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The Celestial Bodies in Enn. II 9 [33]

Implications of Plotinus' Criticism of Gnostic Astrology

Giulia Guidara*

Abstract

In his treatise *Against the Gnostics*, II 9[33], Plotinus claims that those who challenge the perfection of the celestial bodies cannot be virtuous, least of all can be the self-proclaimed elite of the mankind as in the Gnostics' narrative. Not only the heavenly bodies are perfect, as their movement in circle shows: they also instance the highest 'virtue'. What on earth can this mean? II 9[33] is the only treatise of the *Enneads* where the heavens are described in such terms. This article contends that Plotinus establishes a connection between 'virtue' and the celestial bodies in order to refute incisively the astrological beliefs of that kind of would-be Platonists that are the Gnostics in his eyes. He also includes the celestial order in his vision of the structure of reality and of the mankind's role within the visible world.

1. Introduction

The celestial bodies in *Enn.* II 9[33] are credited with a feature that is *prima facie* surprising, 'virtue' (ἀρετή). Here as elsewhere, the stars for Plotinus are eternal,¹ perfect and regular in their motions;² they have the power to indicate events or, to a certain extent, to influence some of them, even without being properly causes.³ All this is normal Plotinian doctrine, and for that matter is also a vision that he shares with most ancient philosophers, with some notable exceptions like John Philoponus, whose position falls outside the scope of this paper, but to whom I will return in the conclusion. Only in II 9[33] Plotinus claims that 'virtue' belongs to the celestial bodies, and considers as immoral whoever thinks otherwise.

This topic is not the subject of a systematic discussion on Plotinus' part, but counts as the frame of seven passages of the treatise, in chapters 4, 5, 8, 9, 13, and 16. In addition, II 9[33], 5.1-16; 8.29-38, and 16.9-12 highlight what kind of 'virtue' the celestial bodies possess, while II 9[33], 4.22-32; 9.26-35; 45-60, and 13.2-31 claim that if one does not adhere to the true doctrine about the heavens, one cannot be virtuous. Perhaps, a way so unusual to address this topic depends on the fact that his main concern here is to highlight the discordances between Gnosticism⁴ and Platonism (or better

* My warmest thanks go to Cristina D'Ancona, Concetta Luna and the anonymous reviewers for their corrections and remarks. All remaining shortcomings are entirely my own.

¹ I 1[40], 5 and II 3 [52], 8.

² II 2[14].

³ III 1[3], 5-6; II 3[52], 6-9, 10-15 and IV 4[28], 33-35.

⁴ Gnosticism is an extremely complex religious phenomenon, encompassing various currents under the label of γνῶσις, a term which is understood in this context as a knowledge of God that implies the humans' self-knowledge of their divine nature. This knowledge is revealed by a celestial entity, that 'descended' to illuminate the mankind. For a recent outline, cf. R. van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2013, pp. 1-12. In the present paper, 'Gnosticism' and related terms will be used in the most general sense, because there is uncertainty about what are

said, his interpretation of Platonism), rather than to argue in full his cosmological theories. The point is however worthy to be investigated. In what follows I will first deal with the ‘virtue’ of the celestial beings; then, I will present Plotinus’ views about the Gnostic mistake deriving from the failure to recognise such ‘virtue’.

1. The ‘virtue’ of the celestial bodies

The idea that the heavenly realities are ‘virtuous’ may seem paradoxical. Clearly, the celestial bodies do not have to choose the right thing to do, much less do they run the risk of becoming vicious: therefore, their ‘virtue’ cannot be understood in the ordinary sense. They are beyond freedom of choice, beyond the need to prevent or correct a bad behaviour since they obviously have no practical life. In order to grasp Plotinus’ point, we have to refer to the treatises where he deals with the true essence of ‘virtue’: I 2[19], *On Virtues*, and VI 8[39], *On the Free Will and the Will of the One*.

In I 2[19] Plotinus discusses virtue in terms of the Platonic “assimilation to God”,⁵ claiming that this is problematic at first glance: for, how can virtue make us similar to God, if God – the One-Good of the Platonic tradition – and the whole divine, intelligible realm are beyond any possibility to be involved in choice, hence do not possess ‘virtues’ properly speaking? Plotinus’ response is that the virtuous soul is similar to God as a copy to its model. If so, and if the model does not necessarily possess as such⁶ the qualities that it produces in its copies, the ‘virtues’ in the intelligible should be defined not as a behaviour or a habit that entails the possibility to act or be otherwise. Rather, in the Intellect the ‘virtues’ are in each case the μέτρον (for disorder belongs to matter), an uninterrupted and impassible thinking of what is good and right. This intelligible model, that is beyond ‘virtue’ in the usual sense, but is also its cause, produces in the soul, as its qualities, two levels of virtues. When the soul grasps the intelligible μέτρον, it develops first the civic virtues: temperance, courage, wisdom and justice. They impart order to the psychic faculties, and if so, man can be said to be ‘virtuous’. This basic level of virtue counts as the prerequisite for higher degrees of virtue: indeed, only once the soul is purified from passions and desires, detaching itself from the body as much as possible, it

the current, or currents, attacked by Plotinus: he never names his opponents. It is probable that his polemical target were the Valentinians, a Christian version of Gnosticism. The existence of a conflict between Plotinus and this Gnostic current seems to be confirmed by the so-called *Tripartite Tractate*, which is presented as the Valentinian answer to II 9[33] by F. Berno, “Rethinking Valentinianism: Some Remarks on the *Tripartite Tractate*, with special reference to Plotinus’ *Enneads* II 9”, *Augustinianum* 56 (2016), pp. 331-46, in part. pp. 343-4. This treatise depicts a kind of Gnosticism based mainly on Platonism. Neither this treatise, nor the two Gnostic works surely known to Plotinus, the *Zostrianos* and the *Allogenes*, contain any uncontroversial Christian element. A selection of the gigantic bibliography on this topic includes: J. Igal, “The Gnostics and ‘The Ancient Philosophy’”, in H.J. Blumenthal - R.A. Markus (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A.H. Armstrong*, Variorum, London 1981, pp. 138-49; M. Tardieu, “Les Gnostiques dans la *Vie de Plotin*. Analyse du chapitre 16”, in L. Brisson - J.-L. Chelonneix - M.-O. Goulet-Cazé - R. Goulet - M.D. Grmek - J.-M. Flamand - S. Matton - J. Pépin - H.D. Saffrey - A.-Ph. Segonds - M. Tardieu - P. Thillet (eds.), *Porphyre. La Vie de Plotin, vol. II. Études d’introduction, texte grec et traduction française, commentaire, notes complémentaires, bibliographie*, Vrin Paris 1992 (Histoire des doctrines de l’Antiquité classique, 16), pp. 505-63, in part. pp. 522-3; S. Gertz (ed.), *Plotinus Ennead II 9. Against the Gnostics*. Translation with an Introduction and Commentary, Parmenides Publishing, Las Vegas - Zurich - Athens 2017 (The *Enneads* of Plotinus with Philosophical Commentaries), in part. pp. 16-9

⁵ I 2[19], 1.

