

# THE FALL OF SOFIA AND PLOTINUS' METAPHYSICS FROM GNOSTIC DENIAL TO AFFIRMATION OF THE COSMOS

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the controversy between Plotinus and the Gnostics regarding the origin and value of the sensible world, focusing on Enn. II, 9, 33. It shows that, although both systems share a mystical horizon and a language of ascension toward the divine, they differ radically in their understanding of the cosmos and the condition of the soul. Valentinian gnosis interprets the world as the result of a fall in the Pleroma, generated by Sophia's audacity in attempting to have a direct apprehension of the Father. As a result of this rupture, both the ignorant Demiurge and the material prison in which the soul has become trapped arose. Salvation, therefore, consists in remembering its origin and escaping from matter. This implies a negative view of the cosmos. Plotinus rejects this perspective as theologically impossible and as an obstacle to understanding the world, since the higher hypostases cannot err; the world does not come from a fault but from the overabundance of the One. Emanation is order and continuity, not violence and rupture. Matter is not the cause of evil because it is evil, but because it is deprivation. The cosmos, therefore, is a beautiful and necessary image of the Intellect, and the soul always retains an essential relationship with its origin. The controversy with the Gnostics was decisive in Plotinus's refinement of his metaphysics and his defense of the positivity of the world as an expression of divine intelligence.*

**Keywords:** *Plotinus, Gnostics, Sophia, the ignorant Demiurge, metaphysics*

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## Introduction

Perhaps because of its mythical mode of expression, most scholars tended to consider Gnosticism as essentially non-philosophical—i.e., irrational—and the influence of Greek philosophy as a whole as extrinsic and, for the most part, superficial<sup>1</sup>. However, after the discovery and publication of the Nag Hammadi Library, scholars recognized that serious research<sup>2</sup> on Late Antique philosophy had to take Gnostic sources into account. Naturally, this had a profound effect on Neoplatonic and Plotinian studies<sup>3</sup>.

The noetic triad of Being, Life, and Intellect was central to the conception of the transcendental realm among the authors of *Allogenes* and *Zostrianos*<sup>4</sup>, and its presence in *Enn.* 1, 6, 7, 10-12—Plotinus's first treatise—in the context of contemplative ascent, suggests a direct or indirect dependence on some Platonic-style Sethian treatise<sup>5</sup>. It is clear that Plotinus and the Gnostics shared conceptual frameworks and mystical practices, such as Plotinus' treatment of the progressive intensification of contemplation in *Enn.* III, 8, 30 and the growing self-awareness that the Gnostics proposed, according to which vision can definitively transcend the realm of material being leading the Invisible Spirit completely beyond Being. This meant setting apart discursive reasoning and encouraging intuition, showing that both systems share an intrinsically mystical orientation<sup>6</sup>.

In both cases, contemplation involves a process of inner concentration that culminates in the transcendence of all determined being. Thus, Plotinus and the Gnostics raise the limit of *διὰ νοῖα* (discursive thought) and *νοῦς* (direct vision). At the highest level, positive knowledge gives way to the

<sup>1</sup> A. H. Armstrong, "Gnosis and Greek Philosophy," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. Barbara Aland, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978, pp. 87–124.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval; Leuven: Peeters, 2001, p. 480.

<sup>3</sup> M. Tardieu, "Les trois stèles de Seth," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 57 (1973): 545–575; M. Tardieu, "Recherches sur la formation de l'Apocalypse de Zostrien et les sources de Marius Victorinus," *Res Orientales* 9 (1996): 7–174; Henri-Charles Puech, "Plotin et les Gnostiques," in *Les sources de Plotin*, ed. Eric R. Dodds, Vandoeuvres–Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1960, 161–190.

<sup>4</sup> John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, XVI. The suggestion that the existence-life-intellect triad was itself a Sethian innovation (albeit developed out of prior Middle Platonic and Chaldaean speculation) was first made more or less simultaneously in 1973 by Tardieu (1973) and Robinson (published as Robinson 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Corrigan, Tuomas Rasimus, eds., *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2013), XI.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Corrigan, "The *Symposium* and *Republic* in the Mystical Thought of Plotinus and the Sethian Gnostics," in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World*, eds. Kevin Corrigan - Tuomas Rasimus (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2013), 309–328, here 310. John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, XVI and 480.

recognition of the inadequacy of all conceptual mediation regarding the One or the Invisible Spirit. Nevertheless, this coincidence is only formal, since Plotinus differs from the Gnostics in considering that transcendence towards the One does not imply a rejection of the cosmos, but rather a recognition of its beauty as an image of the Intellect.

Porphyry reports that when Plotinus began his philosophical work—in Greek, διατριβή, meaning “exercise, teaching”—in 244 AD, although he had not yet begun his work as a writer<sup>7</sup>, there were no other established schools in Rome. At that time, nothing in the Eternal City compared to the philosophical institutions that flourished in Athens and, especially, in Alexandria; instead, there were epideictic declamations by orators such as Maximus of Tyre and Diofanos—quoted by Porphyry in 15, 5—, or lectures by teachers mostly from the East who proclaimed a new form of wisdom (σοφία).

