



GNOSTICISM AND FINITUDE. THE ONTOLOGY OF EVIL BETWEEN “ABSENCE” AND “PRIVATION”

LA ONTOLOGÍA DEL MAL ENTRE "AUSENCIA" Y "PRIVACIÓN"

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Abstract: This article aims to illustrate the metaethical essence of gnosticism. In particular, the key trait of gnosticism is identified with the belief in the equation of finitude and evil, i.e. with the definition of evil as "absence of good" (rather than "privation of good"). The essay also intends to show how this conception of evil underlies a number of contemporary philosophical and political stances, focusing in particular on the gnostic essence of transhumanism. In conclusion, an attempt is made to expose the contradictory nature of this "modern" gnosticism, as opposed to the metaethical coherence of classical Christian eschatology.

Keywords: Gnosticism, evil, finitude, privation, transhumanism.

Resumen: Este artículo pretende ilustrar la esencia metaética del gnosticismo. En concreto, el rasgo clave del gnosticismo se identifica con la creencia en la ecuación de finitud y mal, es decir, con la definición del mal como "ausencia de bien" (en lugar de "privación de bien"). El ensayo también pretende mostrar cómo esta concepción del mal subyace a una serie de posturas filosóficas y políticas contemporáneas, centrándose en particular en la esencia gnóstica del transhumanismo. En conclusión,

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se intenta exponer el carácter contradictorio de este gnosticismo "moderno", frente a la coherencia metaética de la escatología cristiana clásica.

Palabras clave: Gnosticismo, mal, finitud, privación, transhumanismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this article is to shed light, from a meta-ethical point of view, on the common core of a group of doctrines we can refer to as “gnosticism”. The focus will therefore not be limited to that ancient heresy of the early Christian centuries with which the term “gnosticism” is usually associated, but also to those contemporary socio-economic phenomena and political doctrines which show, on close analysis, to share – albeit implicitly – the same assumptions about the nature of good and evil from which the original gnostic mentality sprang. We can therefore use the same name to designate two categories of intellectual phenomena, historically distant but metaethically united: an ancient gnosticism, which is explicitly spiritual and religious in character, and a modern gnosticism, which presents itself instead under a political-philosophical guise.

Now, the use of an originally theological category (gnosticism) applied to the analysis of political reality can easily call to mind the “political theology” of Carl Schmitt (2005); it is therefore appropriate to clarify from the outset the fundamental difference between the German jurist’s investigation and the contents of this article. In Schmitt’s political theology, the theological doctrine and its corresponding political doctrine are linked to each other by a relationship of *analogy*: in the transition from one domain to the other, the terms involved (and the related concepts) undergo a “shift” of meaning and are thus predicated of both spheres not in a univocal manner, but precisely analogically.

In contrast, the “political gnosticism” that this paper discusses is not a simple analogy of ancient “theological gnosticism”, but a direct continuation of it. There is therefore no slipping in meaning between the two uses of the term “gnosticism”: the name is univocally predicated of both forms of gnosticism, since they are historical forms of the same doctrine.



The thesis alluded to is the one already put forward by Eric Voegelin (1952, 1968), according to whom philosophical modernity is nothing other than the result of the process of immanentization of that spiritual search for salvation from the created world that united the various gnostic sects in the first centuries after Christ. What this article proposes to add to the Voegelian reading is first of all the identification of the single ontological presupposition from which the gnostic mentality springs, through reference to the scholastic doctrines of the transcendentality of good and the essence of evil as *privatio boni* ("privation of good").

Gnosticism, in fact, is first and foremost a theory of good, at the foundation of which lies – as this article endeavours to show – the identification of evil with ontological limit (that is, with any *absence* of good). The clash between the Christian view of the world and gnosticism was – and still is – essentially the conflict between two rival notions of evil, from which its antithetical dispositions towards finitude and, therefore, towards the condition of that finite being that is man, logically follow.

2. EVIL AND ONTOLOGY

According to the two major thinkers of the Christian tradition, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, the good is co-extensive with being: everything that exists, insofar as it exists, is good. Augustine is the first to formulate this thesis, briefly in the *Confessions* (1981: VII, 12.18) and more extensively in the short treatise *De natura boni* (1892). Aquinas takes up the Augustinian thesis – also making use of the contribution of Boethius's *De hebdomadibus* (2005) – and formalises it, placing it in a broader ontological framework.

