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The Net in the Sea: A Note to Plotinus' *En. IV* 3(27).9.34-44

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Abstract

In Plotinus' first treatise, *On the Problems of the Soul*, the comparison of the cosmic body floating in the soul to a net in the sea is simple enough, at least at first glance. While most of the translators and experts have no doubts that the net in this metaphor stands for the body and the sea for the soul, a few of them are doubtful as to whether the analogy is as self-evident as it seems. This is particularly true of the second part of the metaphor, casting the universal soul as the sea, and thus presenting a striking contrast to the prevalent symbolism of the sea and water in general. The uncertainty of this Plotinian image leads us to investigate two relevant philosophical concepts, namely flux and infinity, which in Plotinus are applied to very different contexts: the former is generally related to the fluctuating nature of the sensible world, but is also present in the image of the One as inexhaustible spring. Similarly, we have a concept of infinity applied to the ungraspable bodiless matter on the one hand, as well as to the limitless power of Being on the other. I believe that Plotinus, refusing to be limited by the established meaning of the current philosophical imagery, is consciously using these ambiguities to refine his arguments, possibly as a polemic against rival philosophical doctrines.

Keywords

Plotinus, soul, body, sea, net, metaphor, infinite, Gnostics

1. Introduction

In chapter 9 of the first tractate, *On Difficulties about the Soul* (IV 3(27)), in Plotinus' discussion of the relationship between soul and body, we find a metaphor of the net in the water, namely in the sea. In Plotinus' philosophical discourse, images and metaphors are used to reinforce the message of doctrine discussed, but opinions differ on whether its role is subsidiary or whether it has a more independent meaning.¹ Plotinus, not unlike his spiritual teacher Plato, tends to use metaphors when writing about crucial themes of his philosophy. The aforementioned metaphor is less known than other famous Plotinian metaphors of light,² circle, water source, etc. which Plotinus uses repeatedly. The passage goes:

“It is in this sort of way that it is ensouled; it has a soul which does not belong to it, but is present to it; it is mastered, not the master, possessed, not possessor. The universe lies in soul which bears it up, and nothing is without a share of soul. It is as if a net immersed in the waters were alive, but unable to make its own that in which it is. The sea is already spread out and the net spreads with it, as far as it can; for no one of its parts can be anywhere else than where it lies. And the soul's nature is so great, just because it has no size, as to contain the whole of body in one and the same grasp; wherever body extends, there soul is.” (IV 3(27).9.34–44)³

The appeal of this image is that its apparent simplicity harbors a hidden ambiguity, reinforced by doubts about the text itself.⁴ The result is a series of contradictory interpretations of the passage, without anyone really noticing these divergences. The metaphor is used in the description of the coexistence of body and soul, specifically of the cosmic body and the world soul. Plotinus had already endorsed Plato's opinion in *Timaeus* that, contrary to the prevailing opinion, the soul is not in the body, and that it is the body, which is somehow placed inside the soul, as if wrapped into it.⁵ The same view is expressed in the above quoted passage. It is followed by the metaphor of a net in the water, introduced with the comparative *hos*: “it is as if a net immersed in the waters were

1 On this issue, see Rappe (1995: pp. 155–161), who proposes an upgrade of the traditional comparison theory of metaphor with a pragmatic approach to Plotinus' metaphorical language, thus emphasizing its independent anagogical value.

2 That it is not a metaphor (at least when applied to metaphysical or noetic light), had been convincingly argued by Beierwaltes (1961: pp. 334–336), according to whom light, for Plotinus, is what is closest to Being and as such, is the most adequate means of imparting it to the sensible world. His view has been criticized by Ferwerda (1965: pp. 6f. and 194), who denies the independent value of Plotinian metaphor, but was later endorsed by others; see Schroeder (1992: pp. 32f.). In this and similar cases, it is argued that these are not metaphors, strictly speaking (in their rhetorical functions), for it is assumed that every reality from the Intellect down is an “image of the One”; see Gerson (2003: pp. 260f.).

3 All passages are taken from Armstrong's translation of the *Enneads*.

4 The Henry-Schwyzler *editio minor* has ὡς ἂν ἐν ὑδασι δίκτυον τεγγόμενον ζῴῃ: the last word was replaced with ζωῆ by Ficini and deleted by Theiler, but seems now to have been accepted by most translators and is incorporated in various manners into the sense of the text, with the exception of Bréhier, who keeps it in the text, but omits it in the translation.

5 See for example IV 7(2).13.8.s., V 1(10).10.22s., VI 4(22).1.8, IV 3(27).22.8s. Cf. Plato, *Ti.* 34b in 36 d–e.

alive but unable to make its own that in which it is." The first reading, as well as many subsequent ones, had never made me doubt that, in this metaphor, the net stands for the body and the sea for the soul. Only while translating the whole tractate and reading some of the modern translations did I begin to ponder the word *zóē/zoē* (omitted in some editions) as well as the symbolic meanings of both elements (net and water) of the metaphor. Is not the water as much in the net as the net is in the water? And on a more important note, is not the symbolism of water and sea closely connected to material and corporeal nature, in Plotinus as well as in other authors?

2. *Status questionis*

Most translations clearly understand that the net represents the body; older translations in particular seem to have no doubt about it.⁶ In his translation, Bréhier makes a point to be explicit about it: "Il (*sc.* le monde) est comme un filet, jeté dans la mer." In Faggin's translation also, the expression "simile a una rete" clearly refers to the cosmic body (il mondo).⁷ The same could be said of Igal's and Radice's translations.⁸ On the other hand, some translators follow the original in preserving the laxity of the comparison.⁹ While the syntax of the text does lead us to connect the net to the body and the sea to the soul, the text itself does not convey a clear analogy between the body-in-the soul and net-in-the sea relationships. It is why some of the translators believed it necessary to add an explanatory comment to the metaphor (Brisson, Dillon-Blumenthal and Beutler-Theiler). These comments have shown that the reading of this passage may not be as self-evident as it seems. Thus, Beutler and Theiler have accompanied Harder's otherwise unassuming translation¹⁰

