

Introduction to the Treatise

IN *AGAINST THE GNOSTICS*, PLOTINUS undertakes no less than a defense of the Platonic heritage against (as he sees it) an arrogant and mischievous clique of usurpers. The stakes are high: as the rhetoric of the treatise develops, we are presented with a clash between reasoned argument and irrational self-assertion, between the time-honored tradition of Greek philosophical inquiry and the superfluous innovations of inspired visionaries. Plotinus himself never names his opponents, and instead refers to them in vague terms, usually in the third person plural (“they”), sometimes in the singular (“if someone should say . . .”). Only in a single instance (at 15, 22–23) does he identify them by their claim to possessing revealed “knowledge” (*gnōsis*, from which the Greek *gnōstikoi*, “those in possession of knowledge,” derives, which in turn is the origin of the English word “Gnostics”). Gnosticism can be considered a religious movement in its own right, with distinctive positions on the place of human beings in the

universe and the nature of salvation, although its utility as a category has been questioned.¹ For the purposes of this volume, the word “Gnostics,” unless otherwise qualified, is simply a convenient way of referring to Plotinus’ opponents, and nothing more.

Rhetoric seldom matches reality, and only careful study of *Ennead* II.9 and the Gnostic texts themselves will allow us to judge how well the polarities that Plotinus constructs map onto the actual differences between Gnostics and Platonists. The little that we know about the unnamed opponents mostly comes from Chapter 16 of Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus*, our most important source in this regard, and worth quoting here:

There were in his time Christians of many kinds, and especially certain heretics who based their teachings on the ancient philosophy. They were followers of Adelphius and Aculinus who possessed a lot of writings by Alexander the Libyan, Philocomus, Demonstratus and Lydus, and also brandished apocalyptic works by Zoroaster, Zostrianus, Nicotheus, Allogenes, Messus and others of that kind. Deceiving many and themselves deceived, they claimed that Plato had not

1 See, for example, Williams (1996); King (2003).

reached the depths of intelligible being. (*Life of Plotinus* 16.1–9; tr. Edwards)

What Porphyry tells us is that the Gnostics were Christians, that they were regarded as “heretics” by other Christians, and that they took the inspiration for their teachings from the “ancient philosophy” (that is, from Greek philosophy), while at the same time accusing Plato, the “ancient philosopher” par excellence, of not fully grasping intelligible being.² Nothing in *Against the Gnostics* suggests that Plotinus’ opponents gave any particular role to Christ in their writings, which may at first sight cast doubt on Porphyry’s report. Overt Christian references are equally absent from two of the apocalyptic works that Porphyry mentions, namely those by Zostrianus and Allogenes, which are both preserved for us as part of the collection of texts found in the Egyptian desert near Nag Hammadi in 1945. The two texts belong to a group of Gnostic writings that make significant use of Platonic vocabulary and concepts, and which give some prominence to the figure of Seth, also called “the one of another race” (the literal meaning of “Allogenes”).³ But it

2 For detailed discussions of Chapter 16 of Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus*, see Schmidt (1900, 13–17.19–26); García Bazán (1974); Igal (1981) and Tardieu (1992). See also Burns (2014, 161–163).

3 For a thorough study of these Platonizing Sethian treatises, see Turner (2001).

has recently been argued that they were “written by and for an audience familiar with and receptive to Judaeo-Christian ideas and themes,”⁴ such that the absence of overt Christian references and themes may not license the inference to a non-Christian origin or readership of these texts.⁵ In sum, we have no reason to question this part of Porphyry’s report.

Due to lack of evidence, it is more difficult to assess his claim that the Christian heretics brandishing apocalypses were “followers of Adelphius and Aquilinus.” The two are little more than names to us, although Aquilinus is mentioned by Eunapius as a disciple of Plotinus in Rome (see *Lives of the Sophists* 4.2.2 Giangrande).⁶ If Eunapius is in fact talking about the same Aquilinus as Porphyry, it is possible that there were close ties, but also an undercurrent of rivalry, between Aquilinus the Gnostic teacher and Plotinus. More speculative is the suggestion put forward by Tardieu, that Adelphius and Aquilinus may have

4 Burns (2014, 147).

5 See Abramowski (1983, 2), with reference to *Zostrianus*.

6 The veracity of Eunapius’ report has been questioned on good grounds; see Schmidt (1900, 15–17); Puech (1960, 164.177). See also Edwards (1989, 231), who suggests that Aquilinus, far from being a student of Plotinus, may have belonged to the same generation as Origen, Plotinus’ somewhat older fellow-student under Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria.

