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# An End in Itself, or a Means to an End? The Role of Ethics in the Second Century: Plutarch's *Moralia* and the Nag Hammadi Writings

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta

## 1 Introduction

In their attempts at reconstructing ancient philosophical and religious thought, scholars tend to approach the testimonies from Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity separately, as if these cultural groups had lived isolated both from their environment and from one another. Data proceeding from one of these groups are normally dealt with unconnectedly and statically, to be compared only *a posteriori* with data proceeding from other contexts, generally in order to determine the presence or absence of similarities or influences, cultural loans, and appropriations and/or adaptations. Behind this sort of analysis, we often find the will to substantiate chronological claims in order to determine, on the basis of rigid evolutionary schemes, the priority of a given phenomenon in this or that culture or, conversely, its dependence on another.

Besides the serious methodological problems it implies, such an anomalous approach has often raised unsolvable questions, such as the enquiry concerning the origin of Gnosticism. Isolated from its cultural context, Gnosticism has traditionally been considered a liminal phenomenon, a cultural sub-product that can only be understood as a deviation or deformation of established and orthodox worldviews. The four traditional hypotheses regarding its origin are proof, I think, of this biased approach. Up to now, Gnosticism has indeed been considered as deformation, either rooted in Greek philosophy or in Zoroastrianism, or as a deviation from Judaism or from Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Differing from this, my intention in this chapter will be to show that a proper understanding of Gnosticism requires an integral approach to ancient society, an approach that, instead of isolating it from its environment, integrates it within the philosophical and religious context of late antiquity. I will do

1 See, for example, K.L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 149–190, at 169–181.

so by comparing the ethical views of the Nag Hammadi treatises with contemporary Middle Platonic thought dealing with the same subject. It is well known that later Middle Platonists hesitated as to the moral or purely intellectual understanding of Plato's *homoiosis theo*: While for some the goal of the likeness to god was mainly ethical, others saw in this as an *epoptic* or theoretical experience.<sup>2</sup> The latter group, however, did recognize the preparatory function of practical virtue or *phronesis*, which the *Republic* also seems to endorse, as a preparation for the godlike state of contemplation.<sup>3</sup> What is less known, however, is that the Nag Hammadi treatises reflect both of these Middle Platonic interpretations of Plato's ὁμοίωσις θεῷ or 'likeness to God.' Whereas some texts simply focus on the ethical perspective, others conceive of it as an exclusively contemplative act. Interestingly enough, in line with Plutarch the latter texts also integrate the ethical progress in the process, considering it as a sort of initiation into the higher intellectualistic *homoiosis theo*.

After analyzing conspicuous parallelisms in the view of ethics as found in both Plutarch and some Nag Hammadi treatises, this chapter will claim that, in both corpora, similarities in the conception of the ethical path as being initiatory for achieving *epoptic* culmination do not result from influences in either or both directions but rather are simply expressions of the same cultural context they were part of, what I call the philosophical-religious *continuum* of late antiquity. With this goal in mind, my contribution entails three sections. The first will analyze the matter in Plutarch of Chaeronea (2). The second compares this material with the testimony from the Nag Hammadi treatises (3). The third will offer a few concluding remarks (4).

## 2 The Ethical Path and Contemplation in Plutarch's *Moralia*

The Middle Platonic view of the *homoiosis theo* is a sequel to Plato's assertion in the *Theaetetus* that "a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and to escape is to become like god, so far as this is possible."<sup>4</sup> This view

2 On the issue, see L. Roig Lanzillotta, "A Way of Salvation: Becoming like God in Nag Hammadi," in A. Klostergaard Petersen & K. von Stuckrad (eds.), *The Gods as Role Models in Western Traditions* (Numen special issue 60.1; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 71–102.

3 Pl., *R.* 518DE. On Plato's *homoiosis theo* in the *Republic*, see E.F. Cooke, "The Moral and Intellectual Development of the Philosopher in Plato's *Republic*," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999) 37–44. On the influence of Plato's conception in later Middle Platonism, see Roig Lanzillotta, "A Way of Salvation," 81.

4 Pl., *Tht.* 176AB. On Plato's *homoiosis theo*, see H. Merki, *Ὁμοίωσις θεῷ: Von der Platonischen*

that relies on the Pythagorean soul-body dualism implies a clear hierarchy, in which the soul is the true, divine self, and the body is a lower accretion that hinders the fulfillment of the real “I,” due to both its material urges and sensory perceptions.<sup>5</sup> Oblivious of its own true origin and nature due to this unnatural and forced communion, the soul lives a life of servitude to the body.

This means that for Plato the likeness or assimilation to god implies a transformation of the self, a change from the worst to the better that starts when human beings decide to purify their immortal nature from all surrounding pollution that proceeds from the mortal side of their being. So far so good, but problems arise when trying to determine the process by which this metamorphosis is enacted. Admittedly the use of rationality and avoiding every aspect of physical life is crucial, since “no one may join the company of the gods who has not practiced philosophy and is not completely pure when he departs