⁶ Otherwise it would no longer be principle, but would be itself a part of the derivatives and, thus, another principle would be necessary, and so on, *ad infinitum*. This point has been highlighted by G. Catapano in Plotino, *Sulle Virtù. I 2[19]*, Introduzione, testo greco, traduzione e commento a cura di G. Catapano, Edizioni Plus (Greco, Arabo, Latino. Le vie del sapere, 2) Pisa 2006, pp. 21-5, whose treatment of the topic inspires my summary above.

is ready to acquire the ‘contemplative’ virtues, whose repeated practice make the soul to concentrate on rational activities without hindrance and, in this way, to become similar to the divine Intellect, whose nature is intellection.⁷ In this way, the virtue itself qualifies as the “intellectualisation” of the soul, as Plotinus claims in I 2[19], 1.46-50:

οὕτως οὖν κόσμου καὶ τάξεως καὶ ὁμολογίας μεταλαμβάνοντες ἐκεῖθεν καὶ τούτων ὄντων τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐνθάδε, οὐ δεομένων δὲ τῶν ἐκεῖ ὁμολογίας οὐδὲ κόσμου οὐδὲ τάξεως, οὐδ’ ἂν ἀρετῆς εἶη χρεῖα, καὶ ὁμοιούμεθα οὐδὲν ἧττον τοῖς ἐκεῖ δι’ ἀρετῆς παρουσίαν.

So, then, if we participate in order and arrangement and harmony which come from There, and these constitute virtue here, and if the principles There have no need of harmony or order or arrangement, they will have no need of virtue either, and we shall all the same be made like them by the presence of virtue.⁸

True virtue is not only above the practical sphere, but also has little to do with free will. This point emerges from Chapter 6 of the treatise VI 8[39], *On the Free Will and the Will of the One*, that clarifies the relations among virtue and self-determination. While free will entails choice, self-determination does not, in reality: the more something is perfect, the less it can oscillate between alternatives. If something is perfect, it cannot part company with its own nature, hence it is stable in its status, which, being determined only by itself, is ‘free’ in the sense that it has no external constraints.⁹ Together with rationality, virtue is the core of authentic freedom, given that it makes the soul free, namely able to be the only principle of its actions:

εἰ οὖν τά τε νῦν ὀρθῶς λέγεται, ἐκεῖνά τε τούτοις συμφώνως ἔξει, φήσομεν τὴν μὲν ἀρετὴν καὶ τὸν νοῦν κύρια εἶναι καὶ εἰς ταῦτα χρῆναι ἀνάγειν τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν καὶ τὸ ἐλεύθερον· ἀδέσποτα δὲ ὄντα ταῦτα τὸν μὲν ἐφ’ αὐτοῦ εἶναι, τὴν δὲ ἀρετὴν βούλεσθαι μὲν ἐφ’ αὐτῆς εἶναι ἐφεστῶσαν τῇ ψυχῇ, ὥστε εἶναι ἀγαθὴν, καὶ μέχρι τούτου αὐτὴν τε ἐλευθέραν καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐλευθέραν παρασχέσθαι· προσπιπτόντων δὲ τῶν ἀναγκαίων παθημάτων τε καὶ πράξεων ἐφεστῶσαν ταῦτα μὲν μὴ βεβουλεῦσθαι γενέσθαι, ὅμως γε μὴν καὶ ἐν τούτοις διασώσειν τὸ ἐφ’ αὐτῇ εἰς αὐτὴν καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἀναφέρουσιν· [...] ὥστε καὶ τὸ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτεξούσιον καὶ τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν οὐκ εἰς τὸ πράττειν ἀνάγεσθαι οὐδ’ εἰς τὴν ἔξω, ἀλλ’ εἰς τὴν ἐντὸς ἐνέργειαν καὶ νόησιν καὶ θεωρίαν αὐτῆς τῆς ἀρετῆς. δεῖ δὲ τὴν ἀρετὴν ταύτην νοῦν τινα λέγειν εἶναι οὐ συναριθμοῦντα τὰ πάθη τὰ δουλωθέντα ἢ μετρηθέντα τῷ λόγῳ· ταῦτα γὰρ ἔοικε, φησίν, ἐγγύς τι τείνειν τοῦ σώματος ἐθεσι καὶ ἀσκήσεσι κατορθωθέντα.¹⁰

If then what we are saying now is correctly said and what we said before will be in tune with it, we shall assert that virtue and intellect have the mastery and that we should refer being in our power and freedom to them: and since these have no master, intellect is independent and virtue wishes to be independent

⁷ Cf. J. Dillon, “Plotinus, Philo and Origen on the Grades of Virtue”, in Id., *The Golden Chain: Studies in the Development of Platonism and Christianity*, Routledge, Aldershot 1990 (Variorum Collected Studies, 333), pp. 92-105; A. Schniewind, *L’éthique du sage chez Plotin. Le paradigme du spoudaios*, Vrin, Paris 2003 (Histoire des doctrines de l’Antiquité classique, 31), in part. pp. 85-113.

⁸ All the translations quoted are by A.H. Armstrong, Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. I-VI. Translated by A.H. Armstrong, Harvard U.P., Cambridge 1969-1988 (Loeb Classical Library).

⁹ This point is highlighted by E. Eliasson, *The Notion of ‘That Which Depends On Us’ in Plotinus and its Background*, Brill, Leiden 2008 (Philosophia Antiqua, 113).

¹⁰ VI 8[39], 6. 3-14; 19-26.

by supervising the soul to make it good, and up to this point is free itself and makes the soul free; but when compulsory passions and actions come in the way it has not in its supervision wished that they should occur, but all the same even among these it will keep its independence by referring back to itself even here; [...] so that also in practical actions self-determination and being in our own power is not referred to practice and outward activity but to the inner activity of virtue itself, that is, its thought and contemplation. But one must say that this virtue is a kind of intellect and not count in with it the passions which are enslaved and limited by the reason; for these, Plato says, “come close to the body, since it is by habits and exercises”¹¹ that they are set in order.

It is now clear in what sense the celestial bodies are ‘virtuous’: they contemplate the intelligible and nothing hinders such contemplation. Anything that would deflect them from their own intrinsic finality, contemplation, has no influence on them: ‘free’ in the sense of self-determined, they are by the same token also ‘virtuous’, because their intellection is ceaselessly directed towards the intelligible source of every virtue.

