

Plato's Royal Road to Mysticism

By Douglas Lockhart

To ascend through soul to intellect and from intellect to the One we do not have to travel in space to another world, but must wake to a new kind of awareness.

Encyclopaedia Britannica
Vol. 18. 1965 p. 82 concerning Plotinus.

The Socratic-Platonic talk of . . . an inner voice signifies only that its attuning and determining do not come from the outside, i.e., from some being at hand, but from invisible and ungraspable Being itself, which is closer to man than any obtrusive manipulatable being.

Martin Heidegger
Parmenides p. 117.

The Plato-Socrates Dilemma

It is no exaggeration to say that Plato (428 BCE), along with Socrates and Aristotle, was one of the three Greek philosophers who helped lay the philosophical foundations of Western culture. But there are anomalies in how Plato is perceived today, no more so than in how his foundational theory of eternal Ideas, or Forms, has been received by modern thinkers.¹ There is little doubt that Plato was a rational thinker, but he is also suspected of having been a mystic whose realm of absolute Ideas or Forms is at odds with the more rational elements of his philosophy. And so the question as to whether Plato had two distinct philosophies has arisen, and if so what that could possibly mean given that his so-called mysticism is early in his career, and his rational output late in his career.

The stock answer to the above dilemma is double barreled, and goes as follows: Plato's early dialogues were an attempt to preserve the memory of Socrates and his philosophy, but did not constitute what Plato himself believed; or, Plato was himself a Socratic thinker who only become a Platonic rationalist late in life;² which is not dissimilar to the Jewish Jesus becoming a "Christian" by way of later association with himself as the envisioned "Christ" of his followers. So to whom did the theory of absolute Ideas, or Forms, actually belong? Socrates or Plato? Or is that the wrong question? Given that Plato is now known to have been an initiate of the Eleusinian mysteries, might it not be that his theory of absolute Ideas or Forms was both a result of the mysteries and, as suspected by some scholars, a theoretical extension of Socratic principles?³ Benny Shanon's work is the only source I've come across where Plato's involvement with the Greek mysteries is highlighted, and it is I think likely, highly likely, that Socrates was an initiate of the self same mysteries. My reason for thinking this is

threefold: (1) Socrates' deep appreciation of his own ignorance as evidence that he was wiser than other men; (2) his insistence that the supreme realisation in life was the soul's knowledge of good and evil, and (3) his equally pertinent realisation that self-knowledge is of paramount importance.⁴ This type of thinking would mark the evolution of Platonic and Neoplatonic contemplative thought for centuries to come.

The history of Neoplatonism is thought to have started with Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus, in or around 232 CE., but it is uncertain that Neoplatonism, as it developed, truly reflected Plato's final philosophical position. There are evident connections, but they aren't strong enough to guarantee a full continuity. The basic Platonic doctrine of the two worlds (the eternal, intelligible world, and the sense world of time and change) is reflected in Neoplatonic thought, as is the notion of absolute Ideas and Forms on some other level of reality, but that's about it. What we're left with is the thinking of Plotinus which sounds Platonic, but may not in essence have been Platonic. One thing is certain, however, it is Plotinus who stands out as the founder of authentic Neoplatonism, the primary documents of his school being the base on which all later developments of Neoplatonism are built.⁵

In Plato's scheme, there was a "good" beyond "being" that surpassed it in dignity and power, for Plotinus, an ineffable source (the One or the Good) below which are to be found two principles: intellect (*nous*), defined as the *divine mind which is identical with the totality of Platonic Ideas or Forms*, and "soul" which extends from the world of intellect to the lowest realities.⁶ As in Plato, the Divine Mind is *not* the "One" in Plotinus; it is an individual's capacity for "intuitive thought", his/her inherent ability to transcend the limitations of ordinary mind and grasp reality as it is in itself. Influenced, no doubt, by Pythagorean thought, Plato later attempted to derive his absolute Ideas and Forms by a mathematical process from the One, an attempt now considered obscure and too difficult to follow. Plotinus, on the other hand, is clear in his formulations: soul (ordinary mind) works from premise to conclusion, cannot possess the object of thought, but strives to do so. The restless, rational process of soul is responsible for our sense of "time"; whereas "intellect" (the Divine mind) is beyond time and is changeless. Soul is however capable of going beyond ordinary mind (discursive thinking) *in both directions*; it can, with effort, communicate with the Divine Mind via intuition, transcend discursive reasoning altogether and reach the One. In the opposite direction it can master, via rational thought, the whole material universe, and in its lower "unthinking" activity even penetrate down into the darkness of matter itself.⁷

