

The Influence of Gnostic Thought on Plotinus's Philosophy.

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Abstract—This study examines the similarities and differences between Gnosticism, Platonism, and Neoplatonism, focusing on the nature of existence, the relationship between the soul and matter, the origin of good and evil, the immortality of the soul, and the means of purifying it and attaining true knowledge and spiritual salvation. It also investigates the influence of Pythagorean thought and ancient Eastern religious and philosophical traditions on the development of Greek thought, while emphasizing the distinctiveness of each school of thought and the difficulty of establishing direct influence based solely on intellectual similarities.

The study shows that Plato associated true knowledge with transcending the sensible world and apprehending the world of Forms, emphasizing the immortality of the soul and the necessity of its purification. Plotinus, by contrast, regarded the One as the source of all existence and explained the procession of beings from it through the theory of emanation. He also linked the soul's ascent to purification, contemplation, and union with the One. These conceptions intersect with certain Gnostic principles, particularly the distinction between spirit and matter and the pursuit of transcendent truth.

The study also addresses the main criticisms directed at certain Gnostic movements, particularly their sharp separation of spirit and matter, their restriction of knowledge to a select few, and their tendency to diminish the value of the sensible world. It concludes that the similarities between Gnosticism, Platonism, and Neoplatonism reflect a complex process of intellectual and cultural interaction rather than necessarily demonstrating direct influence. The study therefore emphasizes the importance of distinguishing conceptual affinities from historical influence, recognizing the distinctive characteristics of each philosophical system, and acknowledging the role of cumulative knowledge and intercultural exchange in the development of human thought.

Keywords—Gnosticism, Plato, Plotinus, Mysticism, Christianity.

INTRODUCTION:

Human civilizations are founded on the principles of the cumulative development of knowledge and cultural interaction. No civilization emerges in isolation from others; rather, it draws upon previous intellectual and

religious traditions, reinterpreting and developing them in ways that are consistent with its own cultural, social, and political characteristics. Within this context, Greek civilization cannot be regarded as entirely independent of the civilizations of the Ancient Near East, as it intersected with them on numerous issues concerning the origin of existence, the nature of the universe, the fate of the soul, and the concepts of good and evil. However, Greek philosophers reformulated these issues within more systematic and abstract rational and philosophical frameworks.

This interaction is particularly evident in Plato's philosophy, especially through his Theory of Forms, which distinguishes between the changing, sensible world and the immutable and perfect world of Forms, where realities exist in their true form. The influence of this theory extended into later periods in the history of philosophy, particularly with the emergence of Neoplatonism, which reinterpreted and further developed Platonic thought. Plotinus is considered one of the most prominent representatives of this school of thought. He developed a philosophical system in which existence emanates from a transcendent first principle, the One, from which the various levels of being proceed, culminating in Intellect, Soul, and the sensible world. Although Plotinus was influenced by Plato, he did not merely reproduce his ideas; rather, he reformulated several of them within a metaphysical and spiritual vision that emphasizes the soul's ascent and its quest for union with its first principle.

On the other hand, the similarities between certain Platonic and Plotinian conceptions and Eastern religious and spiritual traditions raise questions about the nature of the relationship between them, particularly with regard to esoteric knowledge, the distinction between the sensible and spiritual worlds, the nature of the soul, and the possibility of attaining transcendent truth. Accordingly, this study examines Eastern Gnosticism as one possible approach to understanding the points of convergence between the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus, while taking into account the fundamental differences between them. Whereas Plato addressed these issues within an idealist philosophical framework based on the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, Plotinus revisited them within a metaphysical conception that places the soul's spiritual ascent and its return to the One at the center of his philosophy.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the similarities and differences between Platonic and Plotinian thought in light of certain Eastern Gnostic conceptions, without presupposing the existence of direct influence unsupported by historical evidence or reducing Greek philosophy to purely Eastern origins. The significance of this subject lies in highlighting the role of the cumulative development of knowledge and intercultural interaction in the evolution of human thought, as well as in understanding how ideas are transmitted between different cultures and reformulated in accordance with the distinctive characteristics of each philosophical school. This approach makes it possible to distinguish between intellectual similarity and historical influence, and between continuity and innovation in the development of philosophy.

What is Gnosticism, and what are its general principles? To what extent did it influence the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus?

Furthermore, what are the fundamental Gnostic principles that Plotinus drew upon in his mysticism?

Our interest in Gnosticism, within the framework of investigating the relationship between Platonic and Plotinian thought, stems from the significance of the role that some of its fundamental conceptions and principles may have played in shaping several philosophical issues addressed by both Plato and Plotinus. Through its conceptions concerning the nature of existence, the reality of the sensible world, the status of the human soul, and the possibility of attaining true knowledge by transcending the limits of sensory perception and discursive rational knowledge, Gnosticism raises a number of questions that intersect with certain central themes in both Platonic and Plotinian philosophy. Accordingly, studying this relationship enables us to identify the similarities and differences between the conceptions adopted by the two

philosophers and to investigate the intellectual backgrounds that may help explain certain points of convergence between their respective philosophical systems.

