

Christians and Platonists

Christians and Platonists:

The Ethos of Late Antiquity

By

Theodore Sabo

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PREFACE

This book is a revised version of my master's dissertation in church and dogma history at the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University, South Africa. For their help with various aspects of it I would like to express my appreciation to my supervisors Frank Kovács and Rikus Fick as well as to David Brakke, John Bussanich, Will Deming, Peg Evans, Stuart Rochester, Roger Schlesinger, and Chris Woodall. The most salient drawbacks of my work are where I did not follow the guidance of the aforementioned individuals.

2014

CHAPTER ONE

ETHOS, *AIŌN*, *SAECULUM*

We will commence this study of the late antique ethos with a brief investigation of the terms ethos and *aiōn* as well as the establishment of certain criteria that will enable us to ascertain the distinctive ethos of late antiquity which lasted from approximately AD 100 to 500. Our study of ethos will be indebted to twentieth-century research on the philosophy of language, particularly that of V. N. Voloshinov. Our study of *aiōn*, which owes much to R. C. Trench, will trespass slightly into the domain of its Latin affiliate *saeculum*.

Ethos

Clifford Geertz defines ethos as the tone, character, and quality of a people's life.¹ In his discussion of rhetorical ethos² J. S. Baumlin takes for his start Isocrates' *Antidosis*. For Isocrates ethos referred to a morality that was recognized by all. If the rhetor did not conform to this ethos he would be less readily able to persuade his hearers of the wisdom of his argument. According to Isocrates the rhetor displayed ethos even before speaking or writing; his ethos was manifested in all the actions of his life.³ The Romans picked up on this idea: ethos was for them inherited rather than constructed. A man did not own his body nor did he have ancestors, name, or personal belongings; all was his ethos.⁴ Nor was ethos purely moral. It referred to the character, sentiments, and beliefs of the group or time, in less precise terms its environment or milieu.

¹ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 127.

² Baumlin and Baumlin, *Ethos*, xi-xxxi.

³ Ibid, xiv, xvi.

⁴ Ibid, xix.

Interpreting V. N. Voloshinov, Baumlin proffers that the writer of any given time and culture speaks a language that is partly his own but also an expression of his time and culture.⁵ Ethos changes over time and among cultures; it makes ideology visible and is the cultural dress of human character.⁶ Voloshinov succinctly describes the relationship between the writer and his audience and the crucial limitation of that relationship: "Each person's inner world and thought has its stabilized *social audience* that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values, and so on are fashioned. The more cultured a person, the more closely his inner audience approximate the normal audience of ideological creativity; but, in any case, specific class and specific era are limits that the ideal of addressee cannot go beyond."⁷

In this quotation the distinction between the individual person and his audience is established. The writer's inner audience and its ethos are the means by which he interacts with his audience, but both he and they are constrained by the ethos of the time in which they live. As a result of this constraint it follows that the writer's productions approximate the ethos of his time. Not only is the ethos of each writer an approximation of the ethos of his time, so too is the collective average of the ethoi of the totality of writers. The more cultured of them, if Voloshinov is correct, will be found to give utterance to the ethos most faithfully.

In the introduction to his book on the ethos of Indian literature K. S. Srinivasan asks, "In what does the entire culture constitute?" and "How does intense awareness manifest itself?"⁸ These questions allow us to apply three more distinctions to our understanding of ethos, namely its extension to culture, its possession of some form of self-awareness, and its ability to manifest itself in various ways. We have already intimated that ethos extends to culture by our postulation of literary figures as representatives of the ethos. The self-awareness of an ethos, if it can be proven, would apply more to such figures than to the largely impersonal ethos itself. As for the

⁵ Ibid, xxii.

⁶ Ibid, xxviii.

⁷ In Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader*, 58.

⁸ Srinivasan, *The Ethos of Indian Literature*, 2.

manifestations of the ethos, these phenomena will occupy the bulk of our study of the ethos of late antiquity.

Aiōn and Saeculum

The Greek word *aiōn*, together with its Latin counterpart *saeculum*, forms a subsidiary concept to ethos and enables us to view the concept through a somewhat different lens. Carl Jung clearly draws our attention to the close relationship between the two ideas by quoting Pindar's phrase *aiōnos eidōlon* (image of *aiōn*) which he applies to his psychology thusly: the image is the physical man which mirrors the *aiōn*.⁹ This is the selfsame situation we have described between the individual writer and the ethos of his time.¹⁰

According to the Byzantine *Etymologicum Magnum*, *aiōn* had five meanings: a human life, a span of a thousand years, eternity, an age, and the spinal marrow.¹¹ The fourth meaning, which will concern us here, did not enter the Greek language until the time of the New Testament whose writers were possibly influenced by Rabbinic writings which spoke of this age ('*ôlām hazze*) and the coming age ('*ôlām habbā*').¹² *Aiōn* in this sense had two shades of meaning: age and spirit of the age.¹³

Aristotle derived *aiōn* from *aei einai* (always being), but Trench rejects this for *aēmi* (to breathe).¹⁴ This is appropriate for our purposes because one's ethos is the intellectual air he breathes. *Aiōn* is to be distinguished from *kosmos*. It shapes the *kosmos* but is paradoxically subtler than it. It includes "all the thoughts, opinions, maxims, speculations, impulses, and aspirations present in the world at any given time."¹⁵ Trench emphasizes that it may be impossible to accurately define the *aiōn*, but it is still "a real and

⁹ Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 11:244.

