Robert Berchman
&
John Finamore
(Editors)

History
Of
Platonism

Plato Redivivus

University Press of the South
2005
PLOTINUS' PHILOSOPHICAL OPPOSITION TO GNOSTICISM AND THE IMPLICIT AXIOM OF CONTINUOUS HIERARCHY

ZEKE MAZUR

1. It has often been remarked that Plotinus inveighs against the Gnostics more vehemently than he does against other philosophical rivals. The *locus classicus* for his anti-Gnostic polemic is *Ennead* II.9, the treatise known as *Against the Gnostics*; opposition to Gnostic ideas may also be found lurking more discretely in the rest of the so-called *Großschrift* (III.8, V.8, and V.5) and elsewhere throughout his works. Nevertheless, there appear to be many similarities between his own thought and that of the Gnostics, perhaps due to their common dependence upon Middle-Platonic sources. Moreover, we know that Plotinus had close personal contact with Gnostic sectaries and that he referred to some of them as his *philoi*. Why, then, does he reserve such vehemence for this particular sect? Does his rhetorical furor result from a desire to demarcate his own position clearly from opponents whose *proximity* he recognizes? Or is his stridence instead really motivated by a genuine perception of a philosophical *difference*? And if the latter, what exactly is the core of this difference?

The former position--- that Plotinus is attempting to emphasize what amounts to a subtle difference between essentially similar systems--- is typified by Hans Jonas, who described Plotinus’ thought as one example of a broader Gnostic tendency in late antiquity. In a 1971 essay, Jonas summed up his explanation for Plotinus’ attitude towards Gnostic doctrine: “the very proximity in basic conception explains the strength of feeling which his polemic displays: *it is the protest against a caricature of his own cause.*”

Conversely, however, Plotinus’ anti-Gnostic sentiment has also been attributed to some supposedly fundamental philosophical

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difference: a difference between the world-affirming optimism of the Platonists, on the one hand, and the unhealthy, anticosmic pessimism of the Gnostics, on the other. This position is exemplified by A. H. Armstrong, who perceived a substantial difference between Plotinus' typically Platonic belief in a generally good, albeit imperfect, creation, and the Gnostic doctrine of a radical break in the cosmogonic process: a doctrine which, Armstrong insisted, is "not compatible with the thought of Plotinus or with any kind of genuine Platonism."

Certainly the evaluation of the cosmos and its creator might represent one possible point of difference between Plotinus and the Gnostics. Yet even this supposed conceptual opposition is more ambiguous than its proponents typically admit. For rhetorical effect, one may contrast any two points on the vertical continuum between the divine and the human realms, with the result sounding very disparaging of the lower end of the spectrum. In certain places, of course, even Plotinus himself does this, as do, on occasion, many Platonists, Gnostics, and even Christians. This type of discourse easily leads itself in turn to the accusation of "dualism": an ill-defined term of abuse which often tacitly connotes both pallid sanctimony and ungrateful, adolescent nihilism but which contributes little to real philosophical understanding. Moreover, recent scholarship has questioned the blanket attribution of anticosmism to the Gnostics, and it would be equally wrong to imagine that the Platonists were unequivocally pro-cosmic and pro-somatic. Taking this into account, one might still maintain that the difference is one of degree, and that Plotinus is relatively less disdainful than the Gnostics of the lower aspects of the hierarchy. And yet, while this might represent an important rhetorical difference, it cannot itself be a significant philosophical bone of contention.

2. In their general outline, the Plotinian and Gnostic ontocosmogonies present several obvious parallels. In each system, a supremely transcendent and singular deity emanates a series of progressively inferior hypostases, which are themselves ultimately responsible for the creation of the highly imperfect and multiplex material cosmos. Both systems, therefore, necessarily encounter and grapple with a particular aspect of the problem of evil, which may be formulated as follows. If there is a transcendent god, one might ask, why need anything inferior have come into existence? Wouldn't the One have been better off remaining in its perfect unity, without generating the inferior orders of being? But given that there is in fact something besides the One, how is the activity of an absolutely perfect and unitary deity ultimately responsible for generating the multiplicity of the mundane world, which at times is so obviously mediocre? And whence the evils down here?