1. THE CONCEPT AND ORIGINS OF GNOSTICISM

Before proceeding to examine Gnosticism and its relationship to Platonic and Plotinian thought, methodological considerations necessitate defining the concept and clarifying its linguistic and technical meanings. This constitutes an essential starting point for understanding its nature and grasping the principal principles upon which it is based, thereby helping to address the central research problem and answer the related subsidiary questions. Conceptual clarity and precision in defining terms are necessary steps in avoiding ambiguity in understanding the subject. They also make it possible to establish an initial framework that paves the way for examining its philosophical and intellectual dimensions.

The study of Gnosticism and its relationship to Platonic and Plotinian thought requires defining the term in both its linguistic and technical senses, as this provides an essential starting point for understanding its nature and principles and addressing the research problem. Linguistically, the term *Gnosis* derives from the Greek language and means “knowledge.” However, it acquired a technical meaning referring to higher knowledge attained through revelation and direct inner insight, rather than through theoretical learning or rational reasoning alone. Accordingly, Gnostic knowledge is based on the unveiling of hidden truths that transcend the limits of ordinary sensory perception, enabling human beings to gain a deeper understanding of existence and its mysteries.¹

The linguistic definition of Gnosticism should not be considered sufficient, as it reflects only the term’s meaning in its original Greek context and fails to reveal the philosophical, religious, and doctrinal dimensions it acquired throughout its historical development. Therefore, studying this concept requires seeking a more comprehensive definition that takes into account the diversity of its intellectual sources, the variety of movements influenced by it, and its role in the interaction between philosophy and different religious beliefs.

In this context, Gnosticism may be regarded as a syncretic intellectual movement that combines various philosophical and religious elements and draws upon metaphysical conceptions concerning the origin of existence and the emanation of beings from a first principle. It also seeks to reconcile forms of knowledge and beliefs belonging to different cultural traditions. In some of its currents, ideas of Eastern origin intersected with Greek philosophical conceptions, particularly certain elements of Neoplatonism, alongside other religious beliefs and teachings, including those associated with Mazdakism and Manichaeism. This gave Gnosticism a composite character and made it a field in which diverse intellectual and doctrinal systems interacted.

The influence of certain Gnostic currents, or ideas associated with them, extended into various areas of intellectual history, including philosophy and Christian and Islamic traditions, although the nature and extent of this influence varied from one historical context to another.

From a terminological perspective, Gnosticism is not limited to the concept of knowledge in its general sense; rather, it refers to a form of spiritual and esoteric knowledge that transcends the level of religious knowledge accessible to ordinary believers and seeks to unveil profound truths concerning the mysteries of existence, the nature of the world, the fate of the soul, and the means of salvation. Certain Gnostic movements emerged within Christian circles, particularly during the second and third centuries CE, where they sought to interpret Christian doctrines in accordance with their own distinctive esoteric and metaphysical conceptions. Over time, these movements diversified and developed differing beliefs and interpretations. Consequently, the term came to refer to a range of secret doctrines and beliefs, some of

which deviated from prevailing religious teachings, while others were classified as heretical movements. Accordingly, understanding Gnosticism requires studying it within its historical and intellectual context, while taking into account the diversity of its movements and the differences among their conceptions, rather than reducing it to a single, unified, and fixed doctrinal system.²

Gnosticism is closely associated with religion and doctrine, as it is based on esoteric and spiritual knowledge that seeks to uncover the mysteries of existence, God, humanity, and human destiny. Therefore, it is not so much a purely philosophical system as a religious and epistemological movement that later developed into systems combining religious conceptions with philosophical reflections, particularly in the Hellenistic world and the city of Alexandria. Some Gnostic currents interacted with Christianity during the first centuries CE, reinterpreting its teachings in accordance with Gnostic principles. This gave rise to disputes between these currents and the Church concerning the nature of faith, the source of knowledge, and the path to salvation. This intellectual conflict contributed to the formation of Christian theological discourse and to the delineation of the boundaries between accepted doctrines and teachings that the Church classified as heretical, thereby reflecting the complexity of the relationship between religion and philosophy in antiquity.³

Some scholars suggest that Christian Gnosticism emerged in Alexandria during the first century CE as a result of the interaction between religious beliefs and philosophical conceptions. It subsequently developed to encompass philosophical issues concerning the origin of existence, good and evil, the human soul, knowledge, and salvation, under the influence of the Greek philosophical milieu, particularly Neoplatonism. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised in regarding Plotinus as the culmination of Gnosticism, given the fundamental differences between his philosophy and Gnostic doctrines, despite certain intellectual and spiritual points of convergence between them.