Γεγόνασι δὲ κατ’ αὐτὸν τῶν Χριστιανῶν πολλοὶ μὲν καὶ ἄλλοι, αἰρετικοὶ δὲ ἐκ τῆς παλαιᾶς φιλοσοφίας ἀνηγμένοι οἱ περὶ Ἀδέλφιον καὶ Ἀκυλῖνον οἱ τὰ Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Λίβυος καὶ Φιλοκόμου καὶ Δημοστράτου καὶ Λυδοῦ συγγράμματα<sup>5</sup> πλεῖστα κεκτημένοι ἀποκαλύψεις τε προφέροντες Ζωροάστρου καὶ Ζωστριανοῦ καὶ Νικοθέου καὶ Ἀλλογενοῦς καὶ Μέσσου καὶ ἄλλων τοιούτων πολλοὺς ἐξηπάτων καὶ αὐτοὶ ἠπατημένοι, ὡς δὴ ποῦ Πλάτωνος εἰς τὸ βάθος τῆς νοητῆς οὐσίας οὐ πελάσαντος. Ὅθεν αὐτὸς μὲν πολλοὺς<sup>10</sup> ἐλέγχους ποιούμενος ἐν ταῖς συνουσίαις, γράψας δὲ καὶ βιβλίον ὅπερ “Πρὸς τοὺς Γνωστικούς” ἐπεγράψαμεν, ἡμῖν τὰ λοιπὰ κρίνειν κατατέλοιπεν. Ἀμέλιος δὲ ἄχρι τεσσαράκοντα βιβλίων προκεχώρηκε πρὸς τὸ Ζωστριανοῦ βιβλίον ἀντιγράφων.<sup>15</sup> Πορφύριος δὲ ἐγὼ πρὸς τὸ Ζωροάστρου συχνὸς πεπροίημαι ἐλέγχους. Ὅλως νόθον τε καὶ νέον τὸ βιβλίον παραδεικνύς πεπλασμένον τε ὑπὸ τῶν τῆν αἴρεσιν συστησαμένων εἰς δόξαν τοῦ εἶναι τοῦ παλαιοῦ Ζωροάστρου τὰ δόγματα, ἃ αὐτοὶ εἶλοντο πρεσβεύειν.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> VP 3, 35: Πλωτῖνος δὲ ἄχρι μὲν πολλοῦ γράφων οὐδὲν διετέλεσεν. (“Plotinus for a long time continued to write nothing, but began to base his lectures on his studies with Ammonius”.)

<sup>8</sup> VP 16: “There were in his time many Christians and others, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy, men of the schools of Adelphius and Aculinus, who possessed a great many treatises of Alexander the Libyan and Philocomus and Demostratus and Lydus, and produced revelations by Zoroaster and Zostrianus and Nicotheus and Allogenes and Messus and other people of the kind, deceived themselves and deceiving many, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality. Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title “Against the Gnostics”; he left it to us to assess what he passed over. Amelius went to forty volumes in writing against the book of Zostrianus. I, Porphyry, wrote a considerable number of refutations of the book of Zoroaster, which I showed to be entirely

In other words, they were Gnostics, whom Porphyry calls sectarians (αἰρετικοί), for they lived in Rome at that time and stood out from the rest of the Christian community. In fact, they were followers of Adelfius and Aquilinus, whose doctrine came from the philosophical tradition (ἐκ τῆς παλαιᾶς φιλοσοφίας)<sup>9</sup>. The collection of books found in Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt in 1945, includes “Revelations” attributed to Allogenes (the Stranger, the Gnostic name for Seth), Zostrianus, Meso, and possibly Zoroaster. Thus, Porphyry shares the conviction that some groups of early Christianity have roots in earlier philosophical doctrines (Pythagorean, Platonic, Stoic), which considered that Plato had not achieved a complete understanding of the intelligible essence (τῆς νοητῆς οὐσίας). They proposed a range of doctrines unified by elaborate cosmological mythologies, esoteric symbolism, and decidedly anti-cosmic conceptions<sup>10</sup>.

We also know from this passage that Plotinus refuted them assiduously and with various arguments (πολλοὺς ἐλέγχους ποιούμενος). He even dedicated the treatise *Against the Gnostics* to them, and bequeathed to Porphyry the task of refuting them in detail (ἡμῖν τὰ λοιπὰ κρίνειν καταλέλοιπεν, literally: “he left us to judge the rest”). The set of these doctrines sought, on the one hand, to achieve gnosis understood as supra-rational access to a supreme “unknown” God—that is, inaccessible to discursive thought—and, on the other hand, to give a new orientation to anthropology, since they claimed that human beings are exiles from the heavenly homeland and prisoners in the material universe. This tension between philosophy and gnosis—visible in the Roman environment of the third century—forms the backdrop to Plotinus' anti-Gnostic polemic in *Enn.* II, 9, 33<sup>11</sup>.