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*Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa* (Freiburg: Paulusverlag, 1952); C.W. Müller, *Gleiches zu Gleichem: Ein Prinzip frühgriechischen Denkens* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965) 180–193; D. Roloff, *Gottähnlichkeit, Vergöttlichung und Erhöhung zu seligem Leben. Untersuchungen zur Herkunft der platonischen Angleichung an Gott* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970); W. Scheffel, *Aspekte der platonischen Kosmologie. Untersuchungen zum Dialog “Timaios”* (Leiden: Brill, 1976) 133–139; D. Sedley, “‘Becoming Like God’ in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle,” in T. Calvo & L. Brisson (eds.), *Interpreting the ‘Timaeus’—‘Critias’: Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum, Selected Papers* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1997) 327–339; J. Annas, *Platonic Ethics. Old and New* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) 52–71; K. Comoth, “‘Homoiosis’ bei Platon und Origenes,” in W.A. Bienert & U. Kühneweg (eds.), *Origeniana Septima* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999) 69–75; Cooke, “The Moral and Intellectual Development,” 37–44; M. Erler, “Epicurus as Deus Mortalis: Homoiosis Theoi and Epicurean Self-Cultivation,” in D. Frede & A. Laks (eds.), *Traditions of Theology. Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 159–181; D.C. Russell, “Virtue as ‘Likeness to God’ in Plato and Seneca,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (2004) 241–260; D. Sedley, “The Ideal of Godlikeness,” in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 309–328; J.M. Armstrong, “After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming like God,” *OSAP* 26 (2004) 171–183; D.C. Baltzly, “The Virtues and ‘Becoming like God’: Alcinous to Proclus,” *OSAP* 26 (2004) 297–321; S. Lavecchia, *Una via che conduce al divino: la ‘homoiosis theoi’ nella filosofia di Platone* (Milan: Angeli, 2006); see, most recently, P.L. Miller, *Becoming God. Pure Reason in Early Greek Philosophy* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011).

- 5 The bibliography on the issue is vast. B. Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, 6th ed.) 56–81; see also B. Snell, “Rezension zu J. Böhme, *Seele und Ich bei Homer*,” *Gn* 7 (1931) 78–85; T.H. Heckel, *Der Innere Mensch. Die paulinische Verarbeitung eines platonischen Motivs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); Ch. Marksches, “Die platonische Metapher vom ‘inneren Menschen’: eine Brücke zwischen antiker Philosophie und altchristlicher Theologie,” *ZKG* 105 (1994) 1–17; Ch. Marksches, “Innerer Mensch,” *RAC* 18 (1997) 266–312; W. Burkert, “Towards Plato and Paul: The ‘Inner’ Human Being,” in A. Yabro Collins (ed.), *Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Bible and Culture. Essays in Honor of Hans Dieter Betz* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998) 59–82.

from life,” as the *Phaedo* puts it.<sup>6</sup> However, the *corpus platonicum* envisages various possibilities for achieving *homoiosis*, namely ethical, logical/epistemological, physical, or theoretical ones.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, later tradition hesitates as to the proper understanding of *homoiosis*:<sup>8</sup> While for Eudorus, Philo, or Alcinous the likeness to god was an ethical enterprise,<sup>9</sup> for Plutarch and Apuleius the goal of this assimilation was in general an intellectual achievement, even if Plutarch, depending of the context, may flirt with an ethical interpretation thereof.<sup>10</sup> As far as the former tendency is concerned, it may have originated with Xenocrates, who according to David Sedley, re-interpreted the *Timaeus* (90C) such that *eudaimonia* was equated “with the good ordering of the entire soul, not just of its intellectual part.”<sup>11</sup> He understood the *telos* formula in moral terms and several Middle Platonists followed him in this interpretation. As far as the second interpretation is concerned, it may go back to Aristotle, who in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, after ten books analyzing moral virtue, concludes that it is when we are contemplating that we become like gods, not when we are acting in accordance with moral virtue.<sup>12</sup>

6 Pl., *Phd.* 82B10–11.

7 On the issue, see Roig Lanzillotta, “A Way of Salvation,” at 73–78. On Arius’s tripartite treatment (physical, ethical, and logical) of the matter (Stob. 2.49.16 Wachsmuth), based on Plato’s tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*, see J.M. Dillon, *Alcinous. The Handbook of Platonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 172.

8 Sedley, “‘Becoming Like God,’” 333–337.

9 For Eudorus, see test. 25 Mazzarelli. According to H. Dörrie & M. Baltes, *Der Platonismus in der Antike 3: Der Platonismus im 2. und 3. Jahrhunderte nach Christus* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1993) 328 note 10, Eudorus plausibly introduced the assimilation to god as a Platonic *telos* formula. See on his moral interpretation, H. Dörrie, “Der Platoniker Eudoros von Alexandria,” *Hermes* 79 (1944) 25–39 at 31–32; J.M. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996, 2nd ed.) 122–123. On Philo, see *Fug.* 63; *Opif.* 144. On Philo’s use of Plato’s motif, see Merki, “Ὁμοίωσις θεῶν,” 35–44; B. Belletti, “La dottrina dell’assimilazione a Dio in Filone di Alessandria,” *Rivista di filosofia neo-scolastica* 74 (1982) 419–440; D.T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986) 341–343. For Alcinous’ moral interpretation of the assimilation to god, see *Didask.* 28; on which see Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, 63–66 and, more recently, Baltzly, “The Virtues and ‘Becoming like God,’” 300.

10 There are indeed some passages in which Plutarch interprets the ideal of *homoiosis theo* as an ethical enterprise. Thus, for example, in *Ad princ. iner.* 781A and *Arist.* 6.3. In such cases Plutarch may adopt, for the sake of the argument, a position similar to that of Eudorus, Philo and Alcinous.

11 See Sedley, “The Ideal of Godlikeness,” 322 note 18, on Xenocrates fr. 236 Isnardi-Parent (in *Arist., Top.* 112A36–38), εὐδαίμονα εἶναι τὸν τὴν ψυχὴν ἔχοντα σπουδαίαν. ταῦτην γὰρ ἐκάστου εἶναι δαίμονα.

