507-509: 50
 514 A: 53
 588 C: 95
 617 D: 27
Sophistes 93
Symposium 3, 14, 19, 49, 66
Timaeus 6, 7, 10, 51, 54, 56, 62, 88, 92, 96
- Pliny 58
- Porphyry 62, 65
 quarrel with Amelius 62
 melancholy 79
- Providence 27, 80-81, 99
- Radhakrishnan 57
- Reale, Giovanni 12
- Schwyzler in RE 2, 58
- Self, the 2, 19, 68, 81, 57
 and conversion 24

Sophia 36-38, 71, 77-78, 89

Soul

descending by divine decree 45, 48-49, 53-54

descending by self-will 54, 55, 86
and Self 57

the "fall" from unity 27, 44-45, 50-54

a guilty transgression 37-38, 45, 53, 55

τόλμα 36, 55, 86

forlorn condition 34, 63

amphibious 88

additions causing alienation 34, 63, 87, 92, 95 (προσθήκη)

accretions 33

overgrowths 35, 49, 56, 79

a layer of rust 35, 51

Stoicism 3, 27, 51-52, 57, 89-91

Sufi mysticism 34

Upanishads 50, 57

φῶς (light)

as vehicle of emanation 2, 8, 10, 21, 44, 84

Valentine 35-40

ENNEADS

- Enn. I 1 the human person: 86-100
- Enn. I 4 on happiness: 79
- Enn. I 6 program of inward life: 20-22, 49-50
- Enn. I 8 on evil: 81-83
- Enn. II 9 Gnosticism: 65-74
- Enn. III 2-3 on Providence, Stoicism: 80-81
- Enn. III 8 on contemplation: 66
- Enn. IV 3-4-5 Soul: 63-65
- Enn. IV 8 Soul: 22, 52-55
 - ecstasy: 17, 52
- Enn. V 1 the soul's tragedy: 55-56
- Enn. V 3 self-knowledge: 83-84
- Enn. V 5 Porphyry/Amelius: 62
- Enn. V 8 the centre of soul and universe: 24-25
- Enn. VI 4-5 omnipresence of the One: 31-32, 34, 62-63
- Enn. VI 9 the final aim of the journey: 20-25, 57

- Three periods*: 2, 102
- early treatises (chron. 1-21)
 - theory of Self 1, 16, 20, 49-50
- analytical treatises (chron. 22-45)
 - Porphyry 2, 61, 102
- late treatises, mostly ethical (chron. 46-54) 78-85
- “long treatise” 65-74
 - = chron. 30-31-32-33
 - III 8 – V 8 – V 5 – II 9