¹⁰ Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader*, 58.

¹¹ Keizer, *Life, Time, Entirety*, 8-9.

¹² Ibid, 252; Jenni and Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2:862.

¹³ Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 229-230.

¹⁴ Ibid, 229.

¹⁵ Ibid, 230.

effective power.”¹⁶ Since *aiōn* is so all-encompassing it is fitting that the homonymous Mithraic god, with a lion’s head and a snake around its winged body, represented the union of light and darkness, male and female, creation and destruction.¹⁷ All these elements, not only philosophical ideas but true manifestations of reality, are impartially contained in the *aiōn*.

The relationship between the two shades of meaning of *aiōn*, age and spirit of the age, may be expressed thusly: The spirit of an age is its ethos, and it bears the same correspondence to an age that its fashions do; it is something unique to that age which no other age possesses. The ethos of the last century, for example, has been largely shaped by scientism and is characterized by a physical and psychological dependence on technology. The ethos of the 1980s, the ethos of an age within an age, was characterized by lust for acquisition and a somewhat nonchalant hedonism. As we have seen, ethos sometimes has a moral connotation which *aiōn* shares: Ignatius, for instance, condemned the kingdoms of this *aiōnos*.¹⁸

The Latin counterpart of *aiōn* was *saeculum* which also had several meanings: a human life, a century, a long period of time, an age, the spirit of the age, the world, and heathenism,¹⁹ as for instance Tertullian’s “heathenish examples” (*saeculi exempla*) of chastity.²⁰ For Augustine *saeculum* meant the world of men and time. It was temporal life in its interwoven and perplexed reality.²¹ It included the sacred and the profane and was hence tension-ridden and disordered.²² Like *aiōn*, *saeculum* often had a moral connotation. So Tacitus observed that it corrupted and was corrupted (*nec corrumpere et corrumpi saeculum vocatur*),²³ and the Vulgate of James 1:27 spoke of the Christian keeping himself unspotted from the *saeculum* (*immaculatum se custodire ab hoc saeculo*).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 18:121-122.

¹⁸ Rom. 6.1; Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1:277.

¹⁹ Andrews, *Harpers’ Latin Dictionary*, 1613-1614.

²⁰ *Exh. Cast.* 13; Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:57.

²¹ Markus, *Saeculum*, viii, 71.

²² Ibid, 83, 122.

²³ Andrews, *Harpers’ Latin Dictionary*, 1614.

Four Criteria for Determining the Late Antique Ethos

The late antique ethos, I would argue, is characterized by the sharing of many common attributes among Platonists, Gnostics, and Christians, most notably the dislike of matter and the body. This theory tends to reanimate the spirit of E. R. Dodds and resurrect a useful but currently rejected paradigm. The new construct of late antiquity, the creation of social historians like Foucault and Hadot, does not take the writings of the ancients as seriously as it should and is too tame, as if to say that the era was as effete as the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One example of this tameness is the historians' translation of the word *enkrateia* "self-cultivation" rather than "self-discipline."²⁴

The new view seems inspired by the thought that dislike of matter and the body is deluded, and since the inhabitants of late antiquity were not deluded they could not have disliked matter and the body. The view is an improvement over Dodds' in that it is more respectful to the ancients. Dodds, who was particularly attuned to this dislike, claimed the phenomenon was redolent of poison, disease, and neurosis; the self-abnegation of the desert fathers was to him repulsive and mad.²⁵ In his book on Plotinus, by contrast, Pierre Hadot is at great pains to stress the philosopher's conformity to modern-day notions of normalcy. Yet the late ancients' dislike of the body was neither deluded nor, strictly speaking, unwise. It in fact produced more beauty than that which is manufactured today when the body is raised so far above the soul as to deny all significance to the latter. To name only one example among many one could compare the clothing fashions of the ancient and modern worlds.

The late antique dislike of matter was largely the legacy of Plato and the Middle Platonists and was adopted, with great consistency to their worldview, by the Gnostics and with less consistency by the

²⁴ Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom*, 13. On the old and new paradigms see Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, 216-219; Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*, 4-5, 242.

²⁵ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 33-36.