12 *Arist., EN* 1177A12–1179A33. On the Pythagorean influence on Plutarch, see P. Donini, *De*

This *epoptic* experience, however, is but the last step in a long process of purification in which the role of ethics and practical virtue was central.<sup>13</sup> Indeed both soul and body pose the most important obstacle for unhampered *theoria*, and as a result, their influence needs to be neutralized before human intellect can engage in pure contemplation. In line with Plato's *Phaedo*, Plutarch has a rather negative view of the physical world and, in a quasi-Gnostic fashion, asserts that life is a "prison-house affording no removal or escape, although it allows in the interval much feasting ... as when prisoners play at dice or draughts with the rope hanging overhead."<sup>14</sup> As far as the Pythagorean hierarchy of the human being mentioned earlier is concerned, Plutarch sees the body in such a negative light that *De facie* envisages purification on the moon *even* for good souls:<sup>15</sup> While vicious souls pay the penalty for their offences, righteous souls "purge and blow away [the] pollutions contracted from the body as from an evil odour."<sup>16</sup> In this context, only ethics can provide some solace, since it helps individuals, first, to counteract the influence of externals and, second, to temper all irrational tendencies within the soul; this is the only way to attain complete liberation by means of the intellect.<sup>17</sup>

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*genio Socratis: Plutarco, Il demone di Socrate, Introduzione, traduzione e commento* (Rome: Carocci, 2017). On Pythagorean influence on Plutarch's ethical thinking, see also A. Bellanti, "Aristotele pitagorico? La concezione della medietà nel *De virtute morali* di Plutarco," *RSF* 95 (2003) 3–36.

- 13 See L. Roig Lanzillotta, "Mito y Revelación en Plutarco: o de cómo el conocimiento divino alcanza a los hombres", in Josep Clua (ed.), *Mythologica Plutarchea. Estudio sobre los mitos en Plutarco* (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 2020) 327–350.
- 14 Plu., *De sera num.* 554D: ... ἐν τῷ βίῳ καθάπερ εἰρκτηῆ μηδεμίαν μετανάστασιν ἐχούση μηδὲ διάφουξιν, εὐωχίας δὲ πολλὰς διὰ μέσου καὶ πραγματείας καὶ δόσεις καὶ χάριτας ἀμέλει καὶ παιδιὰς, ὥσπερ ἐν δεσμωτηρίῳ κυβούντων ἢ πεττεούντων ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς τοῦ σχοινοῦ κρεμαμμένου; on which H.D. Betz et al., "De sera numinis vindicta (Moralia 548A–568A)," in H.D. Betz (ed.), *Plutarch's Theological Writings and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1975) 181–235 at 206.
- 15 On Pythagorean influences on Plutarch, see J.M. Dillon, "Pythagoreanism in Plutarch," in H.-G. Nesselrath (ed.), *On the daimonion of Socrates* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2010) 139–144.
- 16 Plu., *De facie* 943C, ... τὰς δ' ἐπιεικεῖς ὄσον ἀφαγνεύσαι καὶ ἀποπνεύσαι (τοὺς) ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος ὥσπερ ἀτμοῦ πονηροῦ μισμοῦς ἐν τῷ πρασιότῳ τοῦ ἀέρος, ὃν λειμώνας Ἄιδου καλοῦσι, δεῖ γίγνεσθαι χρόνον τινὰ τεταγμένον; see also *De tuenda* 129C.
- 17 It is not my intention to provide a detailed analysis of Plutarch's view concerning ethics here. This has been done sufficiently and appropriately in the past, for example, by John Dillon's deductive approach or Francesco Becchi's inductive analysis. See, for example, Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 192–198; F. Becchi, *Plutarco. La Fortuna* (Naples: M. D'Auria, 2010) 9–54. See also the articles on Plutarch's ethics collected in G. Roskam & L. Van der Stockt (eds.), *Virtues for the People. Aspects of Plutarchan Ethics* (Leuven: Brill, 2011).

## 2.1 *Practical Ethics*

The more practical side of Plutarchan ethics, such as developed in *On Feeling Good*, *On Exile*, *On Talkativeness*, *On Curiosity*, and in *Precepts of Health Care* has been sufficiently assessed in a recent book by Lieve van Hoof. Against Konrad Ziegler's interpretation of this part of Plutarch's ethics as "popular-philosophical," van Hoof rightly claims that in these writings Plutarch rather "discusses problems that arise because of society's expectations of its elite and because of the elite's ambitions within society."<sup>18</sup> Practical virtue, when exercised in solitude far from the noise of the city and the preoccupations of society, has the benefit of transforming the soul, as fragment 143 (from *On quietude*) states: "But solitude, being wisdom's training-ground, is a good character-builder, and moulds and reforms men's souls."<sup>19</sup> As Dillon points out, this step is essential, since ethics in the first place provides the peace of mind that eventually allows man to achieve that "mighty wisdom which makes him that acquires it like to God."<sup>20</sup> As *De virtute morali* also asserts, the virtues are necessary due to the bipartite internal structure of the human soul, consisting of rational and irrational parts. Due to the fact that the latter is not always subject to discipline and study,<sup>21</sup> ethics helps both in revitalizing the rational part and tempering the irrational one:

ἢ τ' ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆ μέρος τι ἢ μίμημα τῆς τοῦ παντός οὐσα καὶ συνηρμοσμένη κατὰ λόγους καὶ ἀριθμούς ἐοικότας ἐκείνοις οὐχ ἀπλή τις ἐστὶν οὐδ' ὁμοιοπαθῆς, ἀλλ' ἕτερον μὲν ἔχει τὸ νοερὸν καὶ λογιστικόν, ᾧ κρατεῖν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κατὰ φύσιν καὶ ἄρχειν προσήκον ἐστὶν, ἕτερον δὲ τὸ παθητικὸν καὶ ἄλογον καὶ πολυπλανὲς καὶ ἄτακτον ἐξεταστοῦ δεόμενον.