In II 9 [33], the ‘virtue’ of the heavenly realities is always mentioned in comparison with that of the human beings. If men possess virtue, a fortiori do the celestial bodies, whose nature is divine.¹² Such comparison is not established accidentally, quite the contrary: it implies the criticism of the idea that the human beings are placed above the entire visible reality.¹³ This idea is unacceptable to Plotinus, in whose hierarchy men are surely above animals and plants, but below the heavenly entities.¹⁴

As Sebastian Gertz points out,¹⁵ what makes planets and stars more ‘virtuous’ than humans is their uninterrupted contemplation of the intelligible world. This theme is introduced first in II 9[33], 5.1-16:

ἀλλ’ αὐτοὺς μὲν σῶμα ἔχοντας, οἷον ἔχουσιν ἄνθρωποι, καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν καὶ λύπας καὶ ὀργὰς τὴν παρ’ αὐτοῖς δύναμιν μὴ ἀτιμάζειν, ἀλλ’ ἐφάπτεσθαι τοῦ νοητοῦ λέγειν ἐξεῖναι, μὴ εἶναι δὲ ἐν ἡλίῳ ταύτης ἀπαθεστέραν ἐν τάξει μᾶλλον καὶ οὐκ ἐν ἀλλοιώσει μᾶλλον οὔσαν, οὐδὲ φρόνησιν ἔχειν ἀμείνονα ἡμῶν τῶν ἄρτι γενομένων καὶ διὰ τοσοῦτων κωλυομένων τῶν ἀπατώντων ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐλθεῖν· οὐδὲ τὴν μὲν αὐτῶν ψυχὴν ἀθάνατον καὶ θεῖαν λέγειν καὶ τὴν τῶν φαυλοτάτων ἀνθρώπων, τὸν δὲ οὐρανὸν πάντα καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖ ἄστρα μὴ τῆς ἀθανάτου κεκοινωνηκένα ἐκ πολλῶ

¹¹ Plat., *Resp.* VII, 518 D 10 - E 2.

¹² The assumption that the celestial bodies are gods because they contemplate the intelligible is rather frequent in the *Enneads* and is also quite obvious from the standpoint of a Platonic philosopher of the Imperial Age, being a consequence of the deification of the cosmos attested at least from Xenophon and Plato: cf. A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. II: *Le dieu cosmique*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2006 (Collection d’Études anciennes, 75, 1st ed. 1949), in part. pp. 78-89; 92-150; 153-332. See also R.W. Sharples, “Alexander of Aphrodisias and the End of Aristotelian Theology”, in T. Kobusch - M. Erler (eds.), *Metaphysik und Religion: Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens*. Akten des Internationalen Kongresses vom 13.-17. März 2001 in Würzburg, Saur, München-Leipzig (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 160), pp. 1-22, in part. pp. 14-5. Sharples shows how ‘naturalistic’ theology, including Alexander’s theories of the Unmoved Mover and of providence, paves the way for the Neoplatonists to develop their not-naturalistic and mystical theology.

¹³ Such mastery does not belong to all humans indistinctly. Indeed, it is a common Gnostic belief that mankind is divided into pneumatics (spiritual people), psychics (people who have souls, but not of divine origin) and hylics (material people), and that there is no divine knowledge except in the first class. According to J. Dillon, even Plotinus refers to such division: cf. J. Dillon, “The Theory of the Three Classes of Men in Plotinus and Philo”, in Id., *The Golden Chain* (above, n. 7), pp. 69-75.

¹⁴ II 9[33], 17.33-38.

¹⁵ Cf. Gertz (ed.), Plotinus. *Ennead II 9. Against the Gnostics* (above, n. 4), pp. 188-9.

καλλιόνων καὶ καθαρωτέρων ὄντα, ὁρῶντας ἐκεῖ μὲν τὸ τεταγμένον καὶ εὐσχημον καὶ εὐτακτον καὶ μάλιστα τὴν ἐνταῦθα περὶ γῆν ἀταξίαν αὐτοὺς αἰτιωμένους· ὡσπερ τῆς ἀθανάτου ψυχῆς τὸν χεῖρω τόπον ἐπίτηδες ἐλομένης, παραχωρῆσαι δὲ τοῦ βελτίονος τῆ θνητῆ ψυχῆ ἐλομένης.

But really! For these people who have a body, like men have, and desires and griefs and passions, by no means to despise their own power but to say that they can grasp the intelligible, but that there is no power in the sun which is freer than this power of ours from affections and more ordered and more unchangeable, and that the sun has no better understanding than we have, who have only just come to birth and are hindered by so many things that prevent us from coming to the truth! And to say that their soul, and the soul of the meanest of men, is immortal and divine, but that the whole heaven and the stars there have no share in giving them in the immortal soul, though they are made of much fairer and purer material, though these people see the order there and the excellence of form and arrangement, and are particularly addicted to complaining about the disorder here around the earth! As if the immortal soul had taken care to choose the worse place, and chosen to retire from the better in favour of the mortal soul!

Plotinus says the same then again, in 8.29-38:

γῆ μὲν δὴ πᾶσα ζῶων ποικίλων πλήρης καὶ ἀθανάτων καὶ μέχρως οὐρανοῦ μεστὰ πάντα· ἄστρα δὲ τὰ τε ἐν ταῖς ὑποκάτω σφαίραις τὰ τε ἐν τῷ ἀνωτάτῳ διὰ τί οὐ θεοὶ ἐν τάξει φερόμενα καὶ κόσμῳ περιόντα; διὰ τί γὰρ οὐκ ἀρετὴν ἔξουσιν ἢ τί κώλυμα πρὸς κτήσιν ἀρετῆς αὐτοῖς; οὐ γὰρ δὴ ταῦτά ἐστιν ἐκεῖ, ἅπερ τοὺς ἐνταῦθα ποιεῖ κακοῦς, οὐδ' ἡ τοῦ σώματος κακία ἐνοχλουμένη καὶ ἐνοχλοῦσα. διὰ τί δὲ οὐ συνῆσιν ἐπὶ σχολῆς αἰεὶ καὶ ἐν νῶ λαμβάνουσι τὸν θεὸν καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τοὺς νοητοὺς θεοὺς, ἀλλ' ἡμῖν σοφία βελτίων ἔσται τῶν ἐκεῖ;

Now certainly the whole earth is full of living creatures and immortal beings, and everything up to the sky is full of them: why, then are not the stars, both those in the lower spheres and those in the highest, gods moving in order, circling in well-arranged beauty? Why should they not possess virtue? What hindrance prevents them from acquiring it? The causes are not present there which make people bad here below, and there is no badness of body, disturbed and disturbing. And why should they not have understanding, in their everlasting peace, and grasp in their intellect God and the intelligible gods? Shall our wisdom be greater than that of the gods there in the sky?