Christians.²⁶ By dislike is not meant active animosity but an aversion bordering on nausea. The four criteria that will be used to pinpoint the late antique ethos are an emphasis on the evil of life, the distrust of the sociopolitical world, asceticism, and an interest in the supernatural, whether this takes the form of the occult or the miraculous or a combination of these. If we can establish these four criteria operating in the late antique ethos among both Christians, Platonists, and Gnostics, we will have demonstrated our main argument.

Dislike of matter and the body is revealed by an emphasis on the evil nature of life and reality. If matter and the body are so abhorrent there is something radically wrong with an existence that greatly depends on these two entities, which are really one entity. We will find life's evil being preached strenuously by the Gnostics, but it will not escape the notice of the Platonist and Christian thinkers we encounter. The decayed and partially indecipherable Nag Hammadi manuscripts are not so much a last laugh on the Gnostics as a vindication of their view of reality.

Dislike of matter and the body is also revealed by a distrust of the sociopolitical world. The thinkers of this time wanted to forsake not only the material world but the human world for the realm of spirit. It was in this vein that Plotinus continually praised Rogatianus for leaving the senatorship in order to become his disciple.²⁷ The Gnostics did not want martyrs in their midst because martyrs were pearls cast before the swine of the world as represented by the Roman authorities.²⁸ Christian groups like the Donatists dramatically turned their backs on the Roman Empire,²⁹ and Augustine followed them to some extent in his view that Christian Rome was no real improvement on pagan Rome.³⁰

²⁶ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 388-389; Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 425-426.

²⁷ Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 7; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, cviii-cix.

²⁸ Tertullian, *Scorp.* 15; Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:648; Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:471.

²⁹ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 160.

³⁰ Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 413-414.

Dislike of matter and the body is clearly manifested by asceticism which mistreated the body and which was prevalent in late antiquity. It was practiced by the Neoplatonist Hypatia as well as by Cyril of Alexandria.³¹ For the Christians asceticism was to some extent an “engagement with the body as the arena of salvation,”³² but it constituted a rejection of the body in the case of the Gnostics and Platonists. It should be noted that this latter view is not held by many contemporary scholars. Williams, who finds that the dislike of the body has been overemphasized in discussions of the Gnostics, nonetheless admits one should consider their drastic language.³³

We will find, in Gnosticism, extreme licentiousness doing duty for asceticism since it alike had the tendency to misuse the body.³⁴ The Socratic hedonist Aristippus wanted a life characterized by pleasure rather than victimized by it.³⁵ A Gnostic like Carpocrates, however, actively wanted his body to be victimized by pleasure. That his followers branded the back of their right earlobes is not unexpected.³⁶

Dislike of matter and the body is described by an interest in the occult and the miraculous. The former was usually the province of the Platonists and the latter of the Christians, but in the case of Proclus both phenomena operated together. On the one hand he had visions of dead masters; on the other he was credited with healing powers.³⁷ In general the later Neoplatonic interest in the occult was so pronounced that its representatives are strongly resemblant of practitioners of the New Age. Simon Magus and Carpocrates were two outstanding Gnostics who were famous for their occult powers.³⁸

³¹ Damascius, *The Philosophical History*, 129; McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy*, 3-4.

³² David Brakke, privately.

³³ Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 117.

³⁴ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:457-458; cf. *Enn.* 2.9.15, 17; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 127, 130.

³⁵ Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, 1:272.

³⁶ Foerster, *Gnosis*, 1:38.

³⁷ Marinus of Samaria, *The Life of Proclus*, 43-46.

³⁸ *Rec. Clem.* 2.9; *Hom. Clem.* 2.26; Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:99, 233-235; Foerster, *Gnosis*, 1:37.

Conclusion

Ethos, then, refers to the character, sentiments, and beliefs of a specific time period. Everything a writer writes approximates the ethos of his time. Related to the concept of ethos are the classical words *aiōn* and *saeculum* which imply both age and spirit of the age. The ethos of late antiquity, which will particularly concern us, can be determined by four criteria: an emphasis on the evil of life, the distrust of the sociopolitical world, asceticism, and an interest in the supernatural. The ascertainment of these four criteria among the Platonists, Gnostics, and early Christians will reveal the late antique ethos as one characterized mainly by the dislike for matter and the body.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NEOPLATONISTS

Our study proper begins with the Neoplatonists, the first and greatest of whom was Plotinus. The Neoplatonists inherited from Plato and the Middle Platonists an intensely world-denying philosophy. No one reflected this trend more consistently than the Neopythagoreans who represent the last phase of Middle Platonism and who were involved in an emphasis on the mathematization of reality and the transcendent and ineffable nature of the ultimate principle.¹ Plotinus' teacher Ammonius Saccas was a Neopythagorean, and it was in his person that Plotinus came into contact with what Dillon calls the Neopythagorean underground.²

Plotinus: Life

Plotinus was born in Lycopolis in Upper Egypt. We have no information about his childhood save for the startling revelation that at the age of eight he was still being suckled by his nurse who soon shamed him out of the habit.³ He became interested in philosophy when he was twenty-seven, but until he met Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria he came away from every lecture he attended discouraged and disheartened.⁴ Ammonius possessed an enthusiasm for the philosophy of the Middle Platonist Numenius; his students included Plotinus, Longinus, Erennius, Origen the Platonist, Olympius, and Antoninus.