It is worth noting, first of all, that the thesis has no explicit theological connotation. According to these authors, things are not good simply because God, who is good, created them; they are good because they show themselves to be so. Their goodness is almost a phenomenological fact. It is certainly significant that, historically, Christians were the first to formulate this thesis; however, it is a thesis that, in itself, does not require the assent of faith to the contents of Christian doctrine in order to be intelligible. Consider, for example, the way Augustine (1981: VII, 12.18) introduces it within his work:



It became clear to me that things subject to corruption are good: for they could not be corrupted either if they were supreme goods or if they were not goods. If they were supreme goods they would be incorruptible, but if they were not goods at all there would be nothing in them to be corrupted. For corruption is harm, and if there is no diminution of good there is no harm. Therefore either corruption does no harm, which is impossible, or – which is certain – everything that is corrupted suffers a privation of value. But if the privation of value is total, a thing will cease to exist. For if a thing continues to exist without being able to be corrupted any more, then it will be better, because it will last incorruptible. And what is more monstrous than the assertion that a thing becomes better for having lost all value? So if an entity is deprived of all value, it will be an absolute nothing: therefore, insofar as it exists, it is good. Therefore everything that exists is good.²

Regardless of the validity of the argument itself, the interesting thing is that the author comes to the conclusion without making any reference to the doctrine of creation: not only the discourse does not resort to the theological level of enquiry; it also dispenses with the metaphysical level. The question is placed at the level of experience, as a value judgement on perceived things.

The co-extensiveness of being and good is thus inscribed, in Aquinas (1970-1973: q. 1, a. 1), within the doctrine of the “transcendentals”, i.e. names of being that are predicable of any “*ens*” by the very fact that it exists. The *good* is, precisely, one of these names (Aquinas, 1970-1973: q. 21): thus, goodness belongs *de jure* to every being.

Now, a direct implication of the “transcendentality” of good is, on closer inspection, the “nullity” of evil. The derivation is quite straightforward: if all *being* is good, then evil (which is first of all some negation of good), can only fall within *non-being*. In the first *quaestio* of the *Quaestiones disputatae de*

² «*Et manifestum est mihi, quoniam bona sunt, quae corrumpuntur, quae neque si summa bona essent, neque nisi bona essent, corrumpi possent, quia, si summa bona essent, incorruptibilia essent, si autem nulla bona essent, quid in eis corrumperetur, non esset. Nocet enim corruptio et, nisi bonum minueret, non noceret. Aut igitur nihil nocet corruptio, quod fieri non potest, aut, quod certissimum est, omnia, quae corrumpuntur, privantur bono. Si autem bono privabuntur, omnino non erunt. Si enim erunt et corrumpi iam non poterunt, meliora erunt, quia incorruptibiliter permanebunt. Et quid monstrosius quam ea dicere omni bono amisso facta meliora? Ergo si omni bono privabuntur, omnino nulla erunt: ergo quandiu sunt, bona sunt. Ergo quaecumque sunt, bona sunt*». Translations from Latin are mine.



malo, Aquinas (1982: q. 1, a. 1, s.c. 1) quotes Augustine (1955: XI, 22) and writes: «Evil is not a kind of nature, but this name has been given to an absence [*defectus*] of good»³. Later, in the body of the same article, Aquinas clarifies the definition by calling evil «the privation [*privatio*] of a certain particular good»⁴.

On a superficial reading, the second definition may appear as a simple repetition of the first; it is, in fact, a fundamental clarification. Privation, in fact, does not coincide with absence, but is a species of it; in other words, not every absence is a privation. Therefore, if evil is a privation, then not all non-being (absence) is evil. It is properly evil only the absence of a good that *should* be there, but is not: a good that is *de facto* absent, but whose presence is expected *de jure*.

The criterion of normativity of this “should” is given by the essences of the various beings: not any absence by which a being is marked will be evil, but only the absence of those goods that fall within its essence. In the case of the human being, for example, we could say – somehow anticipating one of the themes discussed later in this essay – that it is evil to be born without legs, but it is not evil to be born without wings.

