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The Aims of Neoplatonism

'NEOPLATONISM' is a term coined in modern times to distinguish the form of the Platonic tradition inaugurated by Plotinus (A.D. 204-70) and lasting in its pagan form down to the sixth century A.D. from the teaching of Plato's immediate disciples (the 'Old Academy') and from the Platonism of the earlier Roman Empire ('Middle Platonism'). Among the movement's post-Plotinian developments three periods may be distinguished: first, the teaching of Plotinus' pupils Porphyry (c. 232-c. 305) and Amelius; secondly, the Syrian and Pergamene schools deriving from the teaching of Iamblichus (died c. 326), and finally, the fifth- and sixth-century schools of Athens and Alexandria. The latter school, important mainly for its commentaries on Aristotle, passed in the sixth century into the hands of Christian teachers and was still active when the city was captured by the Moslems in 641; its dominant themes were subsequently incorporated into Islamic philosophy. The Athenian School, on the other hand, being more determinedly pagan, had been closed by the emperor Justinian in 529; its leading members were Plutarch of Athens (died 432),¹ Syrianus (died c. 437), Proclus (412-85), Damascius, head of the Academy at the time of its closure, and Damascius' younger contemporary Simplicius, the Athenian School's most important Aristotelian commentator. Contemporary Christian thinkers, such as the Cappadocians, Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius, were strongly influenced by the school, and the term 'Neoplatonism' is frequently applied both to their teaching and to later attempts to revive the school's leading ideas, such as those of Ficino and Pico at the Renaissance and Thomas Taylor in the nineteenth century. Some account of the school's later influence will be given in the final chapter, but the bulk of the book will be confined to the ancient Neoplatonists and, among these, to the pagans. This restriction is due to limitations both of space and of my own

¹ Not to be confused with the more famous Plutarch of Chaeronea, the second-century amateur Platonist philosopher and author of the *Moralia* and the *Parallel Lives*.

competence; it is the less serious since positive Christian influence on Neoplatonism was minimal, though reaction against the professedly Christian Gnostics helped to mould Plotinus' thought, just as his successors felt the need to construct a religious system to counter the growing appeal of Christianity. We shall thus have to provide a brief comparison of the Neoplatonic and Christian world-views (cf. pp. 100-5). It will also be necessary to prefix our account of the Neoplatonists themselves with a discussion of their treatment of Plato and Aristotle and to deal with the more important of their Middle Platonic predecessors.

The aims of Neoplatonism, as thus defined, can best be seen from Plotinus' treatise *On the Three Hypostases* (*Enn.* v. 1). The first part of that work (chapters 2-7) proceeds from an analysis of the world's constituent elements to the postulation of three successively more unified levels of true or divine reality (the three Plotinian 'Hypostases'), those of Soul (*psychē*), Intelligence (*nous*) and the One. Chapters 8 and 9 then endeavour to show that these principles are presupposed by the teaching of the Classical Greek philosophers, though they become fully articulate only in Plato, while chapters 10-12 demonstrate the existence of the Hypostases not just in external nature, but within the human mind (cf. v. 1. 10. 5-6). Corresponding to the three sections into which we have divided the treatise we may distinguish three aspects of Neoplatonism, which we may term respectively its metaphysical, exegetic and religious or experiential aspects. The last of these will need special explanation, since, as we shall see, different Neoplatonists understood it to mean different things; they were, however, unanimous that the theoretical knowledge afforded by the first two approaches was greatly inferior to the direct experience of Reality within one's own mind.

The metaphysical principles on which Neoplatonism rests are most conveniently set out in Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, where the whole Neoplatonic scale of being is systematically deduced from them. Fundamental among them were that the order, and indeed the very existence, of anything depends on its unity (props. 1-6; cf. Plotinus vi. 9. 1. 1-17) and that the cause is always more perfect than its effect (prop. 7). Others we shall discover in due course. These principles were for the most part derived from earlier Greek thought; for instance the axioms concerning unity had been fundamental to Pythagoreanism and Platonism, as later to Stoicism. Hence the school's metaphysics is intimately linked to its exegesis of the earlier philosophers. Indeed, as

we shall see, the Neoplatonists regarded themselves as Platonists pure and simple, in the sense of expounding nothing not already present, at least by implication, in Plato's own teaching. The later Neoplatonists tried further to show the presence of the same truths not merely in Aristotle and the earlier Greek philosophers, but in Homer, Hesiod and Greek mythology in general. Two sources were here of outstanding importance, the poems ascribed to Orpheus and the *Chaldaean Oracles*, an alleged divine revelation containing both a theology and a way of salvation. And this brings us to the school's religious aims.