Ammonius believed that Plato and Aristotle could be reconciled and so inspired Plotinus to take from various systems what would

¹ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 383.

² Ibid, 381.

³ Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 3; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ciii.

⁴ *Vit. Plot.* 3; ibid, ciii-civ.

work best for his own. Plotinus studied under Ammonius for eleven years in company with Erennius and Origen the Platonist and with them made a vow he would never disclose his master's teachings, a vow Dillon finds "a traditional Pythagorean attitude taken with unusual seriousness."⁵ He subsequently served in Gordian's Persian expedition and after Gordian's assassination by Philip the Arab made his way to Antioch and then to Rome. For a time he was a friend of the emperor Gallienus and his wife Salonina and presented them with a proposal for a city governed in accordance with Plato's *Laws*. The project was originally supported by the emperor but was brought to nothing by the envy of his courtiers.⁶ That the city was meant to be nothing more than a philosophical society is proven by the facts that the tract of land on which it was to stand had been a city of philosophers and that Plotinus was strongly averse to politics, more than once attempting to dissuade his friend Zethos from his interest in the subject and continually praising the senator Rogatianus for giving up his career in order to become his pupil.⁷ Here we find the late antique distrust of the sociopolitical world clearly in evidence.

When Erennius and Origen broke their pact of secrecy Plotinus felt himself free to teach Ammonius' doctrines although he refrained from writing for ten years. At first he encouraged his students to put questions to him, a habit which is said to have led to much futile talk. He always began his lectures by reading texts by philosophers such as Atticus, Severus, Gaius, Numenius, Cronius, Aspasius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Adrastus.⁸ He produced ostensibly fifty-four treatises which his student Porphyry prepared for publication in six groups of nine each, nine being something of a special number among the Pythagoreans. Whenever Plotinus took pen in hand it was as though he had already written out his treatise; he seemed to copy as from a book, and he never reread what he had written. This freed him to some extent from the prison of the body, but Porphyry tells us that he had poor handwriting and made

⁵ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 383.

⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 12; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, cxi-cxii.

⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 7; *ibid.*, cviii-cix.

⁸ *Vit. Plot.* 14; *ibid.*, cxii.

frequent errors in writing and speaking, for instance saying *anamnēmisketai* instead of *anamimnēsketai*.⁹

Impressed with his asceticism, a reflection of the late antique dislike of matter, many parents made Plotinus the guardian of their sons and daughters.¹⁰ He often said that until the children took to philosophy their fortunes and revenues needed to be kept intact for them, and he looked into their accounts with a diligent thoroughness. One of his favorite wards was the boy Potamon whom he often helped with his lessons, so much so that he did not tire of hearing them repeated many times.¹¹ Porphyry tells us that, living twenty-six years in Rome and acting as an arbiter on many occasions, Plotinus never made an enemy of any citizen.

Plotinus had a curious mixture of humility and arrogance, if his eagerness to conclude a lecture into which his former fellow student, Origen, had stumbled may be construed as humble. His reluctance to sit for his portrait and celebrate his birthday was explicitly because of his shame of being in the body.¹² He nonetheless celebrated the feast days of Plato and Socrates and gave banquets in their honor, expecting everyone who was able to give an address. For all his gentleness he had a darker side and was not ignorant of white magic which puts him neatly in line with the late antique interest in the supernatural. One of Ammonius' pupils, Olympius, was unable to destroy him by star spells, endangering himself more than his former friend who claimed, despite the fact that he had no foreknowledge of Olympius' activities, that he had sensed Olympius' attempts and that, before they were over, Olympius' limbs "were convulsed and his body shriveling like a money-bag pulled tight."¹³ This episode demonstrates less Plotinus' skill in casting counterspells than it does his spiritual invincibility. Regardless, he did not believe that magic was effective on any but the lower levels of existence so that even if Olympius' operation had been successful it would have only cost him his life. Nor did he

⁹ *Vit. Plot.* 13; *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Vit. Plot.* 9; *ibid.*, cix-cx.

¹¹ *Vit. Plot.* 9; *ibid.*, cx.

¹² *Vit. Plot.* 1; *ibid.*, cii.