The perfection of the stars depends upon the nature of their bodies, which allows the corresponding souls to exercise intellection with no break. Both passages emphasise that the heavenly souls rule easily their bodies, because the latter are not subject to impulses and passions (unlike humans' ones). This is due to the fact that in the heavens fire, which is the matter of such bodies, moves circularly.¹⁶

The other reason why the stars' virtue depends upon the kind of their bodies is given in II 9[33], 5.1-16. Their contact with the intelligible is not interrupted by the cycle of rebirth, while years pass before a human being, after having received a basic education, can become aware, under the guidance of a Platonic philosopher, of his true origin and can begin to contemplate – not to say that admittedly few can do it.

¹⁶ Cf. A. Linguiti, "Il cielo di Plotino", in M. Bonazzi - F. Trabattoni (eds.), *Platone e la tradizione platonica. Studi di filosofia antica*, Cisalpino (Quaderni di Acme, 58), Milano 2003, pp. 251-64; A. Falcon, *Corpi e movimenti. Il De Caelo di Aristotele e la sua fortuna nel mondo antico*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 2001 (Elenchos, 33), pp. 211-4.

Plotinus' argument entails the eternity of the celestial bodies and of the cosmos as a whole, which the Gnostics reject. He does not elaborate on this point, but probably he alludes either to the final conflagration that, in some Gnostic accounts, will destroy the whole sensible world, or to the general idea, shared also by Christians not Gnostic, that the visible universe will come to an end at a given point. In Plotinus' view, to deny the eternity of the heavens means not to understand the structure of reality: immortal souls dwell in the sublunar sphere, notwithstanding its disorderly aspects; even more so in the heavens, where everything is orderly and beautiful, and in the celestial bodies, that possess virtue to the highest degree.

It is the 'virtue' of the stars that ensures the indissoluble connection between the sensible and the intelligible levels of the reality, as Plotinus says in II 9[33], 16.9-12:

ψυχαι δὲ καὶ ἐν τούτοις καὶ νοεραὶ καὶ ἀγαθαὶ καὶ συναφεῖς τοῖς ἐκεῖ πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ αἱ ἡμῶν. πῶς γὰρ ἂν ἀποτμηθεῖς ὅδε ὁ κόσμος ἐκείνου ᾗν; πῶς δὲ οἱ ἐν αὐτῷ θεοί;

And there are souls in these [the heavenly bodies] too, and intelligent and good ones, much more closely in touch with the beings of the higher world than our souls are. How could this universe exist if it were cut off from that other world? How could the gods be in it?

In the three passages quoted above, the comparison between the celestial bodies and the human beings highlights what the structure of reality is and what humans' role is within it: as we shall see, the foolish ideas of the Gnostics about the cosmos prevent them also from understanding the real principles of good behaviour.

2.1. *Theoretical mistakes, moral mistakes*

The errors about the celestial realities are only part of a more general erroneous attitude towards reality, as stated in II 9[33], 4.22-32:

οὐδὲ τὸ κακῶς γεγονέναι τόνδε τὸν κόσμον δοτέον τῷ πολλὰ εἶναι ἐν αὐτῷ δυσχερῆ· τοῦτο γὰρ ἀξίωμα μετῴν ἐστι περιτιθέντων αὐτῷ, εἰ ἀξιούσι τὸν αὐτὸν εἶναι τῷ νοητῷ, ἀλλὰ μὴ εἰκόνα ἐκείνου. ἢ τίς ἂν ἐγένετο ἄλλη καλλίων εἰκὼν ἐκείνου; τί γὰρ ἄλλο πῦρ βελτίων τοῦ ἐκεῖ πυρὸς παρὰ τὸ ἐνταῦθα πῦρ; ἢ τίς γῆ ἄλλη παρὰ ταύτην μετὰ τὴν ἐκεῖ γῆν; τίς δὲ σφαῖρα ἀκριβεστέρα καὶ σεμνοτέρα ἢ εὐτακτοτέρα τῇ φορᾷ μετὰ τὴν ἐκεῖ τοῦ κόσμου τοῦ νοητοῦ περιοχὴν ἐν αὐτῷ; ἄλλος δὲ ἥλιος μετ' ἐκεῖνον πρὸ τούτου τοῦ ὀρωμένου τίς;

We cannot grant, either, that this universe had an evil origin because there are many unpleasant things in it: this is a judgement of people who rate it too highly, if they claim that it ought to be the same as the intelligible world and not only an image of it. Surely, what other fairer image of the intelligible would could there be? For what other fire could be a better image of the intelligible fire than the fire here? Or what other earth could be better than this, after the intelligible earth? And what sphere could be more exact or more dignified or better ordered in its circuit [than the sphere of this universe] after the self-enclosed circle there of the intelligible universe? And what other sun could there be which ranked after the intelligible sun and before this visible sun here?

The Gnostics blame the cosmos because of a much more general mistake. They believe that there is nothing good and divine in the visible world, if not some other human beings (i.e. their coreligionists), and that there is an unbridgeable gulf between our world and the divine realm. This is false: between the sensible and the intelligible worlds there is a close connection. Here like in II

9[33], 8.29-38, Plotinus repeats that the cosmos is not merely an image, but a beautiful image of the intelligible: thus, careful observation of it reveals its perfections. Among these, there is also the celestial sphere, for its regular motions prove that it is *σεμνοτέρα* than our human reality, being in close contact with the most divine beings. Now, given that the Gnostics do not recognize the divinity of the cosmos – which is indeed clearly proven by the divinity of the heavens – they cannot be virtuous. As he says in II 9[33], 9.26-35,

ἀλλὰ χρῆ ὡς ἄριστον μὲν αὐτὸν πειραῖσθαι γίνεσθαι, μὴ μόνον δὲ αὐτὸν νομίζειν ἄριστον δύνασθαι γενέσθαι – οὕτω γὰρ οὕτω ἄριστος – ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀνθρώπους ἄλλους ἀρίστους, ἔτι καὶ δαίμονας ἀγαθοὺς εἶναι, πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον θεοὺς τοὺς τε ἐν τῷδε ὄντας ἀκεῖ βλέποντας, πάντων δὲ μάλιστα τὸν ἡγεμόνα τοῦδε τοῦ παντός, ψυχὴν μακαριωτάτην· ἐντεῦθεν δὲ ἤδη καὶ τοὺς νοητοὺς ὑμνεῖν θεοὺς, ἐφ’ ἅπασιν δὲ ἤδη τὸν μέγαν τὸν ἐκεῖ βασιλέα καὶ ἐν τῷ πλήθει μάλιστα τῶν θεῶν τὸ μέγα αὐτοῦ ἐνδεικνυμένους.