Even those who know nothing else of Neoplatonism are aware that Plotinus was a mystic. 'Mystic', it must be stressed, is here used not in the sense of 'irrationalist', 'occultist' or 'teacher of esoteric doctrine', but in its strict sense of one who believes himself to have experienced union with God or Ultimate Reality. Plotinus' experience of union with the One corresponds to the experience which W. T. Stace¹ calls the 'undifferentiated unity', a state in which sensuous imagery and conceptual thought are transcended, the mind becomes perfectly unified and individual limitations are felt to be abolished. Porphyry states that Plotinus experienced this state four times during the six years of their acquaintance and that he himself had in his old age once attained it (*V. Pl.* 23. 12-18), while Plotinus, in a work written before he met Porphyry, describes himself as having often experienced it (*iv.* 8. 1. 1 ff.). Where Plotinus differs from most mystics is that for him, as for Plato, the soul's purification is accomplished primarily through philosophy (cf. *Enn.* 1. 3 passim), though like other mystics he regards moral self-discipline as essential (*Enn.* 1. 3. 6. 16 ff., II. 9. 15 etc.) and regards abstract reasoning as of limited value unless it culminates in intuitive vision and finally in mystical union (cf. e.g. *vi.* 7. 36). Porphyry, however, though still regarding philosophy as necessary for the soul's final salvation, took the not unreasonable view that it was too difficult for the average man; as an easier first step he recommended the practice of theurgy, a system of ritual purification based on a magical view of the universe and derived from the *Chaldaean Oracles* (Augustine *CD* x. 9). And for Iamblichus and the Athenian School it was theurgy which assumed the higher value and which alone could afford full salvation² (though the final goal remained, at least in theory,

¹ Cf. his *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London 1961) and *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York 1960) passim.

² Iamblichus *Myst.* II. 11, Proclus *PT* I. 25. p. 113. 6-10, Olympiodorus *In Phd.* 123. 3-6.

the mystical union). Hence the later Neoplatonists' stress on the justification of traditional ritual and the explanation of traditional mythology, culminating in the attempt of Julian the Apostate (sole emperor 361-3) to replace Christianity by a revived paganism with Neoplatonism as its philosophical basis.

That Neoplatonism should thus combine aims that appear divergent, if not incompatible, should not surprise us, since the same has been true of several of the greatest philosophies, not least those of the Greek world. Plato's theory of Forms, for instance, is an answer both to the logical problem of universals and to the ethical search for standards of ultimate value, while Aristotle's doctrine of substance has its roots both in logical analysis of the subject-predicate relation and in biological study of the structure of living organisms. But to construct a fully consistent philosophy on this basis is evidently far from easy. Doctrinal disputes among the Neoplatonists were in fact the result either of a different approach to a single one of the three aims we have distinguished or of divergent opinions as to which of them should be given preference where they conflicted. Not infrequently several issues were simultaneously involved; take for instance the complex sources, metaphysical, exegetic and experiential, of Plotinus' account of the Intelligible world, one of the major points of dispute within Neoplatonism (cf. pp. 54-6). If it seems surprising that the Neoplatonists never came to feel the incompatibility of their aims, two points should be remembered. First, as we have noted, most of the school's philosophical principles had already been at least implicit in Plato and Aristotle; hence, despite the perversity of Neoplatonic textual exegesis, Neoplatonic metaphysics could fairly claim at least to provide a logical development and systematisation of some of their fundamental ideas. Secondly, harmonisation of the school's metaphysical and religious aims was facilitated by the association, both in Pythagorean-Platonic tradition and in mystical discipline, of degrees of unity with degrees of perfection. Hence the One of Greek philosophical tradition could be identified with the mystics' 'undifferentiated unity' and the philosopher's ascent, whether through contemplation of the external world or by turning his attention within, could be seen as traversing the same stages.