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- 6 See, for example, Bouillet (1859): "L'univers est en effet dans l'Âme qui le contient, et il y participe tout entier : il y est comme un filet dans la mer, pénétré et enveloppé de tous côtés par la vie." The MacKenna-Page translation is even more explicit : "The cosmos is like a net which takes all its life, as far as ever it stretches, from being wet in the water," adding some details which coincide nicely with von Kleist's explanation (1883) that the net, being dry and stiff, is mollified in the water and comes alive, in a way. Theiler and Beutler, however, were not convinced by this interpretation (Iib, 483).
- 7 "Il mondo giace dunque nell'anima che lo sorregge e nulla c'è in essa di cui non partecipi: simile a una rete che, tutta intrisa d'acqua, vive ma non può far sua l'acqua in cui è immersa."
- 8 "Yace [el cosmo], en el Alma que lo sustenta, sin que haya parte alguna que no participe de ella, como una red que cobrase vida en el agua, empapándose de ella pero sin poder posesionarse del medio en que está." (Igal) "Il mondo, dunque, si adagia nell'Anima, che lo tiene su e non lo lascia in nessuna parte privo di sé: in questo è simile a una rete da pesca messa nell'acqua per conservarsi "viva," la quale non può far suo l'elemento in cui è immersa." (Radice) The translation of the word *zóē* in Radice's translation dispels any possible doubts about the meaning of the passage: if the net strives to keep the life, it must refer to the body, not to the soul.
- 9 See, for example, Armstrong's translation above. Cf. Brisson: "Car il (*sc.* le monde) se trouve dans une âme qui le soutient et il n'est rien en lui qui n'ait part à cette âme. C'est une vie qui peut être comparée à un filet jeté dans l'eau et qui est incapable de retenir l'eau dans laquelle il est plongé." Blumenthal also avoids a direct comparison: "For it (*sc.* the Universe) is located in the soul which holds it up, and nothing lacks a share in it, as if a net, submerged in the waters, were alive, without being able to make its own that in which it is."
- 10 "Er ruht nämlich in der Seele, die ihn aufrecht hält, nichts an ihm ist ihrer unteilhaftig; so wie ein Netz im Wasser, wenn es umflutet ist, nicht die Flut, in der se ist, als sein eigen festhalten kann."

with a note explaining that the net represents the body, while discarding the word *zóē* as odd.¹¹ Quite on the contrary, in the Brisson-Pradeau edition, Brisson, who includes the perplexing *zóē* in his translation, understands the net as soul and explains the analogy in a separate note.¹² After consideration, Dillon and/or Blumenthal support this interpretation, although Blumenthal's translation is not so explicit.¹³ Cilento, on the other hand, uses the reference to life to support the opposite view, for according to his interpretation the net "lives" without being able to take hold of what surrounds it which, again, emphasizes the helplessness of the body, not the soul.¹⁴ The prevailing opinion therefore favors the *lectio facilior*, and is supported by other Plotinian scholars, who understand the net as a metaphor for the (cosmic) body swimming in "the Ocean of Soul" and imbibing it in the way the net soaks up water.¹⁵

The present paper does not aim to refute the prevailing opinion which, on the contrary, after a careful reexamination of the text and relevant studies, seems to me to be the only acceptable one. A further hermeneutic treatment of the problem therefore appears to be redundant. Nevertheless, the minority opinion reopens the discussion on the independent value of the metaphor in Plotinus' works. I also believe it worthwhile to consider other uses of both constituents of the image (particularly that of water and/or sea), as well as the possibility of the influence of the contemporary use of these images.

3. Sea and Water

It has been observed that Plotinus' use of metaphors is original, even if metaphors themselves are not.¹⁶ We can add that they are rarely simple or obvious. In my opinion, the ambiguity of this particular image is due to the double symbolism of the sea, and of water in general. Plotinus' friend and disciple, Porphyry, describing the arrival of souls

11 IIb, 483.

12 Although the French *c'est* is less explicit than *elle (sc. l'âme) est*, the life can only refer to the soul, as is explained in the note (*Traité* 27-29, 226, n. 221).

13 P. 219: "In this simile, which is the net and which the sea? On balance it seems that the net is the soul, and the sea is alive because it is in it, as body is in the soul that gives it life. The soul can extend as far as required for the accommodation of body precisely because it is in itself not-extended. As Plotinus remarks, if there were no body, 'the soul would have no concern for extension.' The net image recurs, with a rather more negative connotation, in VI.6 [34] 3, 34, where Plotinus cautions against trying to cast a net of limit over the Unlimited, as it will simply slip through it."

14 "Vogliam dire che il mondo s'adagia in seno all'Anima che lo tiene alto nelle sue braccia e nulla di essa gli è negato; come, nell'onda, una rete tutta intrisa, vive, ma non riesce a far suo l'elemento in cui è immersa."

15 See, for example, Clark (2016: p. 260) and Smith (1996: p. 210; 2004: p. 43). In his fundamental work on the soul in Plotinus, Blumenthal (1971: p. 16) had expressed the same view. The opinion in the Parmenides edition is therefore either result of Dillon's contribution to the commentary, or Blumenthal had changed his view. Nor do Ferwerda (1965: p. 165), Rist (1967: p. 94) and Lambertson (1986: p. 86) have any doubts about it. In the same way, the metaphor is understood also in the works that are not specifically focused on Plotinus (see, for example, Smith 2012: p. 524).