### 1. The Aeon Sophia

Although it cannot be established with certainty, this invective seems to be directed at Valentinus and his followers<sup>12</sup>. This Gnostic teacher had

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spurious and modern, made up by the sectarians to convey the impression that the doctrines which they had chosen to hold in honour were those of the ancient Zoroaster.”

<sup>9</sup> Jesús Igal, “The Gnostics and the ‘Ancient Philosophy’ in Porphyry and Plotinus,” in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong*, eds. Henry J. Blumenthal y Robert A. Markus (London: Variorum, 1981), 138–149.

<sup>10</sup> Jesús Igal, “The Gnostics and the ‘Ancient Philosophy’ in Porphyry and Plotinus,” in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong*, eds. Henry J. Blumenthal y Robert A. Markus (London: Variorum, 1981), 138–149.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Kalligas, “Plotinus against the Gnostics,” *Hermathena* 169 (2000): 117.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd P. Gerson, “Plotinus, Gnosticism, and Christianity,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson and James Wilberding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 41–64; Henri-Charles Puech, “Plotin et les Gnostiques,” in *Les sources de Plotin*, ed. Eric R. Dodds (Vandoeuvres–Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1960), 161–190; Kalligas, “Plotinus against the Gnostics,” 115–128 (while he upholds the basic idea about the Valentinians, he qualifies it with possible sethian sources); Jean-

arrived in Rome around 140, where he remained for about two decades, and his work expresses the process of consolidation of a more philosophically structured religious movement, based on Pythagorean and Platonic influences. In fact, Hippolytus of Rome<sup>13</sup> considers him a follower of Plato, since his system is rooted in the Second Letter—considered a false attribution—which, as we know, had also inspired Numenius<sup>14</sup>. The author of *Refutatio* also states that this movement gained considerable momentum from the preaching of numerous disciples of Valentinus, especially Heracleon and Ptolemy, who also carried out their activities in Italy<sup>15</sup>. The extensive compilation of materials available to Hippolytus for his anti-Gnostic polemic provides valuable evidence of the wide circulation of these writings at the time<sup>16</sup>.

Valentinianism and the Gnostic movement as a whole developed an extraordinarily complex theological system, the core of which was composed of a network of myths, whose main characteristics can be summarized as follows: A) The supreme Deity was conceived as a being that transcended any attempt at discursive understanding; therefore, its description was apophatic, defining it by exclusion—i.e. using names such as “Monad” or “Father” as the only way to suggest its conceptual core. B) The first principle is enveloped in a luminous emanation, in whose light the divinity is reflected and gives rise to multiple divine beings, the eons. These, usually in pairs, make up the celestial kingdom or Pleroma. C) Sophia occupies a central place in the mythical narratives; she is, in fact, the last of the eons, who transgresses the divine order, conceiving the Demiurge of the

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Marc Narbonne, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2011), cap. 1 (raises the interpretation of Enn. II, 9 in a sethian horizon). Francisco García Bzán, *Plotino y la Gnosis* (Buenos Aires: FECIC, 1981), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ref VI 29.1. Τοιαύτη τις, ὡς ἐν κεφαλαίοις εἰπεῖν ἐπελθόντα, ἡ Πυθαγόρου καὶ Πλάτωνος συνέστηκε δόξα, ἀφ’ ἧς Οὐαλεντίνος, οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν εὐαγγελίων, τὴν αἴρεσιν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ συναγαγὼν, ὡς ἐπιδείξομεν, δικαίως (ἄν) Πυθαγορικός καὶ Πλατωνικός, οὐ Χριστιανός, λογισθεῖη. En 37.1-6 Hipólito makes a paraphrase of book II 312d-e; 313a; 314a-c; later, in 37. 7, copies a psalm of Valentinus *Θέρρος* (“Summer” and also “Harvest”) which is based on the ideas mentioned above.

<sup>14</sup> On the spurious nature of the *Segunda Carta*, see Luc Brisson, *Platon. Lettres* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1992), XXV–XXXVI; Kenneth James Dover, *Plato: The Ancient Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 42–51. Regarding its reception in Middle Platonism and Numenius's use of epistolary traditions attributed to Plato: Édouard Des Places, *Numénios. Fragments* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1973), introd.; John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 367–383; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 119–141.