Yet the result of Plotinus' approach to religious experience was the transposition of Greek philosophy into a new key. This was due not so much to the introduction of the mystical experience itself, which, if not certainly to be found in the Classical Greek thinkers, is present in

religious writings of the pre-Neoplatonic period, notably some of the Hermetica (e.g. *CH* x. 4–6) and perhaps (though this is disputed) in the Hellenising Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria. The decisive step was rather Plotinus' identification of metaphysical realities with states of consciousness. From a psychological point of view, his account of consciousness forms a remarkable contrast both with Classical Greek philosophy, which, except for a few passages in Aristotle (*De An.* III. 2. 425b 12 ff., III. 4. 429b 26 ff., *Met.* A. 9. 1074b 33 ff.), had barely recognised the concept, and with the Cartesian identification of 'consciousness' with 'thought' or 'mental activity' (cf. pp. 172–3). For Plotinus, as we shall see, not all thought is conscious; more precisely, our surface consciousness is only one of several levels of awareness and many elements in our mental life normally escape our notice. In fact Plotinus' observations on unconscious mental states form some of the most fascinating and modern-sounding passages of his works. But what concerns us here is that in his view it is states of consciousness that constitute the primary realities, of which material objects are a very poor imitation. In consequence his three Hypostases may be treated either statically, as objectively existing realities, or dynamically, from the point of view of the individual's inner life. The former tendency, termed 'gegenständlich' by German scholars, corresponds to what we have called the metaphysical approach to reality; the latter, experiential, tendency, on the other hand (German 'aktuell'), is most pronounced in Plotinus' vivid accounts of contemplation of the Ideal world and of mystical union.¹ Even in Plotinus, however, the two approaches cannot be sharply separated and in his successors the 'aktuell' element in its Plotinian form largely disappears; in particular, descriptions of mystical union become stereotyped and lack Plotinus' immediacy. But the equation of mental states with metaphysical entities remains basic for them and generates Neoplatonism's profoundest dilemma. Viewed as a metaphysical reality each level is real in its own right; viewed as states of consciousness, on the other hand, the lower levels become imperfect ways of viewing the true realities contemplated by the higher ones. This 'illusionist' view of the lower principles could claim further support from the Platonic tradition's description of them as 'images' of their priors. And here the question of their reality linked up with that of their value. As an image of its prior, and therefore imitating that

¹ The terms in question were coined in P. O. Kristeller's *Der Begriff der Seele in der Ethik des Plotin* (Tübingen 1929); cf. also H.-R. Schwyzer, 'Die Zweifache Sicht in der Philosophie Plotins', *Museum Helveticum* I (1944) 87–99.

prior as well as it can, each level is good and valuable; on the other hand, being merely an image, it is decidedly inferior to that prior and so must be finally transcended. The problem had been posed by Plato's equivocal attitude to the sensible world; it was left for the Neoplatonists to extend it to the whole hierarchy of Hypostases.

Neoplatonism thus stands not as an abandonment of Greek rationalism, but as an adaptation of the categories of Greek thought to the world of inner experience. It was inevitable, however, that such an adaptation should result in the modification, on some points, of the traditional Hellenic conceptual scheme, the most obvious example concerning the status of infinity (cf. pp. 56-7, 148-9). Here the problem arises for the Neoplatonists of reconciling the mystical desire to transcend form and limit with the Classical Greek view of these as the essence of perfection. It is conflicting tendencies of this kind that explain such paradoxes as that a movement that substantially shaped the Renaissance notion of Classicism should have impressed modern scholars with its affinities to the utterly non-classical thought of India.

So far we have presented the conflicts in Neoplatonic thought as arising out of its historical situation and therefore perhaps removable by more careful thought on the part of its proponents. But here we touch on a deeper problem, that the realities with which Neoplatonism dealt were very imperfectly expressible, if expressible at all, in conceptual terms and that in consequence alternative, seemingly contradictory, formulae might appear equally good, and in the last resort equally inadequate. Reality, in short, is impossible to confine within rigid formulae; yet it was just the Greek stress on conceptual precision that the Neoplatonists were unwilling to sacrifice. A further difficulty arose from the necessity for any analysis of mental states to employ language drawn from, and originally intended to apply to, the world of physical objects. Hence, while the problem was most conspicuous on the higher levels of the Neoplatonic universe, especially that of the One, it is also visible, for instance, in Plotinus' alternative attempts to divide Soul into 'levels' (cf. pp. 73-4). The need, in short, was for formulae which were precise and yet not so rigid as to be untrue to living experience. Here Neoplatonism touches on a problem which is finally insoluble and yet which no metaphysical system can ignore. Since the Neoplatonists' historical situation posed this dilemma for them in an exceptionally acute form, their results deserve our special attention.