16 Clarc (2016: p. 17) and Ferwerda (1965: pp. 196f.).

into bodies (*genesis*) in a passage in *The Cave of the Nymphs* (10–11), speaks about water and humidity as having a strong corporeal connotation:

“It is necessary, therefore, that souls [...], and especially such as are about to be bound to blood and moist bodies, should verge to humidity, and be corporealized, in consequence of being drenched in moisture.” (*Antr.* 11.12)¹⁷

In the cave, there are also “perpetually flowing streams of water (*hýdat' aenáonta*),” which, according to Porphyry, emphasize the material nature of the cave (*Antr.* 10.4–6). Plotinus had also adopted the philosophical interpretation of the myth of Cronos and Rhea, explaining the goddess as representing matter because of the etymology Plato had given of her name, connecting it with flow (*rhein*).¹⁸ But Plotinus also discussed the “flowing” nature of the *body*, emphasizing its mutability and corruptibility.¹⁹ This was a widely accepted doctrine, which has been traced back to some passages from Plato, who had applied the Heraclitean theory of flux to the passing and corruptible nature of the sensible world.²⁰ The image of the “flowing” sensible world later influenced not only the Platonic, but also the Stoic concept of matter, which the Stoics claimed to be of corporeal nature.²¹ In Middle Platonism, this connotation had been extended to all forms of water, particularly to the sea: “According to Plato, the deep, the sea, and a tempest are images of a material nature.” (Numenius, fr. 33 des Places).²² In the *Enneads*, we find a poetic, but sinister description of matter:

“Before soul it was a dead body, earth and water, or rather the darkness of matter and non-existence, and “what the gods hate,” as a poet says.” (V 1(10).2.26s.)

Water is therefore a symbol of death, whether it is represented as the tempestuous sea or a deceptively innocent stream (*rheúma*) that can pull in the man chasing the beautiful image on its surface. This last image is given by Plotinus to illustrate the soul's infatuation with charms of the sensible world, which can be fatal, if the soul does not rise above them to the intelligible Beauty.²³ The soul risks being alienated from its source and sent

17 Passages of the *Cave of the Nymphs* are taken from Taylor's translation reproduced in Uždavinys (2009).

18 See Platon, 402a in *En.* V 1(10).7.31

19 See for example VI 4(22).5.6 and 15.20, IV 7(2).3.19 and IV 3(27).45.54, where he compares the body to the river Lethe, from which souls drink before entering their bodies in Plato's *Republic*; see also V 1(10).2.15, where he speaks of “the body's raging sea.”

20 See *Ti.* 43a–b, *Cra.* 401e–402c, *Th.* 156a, 177c, 181a and 182c, *Cra.* 411b–c and 439c, *Phd.* 90c, *Phlb.* 43a and *Sph.* 249b.

21 For *rheusté hýle*, see *SVF II*, fr. 305; and, more thoroughly, Declava Caizzi (1988: pp. 443–454).

22 The source is Porphyry's *De antro* 34.13–35.1. On the Neoplatonic reception and interpretation of Homer, see Lambertson (1986). On the Neoplatonic interpretation of the sea in the *Odyssey*, see also Uždavinys (2009: pp. 224–227). The arguments for the existence of a pre-Plotinian interpretation of the sea as matter (with Odysseus as soul), and the Platonic references of this interpretation, are given by Pépin (1982: pp. 7–9).

23 See I 6(1).8.11 and V 8(31).2.32. Most translators agree that Plotinus' words refer to the myth of Narcissus

to “the region of unlikeness,”²⁴ which, in some versions of Plato's *Politicus*, is given as the *sea* of unlikeness (*póntos* instead of *tópos* in 273d-e).

On the other hand, water has been symbol of the *materia prima*, and the source of life in the oldest cosmogonies of the East (Egyptian, Indian, Babylonian), as well as those of the West.²⁵ Even Plotinus' lines quoted above hint at some sort of primordial chaos.²⁶ Among Greeks, the most significant instances are the Homeric Ocean and Tales' water as *arché*.²⁷ Greek cosmogony distinguishes between the sea as the sterile element – for Hesiod, it is Pontos, born from Gaia “without delightful love” and therefore, barren (*atrýgeton pélagos* in *Th.* 131–133) – and Okeanos which, conceived in lust by the Sky, was probably viewed as a freshwater source of rivers, streams etc., and was considered the father of gods in the Homeric epic. This difference is not always obvious, for the word *pélagos* is often used simply to denote the primordial chaos, where all things are blended and into which all eventually return. It is not, however, a dead entity, like the one in Plotinus' description. A fragment from the cosmogony attributed to Orpheus offers a description of how life sprung from infinite matter (*ex apeírou tês hýles*), designated also as an “infinite abyss,” “eternal stream” and “infinite sea:”

“This matter, of four kinds, and endowed with life, was an entire infinite abyss, so to speak, in eternal stream, borne about without order, and forming every now and then countless but ineffectual combinations (which therefore it dissolved again from want of order); ripe indeed, but not able to be bound so as to generate a living creature. And once it chanced that this infinite sea, which was thus by its own nature driven about with a natural motion, flowed in an orderly manner from the same to the same (back on itself), like a whirlpool, mixing the substances in such a way that from each there flowed down the middle of the universe (as in the funnel of a mold) precisely that which was most useful and suitable for the generation of a living creature. This was carried down by the all-carrying whirlpool, drew to itself the surrounding spirit, and having been so conceived that it was very fertile, formed a separate

(see also Hadot 1976). Narcissus, however, is never mentioned. And since other versions of the myth do not include the boy's death in the stream, where he had been admiring his own reflection, it is possible that Plotinus had Hylas in mind. This interpretation is the more plausible, since the episode does not mention the man's own reflection – just the images on the surface; see Aubenque (2005: p. 269). Hylas, the beautiful companion of Heracles, is said to have been pulled into the water by nymphs living in it, while he was absorbed in observation of the reflections on its surface.

24 I 8(51).13.16.

25 It is the most common motif in creation myths all over the world; see Leeming (2010: pp. 341–343). The oldest creation myths in the Egyptian Pyramid texts (cca. 2400 BC) present matter as an abyss of water, which becomes conscious of itself and manifests itself as creation; see Obenga (2004: pp. 31–33). Indian creation texts refer to the primordial waters or sea that produced the cosmic Egg (e. g. The Satapatha Brahmana text), and the creation myth of the Babylonian Enuma Elish posits primordial oceans of fresh- and saltwater, Apsu and Tiamat; see Leeming (1994: pp. 23–25).

26 Cf. Gen. 1,2 “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” The resemblance seems even more significant for the fact that Numenius (in Porphyry's *Antr.* 10) explicitly refers to this passage of the Bible.