But one ought to try to become as good as possible oneself, but not to think that only oneself can become perfectly good – for if one thinks this one is not yet perfectly good. One must rather think that there are other perfectly good men, and good spirits as well, and, still more, the gods who are in this world and look to the other, and most of all, the ruler of this universe, the most blessed Soul. Then at this point one should go on to praise the intelligible gods, and then, above all, the great king of that other world, most especially by displaying his greatness in the multitude of gods.

Shortly after, at lines 45-60, Plotinus repeats:

ἔπειτα σεμνὸν δεῖ εἰς μέτρον μετὰ οὐκ ἀγροικίας, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἰόντα ἐφ’ ὅσον ἡ φύσις δύναται ἡμῶν, ἀνιέναι, τοῖς δ’ ἄλλοις νομίζειν εἶναι χώραν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ καὶ μὴ αὐτὸν μόνον μετ’ ἐκεῖνον τάξαντα ὡσπερ ὄνειρασι πέτεσθαι ἀποστεροῦντα ἑαυτὸν καὶ ὅσον ἐστὶ δυνατὸν ψυχῇ ἀνθρώπου θεῷ γενέσθαι· δύναται δὲ εἰς ὅσον νοῦς ἄγει· τὸ δ’ ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἤδη ἐστὶν ἔξω νοῦ πεσεῖν. πείθονται δὲ ἄνθρωποι ἀνόητοι τοῖς τοιούτοις τῶν λόγων ἐξαίφνης ἀκούοντες ὡς “σὺ ἔση βελτίων ἀπάντων οὐ μόνον ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλὰ καὶ θεῶν” – πολλὴ γὰρ ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἡ αὐθάδεια – καὶ ὁ πρότερον ταπεινὸς καὶ μέτριος καὶ ἰδιώτης ἀνὴρ, εἰ ἀκούσειε· “σὺ εἶ θεοῦ παῖς, οἱ δ’ ἄλλοι, οὓς ἐθαύμαζες, οὐ παῖδες, οὐδ’ ἂν τιμῶσιν ἐκ πατέρων λαβόντες, σὺ δὲ κρείττων καὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οὐδὲν πονήσας” – εἶτα καὶ συνεπηχῶσιν ἄλλοι;

Then the man of real dignity must ascend in due measure, with an absence of boorish arrogance, going only so far as our nature is able to go, and consider that there is room for the others at God’s side, and not set himself alone right after God; this is like flying in our dreams and will deprive him of becoming a god, even as far as the human soul can. It can as far as intellect leads it; but to set oneself above intellect is immediately to fall outside it. But stupid men believe this sort of talk as soon as they hear “you shall be better than all, not only men, but gods” – for there is a great deal of arrogance among men – and the man who was once meek and modest, an ordinary private person, if he hears “you are the son of God, and the others whom you used to admire are not, nor the beings they venerate according to the tradition received from their fathers; but you are better than the heaven without having taken any trouble to become so” – then are other people really going to join the chorus?

The one who pretends to be the only son of God in this world – making, in addition, no effort to purify himself – is an *ἰδιώτης*, namely a person lacking any philosophical background. Such a person has simply no idea of what the true God is, and ignores that the plurality of the divine realities, be they visible or invisible, is nothing but a trace of God’s immense power. With

their repeated blame of the cosmos, coupled with overvaluation of themselves, such people cannot become *ἄριστοι*. Far from being οἱ ἄν θεῶ ὄσι φίλοι, there is no divine election for them, as Plotinus claims in II 9 [33], 9.70-75:

ἀλλ' ὁ κόσμος δεῖται καὶ οἶδε τὴν τάξιν αὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ ἐν αὐτῷ ὅπως ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ὅπως ἐκεῖ, καὶ ἀνδρῶν οἱ ἄν θεῶ ὄσι φίλοι, πράως μὲν τὰ παρὰ τοῦ κόσμου φέροντες, εἴ τι ἐκ τῆς τῶν πάντων φορᾶς ἀναγκαῖον αὐτοῖς συμβαίνει· οὐ γὰρ πρὸς τὸ ἐκάστω καταθύμιον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸ πᾶν δεῖ βλέπειν·

But the universe does need him [i.e., god], and knows its station, and the beings in it know how they are in it and how they are there in that higher world, and those of men who are dear to God know this, and take kindly what comes to them from the universe, if any unavoidable necessity befalls them from the movement of all things. For one must not look at what is agreeable to the individual but at the All.

Virtue is an integral part of the path to the divine, and those who are really dear to God are virtuous in so far as they accept kindly (*πράως*) everything that is caused by the movement of the universe, even misfortune. Therefore, without knowledge of the cosmic order there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no relationship with the divine.

2.2. *The function of the celestial bodies*

Not only the celestial bodies are virtuous, they also cause virtue. To establish this point, Plotinus proceeds in Chapter 13 to refute the idea that they can cause misfortune. Ignorance of the structure of reality paves the way to superstitious fear of the heavenly configurations:

ὁ ἄρα μεμφόμενος τῇ τοῦ κόσμου φύσει οὐκ οἶδεν ὅ τι ποιεῖ, οὐδ' ὅπου τὸ θράσος αὐτοῦ τοῦτο χωρεῖ. τοῦτο δέ, ὅτι οὐκ ἴσασι τάξιν τῶν ἐφεξῆς πρώτων καὶ δευτέρων καὶ τρίτων καὶ ἀεὶ μέχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων, καὶ ὡς οὐ λοιδορητέον τοῖς χείροσι τῶν πρώτων, ἀλλὰ πράως συγχωρητέον τῇ πάντων φύσει αὐτὸν θέοντα πρὸς τὰ πρῶτα παυσάμενον τῆς τραγωδίας τῶν φοβερῶν, ὡς οἴονται, ἐν ταῖς τοῦ κόσμου σφαίραις, αἱ δὴ πάντα μείλιχα τεύχουσιν αὐτοῖς· τί γὰρ φοβερὸν ἔχουσιν αὐται, ὡς φοβοῦσι τοὺς ἀπείρους λόγων καὶ πεπαιδευμένης ἀνηκόους καὶ ἐμμελοῦς γνώσεως;

The man who censures the nature of the universe does not know what he is doing, and how far this rash criticism of his goes. This is so because the Gnostics do not know that there is an order of firsts, seconds and thirds in regular succession, and so on to the last, and that the things that are worse than the first should not be reviled; one should rather calmly and gently accept the nature of all things, and hurry on oneself to the first, ceasing to concern oneself with the melodrama of the terrors, as they think, in the cosmic spheres, which in reality “make all things sweet and lovely” for them. For what is there terrible about the spheres, which makes them terrify people who are unpractised in reasoning and have never heard anything of a cultured and harmonious “gnosis”?