Investigating the intellectual roots of Gnosticism requires examining the religious, mythological, and philosophical traditions of ancient civilizations, including Indian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian, and Greek civilizations, which addressed questions concerning the origin of the universe, divine powers, good and evil, and hidden knowledge. Although similarities exist between these conceptions and certain Gnostic principles, such similarities do not establish the existence of a unified Gnostic doctrine within these civilizations or its direct transmission among them. Rather, they suggest the possibility that these traditions shared certain religious and metaphysical concerns and that some of their ideas were reformulated within different historical and cultural contexts.

Ancient Persian beliefs are particularly important in the study of the intellectual origins of certain Gnostic conceptions, especially those concerning the problem of evil and its relationship to good. Some Persian religious traditions adopted dualistic conceptions that distinguished between the principles of good and evil. Certain later doctrines developed more radical ideas of a Gnostic or dualistic character as a result of attempts to explain the source and origins of evil and the nature of its opposition to good.

The problem of evil contributed to the emergence of certain dualistic tendencies, owing to the difficulty of reconciling the existence of a creator characterized by goodness and perfection with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. This led some doctrines to distinguish between the source of good and the source of evil, attributing them to two distinct powers. Nevertheless, ancient Persian and other Eastern beliefs differed in their interpretations of the nature of good and evil and the relationship between them; therefore, it would be inaccurate to generalize the dualistic conception to all of these traditions.

Studying the intellectual roots of Gnosticism requires distinguishing between its emergence as a set of specific religious and philosophical movements and the ancient conceptions that share certain features with its principles. Similarities do not establish direct influence; rather, they provide a basis for comparison and

for tracing the transmission of ideas between civilizations. This perspective contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between Gnosticism and Greek philosophy, particularly Platonic and Plotinian thought, through an examination of their conceptions of existence, the soul, knowledge, and truth, without reducing these traditions to a single civilizational origin.⁴

The difficulty of explaining the existence of evil while maintaining belief in the goodness of the divine principle led certain Persian religious conceptions to adopt a dualistic view based on the existence of two independent and opposing principles: light, as a symbol of good, and darkness, as a symbol of evil. This conception was used to explain the conflict within the world, and its various forms developed within certain ancient Persian beliefs, while similar conceptions later emerged in subsequent religious and philosophical movements.

The dualistic conception encountered difficulties in its interaction with Christianity because it conflicted with the doctrine of God's oneness and absolute goodness. This prompted certain Gnostic movements influenced by Christianity to reformulate their metaphysical conceptions and reconcile them with Christian principles. This process gave rise to new ideas concerning the origin of the world and matter, the source of knowledge, the destiny of the soul, and the relationship between God and the sensible world.

- The most prominent Gnostic conceptions are based on a distinction between spirit and matter, whereby spirit is accorded a superior status, while the material world is regarded as imperfect, changing, and transient. God is also conceived of as a transcendent principle and the source of existence, from whom beings may emanate through successive levels or intermediate entities. Certain Gnostic movements emphasize the importance of esoteric knowledge, revelation, and spiritual inspiration in apprehending hidden truths, alongside the belief in the immortality of the soul and the necessity of purifying and elevating it toward an understanding of its origin and destiny.

These conceptions took shape through the interaction of Eastern beliefs, Greek philosophy, and Christian teachings, contributing to the emergence of diverse Gnostic movements that differed in their interpretations of the relationship between God and the world, spirit and matter, and good and evil. Some of their principles also converge with ideas found in Plato and Plotinus, particularly regarding the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, the status of the soul, and the attainment of truth. However, establishing the direct influence of Gnosticism on their philosophies requires a comparative historical study that distinguishes between intellectual similarities and actual historical influence.⁵

Certain Gnostic movements are based on a distinction between the soul and the body, on the grounds that the body belongs to the material world, which is subject to change, corruption, and decay, whereas the soul or spirit possesses a spiritual nature that transcends the limitations of the body and may continue to exist after its death. In some movements, this conception has been associated with the belief in the immortality of the soul and the possibility of its transmigration into another body, depending on the doctrines and beliefs of the various schools. This distinction entails an emphasis on the necessity of purifying the soul, freeing it from attachment to matter, and elevating it toward a deeper understanding of its true nature and spiritual origin. Attaining such knowledge is not limited to sensory perception; rather, it requires transcending it in favor of esoteric knowledge, which makes it possible to explore transcendent truths through contemplation, revelation, and spiritual illumination, ultimately leading to the apprehension of divine truth and drawing closer to it, or even achieving union with it in certain Gnostic and mystical conceptions.