¹³ *Vit. Plot.* 10; *ibid.*, cx.

believe in astrology, a subject which he had once studied with interest, holding that stars foretold the future but were not its causes.¹⁴

Once, at an occult ceremony in Rome, a priest declared that Plotinus' guiding spirit was not of the lower degree but a god. The priest's assistant, who had become overwhelmed with terror, strangled the birds used in the ceremony so that the priest was unable to question the god.¹⁵ Plotinus refused to celebrate holy days, claiming that it was the business of the daemons to come to him and not for him to go to them. He once identified a thief in the house of a woman with whom he had taken lodging; the man was whipped until he confessed his crime and brought forth the stolen object. He also successfully prophesied that Polemon, one of his young charges, would be amorous and short-lived.¹⁶

But Plotinus did not always use his supernatural abilities for ill. Porphyry was in the throes of a suicidal despair when Plotinus, having no prior knowledge of his student's emotional crisis, came to his house and talked him out of his melancholy, at length convincing him of the wisdom of a change of scenery.¹⁷ During the time Porphyry knew him Plotinus was able to attain unity with the One four times. Porphyry himself claimed to have attained unity once, but no other Neoplatonist, for all their interest in theurgy, is recorded as doing so. Unity with the One should be regarded as another occult manifestation of the late antique desire for freedom from the body. Plotinus' description of a similar experience is revealing: "After that sojourn in the divine, I ask myself how it happens that I can now be descending, and how did the Soul ever enter into my body, the Soul which, even within the body, is the high thing it has shown itself to be."¹⁸

At the end of his life Plotinus suffered from leprosy. Ulcers broke out on his hands and feet. His voice, once clear and sonorous, became hoarse, and his sight dim, a grim reminder of the nefarious

¹⁴ *Enn.* 2.3.3; *ibid.* 77.

¹⁵ *Vit. Plot.* 10; *ibid.* cx-cxi.

¹⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 11; *ibid.* cxi.

¹⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 11; *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Enn.* 4.8.1; *ibid.* 334.

nature of matter. He died at the age of sixty-six, attended only by his physician Eustochius. His last words, spoken to Eustochius, express the relaxed monism that was his primary faith: "I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All."¹⁹

Plotinus: Philosophy

Many of the founders of the world religions have been artists, but Plotinus is one of the few philosophers to have achieved this distinction. His teachings are enlivened by the bright, lucid, and parabolic examples of his tractates, though his inelegant and often convoluted Greek has been frequently commented on.²⁰ The *Enneads* are less a collection of philosophical treatises than priceless archaeological documents from the glittering world of the third century when a man could be a Platonist philosopher one day and a Christian martyr the next. Their author, although less concerned with the exact sciences than Plato, was acquainted with astronomy, geometry, mechanics, and optics. He was also an intelligent observer of the Greek dance.²¹

Plotinus developed Numenius' three gods into the emanational triad of the One, the Nous, and the World Soul. The triad was impersonal and its hypostases existed at different levels of being, the One in fact being beyond being and personality though Plotinus used masculine pronouns to refer to it. The One's placement beyond being tended to protect it from the evil of matter. Plotinus usually pictured his hypostases in a vertical relationship but sometimes in a concentric one. Even the rational human soul he sometimes spoke of as being situated above the lower soul and sometimes inside it like a light within a lantern during a storm.²²

Plotinus thought his philosophy was a faithful interpretation of Plato. Of the Platonic dialogues he relied the most on the *Phaedo*,

¹⁹ *Vit. Plot.* 2; *ibid.*, ciii.

²⁰ Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 219-220.

²¹ *Enn.* 4.4.33; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 320.

²² *Ibid.*, xci.

the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Republic*.²³ Plato's philosophy was inherent in the earliest mythologies of the world, hence his use of the terms Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus to describe the One, the Nous, and the World Soul. The first builders of temples and shrines were in a way cognizant of Platonism because the shrines and temples were like mirrors that caught the image of the World Soul. The World Soul in its higher aspect was often conflated by Plotinus with the Nous which was for him both the Demiurge and the abode of the Forms, mathematical formulae that anticipated everything individual human souls but not ugly or artificial objects.²⁴ The eschewal of the ugly should be regarded as an affront to matter which is often characterized by ugliness.

The World Soul emanated the material world by applying the Forms to unorganized matter. Time is the product of the World Soul which, unable to see everything simultaneously, arranges it in a progressional pattern to facilitate understanding, which is why the sensible world is temporal. The relationship between the Nous and the World Soul is like the relationship between a father and his child, and the relationship between the World Soul and the material world is like the relationship between an architect and the mansion he has built and lives in, or like the relationship between the water and a fishing net that has been flung over it. As the architect is superior to his mansion and the water is superior to the fishing net, so the World Soul is superior to matter.

The material world was an image (*eidōlon*) of the World Soul just as the World Soul was an image of the Nous and the Nous an image of the One. Plotinus explained emanation by his theory of a double *energeia*: the internal part of the Nous remains Nous, but its externalized portion emanates the World Soul. He also explained this operation another way, namely that an image is created when an object looks back to its source of emanation.²⁵ The Nous is an

²³ Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 214.

²⁴ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, xcvi.

²⁵ Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, 7-9; Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 241.

illumination of the One and, like the sun's light, is produced with no loss of power to the One.