continued the teaching of the Gnostic Valentinus, who was active in Rome between ca. 135–160 CE.⁷

Before turning to the Gnostic views that are refuted in II.9, some comments on the purpose of the treatise are in order. *Against the Gnostics* is not, in the first instance, directed at the Gnostics themselves: as Plotinus makes clear, he has no confidence that rational argument will persuade them, presumably because he thinks that their views are not ultimately arrived at by reasoned reflection.⁸ Instead, the treatise is aimed at those of his students who have sympathies with Gnostic views but who are also amenable to rational persuasion. By refuting the views of the Gnostics, Plotinus thus demonstrates the superiority of his own philosophy over that of the rival systems known to some of his students. It is difficult to judge just how influential these Gnostics were in Plotinus' circle, but Plotinus at one point in II.9 advises his students to read the Gnostic apocalypses for themselves, suggesting that the latter were readily available (see 14, 36–37).

As far as the views of the Gnostics themselves are concerned, we can do no better than turn to the outline of their ideas that makes up the first part of II.9, from Chapters 1–6. It is frequently difficult to distinguish between instances where Plotinus reports what he takes

7 See Tardieu (1992, 519–520); the possibility is already discussed by Schmidt (1900, 49–50).

8 See II.9.9, 60–64.

to be his opponents' views, and instances where he considers for dialectical purposes what they might say in response to his objections. In addition, it is likely that he is not interested in presenting the particulars of any one sect, but concentrates on the essential features of the type of theory that various Gnostic sects are committed to.⁹ Any attempt to construct a Gnostic "system" from the disparate materials scattered across the first six chapters of II.9, and the treatise as a whole, thus faces insurmountable problems, and the following remarks should be read with this proviso in mind.

The opening chapter of the treatise begins abruptly with the recapitulation of an earlier discussion ("It has become clear to us then . . .") on the identity of the One and the Good in V.5, the treatise immediately prior to II.9 in chronological order.¹⁰ But the real focus of the

9 See Puech (1960, 181).

10 According to an influential proposal put forward by Harder (1936), II.9 completes a "great treatise" that Plotinus' editor Porphyry had somewhat arbitrarily separated into the treatises that are now *Enneads* III.8, V.8, V.5 and II.9. This proposal continues to be widely discussed; two noteworthy critical discussions of Harder's thesis are those by Wolters (1981), and Appendix 1 in *Plotin Traités 30–37*. Porphyry, Plotinus' editor, makes plain that the treatise he titled *Against the Gnostics* was composed as a single work (*Life of Plotinus*, 16.9–11), a piece of evidence that seems to decide the case against the "great treatise," as Narbonne (2011, 2–3) points out. Whether or not II.9 originally belonged to a larger work, it is worth noting the important connection between III.8 and II.9 in particular. Treatise

debate is on the nature of Intellect. Plotinus suggests that the Gnostic opponents would divide Intellect into a potential, contemplated part, and an active, contemplating one (see 1, 23–57). If a comment later in II.9 represents the views of the same opponents, they would also have distinguished a third part of Intellect that uses rational deliberation and has a demiurgic function (see 6, 19–24). In addition to this tripartite division of the Intellect, they may also have posited an intermediary rational principle (*logos*) between Intellect and Soul, which may or may not be identical with the third (demiurgic) part of the Intellect (see 1, 30–33.57–63). They further suppose that Soul, the principle that succeeds Intellect (and the intermediary *logos*), creates the universe as the result of a “fall” (*sphalma*) or a “decline” (*neusis*), terms which Plotinus takes as equivalent. This “fall” is apparently conceived of as a temporal event, which implies that the universe is created in time. Once the soul repents of its “fall,” it goes on to destroy the world, not however without saving the souls of the elect, who are gathered in a heavenly abode called the “new earth,” from which they ascend to the intelligible world after the end of the world (see 4, 1–22;

III.8 sets out how nature, the lowest aspect of the world soul, creates the visible universe through its activity of contemplating Intellect, and this conception of creative action provides the theoretical backdrop for many of Plotinus’ attacks on the Gnostics’ conception of the demiurge in II.9. See O’Meara (1980) for a lucid discussion of this topic.

