Beauty, Number, and Loss of Order in the Gnostic Cosmos

Pheme Perkins

The Nag Hammadi codices have provoked as many questions about the relationship between Gnosticism and the philosophical speculation of the first three centuries of our era as they have answered. Some of these tractates appear to be those read in Plotinus's circles or those referred to in Christian authors. Others appear to reflect adaptation of Gnostic speculation to meet philosophical objections. However, it has been much more difficult to argue that Gnostic speculation, itself, had a major influence on the development of Neoplatonic thought. Dominic O'Meara has suggested that the turn away from demiurgic production of the lower world toward a contemplative process in Plotinus's middle period may have been partially provoked by his polemic against the Gnostics. However, O'Meara also points out that Plotinus's polemic is not dictated by the Gnostic agenda. He develops themes from his own thought which might lead those inclined toward Gnostic views to reject them. The explicit condemnation of Gnostic teachings in the reduction to absurdities of Enn. II.9 is predicated upon the independent metaphysical arguments of the earlier treatises.

Prof. Armstrong's survey of possible contacts between Gnosis and Greek philosophy reaches the same conclusion. He points out that it is necessary to distinguish between occasional ideas taken from a particular tradition and the shaping of a person by a tradition in such a way that one would never think otherwise. Not only are the Platonists of the second century consistently "anti-Gnostic" in the structure of their thought; the Gnostics are only marginally influenced.
by Platonism. Some of the monistic Gnostic writings have adapted elements of Platonic cosmology to their systems, but their structure remains that of a foreign faith and feeling. Even for the most negative of the second century Platonists, this world reflects the intelligible world and remains "well-ordered." That order is based upon the conviction that matter, space and time are limited.

The consistency of the Platonic reading of the cosmos makes the intellectual attractiveness of Gnostic "disorder" all the more puzzling. Armstrong points out that one must beware of presuming that the myth of the Gnostic generates a particular mystical experience. Myth may be used to describe such experiences but it is not their source. The Gnostic treatment of its own mythology suggests a secondary, literary exercise quite unlike primary expressions of the human psyche. Anti-Gnostic polemic of the second and third centuries provides some indication of how their contemporaries viewed Gnostic thinkers. Both Irenaeus and Plotinus address a monistic Gnosticism, which claimed to provide its adherents with a "philosophical" reading of the world. They both ridicule the gnostic "melodrama of terrors" (Enm. II.9, 13) — particularly, the myth of Sophia and her passions. They both attribute arrogance to the Gnostics, a desire to be superior to the "heavenly world," to step above their place in the hierarchy of beings. They both presume that this arrogance is correlated with a lack of moral purpose, an unwillingness to undergo the harder discipline of "becoming good oneself." They presume that the material world contains within it elements of disharmony, discord, irrationality, which are overcome in the larger perspective of God as the creator of all. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that he does not reflect Plotinus's final case against the Gnostics, their failure to perceive the true nature of Beauty. Armstrong suggests that third century Platonists, especially Plotinus, recovered in Beauty an element in perceiving the world that had been neglected in the second century. The "disharmony" presumed by Irenaeus may represent a view of the cosmos that was held widely enough to provide some plausibility for Gnostic arguments. On the other side, we find a few references to the beauty of the intelligible world in the Nag Hammadi writings. These references suggest that Gnostic thinkers would have been influenced by objections such as those raised by Plotinus.

The Beautiful and Order in Middle Platonism

Before investigating the Nag Hammadi material, a brief survey of the treatment of "the Beautiful" as an ordering principle in the first and second century Platonic tradition is appropriate. To what extent is Beauty lost as an ordering principle? To what extent is Irenaeus's
presupposition of discord in the sensible world shared by the philosophical tradition? That the second principle is common in some circles may already be obvious from surveys like Armstrong's. Second century accounts of necessity, multiplicity and irrationality in the lower world tend to exegese Plato in such a way that an "evil" soul is operative in the material world. This interpretation is based upon a combination of *Tim.* 52-53 and *Laws* 896E-897D. Plutarch, Atticus and Numerius provide examples of such interpretation.23

Emphasis on the "disorder" to be found in the lower world and the consequent decline in use of the argument from its *beauty* appears to originate in anti-Stoic argument. The Stoic argument for an immanent divine Providence turned on three points: (1) the cosmos is the structure best suited for survival; (2) the cosmos is complete in itself; (3) the cosmos is one of consummate beauty and contains every kind of embellishment.24 The order, perfection and beauty of nature prove that it is produced by a divine reason, which guides all things for the benefit of humanity.25 The Platonic tradition insists on God's transcending the "ordering principle of the lower world." This transcendence is often expressed in the conviction that the highest God transcedes the Good and the Beautiful.26