So closely are the hypostases related that Plotinus sometimes calls the One Being and at other times speaks of Being as the first moment of the Nous's unfolding. The emanations or illuminations from the One are less good than it because plurality is less good than unity. As in the case of the three Demiurges of Mandaeanism,²⁶ each emanation is morally inferior to the one preceding it, and matter is the most inferior of all. There is even a certain audacity (*tolma*) in the separation of the Nous from the One and in the separation of the World Soul from the Nous,²⁷ but it is not like the audacity of the individual soul which tries to exclude itself from Being and unite itself with matter which is a kind of nonbeing that derives power from the soul and imprisons it in a tomb of the soul's making.

Plotinus' late antique dislike of matter can be seen in his avowal that the material world is evil. The introduction of the Forms into intelligible matter by the World Soul does nothing to change its original state; it only confirms it, "bringing it into actuality, into full effect, as sowing brings out the natural quality of land or as a female organism impregnated by the male is not defeminized but becomes more decidedly of its sex." Matter is "ugliness," "disgracefulness," "utter destitution of sense, of virtue, of beauty, of pattern, of Ideal principle, of quality."²⁸ But it is an irradiation of the World Soul, and the World Soul "makes beautiful to the fullness of their capacity all things whatsoever that it grasps and moulds."²⁹ In addition matter possesses its own deceptive beauty. It appears "bound around with bonds of Beauty, like some captive bound in fetters of gold; and beneath these it is hidden so that, while it must exist, it may not be seen by the gods, and that men need not always have evil before their eyes, but that when it comes before them they may still not be destitute of Images of the Good and Beautiful for

²⁶ Foerster, *Gnosis*, 1:135.

²⁷ Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 242.

²⁸ *Enn.* 2.4.16; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 107.

²⁹ *Enn.* 1.6.6; *ibid.*, 52.

their Remembrance.”³⁰

Plotinus came close to the Gnostics not only in his dislike for matter but in his indifference to civic and moral concerns. While Plato had urged that philosophers who had been vouchsafed a knowledge of the intelligible world should reenter the cave of shadows to aid their fellow mortals, Plotinus was less certain of the wisdom of societal duty; but he was the guardian of many children,³¹ and whenever he attained unity with the One he was in a small way generating the Forms and ensuring the well-being of the universe.

Plotinus ascribed two levels to the soul. The higher soul is the soul proper and the lower soul is the part of the soul that interacts with the body. In addition to the higher and lower soul he distinguished what Dodds calls “a floating spotlight of consciousness” and which he termed the “we” (*hēmeis*).³² The Stoics thought the human soul was part of the World Soul that binds the universe together, but Plotinus identified it more closely with the World Soul by explaining that both were projections from the World Soul’s first phase and were hence partners, although the human soul was an inferior one since it was more closely bound to matter.³³ He alleged that while all of the person is not aware of the pain that part of his body experiences all of him is aware of what his soul experiences. In the same way what affects one human soul affects the World Soul in its entirety, a fact which explains why one can sympathize with suffering in others.³⁴ Like the World Soul the higher human soul cannot be said to have fallen from the realm of Nous. The souls of the worst of men are connected to Nous as the best of men are connected to matter through their bodies.

Plato had said that the soul was situated between the world of Forms and the material universe and thought it was truest to its original nature when detached from the body and contemplating the Forms. He believed that one was able to see the Forms only after

³⁰ *Enn.* 1.8.15; *ibid.*, 70.

³¹ *Vit. Plot.* 9; *ibid.*, cix-cx.

³² *Ibid.*, xcvi-xcix.

³³ *Ibid.*, xcvi.

³⁴ Mayhall, *On Plotinus*, 43.

his death, but Plotinus held that one could participate in the higher realms of reality during his lifetime. The philosopher could live the life of the higher soul while his lower soul controlled his daily activities. Porphyry gives us an example of Plotinus' ability to be in two realms at the same time. After he was interrupted in his writing to carry on a conversation with someone he would continue his work without having to go back and read what he had written before.³⁵ The realm he inhabited while writing was likely the realm of Nous³⁶ and could be reached by contemplation, but only ecstasy could result in union with the One. The men likeliest to attain the level of Nous were the philosopher, the lover, and the musician. The Nous was a kind of resting place where the philosopher awaited union with the One.

The intelligible world was more real than the sensible world and the world of the One was the most real of all. "What passes for the most truly existent is most truly non-existent—the thing of extension [matter] least real of all—while this unseen First is the source and principle of Being and sovereign over reality."³⁷ Everything in the sensible world is in the intelligible world but in a more exalted way. The civic virtues—wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice—are faint reflections of their Forms. Time is an inadequate representation of eternity, action a distorted version of contemplation. The harmonies of the sensible world are not to be compared to the harmonies of the noetic world, and the fire that burns here is nothing like the fire that burns there and which is seen with eyes more real than those of the material man. The unreality of the sensible world can be compared to one who "slept a life through and took the dream world in perfect trust; wake him and he would refuse belief to the report of his open eyes and settle down to sleep again."³⁸

Plotinus was not a pantheist because he did not equate the One with the universe, and he was not a complete monist because he

³⁵ *Vit. Plot.* 8; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, cix.