The Gnostics' fear concerns mainly the astral influence. They depict the celestial bodies as tyrants, ruling wickedly the events of the sublunar world. Plotinus refutes this idea with three arguments. First, in II 9[33], 13.11-18, he claims that the bodies of the stars do not harm in any way the cosmos but, on the contrary, collaborate with the corresponding souls to maintain its order:

οὐ γὰρ, εἰ πύρινα τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν, φοβεῖσθαι δεῖ συμμετρῶς πρὸς τὸ πᾶν καὶ πρὸς τὴν γῆν ἔχοντα, εἰς δὲ τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν βλέπειν, αἷς καὶ αὐτοὶ δῆπουθεν ἀξιούσι τίμιοι εἶναι. καίτοι

καὶ τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν μεγέθει καὶ κάλλει διαφέροντα συμπράττοντα καὶ συνεργοῦντα τοῖς κατὰ φύσιν γιγνομένοις, ἃ οὐκ ἂν οὐ γένοιτό ποτε ἔστ' ἂν ἢ τὰ πρῶτα, συμπληροῦντα δὲ τὸ πᾶν καὶ μεγάλα μέρη ὄντα τοῦ παντός.

For even if their bodies [i.e. of the spheres] are fiery, there is no need to fear them, since they are duly proportioned to the All and the earth; but one should look at their souls – it is on their souls that the Gnostics themselves, of course, base their claim to honour. Yet their bodies, too, are outstanding in size and beauty and are partners and co-operators in all that happens according to nature, and cannot ever not happen as long as the first principles exist; they are essential to the completeness of the All and are important parts of the All.

Probably, the polemical target of this passage is the idea that stars are made by a sort of dangerous matter, that can be detrimental to mankind.¹⁷ On the contrary, Plotinus (and implicitly every sound Platonist in his eyes) assumes the divine, and thus good, nature of the heavenly beings. Such assumption becomes explicit in the second argument, advanced in II 9[33], 13.18-20: a comparison between men and stars. Being better than men, stars do not act in an arbitrary way and with the intent to do evil:

εἰ δ' ἄνθρωποι τίμιόν τι παρ' ἄλλα ζῶα, πολλῶ μᾶλλον ταῦτα οὐ τυραννίδος ἕνεκα ἐν τῷ παντὶ ὄντα, ἀλλὰ κόσμον καὶ τάξιν παρέχοντα.

And if men have an important degree of honour in comparison with other living things, these are much more honourable, as they are not in the All to exercise tyrannical rule but as the givers of beauty and order.

Here Plotinus criticises the foolish identification of the heavenly beings with the 'Archons' and the demons of the celestial spheres in the Gnostic narrative: the sons of Ialdabaoth, controlling every aspect of human existence, feature in some Gnostic texts as capable to necessitate everything by the inescapable regularity of their movements. In this context, episodic irregularities as for instance the precession of the equinoxes signal the interventions of a god who breaks the astrological fate, in order to allow the ascent of an elect soul.¹⁸

The third argument pivots on the function of the celestial bodies within the sensible world. They could hardly be tyrants, as the Gnostics imagine, because they are not causes at all: they do not produce, rather merely indicate events that are indeed the outcome of many different interactions of chances, places where something happens, moments of birth and dispositions of those involved in a particular circumstance. This interesting passage, 13.20-31, deals with a topic so crucial for Plotinus, that an entire treatise will be devoted to it later on: *On Whether the Stars Are Causes* (II 3[52]).

ἃ δὲ λέγεται γίνεσθαι παρ' αὐτῶν, σημεῖα νομίζειν τῶν ἐσομένων εἶναι, γίνεσθαι δὲ τὰ γενόμενα διάφορα καὶ τύχαις – οὐ γὰρ οἷόν τε ἦν ταῦτά περὶ ἐκάστους συμβαίνειν – καὶ καιροῖς γενέσεων καὶ τόποις πλεῖστον ἀφεστηκόσι καὶ διαθέσει ψυχῶν. καὶ οὐκ ἀπαιτητέον πάλιν ἀγαθούς πάντας, οὐδ' ὅτι μὴ τοῦτο δυνατόν, μέμφεσθαι προχείρως πάλιν ἀξιούσι μηδὲν διαφέρειν ταῦτα ἐκείνων, τό τε κακὸν μὴ νομίζειν ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ ἐνδεέστερον εἰς φρόνησιν καὶ ἔλαττον ἀγαθὸν

¹⁷ Cf. R. van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (above, n. 4), pp. 209-10.

¹⁸ Cf. H.J. Hodges, "Gnostic Liberation from Astrological Determinism: Hipparchan 'Trepidation' and the Breaking of Fate", *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997), pp. 359-73.

καὶ ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸ μικρότερον· οἷον εἴ τις τὴν φύσιν κακὸν λέγοι, ὅτι μὴ αἰσθησίς ἐστι, καὶ τὸ αἰσθητικόν, ὅτι μὴ λόγος.

As for what is said to happen as a result of their influence, one should consider that they give signs of things to come, but that the variety of things that happen is due to chance – it was not possible that the fortune of each individual should be the same – and to reasons of birth, and places far different from each other, and the dispositions of souls. And again, one should not demand that everybody should be good nor, because this is not possible, should be ready with censure, demanding that this world should differ in no way from that higher one; nor is it right not to consider evil as anything else than a falling short in wisdom, and a lesser good, continually diminishing; as if one were to say that the growth-principle was evil because it is not perception, and the principle of perception, because it is not reason.

If something bad happens to a sublunar being, this has nothing to do with the celestial bodies, rather it depends on the hierarchical and varied structure of the cosmos, which is nevertheless good, as Plotinus has already shown before.¹⁹

It is not easy to find the exact polemical target of the three arguments developed in II 9[33], 13. The Gnostic texts surely known by Plotinus are few, and only two of them have come down to us: the *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII, 1) and the *Allogenes* (NHC XI, 3).²⁰ Neither depicts the celestial bodies as enemies of men: there is no reference to such topic in the *Allogenes*, while in the *Zostrianos* the heavenly deities are indifferent to human activities.²¹ Plotinus' criticism seemingly refers to the myth of Barbelo, that plays an important role particularly in the 'Sethian' Gnostic texts, so called because they allegedly derive from the same Gnostic movement which poses 'Seth' as the saviour of the mankind.²² This myth describes the visionary ascent of an elect, enabled to see the various spiritual levels of reality, from earth until to the Eon (i.e., a spiritual entity emanated from higher principles) named Barbelo, the first emanation from the Supreme Deity. In some versions of the Gnostic narrative, the transition of the elect from level to level is hindered by the celestial 'Archons', that let pass only who knows magic sayings, or possesses particular amulets.²³ Each passage of level is carried out by means of a baptism, that symbolises the increasing reunification with the divine.²⁴ Plotinus does not mention magical practices connected to Gnostic astrology; one may speculate that this is due to the fact that his intent in this treatise is to refute the general principles of the Gnostic narratives, not their details.²⁵ Be that as it may, the idea that magical practices or amulets may interrupt or change the course of the nature is in the last resort only

¹⁹ II 9[33], 4. 22-32, quoted above.