Philo's treatise on the creation of the world demonstrates the eclectic tendencies of first century Platonism. Its speculation about the numbers involved in the creation account is indebted to Pythagorean traditions.27 God, the active cause of all that is, transcends virtue, knowledge, the Good and the Beautiful (*Opif.* 8). Philo agrees with the Stoic of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* that Providence is the most beneficial and necessary incentive to piety.28 The Beautiful applies most properly to the *paradeigma* of the sensible world. Philo concludes that a god-like, incorporeal pattern was created prior to the production of the sensible world. He concludes that the number of types of object in the two worlds must coincide and that the *ideas* are in the divine Logos, since nothing else could contain God's power.29 The substance which receives the Forms has nothing but the capacity to change, to become all things. It contains inconsistency and disharmony because it is without any qualities. It has no soul, beauty or order. However, its capacity to receive the Good is limited. Consequently, the beauty, harmony and order of the material world is not equivalent to that in the intelligible world.30

However, Philo's account of the elements suggests a further source of discord in the lower world. *Light* the noetic *paradeigma*, the surpassingly beautiful, is not only dimmed in the material world, it meets the void and darkness. God puts *air* between the two, which are naturally in conflict, so as to keep discord and perpetual warfare from arising. Evening and dawn function as boundaries in the heavenly spheres. (*Opif.* 30-33). Not only is there a natural emnity between primordial elements, but God is not entirely responsible for creation. Those things which are Good of themselves or those which are neither Good nor Bad are attributed to God. Deeds of a contrary sort are attributed to subordinates (*Opif.* 74-75).

According to Philo, the human soul is particularly suited to perceive true beauty. It was not constructed according to a pattern such as those for the visible world but in the likeness of God's Word. What has been copied from a beautiful pattern will be itself beautiful. The Word of God surpasses any beauty to be found in nature. Consequently the first human surpassed any human who now exists. The descendants of that first human, like successive copies of work of sculpture or painting, have grown weaker and inferior to the original. (*Opif.* 139-45). Such decline helps explain the acknowledged difference in the return of individuals to the vision of God. *Fig.* 97-99 distinguishes three types of piety. The noblest reaches to the divine Word, the image of God. The next grasps God's creative power and comes to love the one to whom the person owes his or her being. Finally, the last form grasps God's ruling power and gains life through obedience to divine decrees. Only the person who is free from every unintentional offense possesses God himself. Others must take refuge in the three cities, the Word of God, his creative power and his kingly power. Humans need these three refuges because they are by nature prone to intentional and unintentional sin. (*Fig.* 102-105). Philo's description of the fall equates Eve with the senses through which reason becomes ensnared (*Opif.* 165). While hardly the beginnings of a Gnostic system, Philo's account does presume that the sensible world contains certain elements that are not harmonious and not reducible to reason or order. Philo's monothelism and his doctrine of divine powers holds these elements within the bounds of a "good" creation. However, one also finds in the doctrine of God's double act of creation, first the intelligible world, then the sensible one, a way of removing the creator from the ill of this world. The perfection of divine power and beauty can only be expressed in the intelligible realm.

Plutarch is less tentative than Philo in attributing discord in the sensible world to a principle other than God. Against the Epicureans, he argues that matter alone will never produce life, since matter is inanimate. Against the Stoic identification of God, Providence, the Logos and the creative Demiurge, he argues that nothing bad could ever be engendered.31 But, and here we find the image exploited by
Irenaeus, the harmony of the universe is like a lyre. It rebounds from being disturbed. Good and bad are not kept apart in the universe. This fact is evident in the dualistic myths of both barbarians and Greeks. It is also evident in our own experience of life. We find that Nature constantly mingles good and bad, success and failure. The most logical conclusion from both ancient wisdom and our experience of the world is that there are two *souls* at work. Nature as we know it requires both, intelligence and reason and the irrational and destructive soul. However, the struggle between the two is not equal. Fundamentally, Nature inclines toward the good and has an innate tendency to reject evil. The divine Word cripples the destructive force in the universe and creates concord out of discord.