This is of course not philosophy, it is mysticism; but that is far too clear a distinction to make when dealing with the Alexandrian milieu within which Plotinus found himself. In his day, philosophy, theology, and what we now think of as "mysticism", were more or less interchangeable: except that for Plotinus the experiential,

contemplative methodology received from his teacher was always held to be the more important factor. Neoplatonism did eventually take on a more intellectual tenor, but in the end it was the contemplative aspect that won out. This fact can be applied to the problem of philosophical continuity between Plato and Plotinus (or between Socrates and Plato for that matter), for if anything unites them, it is their grasp of experiences at the so-called mystical level. The detailed descriptions already given of Platonic and Plotinian conceptions of reality are not, as some may think, fantasy constructions of the imagination; they are careful elucidations of deep strata encounters with psyche around which accretions of Christian belief had not yet formed. Hence the reputation Plotinus earned for himself in relation to Plato and to Socrates, for unlike others of the Neoplatonic school (Iamblichus in particular), he developed, but did not obscure the older Socratic/Platonic contemplative template. Known to have been uninterested in external religious practices, special revelation, grace, repentance, or in philosophically obtuse attempts to describe the “One”, he pursued *interiority* as sufficient unto itself. But not to the exclusion of offering the occasional polemic against the theological imaginings of Gnosticism and orthodox Christianity. Gnosticism was by this time a heresy of itself, having lost all sense of its Hellenic/Jewish mystical roots, and orthodox Christianity, suffering from a similarly inflicted amnesia, was well on its way towards an Augustinian “coolness” that would slam the contemplative door shut. But not in the monasteries; there would flourish an underground tradition of contemplative practice that would keep the original, uncluttered contemplative vision in operation.

The Influence of Neoplatonism on Christianity was considerable; and that in spite of the Christian authorities of the 5th century destroying the works of Porphyry (234-305), Plotinus’ biographer and editor. Having written 15 books against the Christians, Porphyry earned the Church’s disapproval, perhaps because his writings were considered the most intelligent, and therefore the most dangerous, of all the pagan attacks on Christianity.⁸ There then followed a series of Neoplatonic Schools, each one developing its own brand of Plotinian thought, each one transgressing the simple, straight-forward approach of Plotinus until in the 7th century the Alexandrian School returned to the simpler model. During the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries, the influence of Neoplatonism on Christianity grew steadily, and in the 6th and 7th centuries, prominent Neoplatonists converted to the Christian faith which, in the interim, had taken on many important elements of Greek philosophy and Greek science.⁹ Seeking to change Christianity’s rustic, uneducated image during the earlier centuries, Christian bishops such as Clement of Alexandria, and his successor Origen, had acquainted themselves with the teachings of the Stoics, and with those of Aristotle and Plato, the ever original Origen even going as far as to become acquainted with the thinking of Ammonius Saccas, the mysterious Alexandrian teacher and instructor of Plotinus himself. Other pre-Socratic

teachers such as Pythagorus and Heraclitus were also in vogue, the cults that evolved around these figures forming what one scholar has aptly described as “a constantly mutating intellectual bouillabaisse.”¹⁰

Porphyry insisted that “flights from the body” were an intrinsic part of contemplative experience. For Plotinus, however, the whole point of the contemplative process seems to have been a return to the source from which one came, a condition beyond thought and language, time and space, indeed, beyond even the experience of astral travel. This condition was reached through waking to *another way of seeing*, (another level of awareness) which everyone had access to, but few ever experienced.¹¹ By means of a form of inner reflection that allowed one to penetrate beyond discursive reasoning, a reality altogether different from the one generally known could be entered and interacted with. Which is to say that the contemplative route was well understood, that it had been tested as to effect, and had had an experiential system built around it that could be passed on from person to person. The experiences afforded could be described in many ways, but when all was said and done they were a personal encounter with psyche at depth, and as transition point, that could never with full accuracy be articulated in language. And behind it all lay the ancient Eleusinian mysteries, the use of psychoactive substances as initiatory triggers, and Plato’s similarly induced contemplative vision, a vision that would dominate the royal road of mysticism for centuries to come.