<sup>15</sup> Ref. VI 35.5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Kalligas. “Plotinus against the Gnostics”, 117. Christoph Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung in der Schule Plotins* (Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 27–31.

sensible world, one of whose names is Jaldabaoth<sup>17</sup>. This mythical account, as presented in the Gnostic sources with which Plotinus polemicized, describes the imperfect origin of the sensible cosmos through the fall of this spiritual entity: the Aeon Sophia belongs to the hierarchy of spiritual hypostases—in “Apocryphon of John,” a Barbelognostic text, she is synonymous with the Holy Spirit, Life, and the Mother of All<sup>18</sup>. The myth suggests that Sophia conceived a thought or idea originating from herself and without the consent of the Spirit<sup>19</sup>. This act is interpreted as suffering, a search for the Father, or even an act of arrogance, leading to separation<sup>20</sup>. In the Valentinian system, this passion began with the entities close to Nous and Aletheia, but it manifested itself fully in Sophia. The product of Sophia's deviant thought becomes the creative principle of the material world, known as the Demiurge or First Archon; he is described as ignorant and lacking in understanding. He distances himself from his mother Sophia. The sources also point out that the Mother, despite the deviation, retains the power of light and grace, with which she manages to illuminate the primordial darkness<sup>21</sup>; the Demiurge himself is an ignorant darkness until he mixes with the light. D) Sophia's repentance inaugurates a vast cosmic operation undertaken by the Aeons in order to reintegrate the divine power that, in the very act of creation, had been spilled and scattered into matter<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See Gershom Scholem, “Jaldabaoth Reconsidered,” in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 405–421. This paper examines the difficulties in presenting an etymology and the challenges of accepting others, such as “Son of Chaos,” which are suggestive from a speculative point of view. The figure of Sophia is often associated with Valentinian Gnosticism, although the Nag Hammadi discovery has shown that she also played a prominent role in Sethian systems.

<sup>18</sup> Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung in der Schule Plotins*. 146-147; 162.

<sup>19</sup> Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung in der Schule Plotins*, 162 n. 539.

<sup>20</sup> Τὸ λῦμα describes Sophia's daring act, who, in her desire to know the unknowable Father, ventures beyond the limits of her aeon; Elsas translates this term as *Anmaßung* and explains the scope of this “audacity” or “disordered daring”, that is, the ontological transgression, which breaks the harmony of the *pleroma*. See *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung in der Schule Plotins*, 198-199.

<sup>21</sup> Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung in der Schule Plotins*, 167. Despite her error, she retains a faint memory of the Divine; from this memory, the aeon Sophia gives birth to a spiritual model of the cosmos, the Logos, sometimes identified as Christ or the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the archetype of salvation. In Valentinianism, Sophia achieves repentance for her actions, which links her to the search for the Spirit/Logos she abandoned; ultimately, Sophia's spiritual aspect separates from the material—psychic—elements.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 65, 164.

This plan includes freeing a spiritual elite from carnal servitude and overcoming Destiny (Εἰμαρμένη), understood as the domination exercised by the planetary Archons over the cosmos. The formulation of these speculations in increasingly abstract terminology, their growing systematic complexity, and the effort to ground them in myth led to the composition of treatises in which, under the veil of visionary allegories and through extremely sophisticated symbolism, reveal an attempt to articulate theological answers that we can trace back to the Homeric and pre-Socratic traditions<sup>23</sup>.

Thus, Sophia's role in Gnostic cosmogony is central and complex, often personifying the drama of the origin of the material cosmos and the divine fall. In the Syrian-Egyptian Gnostic systems, Sophia represents the feminine emanation that personifies the fallible aspect of God<sup>24</sup>. In Valentinianism, she is the last and youngest of the Aeons within the Pleroma (the divine Fullness).

## 2. Plotinus' Critique

Plotinus' polemic against the myth of Sophia and Gnostic cosmology is found mainly in the treatise *Enn. II, 9*—"Against the Gnostics", written 33 in Porphyry's order. In this work, the philosopher attacks the doctrines of Gnostic groups—mainly Valentinians—who despised the physical cosmos, postulated a defective creation, and conferred on their followers a rank superior to that of celestial entities. The first line of criticism is directed against the central idea of the myth of Sophia: the fall or error of a higher hypostasis, which would have given rise to the material world and evil.

Εἰ δὲ οἷον πτερορρυήσασαν τὴν ψυχὴν φήσουσι πεποικέναι, οὐχ ἢ τοῦ παντὸς τοῦτο πάσχει· εἰ δὲ σφαλεῖσαν αὐτοὶ φήσουσι, τοῦ σφάλματος λεγέτωσαν τὴν αἰτίαν. Πότε δὲ ἤεσφάλη; Εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἐξ ἀιδίου, μένει κατὰ τὸν αὐτῶν λόγον ἐσφαλμένη· εἰ δὲ ἤρξατο, διὰ τί οὐ πρὸ τοῦ; Ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ νεῦσιν φαμεν τὴν ποιούσαν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον μὴ νεῦσιν.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Kalligas. "Plotinus against the Gnostics", 118-119.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels*. Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 43-46.