Plutarch's rather idiosyncratic exegesis of the World Soul in the *Timaeus* attaches this doctrine of two principles to Plato. It would be absurd to suppose that the universe could come into being merely out of the incorporeal, since God would not turn what is incorporeal to body. Nor could he turn the inanimate into soul. Both are fitted together in a living being which is as beautiful and perfect as possible. Plutarch rejects the view that matter could be the source of evil and disharmony, since it is a substrate without any qualities. It cannot be spoken of as "ugly," maleficent, subject to excess and deficiency. Therefore, the principle of what is disorderly and maleficent must be the soul itself. The material principle needed beauty, shape and the regular geometric figures in order to give birth to creation (De An. Proc. 1014B-1015E). This disorderly soul only becomes the soul of the cosmos when it partakes of intelligence, reason and harmony. Plutarch claims that this principle is evident in the dual motion in the heavens, of the fixed stars (the same) and the contrary motion of the planets (the other), (1015A). The discord inherent in this principle is removed by harmony, proportion and number. They become invariant (aplane) and stable (stasina) in a way that is similar to those things which are invariably the same (1015E). Plutarch finds other examples of the unity of same and other. Within the soul, for example, one encounters both what belongs to the intelligible world, the objects of knowledge, and what belongs to the perceptible one, the objects of opinion. They are combined in mental images and memories. Plutarch combines psychological and cosmological examples of the same/other antithesis (De Proc. An. 1026DE). The divine and impassive soul longs for what is best, while the mortal and passible part has an *innate desire* (epithumia emphoton) for pleasure. He suggests a periodic alternation in the heavens between the period in which the *same* dominates and that in which *discernment* has fallen asleep and forgotten what is proper to it. The soul's association with body puts a drag on the "right hand" motion and pulls it back without being able to disrupt it entirely. The period of the "other" ends when the better part recovers, looks up to the intelligible *paradeigma* and is aided by God's turning and guidance, (De An. Proc. 1026EF).

The cosmos as we experience it provides evidence for both principles. However, Plutarch insists that the portion of evil in the soul has been arranged by God. The commingling of same and other shows order and change, difference and similarity, so that as far as possible everything has come into being in friendship (*philia*) and fellowship (*koimôdia*). The basis of this concord in harmony and number is demonstrated by extensive numerological speculation that Plutarch has apparently taken over from earlier sources. This emphasis on number, harmony and concord contains the establishment of disharmony and evil as cosmological principles. Plutarch's lost treatise on Beauty appears to have included a defense of the body as part of the definition of a human being. "Desire" is attached to the irrational soul and not to matter in any case. But one cannot escape the insistence upon an account of the world which includes disharmony and evil among its principles. For Plutarch, this account demonstrates the superiority of Plato to the Epicurean or Stoic accounts. It also demonstrates that the true source of order lies in the intelligible realm.

The myth of the sleeping World Soul also appears in Albinus. It cannot be found directly in Plato but may represent a tradition that is earlier than both thinkers. It suggests a view that the intertwining of the irrational and rational souls is responsible for maintaining a constant cosmic tension. Atticus, according to Proclus, agreed with Plutarch's view that prior to the divine ordering of the cosmos, the disorderly soul was responsible for its chaotic motion. Thus, one may presume that much of Plutarch’s account would have found a ready hearing among second century Platonists.

Numenius can be read as standing in this tradition of Platonism. Yet, where Plutarch and Atticus see harmony, he finds constant struggle. Numenius also appears to have associated evil more closely with matter, the unorganized, infinite Dyad than did Plutarch. As a result, the material character of the heavenly bodies suggests that they, too, fall under the influence of evil. Numenius also appears to have divided the Demiurgic figure into two. The Demiurge forgets itself and is distracted out of concern for matter. However, the Demiurgic figure remains "good" and contemplative. The world which comes into being as a result of the action of the demiurge is one which participates in beauty.
Even at its most negative, second century Platonists presumed that the sensible world reflected the beauty and order of the intelligible one. If they emphasized the elements of discord and evil, it served a polemic on behalf of transcendent divine order against the Stoic version of an immanent providence to be identified with the divine Logos. It appears likely that the few references to intelligible beauty in Gnostic writings reflect the influence of such Platonic topos.

Intelligible Beauty in the Nag Hammadi Codices

The rupture between the Pleroma and the material world in Gnostic mythology permits an antitype of numerical order in the heavens created by the Demiurge, but not continuous reflections of the Beautiful. Plotinus concludes his work against the Gnostics with the charge that they are impervious to the beauty in the world. A person who cannot be moved by beauty is incapable of contemplation, he argues. Therefore, such a person cannot claim to attain to God, (Enn. II.9, 17). This charge strikes at the foundation of Gnostic piety.