Matter and Psyche as an Holistic Order

Mathematics was intimately related to Plato’s world of Ideas and ideal Forms, and according to Benny Shanon, “geometric” visions are a common experience for users of Ayahuasca. A relationship between mind and mathematics also lies at the heart of Pythagorean thought, which heavily influenced Plato, and music (the “music of the spheres”) being considered part of the world of Ideal Forms. And rightly so, for music is not only mathematical at heart, it is also capable of producing altered states of consciousness. In this sense Plato links “noesis” (an experience of knowledge not mediated by our reasoning powers) to aesthetics, and in turn links aesthetics to a *deep investment of meaning* in things which, according to Shanon, perfectly describes the intensity associated with psychoactive experience: a form of intense “knowing” brought about by a *heightened sense of significance*. It is as if matter opens up and reveals its essence, a non-verbal experience on which the experiencer can build, as did Plotinus and Plato and William James, theoretical schemes concerning mind, matter and other dimensions of awareness. Which informs us that something extraordinarily important is going on here, and it is not the result of *psychic mush*.

The question of whether mathematics was “created”, or “discovered” by the

human mind, has not yet been resolved by mathematicians; or by philosophers. Hanging like a sword of Damocles over all forms of reductionist thinking, this question is perhaps the question of all questions in relation to what the world is in itself, and what human beings are in themselves. If, as is believed by many, mathematics is purely a creation of the mind, then by what means has the human mind created the mathematical correlates evident in the world at large? For it stands to reason, does it not, that if such correlates did not exist, then mathematics would be meaningless. So the next question is this: what is mathematics? And that of course spawns a further question: what is “mind” in that it is capable of conceiving the existence of something that has no actual existence outside of mind? Unlike the word “horse”, which has nothing to do with any particular horse, and is therefore “ontological” in nature (“horse” as an *ideal*, not as a singular “object”), mathematics, too, would seem to be ontological in nature. But not “ideal” in the sense that horse is ideal, for mathematics has no parallel in nature beyond the vicissitudes of number perceived in objects, an encounter that affords nothing without a basic comprehension of arithmetic. Albert Einstein summed up this perplexing situation when he said that the mystery facing us is not that the world is incomprehensible, but that it *is* comprehensible. He was of course referring to the fact that the world, and by extension the universe, can be predicatively engaged with via mathematics.¹² Hence the awe with which mathematics was viewed in ancient Greece, an awe shared by today’s physicists.

That such a thing as mathematics exists is a puzzle; the very fact of its existence seems to contradict the notion that the universe, and life as we know it, is a fluke of cosmic circumstances. The existence of mathematics suggests, as Pauli and Einstein suggested, an organising principle at the very heart of matter that allows matter to evolve and change via terrestrial and cosmic processes, and this principle may, as Jung suggested, mirror a similar, if not identical, principle of organisation within the consciousness of human beings. And as we saw in chapter four, again via Pauli, matter and psyche may constitute an *holistic order* governed by some underlying principle of organisation. Which is to suggest what? Well, it is not to suggest that exponents of Intelligent Design should be taken seriously. There is an inbuilt subterfuge in that term that would force us back into the arms of the God standard Christianity believes interferes in history and punishes for all eternity. Not that all Christians think like that, but even those with a broader conception of spiritual reality are left with the problem of what their God *is* if he isn’t a conscious being with likes and dislikes. There’s a problem here, and it is related to Niels Bohr’s quantum level of expression where, prior to being observed, matter is ‘other’ than how it is perceived during conscious observation. In this sense, mathematics *is* a conscious construct, as is the God of the searching Christian imagination, whereas in quantum theory something ‘other’ is sensed to lie behind classical mathematical forms. Hence Bohr’s ‘theory of complementarity’ where matter is described

in 'wave' *and* 'particle' terms, a contradiction in terms beyond our capacity to mathematically visualise. We can *infer* that it is the case, but we cannot conceptually *prove* that it is the case by means of standard, classically-based theoretical physics.

