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The Body among Neoplatonists and Christians at the End of the Fourth Century: Synesius of Cyrene's and Eunapius of Sardis' Perspective

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Abstract: This brief study addresses the controversial issue of the relationship with the body, with the flesh, on the part of pagan and Christian thinkers at a particularly important point in their evolution, in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, a time in which Neoplatonic thinkers had to defend their doctrinal positions against the increasingly hegemonic position of the triumphant Christianity. In this sense, it is particularly interesting to approach the perspective of two authors who are not strictly speaking philosophers: in particular, Synesius of Cyrene, a thinker in the Neoplatonic tradition who became a Christian bishop, complemented also by some interesting reflections by Eunapius of Sardis, historian and biographer of Neoplatonic philosophers. In the light of this analysis, it becomes clear that the discussion on the value of the body and carnality is an essential point of doctrinal discrepancy in this period and, contrary to what sometimes appears, the discrepancy also pertains to the formation of the intellectual, and Christianity clearly appears as a doctrine obsessed with the flesh to the detriment of the soul.



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1. A Word on Aims, Methodology and Delimitations

The controversy about the body, the flesh, matter itself, is one of the main axes of the ideological and doctrinal confrontation between pagan philosophy—mostly Neoplatonic—and early Christianity, during the first centuries of our era. Despite the various studies on Christianity's disdain for the flesh and the body¹, it may be said, however, that the usual criticism against Christian thinkers, in Neoplatonic sources, focuses precisely on the—in their opinion—excessive attachment to the carnal, to the body. In this sense, it is particularly significant to address the question at the end of the fourth century and the beginnings of the fifth, when Christian philosophy had already consolidated some of its major doctrines and thinkers, precisely at the time of the emergence of the asceticism represented by the desert anchorites—which is some kind of “democratization” of ancient Greek philosophy—and also when the pagan philosophical schools withdrew, not without having notably influenced Christianity itself. In this period, figures emerge that help to analyze these doctrinal discrepancies in a privileged, particular way: I am referring to Synesius of Cyrene (373–414), an intellectual trained in the major pagan tradition, a disciple of the famous Neoplatonic philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria, and a prolific writer in practically all the traditional Greek literary genres, who ended his days, moreover, as a Christian bishop and to Eunapius of Sardis (347–414), sophist and historian, author of a collective biography of almost contemporary Neoplatonic philosophers, an ardent defender of the pagan tradition in the face of triumphant Christianity. The fact that they have an excellent knowledge of the contemporary Neoplatonic tradition without, however, being

philosophers belonging to a school and that they are well acquainted with the Christianity of the time, allows us the approach that we intend here.

The main aim of this analysis is to show evidence of the controversy between Neoplatonists and Christians concerning the body and carnality at the end of the fourth century from the perspective of two leading intellectual figures of the period who do not belong to any particular philosophical school, that is, who do not practice as professional philosophers. They approach the problem from a different point of view, which can be described as more generic, more rooted in traditional pagan παιδεία, and therefore more interesting in a literary and even sociological sense. Such an approach will allow us to see that the dispute over carnality affected, in this period, not only the most obvious philosophical positions but also the very notion of intellectual training, of παιδεία itself, at a time of widespread discussion about valid pedagogical models. It will also allow us to see that the perception of Christianity by pagan intellectuals was—contrary to what is often perceived—that of a group of uneducated barbarians obsessed with an excessive attachment to the body and carnality to the detriment of the soul and contemplation.

