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Intermediary and Mediating Principles in Gnostic Systems **

Abstract: Platonism founds its whole philosophical tradition on the following main idea: there are two spheres of reality, one is truly real, eternal and unchangeable and the other is just a copy, it is an imperfect imagine of the first one. In *Timaeus*, Plato says that the demiurge shapes an amorphous matter following an eternal model. Plato's interpreters, in particular the Middle Platonists, saw in demiurge a mediating principle between the complete transcendent First God and matter. Looking up to First Principle and in harmony with the eternal Ideas demiurge creates the world. In gnostic systems, there is an inferior being, a demiurge often named Yaldabaoth, Samael or Sakla who is ignorant and boastful. He gives form to matter, without knowing the eternal realm above him. So, he is no longer a mediator in a platonic sense. In these gnostic systems the mediator role is rather played by Sophia, demiurge's mother. However, in this case the world is no longer the result of the divine goodness, but it is a result of a fall.

Keywords: Demiurge, mediator, reality, fall, hierarchy, intermediary.

I. Two levels of reality in Plato's philosophy

From Plato to Plotinian Neoplatonism have passed nearly six centuries, period in which the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* are among the most cited and commented Plato's texts. The first dialogue puts in scene the demiurge theme, while the second treats issues related to One beyond being.

Regarding this last matter, it should be noted that Plato did not address this issue directly, but he just outlines details of this subject, especially in the fragment 137c-142a from dialogue mentioned. André-Jean Festugière shows that the theme is also dealt in other places, such as *Symposium* 210 e 2 – 211 b 3, *Sophist* 218 c 1-5, 221 a 8, *Laws* X 895 d 1-896 a 5, *Letter VII-a* 342 a 7-e 3, *Republic* 509 b 8[1]. Romanian scholar Marilena Vlad believes that

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[1] André-Jean Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*. Tome IV: *Le dieu inconnu et la gnose*. Paris: J. Gabalda, 1954, pp. 79-91.

there are two classical references which are frequently used by which frequently, namely the fragments taken from *Republic* and *Parmenides* [2].

The platonic tradition founds its philosophical system on the following paradigm: there are two spheres of reality, a changing reality, subject of becoming and corruption, that of the sublunary world and another perfect reality, immutable, that is origin and cause of the former.

Besides the fact that *Timaeus* evokes a cosmological theory, it is also an account about the distinction and relation between Being and becoming, between what is eternal and what is changeable. Being is changeless, always eternal and the model of things from physical world. Ideas are the core of the Platonic philosophical doctrine, and its basic features are, as Giovanni Reale summarizes: intelligibility, incorporeal, being in the full sense, unchangeable, self-identical and unities[3]. *Being in the full sense* refers to the fact that ideas are the beings that are truly real, that is what is really real. Plato attributes ideas the character of true and absolute being, namely being in the full sense, in multiple places of his dialogues, among which should be noted *Republic* 477 a, *Sophist* 248 e or *Phaedrus* 247 c-e. Immutability refers to the fact that Ideas devoid any change, they are beyond birth and destruction, beyond beginning and end, generation and corruption. Intelligibility is another Ideas' essential feature, and this trait puts them in opposition to sensible world, "which makes manifest that realm of realities *existing beyond the sensibles themselves*. They are precisely graspable only by the intelligence that is able to disengage itself from the senses."[4]

Considering that there is a two-level reality, a sensitive and visible level, and the other supersensible or metaphysical, Plato must explain the way in which can be set up a connection between them. Several authors talk about Plato's dualistic perspective of reality. One of them notes that "The distinction of the two realms (…) of reality, that of the intelligible and that of the sensible, is truly the principal path of all Platonic thought"[5]. Plato writes in his dialogue about the necessity of two different levels of being:

> "This being so, we have to admit that there exists, first, the class of things which are unchanging, uncreated, and undying, which neither admit anything else into themselves from elsewhere nor enter anything else themselves, and which are imperceptible by sight or any of the other senses. This class is the proper object of intellect. Then, second, there is the class of things that have the same names as the members of the first class and resemble them, but are perceptible,

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[2] Marilena Vlad, *Dincolo de fiinţă: neoplatonismul şi aporiile originii inefabile*, Bucureşti: Zeta Books, 2011, pp. 26-37.