Plotinus preceded the charge with the argument that the Gnostics have abandoned the providential ordering of the lower world. Disputes over providence were common in the second century. Several Gnostic writings construct their own accounts of providence. The Gnostic response to Plotinus's charge that they have abandoned the providential ordering of the world and fail to see its beauty can be exemplified in Eus. The lower heavens are constructed according to an ordered sequence of powers of ten in androgynous pairs. However, Eus. argues, the perfect and good aons created in the heavens also reveal the defect of the female. The aons which come to be from the Immortal Man and his consort Sophia provide the types for what appears in the sensible world. This region of ineffable joy, rest and glory is apparently the realm which the Gnostic reader of the tractate is summoned to contemplate. The cosmological speculation in Eus. apparently formed the basis for the writing which follows it in the collection, Sophia of Jesus Christ. The Christian Gnostic revelation dialogue combines the cosmology with a myth of the fall of Sophia's "drop" into the material world and the rescue of her offspring from the "powers" by the Gnostic revealer. Although it repeats much of Eus. word for word, SJC lacks the speculation on numerological order and the origin of time. It retains the reference to the defect of the female in the heavens, which is clearly interpreted to refer to the Sophia myth. It presumes that the Gnostic is to "shine more than" the glorious heavenly powers with which Eus. concludes. SJC has a different image of heavenly resting place of the soul derived from the Sophia myth. Those who know the Father in pure knowledge depart to be with the Unbegotten. Those who know him defectively are in the Eighth. Others become a light in the spirit of silence or attain the Eighth through their knowledge of the Son of Man. Eus. apparently proposes some form of contemplation of heavenly order as a key to the knowledge of the divine received by the Gnostics. They apparently become participants in the joyous, immortality of the heavenly aons. Perhaps the defect of the female evident in the heavens motivates this turn toward knowledge. However, SJC reflects quite a different pattern of redemption. It depends upon a salvation gained through the revealer, who is finally identified with Christ. Such Gnosis has no interest in contemplating the order of the heavens. It is possible that the present version of Eus. is as much a redaction of an earlier cosmological treatise as is SJC. The two writings reflect a diverging path in Gnostic piety.

The path of spiritual ascent and contemplation is clearly evident in those tractates which are also reputed to have circulated in Plotinus's circles. Allogenes assures his readers that the Invisible One, God, transcends all things. He is even spoken of as "non-being." The One is a triad, Life, Mind and Existence, of unsurpassable greatness and beauty. It is the source of all things. Ascent takes the form of a heavenly journey through the spheres to the One. The author concludes that the transcendence of the One, which includes its perfection and beauty, implies that He is "unknown" to the lower powers. There is no activity in the One; no concern with what is below. Yet, the One contains all things. The paradoxes of "non-being existence" and unknowability, suggest that the One cannot be known directly. Allog. rejects the claims of those who might say they have done so. Only Gnostic revelation provides access to the One. Against Plotinus, then, Allog. holds that beauty, goodness and the other attributes attached to God have nothing in common with their use in this world. Claims to a contemplative ascent without revelation are mere self-deception.

Marsanes also contains a vision of the ascent of the soul through the various grades of being. It includes correspondences between the sounds of vowels, diphthongs and the shapes of the soul, which might address Plotinus's argument against the influence of sounds on incorporeal entities. Speculation about the monad, dyad and subsequent numbers attaches beauty to the number seven. The fragmentary nature of the work makes interpretation of its cosmological structure difficult. The visionary claims to seek the Three-powered One
and to understand “what really exists.” This claim is attached to a
sketch of the levels of being, which suggests that knowledge of the
intelligible world leads to the conclusion that the sensible world is to be
saved completely.54 What survives of Mar. does not permit us to
reconstruct the argument for that conclusion. Unlike Allog, Mar. does
not appear to emphasize the radical transcendence of the three-powered
One or its relationship to the Good and the Beautiful. It would appear
that the numerological correspondences and the correlation between
sounds and shapes of the soul are the foundation of its understanding
of ascent. The soul has to be summoned out of its infatuation with the
sense-perceptible world that is the result of embodiment. Mar. suggests
that contemplation of the celestial order of the seven planets, the twelve
signs of the zodiac and the thirty-six decans are the begining of the
turn away from the sensible world toward the intelligible.55 The
affirmation of the sensible world in Mar. represents one of the strongest
in any Gnostic text. This affirmation appears to have been attached to
an equally strong conviction that the heavenly spheres reflect the order
of the intelligible world.

The Gospel of Truth stems from a monistic form of gnosis, which
appears to be closely related to that opposed by Irenaeus in Adv. Haer.
II.56 It presumes a close identification between the story of ignorance
among the accons and the situation of the Gnostic.57 We have already
seen hints of such coordination in Plutarch’s parallels between cosmic
and psychic reflections of the “same and other.” Irenaeus’s reading
presumes that Gnostic statements are to be read on the cosmological
level simply. Gos. Truth presupposes that ignorance of the Father
occurs within the divine pleroma. For Allog, such “ignorance” was an
expression of the transcendence of the Father. Gos. Truth on the other
hand, ties the incomprehensibility of the Father to the story of the
emergence of the sensible world. The drama of salvation unfolded
around the figure of Jesus leads to the overcoming of that condition of
ignorance.58 Since the Father contains all things, this entire drama
takes place “within” the pleroma.59

The coordination between a story of the “fall” as the origin of a
world that is ignorant of the Father and the pleroma as the place in
which the story is enacted, appears in the peculiar role played by beauty
in Gos. Truth. Ignorance of the Father leads to anguish and error which
set about making a creature, “preparing in beauty a substitute for
truth.”60 This assertion is immediately followed by an affirmation that
error and ignorance are no humiliation to the Father. The Father is
established, immutable truth, which is perfect in beauty.61 Therefore,
the Gnostic should despise error. This argument follows the image of

transcendence set out in Allog. Nothing which happens in the lower
world can be of concern to the transcendent, self-sufficient One.
Therefore, those, like Irenaeus, who might argue that the Gnostic
account of the lower world is somehow unworthy of God, simply fail to
understand that God’s perfect Truth is beyond such concerns.