2. The (Neo)platonic Problem with the Body: A Very Short Retrospective

As is well known—and, of course, the subject is completely beyond the scope of this study—the Platonic dualism between body and soul, plausibly Pythagorean or Orphic in origin, contributes to the development of a disdain for the body in favor of the soul—something markedly new in ancient Greek culture². Perhaps the most emblematic image of this new conception appears in the *Charmides*, where Plato presents Socrates fervent with desire for the young Charmides, barely able to restrain himself in his eagerness to see what is hidden under his cloak, but who nevertheless finally manifests his deep desire to strip the young man not of his cloak, but of his body, to have a look at his soul (154e). The idea, of course, is revolutionary with respect to the whole previous Greek tradition:³ instead of contemplating the desirable body of a young man, it is preferable for (the Platonic) Socrates to contemplate his soul of which the body is nothing more than a mere garment. The Platonic novelty is, whatever its antecedents, very significant: unlike in Homer, the soul (ψυχή) does not end in Hades but can be reincarnated again in a new body;⁴ and the body (σῶμα) does not receive its name only after the death of the person but as the soul inhabits it. Even more innovative is the relationship established between body and soul in the Platonic texts, markedly unfriendly throughout life, to the extent that the separation of the soul from the body after death is described as a real liberation of the soul from its body/grave—the famous σῶμα σῆμα⁵.

From these assumptions⁶—along with their development in the cosmic speculations of the *Timaeus* and despite the peculiar drifts of the Middle and New Academy regarding the soul⁷—the notion of the preponderance of the soul over the body and the even abject character of the body are systematically emphasized in the Neoplatonic tradition. Indeed, for the Neoplatonists, the terrible consequences of the incarnation of the soul in a body can be only neutralized by a strong asceticism which forces all sorts of physical renunciations and allow the philosopher to reach, with the minimum possible distraction due to the claim of matter, the union with the divine through pure intellectual labors, which include the contemplation of the universe and the analysis of the principles of human knowledge: this is the postulate by Plotinus (*Enneads* III 5, 1), to take only the most conspicuous example⁸, and according to Porphyry's most literary description (*The Cave of the Nymphs* 35), when the bodiless souls will return to their true spiritual homeland beyond the stars, even the inconvenience of possessing a body will be forgotten, as if it had never been.

This contempt for carnality on the part of the Neoplatonic intellectuals is clearly evident in Eunapius of Sardis⁹, who takes up the general feeling of his confreres regarding the complete disregard for the body. In the *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, usually dated in approximately 399¹⁰, he presents his heroes clearly in this light: Porphyry, during his stay at Rome together with Plotinus, began to hate his body and his very humanity

(VS IV 1, 7: τὸ τε σῶμα καὶ τὸ ἄνθρωπος εἶναι ἐμίσησεν); Aedesius turns away from all that is human, to the extent that he seems to be all soul (VS II 3, 5); Antoninus despised his body (VS VI 10, 6); and we could add further examples. Eunapius also echoes, with great scandal, the Christians' taste for the carnal, especially in the cult of the martyrs, in the context of a furious attack, typical of one who feels the very survival of paganism to be deeply threatened, at a time of destruction of temples and restrictions on the public expression of pagan cults (VS VI 11, 8):

Next, into the sacred places they [sc. the Christians] imported monks, as they called them (τοὺς καλουμένους μοναχοὺς), who were men in appearance but led the lives of swine, and openly did and allowed countless unspeakable crimes (ἄνθρώπους μὲν κατὰ τὸ εἶδος, ὁ δὲ βίος αὐτοῖς συνώδης, καὶ ἐς τὸ ἐμφανὲς ἔπασχόν τε καὶ ἐποιοῦν μυρία κακὰ καὶ ἄφραστα). But this they accounted piety, to show contempt for things divine. For in those days every man who wore a black robe and consented to behave in unseemly fashion in public, possessed the power of a tyrant (τυραννικὴν γὰρ εἶχεν ἐξουσίαν τότε πᾶς ἄνθρωπος μέλαιναν φορῶν ἐσθῆτα, καὶ δημοσίᾳ βουλόμενος ἀσχημονεῖν), to such a pitch of virtue had the human race advanced! [...]