In even more universal terms, if evil is privation and not absence *simpliciter*, then it is not evil for a finite being to be finite. For the essence of a being defines both what that being is and what that being is *not*⁵; if we were to consider *any* absence of good as evil, then we would have to consider the essence of a finite being as its first, original evil: the essence limits the being to a certain “form”, and thus deprives it of an indefinite amount of other goods (all those goods that are not contemplated by the essence of that being)⁶. If the distinction between mere absence and privation is missing, then we are forced to identify finitude with evil. And, as already mentioned in the introduction, it is precisely in the equation between finitude and evil that the “core belief” of gnosticism lies.

³ «*Malum non est natura aliqua, sed defectus boni hoc nomen accepit*».

⁴ «*Privatio alicuius particularis boni*». It is worth noting that Augustine himself, in the passage from *De civitate Dei* cited by Aquinas, does not speak of *defectus* but of *privatio*: «*cum omnino natura nulla sit malum nomenque hoc non sit nisi privationis boni*».

⁵ If A is A, then it is not $\neg A$.

⁶ Whereas finite being “A” corresponds to a determinate content, the content of its negative (“ $\neg A$ ”) is indeterminate and potentially infinite.



3. CHRISTIANITY AND ANCIENT GNOSTICISM

In ancient times, the fundamental disagreement between gnostics and Catholics could be boiled down to a question of “theodicy”. As is well known, the term – introduced by Leibniz (1952) – derives from the union of the Greek words *Theós* (God) and *dike* (justice), and literally means “justification of God”. Theodicy is, basically, the elaboration of a solution to the problem of the apparent contradiction between the goodness of the omnipotent God and the presence of evil in the world.

Although the origin of the term is modern, forms of theodicy are widely found in the work of classical theologians such as Augustine (1970) and Aquinas (1888-1889: qq. 19-25). The conclusions reached by Catholic thinkers are, in summary, as follows:

- The world must be finite because infinity (by essence) can only belong to one being, which is God;
- Perfection, strictly speaking, is an attribute of one who lacks nothing in an absolute sense, i.e. the Infinite;
- Nevertheless, the finite can be in its own way perfect insofar as it lacks nothing in relation to what is proper to it;
- From this point of view, the world is perfect, since each part has the right place in the totality of things and in creation, taken as a whole, nothing is lacking that is proper to creatural reality;
- Creation, then, is perfect in its finiteness: finiteness and perfection are not mutually exclusive.⁷

It is true that there is evil in the creature, but evil only affects the part and never the whole. Only a limited point of view, incapable of grasping creation in its entirety (and such is, structurally, the human point of view), can give rise to the idea that it is the world in itself that is afflicted by privation. In his *De ordine*, Augustine (1970: I, 1.2) resorts to an allegory to illustrate this concept:

If one's eyesight were so limited that one could only perceive the size of a single piece in a mosaic floor, one would blame the artist for incompetence

⁷An example of modern theodicy that reaches the same conclusions is that of Rosmini (1977).



in arranging and composing the mosaic, in the belief that the different stones had been badly arranged; but it is him who cannot grasp and see the harmonised pieces as a whole in a reproduction of unified beauty. The same condition occurs for uncultured men, incapable of understanding and reflecting on the universal and harmonious ordering of things, who, if some aspect, which appears great to their thinking, shocks them, believe that there is great irrationality in the universe.⁸

It cannot be ruled out that the “uncultured men” Augustine has in mind are indeed gnostics, perhaps the very followers of that gnostic doctrine (Manichaeism) to which he himself had adhered in his youth and to which he later addressed several polemical writings. In fact, in the eyes of the ancient gnostics – whose doctrines are known to us mainly thanks to Irenaeus (1857) and the discovery of the writings of Nag Hammadi (Robinson, 1988) – the world did not appear at all as a perfect work, but rather as a true failure. So ubiquitous is the presence of evil in the world, according to the gnostics, that it was inconceivable that the world had been created by the true God.

As Gilson (1955: 22) reports, for the gnostic theologian Marcion, the world is the work of a minor god, a “demiurge”, whom he identifies with the Old Testament God:

In order to account for the presence of evil in the world without making God responsible for it, some Gnostics, Marcion for instance, had distinguished between two Gods. First, the God of the Old Testament, orderer of a matter which he had not created and which is the source of evil in the world. The presence of a matter to be shaped and framed accounts for the fact that the Maker of the world did not completely succeed in his undertaking.