Both Jonas and Armstrong would agree that the Gnostic answer to this question involves a discrete rupture in the spiritual realm. But whereas Armstrong considered this type of Gnostic idea incompatible with the optimism of Platonism and thus foreign to Plotinus, Jonas suggested rather that Plotinus too does at times employ similarly catastrophic imagery to express his ideas of procession. "Plotinus," Jonas wrote, "cannot make do without the same language of apostasy and fall for which he takes the Gnostics so severely to task." Indeed, Plotinus' thought is permeated by the tension between a positive and a negative view of procession. While it is true that Plotinus may not insist on the tragic nature of this fall as strongly and in as negative terms as the most pessimistic Gnostic accounts, this is a relative difference, a difference in degree or in tone, rather than in the essential structure of thought.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that a careful examination of Plotinus' critique of the Gnostic onto-cosmogony may in fact reveal his most basic philosophical disagreement, one that goes beyond the facile and unhelpful issue of "dualism."

3. Let us turn, then, to the relevant passages. In Il.9.10.19-33, Plotinus summarizes the Gnostic doctrine of the fall of the Soul: a doctrine which, in his opinion, exceeds their other ideas in "absurdity"

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4 The complexity of this issue has long been recognized; see, inter alia, C. Elsas, Neuplatonische u. gnostische Wellabehnungen in der Schule Plotins, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche 34 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975).


6 See J. Dillon, "The Descent of the Soul in Middle Platonic and Gnostic Theory," in B. Layton, ed. The Rediscovery of Gnosticism, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1980) 357-64. The issue was not new, but already had a long history in Pythagorean and early Academic speculation on first principles.

Jonas, op. cit. 52.
ultimately at stake in this debate is the source of evil. First, he says, the illumination must either be according to Soul’s nature (kata phusin) or against it (para phusin). If the illumination is according to its nature, it must be universal (panós) and continuous. Yet, on the other hand, if it is against its nature, there must be some principle in the upper world which obliges unnatural behavior, and such a principle can only be evil. And in this case an evil principle in the higher world would be causally prior to the cosmos and would be responsible for the evils down here, and this, by implication, is impossible, since it would ultimately lead to the attribution of cosmic evil to the first principles (ta próta), a possibility which Plotinus categorically rejects.11 The implicit conclusion, therefore, is that the Soul’s illumination is according to nature, universal, and perpetual.12

In the second argument, lines 39 to 44, he defends the Soul by attempting to show the incoherence of the doctrine of its putative “decline” during its illumination of matter-darkness. Unfortunately, several steps are entirely implicit and must be teased out of the elliptical passage. Plotinus opens by asking rhetorically about the origin of the “darkness,” by which he apparently means both matter and evil, which for him are essentially related if not synonymous. He then reasons syllogistically that matter-darkness was either generated by the Soul during its decline, or else was co-eternal with it and had some opponents, who would deny that matter is perpetually illuminated, be to careful to insist that the atemporal procession which is originally responsible for the creation of the cosmos is also responsible for its continual maintenance, and that this ensures that the cosmos is eternally irradiated by the Good. (One should note that this argument seems to have little to do with the better-known debate about whether or not creation takes place in time).

11 In 1.8.2.27-29 Plotinus says that evil is not to be found among the first three hypostases, and if things stopped there, there wouldn’t be any evil at all (ei entauha étai, kaikos eudaimon an éno).
12 1.9.12.30-39: “For their ‘illumination of the darkness,’ if it is investigated, will make them admit the true causes of the universe. For why was it necessary for the soul to illuminate, unless the necessity was universal? It was either according to Soul’s nature or against it. But if it was according to nature, it must always be so. If, on the other hand, it was against its nature, then there will be a place for what is against nature in the higher world, and evil will exist before this universe, and the universe will not be responsible for evil, but the higher world will be the cause of evil for this world, and evil will not come from the world here to the soul, but from the soul to the world here; and the course of the argument will lead to the attribution of responsibility for the universe to the first principles: and if the universe, then also the matter, from which the universe on this hypothesis would have emerged.” (Armstrong 2/273-5).


9 1.10.19-33: “For they say that Soul declined to what was below it, and with it some sort of ‘Wisdom,’ whether Soul started it or whether Wisdom was a cause of soul being like this, or whether they mean both to be the same thing, and then they tell us that the other souls came down too, and as members of Wisdom put on bodies, human bodies for instance. But again they say that very being for the sake of which these souls came down did not come down itself, did not decline, so to put it, but only illuminated the darkness, and so an image from it came into existence in matter. Then they form an image of an image somewhere here below, through matter or materiality or whatever they like to call it— they use now one name and now another, and say many other names just to make their meaning obscure— and produce what they call the Maker, and make him revolt from his mother and drag the universe which proceeds from him down to the ultimate limit of images.” (Armstrong 2/265-7); all Plotinus translations are those of A. H. Armstrong, Plotinus: Enneads, 7 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966-88) unless otherwise noted.