In Plato's scheme, ideas, meanings and regularities of thought were housed as Ideal Forms in an alternative reality: hence his theory of Ideas which, when applied to mathematics, suggests that mathematics was discovered and not invented. So with music. Benny Shanon asks: "Why do two tones differing by an octave sound 'the same'? Why do certain melodic progressions - such as those involving fifths and thirds - sound right to our ears?" Music, he tells us, "reaches complexities that are not readily accountable in . . . psychological or physiological terms." And not just music; also the grammatical constructions to be found in all languages. The acquisition of grammatical structures by children have not been satisfactorily explained, we are told, and neither has the generation of myth.¹³ A controversial statement by Levi-Strauss (controversial because in the original French it is thought by some to be ambiguous) states: "We are not . . . claiming to show how men think the myths, but rather how the myths think themselves out in men and without men's knowledge."¹⁴ For Shanon, what we have to consider is a "non-psychological account of myth as a possibility",¹⁵ an origin for myth that lies beyond mental construction. Which causes Shanon to add: "If myths were discovered by their originators through the use of substance-induced altered states of consciousness, then the world of myth *is* actually the world of [the psychoactive substance] Ayahuasca."¹⁶ This takes us back to the quote at the head of chapter ten where he suggests that Plato's Ideas were perhaps not intellectual creations, but actual "entities" encountered as a result of ingesting a mind-altering substance. In other words, an encounter with "Gods" such as those perceived by initiates at Eleusis. As Plato himself partook of such substances at Eleusis, it is fairly certain that his idea of "Ideas" as *ideal forms* was the visionary result of a drug like LSD, or perhaps even a substance as powerful as the Amazonian drug ayahuasca. Question is, what does all of this mean? Are we to understand Plato's realm of "ideal forms" to be no more than a drug-induced fantasy or aberration?

Herein lies a problem, for in the previous chapter Shanon told us that the key factors in the ayahuasca experience are not "chemical", so how can he now say that the world of myth *is actually the world of ayahuasca*? Yet also say that the experience is the result of *where and how and by whom*. So has he contradicted himself? After consideration, I concluded that he had not, because a close reading of his text showed him to be postulating not some effect belonging to the drug itself, or to projections of the human mind, but to the psychological needs of the individual in relation to some kind of alternative reality *made available through ayahuasca*. The drug therefore constituted a mind-altering experience only in terms of a "threshold" crossed, an "entry point" beyond which lay a dimension of reality altogether different from our own three-dimensionally

circumscribed reality. What this means experientially is, to say the least, challenging. Suffice it to say that Shanon's clinical contribution to our understanding of substances like ayahuasca is considerable, and in conjunction with the carefully controlled research of Rick Strassman into the effects of DMT, constitutes the means by which an intellectually adventurous piece of reasoning will avoid being dismissed too quickly. For if the experience of crossing some kind of threshold or entry point only applied to substances like ayahuasca, LSD or DMT, then I would of course be placing a large question mark on both Shanon's and Strassmann's conclusions, but as identical experiences are to be had via the more laborious route of meditation and contemplation, then one has to suspect consciousness of being even more complicated and surprising than either Jung, Einstein, Pauli, Bergson or James fully realised.

In his illuminating study *Coming to Our Senses*, Morris Berman takes up the problem of deep strata experience, and boldly tells us that he is going to take the evidence for mystical experience at face value, a decision also made by Rick Strassman that we'll look into later. Berman puts his case like this: "They *did* ascend to heaven, or turn into light, or whatever; all of this is not reducible to 'brain chemistry,' which is a very low-level understanding of altered states of consciousness."¹⁷ The greatest enemy for Berman is ". . . organised religion and the concept of God that such religions peddle to the masses."¹⁸ We have been deceived; other levels of reality exist of which we know nothing because the West's religious tradition lost its spiritual bearings. History has been distorted to accommodate the Christian myth to such an extent that almost all trace of the visionary, ecstatic path to truth as a *vertical* "ascent" experience has been lost sight of. What remains is a *horizontal* path governed by linear time and a slow, incremental progression towards understanding governed by the limitations of language and mathematics as a substitute "ascent" mechanism:¹⁹ the mechanical has overpowered the mystical, deep strata experience swapped for the methodology of the engineer.