Other gnostics go even further than this hypothesis, attributing the creation of the world to demonic entities that, after having created it and imprisoned

⁸ «Sed hoc pacto, si quis tam minutum cerneret, ut in vermiculato pavimento nihil ultra unius tessellae modulum acies eius valeret ambire, vituperaret artificem velut ordinationis et compositionis ignarum eo, quod varietatem lapillorum perturbatam putaret, a quo illa emblemata in unius pulchritudinis faciem congruentia simul cerni conlustrarique non possent. Nihil enim aliud minus eruditibus hominibus accidit, qui universam rerum coaptationem atque concentum inbecilla mente complecti et considerare non valentes, si quid eos offenderit, quia suae cogitationi magnum est, magnam rebus putant inharere foeditatem».



man in it, govern it like the guardians of a prison (Jonas, 2001: 42-43). The true God – which for Marcion coincides with the God revealed by Christ in the New Testament – has nothing to do with the creation and government of this world; the God of the gnostics is “Alien” (Jonas, 2001: 49) or – to use an expression so much in vogue in contemporary theology – “wholly Other”. The dualism between the finiteness of matter, understood as an earthly prison from which to escape, and the infinity of the spirit, the original homeland and ultimate destination of the human soul, is the hallmark of ancient gnosticism.

The Christian tradition, on the other hand, emphasises that God is the creator of the whole world, including matter. Christian theology speaks, as is well known, of creation *ex nihilo*, i.e. without any presupposition other than God himself (Aquinas, 1888-1889: q. 45, aa. 1-2). Not only is matter entirely created by God, but it does not even exert any limiting effect on God’s creative freedom. For example, Aquinas (1965: q. 3, a. 1, *ad* 9) writes that it is not because of matter that there is a multiplicity of creatures in the universe, but because God willed it so:

God does not produce things by necessity of his nature, but according to what his wisdom disposes. And therefore the diversity of things does not necessarily derive from matter, but from what divine wisdom has disposed, which has established different natures for the completeness of the universe.⁹

The value judgement that follows from this is diametrically opposed to the gnostic mentality¹⁰: the existence of different creatures (and thus, consequently, of creatures inferior to others) implies neither an imperfection in creation as a whole nor, on closer inspection, in individual creatures. Aquinas (1965: q. 3, a. 1, *ad* 14) writes:

If of two creatures one is more valuable than another, the less valuable one does not necessarily have an imperfection. For imperfection indicates the

⁹ «*Deus non producit res ex necessitate naturae, sed ex ordine suae sapientiae. Et ideo diversitas rerum non oportet quod sit ex materia, sed ex ordine divinae sapientiae; quae ad complementum universi diversas naturas instituit*».

¹⁰The gnostic prejudice against differences will be discussed briefly in footnote 16.



lack of something that it by nature has or must have. Even in the glory of Paradise one saint will be superior to another, but none will be imperfect.¹¹

The only imperfection, properly speaking, is privation. Each creature, in the integrity of its essence, is perfect, from the first of angels to the last of beasts. Indeed, these differences between individuals will not need to be “corrected” even in the next life, where beatitude will not need to be matched by equality.

Aquinas (1965: q. 3, a. 1, *ad* 14) concludes, finally, that even where there is, in fact, an imperfection-privation in a creature, «it need not be derived from God nor from matter»¹². Matter is therefore not to blame for the evils in creatures.

4. MODERN GNOSTICISM

Now, in order to obtain the transition from ancient gnosticism to modern gnosticism, we must endeavour to remove the theological framework from what has been said; taking care, however, to keep the backbone of the gnostic vision intact. For modern gnostics, too, the finitude of the world represents an unbearable constraint from which to free themselves. The idea of "liberation" is in fact at the basis of all the revolutionary movements of recent centuries: liberation from the authority of the Church, initiated by Luther and continued by the Enlightenment; liberation from private property, attempted with tragic results by communists; liberation from sexual morality, pursued to this day by feminists and progressives (Voegelin, 1952; Samek Lodovici, 1979).