... the soul of man, since it is a portion or a copy of the soul of the Universe and is joined together on principles and in proportions corresponding to those which govern the Universe, is not simple nor subject to similar emo-

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- 18 L. Van Hoof, *Plutarch's Practical Ethics. The Social Dynamics of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) in reference to K. Ziegler, "Plutarchos von Chaironeia," *RE* 21,1 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1951) 636–962, at 636–637. See also L. Van der Stockt, "Semper duo, numquam tres? Plutarch's *Popularphilosophie* on Friendship and Virtue in *On having many friends*," in G. Roskam & L. Van der Stockt (eds.), *Virtues*, 19–40; and C. Pelling, "What is Popular About Plutarch's 'Popular Philosophy'?" in *ibid.*, 41–58.
- 19 Plu., fr. 143 Sandbach = Stob. 4.16.18: ἢ δ' ἐρημία, σοφίας οὐσα γυμνάσιον, ἠθοποιὸς ἀγαθῆ καὶ πλάττει καὶ μετευθύνει τῶν ἀνδρῶν τὰς ψυχάς.
- 20 Plu., fr. 143 Sandbach = Stob. 4.16.18, with Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 193.
- 21 As is also the case with the World Soul's combination of Sameness and Otherness in Pl., *Ti.* 34B–36A.

tions, but has as one part the intelligent and rational, whose natural duty it is to govern and rule the individual, and as another part the passionate and irrational, the variable and disorderly, which has need of a director.

*De virtute morali* 441EF

## 2.2 *Ethics Auxiliary for the Attainment of Contemplation*

However, rather than in the role of philosophy and ethics in society at large, I am mainly interested in showing the auxiliary function that ethics has in the achievement of the individual's *likeness to god*. "When it comes to the achievement of the highest goal for individual humans", instead of being a goal in itself ethics has a preparatory role, paving the way for the intellectual culmination of the *homoiosis*.

As *De Iside* affirms, Isis helps the individual to defeat Typhon, namely "that part of the soul which is impressionable, impulsive, irrational and truculent."<sup>22</sup> In this process, Isis functions as a helper and guide along the path, in which the *mystes* learns to counteract the attachment to the body and the senses "by abstinence from many kinds of food and from the lusts of the flesh, [which] curtails licentiousness and the love of pleasure, and induces a habit of patient submission to the stern and rigorous services in shrines."<sup>23</sup> The parallelism with a mystery initiation at the end of which individuals receive the contemplation shows the auxiliary role of ethics. And this is so, because following a spiritual life, abstaining from certain foods and sexual intercourse, and limiting Typhon's realm of influence seems to openly facilitate the work of reason—the realm of *episteme*.<sup>24</sup>

Control of the irrational part of the soul was not always successful, however. Timarchus' myth in *De genio*, in fact, distinguishes between star-souls with a regular motion, those belonging to souls responsive to guidance thanks to good nurturing and education, and "which therefore delivered their irrational element in not too stubborn or savage condition,"<sup>25</sup> and star-souls moving irregularly, due to their lack of education. In the latter case, *daemons* are forced to control them as if they were horses:

τὸν μὲν γὰρ σύνδεσμον, οἷα χαλινὸν τῷ ἀλόγῳ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐμβεβλημένον, ὅταν ἀντισπάσῃ, τὴν λεγομένην μεταμέλειαν ἐπάγειν ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις καὶ τὴν ἐπὶ ταῖς ἡδοναῖς, ὅσαι παράνομοι καὶ ἀκρατεῖς, αἰσχύνην, ἀλγηδὸνα καὶ πληγὴν οὖσαν

<sup>22</sup> Plu., *De Is. et Os.* 371B.

<sup>23</sup> Plu., *De Is. et Os.* 352A.

<sup>24</sup> Plu., *De virt. mor.* 441D.

<sup>25</sup> Plu., *De genio Socr.* 592A.



ἐνθένδε τῆς ψυχῆς ὑπὸ τοῦ κρατοῦντος καὶ ἄρχοντος ἐπιστομιζομένης, μέχρι ἂν οὕτως κολαζομένη πειθήνιος γένηται καὶ συνήθης, ὥσπερ θρέμμα πρᾶον, ἄνευ πληγῆς καὶ ἀλγηδόνος ὑπὸ συμβόλων ὀξέως καὶ σημείων αἰσθανομένη τοῦ δαίμονος.<sup>26</sup>

The bond, you see, was like a curb put on the irrational element in the soul; when the *daimon* pulls on it, it induces what is called repentance for misdeeds and shame for illicit and uncontrolled pleasures. His shame is a painful wound felt because from this point the soul is being checked by its controlling and ruling power, and it continues to be felt until this chastisement makes the soul accustomed and responsive to the rein, like a well-broken animal needing no blow or pain, but quickly becoming aware of the *daimon* through symbols and signs.

*De genio Socratis* 592A<sup>27</sup>

Ethics, consequently, has the virtue of transforming the individual, assuring, for those educated, the higher achievements of rational beings. Conversely, ignoring the mandates of reason and following one's drives can transform rational beings into brutes, as can be seen in Plutarch's fragment 200, preserved by Stobaeus and first claimed for Plutarch by Bernardakis.<sup>28</sup> In this parodic text, education and philosophy are crucial in order to prevent individuals from changing into animals in a future life, be it donkey, swine, wolf, or lion, depending on the nature of their affections:

ἔνθα δὴ τὸ μέγα παιδείας ἐκάστῳ καὶ φιλοσοφίας ὄφελος, ἂν μνημονεύουσα τῶν καλῶν ἢ ψυχὴ καὶ δυσχεραίνουσα τὰς αἰσυχρὰς καὶ παρανόμους ἡδονὰς δύνηται κρατεῖν καὶ προσέχειν αὐτῇ καὶ φυλάττειν μὴ λάθῃ θηρίον γενομένη καὶ στέρξασα σώματος οὐκ εὐφυοῦς οὐδὲ καθαροῦ πρὸς ἀρετὴν φύσιν ἄμουσον καὶ ἄλογον καὶ τὸ ἐπιθυμοῦν καὶ θυμούμενον μάλλον ἢ τὸ φρόνιμον αὐξάνοντος καὶ τρέφοντος.