In its stress on finding reality by turning within, away from the sensible world, Neoplatonism exhibits, in its own distinctive form, the

growing otherworldliness that affected all contemporary philosophies and religious movements. It would certainly be wrong to ascribe an otherworldly attitude to the population in general; as always, the hopes, fears and pleasures of both the masses and the aristocracy will have been firmly centred in the material sphere. The period has been more aptly characterised as an 'age of anxiety' or of insecurity, whose fruits manifested on the one hand in the proliferation of saviour cults, like those of Isis and Mithras, and of alleged divine revelations containing the knowledge needed for salvation (for instance the Gnostic systems and the writings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus), and on the other in the growth of belief in and practice of magic, much of it directed to decidedly this-worldly ends. Both these forces, as we shall see, were to affect Neoplatonism, but in appraising their effect it is vital both to distinguish the Neoplatonic attitude as a whole from that of other movements and to appreciate the divergent views existing within the school itself. Another symptom of the times, reflected in the Neoplatonists' attitude to their philosophical and religious sources, was a greatly increased reverence for the sages of the East and of antiquity. But to treat the period as merely a time of intellectual decline is too simple a view; while science and literature were all but dead, art and architecture certainly were not, and both the Neoplatonists and the best of their Christian contemporaries show that the power to think had not been lost. It is safer to regard it as a time when men's energies were directed to new ends; whether these were better or worse than what had gone before, or merely different, the reader's own preconceptions may be left to decide.

Nor can we speculate here about the new attitude's sociological causes. Some are obvious enough; for instance Neoplatonism's lack of interest in political thought clearly stems from the lack of free discussion imposed by the imperial structure. Other supposed causes should be viewed with more caution; thus to ascribe the new otherworldliness simply to the unsettled political and social conditions prevailing from the third century onwards ignores the fact that the most otherworldly of the Gnostic systems had appeared in the preceding, relatively tranquil century.¹ It must none the less be noted that Plotinus' life fell within the most disturbed period of the pagan empire's history, that between the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 and the accession of Diocletian in 284, and that the later Neoplatonic systems,

¹ Cf. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 250-1, and *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, p. 4.

with their rigidly hierarchical structure, coincided with the development, from Diocletian onwards, of a correspondingly rigid hierarchy among the empire's citizens. For the rest, the Neoplatonists were relatively well-off by contemporary standards and external events, the conflict with Christianity apart, have left virtually no trace on their writings and may therefore be ignored here.

Yet, while the Neoplatonists' otherworldliness was more thoroughgoing than that of their predecessors, the notion of philosophy as a way of life involving the whole man had been basic to Greek thought from the earliest times. The Neoplatonists' conception of the ideal philosophical life can be ascertained both from their ethical writings (for instance some of those making up Plotinus' first *Ennead* or Porphyry's letter to his wife Marcella) and from their disciples' accounts of their lives. Our surviving biographical sources number four. The best known are Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* and the biography of Proclus by his pupil and successor Marinus. The *Lives of the Sophists* by the rhetorician Eunapius of Sardis deals with Porphyry, Iamblichus and the latter's disciples, while Damascius' biography of his teacher Isidorus (regrettably extant only in fragments) digresses at incredible length to deal with most of the leading personalities of the Athenian and Alexandrian schools. All these sources stood close in time to their subjects (even Eunapius having had contact with Iamblichus' disciples) and there seems little reason to doubt their accuracy on most matters of fact. Unfortunately they all suffer to a greater or less extent from three defects. First, as any reader of Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* is aware (cf. p. 37), they display irritating silences on crucial points; secondly, they exhibit a predilection for the marvellous and miraculous; thirdly, they aim less at a historical picture of their subject than at depicting him as a model of all the philosophical virtues. This hagiographical tendency is especially pronounced, and quite openly avowed, in Marinus (*V. Pr.* 2, etc.), whose description of his master shamelessly pillages phrases from the *Enneads* and from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, while Damascius' eulogy of Isidorus contrasts amusingly with his vivid depiction of the foibles and failings of other late Neoplatonists.¹ At times, however, their subjects' idiosyncrasies emerge against their will; Marinus, for instance, has to acknowledge Proclus' quick temper (*V. Pr.* 16). The