5, 23–26). This “new earth” is itself the creation of the Soul, and acts as the paradigm of the visible universe. Plotinus seems unsure whether his opponents viewed its creation as prior or posterior to the visible universe, and dismisses both options as absurd. They agree with Plato in some respects, for example when they hold the soul to be immortal and maintain that it must separate itself from its association with the body (see 6, 36–43). But in Plotinus’ view, they either misinterpret Plato’s teaching, as, for example, when they read Plato’s *Timaeus* as suggesting a tripartite division of the Intellect, or disguise some of their debts to Plato under new terminology (see 6, 5–10).

The core of the disagreement between Plotinus and the Gnostics is best summed up by the alternative title *Against those who say that the creator of the cosmos and the cosmos are evil*. The central chapters of the treatise, from 7–18 (with the exception of Chapter 14, which is something of a digression), are all in various ways concerned with refuting the view that the cosmos, and anything that has a body quite generally, is to be despised and regarded as evil. Plotinus himself concedes that the Gnostics may have found support for their views in Plato’s own texts, especially the *Phaedo*, but he insists that the universe must be regarded as an image of the intelligible reality that it reflects. As an image, the universe is different from, and less perfect than, its intelligible model, but that does not overturn its claim to being the most beautiful

image of the intelligible world that there is. Throughout these chapters, Plato's own account, in the *Timaeus*, of the creation of the universe by a divine craftsman who creates out of his own goodness, provides a key point of reference for Plotinus' own discussion.

The structure of this second part of II.9 is somewhat difficult to discern in detail, but I suggest that it falls into three broad sections. To begin with, Chapters 7–9 survey various reasons why the Gnostics might blame the universe. It may be because the world soul's concern with a material body could in some sense be troublesome and a departure from its natural state. But, as Plotinus argues in Chapter 7, one cannot conceive of the world soul's governance of the universe by analogy with the rule of individual souls over their bodies. Nor can sufficient grounds for blaming the universe be found in the reason for the soul's creation, which, for the Gnostics, is its decline away from intelligible reality. Chapter 8 thus argues that to think of the world's creation in terms of a decline and a deliberate undertaking on the part of the world soul is to fundamentally misconceive what it means for intelligible entities to create. Plotinus' theory of double activity, according to which an entity has its own internal activity that is part of its own essence while also producing an image of that activity in external effects, is

here employed to give an alternative account of creation.¹¹ On this picture, creation does not require the fallible and imperfect reasoning that accompanies the production of craftsmen; rather, the production of the world is the necessary consequence of the world soul's contemplation of the intelligible world, and the beauty and orderliness of the cosmos a direct reflection of the great power of its producer. If the Gnostics should wish to object that the world displays some manifest imperfections, such as inequalities in wealth and the injustices many people suffer, Plotinus, in Chapter 9, urges them to consider that the wise man's happiness does not depend on good fortune, and is consequently not harmed by the eventualities whose occurrence the Gnostics decry. But even so, any injustices in this life will be made up by punishments and rewards in the afterlife. For Plotinus, the Gnostics' censure of the universe goes hand in hand with their claims to being the sole possessors of a divine substance, and it is this aspect of their teaching that the rest of Chapter 9 discusses.

The second section of the second half of II.9 spans Chapters 10–14. It begins with a transitional section in Chapter 10, where Plotinus refuses, perhaps not with the utmost sincerity, to offer a point-by-point refutation of his Gnostic friends because of the “respect” that he feels for them. He instead offers to examine one point

11 For two important formulations of the theory of double activity in the *Enneads*, see V.1.6, 30–39 and V.4.2, 27–33.

in particular, how the Gnostics compromise the purity of the intelligibles, by attributing to them responsibility for the (in their view) evil creation. For this reason, Plotinus proceeds to examine their account of creation in considerable detail (from the end of Chapter 10 to the end of Chapter 12), probably drawing on a text that has close parallels with our version of the Nag Hammadi text *Zostrianus*. Chapter 13 brings this discussion to a conclusion, and offers a diagnosis of the Gnostics' error: they blame the cosmos because they do not understand that there is a gradual and necessary succession of entities, from the One to Intellect, from Intellect to Soul, and from Soul to the universe. Tagged on to this diagnosis are observations on the nature of the stars and evil. Chapter 14 then returns to the larger topic, how the Gnostics render the intelligibles impure, and discusses their views on magic, which, he argues, imply that the intelligibles can be affected by human actions and words. The source of their error lies in a mistaken ambition to appear holy, which Plotinus goes on to link with their claims of being able to cure diseases by expelling demons.