The correlation between the beauty in the material world and the
true beauty of the Father is unclear. Since the Gnostic requires
revelation to turn away from error, Gos. Truth does not appear to hold
that the former can direct the soul to the latter. Menard observes that
Philo has a similar contrast in Opif. 139. The true beauty of the divine
Logos is contrasted with that found in the cosmos.62 According to
Gos. Truth, the lower world is characterized by a “deficiency” which
will come to an end with the revelation of the Father. Both matter and
the “form of the world” will be consumed by the knowledge of God
and all will exist in unity. Thus, nothing remains outside the Father.63
The exhortation to the Gnostic is to see to it that “the house” is
purified and silent for the Unity. Awaking to gnosis means that the
Gnostic recognizes that he or she is “in the Father” and is thus able
to come forth from error and ignorance and ascend to the Father.” It
would appear that material beauty could only be a deficient substitute
for the true beauty of the Father, since it is characterized by a
deficiency, which is to be overcome. Unlike Irenaeus, who must also
agree that the material world comes to an end, Plotinus insists upon the
permanence of the sensible world. (Enn. 11.9, 3). He insists that one
who thinks that the universe will end would have to argue that matter
itself is dissolved, which Gos. Truth does appear to hold. Such a
discourse is philosophically incoherent, he argues, because whatever
comes into being as the result of the operation of a spiritual principle
must always remain so. Indeed, Allog appears more consistent than
Gos. Truth in its account of the “necessary” ignorance of the Father
without revelation.

The alternation between cosmic and psychic metaphors continues
in the dream sequence. Existence in the world prior to the awakening
granted by revelation is like persons suffering a series of nightmares.
When one awakens, all the terrors of the dream vanish.64 Plutarch
used the image of the “slumbering World Soul” to describe the cosmic
alteration of principles of the “same and other.” Plotinus comments
that the Gnostics create their own terrors through ignorance. If they
understood the true nature of the cosmic spheres, they would not fear
them. They cannot be treated as tyrannical rulers but are set over the
universe as givers of beauty and order.65

Gos. Truth would appear to reject any claim that the ultimate truth
can be known through philosophical reflection. The work consistently returns to revelation through the activity of the Son as the way in which one comes to know the Father and so attain stability and rest. For one who has awakened to the Truth, the drama of salvation has been played out. That portion is no longer living in the nightmares of the ignorant. However much Gos. Truth owes to philosophic speculation, the author never supposes it to be a substitute for revelation. In the end, as Alph. and Mar. also contend, philosophy must give way to revelation of the Father.

The Tripartite Tractate presents an even more elaborate systematization of Gnostic traditions. Instead of an errant Sophia, we find the logos as the aeon responsible for the creation of the lower worlds. Trip. Trac. opens with an elaborate exposition of the transcendence of the Father in categories drawn from the Platonic traditions of negative theology. The demiurgic mode of creation had been seen to be inappropriate for the highest God. Plotinus rejects the idea that the World Soul could have engaged in any activity that might require deliberation to create the universe. Trip. Trac. shows a similar concern in its insistence that the Father does not create on the basis of a Form or have to overcome any obstacle. Indeed, the Father does not create from any external matter or generate the lower aeons from any internal substance.

Like the other Gnostic writings in this group, Trip. Trac. finds an "ignorance of the Father" to be characteristic of the lower aeons. Several explanations are offered to make that view more acceptable. The unity of the entire system is one of love and longing for the Father, which stems from the fact that he is not perfectly known. Instead, the names provided for the Father by the Spirit provide knowledge through a "divided unity." The Father will graciously grant knowledge of himself, but withholds it so that the aeons will be perfected through the process of searching. Had they not gone through that process, they would think that such knowledge came through their own powers and would be arrogant. Had the Father revealed himself all at once, the aeons would have perished.

Ignorance of the Father also guards his incomprehensibility. The devolution of the lower world results from the attempt of the Logos to grasp the incomprehensibility of the Father. Quite unlike many Gnostic myths, Trip. Trac. insists that this attempt was good. It was the result of great love for the Father and according to the will of the Father. The world which the Logos begets is the realm of shadows and likenesses, of division, doubt, deliberation and the two opposing movements of the "same and other," of ascent back to the pleroma and descent into deficiency. As in Philo, the lowest world is the one in which the desire for power and command represents the fundamental principle of order. Association with this world of division means that the Logos must be awakened and turned toward the pleroma and its likenesses. Trip. Trac. uses the dream image in a cosmological sense to describe the two types of powers: some are like forgetfulness in a heavy, troubled sleep; others like creatures of light looking for the rising sun who dream pleasant dreams.