¹ Cf. his epigrammatic comments on Hypatia (quoted below p. 141) and Hierocles (cf. p. 143); also *V. Is.* 62 and fr. 115 (on Theon), 74 (on Hermias), 144 (on Marinus), 221 (on Hegias), fr. 227 (on Domninus), fr. 316 (on Ammonius).

miraculous element is most pronounced in Eunapius' work, where it entirely obscures his subjects' role as theoretical philosophers; one should remember that he is the only one of the four who was not a philosopher himself. By contrast Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* is much more restrained and affords a powerful, if somewhat idealised, picture of the impression made by a great philosopher on his contemporaries. But here we are concerned with the general picture of the Neoplatonic philosophical life these sources provide.

The theoretical basis of that life was laid down by Plotinus and will be discussed in connection with his philosophy. Here we need merely correct mistaken impressions that might arise from a careless reading of our sources; we can be the briefer since the task has recently been admirably performed by P. Hadot, who observes, for instance, that Porphyry's statement that Plotinus 'abstained from the bath' (*V. Pl.* 2. 5-6) means not that he never washed, but that he avoided the distractions of the public bathing establishments.¹ What should be stressed for those disconcerted by Porphyry's remark that his master 'seemed ashamed of being in the body' (*V. Pl.* 1. 1-2) is the mildness, by Manichaean and even some contemporary Christian standards, of Neoplatonic asceticism. Why this was so our account of Plotinus will show (cf. pp. 82 ff.); to its underlying cause we have already alluded, namely the Platonic view of the material world as an image of its ideal archetype. Hence the body is not seen as an enemy, the keynote remains Hellenic moderation and self-discipline rarely turns into self-torture. Excesses of course occurred; it is more than doubtful whether the school can be blamed for Julian's notorious indifference to hygiene (*Misopogon* 338c), but Damascius provides a number of examples, for instance the extremely unladylike shock-tactics used by the Alexandrian philosopher-martyr Hypatia to discourage a would-be suitor (*V. Is.* fr. 102). But while the general Neoplatonic attitude to sex was, to say the least, very different from that of our own day, it was none the less equally opposed to that of Manichaeism. That sexual relations have value only for procreation had been implicit in Plato and was common ground for most moralists of late Antiquity. And the *Symposium's* doctrine that the sexual energy is more profitably directed towards the Ideal world provided a strong incentive to total celibacy. Plotinus himself never married, though his circle included married men and widows. Porphyry married the widow of a friend late in life and

¹ *Plotin*, pp. 105-16. On contemporary asceticism in general cf. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, pp. 29-36.

then only to care for her and her children (*Ad Marc.* III, Eunapius *VS* 457). In the later school, on the other hand, marriage became more common, with Proclus a notable exception (*V. Pr.* 17). Also remarkable was the school's rejection of the homosexuality of Classical Greece; Plotinus was shocked by a defence of the Platonic Alcibiades (*V. Pl.* 15. 6-17) and tacitly drops even Plato's conception of a sublimated non-physical relationship between philosophers (cf. p. 86), while Proclus' interpretation of Socrates' love for Alcibiades has more in common with Christian *agapē* than with Platonic *erōs* (cf. p. 154).

A similar attitude was taken to the question of vegetarianism. Plotinus himself abstained from meat (*V. Pl.* 2. 1-5), but the *Enneads* never mention the point, though Porphyry composed a treatise on the subject (the *De Abstinencia*). Later Neoplatonists had more difficulty, since animal sacrifice, involving consumption of part of the victim, was a feature of many of the traditional rites they wished to defend. Here again Proclus' attitude was stricter than that of most of his contemporaries and caused concern on his teachers' part for his health (*V. Pr.* 12); at sacrifices, however, he consented to taste a little meat for the sake of the ritual (*ibid.* 19). The Neoplatonic attitude to such points thus remained flexible and far removed from extreme asceticism.