Both Shanon and Strassman are with Berman on this; they too have broken through hardline secular humanism's barrier of contempt and rediscovered that the human body constitutes not a barrier to knowledge, as in Christianity, but a conduit for knowledge via experiences of psyche at depth. Berman offers what is probably the most insightful glimpse of what has gone wrong in this debate about spirituality when he says: "[T]he attempt to restore body cognition to the centre of human consciousness is a central feature of most heretical movements in the history of the Christian West."²⁰ The argument between "heresy" and "orthodoxy" is actually an argument between "belief" and "experience", he tells us, an argument that can only be resolved by way of somatic practices such as meditation. Those who engaged in such practices in the past were not mental defectives;²¹ they were in fact at the cutting edge of human experience and intelligence in an age already in the grip of doctrinal stagnation: Christianity's grocery list

of beliefs as indisputable “fact” was fast preparing the Western mind for the cold, hard, lifeless physicalist theories that would eventually come to dominate thought and action on just about every level. And all because the human body had come to be feared as an agent of the devil. Why? Because it housed forces capable of cutting through Christianity’s consciously constructed theological fairytale and reveal it for what it actually was: an all but empty husk. Yes, there’s the remnant of something important in Christianity, but that “something” has long since been obscured through theological sleight-of-hand.

The Gnostic Hotch-Potch

The problem with Christianity as it evolved over the first few centuries was that it came to view itself as the only legitimate path to ascent experience. Well, that was one level of the problem. The other level was that its own earlier experiences of mystical ascent prior to Jesus turning into God had, to put it bluntly, ceased. The experiential level of Christianity had turned into a belief system based on the experiences of others afforded the status of myth. Jesus the flesh and blood man whose greatest realisation was that he was himself “the way, the truth and the life”, had been transformed into the “belief” that his experience of being such sufficed for everyone else: personal descent was now unnecessary. Deep strata experience leading to ascent experiences had been exchanged for an emotional investment in Jesus that progressively ran out of control; an investment that afforded the “believer” a simulation of ecstatic ascent minus the psychological labours of descent. Ecstasy was now an affective identification with Jesus *as* God that demanded nothing from the believer other than that he/she kept on believing through a process of emotional booster shots. As there were disastrous consequences for anyone who stopped believing (damnation for all eternity), and the rewards for continuing to believe were so great (salvation for all eternity), the attrition rate suffered by the Church was minimal. But there were also many who refused to believe, and the root cause of their dissent was, unsurprisingly, of Jewish origin. For in spite of a theology that now made the Jewish background of Christianity all but invisible, and Jesus’ socially defined role as Jewish Messiah fade from sight, there were at large those within a now disintegrated and scattered Judaism who had experienced both descent and ascent, and they took a stand against the effrontery of a Church in the process of turning spiritually maniacal. Yes, legalistic, Rabbinic, Torah-bound Judaism would continue in the synagogues, but its mystical core would flourish in the breakaway groups termed “Gnostic”, and these groups would in turn carry evidence of their Jewish origins.

As already noted, theories abound as to the origins of Gnosticism, but the British scholar E. R. Dodds has perhaps come closest to an explanation that properly accounts for much of Gnostic writings, namely, that the whole movement’s inspiration

was the result of “mystical experiences”.²² Gershom Scholem, the eminent Professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem is not only in agreement with Dodds, he points to esoteric practices in Rabbinic Judaism that developed alongside gnosticism, and in parallel with John Allegro and Morris Berman categorises the Gnostic groups as *forms of Jewish gnosticism*. And as many of those groups also bore a quite definite Christian stamp, and Christianity *in its original form* had been a well-known Jewish sect of mystical orientation, it did not take much imagination to realise that there was nothing particularly startling in how “Christianity”, as it was eventually called, had come into being. What was startling was how the Rome-based, Hellenistic-influenced offshoot of the Nazarene sect had lost sight of its sectarian origins and come to view itself as not only spiritually unique, but also spiritually superior to all other Jewish/Christian groups. But not because of hubris. More because the documents on which its beliefs were based (Paul’s letters and what there was of the gospels) had been largely misunderstood due to Paul’s antagonistic relationship with the so-called Jerusalem Church led by Jesus’ brother James. In Paul’s writings, Jesus the failed Jewish Messiah had turned into a miraculous being whose Messianic role was now conceived as an act of salvation, not just for Israel, but for the whole human race. Believing in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel so as to gain entrance to Judaism as a convert, and so into a deeper affiliation with the Temple, had been transformed into a Christian rite of passage devoid of a Jewish context: believing in Jesus was now a magical formula which, once articulated, guaranteed an eventual “ascent” experience for Christians. A new fundamentalism had been born, and with a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, adjustment of its foundation texts, it would from there on harass and persecute Judaism in a vain attempt to wipe her from its so-selective memory banks.