[3] Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy*. Vol. II: *Plato and Aristotle*. Edited and translated from the fifth Italian edition John R. Catan. New York: State University of New York Press, 1990, p. 49.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 50.

[5][5] *Ibidem*, pp. 50-51.

created, and in perpetual motion, since they come into existence in a particular place and subsequently pass away from there. This class is grasped by belief with the support of sensation." (*Timaeus*, 52a)

II. Demiurge as mediator between Ideas and matter

Therefore, for the Greek philosopher there are two levels of reality, and between them subsist a relation of "ontological dependence and not one that is *symmetrical* or *reciprocal*"[6]. I said above that *Timaeus* presents a cosmology, but it should not overlook the fact that the same dialogue presents also a cosmogony, Plato is describing both the way in which the cosmos is structured and how is it structured. The cosmos is subjected to change and, consequently, the world is not eternal. It has a beginning because is visible, has a body, it is palpable, all this belonging to sensitives. Because it is generated, it "is necessarily created by some cause" (*Timaeus*, 28a). So, if the world is not eternal, it must necessarily have a beginning and a maker, which Plato calls him a demiurge or craftsman, and thus the Athenian philosopher "is introducing into philosophy for the first time the image of a creator god."[7] In order to unite these different levels of reality, the demiurge, as a mediator, was often aided by his lesser intermediaries, the younger gods.

The world was brought to life because of the goodness of the world's Architect. He is good and he wanted to pass along or to communicate his goodness and perfection, because, Plato says, demiurge "was good, and nothing good is ever characterized by mean-spiritedness over anything; being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to be as similar to himself as possible" (*Timaeus*, 29e). Demiurge being good and wanting everything to be as good, took everything that was visible and chaotic and brought it from this state into order, "which he regarded as in all ways better" (*Timaeus*, 30a). It must be stressed out that Plato does not make the demiurge omnipotent, at least not in the way that Jewish and Christian God is; the world is not created out of nothing or ex nihilo, but out of disorder.

The world-artisan is located between eternal Ideas, which he uses as a model, and chaotic matter which receives an order, resulting the world, named by Plato cosmos. He shapes primordial chaos looking to a perfect being, this is why "this world of ours is an image of something" (*Timaeus*, 29b). The aim of the author of the world is to make a genuine copy of the eternal model, as we can read in *Timaeus* "craftsman takes something consistent as his model, and reproduces its form and properties, the result is

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[6] *Ibidem*, p. 96.
[7] Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, p. 34.

bound in every case to be a thing of beauty, but if he takes as his model something that has been created, the product is bound to be imperfect" (*Timaeus*, 28a-b).

In any case, the final product is not a genuine copy or reproduction of the eternal model after which it was designed. Matter stands in the way of achieving an exact copy. Hence, in *Timaeus* we find three main actors acting in the process of forming the world: Ideas, Demiurge and chaotic matter. It should be mentioned however that Plato did not use the concept of matter. In fragments 30 a, 37 d, 46 c, 53 b is suggested that the demiurge meets an obstacle in the process of forming the world. The philosopher speaks of a pre-existing material, but it is not explicitly named in matter, but receptacle (*hypodoche* or *chora*). Among post-Plato philosophers, Aristotle is the first one who identifies the receptacle from *Timaeus* with matter (*Physics*, 209b). This idea was accepted at first by Plato's students and it was universally supported in Antiquity[8] (Sorabji 1988, 33).

III. Mediating Principle in Middle Platonism

The question that now arises is as follows: does the demiurge identify with the Idea of Good? This question arises because Plato never explicitly established the relationship between the demiurge and the Good. As I mentioned at the beginning, *Parmenides* is an emblematic dialogue, the One's transcendence question finds its lifeblood in it.

The Italian exegete Giovanni Reale considers that for Plato demiurge is the supreme God, but the Idea of Good is „the divine" or using author's words "the Platonic God is «he who is god» in the *personal* sense, whereas «the Idea of Good» is the Good in the *impersonal* sense"[9]. John Dillon makes a similar observation: "The Good, after all (…) though a creative force, is a creator in a far more transcendent manner than the Demiurge. It simply provides the conditions of existence and knowability for the totality of the Forms"[10].