Closer attention to our sources is apt indeed to raise doubts of an opposite kind. When we learn that Plotinus had full use of the large mansion of a wealthy widow (*V. Pl.* 9) or reflect on the revenues on which the Athenian Academy could draw in its last years (*V. Is.* 158, fr. 265, Olympiodorus *In Alc.* 141. 1-3), we may wonder whether the Neoplatonists' otherworldly protestations do not contain a tinge of hypocrisy. Against this we should recall that Plotinus' most determined affirmations of the philosopher's serenity come in the treatises written in his last two years, when his pupils had left him and he was dying of a painful disease. Nor, with persecution by the Christians an ever-present threat, was life without its problems for his later followers. And while the school had of course no doctrine of social service, the philosopher was expected to perform such tasks as came his way and show kindness to those he met. Once again Plotinus provides the best-known example, in his kindness (often involving very practical advice) to his friends and in particular his care for the welfare of the children bequeathed to his charge by senators on the point of death and impressed by his rectitude (*V. Pl.* 9. 5 ff.). From the later period we may quote such cases as the Alexandrian Hermeias' insistence on paying a fair price to booksellers ignorant of the value of their wares (*V. Is.* 74, fr. 122). But perhaps the

best evidence is the fact that in an age when men were apt to seize on any scandalous charge to hurl at their opponents, the Neoplatonists' Christian adversaries could generally find nothing worse than 'impiety' and 'arrogance' with which to charge them.¹ There are exceptions; for instance Maximus of Ephesus, Julian's spiritual director, became notorious for his ambition and luxury (Eunapius *VS* 476-80). On the whole, however, we may conclude that, like most ancient philosophers, the Neoplatonists were concerned to practise what they preached and succeeded as well as most both in using resources well and in facing adversity with fortitude.

The effects of the new otherworldliness on theology were likewise profound. Its aim was now first and foremost to afford man security through knowledge of his true nature and destiny, a destiny no longer confined, as in Stoicism and Epicureanism, within the sensible cosmos. Hence the revival in the new systems of Plato's body-soul dualism and their stress on the remoteness of the supreme God from this world, with which many of them, however, sought to combine the cosmic piety of Stoicism. But it was in knowledge of the supreme God that salvation was now regarded as consisting, a knowledge expressible only inadequately, if at all, in conceptual terms. The result was the rise of negative theology, the doctrine—common to mystical systems the world over—that words can tell us only what God is not, never what he is. A further result was the introduction of subordinate intermediary powers to bridge the vast gulf between God and the cosmos. In the Alexandrian Jew Philo this function is fulfilled by the Logos and the divine powers, in Platonists by the World-soul of Plato's *Timaeus* and in popular writers by the daemons, semi-divine spirits, who might be either good or evil, and whom Plato had described as mediators between gods and men (*Symp.* 202E, *Epin.* 984E). The multiplication of intermediate hypostases was carried to its greatest extent in some of the Gnostic systems and, as we shall see, in post-Iamblichean Neoplatonism.

The effects of these trends on the Neoplatonists' philosophical predecessors will be briefly discussed in our next chapter. Here we need merely issue a warning against blanket terms characterising the above developments that ignore the important divergences between the theological schools of late Antiquity. A term of this kind popular during the nineteenth century was the 'School of Alexandria', a label

¹ Porphyry, however, had to face the charge that his marriage was prompted by mercenary motives (*Ad. Marc.* 1).

grouping the Neoplatonists with Jewish and Christian thinkers resident at Alexandria and exhibiting similar tendencies, notably Philo, Clement and Origen. Use of this term obscures the facts, first that the thinkers in question were never members of a single common school and second that the only Neoplatonists based at Alexandria after Plotinus himself were the fifth- and sixth-century scholars to whom we have referred, who were of all Neoplatonists the least influenced by such other-worldly religious tendencies. For these reasons the term is now generally and rightly abandoned.