What eventually separated the standard Christian story from gnosticism was gnosticism’s claim of “salvation by knowledge”, a claim rejected by the Church as insufficient because it knew worldly knowledge could not in the end satisfy the soul’s longings. The answer was “faith”, faith in Jesus, and faith in Jesus, when it was boiled down, cancelled out as “belief” in what the Church said about Jesus. All you had to do was surrender yourself to the Church’s teachings about Jesus and start believing. That’s all there was to it. Simple. Well, not quite; you had also to live a good life, and you did that by trying to be like Jesus, who had been sinless, and you got to be like Jesus by praying to God through Jesus. At least that’s what you did early on; after a while you prayed to Jesus *as God*, and the sense of immediacy, or intimacy, helped you over a hurdle or two. And there were moments when, if you were terribly serious, prayer began to take on a surprising edge, an edge of mystery which opened up into a domain of the self you hadn’t known to exist. At first a place where you met and talked to Jesus, for that was what prayer was, this place, or space, turned into a species of psychic elevator, an

ecstatic “lifting up” of the spirit where words tumbled together to such an extent that they formed an opening beyond words. Such moments were however rare, and they seemed always to end in a profound, and sometimes disturbing, silence .

Faith in Jesus versus “knowledge of the self” is an argument still being used against gnosticism by Christianity; it clears the ground quickly and allows Gnostic self-centredness to be dismissed. Faith is simple; knowledge in the gnostic sense is too complicated. Problem is, knowledge in the Gnostic sense wasn’t at all what Christianity then or now imagined it to be; it too was a form of faith: faith in something discovered by the self in the depths of being. For Christians, faith in Jesus was intricately connected to a set of supposed historical events stored in the conscious mind: faith was fundamentally *knowledge about* Jesus as opposed to gnosticism’s experiential and experimental *knowledge of* the source Jesus himself was believed to have tapped into. For the Christian, faith was a belief formula; for the gnostic initiate it was a psychic encounter affording multiple possibilities. But some Christians did inadvertently make the descent into psyche, and when they did their whole conception of the spiritual life underwent change. The Jesus story and God seemed to melt away in such moments, a whole new horizon of spiritual possibilities opening up to a self frozen into immobility in the depths of being. But quickly interpreted back into a Christian context in most cases; if pursued, however, then subtly modified to avoid a head-on collision with Church authorities. And so arose the problem the Church had with its own mystics, for there was often an air of subversion in their sometimes impenetrable claims. And not because they were political subversives, more because descent into the self by sane, healthy individuals led automatically to the realisation that psyche was a law unto itself.

Pétrément, Puech and Pagels

In her quite exhaustive study of gnosticism, the French scholar Simone Pétrément criticises fellow Gnostic scholar Henri-Charles Puech’s interpretation of Gnostic meanings as not corresponding to the history of gnosticism *as far as we know it*. Pétrément is explicit; Puech’s got the whole business of the Gnostic *search for self* quite wrong. The Gnostic preoccupation with “knowing the self” did not in actual fact concern a *search* for the self as now understood; it concerned the self’s origin in another dimension of time and space. Knowledge of the self implied “knowledge of a complete doctrine concerning God, the human soul, and the world.”²³ For Puech, the “search” was a little more self-centred. In his view the Gnostic initiate tended to be egotistical; he related everything to himself and his personal salvation. Knowledge of the self was, essentially, knowledge of the surface self, or ego. So far so good, but the divide between Pétrément and Puech widens, for Pétrément then says that Puech’s notion of the Gnostics

having invented a doctrine by which they could judge themselves superior to the world in which they found themselves is unacceptable. Gnosticism was not dissatisfaction with this world turned into an excuse to imagine a fantasy world; it was to realise that one was not of this world and search for the means to return to the divine world from which one had originated.²⁴