27 DK 11 A 3 and A 12; In the *Iliad*, the river Okeanos is principle and the source of everything (*Il.* XIV.246). See also Aristotle, *Metaph.* 983b 18–30 who adjoins the river Styx, which bore witness to the oaths of the gods, “for what is oldest is most honourable, and the most honourable thing is that by which one swears.”

substance. [...] Then there came forth to the light, after it had been conceived in itself, and was borne upwards by the divine spirit which surrounded it, perhaps the greatest thing ever born.” (Fr. 104 F Bernabé, 55 Kern)²⁸

The fragment contains the message of the old cosmologies featuring a material (female) principle at the beginning of the world. This principle is not dead: she is “endowed with life” (*émpsychos*) which, however, she is unable to bring forth herself and wherein she is aided by some sort of life-giving principle, in our case, the surrounding spirit (*pneûma*) that leads substances (*ousiai*) which are in her, into life. This duality is mostly absent from Greek Pre-Socratic principles, but it reemerges with the Platonic distinction between soul, or intellect, on the one side and body, or matter, on the other. Neoplatonism adopts and redefines this difference which, at first sight, seems ineradicable. Nevertheless, a close look at some of the Middle and Neo Platonic doctrines reveals that the line between the material and non-material realm was sometimes blurred. One instance is the very concept of intelligible matter which, in Plotinus, seems to be present at the highest level of realities proceeding from the One, and which, as indetermination, pre-exists the generation of Nous. What is more, its essence of pure potentiality appears to determine the relationship between a higher and a lower hypostasis, for even the Soul, as recipient of *logoi* coming from Nous is, in a way, matter to its noetic Principle.²⁹ Plotinus' concept of Noetic matter, which closely relies on the Aristotelian doctrine of the potential Intellect,³⁰ is also connected to the doctrine of the first principles of the so-called *ágrapha dógmata* of Plato, namely to the material principle, developed by Plato's successors from his Receptacle of generation and ever-existing Place (*chóra*).³¹ In this role, Matter appears near the top of the hierarchy of Middle Platonic and Neo-Pythagorean first principles, and is relieved of negative connotation resulting from a pseudo-Platonic dualism of principles (Monad / Good and Dyad / Evil).³² Paired with the Neo-Pythagorean Monad as the forming principle, Matter had in a way taken over the place of the world soul,³³ which in Plato (and later in Plotinus) is paired with the demiurgic Intellect governing the Universe.³⁴ Thus the world soul sometimes found itself taking the fourth place after

28 English text is taken from Smith's translation of the Clementine Homilies (1870: p. 117f.)

29 V 9(5).4.11s., V 1(10).3.23, III 9(13).5 and II 5(25).3.14. See, Blumenthal (1971: p. 69). As otherness, the nature of matter is part of every reality that is not One; cf. Carroll (2002: p. 183). Narbonne (1993: p. 52) has pertinently observed that the first mention of non-sensible matter in the *Enneads* refers not to noetic matter, but to a “matière ‚psychique‘.” Lacrosse (1994: p. 94), uses the term “rapport hylémorphique” to designate this particular tendency of the lower reality ascending to the higher.

30 See *De an.* 429a 10–430a 25 (III.4–5).

31 See *Ti.* 52a–b and Aristotle, *Metaph.* 981 a29–988a 17 and *Ph.* 209b 12.

32 According to Aristotle's testimony (*Metaph.* 1091b 32), Speusippus had rejected this kind of valuation of the first principles.

33 Dillon (1977: p. 46) views it as a consequence of the distinction, initiated by the Stoics, between the first, contemplative God, and the second, active one, the first having been modelled on the transcendent Good of Plato's *Republic*, and the second inspired by the Demiurge of *Timaeus*.

34 In *Philebus* (30d), both work in pair, since “wisdom and mind,” governing the universe, “cannot exist without soul” [] “And in the divine nature of Zeus [...] there is the soul and mind of a king, because there

the Triad consisting of the transcendent First Principle, which was followed by the pair of Monad/Form and Dyad/Matter. Moreover, Plato's concept of an evil world soul of the *Laws* (*Lg.* 896e–897d), as the source of the irrational movement of the universe, gave birth, among Plato's successors, to the doctrine of a double orientation of the soul and led further to a reversal of the roles of soul and matter.³⁵ This may not be reason enough to believe that some thinkers have actually identified the material principle as the entity of the world soul.³⁶ I think, however, that it is safe to say that Middle Platonism, tinged by Pythagorean ideas, has broadened the concept of matter to the point where it began to display a certain resemblance to the hylozoistic Pre-Socratic Principle.

The water/sea symbolism in Plotinus and Porphyry may reflect this contest in the hierarchy of principle realities, without, however, affecting the essential difference between noetic and material realm. In *Antr.* 10.10 Porphyry affirms that, because of the perpetually flowing streams of water (*hýdat' aenáonta*), the Homeric cave “will not be a symbol of an intelligible hypostasis, but of a material essence.” On the other hand, he admits the existence of divinely-inspired water (*hýdor theópnoun*) that attracts the souls entering into generation, and he reinforces his argument by quoting Numenius and his reference to the above-mentioned Biblical passage describing the proximity of the Spirit of God and the primordial waters. In fact, the *hýdor theópnoun* reminds us of the “luminous water,” reflecting the Father, in the Gnostic treatise *The Apocryphon of John* (*NHC II 1/IV 1.5*). Its ambiguous nature is also revealed in the Hermetic *Poimandres* where its nature, though represented as the dwelling place of darkness, is obviously fiery (*CH I.4-5*). The variety of references in the *Cave of Nymphs* suggests an acquaintance with different religious and philosophical traditions that coexisted with the budding Neoplatonism, even if they did not have a direct impact on it, or were even giving rise to polemics, as in the case of Plotinus' reaction to some of the Gnostic doctrines. Different studies have explored the many parallels between Plotinus' and Gnostic doctrines, which testify to a vivacious, if not harmonious interaction between various religious and philosophical schools.³⁷ Narbonne's

is in him the power of the cause.” (Transl. by B. Jowett). Many Middle Platonists regarded Demiurge and world soul (together with Providence) as a single divine principle governing the universe, but their opinions about it would not always coincide. Plotinus generally distinguishes between the demiurgic Intellect and the world soul (see for example, *V 9(5).3.25s*, where the Demiurge is Intellect), but is not consistent (see *IV 4(27).7.9-12*) where the Demiurge is followed by the world soul: here, he is obviously influenced by *Timaeus* (30d), according to which the world soul is created by the Demiurge. See also Charrue (1978: p. 176).