A more dangerous term, and one still commonly used, is 'Gnosticism'. The trouble with this term is that it has two senses, one broader and the other narrower and more precise. The former application is very similar to, though rather wider than, that of the term 'School of Alexandria', embracing, as it does, all the religious systems of the early centuries A.D. which sought salvation through knowledge or 'gnosis'. In its strict sense, however, the term denotes a group of systems, the majority of those known to us maintained by Christian heretics, and all of them opposed to Neoplatonism in that the 'knowledge' they sought was the product, not of philosophical reasoning, but of revelation by a divine saviour. And while on the doctrinal side it may be the resemblances between Gnosticism and Neoplatonism that impress a modern reader, matters appeared very differently to Plotinus, as we can see from the polemic composed by him against some Gnostics who had infiltrated his school (*Enn.* II. 9; cf. *V. Pl.* 16). Most important was their view of the material world as the work of an evil, or at best ignorant, creator, himself the result of a fall within the spiritual hierarchy (II. 9. chs. 4, 10-12). Their refusal to reverence the material world as a divine creation and their excessive complaints against the body were bad enough (cf. *ibid.* chs. 8, 16-18); far worse were their abuse of its creator and their denial of divinity to the World-soul and the heavenly bodies (*ibid.* ch. 5. 1-16, etc.). Hardly less objectionable were the Gnostics' disparagement of Plato, from whom, in Plotinus' view, they had derived everything of value in their doctrine, and their refusal to put forward their own views by reasoned argument instead of in the form of anthropomorphic and melodramatic myths (*ibid.* chs. 6 *passim*, 10. 5-14, *V. Pl.* 16. 8-9). Finally, there was their view of themselves as saved by nature, which led them to neglect moral discipline and even (in the antinomian Gnostic schools) to give themselves over to vice (II. 9. 15 *passim*, 17. 27-9). The existence of significant resemblances between the two systems Plotinus admits, explaining

them (on the whole correctly) as the result of borrowing from Plato (II. 9. 6. 6 ff.). And we must remember that both Platonism and Gnosticism were heterogeneous movements; Numenius of Apamea's dualism, for instance, came very close to Gnosticism on many points (cf. pp. 33-35), while conversely not all Gnostics took as unfavourable a view of the creator as Plotinus' opponents.¹ None the less in the light of such divergences as his polemic reveals, and especially the two movements' contrasting evaluations of philosophy and revelation, the classification of Neoplatonism as a form of Gnosis, even when no more than a general 'Gnostic tendency' is claimed, would seem to cause more confusion than it is worth.

In conclusion we must consider the vexed question of 'Orientalism'. The view, common in the nineteenth century and still often defended, that Neoplatonism marks the capitulation of Greek philosophy to Oriental influences, gains in plausibility when we consider the nationalities of the school's leading members. For instance the seven 'Greek philosophers' who went to Persia on the closure of the Academy include a Syrian, two Phoenicians, a Gazaeon and three natives of Asia Minor (a Cilician, a Phrygian and a Lydian) (cf. Agathias *Hist.* II. 30). Plotinus' alleged Egyptian birth may be doubtful (cf. p. 37), but Iamblichus' and Damascius' very names betray their Syrian origin,² while Porphyry was a Phoenician from Tyre, his Greek name being a translation of his Semitic name Malchus (*V. PL.* 17.6 ff., Eunapius *VS* 456). Even Proclus, though born in Constantinople, was by descent a Lycian from the city of Xanthus (*V. Pr.* 6), while his biographer and successor Marinus was a Samaritan from Neapolis (modern Nablus) in Palestine (*V. Is.* 141). But before this is taken as proof of 'Oriental degeneracy' we should recall, first, that Alexander's conquests had long ago established Hellenism as the culture of the educated classes throughout the Near East, secondly, that the proportion of Greek and Oriental blood in the citizens of those lands during our period is impossible to determine, and thirdly that it was the areas in question (Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt) that formed the most civilised parts of the Roman Empire and, with contemporary India and China, constituted one of the three major civilised areas of the globe.

The question of Orientalism decomposes on examination into three questions. First, does Neoplatonism involve abandonment of the Greek

¹ Cf. J. Zandee, *The Terminology of Plotinus and of Some Gnostic Writings, Mainly the Fourth Treatise of the Jung Codex*, Istanbul 1961, esp. pp. 24-6.