The difference between these movements and ancient gnosticism is first of all that the former are the offspring of modern secularisation: the horizon of salvation (the *eschaton*) is "immanentised", i.e. transferred from a transcendent-otherworldly dimension to the dimension of earthly experience. The modern gnostic can no longer seek salvation from the world in the spiritual

¹¹ «Non oportet, si duarum creaturarum est aliqua dignior, quod minus digna habeat aliquam imperfectionem: nam imperfectio designat carentiam alicuius quod natum est haberi vel debet haberi. Unde et in gloria, quamvis unus sanctorum alium excedat, nullus tamen imperfectus erit».

¹² «Si tamen aliqua imperfectio in creaturis sit, non oportet quod sit ex Deo neque ex materia».



beyond, but is forced to seek it in the world itself. Hence the need to transform (or *transfigure*) the world, in an attempt to make it infinite.

A second difference between the two forms of gnosticism – consistent with the first – concerns the *source* of this salvation. The ancient gnostic sought individual salvation in a knowledge (*gnosis*) of divine origin, capable of showing him the way to escape from the world. If the fundamental demand of modern gnosticism becomes the transformation of the world (and no longer an escape from it), the gnostic will now have to seek a new means of salvation, adequate for this purpose.

Here, gnosticism comes into synthesis with the "anthropological turn" that marked modernity, identifying the new source of salvation once again in a form of knowledge, but this time in a knowledge of human origin, and no longer divine. In recent centuries, it is natural science – especially in the guise of its practical application, technology – that has progressively assumed the role of guiding man in his relationship with reality: technical-scientific knowledge promises a power of direct manipulation of the world that is unprecedented in human history. It is, for the gnostic, the gateway to the attainment of his ultimate goal: dominion over *being*. Thus, modern science assumes the role of the new *gnosis*¹³.

5. GNOSTICISM AND “TRANSHUMANISM”

The continuation of our discourse requires us to return to one of the concepts introduced earlier, namely that of “essence”. Now, the essence of man (or “human nature”) is what defines man: the human being is *defined* by his essence and is therefore *limited* by it¹⁴. According to the gnostic mentality – i.e. according to the equation between finitude and evil – it follows from this that human nature is in itself an evil to be fought.

The good of man, for the gnostic, will therefore consist in overcoming his limitations (i.e. his very nature). The gnostic hopes that man will be transformed

¹³ On the subject of science and its idolatry (scientism), see Voegelin's (1948) clarifications. The observations on modern technology made by Heidegger (1977: 3-35) are also relevant.

¹⁴ For the reason already shown, namely that human nature establishes both what belongs properly to man and what is essentially (and not only accidentally) foreign to him.



into something less limited than he is by essence, with the ultimate goal of making him limitless. This is the underlying idea of so-called “transhumanism”¹⁵, that contemporary ideology that preaches the exploitation of scientific knowledge and technological innovations to indefinitely enhance the faculties of human beings (Allegra, 2017; Samek Lodovici, 2018). The perspective theorised by this ideology is that man, through science, can emancipate himself from nature to such an extent that he will even be able to recreate himself, to become his own creator (Pessina 2015, 2016); this idea is made explicit in the transhumanist myth of the “*Homo Deus*” (Harari, 2016). Transhumanism is the most self-aware expression of that gnostic tendency towards the “deification” of man that Voegelin (1968) already identified as one cardinal principle of all modern and postmodern ideologies, while also being – to use the definition given by Allegra (2017: 7) – «a distillation of pervasive cultural influences and a surrogate of outmoded ideologies» (transl. mine).

Although the realisability of transhumanist goals can be seen as something still far in the future, transhumanism seems to have already succeeded in imposing some of its principles on the common sense of contemporary man. I refer, above all, to the recent tendency to exploit medicine and biomedical engineering to indefinitely increase human life expectancy. While it is undoubtedly true that finding cures for diseases and reducing the number of premature deaths are entirely worthy endeavours, it is equally true that ageing and, ultimately, death are essential parts of human nature. Yet how many people today would deny that – if it were technically feasible – it would be desirable to eradicate not only diseases, but also mortality as such?¹⁶

¹⁵ I have chosen to use this term, instead of the alternative “posthumanism”, for the reason that, while the latter exclusively indicates a historical overcoming of the human being as we know him, “transhumanism” «instead identifies a perspective of overcoming and transcending the limit, a moving away from man more towards an “above” than an “after”» (Allegra, 2017: 9, transl. mine).