10 He argues elsewhere (e.g. III.9.3.7-17; V.2.1.14-22) for a conception of the cosmogony reminiscent of the Gnostic reproduction of images, yet unlike his Gnostic
prior existence independent of Soul. But this latter option is impossible, since this would in effect grant the matter-darkness, which for him is an evil principle, the status of a priori principle—prior, that is, in either a temporal or a causal sense—and as we have already seen in the previous argument, evil cannot exist among the “prior things.” Therefore, the matter-darkness must have been generated by the Soul, and, he says, the Gnostics would call this a neusis, a decline. But in this case, Plotinus continues, prior to the creation of matter-darkness, there would have been nowhere—no ontologically lower “place,” as it were—towards which the Soul could decline. By this he seems to mean that before its coming into existence, the matter-darkness could not be the cause of the Soul’s decline, since the decline itself involves evil, and evil—that is, matter-darkness itself—has not yet (causally speaking) come into being, prior to its creation by the Soul. Therefore the “decline”—in other words, the generation of matter—is not really a “decline” at all, in that it is not an evil act. But conversely, Plotinus insists, if the Soul’s nature were responsible for the decline, then evil would also be present in the intelligible realm, among the first principles, which is similarly an impossibility. The implicit conclusion of this compressed argument is, as Plotinus affirms elsewhere, that the Soul does both generate and illuminate lower matter (via the activity of its lesser reflection, the “partial” of III.9.3) but either does not decline when it does so, or else its so-called “decline,”—in other words, the creation of matter-darkness, which does represent a lower and indeed potentially evil ontological level—is not an evil act (as the Gnostics would claim) but is, rather, necessary, natural, and voluntary.

4. Yet as it stands, is the view that Plotinus attacks really substantially different from his own? In several publications, Denis O’Brien has argued that Plotinus’ more positive evaluation of the Soul’s generation of matter comprises his fundamental point of disagreement with the Gnostics: whereas Plotinus would see it as a voluntary and natural act, the Gnostics understand it to be a compulsory

or sinful one, although in each case the essential structure of the system is roughly similar. Were we to take into account only Plotinus’ arguments in II.9, this would appear to be a reasonable conclusion; given his thought elsewhere on the subject, however, it seems that this reading impugns to him a certain inconsistency, if not outright hypocrisy. After all, Plotinus too sometimes describes the generation of an inferior ontological level with language redolent of error or of “tragic rupture,” if not of sin itself. Consider, for example, his pessimistic description at VII.9.5 of the emergence of Intellect from the One as an act of recklessness or audacity (tolma), and his remarkable lament elsewhere in the *Großschrift*, at III.8.8, that the lazy Nous, greedily wanting to possess everything, dissipated itself in an inept attempt to contemplate the One. And since the unfolding of each level of being in some sense recapitulates the process on a prior level, Plotinus sometimes treats the Soul similarly, with the most scornful language reserved for the descent of individual souls into human bodies (e.g. at III.7.11). Indeed, in his discussion of the descent of souls at V.1.1, Plotinus explicitly associates tolma with evil. Now does this


12 VII.9.525-30: “Now that which is prior to what is most honorable among real beings, given that there must be something before intellect which wants to be one but is not one, but in unitary form, because intellect is not dispersed in itself but is in reality all together with itself and its nearness after the One has kept it from dividing itself, though it did somehow dare to stand away from the One (apostathei de pós tou henos tolmosan).” (Armstrong 7/321). See also N. J. Torchia, *Plotinus, Tolma, and the Descent of Being: an Exposition and Analysis*, American University Studies, series V, vol. 135 (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

13 III.8.8.30-38: “For when [Nous] contemplates the One, it does not contemplate it as one; otherwise it would not become intellect. But beginning as one, it did not stay as it began, but, without noticing it, became many, as if heavy, and unfolded itself because it wanted to possess everything—how much better it would have been for it not to want this, for it became the second— for it became like a circle unrolling itself, shape and surface and circumference and center and radii, some parts above and some parts below.” (Armstrong 3/97).

14 V.1.1.1-18: “What is it then, which has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves and him, even though they are parts which come from his
not constitute a breach of his own rule, by imputing a similarly decadent or even evil nature to the intelligible realm? In other words, how does Plotinus himself avoid implicating the “first things” in a cosmogonic “decline,” according to the rationale he has used against the Gnostics in II.9.12, if indeed the downward direction of procession, according to his own scheme, is initiated by the audacious and restless tendencies of the second and third hypostases themselves, not to mention the far greater mischief of the lower soul?