35 See, for example, Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* (370e–f), where Osiris and Typhon respectively represent the good and the bad world soul, while Isis is cast as a positively neutral Matter-entity. For Numenius' theory of two world souls, see Caluori (2015: pp. 29–33).

36 See Deuse's examination of Plutarch's and Xenocrates' concepts of matter, and his rejection of the theory proposing that the two concepts could have been blended into an ensouled matter, represented by Plutarch's Isis (1983: pp. 33–37).

37 Scholars also continue to point to Gnostic elements outside of Harder's *Großschrift*, whose existence is becoming increasingly doubtful (for an overview of the problem, see Dufour' *Annexe 1* in the Brisson-Pradeau edition of the *Traité*s 30–37, pp. 399–420), and to discover evidences of an ongoing discussion between Plotinus and the adversaries he attacks so fiercely in the anti-Gnostic tractate II 9(33); see Narbonne (2011: pp. 5f.), who also argues the probability of Gnostic sources of some of the Plotinian argumentation, see *ibid.* pp. 129–141).

study (2011), focusing on Plotinus' discussion of the origins of matter, the ascent and the fall of the soul and its relation to evil, has proven that Plotinus' anti-Gnostic polemics have fostered certain solutions to these problems and that some peculiarities of Plotinus' doctrines can be seen more clearly through the knowledge of Gnostic doctrines.³⁸

4. Water Source

Some Gnostic parallels can be explained as part of a common set of philosophical imagery, although they are sometimes used in an intriguingly similar context. Corrigan (2000: p. 49s.) has brought one such instance forth as part of the doctrine of the origins of multiplicity from the One: it is the famous image of the spring (*pegé*), which sustains the flow of many rivers springing out of it, while remaining inexhaustible and unchanged. This image conveys a completely different meaning of water:

“For think of a spring which has no other origin, but gives the whole of itself to rivers, and is not used up by the rivers but remains itself at rest, but the rivers that rise from it, before each of them flows in a different direction, remain for a while all together, though each of them knows, in a way, the direction in which it is going to let its stream flow.” (III 8(30).10.5–10)

Bussanich has pointed out the similar use of river imagery in Numenius' description of matter,³⁹ observing that this is “another example of literary borrowing on the part of Plotinus without strict doctrinal dependence.”⁴⁰ In truth, Plotinus' water spring has nothing to do with the “flowing” nature of matter. Ferwerda was the first to point out the double use of the image of flow in the *Enneadas*, and the widely present Heraclitean context of the doctrine of material or corporeal flux, which Plotinus, at the highest level, had replaced with the image of the inexhaustible source of this flux.⁴¹

The dynamic image of the source does not seem compatible with the absolute and pristine stillness of the One. As a metaphor, it is in a way unsatisfying, since it does not

38 The tractate *Against the Gnostics* (II 9(33)) is one of his most-commented works and continues to inspire new studies (just in the last few years, translations with commentary by Spanu 2012 and Gertz 2017). Many resemblances predate Plotinus (see Turner 1992), and it has been recognized that Gnostic literature (particularly Sethian) was heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy (see, Turner 2001: pp. 697–711), as well as by other religious movements, particularly by Jewish Wisdom literature. For a review of modern research of the subject, see King (2013). Porphyry designated the Gnostics as “sectarians who have abandoned the old philosophy” (*Plot.* 16), and Plotinus reproached them for having borrowed and then perverted Plato's doctrine (II 9(33).6). The surname *Platonicus*, given to Valentinus, also speaks for itself. The parallels were not restricted to a particular sect, for different Gnostic schools shared some common doctrines; see Puech (1957). Neither were Plotinus' polemics directed towards one particular sect: it has been argued that “Plotinus' Gnostics” were using both Sethian and Valentinian texts; see Wallis (1992: p. 474). Puech (1957: pp. 180f.), however, held them to be mainly Sethians.

39 See fr. 3 (des Places): “Car c'est un fleuve impétueux et instable que la matière; elle est, en profondeur, en largeur, en longueur, indéfinie et illimitée.”

40 Bussanich (1988: p. 108). Cf. also Corrigan (2005: p. 181).

41 Ferwerda (1965: p. 43).

allow a direct transfer to the sensible reality: in nature, we will not find an inexhaustible water source that springs from itself.⁴² As Gatti has pointed out, “by means of these images of a physical character, he seeks to explain the action of the infinite One, self-caused, making use of that which is *infinitely different* from it, insofar as everything else is caused by something other than itself, that is, everything that is not the One. The doctrine of Plotinus was much richer in images utilized by him for purely didactic purposes, aimed at showing that the First Principle produces everything else while remaining absolutely stable.”⁴³

I agree with Ferwerda that the point of this image is not in the flow of the water source, but in its boundless power (*dýnamis*). Power and flux are also two traits of the Ocean in the Orfic fragment on the Derveni papyrus, saying that “Zeus ... contrived ... great might” of the “wide flowing” Okeanos, and the Ancient commentator makes a point to connect the two features by saying that “those who have great power among men are said to ‘have flowed big’.”⁴⁴ The flow here is a mark of power, as it is in Plotinus’ metaphor of the ever-flowing source, “the productive power of all things” (*dýnamis pánton*). It is therefore not unusual to find the same metaphor in the discourses on Intellect and Soul, as well, since they tend to imitate the One. In the 38th tractate, we find a description of the universal life originating from somewhere, where:

“there is no poverty or lack of resource there, but all things are filled full of life, and, we may say, boiling with life. They all flow, in a way, from a single spring [...].” (VI 7(38).12)

Even the nature of the all-encompassing Soul is described as “springing up,” with a particularly significant attribute, *aénnaos*:

“For how will it depart when it does not fail, but is a nature which springs up for ever <*aénnaos*> and does not flow <*ou rhéousa*>? For if it flowed, it would reach as far as it was able to flow, but as it does not flow – for it could not, and has nowhere it could flow to: for it has taken hold of the All, or rather is itself the All.” (VI 4(22).5.5–9)