Even the hostile powers in the lower order are ultimately subject to the administration of the Logos. The Logos creates and administers the world through the intelligible world of Forms, which is an image of the Pleroma and is superior to the strife in the material world. Throughout its account of the devolution of the lower world, Trip. Trac. emphasizes the elements of beauty which belong to the various realms. Things in the lower realm are divided between those due to discordant powers, which are shadows and will ultimately vanish, and those which are images of the Pleroma. The latter have beauty derived from the things of which they are images. When the repentant Logos turns toward the higher world, he gives honor and praise to the Pleroma and is able to generate images of "the living Forms, beautiful in that which is good, resembling them in beauty, but unequal to them in truth." The administrative function of the Logos is reflected in a process of beautification. This process does not extend to all of the lower world, but to the creation of "spiritual places" in which those who belong to the aeon "church" belong.

However, Trip. Trac. also operates on a threefold division of humanity, pneumatics, psychics and hylics. It appears to claim that both the pneumatics and psychics attain salvation. Like Gos. Truth, the story of the aeons becomes that of the Gnostic soul. Consequently, a further division is introduced into the same/other, right/left, dualism of the account. The distinction between beauty and thought provides the vehicle for this development. The realm of thought, the pleroma, the world of the things which pre-exist, is separate from the world of images which have come into being from the Logos. We find a triple division in the cosmos. The truly beautiful are the things which belong to thought and represent the pleroma. The middle realm, generated by the repentant Logos, is the realm of conversion. Finally, the lowest realm is that administered by law, the region of condemnation and wrath. Even the things which come to be there are images, those images are phantasies. No knowledge is associated with what comes into being through phantasies of arrogance and power. However, the sensible world and its images are ruled by an Archon established by the Logos.
after the pattern of the Father of the pleroma. The Logos uses the Archon as a "hand" to beautify the lower regions, as well as to prophesy and to administer that world. 82 Trip. Trac. suggests that the action of the Logos differs with regard to each of the three types of person. Those who belong to thought are drawn into a material union with the lower Logos, so that they cease to be attracted by evil or by the glories of the world. Instead, they love and search for the one who can heal them from deficiency. Those who belong to the "likeness" are set under the "word of beauty" so that the Logos can bring them into a Form. The final group falls under judgment. Their lust for power is used by the Logos to administer the world.83 The distinction between the process for those belonging to thought and those belonging to beauty is not clear. Later in Trip. Trac., we find that the "spiritual" receive salvation immediately in the revelation of the Logos. The "psychics," apparently a category which includes Gnostics, require instruction. They are said to receive forms resembling the images and archetypes until the whole church can be assembled. Trip. Trac. appears to associate this process with the Gnostic sacraments, though it also presumes that Christians are rewarded for their faith, good deeds and good dispositions.84

Trip. Trac. introduces this section on salvation with the cosmological image of the cyclic alteration between the powers on the right and on the left. When those on the left dominate, the "wise" powers on the right appear like them in using force. When those on the "right" dominate, the powers of the left seek to copy them in doing good. This shifting alteration of powers provides an explanation for the diverse philosophical accounts of the origins of the cosmos that have been offered by the philosophers. However, Trip. Trac. argues, none of the philosophers have been able to advance a true explanation of the cosmos. Their arrogance and confusion reflects the "fighting" that takes place among the powers of the lower world. Philosophical systems depend upon imagination and speculation. Consequently, they mistake the realm of images for reality.85 Much of this attack on the philosophers could be paralleled in Plotinus's polemic against the Gnostics. It clearly reflects conventional inter-school polemic. However, it also shows that Trip. Trac.'s debts to philosophic speculation are not aimed at philosophical analysis for its own sake. Its revelation entails a conversion away from philosophy. Similarly, Trip. Trac. speaks of a conversion away from the gods sparked by the coming of the Son of the unknown God.86 Trip. Trac., at least, would agree with Armstrong's conclusion. Gnosis is fundamentally a different mode of faith from Platonism, however much it may have learned to express the transcendence of God and the ordering principles of the world in Platonic terms.