26 Plu., *De genio Socr.* 592A.

27 English translation by D.A. Russel in Nesselrath (ed.), *Plutarch. On the daimon of Socrates*.

28 See F.H. Sandbach, *Plutarch's Moralia in Fifteen Volumes*, vol. xv: *Fragments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) 366–367. See also the interesting study by R. Scannapieco, “Circe, la Luna e l'anima: Il frammento plutarcheo 200 Sandbach,” in L. Van der Stockt et al. (eds.), *Gods, Daimones, Rituals, Myths and History of Religions in Plutarch's Works. Studies Devoted to Professor Frederick E. Brenk by the International Plutarch Society* (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 2010) 363–395.

And there, they say, is the great benefit that each individual derives from education and philosophy, should his soul remember all that is fine and beautiful and feel distaste for ugly, illicit pleasures; then it will be able to retain control and look to itself and guard against the danger that, before it knows what has happened, it may become a beast, having taken a liking to a body that is naturally gross and irrational, one unclean and without innate disposition to goodness, one that strengthens and feeds in it the source of appetite and anger rather than that of intelligence.

fr. 200<sup>29</sup>

Life is a never-ending competition in which both the external world through sensorial perceptions and our own passions continuously tend to unbalance our soul. In this sense, Plato's view of life as a hard-fought contest<sup>30</sup> appears recurrently in Plutarch, who grants punishment or reward after death.<sup>31</sup> Thus, for example, *De facie*, which reserves for the winners of this contest the highest honors and has them go "about like victors crowned with wreaths of feathers called wreaths of steadfastness, because in life they had made the irrational or affective element of the soul orderly and tolerably tractable to reason."<sup>32</sup>

Again, this is only the first step towards the *telos* or purpose of human life, namely the focus on the only existent, "the knowledge of Him who is the First, the Lord of All, the Ideal One."<sup>33</sup> I will not delve now into this final moment, which I have touched upon on numerous occasions.<sup>34</sup> It is important; however, to highlight that, for Plutarch, contemplation can take place both during and after this life. In this sense, ethics is a life-long process that can help us to not only achieve contemplation at punctual moments but also prepare us for the final and definitive fusion with the Intellect after the second death on the moon.

29 English translation by F.H. Sandbach, *Plutarch's Moralia in Fifteen Volumes*, vol. xv: *Fragments* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

30 Pl., R. 621CD; *Phdr.* 256BC.

31 Plu., *De sera num.* 561A; and especially *De genio Socr.* 593D–594A.

32 Plu., *De facie* 943D, αἱ δ' ἄνω γενόμενοι καὶ βεβαίως ἰδρυθεῖσαι πρῶτον μὲν ὡσπερ οἱ νικηφόροι περιάσιν ἀναδούμενα στεφάνοις πτερῶν εὐσταθείας λεγομένοις ὅτι τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ ἄλογον καὶ τὸ παθητικὸν εὐήνιον ἐπιεικῶς τῷ λόγῳ καὶ κεκοσμημένον ἐν τῷ βίῳ παρέσχοντο.

33 Plu., *De Is. et Os.* 352A.

34 See, f.e., L. Roig Lanzillotta, "Plutarch of Chaeronea and the Gnostic Worldview: Middle Platonism and the Nag Hammadi Library," in J.M. Candau Morón et al. (eds.), *Plutarco Transmisor. Actas del X Simposio internacional de la sociedad española de Plutarquistas, Sevilla, 12–14 de noviembre de 2009* (Seville: Secr. De Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 2011) 401–417, at 412–413.

### 3 Ethics and Revelation in the Nag Hammadi Treatises

The process of detachment that, according to Gnosticism and Hermetism, would lead to reunion with the divine reveals conspicuous similarities with Plutarch's view that ethics leads to contemplation: After individuals receive and pay heed to the call from above, they must follow a rigorous preparation to attain knowledge of God, which consists of leading a pious life detached from the body and controlling the influence of the irrational aspects of the soul by means of reason. Following in the steps of M. Malaise, whose object was to stress the differences between the Isiac cult and Plutarch's presentation of it, scholars recently have tried to downplay the conspicuous similarities between the writer from Chaeronea and Gnosticism.<sup>35</sup> While, in the Greco-Roman world, contact with the divinity allegedly results from observance of the rituals, in the latter, it is the result of revelation.<sup>36</sup> As I show elsewhere, however, there is no such hard divide regarding revelation between the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian worlds: In fact, Plutarch's *Moralia* evaluates up to five different modes of revelation through which knowledge of the divine may reach humans.<sup>37</sup>

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi treatises last century has helped us to nuance black and white anti-heretical views on Gnosticism.<sup>38</sup> To begin with, we now know that what Church Fathers called Gnosticism was not a monolithic phenomenon, but a wide ranging and manifold movement that covered a varied spectrum of beliefs regarding God, the world, and human

35 M. Malaise, "Isisme et gnosticisme," in J. Ries (ed.), *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique. Actes du Colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve, 11–14 mars 1980* (Leuven: Peeters, 1982) 47–60, 58–60.