² Syrianus, however, despite his name, was by birth an Alexandrian.

tradition of rational, critical thought? Secondly, were any of its main doctrines or practices of Oriental origin? Thirdly, can the distinctive tone of Neoplatonism as opposed to earlier thought, on which we have commented, be ascribed to Oriental influence? To the first question alone the answer seems clear, and that answer, if our analysis is correct, is 'no'. We have just noted Plotinus' criticism of the Gnostics' refusal to state their position rationally and we shall find other Neoplatonists taking a similar stand against the Christian appeal to faith (cf. p. 101). The position is less clear-cut as regards Iamblichus and his followers; yet, even when philosophy had at their hands acquired a more avowedly theological purpose, the philosopher was still obliged, as Proclus' *Elements* shows, to demonstrate its truth on rational grounds. Iamblichus' demand that philosophical and theurgic matters must be kept separate (*Myst.* I. 2, II. 11 p. 96. 6-10) prevented the swamping of philosophy by religion, while his *De Mysteriis* was to offer a rational justification even of theurgic ritual. Nor did the Neoplatonists' recognition of a realm transcending conceptual thought—a view they shared with Plato, Kant and Wittgenstein—involve any slackening of critical rigour within the bounds of reasoning or in determining those bounds. As evidence of their opposition to treating mysticism as an excuse for irrationalism, Plotinus' declaration that 'to set oneself above Intelligence is to fall away from it' (II. 9. 9. 51-2) is echoed by that of Isidorus that 'those who would be gods must first become men' (*V. Is.* 227). To demonstrate this is one of the objects of our account.

Our second and third questions are much less easy to answer. From their earliest days Greek philosophy and science had drawn freely on the ideas of the Near East, which they had habitually given new meaning by organising them in a conceptual system hitherto lacking, and it is therefore to be expected that the Neoplatonists should have done the same. Whether we can determine exactly where this has been done is another question; allegedly Oriental doctrines have been generally shown to be explicable in terms of earlier Greek thought, and it is only those which explicitly conflict with traditional Hellenic ideas, as does, for instance, Numenius of Apamea's view that evil is present in the celestial spheres,¹ for which an Oriental origin can be plausibly inferred. Claims by the Neoplatonists themselves of an Oriental origin for their ideas are more often to be explained as a reading of Pythagoras or Plato into the Oriental sages. The case is a little happier as regards some of the later Neoplatonists' theurgic practices; for instance the

¹ Cf. p. 35 and A. H. Armstrong, *Entretiens Hardt V*, p. 53.

Egyptian origin of 'teletic', the magical animation of a divine statue, seems fairly securely established.¹ But the philosophical concepts by which theurgy was justified appear to be mainly Greek; Ptolemy and others had similarly justified Chaldaean astrology in terms of Greek scientific theory.

The picture is, if anything, even murkier as regards our third question. It seems certain, however, that only Indian thought bears sufficient resemblance to Plotinus' introspective mysticism to be taken seriously as a possible source. It has been shown on the one hand that cultural contacts were quite possible both before and during our period, on the other that Plotinus' views could have arisen simply by reflection on earlier ideas, notably the Aristotelian account of Intelligence, in the light of his own experience. And the tendency of the mystical experience to express itself in similar ways at all times and in all civilisations must also be taken into account. But it is doubtful whether all the resemblances between the similes used by Greek and Indian writers can be explained in this way; for instance the Neoplatonic comparison of divine activity to the effortless and unpremeditated radiation of light by the sun is also widespread in Indian texts.² But a final verdict on such points must await future research and it cannot, of course, be assumed that any borrowings must have been on the Greek side. In the meantime, though parallels between Greek and Indian thought deserve serious study, Neoplatonism must be treated as a development of the preceding Greek tradition. It is that tradition, and the Neoplatonists' use thereof, that will form the object of our second chapter.

¹ Cf. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 293-4. For an attempt to distinguish Platonic and Oriental elements in the *Chaldaean Oracles* cf. H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, chs. 6-7, pp. 311-441.

² Cf. for instance the use of this and other similes to illustrate the unpremeditated nature of the Buddha's activity by the Tibetan writer Gampopa (*Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, ch. 21, trans. Guenther, pp. 271-4), following the Indian Buddhist philosopher Asanga (*Uttaratantra IV*, 58-60). The sun simile recurs in the modern Hindu mystic Ramana Maharshi (*Collected Works*, p. 46). For another parallel cf. E. Bréhier, 'Les Analogies de la Création chez Çankara et chez Proclus', *Études de Philosophie Antiqué*, pp. 284-8. For a survey of scholars' views on possible connections between Plotinus and Indian thought, with full bibliographical references, cf. J. F. Staal, *Advaita and Neoplatonism* (Madras 1961), pp. 235-49.