<sup>25</sup> *Enn. II, 9, 4*: "But if they are going to assert that the soul made the world when it had, so to speak, "shed its wings," this does not happen to the Soul of the All; but if they are going to say that it made the world as the result of a moral failure, let them tell us the cause of the failure. But when did it fail? If it was from eternity, it abides in a state of failure according to their own account. If it began to fail, why did it not begin before? But we say that the making act of the soul is not a declination but rather a non-declination." With the feminine aorist participle πτερορρυήσασαν, from πτερορρυέω, "lose its wings", Plotin alludes with evident irony to *Phaidros* 246c-d, where the soul possesses wings and can descend when it loses them. The Gnostics reinterpret this motif as an actual fall; Plotinus inadvertently moves from the mythical image to the literal one. The terms σφαλεῖσαν, σφάλμα (the lexical field of σφάλω includes "to cause to err", "to fall", "to fail") point to

This section examines the Gnostic notion of Sophia, her fall, in direct contrast to the exposition of Valentinian doctrine offered by Irenaeus of Lyon in *Adversus Haereses* I, 2-4. The purpose is to show that Plotinus' refutation is not directed against a caricature of Gnosticism but against a well-defined doctrinal construct transmitted in the intellectual milieu of the third century. According to Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* I, 2-4), Sophia, the last Aeon in the Pleroma, experiences a passion (πάθος) or immoderate desire to know the Father. This movement produces disorder and rupture in the order of emanations, giving rise to a "deficient fruit" (ἔκτρομα), identified as Achamoth or lower Sophia, who, separated from the Pleroma, relates to matter and gives rise to the formation of the sensible world. The Demiurge, ignorant of the higher level, organizes the cosmos believing himself to be the supreme god.

In *Enn.* II, 9, 4, Plotinus criticizes precisely this conception of "fall" (in Plotinian vocabulary, πέπτωκεν, perfect active of πίπτω) and describes it as philosophically untenable. If the soul or Sophia "fell," the cause (αἰτία) and the moment when this fall occurred must be indicated. If it is eternal, then imperfection is essential and the Pleroma ceases to be perfect. If it had a beginning, it is necessary to explain why it occurred then and not before. Gnostic doctrine cannot justify this without resorting to new mythical accounts.

Likewise, Valentinianism presupposes that the visible world is the result of an ontological defect, whereas for Plotinus the cosmos is a beautiful and necessary image of the Intellect. The universe does not arise from a fall but from emanation: it is not the effect of a passion but of an overabundance. The soul does not descend by mistake but contemplates and produces according to its nature. Therefore, the controversy between Plotinus and the Valentinians is not only theological but fundamentally ontological. The Neoplatonic master defends the positivity of being and the continuity between the intelligible and the sensible, while gnosis introduces a metaphysical fracture that turns the world into a prison. Plotinus posits, then, the impossibility of the fall, since it is inconceivable that the Universal Soul—often equated with Sophia—could commit a slip. On the other hand, if the cosmos is not born of error, then he rejects the idea that creation derives from a defective process of thought or a murky presence of the

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error, not to metaphysical guilt, and therefore Plotinus demands that the cause (αἰτία) be established, that is, the when and why. If the soul fell "from eternity" (ἐξ αἰδίου), it was never right, which contradicts the Gnostic doctrine of "previous glory." If it began (ἤρξατο) at a certain moment, Plotinus asks why not before (διὰ τὸ οὐ πρό τοῦ). The term νεῦσις implies "inclination," "gesture of assent," "orientation," and Plotinus states that the soul does not act by a voluntary turn or fall, but μάλλον μὴ νεῦσιν, "rather without declining," that is, its production is natural, not the result of a defective movement.

superior. Plotinus' critique thus represents a decisive moment in the Neoplatonic affirmation against Gnostic dualism.

The universe (ὁ κόσμος) proceeds from the very essence of the Soul, from its fullness of power, and not from ignorance or arrogance<sup>26</sup>. Plotinus considers absurd the notion that the Soul regrets its own access to the world. He describes this concept as contradictory and, in contrast, defends the beauty of the cosmos: the visible world, far from being “ill-conceived,” constitutes a splendid image of the intelligible world. He reproaches the Gnostics for despising earthly beauty, when it is precisely this that leads to the recognition of higher beauty<sup>27</sup>.

Another target of his criticism is the Demiurge, conceived by the Gnostics as an ignorant or evil deity, born from the fall of Sophia. Plotinus describes this account as blasphemous, as it degrades the creator to a material-animic product, incapable of sustaining the function attributed to him. He finds it irrational to imagine that a newly emerged being affected by matter is capable of generating the cosmos. He also ridicules the notion

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<sup>26</sup> Enn. II, 9, 7: “It has been said already that this universe did not begin and will not come to an end but exists always as long as the intelligible realities exist. And it has been said before the Gnostics that the association of our soul with body is not to the advantage of the soul. But to apply conclusions drawn from our soul to the Soul of the All is as if somebody were to take the tribe of potters or smiths in a well-ordered city and make them a reason for blaming the whole. But one must take into account the differences between the universal soul and ours, in its management of body; it does not direct it in the same way, and is not bound to it. For, as well as all the other differences (of which we have mentioned a vast number elsewhere) this ought to have been taken into consideration, that we are bound by a body which has already become a bond”.