The answer, I believe, lies in the precise meaning of the “decline” that Plotinus rejects. In order for his argument against the decline to succeed, it requires the premise, suggested earlier at II.9.4, that the decline is itself something evil or is at least the result of an evil cause. Scholars have typically assumed that both Plotinus and the Gnostics take the term *neusis* to be more or less synonymous with “sinful decline” or simply “sin.” But if it were synonymous with sin, why couldn’t Plotinus bypass the complicated argument against it in terms of the Soul’s natural or unnatural predilections by simply insisting that such a decline is by definition impossible, since absolute evil, or sin, clearly has no place in the intelligible realm? Rather, I would suggest that *neusis* here does not exactly mean sin, but has a more precise meaning in this context.¹⁴ Plotinus himself provides us

higher world and altogether belong to it? The beginning of evil for them was audacity (τόλμη) and coming to birth and the first otherness and the wishing to belong to themselves. Since they were clearly delighted with their own independence, and made great use of self-movement, running the opposite course and getting as far away as possible, they were ignorant even that they themselves came from that world; just as children who are immediately torn from their parents and brought up far away do not know who they themselves or their parents are.” (Armstrong 5/11). Also VI.6.1.1-16: Is multiplicity a falling away from (apostasis) from the One, and infinity a total falling away because it is an innumerable multiplicity and for this reason is evil in so far as it is infinity, and are we evil when we are multiplicity?...For everything seeks not another, but itself, and the journey to the exterior is foolish or compulsory. A thing exists more, not when it comes to be large or many, but when it belongs to itself. But the desire to be great in this way is the property of something which does not know what true greatness is and is hastening not where it should but to the exterior; but the inclination towards itself was inward.” (Armstrong 7/11).

¹⁴ That the Soul’s decline is not exactly synonymous with sin it further supported by a parallel discussion of the descent of the individual soul in I.1.12, where Plotinus argues that, in contrast to the hypostatic Soul, which remains above, this soul does decline. But how, Plotinus asks, is this *neusis* not a sin (hamaria)? He answers as follows: “If the inclination is an illumination directed to what is below it is not a sin; just as casting a shadow is not a sin; what is illuminated is responsible, for it did not exist the soul would have nowhere to illuminate. The soul is said to go down or

a hint as to what he means by decline in a previous passage, at the opening of II.9.11, whose significance will gradually become clear. In this curious passage, Plotinus sets out by asking rhetorically why the Gnostics insist that the soul *declines* if it is really only *iluminating* the underlying matter. (We have seen earlier that Plotinus relates two alternate Gnostic accounts, one in which the soul illuminates and *also* declines, the other in which it illuminates what lies below it but does not decline: and it is this latter option which is closest to his own position). Mere *illumination*, he reasons, does not necessarily entail any displacement, since a source of light may illuminate something else without moving or indeed incurring any change in itself whatsoever (and this, one might note, is a guiding principle of all theories of emanation). But if the Soul does not decline when it illuminates, how can it *fail* to illuminate those intermediary entities which are “below” it, ontologically speaking, and yet which are “above” matter?¹⁵ The implicit conclusion of this argument is that if the Soul does not really decline—which is, as we have seen, Plotinus’ actual opinion—then the illumination reaches all levels of being, which means that all intermediate levels are also suffused with energies from the intelligible realm, and thus the Gnostics must be wrong.

By juxtaposing these three arguments (II.9.11.1-9, II.9.12.30-39, and II.9.12.39-44), we may begin to see exactly what sort of Gnostic “decline” Plotinus rejects. He means something specifically related to procession, but not the ordinary sort of deviation from higher to lower ontological plane whose inception he himself describes in occasionally pessimistic terms. What he *does* mean by decline is a displacement in which a principle naturally occurring at one level of being slides down below its ontological station, so to speak, by *skipping a level*. The sense is that the Gnostics wrongly implicate the Soul in a discontinuous decline which only briefly illuminates the lower matter of the cosmos while bypassing the intermediary strata and leaving them completely bereft of intelligible light. The interpretation

incline (only) in the sense that the thing which receives light from it lives with it.” (Armstrong 1/119).