The use of this adjective seems to imply a difference between the “material” flux and the ever-lasting metaphysical flow. Tornau, in his commentary on the tractate, recognizes it as a direct reference to the Pythagorean Tetractys, the most powerful number (*katà dýnamin*) and “the source and the root of ever-flowing nature” (*pagàn aenáou phýseos*; DK 58 B 15) which gives birth to universal harmony and order.⁴⁵ Platonic use of the word

42 See Beierwaltes (1995: pp. 18f.).

43 Gatti (1996: p. 30). Italics are mine.

44 F 16 Bernabé; cf. DP col. XXIII. The commentator, who might already be influenced by the Platonic concept of fluid matter, also strives to separate the element of water from the divine Okeanos, identifying the latter with Zeus as air and claiming that Orpheus was using a metaphor there (“He indicates (*semáinei*) his own opinion in everyday and conventional words”); see Kouremenos’ commentary to this fragment (2006: pp. 256f.).

45 Tornau (1998: pp. 117f.). See also Drozdek (2007: pp. 54f.). The Pythagorean oath includes a joint me-

is attested in Xenocrates, who applies it to the second of the two principles from which the universe was born (the first one being the One, *hén*).⁴⁶ In the 23rd tractate, the same adjective is employed to describe the intelligible whole:

“If then you grasp the endlessness forever welling up in it <*aénnaos*>, the unwearying and unwearing nature which in no way falls short in it, boiling over with life,⁴⁷ we may say, – [...]” (VI 5(23).12.6–8)

Plotinus' effort to distinguish between the flow of corporeal nature and the eternal “flow” springing up from itself (*rheustés*, *rheîn* vs. *aénnaos*) seems to be a onetime inspiration for, in other instances, he does not hesitate to use the verb *rheîn* (and compounds), when he writes about the One and describes the effusion from the Source, which “overflows, as it were” (see V 2(11).1.8s. and V 1(10).6.7, for example).

These passages make evident that the image of flow is being used at all levels of Plotinus' non-material reality.⁴⁸ The tolerably frequent use of the expressions linked to flowing (*rheîn*) and even flowing out of (*aporrhoé* in VI 7(38).22.8, for example), is brought up in defense of the – disputable, according to many – Plotinian term *emanation*.⁴⁹ Ferwerda believes that Gnostic and Stoic parallel theories of emanation could not have influenced Plotinus, because they were essentially materialistic. He sees the direct source of his image of water spring in Plato's *Phaedrus* (245c), where the soul is described as “the source and beginning of motion.” This may be true, but the fact is that Plotinus has considerably developed his image by dwelling on the water imagery (rivers, flowing out of it) which is absent from Plato's description. Standing firmly on Platonic ground, Plotinus entered into a dynamic dialogue with other philosophical schools: primarily with Aristotle and the Stoics, but also with the Gnostics, even if more polemically. I believe it possible that, while he adhered to the generally accepted theory of flowing “matter,” he also embraced the omnipresent symbolism of water as a source of life, and that he did

taphor of source and root, which both appear in the quoted passage of Plotinus (see above III 8(30).10.5–10). It has been observed that Plotinus' discourse on “ancient nature” includes less ordinary and/or poetical expressions (for example *akámatos* in *átrytos* in both passages; for other examples, see Tornau 1998: pp. 486f.). See also the description of matter in V 1(10).2.26s. (above) where the expression “what the gods hate” is also borrowed from Homer's verses about Hades (*Il.* XX.65).

46 Fr. 28 Heinze (in Aetius 1.3.23).

47 *Hyperzéousa zoé*; Aristoteles (*De an.* 405b 28) mentions the etymology linking the word *zên* (‘to live’) to *zeîn* (‘to boil’).

48 For a list of references, see Ferwerda (1965: pp. 41–44) and Bussanich (1988: p. 108).

49 See Müller (1913). See also Reale (2004: pp. 189–195), who rejects the term in comparison with the Oriental emanation system and prefers to use the term *processione* (for his position reaffirmed and elaborated, see Id. 1983: 161–174). The problem of the emanationist interpretation is not only that it conveys the ideal of an outflow and consequently implies a bond between the principle and the recipient of this outflow. The expression itself also fails to comprehend one of the crucial moments of Plotinus' metaphysics, which is the turning back to the source (*epistrophé*; see Gatti 1996: p. 31); but the last argument can also be used against the term ‘procession’. Despite many well-founded arguments, the word emanation is still widely used, mostly with the presupposition that Plotinus' own use of the expressions of flow was metaphorical (Armstrong 1937: pp. 58f.), Ferwerda (1965: p. 195) and Gerson (1994: pp. 27f.).

so acknowledging the ambiguity and even welcoming it, for it gave him the opportunity to elaborate on the differences between the material and the eternal flow (see above VI 4(22).5.5-9). With this incredible image of a water source, Plotinus, by giving it inexhaustible power, excluded any material or corporeal notion from his own emanation process, and consequently refuted the similar, but essentially opposing, emanation theories of his adversaries.

5. Net in the Infinite

The other part of the metaphor which must be taken into consideration is the net. The prevailing opinion that the net represents the body is supported by the structure of the sentence, stating that the body is in the soul, like a net in the sea. It cannot be the other way around, for the sea can never be in the net; or if it is, it is "in" it only for as long as the net is in its waters. The net itself is not able to hold the water, just as the body cannot possess the soul, for it is the soul that possesses the body. The net metaphor had been used, by both the Orphics and Plato,⁵⁰ to convey the intricate structure of the living being, which would support its acknowledged meaning in the *Enneads*. The puzzling word $\zeta\acute{o}\eta$ / $z\acute{o}\hat{\eta}$ is mostly taken as predicate to the net as subject: in this case, the net lives in the water.⁵¹ The body is alive because of the soul, so the life primarily belongs to the latter. From this point of view, it is easier to understand those who might view the net as the soul, as well as those who believe that the net stands for the body and prefer to leave it out, as do Theiler and Beutler. Other translators, undeterred by it, claim that the body is in a way soaking up the water, and living through it.⁵²