Plotinus and Gnostic Christianity

Much of the cosmological speculation in Trip. Trac. can be paralleled in Plotinus. Even the introduction of division and multiplicity into the Logos as part of the generation of the lower world can be given a good Platonist reading.87 But the contemplative structure of the world by which even "unconscious nature" can be said to engage in a sleeping movement toward the good is impossible in the Gnostic cosmos.88 The Gnostic thinkers have appropriated a second century Platonism, which had already pointed to the disharmony and evil in the sensible world to counter Stoic cosmological speculation. Trip. Trac. points out that while some philosophers are impressed with the harmony and unity of all things, others are equally influenced by evils and discord. The conventional Platonist argument insists that the imperfections of the sensible world merely serve to turn the soul toward the reality of the intelligible. However, Irenaeus uses an anti-Platonist argument that the theory of sensible things as the images of "Forms" requires that disharmony and discord characterize the intelligible world as well as the sensible one. In a milder vein, the second century Platonists like Psechrarch who excelled Plato to provide a "disorderly World Soul" as a cosmic principle answered that objection while granting it in principle. Trip. Trac. has used that theme to provide a monistic reading of early Gnostic myths of the devolution of the lower world.

But for all of the Gnostic systems the transcendence of God and the disorder in the sensible world combine to indicate the necessity of revealed knowledge of the Father. Plotinus lays hold of another fundamental difference between his vision and that of the Gnostics when he objects to the "temporality" of the Gnostic stories, (Enn. Il 9, 3.4). Principles of generation in the intelligible realm must always be operative. The Gnostics, on the other hand, constantly speak of things coming to be in a way that implies change in that realm just as much as they presume that the material world will ultimately be dissolved. For the Platonist, beauty and order in the sensible world are images of eternity. For the Gnostic, disorder bespeaks the illusory character of a world that is not eternal. Unlike the philosophical image of an eternal alteration of the two opposing powers, the Gnostic view is incoherent. Plotinus protests that if this world is destined for destruction, its creator
should have done so. If the Gnostic protests that not all the souls have been liberated, one should respond that there has been more than enough time for them to reject this world in favor of their true home (Enn. II.9, 4-5). Fundamentally, the Gnostic is trapped by categories of time and space that belong to the sensible world. These categories are mediated in stories which depend upon their applicability. Thus, Plotinus concludes his refutation of the Gnostics by contrasting the contemplation of the philosopher who knows what it means for the soul to be “outside” this world with the claims of the Gnostics that they will ascend beyond the stars. Whatever happens in this world, the philosopher can withdraw into the untroubled contemplation of the intelligible realm. The Gnostics, on the other hand, must finally dissolve this world, its order and beauty, in order to transcend it (Enn. II.9, 18).

NOTES
4. O'Meara, “Making,” pp. 375-378. Plotinus's style of reflection sought to respond to individual philosophical questions rather than to create a systematic exposition of doctrine (see R.T. Wallis, Neoplatonism, [New York: Scribner's, 1972], pp. 41-42, 47). Plotinus protests that he hopes to persuade those who are “friends” to engage in courteous, philosophical inquiry into the logic of the Gnostic beliefs (Enn. II.9, 10).
6. Armstrong, “Philosophy,” p. 101. Armstrong consistently rejects explanations of the Gnostic phenomenon which appeal to a pessimistic “spirit of late antiquity.” He insists that ancient views of the world were quite diverse and that Gnosticism is more likely to have been a movement among a few intellectuals than a popular mass movement.
7. Armstrong, “Philosophy,” pp. 113-114. The ritual elements which are attached to Gnostic descriptions of the ascent of the soul suggest that some experience of praise of the transcendent Father was typical of Gnostic piety.
9. Adv. Haer. II 25, 4, 26, 1; Enn. II 9, 9. Plotinus would never agree with Irenaeus's assertion that it is better to be among the “simple and unlettered” and attain God by love rather than “puffed up” with false knowledge. He claims that the Gnostic arrogance springs from a lack of educated civility and humility, (Enn. II.9, 6).
10. Adv. Haer. II 30, 2; 32, 2; Enn. II.9, 9 and 15.
15. Enn. II.9, 2 and 6.
16. On number symbolism as a primordial way of ordering the cosmos, which was adapted to the “scientific” understanding of the world by the Platonist tradition, see Walter Burkert, Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1972), pp. 465-482.
17. Wallis, Neoplatonism, p. 18.
18. Enn. II.9, 14. This view presumes that the heavenly spheres do not “make music.” For the dispute over the harmony of the spheres, see Burkert, Science, pp. 350-356.
22. Cicero, De Natura Deorum II 58.
23. Cicero, De Nat. Deor., II 73-167. De Nat. Deor. III 79-93 contains the counter argument to the Stoic view based on the evils in the world, especially those experienced by the good person. Plotinus objects to the Stoic view of divine providence that they still maintain a spatial identity between the World Soul and the divine and do not contemplate the intelligible world to which the true self belongs, (see Wallis, Neoplatonism, p. 25). Plotinus adopts the same argument to refute the Gnostic claims to an ascent of the soul beyond the stars.
24. Second century Platonists developed Plato's doctrine of the transcendent One/Good/Beautiful into an image of the One beyond the Good and the Beautiful, (see A.J. Festugière, La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste IV. Le Dieu Inconnu et la Gnost [Paris: Gabalda, 1954], pp. 79-140). However, these developments do not necessarily indicate a widespread pessimism as
NEOPLATONISM AND Gnosticism

Festugière presumes, (p. 140). They often reflect a tradition-oriented, interschool polemic against Stoic pantheism.