This epistemological path can be understood as a gradual ascent through which the soul moves from perceiving the sensible world to contemplating intelligible truths, and then turns toward the transcendent principle that represents the origin of existence and the source of truth. Corresponding to this ascent is a descending process that explains the emanation of beings from the First Principle and their transition from

unity to multiplicity through *emanation* or *effusion*, according to successive degrees of perfection. On the basis of this conception, the existence of the world is not necessarily explained as the result of a direct act of creation, but rather as the outcome of a gradual unfolding of existence from the First Principle. In certain Gnostic movements, this conception is associated with the view that the material world occupies a lower rank than the spiritual world. This raises the problem of the relationship between the divine principle and the sensible world, as well as the question of how to reconcile the perfection of the source with the existence of imperfection and evil in the world.

Some Gnostic conceptions maintain that the emergence of the material world, characterized by imperfection and corruption, occurred through successive intermediaries and levels that separate the transcendent divine principle from the sensible world. They explain this process through the concept of *emanation*, understood as the procession of beings from the perfection of the First Principle. However, this conception does not apply to all Gnostic movements. Furthermore, Plotinus's concept of emanation differs from Gnostic conceptions in several fundamental respects, particularly in its evaluation of the material world and its relationship to the First Principle. Therefore, comparing the two requires taking into account the distinctive characteristics of each intellectual system and distinguishing between their similarities and differences in explaining existence and the relationships between God, the world, and the soul.

2. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PYTHAGOREANS TO GNOSTIC PHILOSOPHY

Certain Gnostic conceptions were influenced by Greek thought, particularly Pythagoreanism, which combined philosophical contemplation with religious and purificatory practices. Pythagoreanism emphasized the immortality of the soul, its transmigration from one body to another, and the necessity of purifying and elevating it through knowledge and a particular way of life. These ideas intersect with certain Gnostic principles based on the distinction between spirit and body and on the view that knowledge and purification provide a means of liberation from the sensible world.

Pythagoreanism is considered one of the intellectual movements that paved the way for the emergence of spiritual and esoteric philosophical thought in Greece by combining metaphysical conceptions with religious and ethical teachings. Its doctrines aimed to discipline and purify the soul and to understand the cosmic order, while guiding its adherents toward practices and forms of contemplation that contribute to spiritual elevation and transcendence of the limitations of bodily existence.

Pythagoreanism was not confined to philosophical contemplation; it also encompassed a religious and ethical doctrine based on belief in the immortality of the soul and the existence of a spiritual realm, as well as practices intended to purify the soul in preparation for the afterlife. These teachings aimed to free the soul from attachment to matter and elevate it spiritually. Nevertheless, the similarities between Pythagoreanism and Gnosticism do not imply that the two were identical; rather, they reflect intellectual points of convergence concerning the immortality and purification of the soul and the relationship between body and spirit.⁶

Pythagoreanism combines philosophical contemplation of existence with a concern for the soul's destiny, purification, and salvation through beliefs and practices intended to free it from attachment to the material world and elevate it to a higher level of existence. These principles intersect with certain later Gnostic conceptions, particularly those concerning the spiritual nature of the soul and the possibility of its salvation.

The doctrine of transmigration in Pythagorean thought is based on the immortality of the soul and its passage, after death, into another body. It is associated with the idea of purifying the soul and liberating it from the cycle of birth and death known as the "Wheel of Birth." Ethical conduct and purificatory practices are regarded as two means of elevating the soul and freeing it from this recurring cycle.

Some scholars consider it possible that Pythagoras was influenced by ancient Egyptian beliefs concerning the soul and the afterlife, based on accounts indicating that he traveled to Egypt and came into contact with its priests and sages. However, establishing that the doctrine of transmigration was transmitted directly to him remains a hypothesis that requires historical evidence, despite the importance of investigating this question for understanding the possible interaction between Greek thought and Eastern beliefs concerning the immortality, purification, and posthumous destiny of the soul.⁷

As mentioned earlier, Gnosticism was widespread among the Egyptians, which suggests that this idea, namely the transmigration of souls, was derived from Egyptian Gnosticism. The Egyptians believed that “once the human soul departed from its body and passed into the body of another living animal, it would continue to move from one animal to another on land, in the sea, and in the air until it had completed the cycle of all animal species over a period of three thousand years. It would then return once again to the body of a newborn human being and might even return to the body of its original owner, reborn anew.”⁸

The Pythagorean conception of transmigration was also closely associated with the idea of the immortality of the soul, which the Pythagoreans are said to have adopted from the Indians.

The Pythagoreans regarded the soul as the source of good and the body and matter as sources of evil, to the extent that they considered the body a prison for the soul. They also revered numbers and mathematics as absolute truths that reveal the hidden order of the universe, linking this order to a single divine principle. Their thought was oriented toward the spiritual world, while diminishing the importance of the sensible world. This gave rise to points of convergence between Pythagoreanism and certain Gnostic conceptions, particularly regarding the oneness of God and the nature of spirit and matter.