36 See, for example, J. Pépin, "L'arcane religieux et sa transposition philosophique dans la tradition platonicienne," in N. Badaloni (ed.), *La storia della filosofia come sapere critico. Studi offerti a Mario dal Pra* (Milan: Angeli, 1984) 18–35; A.H. Armstrong, "The Hidden and the Open in Hellenic Thought," in R. Ritsema (ed.), *Der Geheime Strom des Geschehens, ErJb 54* (1985) 81–117, at 83–85; G.G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); R. Van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

37 See Roig Lanzillotta, "Mito y Revelación en Plutarco," 327–350.

38 See, for example, M.A. Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 201–208; G.P. Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). See more recently, I. Dunderberg, "Valentinian Theories on Classes of Humankind," in Ch. Marksches & J. van Oort (eds.), *Zugänge zur Gnosis. Akten zur Tagung der Patristischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft vom 02.–05.01.2011 in Berlin-Spandau* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013) 113–128; E. Thomassen, "Saved by Nature," in Marksches & van Oort (eds.), *Zugänge zur Gnosis*, 129–149.

beings.<sup>39</sup> Also important for the theme of this chapter is that, as far as we can judge on the basis of the Nag Hammadi codices, Gnostic anthropology was not deterministic but dynamic<sup>40</sup> and that a demanding understanding of ethics was essential to progress along the path that led individuals to the final and desired union with the divine.<sup>41</sup> This is far from strikingly unusual: *Phaedo's* view of life as a prison is also central to numerous texts of the Nag Hammadi corpus. On the one hand, the spellbinding effect of externals is so powerful that it tends to overwhelm the divine core in humans, namely the intellect or spirit; on the other, even if not always negative,<sup>42</sup> both body and soul generally seem to hinder a direct and intuitive knowledge of the divine. This is the reason why Nag Hammadi texts also speak of a “transformation” of the human being, as did Plato and Plutarch—a metamorphosis brought about by ethics with a view to liberating humans from their current condition. “Becoming one from above,” “becoming spiritual,” “becoming male,”<sup>43</sup> and “becoming divine”<sup>44</sup> are some of the expressions used in this context.<sup>45</sup>

39 See the antiheretical view, for example, in Iren., *Haer.* 1.13.3; 1.6.3–4; 1.25.3.

40 The revision of this approach began with L. Schottroff, “Animae naturaliter salvandae: Zum Problem der himmlischen Herkunft des Gnostikers,” in W. Eltester (ed.), *Christentum und Gnosis* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1969) 65–97. Later on it was developed by many other studies: E. Pagels, “Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology,” *HTR* 67 (1974) 35–53; M. Desjardins, *Sin in Valentianism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); W.A. Löhr, “Gnostic Determinism Reconsidered,” *Vig. Christ.* 46 (1992) 381–390; G.P. Luttikhuisen, “Eve’s Children and the Salvation of Humanity,” in idem (ed.), *Eve’s Children. The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 203–217.

41 See F. Wisse, “Die Sextus-Sprüche und das Problem der gnostischen Ethik,” in A. Böhlig & F. Wisse (eds.), *Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975) 55–86; see also, K. Rudolph, *Die Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte eine spätantiken Religion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990, 3rd ed.) 261–293; Desjardins, *Sin in Valentianism*; Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’*; and more recently Ph.L. Tite, *Valentinian Ethics and Paraenetic Discourse. Determining the Social Function of Moral Exhortation in Valentinian Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

42 Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’* 96–114 (Anti-cosmic World-rejection); 115–138 (Hatred of the Body).

43 On this expression, see K. Vogt, “‘Becoming Male’: A Gnostic and Early Christian Metaphor,” in K.E. Børresen (ed.), *Image of God and Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1991) 172–187.

44 *Zost.* (NHC VIII,1) 53.18–19 affirms “I became divine;” see also 44.18–22. On the issue G.P. Luttikhuisen, “Monism and Dualism in Jewish-Mystical and Gnostic Ascent Texts,” in A. Hilhorst et al. (eds.), *Flores Florentino. Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007) 749–772, at 766.

45 See, for example, *Ap. Jas.* (NHC 1,2) 6.19–20: “Make yourselves like the son of the Holy Spirit;” 13.13–17: “Once more I reprove you, you who are; become like those who are not, that you may be with those who are not;” 16.20–21: “Endeavor earnestly then to make

### 3.1 *Practical Ethics*

The influence of both world and body were indeed so powerful that, in addition to the external call that awakens the ψυχάιος σπινθήρ ('spark of the soul'), the divine core, ethics was also essential. On the one hand, (irrational) soul and body form serious threats and frustrate the individual's ability to pay heed to the call; on the other, even for those who duly follow the right path and focus on their divine interior, nothing assures that they will not fall back to the old way of life. A good example of this appears in *The Teaching of Silvanus*, a text which despite scholarly attempts to deny its Gnostic character, presents in my view clear contacts, especially, in its anthropology, with Valentianism. *Teach. Silv* is clear as to the need to overcome the obstacles posed by body and soul in order to achieve redemption.<sup>46</sup> Conceived of as robbers that ambush the soul, passions might frustrate its higher goals. The text consequently warns individuals not to fall asleep: "Do not allow sleep to your eyes nor slumber to your eyelids, that you may be saved like a gazelle from snares and like a bird from a trap."<sup>47</sup>

Asceticism and rejection of the physical world is also a central issue in the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* (NHC VI,1):<sup>48</sup>

No man is able to go on that road, except one who has forsaken (ἀποτάσσει) everything that he has and has fasted (νηστεύειν) daily from stage (μονή) to stage (μονή). For many are the robbers (ληστής) and wild beasts (θηρίον) on that road. The one who carries bread with him on the road, the black dogs kill because of the bread. The one who carries a costly garment of the world (κόσμος) [because of the] garment.

The allegory of the robbers falling upon the soul is recurrent in Nag Hammadi: abstaining from everything in the world appears as the only possible protection against them, since objects and desires open the way to the external threats that may assault us. According to the *Authoritative Teaching*: "all such things the adversary prepares beautifully and spreads out before the body, wishing to make the mind of the soul incline her toward one of them and overwhelm her by force in ignorance until she conceives evil and bears fruit of matter."<sup>49</sup> The

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yourselves like them;" *Gos. Phil.* (NHC II,3) 78.24–79.13: "Now you who live together with the Son of God, love not the world, but love the Lord, in order that those you will bring forth may not resemble the world, but may resemble the Lord;" *Apoc. Adam* (NHC V,5) 64.14–15. See also the text of *Teach. Silv.* (NHC VII,4) 94.19–29.