But, for Plato's descendants things were not so simple. There exist two main directions of interpretation in Middle Platonism. One branch argues that Demiurge is a living intellect which contains the eternal Ideas; The other branch supports that the divine is a hierarchical construction of

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[8] Richard Sorabji, *Matter, Space and Motion. Theories in Antiquity and Their Sequel.* London: Duckworth, 1988, p. 33.

[9] Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy.* Vol. II: *Plato and Aristotle*, ed. cit., p. 114.

[10] John Dillon, "The Role of the Demiurge in the Platonic Theology." In *Proclus et la theologie platonicienne : actes du colloque international de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998) en l'honneur de H.D. Saffrey et de L.G. Westerink*, edited by A. Ph. Segonds and C. Steel, 339-349. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000, pp. 339-340.

realities, where we must distinguish between an absolute unknowable principle, a demiurgic and sometimes a third god, named the World Soul[11].

The One, as a complete transcendent First Principle, was situated above the demiurge, as second God and active principle, only under the Neopythagorean influence[12].

In the first three centuries, the Demiurge has received the interpretation described above, he is perceived as an intermediate being or entity, midway between the eternal transcendent God and matter. More accurate an exactly distinction of a First, unknown "God or Mind above a Second God or Mind is to be found in the first-century Neo-Pythagorean Moderatus and in Alcinous"[13]. For Numenius, Demiurge is the second God, the principle of the sensible world, as we can read in *Fragments* 16, 17, 19 and 21. Also, in fragment 18 we find the following dates about this Second God: he is a good deity, but with a certain amount of imperfection. He is contemplative, looking up to God on high and directs his demiurgic activity by his contemplation, in harmony according with the eternal Ideas.

Apuleius, a second century philosopher, writes in *De Platone et eius dogmate* a fragment regarding God, passage which is extensively discussed by modern exegesis. This is the fragment (1.V.190-191): "sed haec de deo sentit, quod sit incorporeus. is unus, ait, ἀπερίμετρος, genitor rerumque omnium extructor, beatus et beatificus, optimus, nihil indigens, ipse conferens cuncta. quem quidem caelestem pronuntiat, indictum, innominabilem et, ut ait ipse, ἀόρατον, ἀδάμαστον, cuius naturam invenire difficile est, si inventa sit, in multos earn enuntiari non posse."

In the fragment above, Apuleius tells us that according to Plato, God is *incorporeus*, *unus*, *aperimetros*, so, he is one and unique, unmeasurable, father and creator of everything – *genitor rerumque omnium extractor*, he is good and he does not require anything. He cannot be expressed, is nameless, God is invisible and hard to discover his nature. Claudio Moreschini asks if this uniqueness of God exclude the existence of other deities. The Italian scholar stresses that Apuleius' God is unique in the sense that he is prime. He puts the fragment cited in relation to another passage, I, 11, 204-205, where we read that there are a multiplicity of gods above which rises the supreme god. Accordingly, there is a gradation of divinity that culminates in a supreme and unique god[14].

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[11] Marco Zambon,. "Middle Platonism." In *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, edited by Mary Louise Gill, Pierre Pellegrin, 561-576. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 570.

[12] John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists. A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 200*. London: Duckworth, 1997, p. 7.

[13] Arthur Hilary Armstrong, "Gnosis and Greek Philosophy." In Barbara Aland (Hrsg.), *Gnosis. Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, edited by Barbara Aland, 87-124. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987, p. 107.

[14] Claudio Moreschini, *Storia della filosofia patristica*. Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2005, pp. 27-28.

IV. Demiurgic figures in Gnostic systems

A series of Platonic philosophers see a rapprochement between Greek philosophy, especially the Platonic one, and the doctrines professed by Gnostic movements. Testimonies in this respect are found at Porphyry and Plotinus. The latter tells us that Gnostics take their ideas from Plato's philosophy. As Michael Allen Williams noted, the demiurge has a central place in gnostic myths, and he suggests that the term *Gnosticism* should be replaced with the one of "biblical demiurgical traditions"[15]. These systems are constructed on "a pessimistic interpretation of Platonism"[16], but for sure, together with an intake from the Judeo-Christian thought; for example, the figure of Sophia derives from Judaism[17].