²⁰ Porph., *Vita Plotini* 16.1-9. The texts known by Plotinus feature also in the Nag Hammadi collection: cf. M. Tardieu, "Les Gnostiques dans la *Vie de Plotin*. Analyse du chapitre 16" (above, n. 4), p. 520; J.D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, Les Presses de l'Université Laval - Éditions Peeters Québec - Louvain-Paris 2001 (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section Études, 6), pp. 198-9 and 295. According to R. Majercik, on the contrary, there are some differences between the Greek versions that circulated in Plotinus' school, and their Coptic translations: cf. R. Majercik, "The 'Being-Life-Mind' Triad in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism", *The Classical Quarterly* 42 (1992), pp. 475-88.

²¹ Cf. C. Barry - W.-P. Funk - P.-H. Poirier - J.D. Turner (eds.), *Zostrien (NH VIII, 1)*, Les Presses de l'Université Laval - Éditions Peeters Québec - Louvain-Paris, 2000 (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section Textes, 24), pp. 498-9.

²² Cf. van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (above, n. 4), p. 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13; 174-5.

²⁴ Cf. J.D. Turner, "Ritual in Gnosticism", in Turner - Majercik (eds.), *Gnosticism and Later Platonism* (above, n. 12), pp. 86-97.

²⁵ Plotinus assigned to Porphyry and Amelius the task of developing a more detailed refutation: cf. Porph., *Vita Plotini*, 16.9-18.

a consequence of the fallacy of thinking that man supersedes nature, a fallacy that is repeatedly criticised in the treatise.

The third argument is potentially problematic. As we have seen before, II 9[33], 13.22-25 claims that the events are determined not by the stars, but by the people and the places involved. Now, even if one does not take into account the intelligible causality, which is not mentioned in Chapter 13,²⁶ one should recall that for Plotinus the true cause of the events in the cosmos is the cosmos itself, a living organism whose parts are connected to each other. This idea is clearly stated in IV 4[28], 32.1-14:

εἰ οὖν μήτε σωματικαῖς αἰτίαις ἀναθήσομεν μήτε προαιρέσεσιν, ὅσα ἔξωθεν εἰς ἡμᾶς τε καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ζῶα καὶ ὅλως ἐπὶ γῆς ἀφικνεῖται ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, τίς ἂν εἴη λοιπὴ καὶ εὐλογος αἰτία; πρῶτον τοίνυν θετέον ζῶον ἔν παντα τὰ ζῶα τὰ ἐντὸς αὐτοῦ περιέχον τόδε τὸ πᾶν εἶναι, ψυχὴν μίαν ἔχον εἰς πάντα αὐτοῦ μέρη, καθόσον ἐστὶν ἕκαστον αὐτοῦ μέρος· μέρος δὲ ἕκαστόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν τῷ παντὶ αἰσθητῷ, κατὰ μὲν τὸ σῶμα καὶ πάντη, ὅσον δὲ καὶ ψυχῆς τοῦ παντός μετέχει, κατὰ τοσοῦτον καὶ ταύτη· καὶ τὰ μὲν μόνης ταύτης μετέχοντα κατὰ πᾶν ἐστὶ μέρη, ὅσα δὲ καὶ ἄλλης, ταύτη ἔχει τὸ μὴ μέρη πάντη εἶναι, πάσχει δὲ οὐδὲν ἦττον παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων, καθόσον αὐτοῦ τι ἔχει, καὶ κατ' ἐκεῖνα, ἃ ἔχει. συμπαθὲς δὴ πᾶν τοῦτο τὸ ἔν, καὶ ὡς ζῶον ἔν.

If, then, we are not to attribute all that comes from the sky to us and the other living creatures, and in general upon the earth, to bodily causes or the deliberate choices of the heavenly bodies, what reasonable explanation is left? First of all we must posit that this All is a single living being which encompasses all the living beings that are within it; it has one soul which extends to all its parts, in so far as each individual thing is a part of it; and each thing in the perceptible All is a part of it, and completely a part of it as regards its body; and in so far as it participates in the soul of the All, it is to this extent a part of it in this way too; and those things which participate in the soul of the All alone are altogether parts, but all those which also participate in another soul are in this way not altogether parts, but none the less are affected by the other parts in so far as they have something of the All, and in a way corresponding to what they have. This one universe is all bound together in shared experience and is like one living creature [...].

Thus, even though Plotinus denies firmly the direct causal function of the celestial bodies, he acknowledges some sort of influence on their part on the sublunar world: in II 9[33], 9.70-75 he says that some unspecified events are linked to the movement of the celestial sphere,²⁷ and in

²⁶ Only the intelligible can be truly cause. This point emerges mainly when Plotinus deals with the freedom of the souls, due to their intelligible nature: cf. P. Henry, "Le problème de la liberté chez Plotin", *Revue néoscholastique de philosophie* 33 (1931), pp. 50-79; J. Trouillard, "La liberté chez Plotin", in *La liberté*. Actes du IV^e Congrès des Sociétés de philosophie de langue française, Neuchâtel, 13-16 septembre 1949, éd. de la Baconnière, Neuchâtel 1949, pp. 353-7; J. Rist, "Prohairesis: Proclus, Plotinus et alii", in H. Dörrie (ed.), *De Jamblique à Proclus*, Fondation Hardt, Genève 1975 (Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique, 21), pp. 103-17; D. O'Brien, "Le volontaire et la nécessité", *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 167 (1977), pp. 401-22; G. Leroux, "Human Freedom in the Thought of Plotinus", in L.P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 1996, pp. 292-314; A. Linguisti, "Scelta e libertà", *Aperture* 9 (2000), pp. 51-8; Plotino, *Che cos'è l'essere vivente e che cos'è l'uomo? I I*[53]. Introduzione, testo greco, traduzione ne e commento di C. Marzolo, Plus, Pisa 2006 (Greco, arabo, latino. Le vie del sapere, 1), pp. 53-62; F. Trabattoni, "Libertà e autodeterminazione dell'essere umano in Plotino", in M. Di Pasquale Barbanti - D. Iozzia (eds.), *Anima e libertà in Plotino*. Atti del convegno nazionale, Catania, 29-30 gennaio 2009, Cuecm, Catania 2009, pp. 189-211.