3. GNOSTIC ELEMENTS IN PLATO’S PHILOSOPHY

Platonic thought was influenced by certain Pythagorean principles, particularly the emphasis on mathematics and rational knowledge. This influence is evident in the distinction between the changing sensible world and the immutable world of Forms. This conception gave rise to points of convergence with certain Gnostic principles, which regard knowledge as a means of transcending appearances and apprehending ultimate truth. Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish between the different philosophical premises and objectives of each.

Plato’s Theory of Forms provides a framework for examining similarities between his philosophy and certain ancient Eastern intellectual conceptions, particularly the distinction between the sensible world and the world of true reality. However, these similarities do not establish that Plato directly borrowed from such traditions, since the distinctive feature of his philosophy lies in its formulation of a comprehensive rational theory that explains existence, knowledge, and the possibility of attaining truth.

Plato distinguished between the changing and perishable sensible world and the world of Forms, which encompasses immutable and perfect truths. He maintained that material things are merely imperfect representations of their original Forms. Accordingly, genuine knowledge is attained by moving beyond sensory perception and elevating the intellect toward the apprehension of immutable essences, which confer reality and meaning upon things.

The Theory of Forms asserts that truth resides in immutable essences apprehended by the intellect rather than in changing sensory appearances. This made it a significant foundation for Neoplatonic philosophy, which developed its metaphysical and spiritual dimensions further. Studying this theory also provides a means of understanding the points of convergence between Platonic thought and Gnosticism, without presupposing that the two are identical or that a direct influence between them has been historically established.⁹

Plato maintains that the sensible world is changing and perishable and does not represent complete reality. Rather, the beings within it are merely imperfect images that imitate the immutable and perfect Forms. Accordingly, the world of Forms is regarded as the source of truth and true existence, whereas the material world remains limited, and its full reality cannot be apprehended through the senses alone.

Plato's philosophy converges with certain Gnostic conceptions in distinguishing between the material and spiritual worlds and in regarding ultimate truth as attainable through transcending the sensible realm toward spiritual knowledge. However, Plato connected the sensible world to the world of Forms through imitation and participation, whereas certain Gnostic doctrines adopted a more negative attitude toward matter because of its association with imperfection, corruption, and the source of evil.

Plato links the Theory of Forms to the nature of the soul and knowledge, maintaining that the soul apprehended intelligible truths before becoming united with the body. The Theory of Recollection is based on the idea that learning does not involve acquiring knowledge from nothing; rather, it consists in recovering what the soul previously knew in the world of Forms. This explains why the senses alone are insufficient to attain complete truth.

In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato maintains that the soul knew the Forms before becoming united with the body but lost that knowledge upon descending into the earthly world. Sensible objects therefore help the soul recollect the intelligible truths it previously knew, enabling it to move from the sensory perception of particulars to the intellectual apprehension of universal Forms.

Plato's Theory of Recollection emphasizes that genuine knowledge is attained through the intellect, while the senses merely stimulate the soul to recover truths it previously knew in the world of Forms. This conception converges with certain Gnostic beliefs that associate knowledge with the soul's recovery of its spiritual origin and liberation from ignorance. Nevertheless, this similarity does not establish the existence of direct influence between them, given the differences in their philosophical foundations and objectives.¹⁰

Plato maintains that the human soul is immortal and immaterial, as it possesses an intellectual nature and is connected to the immutable and eternal world of Forms. He supports this view by referring to the soul's existence prior to its union with the body and its ability to apprehend intelligible truths. He argues that death brings about the dissolution of the body without necessarily entailing the destruction of the soul, given the difference in the nature of the two.

Plato links the immortality of the soul to its origin in the world of Forms and also draws upon the concept of the transmigration of souls, which presupposes that, after the death of the body, the soul passes into another body. In his dialogue *Phaedo*, he presents the principle of the succession of opposites, maintaining that life emerges from death and death from life. This reinforces his view that death does not constitute the soul's final annihilation, but rather its transition to another stage of existence.¹¹

This means that the soul enters another body after separating from the first body upon its death. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the transmigration of souls is one of the fundamental principles of Gnosticism, which inherited it from the Pythagoreans.

Plato maintains that, despite its immortality, the soul loses its knowledge when it becomes connected to the sensible world, and that this knowledge is recovered through recollection and intellectual ascent toward the world of truth by means of dialectic. He emphasizes that the wise person attains knowledge and goodness through reason and virtue, thereby achieving true happiness founded on intellectual pleasures. By contrast, the tyrant indulges in illusory sensual pleasures and consequently lives in misery and turmoil.¹²

Plato maintains that the virtuous person is one who transcends sensory perception and attains intellectual knowledge through contemplation and abstract thought, in pursuit of understanding the immutable truths underlying sensible things. Accordingly, virtue is closely linked to wisdom and knowledge, as both help

individuals guide their conduct according to reason and achieve moral perfection.

Platonic philosophy converges with certain Gnostic movements in regarding knowledge as a means of transcending sensory perception, attaining a higher truth, and liberating oneself from ignorance. However, for Plato, knowledge is based on rational contemplation and the apprehension of immutable essences, whereas Gnostic knowledge, in many of its forms, relies on inner revelation and spiritual experience.