46 See *Teach. Silv.* (NHC VII,4) 113.33–114.6.

47 *Teach. Silv.* (NHC VII,4) 113.33–114.1.

48 *Acts Pet. 12 Apost.* (NHC VI,1) 5.19–6.1.

49 *Auth. Teach.* (NHC VI,3) 31.8–18.

same metaphor is also applied to the soul's incarnation in *Exegesis on the Soul*, in which sensorial perception and passions are equated to the prostitution of the soul: "as long as she was alone with the father, she was virgin and in form androgynous. But when she fell down into a body and came to this life, then she fell into the hands of many robbers."<sup>50</sup>

In the Nag Hammadi codices, external threat was seen as certain and constant. This is the reason why the *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2) also warns against the thieves that will certainly take all worldly possessions one may have: "be on your guard against the world. Arm yourselves with great strength lest the robbers find a way to come to you, for the difficulty which you expect will (surely) materialize."<sup>51</sup> It is not surprising, consequently, that according to these texts ethics is valuable in itself, since it preserves us from what is worse in the human being. However, as we will immediately see, ethics also fulfils a seminal role in preparing individuals for the unrestrained contemplation of the divine.

### 3.2 *The Auxiliary Role of Ethics in the Attainment of Contemplation*

Indeed, along with its intrinsic value, ethics in the Nag Hammadi corpus may also play an important auxiliary role in the attainment of humankind's highest goal, the *homoiosis theo*. As I showed some years ago, the Nag Hammadi treatises share this view of the human *telos* with their Middle Platonist contemporaries.<sup>52</sup> The parallelism goes even further than that, however: They even share the Middle Platonic hesitation I mentioned above as to the right interpretation of Plato's likeness to god. While some texts emphasize the mainly ethical nature of the assimilation, which Eudorus, Alcinous and Philo also did, others combine the ethical and the theoretical sides, as is the case with Plutarch.

According to Nag Hammadi texts, assimilation is achieved by controlling, by means of reason, both bodily and psychic accretions and by focusing on a human being's only godly element, the intellect. Only then is the *nous* able to develop the contemplation or *theoria* proper to it—that moment in which individuals attain the desired fusion with the divine. This is the *homoiosis theo* in the highest degree. The *Treatise on Resurrection* (NHC I,4)<sup>53</sup> offers

50 *Exeg. Soul* (NHC II,6), 127.25–27. See L. Roig Lanzillotta, "Come out of your Country and your Kinsfolk: Allegory and Ascent of the Soul in The Expository Treatise on the Soul (NHC II,6)," in M. Goodman et al. (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) 401–420.

51 *Gos. Thom.* (NHC II,2) 21b.

52 Roig Lanzillotta, "A Way of Salvation," 71–102.

53 See *Treat. Res.* (NHC I, 4) 45:39–46:2; M.L. Peel, "The Treatise on Resurrection," in H.W. Attridge (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex 1.2 Notes* (NHS 23; Leiden: Brill, 1985) 137–215. See also M.L. Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginos: a Valentinian Letter of the Resurrection. Introduc-*

perhaps the best example of the integration of the ethical and theoretical aspects of the assimilation to god:

Rheginus, do not get lost in details, nor live according to the flesh for the sake of harmony. Flee from divisions and bonds, and then you already have resurrection ... Everyone needs to practice ways to be released from this element so as not to wander in error.<sup>54</sup>

The text strikingly recalls Plutarch's description in *De Iside* of highest achievement of contemplation.<sup>55</sup> The term 'practice' (γυμνάζω) highlights the ethical nature of the preliminary process in which individuals engage in order to shun the distortion that proceeds from the division and dispersion of both the body and the physical world. This progress facilitates the transformation (= the resurrection) through which Rheginus may overcome the world of delusion and attain union with the truly existent, the likeness to the divine:

The world is illusion ... The resurrection is different. It is real; it stands firm. It is the revelation of what is, a transformation of things, a transition into newness. Incorruptibility [flows] over corruption, light flows over darkness, swallowing it, fullness fills what it lacks. These are the symbols and images of the resurrection. This brings goodness.<sup>56</sup>

Ethical progress towards the knowledge of god is also central to the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In fact, the notion of *palingenesis* or "rebirth" in *Corpus Hermeticum* 13 is the Hermetic variant of the transformation described above, since it provides the preliminary preparation that frees the *nous* or intellect from the body.<sup>57</sup>

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*tion, Translation, Analysis and Exposition* (Philadelphia: S.C.M. Press, 1969) 48–49, 74–75, 112–113, 148; B.R. Layton, *The Gnostic Treatise on Resurrection from Nag Hammadi* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979 [orig. Diss., Harvard 1971]) 65–66, 71–73, 78, 82–84; *Gos. Mary* (BG 1) 10.14–16.

54 *Treat. Res.* (NHC 1,4) 49.9–16.

55 Plu., *De Is. et Os.* 382DE.

56 *Treat. Res.* (NHC 1,4) 48.27–49.7.