¹⁵ II.9.11.1-9: “First of all, then, if it did not come down, but illuminated the darkness, how can it rightly be said to have declined? For if something like light streamed from it, it is not proper to say it declined when that happened; unless the darkness lay somewhere below it and it moved spatially toward it and illuminated it when it came close to it. But if Soul remained in itself and illumined matter without taking any action to this end, why did it only illuminate matter and not the powers greater than it in the realm of existence?” (Armstrong 2/267).
of decline as “sin” does not take into account the relational significance of the spatial metaphor, and does not allow us to differentiate adequately between Plotinus’ own position and the one he attacks.

5. But to what sort of scheme is Plotinus actually referring? Broadly speaking, in the typical Gnostic onto-cosmology, the supreme, unknowable god reverts to itself in an eternal moment of self-contemplation, and its own self-perception emerges as an independent noetic principle. This subsidiary deity in turn engenders a third, often psychic, principle, which similarly seeks its ultimate origin, but fails to do so because it is—understandably—unable to know or to reproduce the unknowable first deity. As a consequence of this initial cognitive or reproductive failure, the psychic principle falls even further away from its parent and thus sets into motion a descending process which is replicated on each successive level. Thus far the Gnostic onto-cosmology broadly parallels Plotinus’ scheme, as the inability of each hypostasis to contemplate the superjacent one adequately—i.e. on the latter’s own level—leads to the hypostatization of an inferior stratum. The point at which Gnostic doctrine diverges fundamentally from Plotinus is where the descent of being becomes discontinuous, and it is this discontinuity which he cannot tolerate.

What I mean by “discontinuity” is the following. Typically, when the tertiary deity fails to comprehend its ineffable forefather, it experiences a kind of primordial befuddlement and consequently suffers various negative emotions. These divine passions do not remain subjective states but rather crystallize into hostile entities, capable of causal agency. Sometimes they become malevolent celestial guardians and other times the noetic ascent to the Ploroma. Occasionally they are understood to be in some way consubstantial with the thermomorphic passions accreted concentrically around individual souls. In certain systems, significantly, they are also the origin of matter. The process thus intercalates agents of positive evil somewhere between the weak but ethically superior human souls “below” and the truly divine Ploroma “above.” This type of hierarchy entails a disjunction between ethical status on the one hand and ontological or causal priority on the other, which means that an evil entity may exert some control over a less powerful but ethically superior one.22

Several patristic heresiologies and Nag Hammadi tracts provide clear illustrations of this sort of discontinuity. For example, according to Irenaeus’ account of Valentinian doctrine, the unknowable god emanates an intellectual principle, the Nous, which subsequently emits a second generation of aeons. The last and weakest of these aeons, Sophia, attempts to comprehend her ancestor, but fails. This cognitive failure results in her suffering fear, grief, and terror. Sophia’s passions comprise the origin of both the human passions and matter itself; they also become other entities, such as the devil (whom the Valentinians call the “world-ruler”) and the Demiurge, who creates the world, as well as a host of other demons.23 In the Valentinian Gospel of Truth, (NHC I,3; XII,2: 17.4-17.20), the collective “Totality” of pleromatic aeons search for the inconceivable Father, and their inability to conceptually know him leads to “anguish and terror”; these passions then congeal into a kind of fog which eventually persecutes and crucifies Jesus. In On the Origin of the World (NHC II,5 and XIII,2: 97.24 ff.), the deity Pistas Sophia willfully emanates a primeval realm of light, which produces “Shadow” through exclusion. Shadow becomes jealous of Pistas Sophia’s superiority, and this jealousy metamorphoses into an aqueous matter-darkness called Chaos. Pistas Sophia’s disturbance at the sight of Chaos in turn crystallizes into the dreadful leontoccephalic demiurge Yaldabaoth, who then begets a profusion of hostile androgynous archons: and so forth.24 In the Sethian Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG 8502,2: 9-14), the aeon Sophia tries to produce a likeness of the transcendent Invisible Spirit, in order to honor him, but fails because she acts without his consent. She consequently engenders only a shamefully botched malformation, (again, the arrogant Yaldabaoth), who immediately sets to work creating a proliferation of malevolent archons to rule over the heavens and the earth. In the Tripartite Tractate (NHC I,5: 77.11-25), the transcendent