4. GNOSTIC ELEMENTS IN PLOTINUS'S PHILOSOPHY

Certain Gnostic ideas may have continued to exert an influence on ancient philosophy, extending into Neoplatonism, which developed under Plotinus. Plotinus was concerned with the nature and source of existence and the soul's ascent toward the First Principle. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to regard him as a representative of Gnosticism, despite certain points of convergence between his philosophy and some Gnostic conceptions, because he criticized several Gnostic doctrines, particularly their attitude toward the material world.

Plotinus was of Greek origin and received his philosophical education in Alexandria, a city characterized by the interaction of Greek philosophy with Eastern beliefs and religious and esoteric traditions. Within this intellectual environment, Neoplatonism emerged as a reinterpretation of the Platonic heritage in light of the prevailing metaphysical and religious questions. This makes it necessary to study Plotinus's philosophy within its historical context, while distinguishing between possible influences and his critical positions toward the movements of his time.

Neoplatonism converges with certain Gnostic conceptions along three fundamental lines: the One as a transcendent principle, emanation as an explanation for the procession of the various levels of existence, and matter as the lowest level of being. Nevertheless, Gnostic movements differ from Plotinus's philosophy in their interpretations of the origin of the material world and its relationship to the First Principle. This necessitates distinguishing between metaphysical similarities and doctrinal differences, without treating his philosophy as a direct continuation of Gnosticism.¹³

For Plotinus, the One is the First Principle and the source of existence. It is an absolute unity that transcends multiplicity, composition, and change. It also transcends all categories and determinations, making it impossible for the human intellect to fully comprehend its nature or describe it completely.

Plotinus maintains that the One transcends thought and intellect because thinking presupposes a distinction between the thinking subject and the object of thought, which is incompatible with its absolute unity. The One precedes Intellect and is the source from which Intellect emanates. Its true nature cannot be apprehended through rational concepts alone, which explains Plotinus's reliance on the method of negative theology when describing the First Principle.

Plotinus denies that the One possesses attributes such as thought, will, and activity in their familiar senses, because these imply distinction and multiplicity, which are incompatible with its absolute unity. This does not mean that the One lacks efficacy; rather, it emphasizes its transcendence of the limited attributes applicable to other beings.

Plotinus maintains that the One is the origin and source of existence, remaining transcendent to all beings without undergoing change or having its unity divided as they proceed from it. The theory of emanation explains how the various levels of existence proceed from this First Principle while preserving its absolute unity. The true nature of this unity cannot be apprehended directly; instead, it can be approached by denying of the One the limited attributes that characterize other beings.¹⁴

Plotinus maintains that the One is the absolute source of existence, self-sufficient and transcendent to Intellect, and that describing it as the absolute Good and absolute Truth is merely an approximation

intended to facilitate its understanding. His theory of emanation holds that Universal Intellect proceeds from the One, followed by the Universal Soul proceeding from Intellect, ultimately culminating in the sensible material world. This conception converges with certain Gnostic ideas that explain the emergence of beings as a gradual emanation from the One, descending through successive levels until reaching the level of matter.¹⁵

The similarity between the Plotinian and Gnostic conceptions is evident; however, the Gnostics did not explain how this process of emanation occurs, resorting instead to mythical expressions.

Plotinus's theory of emanation is based on the idea that existence necessarily proceeds from the One, owing to its absolute perfection and complete self-sufficiency. Contemplation constitutes the foundation of this process: Intellect proceeds from the One, the Universal Soul proceeds from Intellect, and sensible beings then emerge through the contemplation of the lower level of the Soul, in accordance with the hierarchical order of the levels of existence.¹⁶

Plotinus maintains that the attainment of true knowledge is achieved through the soul's ascent to Intellect and then to the One, by means of illumination and spiritual union with the divine principle. He also regards matter as the lowest level of existence because it lacks perfection, associating it with imperfection and metaphysical evil. Accordingly, spiritual ascent requires freeing the soul from attachment to the body and the senses and transcending the sensible world toward higher levels of existence, without denying its existence or regarding it as absolute non-being.

Plotinus holds that spiritual ascent begins with the purification of the soul from desires and bodily inclinations through the cultivation of moral virtues and the discipline of desires. This purification constitutes the foundation for achieving inner balance and liberation from attachment to sensible things, thereby preparing the soul for intellectual ascent and the apprehension of higher intelligible truths.

The second stage in Plotinus's philosophy consists of intellectual contemplation and the practice of philosophy as a means of transcending sensory perception and apprehending universal and immutable truths. Through this process, the soul ascends through the levels of knowledge and approaches an understanding of the metaphysical order of existence, ultimately reaching Intellect, which emanates from the One.