Those who wish to reject the majority opinion can find plenty of references to support their view, particular in the Eastern literature of wisdom.⁵³ Unfortunately, these and similar references have not been proved to have had any direct influence on Plotinus. Many scholars have been researching the resemblances between Plotinus' mysticism and the texts of Eastern spiritual traditions, particularly that of Indian wisdom literature. The interest in possible Oriental features in Plotinus' philosophy was sparked by a proposition of Émile Bréhier, who speculated on the possible influence of Indian thought on Plotinus.⁵⁴ His thesis has been refuted by most Plotinian experts who, though acknowledging certain resemblances, have argued against any direct influence.⁵⁵ This article does not pretend to be able to contribute anything to this debate and will therefore restrain

50 For references, see Ferwerda (1965: p. 165) and Clark (2016: p. 260).

51 MacKenna, who understands the net as (universal) body translates "takes all its life" (presumably the life of the soul).

52 Cf. above, Kleist (n. 6).

53 In Iranian mysticism, the net symbolizes the instrument of spirit, with which the eternal Hunter (*Pir-Binyanun*, also the manifestation of the Angel Gabriel) seeks to get hold of the Divine (represented by a royal Eagle).

54 Bréhier (1982: pp. 107-133; "L'orientalisme de Plotin"). For a more recent collection of comparative studies, see Gregorios (2002).

55 For an overview, see Wolters (1982).

from any unfounded speculation, although one might consider the possibility that philosophical images were circulating in Plotinus' time without entailing any deeper doctrinal meaning. Religious and philosophical movements were flourishing in Alexandria, where he first went looking for masters. The net-image, with its indisputably spiritual meaning, appears for example in Manichean writings, where it is a symbol of spiritual light, fishing in the deep of the Darkness.⁵⁶ There is also the well-known metaphor in the Gospels: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind." (Math. 13.47) In Manichean dualism, as well as in Christian revelation, the sea is undoubtedly the symbol of spiritual death, which coincides with the general meaning of sea/water in Platonic (and Plotinus') philosophy.

Plotinus' metaphor did not go unnoticed among the experts of Eastern mysticism. I would like to bring attention to an example of a modern understanding of Plotinus, influenced by the Eastern symbolism of the net. Coleman Barks, poet and researcher of Sufi poetry, has no difficulty understanding the net as the cosmos, floating in the soul as in the sea. Nevertheless, such an understanding does not prevent him from using the metaphor as "the predicament of human consciousness," and thereby bringing out the spiritual meaning of the net-metaphor: "We are the net. Soul is the Ocean we are in, but we cannot hold on to it. We cannot *own* any part of what we swim within, the mystery we love so."⁵⁷ I would not have mentioned this instance, but for the unexpected lack of a corporeal element in his interpretation. As it happens, there is another use of the net metaphor in the *Enneads*, which is also exempt from any corporeal connotation and does not feature water, either. In the tractate *On Numbers*, Plotinus warns us off of any attempt to define Infinity, since any such an attempt is an attack on its very nature, which is unlimited and consequently undefinable.

"In what way, then, could one conceive infinity? By separating its form in one's reasoning. What, then, will one conceive? One will conceive it as the opposites and at the same time not the opposites: for one will conceive it as great and small – for it becomes both – and at rest and moving – for it does really become these. But it is obvious that before becoming them it is neither definitely: otherwise, you have limited [or defined] it. If then it is infinite, and infinitely and indefinitely infinite, it could be imagined as either. And when you come up close to it and **do not throw any limit over it like a net** you will have it slipping away from you and will not find it any one thing: for [if you did] you would have defined it." (VI 6(34).3.30–35)

56 The *Manichean Psalms* present the image of the net as a soul that is delivered (or delivers itself) to the Darkness. The purpose of this (self) sacrifice is double: to lead the Darkness away from the Light and to offer itself to the dark forces that take it (see *Psalm CCXXXIII*). The net is cast as a kind of bait and, consequently, the weapon that eventually conquers the Darkness. For once the latter takes hold of the net/ the light, it cannot exist without it any more. The soul is like "nets over fishes, he (meaning, the Watcher) made her rain down upon them like purified clouds of water, she thrust herself within them like piercing lightning." (Transl. taken from: <http://gnosis.org/library/bc23.htm>.) We find similar symbolism in the Manichean *Kephalaia* (5): the texts feature five Hunters (Fishermen) holding, among other things, a net which is sometimes a hidden weapon, while at other times it is some form of light attracting the other light, which is held captive in the Darkness and represents individual souls. In this case, the net is an instrument of deliverance, bringing the liberated souls back into the Light.

57 Barks (2010: p. 7).

It turns out that Barks' interpretation of Plotinus' net in the sea is more consistent with this second metaphor of a net trying to catch and define Infinity. There is no metaphor for Infinity here. We could assume it to be water again, for the attempt of reason to define Infinity is as futile as that of a net gathering water. This would mean that Plotinus had abandoned the image of soul as sea, which would reaffirm the material symbolism of water in the *Enneads*. The second option, which I find more plausible, is that the object of what the net is trying to catch is not given on purpose. It could also be air, since trying to catch it in the net would be as unsuccessful as gathering water with it. As a metaphor, it would certainly fit better, since the water is closely related not only to the material, but also to the corporeal world. Unlike in the first instance, however, Plotinus does not speak of a body-and-soul relationship here. He is talking about incorporeal Infinity that is impossible to define by reason, or even, it would seem, to apply an image to it. Both, the body-net and the limiting reason-net, are incapable of getting hold of what they are grasping. The difference is that, in the second instance, the net has a more active role, for instead of passively stretching in the water, it is concentrating on an elusive goal.