57 See *Corp. Herm.* 13.3 for the *palingenesis* or "regeneration," after which the individual, having left behind every distortion proceeding from his material body, is able to focus on the intellect and, consequently, to assimilate himself to god. On the issue, see A.J. Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1967) 61–64 and G. Luck, "The Doctrine of Salvation in the Hermetic Writings," *SecCent* 8 (1991) 31–41. In general, see more recently, H. Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the 'Gospel of Philip' and the 'Exegesis on the Soul'* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

It is in this way that the *nous* is receptive to divine illumination.<sup>58</sup> According to the Thirteenth tractate:

ἔγνωκας, ὦ τέκνον, τῆς παλιγγενεσίας τὸν τρόπον· τῆς δεκάδος παραγινομένης, ὦ τέκνον, συντετέθη νοερά γενέσις καὶ τὴν δωδεκάδα ἐξελαύνει καὶ ἐθεώθημεν τῇ γενέσει· ὅστις οὖν ἔτυχε κατὰ τὸ ἔλεος τῆς κατὰ θεὸν γενέσεως, τὴν σωματικὴν αἴσθησιν καταλιπὼν, ἑαυτὸν γνωρίζει ἐκ τούτων συνιστάμενον καὶ εὐφραίνεται.

My child, you have come to know the means of rebirth. The arrival of the decad sets in order a birth of mind that expels the twelve; we have been divinized by this birth. Therefore, whoever through mercy has attained this godly birth and has forsaken bodily sensation recognizes himself as constituted of the intelligibles and rejoices.<sup>59</sup>

This transformation enacts the union that results from contemplation both during this life and after it. In the former case, however, the continuous influx of information tends to alter the state achieved by purification. That this latter condition, once achieved, is not permanent, but liable to be altered again is clear in the *Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NHC VI,7), a hermetic text in Nag Hammadi codex VI. The text gives thanks to God for granting the vision that culminates this transformation: “We rejoice because while we were in (the) body, Thou hast made us divine through Thy knowledge.”<sup>60</sup> However, likeness to god is equated to the uninterrupted possession of this knowledge of the divine—something that is apparently not granted automatically and for evermore during this life. At least this is what one may conclude from the petition included immediately afterwards in the *Prayer*:

There is one petition that we ask:  
we would be  
preserved in knowledge.  
And there is one protection that we  
desire: that we not stumble  
in this kind of life.<sup>61</sup>

58 Malaise, “Isisme et Gnosticisme,” 58.

59 *Corp. Herm.* 13.10. See on the issue, Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, 61–64.

60 *Pr. Thanks.* (NHC VI,7) 64.15–19.

61 *Pr. Thanks.* (NHC VI,7) 64.31–65.4.



The world and the body appear to have too strong an attraction: Despite the preliminary ethical process of purification; despite the previous achievements of understanding, knowledge, and divine *pneuma*; the neophyte feels he can still stumble and be distracted from his unity with god. This is the reason why Nag Hammadi texts also share Plato's view, referred to above, of life as a hard fought contest. As is also the case in Plutarch's *De facie*, this life was conceived of as a contest, and victory was for those who succeeded in rejecting the delusion imposed by externals so as to focus on a higher level of reality:

He, then, the Father, wishing to reveal his wealth and his glory, brought about this great contest in this world, wishing to make the contestants appear, and make all those who contend leave behind the things that had come into being, and despise them with a lofty, incomprehensible knowledge, and flee to the one who exists.<sup>62</sup>

The structure of the human soul and the constitution of the human complex made ethics a necessary means to assure both the *homoiosis theo* by means of contemplation and the preservation of the state of purity that may facilitate future visions.

#### 4 Conclusions

I think this previous comparative study of Plutarch and Nag Hammadi texts has made clear that there are conspicuous similarities between the Middle Platonic view of the *homoiosis theo* and the conception we find in Nag Hammadi. Parallelisms concern not only the hesitation regarding the interpretation of Plato's conception but also the two possible ways in which this hesitation was resolved by Middle Platonists.

More specifically, comparison with Plutarch's view of the auxiliary but crucial role that ethics plays on the path to contemplation shows that similarities are something more than just simple coincidences. As far as ethics goes, we see *Phaedo's* view of life as a prison, life as an (ethical) contest, ethics as enacting the transformation instrumental for the improvement in the scale of being, and the price that awaits the victors appear in both contexts. As far as contemplation is concerned, according to Plutarch and Nag Hammadi texts it may take

62 *Auth. Teach.* (NHC VI,3) 26.8–26. Translation by G.W. MacRae, "The Authoritative Teaching," in D.M. Parrot (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4* (Leiden: Brill, 1979) 257–289.

place both during and after this life. If contemplation during this life allows individuals to achieve a glimpse of the divine while still in the body, its condition is never permanent and needs to be cemented by the continuous exercise of ethics due to threats that proceed from both world and body. However, it is the latter sort, contemplation after this life, which fulfills the *telos* of human life, namely the union with the divine.

Once heresiological clichés regarding the nature of Gnosticism have been superseded and many of the prejudices of 20th-century scholarship corrected, nuanced, or rejected altogether, it will be time for a new approach that substitutes biased analyses for a wide and serious scrutiny that evaluates Gnosticism in and of itself, considering it as a movement with its own roots, characteristics, and identity, all in fluid conversation with its cultural context. Such an analysis should attempt to understand Gnosticism—and other phenomena for that matter—together with other religious and philosophical currents in the historical period; Gnosticism needs to be situated and understood as part and parcel of the religious-philosophical *continuum* of late antiquity. As a matter of fact, ancient society was never made up of cultural or religious impermeable compartments divided by insurmountable walls. As is also the case nowadays, the cosmopolitan world of the ancient Mediterranean Sea was a permeable world in which people from different geographical, cultural, and economic origins, with diverse education, philosophical orientation, and/or religious beliefs, attempted to provide answers to the same questions posed by their daily lives: God, the world, the human being, the meaning of human existence and its purpose, and the meaning of good and evil in the context of creation.

In my view the polygraph of Plutarch can help us in this hermeneutical enterprise. The author's privileged place in the religious landscape of antiquity, both as an actor or as an observer, can help us to smooth over the gaps between the impermeable compartments found in traditional scholarship so as to understand ancient testimonies (Pagan, Judean, Christian) for what they are: vestiges of the ancient philosophical-religious *continuum* we are trying to reconstruct and understand.

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