20 Cf. VI.7.16.11-23.
god emanates a series of aeons, the last and least capable of which is the Logos. With all the best intentions, the Logos wants to honor his father (the true god) by generating a copy of the divine Pleroma, but his feeble intellect is unable to observe the divine realities directly, and consequently his attempt at reproduction results in an intermediate stratum of malevolent archons.\(^\text{23}\) Finally, a faint trace of the discontinuous decline may be discerned even in the later Platonizing Sethian treatise \textit{Zostrianos} (NHC VIII,1), known to have been read in Plotinus’ circle.\(^\text{25}\) At 9.1–10.17, Sophia emits matter-darkness through an act of contemplation (for which she later repents); and an “Archon” -of unspecified origin, but presumably the “divine Cosmocrater of the perceptible world” whom \textit{Zostrianos} reproves (Coptic: \textit{sohe}) at 1.16, and who is condemned to “perishability”\(^\text{26}\) by celestial “judges” at 9.12- -then fashions this matter into the cosmos by means of the ignorant replication of reflections. In another passage (45.12–46.18), the individual soul is said to fall when it fails to comprehend the hyperontic entities; the immediate result is that it is fettered and subjugated by “every (evil) spirit” (\textit{mephit}).\(^\text{27}\)

\(^{25}\) A variant of this scheme occurs in two Sethian tracts, the \textit{Trimorphic Proteus} (NHC XIII,1: 39.13 ff.) and the \textit{Gospel of the Egyptians} (NHC III,2 and IV,2: 56.23 ff.). This version is further from Plotinus in that it involves no cognitive or reproductive failure, but rather the seemingly voluntary creation of hostile powers by the fourth luminary Eleleth.


\(^{27}\) This familiar scheme, however, does not occur in \textit{Allogenes} (NHC XI,3), the other extant tractate explicitly mentioned by Porphyry, nor in the clearly related treatise \textit{Marsanes} (NHC IX,1), where the terminology and mythologoumena of these tractates overlap with the more conflict-oriented Sethian documents, they nevertheless suggest a continuous metaphysical hierarchy and evolve an optimism resembling that of Plotinus. In \textit{Marsanes}, the orderly numerical sequence of 13 “seals” extending from the physical realm to the Unknown Silent One atop the ontological hierarchy would seem to preclude any intermediary stratum of hostile entities (despite a mention, at 25.2-4, of multifarious thermorphic celestial powers). The absence of clear metaphysical discontinuity and the insistence upon strict regularity in these tractates might be explained as a \textit{response} to criticism from Plotinus’ school; it has been suggested that \textit{Allogenes} was later than \textit{Zostrianos} and had already been adjusted to take Plotonian criticism into account, while \textit{Marsanes} is thought to be later still, possibly even post-Plotian; see, \textit{inter alia}, J. D. Turner, \textit{Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition}, Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Section “Études” 6 (Louvain: Peeters, 2001) esp. 218-220; \textit{idem}, “The Setting of the Platonizing Sethian Treatises in Middle Plotanism,” in Turner and Majercik, \textit{Gnosticism and Later Platonism}, 179-224 esp. 200; J. Finanmore, “Jamblichus, the Sethians, and Marsanes,” in Turner and Majercik, \textit{op. cit.}, 225-257.

6. Now let us compare these accounts with Plotinus. In Plotinus’ system, the unfolding of each hypostasis from the \textit{logoi} of the superjacent level represents a progressive ontological descent, one which, as we have seen, he too sometimes describes as a kind of error. In contrast with the Gnostic scheme, however, this regularly diminishing process is \textit{absolutely continuous}. Although each successive level of being is worse than the last, it nevertheless reflects the illumination of the Good to the maximum of its respective capacity.\(^\text{22}\) The effluence of divine energy extends in decreasing but uninterrupted order all the way down to the lowest things, and the Soul’s mediation ensures the excellence of the cosmos as well as all the intermediary strata. The hierarchy of being thus follows an unbroken order whose regularity entails an absolute co-ordination between power and value. Here there can be no “decline” which “skips a level,” so to speak, such that an entity wins up on an ontological plane incongruous with its ethical status. This type of situation would be “against nature,” and would require a radically evil cause among the prior principles, which is impossible. To put it very plainly, in Plotinus’ system, there can be no situation in which an ethically worse principle controls a better one, because causal priority entails ontological priority, and ontological priority, by its inherent definition, also means ethical priority, or, in other words, greater proximity to the Good.