The final stage in Plotinus's philosophy consists of transcending discursive reasoning toward intuitive apprehension and union with the One, which transcends all intellectual distinctions. Moral purification, philosophical contemplation, and intellectual ascent constitute preparatory stages for attaining this spiritual union, which surpasses conceptual knowledge.

The spiritual experience in Plotinus's philosophy reaches its culmination in union with the One. At this stage, the soul transcends intellectual knowledge based on the distinction between subject and object and experiences direct communion with the First Principle. This union does not mean that the soul becomes a god; rather, it involves transcending the ordinary sense of separation from the transcendent principle.

For Plotinus, the ultimate goal is the soul's ascent from the sensible world to intellectual knowledge, followed by union with the One as the origin of existence. Although his philosophy converges with certain Gnostic conceptions regarding the purification of the soul and the transcendence of sensory knowledge in pursuit of transcendent truth, it differs from them in its view of the material world, which Plotinus considers the lowest level of existence rather than absolute non-being or pure evil.

Plotinus's concept of purification aims at the soul's elevation and union with the One in order to attain certain knowledge, with an emphasis on spiritual experience, revelation, and direct intuitive apprehension.¹⁷ His philosophy is based on a process that proceeds from the One to the intelligible world and then to the sensible world, followed by the soul's return through spiritual ascent toward the First Principle.¹⁸

For this reason, the concept of divinity constituted the central part of Plotinus's philosophy, through which he sought to explain all the issues he addressed.

A comparison between Gnosticism and the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus reveals intellectual points of convergence concerning existence, the relationship between spirit and matter, true knowledge, and the soul's destiny and ascent toward transcendent truth, despite the differences in their respective philosophical and doctrinal foundations. The most prominent points of similarity can be identified in several fundamental principles.

- Certain Gnostic conceptions converge with the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus in distinguishing between the spiritual world and the material world and in assigning a higher status to the former. Plato distinguishes between the immutable world of Forms and the changing sensible world, whereas Plotinus adopts a hierarchical conception of the levels of existence. However, this similarity does not establish the existence of direct influence; rather, it reflects a broader intellectual and religious interaction in the ancient world.

Gnosticism converges with the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus in regarding the sensible world as inferior to the intelligible or spiritual world because of its association with change, imperfection, and corruption. It also shares with them an inquiry into the origin of good and evil. Nevertheless, it differs in its interpretation of this issue and of the relationship between the divine principle and the material world, which precludes asserting that these conceptions originated in Gnosticism.

- Gnosticism and the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus share the view that sensory knowledge is limited and must be transcended in the pursuit of transcendent truth. Plato relies on rational knowledge and dialectical ascent, Plotinus emphasizes spiritual ascent and union with the One, while Gnosticism stresses the importance of esoteric knowledge and spiritual revelation as means of attaining salvation, despite the differences in their respective methods of acquiring knowledge and ultimate objectives.

- Gnosticism converges with the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus in its belief in the spiritual nature of the soul and the importance of purifying and elevating it toward higher knowledge. Plato emphasizes the immortality of the soul and its connection with wisdom and virtue, whereas Plotinus focuses on its purification and union with the One. These conceptions converge with Gnosticism in linking salvation to liberation from ignorance and attachment to matter, although the various doctrines differ in their interpretations of immortality, transmigration, and the means of salvation.

A comparison between Gnosticism and the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus reveals intellectual points of convergence concerning the nature of existence, the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible, and the status of the soul, knowledge, and transcendent truth. Nevertheless, these convergences do not necessarily imply direct influence or a single intellectual origin. Rather, they call for an examination of similarities and differences that takes into account the distinctive characteristics of each philosophical system and the available historical evidence.

CONCLUSION

Gnosticism has been criticized because some of its movements adopted a sharp separation between spirit and matter, leading to a view of the human being as divided between two opposing worlds and to the belief that salvation depends on distancing oneself from the material world. This conception may undermine an understanding of the human being as an integrated whole and limit concern for improving the world and engaging positively with its problems.

Certain Gnostic movements have also been criticized for restricting knowledge to a limited group and relying on symbolic and mythical interpretations. These tendencies gave rise to sharp disagreements with

the Christian Church concerning the nature of God, the world, Christ, and salvation. Nevertheless, the decline of Gnosticism cannot be attributed solely to the Church's opposition; it was also related to the diversity of Gnostic movements and the religious and political transformations experienced by ancient societies.

Some Gnostic movements have been criticized for their emphasis on transcendent realms and esoteric truths, which may lead to the marginalization of reality and its human and social problems, as well as a diminished concern for moral responsibility. Moreover, the separation of God from the world through multiple levels and intermediaries raises questions about divine providence and the origin of evil and suffering. These criticisms, however, should not be generalized to all Gnostic movements, given the differences among their respective conceptions.