The central argument draws an absolute divide: the individual soul is not like the World Soul. The human soul may feel imprisoned by the body, but the World Soul is not. It governs the universe from a position of contemplation, unaffected by matter. Its creation is not an accident or the product of passion, but the natural overflowing of the perfection of the Intellect. Thus, the physical world is not an error, but a beautiful and ordered image of divine reality. For Plotinus, the error of Valentinian gnosis lies in considering a catastrophe in the pleroma and a defective world, a vision that shatters the unity of being. His refutation, on the other hand, defends the harmony of creation, seeing the cosmos as a positive and necessary manifestation of divine intelligence. See Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God*, 262-263.

<sup>27</sup> Enn. II, 9, 4, where he affirms: καὶ οὐδὲν ἐν τοῖς ἄνωθεν ἡμαρται» (“and nothing above has erred”), denying any possibility of failure in the higher hypostases. Complementarily, Enn. II,9,5 states: οὐ γὰρ ἡ ψυχὴ πεπτώκεν· οὐδὲ γέγονε κακὴ (“for the Soul has not fallen, nor has it become evil”), rejecting the notion of ontological fall. Finally, Plotinus' position is summarized in Enn. II, 9, 13: οὐκ ἐξ ἀμαρτήματος ἢ γένεσις, ἀλλ' ἐκ τῆς ὑπερπληρώσεως (“its coming-to-be is not from a fault, but from an overflowing abundance”), where the genesis of the cosmos is presented not as a defective product, but as a necessary emanation of intelligible plenitude.

that this Demiurge acts out of audacity (τόλμα)<sup>28</sup> or a craving for fame. On an ethical and intellectual level, Plotinus reproaches the Gnostics for their arrogance: they claim that even the souls of the most miserable men are divine and immortal, while denying this status to celestial bodies, which are much more beautiful and purer. This position breaks the natural hierarchy of ascent towards the divine and constitutes a fanciful flight that distorts the path of spiritual ascent<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, he denounces the Gnostics for distorting the Platonic tradition by introducing new hypostases and high-sounding terminology. In this sense, the Gnostic interpretation of *Timaeus* is—according to him—a sign of philosophical incomprehension: they multiply entities arbitrarily and reduce their author to a preliminary stage, arrogating to themselves a superior knowledge that Plato himself would not have attained<sup>30</sup>. Finally, he points out the inconsistency of their dualism: if darkness already existed before things, the Soul could not have produced it;

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<sup>28</sup> Enn. II, 9, 12–13. Cf. on τόλμα, VI, 9, 5. In the Valentinian Gnostic tradition, τόλμα (“audacity,” “boldness”) designates Sophia’s excessive movement, which is interpreted as a disordered desire to know beyond the limits of her hypostasis. Sophia’s τόλμα produces an imbalance in the pleromatic order and gives rise to a “deficient fruit” (ἔκτρομα), which leads to the differentiation between the superior, unfallen Sophia and the inferior Sophia (Achamoth), who relates to matter and participates in the genesis of the sensible world. The most profound refutation consists of the ontological reinterpretation of the term τόλμα. Instead of understanding it as a fall or deviation, Plotinus conceives of it as the very condition of otherness and multiplicity derived from the One. The τόλμα is not a psychological or historical event, but the ontological distance that allows something to be other with respect to the principle. The sensible world is therefore not the product of a flaw, but the necessary and ordered image of the Intellect. From this conceptual difference follows a radical divergence in the valuation of the cosmos. While Valentinianism describes the world as a prison and corruption, the product of a divine accident, Plotinus understands it as a positive manifestation of the contemplative activity of the Soul of the All. Albert Roland Haig, “Gnostic and Catholic Appropriations of Platonism,” *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 77–102. Fernando Martín de Blassi, “Considerations on the Concept of Audacity (τόλμα) in Plotinus,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2017): 1–19. Patricia Ciner, “Unión Mística y Osadía: implicancias del término *tolmeteón* en el *Comentario al Evangelio de Juan*,” en *Actas del Colloquium Origenianum Decimum: ‘Origen as Writer’*, eds. S. Kaczmarek y H. Pietras (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010), 420–435.

<sup>29</sup> Enn. II, 9, 9. 34–36: “They think they can fly up through the heavens and beyond the ordered universe, but in truth they do not leave the earth. Their flight is in imagination, not in intellect”. In Greek the verb is πέτεσθαι (“fly”), and is used ironically: πέτονται δὲ οὐκ ἀληθῶς, ἀλλὰ φαντασίᾳ (literally, “But they do not really fly, except in their imagination”).

<sup>30</sup> Enn. II, 9, 6, 1–10; 11. “They say that Plato did not attain to the intelligible, but that they have reached a knowledge higher than his.” ... λέγουσι δὲ καὶ Πλάτωνα μὴ ἐφικέσθαι τοῦ νοητοῦ, αὐτοὺς δὲ εἰδέναι τὰ ἄνω.

if it arises from Sophia's error, then evil proceeds from the higher principle, which Plotinus categorically rejects<sup>31</sup>.