7. Although it is never stated explicitly, this notion is in fact so fundamental to Plotinus’ thought that it almost has the status of an axiom: what I would call his “Axiom of Continuous Hierarchy.” This axiom may be stated as follows:

\begin{itemize}
\item The \textit{continuity of procession} ensures that ontological and ethical status are always correlative, which concurrently assures that what is ontologically and causally prior, i.e. more powerful, is always ethically superior, and vice versa.
\end{itemize}


This has an important ramification. Although here I cannot possibly do justice to the question of evil in Plotinus, I will mention that in Plotinus' system, evil action, as Kevin Corrigan has so vividly illustrated, is never the result of active coercion from above but rather only of passive seduction from below, since evil itself, which is virtually equivalent to matter, is at the very bottom of the causal chain and thus represents absolute passivity and privation. The "existence" of matter-evil at all, inasmuch as it can even be said to "exist," (properly speaking, it cannot) is due to the absolute completeness of the hierarchy of value, which must necessarily descend to its very limit, i.e. down to the negative pole of the continuous but ever-diminishing cascade of goodness. We may, therefore, add two corollaries to our axiom:

(2) An ontologically prior principle can never be the true cause of evil for anything posterior to it, which also means that

(3) Absolute evil can never be a true cause of anything.

This axiom, to which I shall hereafter refer as the ACH, is a fundamental premise of the three arguments I have outlined above. If one examines the logic of these arguments simultaneously, one can see that Plotinus implicitly considers the "decline" of the hypostatic Soul to be a violation of the ACH and therefore both an evil--- for the sake of his anti-Gnostic argument--- and also an impossibility, in the context of his own system. The ACH certainly does not allow the possibility of any true primordial evil (and conversely, its violation, for Plotinus, would necessarily entail such evil), but more significantly, it prohibits the kind of prototypical melodrama prevalent in Gnostic myths, in which an intermediate principle errs and causes a fragment of the supreme deity to be overcome and imprisoned by an evil but subordinate entity, since what is more powerful--- at least in the divine realm--- must also be better.

8. An awareness of Plotinus' dependence upon the ACH might now help us understand how he manages to avoid the trap that he has laid for the Gnostics. In his own system, the natural inclination of the subsidiary hypostases towards audacity and thus ultimately towards the production of evil nevertheless does not violate this axiom, since the process of emanation is continuous and therefore guarantees a correspondence between ontological priority and ethical status. In the Gnostic cosmogony, by contrast, the disorderly decline is necessarily a radical violation of the ACH, since the discontinuity establishes a dissonance between the relative hierarchies of power and goodness. Plotinus appears to confirm this reading in the passage which immediately follows the conclusion of his argument in chapter 12, by complaining that that the Gnostics' hatred of the intermediary entities, including the celestial spheres, results from their ignorance of the "regular order" (taxis ephexês) of the ontological hierarchy. And in the conclusion of I.9.13, he insists that relative inferiority does not constitute a positive evil. The axiom therefore allows him to account for the (apparent) presence of evil in this world while nevertheless preserving his belief in the general goodness of the intermediary hypostases. (Whether in fact his account of evil is more successful than that of the Gnostics remains open for debate).

There is, therefore, a fundamental philosophical difference between Plotinus and the Gnostics, but it does not involve a differential evaluation of the cosmogony, as is often supposed. Rather, Plotinus' essential disagreement concerns the fact that the Gnostics' ontological hierarchy is incongruous with the scale of ethical value, i.e., that it violates the ACH. This issue is not merely one of tone, of degree, or of rhetorical style; rather, it represents a genuine philosophical difference, involving both theodicy and metaphysics.

9. Thus far we have seen that the ACH ultimately governs Plotinus' argument against the Gnostic onto-cosmogony. But if my suggestion is correct, it might have wider ramifications, and it may

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30 This is expressed, for example, throughout his treatise on evils, I.8.
31 I.II.13.1-8: "The man who censures the nature of the universe does not know what he is doing, and how far this rash criticism of his goes. This is so because the Gnostics do not know that there is an order of firsts, seconds, and thirds in regular succession, and so on to the last, and that the things that are worse than the first should not be reviled; one should rather calmly and gently accept the nature of all things, and hurry on oneself to the first, ceasing to concern oneself with the melodrama of the terrors, as they think, in the cosmic spheres, which in reality 'make all things sweet and lovely' for them." (Armstrong 2/275).
32 I.II.13.25-34: "...one should not demand that everybody should be good nor, because this is not possible, should they be ready with censure, demanding that this world should differ in no way from that higher one; nor is it right not to consider evil as anything else than a failing short in wisdom, and a lesser good, continually diminishing; as if one were to say that the growth-principle was evil because it is not perception, and the principle of perception, because it is not reason. Otherwise, they will be compelled to say that there are evils in the higher world too: for there Soul is worse than Intellect and Intellect than Something Else." (Armstrong 2/277).
even help explain many otherwise inexplicable or seemingly incongruous aspects of the Großschrift. I would suggest that it also tacitly underlies several of his other disputes with the Gnostics, even where it is not immediately apparent. Thus, for example, in the subsequent chapter (II.9.14) Plotinus complains that the Gnostics pollute the divine realm by directing magical incantations at the gods and also that they practice magico-medical exorcism. Here Plotinus operates with the implicit assumption, based upon the ACH, that daimónes cannot be accused of causing evil for humans, since in his opinion they represent quasi-divine entities just above humans on the ontological scale. Rather, as he explains at III.4.5-6, it is the reverse: by following one’s personal daimón one attains to one’s highest potential. It is important to understand exactly how this fits into the argument of the treatise, since this chapter is sometimes wrongly cited out of context to show Plotinus’ supposed disapproval of magic, or as yet another critique of the putative irrationality of his adversaries.