¹⁶ Another transhumanist aspect, which is beyond the scope of the remainder of our discussion but which is becoming entrenched in contemporary thinking, is the one investigated by Samek Lodovici (1979: 135-171) in the chapters “*L’uguaglianza come fine*” (“Equality as an end”) and “*Un modello gnostico per il femminismo*” (“A gnostic model for feminism”). We have already shortly mentioned, at the end of paragraph 3, the gnostic hostility towards differences. Hostility that follows consistently from what has already been said: what differentiates an individual from others is his identity (or nature), which however – as we have seen – is also the mark of his finitude. Indeed, my identity determines both what I am (and can be) and what I am not (and cannot be). Identity is thus always also a difference.



A collateral aspect of the transhumanist project of overcoming finitude by means of technology is expressed, furthermore, in the attempt to indefinitely expand the anthropic environment, that is, the part of the world that we can exploit to satisfy our needs and desires. While natural reality offers man a limited quantity of goods and an infinitesimal portion of the universe to inhabit, technology promises to increase indefinitely both the quantity and variety of consumable goods and the surface area of the universe available for our fruition.

The resulting perspective – which we may call “productivism” – consists of the belief that the right combination of technology, economics and politics can lead to a production of goods large enough to satisfy every human need and desire. Productivism is the idea that it is not only possible, but also desirable, to rid the world of scarcity¹⁷.

Now, given the actual superior productivity of technology over nature, the conclusion derived from the productivist paradigm is unequivocal: in order to achieve the goal of production maximisation, technology must completely replace nature; the natural world must be replaced by the technological world.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in gnosticism even differences have taken on a negative connotation. Indicative of this is the use of the term “inequalities”, which almost presupposes equality as a natural condition, when in fact reality – especially *human* reality – is presented to us as characterised above all by differences. In this regard, we can understand Marxism and its fight against socio-economic “inequalities” as a typically gnostic phenomenon. Transhumanism adds to Marxism the possibility of intervening to eliminate another order of differences-inequalities, the bodily ones. As early as 1960, in the dystopian novel *Facial Justice*, Leslie Poles Hartley imagined a hyper-egalitarian society in which the disparities between individuals were considered so intolerable that the most attractive people were forced to undergo cosmetic surgery to homologate their features to those of the average citizen. However much Hartley’s hypothetical scenario may seem today like nothing more than a satirical exaggeration, it is nevertheless evident that the fight against at least one bodily difference has indeed reached significant levels in today’s society. It is the attempt to subvert the bodily difference par excellence, namely the sexual difference between man and woman. The complementarity between the sexes, based on their difference, is today conceived by some as a limitation to be overcome. In typical transhumanist fashion, this ideology intends to use medical science to impose its models on natural reality. As Samek Lodovici (1979: 157) points out, a distinctive part of the gnostic tradition is the myth of the androgyne, according to which sexual differentiation was not an original aspect of the human being, but rather a form of corruption which followed the fall of man. The current fight against sexual difference is thus a further example of the return of the gnostic mentality in the form of contemporary ideologies.

¹⁷On close inspection, the first historical form of productivism was precisely communism. As the classical liberal tradition teaches, private property is the direct consequence of resource scarcity. The communist desire to abolish private property implicitly reveals a desire to abolish scarcity: it is a fallacious attempt to remove the effect in order to eliminate the cause.



This process does not, however, coincide with a total annihilation of nature: some “fragments” of the natural world may still be useful from a consumption perspective and should therefore be spared from destruction (think, trivially, of an urban park, a beach or a ski slope). Nevertheless, these fragments will be “incorporated” into the new technological world: nature will be denied any intrinsic value, while being recognised a certain, irreducible, instrumental value¹⁸. From this process, then, nature does not emerge destroyed, but *transformed* (from an end into a means): the natural world makes way for a “transnatural” world¹⁹.

6. THE CONTRADICTION OF TRANSHUMANISM

The “transhumanist paradise” envisaged by the modern gnostic presents itself, in short, as an earthly condition in which all our desires are satisfied by an unlimited supply of goods and services over an endless period of time. This perspective is, at first glance, genuinely attractive, since it somehow stems from two true presuppositions of the human condition.