For Pétrement, Gnostic texts dealing specifically with the self and its experience of psyche in Puech's sense are probably of late origin, texts dealing with "knowledge of self" in the sense she offers, of earlier vintage. Which does not entirely close down Puech's argument, except with regard to such experiences being interpreted as no more than egotistical excursions into fantasy. Excursions they certainly were, but creations of "fantasy" may not properly describe what was being experienced. Enter Elaine Pagels with her little 1979 book *The Gnostic Gospels* in which she reveals a gnosticism firmly in the grip of descent/ascent experience. There is, as Pétrement states, a desire to know one's origin and one's destination, but along with this are an avalanche of texts describing not only meditative/contemplative outcomes, but also details of the descent into psyche *as process*. Perhaps chief of those texts would be one from the *Gospel of Thomas*, considered not only early by most scholars, but most probably earlier than Paul's letters or any of the Gospels. It reads as follows:

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.²⁵

With the use of many similar texts, Pagels teases open the question of what Gnosticism was in itself, and we learn that the pursuit of *gnosis* (knowledge) engaged each person in "a solitary, difficult process, as one struggle[d] against internal resistance."²⁶ This "resistance" was the desire to "sleep" or be "drunk", which Pagels interprets as *the desire to remain unconscious*. In the *Dialogue of the Saviour*, which is attributed to Jesus, Silvanus the teacher says: "Knock on yourself as upon a door and walk upon yourself as on a straight road. . . . Open the door for yourself that you may know what is Whatever you will open for yourself, you will open." In the *Gospel of Truth*, initiates are referred to as "sons of interior knowledge", and in the *Gospel of Thomas* the "Kingdom" does not refer to some unearthly state, some Divine realm after death, but to a *state of transformed consciousness*. In the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, "whoever has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depths of all things." And in the *Testimony of Truth* the initiate becomes a "disciple of his [own] mind", learns that his mind is "the father of all truth", and that the route to this truth is through *meditative silence*. By this

difficult, solitary internal route the initiate can “maintain his independence of anyone else’s authority”,²⁷ the mature initiate requiring no external source of authority other than for the purpose of outgrowing it.²⁸

Henri-Charles Puech’s approach is basically sociological; he reads the Gnostic texts from the point of view of someone explaining a social phenomenon. In that spirit he interprets the reaction to “authority” as self-evidently egotistical, which is to say “subversive” of Church authority. Basically, I have no problem with the idea of “subversion” in the sense that the pronouncements of some Christian mystics did challenge Church authority, but I do have a problem with Puech’s assessment of Gnostic texts being no more than an egotistical reaction to authority. Theological and political subversion could not be avoided due to the inherent challenge deep strata experience brought to the table, whereas the view that gnosticism was no more than a social phenomenon caused by deprivation and depression ignores the substantive psychological element of these texts. But again, Cupitt isn’t far behind, for he too identified mystic utterances with “lower-strata social discontent”, and that, too, leaves us with a sociological explanation. As Puech himself notices, however, knowledge of self was essentially *knowledge of the deep and hidden part of each human being*, and that, along with the sample texts above, indicates that something a little more complicated than social discontent was operative. The “resistance” experienced by Gnostic initiates was not due to social dislocation; it was due to deep-seated psychological resistance born from natural processes of perception later identified by Henri Bergson as our having “no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life’s depths.” Interiority could be ignored; only exteriority mattered.

References and Notes:

- 1) Britannica, Inc., Encyclopaedia (Macropaedia 1981) Vol. 4, p. 533.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid, pp. 533-534.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Britannica, Inc., Encyclopaedia 1965, Vol. 16, p. 217.
- 6) Ibid, pp. 217-218.
- 7) Ibid, p. 218.
- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Dodds, E. R., *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, p.106.
- 10) Baigent, Michael, and Richard Leigh, *The Elixir and the Stone: the Tradition of Magic and Alchemy*, Viking, London 1997. p. 19.
- 11) Britannica, Inc., Encyclopaedia 1981. Vol. 18. p. 82.
- 12) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, Oxford University Press New York, 2002.
- 13) Ibid, p. 394-395.
- 14) Ibid, p. 395. The actual sentence by Levi Strauss reads: “*Nous ne pretendons donc pas montrer comment les hommes pensent dans les mythes mais comment les mythes se pensent dans les hommes, et a leur insu.*”
- 15) Ibid.
- 16) Ibid.
- 17) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, Bantam Books, 1990. p. 140.
- 18) Ibid, p. 141.
- 19) Ibid, p. 164, 168, 170.

- 20) Ibid, p, 138.
- 21) Ibid.
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