### Doctrinal Issues Raised in the Anti-Gnostic Controversy

Based on this refutation, Plotinus redefines aspects of his philosophy. In particular, Plotinus' dialogue with the Gnostics played a decisive role in determining his own philosophy, for he opposes the thesis that evil (or darkness) emanates from a higher principle, such as the productive activity of the soul. The controversy forced him to minimize the role of the Soul and maximize the role of matter in the emergence of sensible evil. In Treatise 51, Plotinus argues that matter is the universal cause of all evils, including the weakness of the soul, which represents a doctrinal evolution to counteract Gnostic cosmogony<sup>32</sup>. Let us look at the structure of his argument:

a) Chapter 14 culminates with Plotinus' assertion that matter is the primary evil; he considers its role as the source of evil and minimizes the responsibility of higher principles, since the individual soul, although imperfect, is not properly a principle. For Plotinus evil resides in absolute deficiency. This distinction was crucial in opposing the Gnostic teaching that ontological inferiority (or a being's lack of wisdom) was itself evil<sup>33</sup>. Plotinus describes matter as having a malevolent will and activity that seeks to corrupt the soul. According to him, it “begs,” pesters, and “wants to enter directly” into the soul; matter “obscures enlightenment” and “weakens” the soul through its mixture<sup>34</sup>. Thus, the soul's descent into the body and its consequent weakness are caused by matter itself, which “obstructs” (κωλύουσα) all the powers of the soul from acting fully, “occupying the place that the soul has and producing a kind of cramp-like condition”<sup>35</sup>. Matter

<sup>31</sup> Enn. II, 9, 13, 33-34. “Its coming-to-be is not from a fault, but from the overflowing abundance [of the higher principle].” ... οὐκ ἐξ ἀμαρτήματος ἢ γένεσις, ἀλλ' ἐκ τῆς ὑπερπληρώσεως.

<sup>32</sup> We consider the position of Jean-Marc Narbonne, op. cit., p. 6. And pp. 1-6 for considering his discrepancies with Harder (cited below), who proposes to substitute the idea of *Großschrift* (“Great Writing”, which traditionally limited the controversy to the treatises 30 to 33) for that of a Great Cycle (*Großzyklus*). This concept includes a set of treatises, composed between 263 and 268, in which the answer to Gnosticism is ordered progressively, culminating in Treaty 33, *Against the Gnostics*. This cycle has roots in Plotin's initial period (treaties 2, 6 and 8) and extends to posterior workse (traties 47, 48 and especially 51). For the notion of *Großschrift* cf. Richard Harder, “Eine neue Schrift Plotins,” *Hermes* 71 (1936): 1–10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4474437>

<sup>33</sup> Narbonne. *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, 80-81.

<sup>34</sup> Matter insists and harasses (ἐνοχλεῖ, δέεται) the soul, trying to enter it (προσπίπτει), while its mixture with the body obscures (σκιάζει) and weakens (ἀσθενίζει, ἀμβλύνει) the contemplative power. Enn. I, 1,7; IV, 3, 18; I, 8, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Enn. IV, 4, 18, 3–4; συσπώμενον καὶ συνεσπασμένον γίγνεται τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς πάθος, ὥσπερ σπασμὸς ἐν σώματι. (litt. “The affection of the soul becomes contracted and taut, like a spasm in the body.” Plotinus describes the soul's turning towards the multiple as a

attempts to corrupt what it touches, “making evil what it has seized as if by theft.” This description of matter as an active and sufficient cause of evil leaves no room for the idea that the weakness of the soul is only a partial cause.

b) The final passage of Treatise 51 (I 8) contains a statement which, if interpreted as Plotinus' own position, would contradict the rest of his system and his anti-Gnostic polemic, for he poses a hypothetical scenario: “Even if the soul itself produced matter, being affected in some way, and had become evil by communicating with it, matter is the cause of it by its presence.”<sup>36</sup> Plotinus adopts the Gnostic hypothesis (the production of matter by a soul that went astray) and demonstrates that, even under that premise, the ultimate responsibility for evil still lies with matter, since the soul would not have associated with it if matter had not given the soul the opportunity to come into being. This chapter thus culminates a selective development in Plotinus's thought, as the need to distinguish his doctrine from Gnosticism led him to emphasize more strongly the material causality of evil.

c) The doctrine of the partially undescended soul. Plotinus's thesis regarding the undescended soul—according to which a part of the soul always remains in the intelligible world—is interpreted as a reformulation of the Gnostic doctrine of consubstantiality (ὁμοούσιος)<sup>37</sup>. This doctrine operates as a direct response to the Gnostics, as it guarantees the possibility of return for all human souls—contrary to the Gnostic distinction between souls as pneumatic, psychic, and hylic. Treatise 6 (IV 8) is identified, then, as the possible first anti-Gnostic statement.

d) Treatise 33 criticizes the Gnostic presumption according to which it is possible to ascend to the Supreme Principle by ourselves, without the guidance of the Intellect. Plotinus reproached the Gnostics for aspiring to place themselves immediately below God<sup>38</sup>. This criticism probably motivated a selective development in the description of the soul's re-ascent in Treatise 38 (VI 7), where the soul no longer ascends alone (as described in Treatise 9) but is carried by the surge of the Intellect. Plotinus attacked Gnostic cosmogony for presenting an accidental creation, with a Demiurge acting by reflection or calculation, which introduced contingency and

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contraction (σπασμός), similar to a cramp that tenses its activity and takes it away from contemplation.