²⁷ Plotinus does not detail here, or anywhere else, the diverse effects of the celestial movements; however, it is clear that he is thinking of the phenomena of the bodily sphere, that do not restrict men's freedom: in IV 4[28], 34.1-3 he points out that the stars influence those parts of the human being which are connected to the body of the universe (defined in II 3[52],

II 9[33], 13.14-18 he describes the cooperation between the stars and nature as the cause of some events. A contradiction seems to arise with the denial of the causality of the celestial bodies that we have seen before. However, the contradiction is only apparent: if the true cause of what happens in the cosmos is the cosmos itself, this entails that the celestial bodies act as its parts, and not as stand-alone principles, that in addition would ‘act’ against the general rules of nature to harm an individual, or the mankind. As Frederick M. Schroeder remarks, according to Plotinus the whole always transcends its parts, because the function of each part can be understood only in relation to organic wholeness.²⁸ It is true that a Gnostic respondent could consider the heavens’ influence on the sublunar world, which is admitted by Plotinus, as potentially inconsistent with the third argument of Chapter 13: perhaps, it is for this reason that II 9[33] does not contain references to the connection between individual souls and stars, that was posed by Plato²⁹ and is admitted by Plotinus in other treatises.³⁰ All in all, the reader gets the impression that the first and second arguments, that take into account the ‘virtue’ of the celestial bodies, are the most important ones for him.

3. Conclusion

It is now clear why Plotinus can say that the celestial bodies are ‘virtuous’. They perform in ceaseless way the contemplative virtue, with no need of any inferior or preparatory kind of virtue that might imply effort or decision between alternatives. Their bodies are eternal and require no care, their souls are pure of passions and contemplate the intelligible uninterruptedly. This topic occurs only in II 9[33] and nowhere else, and one is entitled to ask why. My tentative response is that in this way Plotinus leaves no doubt about the fact that a Platonist is expected to maintain that the celestial bodies have by nature what few humans achieve with great effort. Hence, the Gnostic contempt for the visible world is unacceptable for a real Platonist: a mistake, theoretical and ethical at the same time. Thus, Plotinus’ account of the celestial bodies in II 9[33] reveals itself as a well defined strategy against the heart of Gnosticism, namely the idea of self-proclaimed divine election. Plotinus

10.1-3 as the passive aspects of the cosmos), while II 3[52], 14 shows that such parts are the bodily complexions (including temperament: cf. III 1[3], 5.24-28). This is Plotinus’ answer to the astral determinism of the Gnostics, the Stoics, and the astrologers: cf. E. Spinelli, “La semiologia del cielo. Astrologia e anti-astrologia in Sesto Empirico e Plotino”, in A. Pérez Jiménez - R. Caballero (eds.), *Homo mathematicus*. Actas del Congreso Internacional sobre Astrólogos Griegos y Romanos (Benalmádena, 8- 10 de octubre de 2001), Málaga 2002, pp. 275-300, in part. pp. 279-83; 293-9; C. Maggi, “La concezione plotiniana dell’uomo tra fascino e autodomínio: la questione degli influssi astrali”, *Études platoniciennes* 4 (2007), pp. 353-71.

²⁸ Cf. F.M. Schroeder, “Aseity and Connectedness in the Plotinian Philosophy of Providence”, in J.D. Turner - R. Majercik (eds.), *Gnosticism and Later Platonism. Themes, Figures, and Texts*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta 2000 (Symposium, 12), pp. 138-9; cf. also M. Fattal, “Plotino di fronte agli Gnostici, ovvero Plotino di fronte all’antiellenismo e all’antiplatonismo degli Gnostici: la questione del mondo e del demiurgo nel Trattato 33 (II, 9)”, in Id., *Plotino, gli Gnostici e Agostino*, Loffredo Editore Napoli 2008 (Σκέψεις. Collana di testi e studi di filosofia antica, 20), pp. 127-8.

²⁹ In *Tim.* 42 B 3 - D 2, each soul is related to a star, from which it moves and to which it returns after death, on condition that it has lived in the right way. On the reception of this idea, cf. Festugière, *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste* (above, n. 11), vol. III: *Les doctrines de l’âme, chapitre I, “L’origine céleste de l’âme”*, pp. 1127-62.

³⁰ In III 4[15], 6.19-30 Plotinus, paraphrasing Plato, writes that the individual souls after death dwell in different parts of the heavens according to their dispositions, for they have different potentialities, in analogy to those of the celestial bodies they come from. Nothing in III 4[15] allows us to say that these celestial bodies determine through and through the human actions; nevertheless, the point summarised above raises some problems of consistence with the refutation of astrological determinism.

points out that virtue is essential for ascending to God, and therefore the Gnostics, having no idea of the nature of cosmos and virtue, have no ground for pretending that their alleged ‘knowledge’ descends from high, from the divine realm. Against this background, one can better understand a much later debate, on which Philippe Hoffmann has called attention in his analysis of Simplicius’ attack against Philoponus. The latter argued against Aristotle that there was no difference between the sublunar and the celestial substance, both being generated (as proclaimed in the *Timaeus*), and hence corruptible. “In his reply to the *Contra Aristotelem*, Simplicius reaffirms the divinity, the transcendency, and the eternal nature of the heavens. His exegesis aims to connect, rather than contrast, Plato’s *Timaeus* and Aristotle’s *De Caelo*. (...) Dominated by his passions, led by his imaginations or fantasies, Philoponus is inveigled into the crassest absurdities: he even goes so far as to assert that the light of the heavens is in no way different from the light of a glow worm or of fish-scales. (...). Philoponus is intent on showing that (...) the heavens and the whole universe were born at one precise moment in time and will perish at another. (...) Simplicius intended not only to teach Philoponus something about the interpretation of Plato, but also to re-establish the harmony between Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophies and to reaffirm the separation of the heavens and the sublunary world in keeping with the teachings of the *De Caelo*”.³¹ It is tempting to conclude from the passages analysed above that in vindicating the divinity of the heavens Simplicius inherits ultimately from Plotinus’ treatment of the visible cosmos in II 9[33].

³¹ Ph. Hoffmann, “Simplicius’ Polemics. Some Aspects of Simplicius’ Polemical Writings against John Philoponus: from Invective to a Reaffirmation of the Transcendancy of the Heavens”, in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science*, Duckworth, London 1987, pp. 57-83, quotations from pp. 57, 71, 76, and 82.

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