³⁶ Cf. Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, 26-27.

³⁷ *Enn.* 5.5.11; *ibid.*, 402.

³⁸ *Enn.* 5.5.11; *ibid.*

granted unity with the One to only the higher soul.³⁹ Unity with the One was the goal of life, and although the *Seventh Platonic Letter* alleged that the supreme being was unspeakable and indescribable Plotinus affirmed that we still speak and write of the One, “but urging towards it: out of discussion we call to vision: to those desiring to see we point the path.”⁴⁰ The vision of the One comes suddenly, and one cannot control how long it lasts. It is calm but intense, and Plotinus describes it as drunkenness, a fitting analogy which combines the positive and negative approaches to God.

Plotinus accepted the recurring cycles of the Stoics in which the same individual relives the same life, after innumerable ages, countless times, and he also accepted the more traditional reincarnation of the Platonists. The soul received a new daemon with each metempsychosis. The soul’s daemon was on a level immediately above the soul itself so that the daemon of the perfect sage was the One. Metempsychosis consisted of incarnation into animal and plant bodies. Men who were spirited became ferocious animals, those who were appetitive became gluttonous animals, those characterized by torpid grossness became plants, those who had loved song became vocal animals, unreasonable kings became eagles, visionaries became high-flying birds, and observers of the merely civic virtues became either men or bees.⁴¹ Even the sage could not escape metempsychosis which could be brought to an end only momentarily. The Gnostics, who thought even more evil of matter and the body than Plotinus, believed the cycle of incarnations could be stopped, and so did Plotinus’ pupil Porphyry.

Porphyry

Porphyry was a transitional figure between Plotinus and his more magically minded successors Iamblichus and Proclus. According to Socrates of Constantinople he was once a Christian but was assaulted by a group of Christians in Caesarea and in anger

³⁹ Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, 215-216, 229-230.

⁴⁰ *Enn.* 6.9.4; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 540.

⁴¹ *Enn.* 3.4.2; *ibid.*, 167-168.

forsook the religion,⁴² writing a large volume against the Bible and Christian exegesis in which he denied certain books to their reputed authors, alleged the biblical prophecies were written after the events they described, enumerated contradictions in the Gospels, and disclaimed Christ's divinity, although he continued to profess admiration for the man.

Porphry was tutored by Origen the Christian in Caesarea but afterwards traveled to Athens and studied with the intelligent but unspectacular Middle Platonist Longinus before going on to learn from Plotinus in Rome. Porphry disliked the allegorical method employed by his first teacher,⁴³ and though he himself employed it he was careful to do so only in the case of texts not dealing with historical events. In other words, Homer's cave of the nymphs could be for him a valid metaphor for the ascent and descent of souls into the world.⁴⁴

Unlike Plotinus, who has come down as a passive participant in occult happenings, Porphry took an active role in magic, and this is of a piece with his stronger dislike of matter. He was more outgoing than Plotinus but also more pessimistic. He once read his poem "The Sacred Marriage" at the feast of Plato, and Plotinus was sympathetic to its esoteric undertones. He also commissioned his pupil to write a refutation of a scandalous commentary on the *Symposium* and in praising Porphry's offering quoted Homer's words, "So strike and be a light to men."⁴⁵ Porphry appears to have gotten Plotinus and his student Amelius to write treatises rather than the ill-organized notebooks they were accustomed to writing, and Plotinus responded by selecting Porphry to edit and arrange his works. Plotinus, as we have seen, convinced Porphry to travel,⁴⁶ and the latter came to Sicily where he wrote against the Christians in language more vituperative than that which Plotinus had leveled against the Gnostics. Porphry, almost in emulation of Apuleius of Madaura, married the wealthy Jewish widow Marcella

⁴² *Hist. Eccl.* 3.23; Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II,2:93.

⁴³ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.19; *ibid.* II,1:265.

⁴⁴ Sellw, "Achilles or Christ?" 87.

⁴⁵ *Vit. Plot.* 15; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, cxiii.

⁴⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 11; *ibid.* cxi.

against the will of her relatives, but he left her for a time in order to rededicate himself to philosophy which in late antiquity was almost always associated with asceticism.