26. See Philo, Opif, 9, against those who claim that the world is agenetos. Cicero, De Nat. Deor. I 2: 41; 43, argues that the lack of providence in Epicurean systems destroys piety. For the Stoic influences on Philo's understanding of providence, see Dillon, Platonists, pp. 167-168.

27. Opif. 16; 20.


29. Dillon, Platonists, pp. 160-170, compares the Vingly power of Philo with the Valentinian Demiurge. We will see an independent adaptation of that theme in the Tripartite Tractate. Dillon suggests that both images reflect an independent tradition of a demon who rules the sublunar world. In Trip. Trac., the Logos establishes an Archon to rule the sensible world.

30. Dillon, Platonists, pp. 174-175.

31. Plutarch, Isis Osir. 369AB.

32. Isis Osir. 369B-371E.

33. Isis Osir. 372B-373D.

34. Harold Cherniss, Plutarch's Moralia XIII, 1 999e-1032f (I.C.L.; Cambridge: Harvard, 1976), pp. 138-141, emphasizes the incorrect interpretations of Plato presumed in Plutarch's exegesis. For Plato the only "irrational soul" is the embodied human soul and even that is not irrational in its immortal part. The "young gods" are assigned to create the moral, possible soul.

35. Plutarch, De An Proc. 1024E-F. Cherniss (Moralia XIII, 1.236-37, nd & f), observes that Plutarch has identified the "same and other" of the Timaicus with "same and other" in the soul.


37. Cherniss, Moralia XIII, 1, 134-36.

38. Dillon, Platonists, p. 197; on the logos of the human as including body and soul in Plotinus, see Enn. VI 7, 4-6; Armstrong, "Philosophy," p. 115.

39. Dillon, Platonists, p. 287.


41. Dillon, Platonists, pp. 256-257. Armstrong, "Philosophy," p. 107, finds this picture of the two souls closest to the realism of the two spirits in the Dead Sea Scroils.

42. Fr. 50 & 52; Armstrong, "Philosophy," p. 107; Dillon, Platonists, pp. 374-375.


46. Eus., III 82, 21-84, 11.

BEAUTY, NUMBER AND LOSS OF ORDER

47. Eus., III 83, 23-84, 11. Time frequently appears in connection with the motions of the world. Atticus apparently concluded from the irrational motions of the pre-cosmic world soul that time was pre-cosmic (see Dillon, Platonists, p. 253).

48. Eus., III 89, 10-90, 3.


50. SJC, CG III 4, 114, 7-8.

51. SJC, CG III 117, 8-118, 2.

52. Allogenes, CG X 3, 47, 8-37.

53. Allog. X 1, 62-1, 64, 11.

54. Marsanes, CG X 1, 27, 22-34, 5.


57. Mar., X 41, 42-42, 23.


62. Gos. Truth, I 17, 19-20; Heldermand, "Iris," p. 31, does not observe the connection between the "substitute" and beauty.


64. Jacques-E. Ménard, L'Évangile de Vérité (NHS 2; Leiden: Brill, 1972), pp. 82-83, points to the parallel with Enn. II 9, 10.


68. Plotinus, Enn. II 9, 13.


71. Trip. Trac. CG I 5, 52, 7 - 57, 30.


Theories of Procession in Plotinus and the Gnostics

Jean Pépin

Introduction

The pages which follow are intended as a preliminary study of some aspects only of the generation of hypostases in Plotinus and among certain of the Gnostics. My study will be a comparative one. By that I mean that it will be almost entirely descriptive, and that the possibility of influence, positive or negative, in either direction, will only very occasionally be brought into the discussion. A further limitation on my study will be that the Gnostic systems that I shall here take account of will be almost invariably those that are recorded by the Christian writers against the heretics: Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and the like. They will therefore be theories that these writers thought of as Christian theories, belonging for the most part, but not exclusively, to that brand of Valentinian Gnosticism which Plotinus had very likely come into contact with at Rome, whether or not the theories in question are identical to the system which Porphyry writes of in the sixteenth chapter of the *Vita Plotini*. I shall of course occasionally allow myself to bring in original Gnostic texts to illustrate and to complete the accounts of Gnostic beliefs which are preserved for us by their Christian adversaries; but it is these latter documents which will constitute the primary evidence that I shall draw upon.

My study falls into three parts. Parts two and three concern questions of detail. Is the Logos thought of or not as a fully active