Although there is no mention of matter in this passage, the material connotation of what reason is trying to grasp is clear.⁵⁸ Plotinus' doctrine of matter is, to put it mildly, complex, for it presupposes the existence of matter in the noetic world, beside the one that underlies sensible realities. They have infinity in common, but while the matter in the sensible world is the Infinite itself (*par'outes*), the noetic matter, which *par'outes* remains a Form, appears to have obtained its infinity from the boundless power of its noetic principle:

“For in the intelligible world, too, matter is the unlimited, and it would be produced from the unlimitedness or the power or the everlastingness of the One; unlimitedness is not in the One, but the One produces it.” (II 4(12).15)⁵⁹

This brings our attention to the fact that ‘infinite’ and ‘infinity’ are expressions, also applied to the three Hypostases.⁶⁰ In Tractates 22 and 23 (VI 4 and VI 5), the term is applied to what is everywhere one and the same: sometimes It is Being, sometimes Soul.⁶¹

58 The quoted passage of the tractate *On Numbers* is situated in the context of the Platonic doctrine of the Infinite Dyad, which Plato's successors had identified with bodiless Matter. According to Aristotle, Plato himself had derived Infinity from the material principle of Forms (i. e. the great and the small) and identified it to the Dyad (*Metaph.* 987b 19–26).

59 In this sense, the matter of the sensible world is more truly the Infinite than the noetic matter: the role of the image and the original is here subverted, without of course implying that the intelligible infinity is an image of the sensible one, for it is derived from the infinite power of the Principle. For a thorough analysis of this passage, see Narbonne (1993: pp. 82–85).

60 As we have observed above, the expression is used to convey the limitless power of the One, while Tractates 22 and 23 (VI 4 and VI 5) focus on the omnipresence of the infinite Nature, the infinity of which must be viewed not as a lack, but an *absence* of limit which would divide the individual soul from the universal one and, consequently, from the all-comprehending Hypostasis of Soul (see VI 5(23).4).

61 It is not always clear which. Bréhier and Dufour (in the Brisson-Pradeau edition) believe it to be the soul, but most of the translators prefer to keep the neutral form (Armstrong, Harder, Emilsson-Strange). Radice and Faggini have ‘l'Essere.’

"Now, it is sufficient for each and contains all souls and all intellects. For it is one and again unbounded and holds all things together and each distinct, and, again, not distinct in separation. For how could it be called unbounded except in this sense, that it has all things together, every life and every soul and every intellect?" (VI 4(22).14.3-8)

Plotinus' writing and our reading about It make us realize that our discursive reason, trying to grasp this all-comprehending Whole, faces a problem similar to the one described in the passage in *On Numbers*. One of the very passages that refer to the overflowing and boundless power of the noetic Principle proceeds by addressing the problem of reason, trying to dissect what is infinite and being unable to:

"How then is it present? As one life: for life in a living being does not reach only so far, and then is unable to extend over the whole, but it is everywhere. But if someone again enquires how, let him call to mind its power, that there is not a certain quantity of it, but if he divides it endlessly in his discursive thought he always has the same power, endless in depth; for it does not have matter there in the intelligible, that it might fall short along with the size of its bulk and come to little. If then you grasp the endlessness forever welling up in it, the unwearying and unwearied nature which in no way falls short in it, boiling over with life, we may say, if you concentrate your attention somewhere or fix your gaze on a particular point you will not find it there, but the opposite will happen to you." (VI 5(23).12.1-10)

The quote combines both Plotinus' ambiguities, a flowing (or in this case "boiling") nature, and its infinity. At the same time, it does not allow us to misconstrue the true hierarchy of being: matter is still matter and, as bearer of size and bulk, it is banned from the intelligible world. Its infinity is not the infinity of Being; the material flux has nothing to do with the eternal flow of either Soul, Intellect or One. In the former case, infinity and flux imply instability and weakness, in the latter, they give the idea of boundless power. These observations do no more than support the established fact that every coin has two sides, and every symbol a double meaning. And while I remain convinced that, in Plotinus' metaphor of the net in the sea, the former is referring to the body and the latter to the soul, I perceive an underlying ambiguity in it, which may be due not only to the prevailing symbolism of sea and water, but also to Plotinus' own challenging use of the image of the net, which he attaches once to the body and, on another occasion, to the defining faculty of the soul. This proves that Plotinus does not allow his philosophical discourse to be curbed by the general use of symbols and metaphors, and that he is willing to explore and exploit their opposite meanings.

I will conclude the paper by attempting a speculation regarding this remarkable ambiguity of Plotinus' image. What seems an unorthodox attempt to blur the lines between two separate entities of soul and matter may contain a polemical edge against the Gnostic dualism, which leaves the matter antagonistic, untamed, forever dark and unable to accept the light of higher realities. Plotinus' matter is impassive, too, but this does not prevent it from offering itself, from the very beginning, as a substrate to everything that comes into being. Unlike the Gnostic Darkness, it does not show much initiative in

the way of aggression, since it is completely subjected to what comes to it.⁶² The only “resistance” it displays is by remaining a perpetual non-being, lacking every definition and quality, because it is the only way for it to remain what it is. As noetic matter, it is present at every stage of the emanation process resulting in the “generation” of the second and the third hypostasis: as first Otherness, it is present at the effusion of the One into what turns back to become the Intellect; as Soul, it receives the flux of intelligible realities becoming *logoi*. Matter is therefore more than a dark emptiness, without being an active evil principle. It is a substrate, but it is also, as some would put it, a capacity to enter different states.⁶³ Among these states there is one which Soul itself does not shun, as I think is evident not only from Plotinus' words (and his ambivalent imagery), but also from the disagreement of Middle Platonic doctrines of matter and World Soul.

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62 There are some instances, in the *Enneads*, of matter displaying a firmer character. Such, for example, is the case of Plato's Penia (*Smp.* 203b), which, according to Platonic interpretations followed by Plotinus, represents matter (*III 5(50).9*; cf. Plutarch, *De Is. et Os.* 374d; see also *III 6(26).11.32* and *I 8(51).14.35s.*). Matter is hereby cast in the role of impertinent beggar, trying to forcefully introduce itself into the intelligible world. However, it is an allegory illustrating the natural desire of every existing thing for the Good – a desire which, in the case of matter, must itself be taken metaphorically, since matter, unqualified and unfeeling, is unable to desire (see *VI 7(38).25.25* and *28.8s.*).

63 See Reale in: Radice (2002: p. 370, n.74).

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