Plotinus accuses the Gnostics that they misinterpret Plato's demiurge and that they called him evil. It is well known the fact that cosmological theories from various Gnostic texts are based on an interpretation of Genesis in the light of Platonic philosophy. But, Gnostic groups are different and offer different interpretations of the same episode, or using Williams' words "there is no single «gnostic exegesis»"[18]. Therefore, Gnostic movements offer different testimonies when they evoke: ""how the material universe came into being and how Wisdom was involved in it, but in any case the result was a distorted thought, a contemptible false version of divinity named Ialdabaoth (…). While Plato's craftsman god created this world as the best possible copy of the eternal forms, Ialdabaoth formed the material universe as a highly imperfect copy of the spiritual entirety of which he had a dim memory."[19]

Nevertheless, broadly the gnostic systems are based on the following premise: there is a Supreme God, who is good, perfect and unknown[20] and an inferior God, identified with God of *Old Testament*. Many original gnostic

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[15] Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking"Gnosticism": an argument for dismantling a dubious category*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 51.

[16] Philip Merlan, "Greek Philosophy from Plato to Plotinus." In *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Arthur H. Armstrong, 14-132. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 166.

[17] George W. MacRae, "The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth." In *Novum Testamentum*, 1970, 12.2, pp. 86-101; Michael A. Williams, "The demonizing of the demiurge: The innovation of Gnostic myth." In *Innovation in Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change*, edited by Michael A. Williams et al., 73-107. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992, p. 76.

[18] Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking"Gnosticism": an argument for dismantling a dubious category*. ed. cit., p. 78.

[19] David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 63.

[20] Here are some Valentinian and Sethian examples: *A Valentinian Exposition* 22. 19-31; *Apocryphon of John* 2.25-4.19; *Eugnostus* 71.13–73.3; *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 7.1, 29; *Tripartite Tractate* 51.8-54.35.

texts start with, or at least they contain, an extensive description of the Unknown God, or, with a description of his unknowability and indescribability. This point is also found in the heresiological testimonies, as for example we find in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I.1.1:

> "They claim that in the invisible and unnameable heights there is a certain perfect Aeon that was before all, the First-Being, whom they also call First-Beginning, First-Father, and Profundity. He is invisible and incomprehensible. And, since he is incomprehensible and invisible, eternal and ingenerate, he existed in deep quiet and stillness through countless ages."

This Supreme God generates a series of beings, named *aeons*, which meaning *realms*, *eternities* or *eternal realms*. All these beings constitute the Pleroma, and the last and the youngest of the aeons is named Wisdom or Sophia. This feminine aeon committed an error, an episode often called "the fall of Sophia". After this event, she repents, but the error already committed lead to the appearance of her son, the Demiurge, craftsman or maker of the world, often named Yaldabaoth, Sakla, Samael. These systems are characterized by "a break in the middle of the procession of all things from the first principle, a radical disorder and discontinuity between the spiritual world and the ignorant and inferior power"[21]. Through this kind of representation the process of creation "is attributed to the fallen aeon, since a direct relationship between the Perfect Father and the defective cosmos is impossible"[22], which is a revolutionary perspective proposed by Gnostics. This kind of approach allows Gnostics to exonerate the unknown God for the evil in the universe[23].

For Gnostics, Sophia occupies a central place in the system, even if there are multiple scenarios regarding the role played by her, the results are always the same: the emergence of matter and Demiurge. From an error or passion, Sophia gives birth to rough matter and to his descendant, an imperfect, formless and weak demiurge.

However, we must keep in mind the fact that "Unlike the cosmic demiurge, she is not an evil figure but she is not fully perfect either. In fact she is pictured as an ambivalent and tragic character. (…) But Sophia repented and wished to make good her failure."[24] Sophia is a mediating figure, she introduced demiurge in the scene, in this cosmic drama, she "plays the crucial mediating role between the transcendent realm of perfection and the origin of the demiurge and the created cosmos."[25] In

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[21] Philip Merlan, "Greek Philosophy from Plato to Plotinus." In *op. cit.*, p. 244.

[22] J. Zandee, "Gnostic Ideas on the Fall and Salvation". In *Numen*, 1964, 11.1, p. 27.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 21.

[24] Gerard P. Luttikhuizen, "The Demonic Demiurge in Gnostic Mythology." In *The Fall of the Angels*, edited by Christoph Auffarth and Loren Stuckenbruck, 148-160. Leiden: Brill, 2004, p. 151.