In fact, once it has come to one’s attention, one can find this axiom lurking beneath many other Plotinian arguments throughout the Enneads, and not only in anti-Gnostic contexts. Consider his vigorous arguments against astral determinism, and, meandering through II.9, III.1, II.3, and IV.4, his defense of the celestial bodies against the common accusation that they are responsible for terrestrial evil. At II.3.11, for instance, Plotinus says that the astral effluxes are virtuous when they are emitted in heaven, and only become vicious after they have been commingled with lower matter. In fact, he maintains generally that the celestial bodies themselves cannot be truly complicit in evil because they occupy a superior spatial and ontological position: again, a rationale which is ultimately dependent on the ACH.

Moreover, without being able to mount a full defense here, I would even like to raise the possibility that in Plotinus’ system the ACH applies not only to the intelligible realm but in fact to every vertical relationship between any two elements of the chain of being.34

33 III.4.5.25-29: “For [the daimon], settled above [the human], does not allow [the latter] to go very much further down towards the worse, but only that one [principle in the human] acts which is under the daimon, not that above it nor on the equivalent [level]. For [the daimon] is not able to become other than where it is.” (Translation mine).
34 I suspect the ACH underlies Plotinus’ discussion of other topics as diverse as destiny, providence, the undescended soul, the soul’s impassability, and even sensory perception, which is particularly problematic in this regard (i.e. how can the

In Plotinian metaphysics, the vertical structure of reality requires that the true cause of any phenomenon exist on an ontological level prior to that of its effect. The ontologically superior and inferior invariably have the relationship of active to passive, and thus a true cause is always better than its effect.36

10. In conclusion, I think it is safe to say that not only does the ACH provide a unified, theoretical explanation for Plotinus’ multifarious and apparently disparate attacks on many points of Gnostic doctrine, but also that it comprises his most fundamental philosophical disagreement with Gnosticism in general. In fact, I would even go so far as to suggest that this axiom tacitly supports much of his thought and even undergirds his notion of procession itself. Yet it may also be conceptually useful for us in another way too. A rather unexpected additional consequence of this conclusion, if I am correct thus far, is that Plotinus has inadvertently provided us with an effective structural definition of Gnosticism, a category which has recently been received with increasing scholarly skepticism.37 I would suggest that we do not reject the category of Gnosticism altogether, but rather provisionally redefine it, at least within philosophical discourse, as a metaphysical system which radically violates the Axiom of Continuous Hierarchy. In this way we may dispense with misleading definiitonia such as

immaterial soul perceive, or in other words be affected by, any ontologically-lower, material cause?). This deserves further investigation elsewhere.

36 Plotinus in fact makes this explicit in the broader context of his defense of the celestial bodies, when he exonerates the cosmic soul from complicity in evil; see II.5.16.23-27: “Soul takes over or foresees these antecedent conditions and taking account of them accomplishes what follows and links up the chain of consequences, bringing antecedents and consequents into complete connection, and again linking to the antecedents the causes which precede them in order, as far as it can in the existing circumstances. This is, perhaps, why what comes later in the series is always worse.” (Armstrong 295; italics added).
37 M. Williams, Rethinking Gnosticism, (as supra, n. 5) and now K. L. King, What is Gnosticism? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).
38 I would thus revive Jonas’ original, but now unfashionable, phenomenological approach, although I follow J. Z. Smith’s suggestion that Gnosticism be considered less a religion in its own right than a “structural possibility” existing within many different religious systems; see his Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 151 n. 12; also I. Coulanos, The Tree of Gnostics: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).
“dualism” and “anticosmism,” and yet be able to differentiate meaningfully between Gnostic thought and the more typical varieties of Platonism.