The study of the relationship between Gnosticism and Platonic and Plotinian thought reveals the interplay of philosophical and religious influences in the ancient world. Plotinus was influenced by Plato, while Plato was influenced by Pythagoreanism, certain ideas of which intersected with ancient Eastern beliefs. Nevertheless, establishing the transmission of ideas between these cultures requires historical evidence; intellectual similarities alone are insufficient to demonstrate such transmission.

The principle of the cumulative development of knowledge emphasizes that philosophical thought evolves through interaction with, criticism of, and reformulation of earlier intellectual traditions, rather than in isolation from its civilizational contexts. Therefore, Greek thought cannot be regarded as entirely independent of its surrounding environment, nor can Plotinus's philosophy be reduced to a mere repetition of Plato or Gnosticism. Each intellectual movement possesses its own distinctive characteristics within a broader intellectual tradition shaped by the contributions of multiple civilizations.

The significance of studying the relationship between Gnosticism and Platonic and Plotinian thought lies in understanding the development and interaction of ideas across historical periods while preserving the distinctive character of each doctrine. Human thought is the cumulative product of interactions among civilizations, combining continuity, innovation, and criticism, and reflecting humanity's ongoing pursuit of self-understanding, comprehension of the world, and the search for truth and meaning.

Footnotes

(1) Amira Helmy Matar, *Plato's Republic*, Reading for All Festival, Family Library, 1994.

(2) Al-Shahrastani, *The Book of Religions and Sects*, edited by Amir Ali Muhanna and Ali Hasan Faour, Dar al-Ma'rifa, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. 2.

(3) Dr. Ibrahim Madkour, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, General Authority for Amiri Press Affairs, Cairo, 1983.

(4) Hanna al-Fakhoury and Khalil al-Jarr, *History of Arabic Philosophy*, Dar al-Jeel, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. 1, 2nd ed., 1972.

(5) Abdelkader Saleh, *Doctrines and Religions*, Dar al-Ma'rifa, Beirut, Lebanon.

(6) Abdel Rahman Badawi, *The Decline of Greek Thought*, United Artistic Printing Company, 4th ed., 1970.

(7) Ali Sami al-Nashshar, *The Emergence of Philosophical Thought in Islam*, Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, vol. 1, 1st ed.

(8) Mustafa al-Nashshar, *The History of Greek Philosophy from an Eastern Perspective*, Dar Quba for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1987.

(9) Mustafa al-Nashshar, *A New Introduction to Philosophy*, Dar Quba for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1st ed., 1998.

(10) Mustafa al-Nashshar, *The Philosophical School of Alexandria between Eastern Heritage and Greek Philosophy*, Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, 1st ed., 1995.

(11) Yusuf Karam, *The History of Greek Philosophy*, Committee for Authorship, Translation and Publication Press.

(12) Walter Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, translated by Mujahid Abdel Moneim Mujahid, Dar al-Thaqafa for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1984.

NOTES

¹ Ali Sami al-Nashshar, *The Emergence of Philosophical Thought in Islam*, Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, vol. 1, 1st ed., p. 176.

² Dr. Ibrahim Madkour, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, General Organization for Amiri Printing Affairs, Cairo, 1983, p. 133.

³ Abdelkader Saleh, *Doctrines and Religions*, Dar al-Ma'rifa, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 219.

⁴ Ali Sami al-Nashshar, *The Emergence of Philosophical Thought*, op. cit., p. 179.

⁵ Al-Shahrastani, *The Book of Religions and Sects*, ed. Amir Ali Muhanna and Ali Hasan Faour, Dar al-Ma'rifa, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. 2, pp. 20–21.

⁶ Mustafa al-Nashshar, *The History of Greek Philosophy from an Eastern Perspective*, Dar Quba for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1987, p. 167.

⁷ Mustafa al-Nashshar, *The History of Greek Philosophy from an Eastern Perspective*, op. cit., pp. 160–161.

⁸ Ibid., p. 161.

⁹ Mustafa al-Nashshar, *A New Introduction to Philosophy*, Dar Quba for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1st ed., 1998, p. 53.

¹⁰ Yusuf Karam, *The History of Greek Philosophy*, Committee for Authorship, Translation and Publication Press, p. 90.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 111.

¹² Amira Helmy Matar, *Plato's Republic*, Reading for All Festival, Family Library, 1994, p. 44.

¹³ Abdel Rahman Badawi, *The Decline of Greek Thought*, United Artistic Printing Company, 4th ed., 1970, p. 118.

¹⁴ Walter Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, trans. Mujahid Abdel Moneim Mujahid, Dar al-Thaqafa for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1984, p. 303.

¹⁵ Mustafa al-Nashshar, *The Philosophical School of Alexandria between Eastern Heritage and Greek Philosophy*, Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, 1st ed., 1995, p. 149.

¹⁶ Mustafa al-Nashshar, op. cit., p. 153.

¹⁷ Walter Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 306.

¹⁸ Abdel Rahman Badawi, *The Decline of Greek Thought*, op. cit., p. 122.