[25] Michael A. Williams, "The demonizing of the demiurge…", In *op. cit.*, p. 76.

most accounts the craftsman is ignorant, jealous and boastful, he does not know his Mother or the Pleroma above him.

We cannot say about him that he is really evil. The Gnostic world-maker "is morally ambivalent, for though he loves the good he is fatally flawed by ignorance and self-centeredness. Thus, for example, he recognizes the goodness of the patterns in the spiritual realm and feels a natural attraction toward them"[26]. The sensible universe was formed through Sophia by the world-maker, despite he was ignorant of his mother's role in this process and thought himself to be the sole world-artisan. Valentinian Gnostics describe demiurge in more positive terms, being called *image of the Father*, *Father*, *God*, as we can read in *Adversus Haereses* I.5.1, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 47.2 or *Tripartite Tractate* 100.20-30.

In this context we must note an observation made by a Romanian scholar: "It is therefore quite naive to state that, for Gnostics in general, the evil Demiurge of the world is identified with the Old Testament god. If such identification occurs indeed in most cases, only in a very few instances is the Demiurge simply or strictly evil."[27]

The same observation is made by Norwegian scholar Einar Thomassen, who says that the idea of an evil demiurge is absent primary texts preserved in Coptic manuscripts. In Nag Hammadi documents, the greek term *demiourgos* occurs only a few times, more accurate in two Valentinian texts, *Tripartite Tractate* and *A Valentinian Exposition* and in some non-Gnostic texts, *The Teachings of Silvanus* and *Asclepius*. In older texts owned by Sethian Gnostics, the world-maker is not named demiurge, but Yaldabaoth. Sophia's offspring, at least as he is described in the *Apocryphon of John*, he is a parody of both the *Old Testament* God, as well as the Demiurge from *Timaeus* [28]. Author concludes "that neither with respect to terminology, conceptual structure or focus of interest is there any indication that the cosmogony of the *Timaeus* exercised an influence on that of *Ap. John* and cognate documents"[29]. Against this conclusion, Karen L. King reacts and writes "at least in antiquity readers of texts like the *Secret Revelation of John* considered figures like Yaldabaoth to be demiurgic figures"[30]. Indeed, Neoplatonic philosopher as Porphyry and Plotinus used the designation *demiurge* in order to name the Gnostic world-maker.

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[26] Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1987, p. 16.
[27] Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*. Translated into English by H. S. Wiesner and the author. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992, p. 96.
[28] Einar Thomassen, "The Platonic and the Gnostic *Demiurge*." In *Apocryphon Severini: presented to Søren Giversen*, edited by Per Bilde, Helge Kjær Nielsen and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen, 226-244. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993, pp. 226-229.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 231.
[30] Karen L. King, *The secret revelation of John*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 352.

On the other hand, in Valentinian manuscripts there is not just one demiurgic figure. The term *demiourgos* is used in order to name several beings with creative features. Thomassen notes the following figures: a. The Saviour-Logos; b. Sophia herself; and c. "her son, who carries the epithet Demiurge as a proper name, but who basically is not more than a tool manipulated by his mother."[31]

The Valentinian craftsman described by Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses*, 1.5.1. is ignorant, as we have already seen; he is just a tool in Sophia's hand, he is an agent in the process of forming the world, but he does not know this fact, he is secretly moved by Sophia[32]. The same information we can find in Clement's *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 49.1: "He did not know her who was acting through him and believed that, being industrious by nature, he was creating by his own power." Accordingly, even if the gnostic world-maker is sometimes called demiurge, or if he is perceived by Neoplatonic philosophers as a demiurge, he is not like Plato's craftsman. Firstly, he does not know eternal ideas above him. Secondly, he is a creative agent, a tool in the process of creation.

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[31] Einar Thomassen, "The Platonic and the Gnostic *Demiurge*", In *op. cit.*, p. 227.

[32] At the same time Demiurge does not know the eternal Ideas, as we can read in *Adversus Haereses*, 1.5.3."He made the heavens without knowing the heavens; he fashioned man without knowing Man; he brought the earth to light without understanding the Earth. In like manner, they assert, he was ignorant of the images of the things he made".

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