The first problematic aspect of human existence, which transhumanism correctly highlights, is the intolerability of the mortal state. Like that of all other animals, human life unfolds between two extremes: the moment of conception and the moment of death; dying is a direct consequence of the act of coming into the world. Being an essential condition of our nature, death should not be seen (from a non-gnostic perspective) as an evil. However, it is undeniable, as already noted, that death is – in fact – approached as such²⁰. It is the very idea of death – if considered as the annihilation of our being – that is humanly intolerable, since it clashes directly with the first principle of our affective dimension, namely self-love or love of one’s own being.

The second valid assumption underlying the transhumanist proposal is the insatiability of human desire. It is true, as any thinker who has thought deeply

¹⁸In this sense, contemporary environmentalism can also be inscribed in the productivist paradigm, as that current of productivism that recognises nature as having a high instrumental value.

¹⁹I leave it to the reader to judge how much this paradigm is part of the contemporary mindset.

²⁰So much so that even St. Paul, in *1Cor*: 15,26, calls it an “enemy”.



about the human condition concludes, that man does not desire what is finite, but the infinite: our will cannot be completely satisfied by finite goods; it is, in fact, unlimited openness.

Now, the speculative error that transhumanism commits, in working out an answer to these two preconditions, lies in a misunderstanding of the concept of infinity. Man does indeed desire an infinite good, but what transhumanism offers him is only an unlimited quantity of finite goods. The key trait of finiteness is incrementality: now, any quantity of finite goods, however enormous, can always potentially be increased by adding other goods; therefore, any quantity of finite goods is incrementable, and thus finite²¹. The transhumanist solution does not offer the enjoyment of an effectively infinite good, but rather the consumption of a finite sum of goods which, being itself finite, is still incapable of satisfying our will.

At this level lies the fundamental contradiction of transhumanism: if man were able to make his life endless, without at the same time being able to offer himself a good capable of satisfying the thirst of his will, then he would condemn himself to a perpetual state of dissatisfaction; the “earthly paradise” theorised by transhumanism would, if realised, consist in a rather *hellish* condition. Our current state of finitude is not an evil in itself, as long as it itself has an end: a state of finitude without end, for a being who essentially yearns for infinity, would itself represent an evil, perhaps even the worst conceivable evil (Vilarroig Martín-Esteve Esteve, 2015; Samek Lodovici, 2018).

This structural failure of transhumanism is in some ways already implied by another contemporary version of gnosticism, which – for lack of a better term – we shall call “antinatalism”. It is, in essence, a negative disposition towards human life, which judges man's very existence as an evil in itself: rather than being forced to live – thinks the antinatalist – it is preferable for a man not to be born at all.

On closer inspection, antinatalism is nothing other than a “sceptical transhumanism”: the premise is, in fact, always the same, namely the evilness of human nature as such; what changes is the belief in the possibility of emancipating

²¹The infinitely incrementable is also, as such, incrementable (and therefore finite). Even if we wanted to call it “infinite”, we would have to specify that it is only a potential infinity, qualitatively different from the actual infinity.



oneself from this nature. It is a transhumanism that distrusts its own promises. This distrust, however, can occur on two levels:

- The antinatalist may doubt the technical feasibility – either absolutely or relatively to his own historical moment – of the transhumanist promises.
- The antinatalist may consider transhumanist goals technically feasible, but be aware of their ultimate inability to solve the problem of the human condition.

The second level represents the peak of modern gnostic consciousness: the immanentist presupposition, on which the new gnosticism rests, cannot but result – at the end of its speculative development – in the rejection of existence. In his immanentisation of the *eschaton*, the gnostic wants to make the world a paradise and man a god. He demands more from earthly reality than this reality is, by essence, able to give; in a sense, the modern gnostic loves the world and man too much. But too much love is nothing more than the antechamber of hatred: when love for a reality exceeds the measure appropriate to the reality itself – when, that is, we expect more from a reality than that reality can possibly give us – sooner or later love is succeeded by disappointment at the failure of the beloved reality to meet our expectations, and thus by hatred.