<sup>36</sup> Enn. I,8,14, 8-10: “Even if the Soul itself produced matter, and was affected in some way and became ‘evil’ through its association with it, matter is the cause, by its very presence.” (... εἰ δὲ καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ ψυχὴ ἐποίησεν αὐτήν, καὶ παθητικὴ τις ἐγένετο, καὶ κακὴ ἐκ τοῦ συγγενέσθαι, ἢ ὕλη αἰτία τῆ παρουσίᾳ.).

<sup>37</sup> J.M. Narbonne, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2011, cap. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer, “Plotinos,” in *Pauly-Wissowa. Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* XX, 1 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1953), col. 472-592.

conflict into the world. In response, Plotinus developed the idea of contemplative demiurgy (δημιουργία), where the production of the universe is a natural and eternal act, not the result of rational discourse.

e) The development of the argument of God as *causa sui* in Treatise 39 (VI 8) is interpreted as an ad hoc response to a Gnostic objection. Gnostic adversaries, who insisted on the sovereign and free will of the Principle, would criticize Plotinus' One for being too subject to the necessity of its own nature. Plotinus then uses the language of self-generation to defend the freedom of his Principle.

Criticism of Gnosticism shows a different perspective of Plotinus's thought, as some aspects of *The Enneads* are defined in the context of this dispute. Primarily, this does not mean that Gnostic doctrines should be understood as theories that Plotinus inserted into his system— or simply rejected—but rather as part of the spiritual and intellectual world of the time and, more specifically, of the philosophical schools of Alexandria<sup>39</sup>. Gnostic ideas are present in *The Enneads*—often adapted and corrected—but their doctrines or myths are also directly criticized. Although it is difficult to clearly distinguish different periods in Plotinus' work because, as we know, he began writing late in life—that is, after years of teaching, when his ideas had reached a certain maturity—we can nevertheless speak, in general terms, of three periods: a) the early treatises (1-21), b) the Porphyrian period (22-45), and c) the late treatises (46-54). The theory of interior contemplation as a way to find one's own Being and the Whole is present throughout *The Enneads*, although more frequently in the early treatises. This theory—which does not appear unequivocally in the Greek tradition—is attributed to Plotinus' teacher, Ammonius Saccas<sup>40</sup>.

## Conclusion

Plotinus' confrontation with the Gnostics was not merely a marginal debate, but rather the crucible in which his philosophical system reached its definitive maturity. The controversy—crystallized in *Enn.* II, 9, 33—transcends simple theological refutation to become a fundamental defense of the very foundations of Platonic philosophy, threatened by the Gnostic worldview. The core of this confrontation is ontological. Faced with the radical dualism that conceived of the material world as a prison and the result of divine corruption—Sophia's error—Plotinus reaffirmed the absolute positivity of the cosmos. For him, the universe is not a fracture but a beautiful and necessary image of the Intellect. Creation is not a tragic

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<sup>39</sup> In this perspective, we are indebted to Theodorus Gerardus Sinnige, *Six Lectures on Plotinus and Gnosticism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), who has compiled evidence from the gnostic doctrines, reading the *Enéadas* in chronological order.

<sup>40</sup> Schwyzer, "Plotinos", col. 580.: "... im griechischen Denken kaum vorgebildet..."

accident, but the generous and eternal overflowing of a higher fullness, an emanation, not a fall.

This revaluation of the cosmos radically transforms the human condition. For Plotinus the soul is not a divine exile in a hostile world, as Gnosticism postulated. Rather, it is called to a return that is realized through contemplation, using the beauty of the sensible world as a stepping stone to ascend to the recognition of intelligible beauty. In this way, Plotinus takes the Gnostic mythical drama of the fall of Sophia and reinterprets it philosophically—he turns it into a metaphysical key to the internalization and reunion of the soul with its origin, the One.

In practice, this process of refutation becomes a philosophical purification of Platonism. Forced to respond to the Gnostics, Plotinus had to define with unprecedented precision the conceptual relationships of Neoplatonism: a) reality proceeds from the fullness of the Good, not from a defect or passion. b) The harmonious participation and hierarchical continuity of being is restored, opposing the ontological fracture that the Gnostics introduced between the Pleroma and the cosmos. c) The doctrine of evil is consolidated not as an active force or a principle (such as matter or the Gnostic Demiurge) but as a deprivation or absence of Good. Ultimately—in the face of Gnostic despair that denies the value of the world—Plotinus constructs a metaphysics of meaning. He offers an orderly cosmos that reflects the goodness of its principle and a human soul that, far from being a tragic victim, possesses an inalienable dignity (its undescended part) that allows it to recognize itself as a reflection of the Intellect. For all these reasons, the refutation of the Gnostics is not an appendix to Plotinus' work, but one of the founding acts of Neoplatonism.

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