In the third and final section, from Chapters 15–18, Plotinus explores the practical consequences of the Gnostics' contempt for the world and their corresponding belief that they possess a privileged spiritual nature. In the domain of ethics, he argues in Chapter 15, their belief in a special providence that rewards the elect few

can give no meaningful place for the pursuit of virtue. Against this view, Plotinus thinks that providence is universal and rewards individuals in accordance with their character, which is the result of natural dispositions that are trained through habituation and cultivated by the development of the intellectual faculties. The notion of a special providence that extends only to the Gnostics but not to the world at large continues to come under attack in Chapter 16, which culminates with an account of how an understanding of intelligible realities leads to an appreciation of their perceptible imitations. In some cases, such as that of lovers, appreciation of sensible beauty can trigger our recollection of intelligible reality, but the Gnostics, we are to infer, are barred from gaining knowledge of reality in this way because of their contempt for worldly beauty. If this contempt is the result of a mistaken understanding of Plato, Plotinus continues in Chapter 17, the opponents should consider that just as the world soul has the marvelous power of bringing the whole universe into motion, so it is able to make it beautiful to the greatest possible extent. Beauty, then, should move the soul, and if the Gnostics claim to be unmoved by it, their position is irrational, and may be an overcorrection of some prior tendency toward excess. Chapter 18 concludes the treatise by arguing that contempt for the world and everything that is bodily does not result in a greater ability to contemplate the intelligibles. Our condition of

embodiment is a necessity that should be accepted and that does not prevent us from contemplation if we prepare ourselves appropriately through virtue. Thus the Gnostics' contempt for the body blinds them to the real possibility of happiness while being embodied.

So much about the structure of II.9. I conclude with a few remarks on the character of Plotinus' engagement with the Gnostics, and its significance in his wider philosophy. The overall tone of the treatise is, I think, one of puzzlement. Plotinus struggles to understand both what it is that the Gnostics believe, and, when failing to find any rational justification, why they believe it at all. Many of his criticisms assume the validity of his own philosophy, which is unsurprising given that the treatise is addressed in the first instance to his own students. He occasionally glosses over possible differences between Gnostic accounts, for example when equating the idea of a "fall" of the soul with its "decline" in Chapter 4, and at times he simply refuses to engage with his opponents on their own terms (see, for instance, 12, 41, where the notion of a pre-existing darkness is dismissed by asking, "Where did it come from?"). But his overall method is a sound one: he assumes that the Gnostics' claims have a meaning, that this meaning can be expressed in propositions, and that these propositions ought to be consistent. In this way, he treats them as he would any other school of philosophy, such as the Stoics and the Peripatetics. It may be objected

that the Gnostics, like Plato in his *Timaeus*, did not intend their creation narratives to be read as literal truths, but rather as myths that describe reality through symbols. Yet even if the Gnostic narratives are ultimately to be read as symbolic, they must be symbolic *of* something, and Plotinus is surely right to demand an explanation of what it is that is being symbolized. He himself attempts such an explanation when he discusses the possibility that the “sojourns, repentances and copies” that Gnostic texts such as *Zostrianus* and the anonymous untitled text in the Bruce Codex mention are meant to describe the soul’s progress toward the intelligibles, rather than actual locations (6, 2–5).

Finally, what significance should we attribute to II.9 within Plotinus’ philosophy in the *Enneads*? We can begin by noting that Plotinus’ debate with the Gnostics did not begin with II.9 and did not end there. Polemical asides that seem directed at views endorsed by the Gnostics can be found both before and after *Against the Gnostics*, which suggests a more continuous engagement with their views rather than a single skirmish.¹² It is reasonable to think that some of his ideas, for example those regarding the

12 To take but one example, Plotinus formulates his views on the productive activity of intelligible causes in opposition to views that, if not exclusively Gnostic, would certainly have been shared by his Gnostic opponents. See, for instance, IV [28] 4.10 and 12, and VI [38] 7.1. See more generally the passages listed in Puech (1960, 183).

generation of matter, had been formulated more carefully as a result of the Gnostic confrontation.¹³ But the larger question to what extent this engagement shaped Plotinus' own views and affected the development of his philosophy would exceed the confines of this introduction. Suffice it to say here that it is an area of lively research, in which much work remains to be done.¹⁴

13 On this point, see Puech (1960, 182–185); Narbonne (2011, 5–6).

14 Narbonne (2011) is a fine example of how the study of Plotinus' engagement with the Gnostics can open up new perspectives on the development of his thought.