With Porphyry the distinction between the Nous and the World Soul largely disappears which is puzzling because there is therefore less protective distancing between the One and matter in his philosophy than in Plotinus's. Like Plotinus he thought of the sublunary sphere as the place of embodiment, the translunary sphere as the place of the soul after death (where it took the form of an astral body), and the region beyond the stars and space itself as the intelligible realm, the home of the higher soul.⁴⁷ Permanent escape from incarnation came through philosophy, and few men could attain it, but temporary escape for the common man lay in one of two mutually exclusive paths: theurgy and virtue.⁴⁸ At death the lower soul of the philosopher could no longer serve as a basis for future incarnations but would disintegrate and its energy give life to the cosmos. Porphyry introduced the metaphysical triad of *ousia*, *dynamis*, and *energeia* (which corresponded to beginning, middle, and end) and wrote a handbook on logic that would be immensely popular during the Middle Ages.

Iamblichus and Syrianus

Iamblichus, a student of Porphyry, probably only from book learning, lived in Apamea. Students flocked to his house and feasted at his table less on his food than on his words. His late antique interest in magic was so pronounced that he is said to have been able to make spirits appear on water fountains and to transform his robes to gold, and his disciples are reported as asking him whether he levitated when he prayed.⁴⁹ He was disappointed that Porphyry was interested in religion but was not religious, in other words that he was a typical Platonist and not a fervent theurgic of the Neoplatonic variety, and he introduced into the metaphysical draught of the later Neoplatonists a reverent study of

⁴⁷ Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, 61.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 59-61.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 143.

the *Chaldean Oracles*.

Iamblichus posited a nonattributive One beyond Plotinus' One in order to separate it from what the Gnostic author of the *Acts of John* called "the filthy madness of the flesh."⁵⁰ He established certain gods or henads as links between the nonattributive One and the material universe which of course served to protect the former from the latter. They are to the second One what intellects are to the Nous and human souls are to the World Soul, neither distinct from it nor, strictly speaking, illuminations from it. Each god was the head of a series of manifestations of itself at various levels, from the intelligible down to the physical.⁵¹ Iamblichus distinguished three parts in the Nous, the last of which was the Demiurge which was in turn divided into seven parts. He also divided the World Soul into triads, and his own triads were multiplied by Proclus who believed not only in vertical but also in horizontal emanation.

Syrianus, who succeeded Plutarch of Athens as diadochus of the Athenian school of Platonism, gave allegorical interpretations of Plato and Homer and applied his allegorizations not only to the intellectual realm but to its highest levels. He postulated a One and, immediately following it, a Monad and Dyad which are to be distinguished from a lower monad and dyad (the *automonas* and *autodyas*) which are responsible for there being one or two of anything.⁵² Syrianus frequently confused the properties of the One and the Monad. The functions of the supreme Monad and the supreme Dyad—sameness, firmness, and eternality on the one hand, and production, procession, and plurality on the other—infuse everything that exists but for the One.⁵³ Syrianus recognized more than one name for each of his two principles, accepting the Definite and Indefinite of the *Philebus*, the Ether and Chaos of the Orphics, the First and Second of the Pythagoreans, and the Love and Strife of Empedocles.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 269.

⁵¹ Dillon, *The Golden Chain*, 26:105.

⁵² Blumenthal and Lloyd, *Soul and the Structure of Being in Late Neoplatonism*, 2-3.

⁵³ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 5-9.

Syrianus' Dyad was not evil, nor was his material world, but it was ultimately responsible for the presence of evil because it brought about otherness and plurality which were opposed to the goodness of the One. The late antique dislike of matter in Syrianus thus takes the form of an insistence that it is an inferior entity. Certain scholars believe it was Syrianus rather than Iamblichus who came up with the system of henads although he did not employ them as extensively as Proclus would and they have little correlation to his basic metaphysical scheme.⁵⁵ It is likely that his Monad and Dyad are related to the henads in much the same way as being, life, and intelligence are related to the Forms.⁵⁶

Proclus

Proclus once had a dream in which it was revealed that he was the reincarnation of Nicomachus of Gerasa, and it is possible that he was born two hundred sixteen years after Nicomachus since two hundred sixteen was the number of years between Pythagoras' incarnations.⁵⁷ Proclus cultivated special relationships with the gods, in particular Asclepius and Athena. When he was sick as a boy he saw Asclepius in the form of a child, and in his last illness he had a vision of him in the form of a snake.⁵⁸ Here again we see the late antique dislike of matter manifesting itself in occultism.

Proclus was educated in Alexandria and began to devote himself to philosophy after receiving special communication from Athena in a vision. He was characteristic of much of later Neoplatonism: he prayed to the sun, observed the Egyptian holy days, and was attracted to the *Chaldean Oracles* which were his scripture as Syrianus was his theologian. One of his earliest teachers was Olympiodorus the Younger who had such an indistinct and hurried manner of speaking that Proclus was obliged to recount his lecture

⁵⁵ Dillon, *The Golden Chain*, 26:102.

⁵⁶ Blumenthal and Lloyd, *Soul and the Structure of Being in Late Neoplatonism*, 11.

⁵⁷ Dillon, *The Golden Chain*, 15:274-275.

⁵⁸ Marinus of Samaria, *The Life of Proclus*, 21, 47.