7. CONCLUSION: ON CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY AND THE GNOSTIC ALTERNATIVE

If the gnostic immanentist project, having reached its logical conclusion, inevitably leads to despair, the only way to escape this outcome is to re-discuss the project itself.

As an attentive reader will have already guessed, the implicit counterpart to everything discussed in this article is the traditional Christian eschatological perspective²². Indeed, Christian eschatology answers both questions raised by the gnostics (how to deal with the mortal condition and how to reach the ultimate satisfaction of our will) without running into contradiction.

²² As expounded by Ratzinger (1988).



It does so by advancing the hypothesis of an encounter with an infinite good that will take place beyond corporeal death and even *thanks to* corporeal death. In this perspective, death is not conceived as the annihilation of our self, but as the gateway to the enjoyment of that infinite good capable of satisfying the thirst of our will. This encounter is not based on some kind of knowledge, but on *faith*. And faith, in its turn, is based on an act of will, on a choice (Aquinas, 1895-1899: q. 2, a. 1, *ad* 3): the choice to establish a relationship of absolute trust with a transcendent and therefore unobservable reality.

How is it that this choice has become so unpopular in the modern world that it has given way to the ideological proposals discussed in this article? Eric Voegelin (1952: 122-124) asked himself the same question, and wrote:

One does not have to look far afield for an answer. Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity. The feeling of security in a “world full of gods” is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, in the sense of Heb. 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen. Ontologically, the substance of things hoped for is nowhere to be found but in faith itself; and, epistemologically, there is no proof for things unseen but again this very faith. The bond is tenuous, indeed, and it may snap easily. The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty that if gained is loss – the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience. The danger of a breakdown of faith to a socially relevant degree, now, will increase in the measure in which Christianity is a worldly success, that is, it will grow when Christianity penetrates a civilizational area thoroughly, supported by institutional pressure, and when, at the same time, it undergoes an internal process of spiritualization, of a more complete realization of its essence. The more people are drawn of pressured into the Christian orbit, the greater will be the number among them who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity; and the likeliness of a fall from faith will increase when civilizational progress of education, literacy, and intellectual debate



will bring the full seriousness of Christianity to the understanding of ever more individuals.

(...) If the predicament of a fall from faith in the Christian sense occurs as a mass phenomenon, the consequences will depend on the content of the civilizational environment into which the agnostics are falling. A man cannot fall back on himself in an absolute sense, because, if he tried, he would find very soon that he has fallen into the abyss of his despair and nothingness; he will have to fall back on a less differentiated culture of spiritual experience. Under the civilizational conditions of the twelfth century it was impossible to fall back into Greco-Roman polytheism, because it had disappeared as the living culture of a society; and the stunted remnants could hardly be revived, because they had lost their spell precisely for men who had tasted Christianity. The fall could be caught only by experiential alternatives, sufficiently close to the experience of faith that only a discerning eye would see the difference, but receding far enough from it to remedy the uncertainty of faith in the strict sense. Such alternative experiences were at hand in the Gnosis that had accompanied Christianity from its very beginnings.

(...) The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence is fundamentally an attempt at bringing our knowledge of transcendence into a firmer grip than the *cognitio fidei*, the cognition of faith, will afford; and gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip in so far as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man.

Whether this slightly pessimistic and, on closer inspection, elitist interpretation of Voegelin offers the definitive word on the matter is debatable, and certainly exceeds the scope of this article. However, it does highlight the fundamental choice under discussion, which is nothing but an alternative between an uncertain path to salvation and a certain path to despair:

The death of the spirit is the price of progress. Nietzsche revealed this mystery of the Western apocalypse when he announced that God was dead and that He had been murdered. This gnostic murder is constantly committed by the men who sacrifice God to civilization. The more fervently all human



energies are thrown into the great enterprise of salvation through world-immanent action, the farther the human beings who engage in this enterprise move away from the life of the spirit. And since the life of the spirit is the source of order in man and society, the very success of a gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline.

A civilization can, indeed, advance and decline at the same time – but not forever. There is a limit toward which this ambiguous process moves; the limit is reached when an activist sect that represents the gnostic truth organizes the civilization into an empire under its rule. Totalitarianism, defined as the existential rule of gnostic activists, is the end form of progressive civilization (Voegelin, 1952: 131-132).

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