For they collected the bones and skulls of criminals who had been put to death for numerous crimes, men whom the law courts of the city had condemned to punishment, made them out to be gods, haunted their sepulchres, and thought that they became better by defiling themselves at their graves (ὁστέα γὰρ καὶ κεφαλὰς τῶν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς ἁμαρτήμασιν ἑαλωκότων συναλίζοντες, οὓς τὸ πολιτικὸν ἐκόλαζε δικαστήριον, θεοὺς τε ἀπεδείκνυσαν, καὶ προσεκαλινδοῦντο τοῖς ὅσοις καὶ κρείττους ὑπελάμβανον εἶναι μολυνόμενοι πρὸς τοῖς τάφοις). “Martyrs” (μάρτυρες) the dead men were called, and “ministers” (διάκονοι) of a sort, and “ambassadors” (πρέσβεις) from the gods to carry men's prayers—these slaves in vilest servitude, who had been consumed by stripes and carried on their phantom forms the scars of their villainy (δεδουλενκότα κακῶς, καὶ μάστιγικαταδεδαπανημένα, καὶ τὰς τῆς μοχθηρίας ὥπειλὰς ἐν τοῖς εἰδώλοις φέροντα). [Trans. Wilmer Cave Wright]

In the same vein, for Eunapius, attachment to the corporeal (τὸ φιλοσώματον) is not only considered to be opposed to philosophical practice (VS VIII, 1, 3) but also something that belongs to barbarians (VS VI 5, 8).

3. Early Christian Attitudes on the Body

In the early Christian thought, on the other hand, the body—despite being opposed to the soul according to the same shared Neoplatonic precepts and having to subordinate itself to the soul through hard asceticism (See [Brown 1998](#))—nevertheless acquires an importance unthinkable in Neoplatonic terms, insofar as the body must be the reflection of the soul with which it forms a unity: it must reflect God as much as the soul¹¹. No doubt this importance of the body, which is not simply to be neutralized by the soul, stems from the paramount importance of the resurrection of the flesh, which was the subject of debate in Christian circles at precisely this time. Plotinus, although he never mentions the Christians by name, undoubtedly has them in mind when he writes (*Enneads* III, vi, 6, 71):

The true waking is the true resurrection, not with the body, but from the body (ἢ δ' ἄληθινὴ ἐγρήγορσις ἀληθινὴ ἀπὸ σώματος, οὐ μετὰ σώματος, ἀνάστασις), because resurrecting with the body only mean getting out (μετάστασις) of one sleep into another.

The resurrection of the flesh is the exact opposite of what the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, from the Pythagoreans and Plato to the Neoplatonists, put forward—which is no doubt why the fourth-century Church had to assert it forcefully against all kinds of pagan philosophical approaches¹². The three objections by Porphyry in his treatise *Against the Christians*, preserved fragmentarily, are well known: (a) the universe is eternal,

uncreated and indestructible, (b) souls cannot be created at birth, and (c) resurrection of the body is impossible¹³. It can be argued that this is the basic doctrinal apparatus shared by the entire Neoplatonic tradition, the same one that led to the rejection of the idea of a bodily resurrection in the Neoplatonic Christian John Philoponus, of whose treatise *On the Resurrection* only a few fragments have survived in Syriac. In addition, undoubtedly, his Neoplatonic training is what motivated the reluctance of bishop Synesius of Cyrene to accept the literalness of the resurrection of the flesh, for example in his *Epistle* 105, where he describes it as “a sacred and mysterious allegory”, ἱερὸν τι καὶ ἀπόρρητον (89) (See [Bregman 1982](#), pp. 98–111, 160–61). Even the semi-corporeal element that remains attached to the soul after death according to Porphyry (*Sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes* XXIX) is only a physical remnant that adheres to souls that have not sufficiently purified themselves of worldly concerns, since the ultimate goal of the Neoplatonic tradition is precisely that the soul is finally completely freed from the burden of the body, which distracts it from living in the element that is proper to it. It is especially significant that the Neoplatonist Celsus, in attacking Christians, refers to them as “people who love the body” (φιλοσώματον γένος)¹⁴, exactly the same word that Eunapius, as we have seen above, used to define the opposite of philosophical practice, no doubt in a veiled reference to Christianity; and the same claim made by Plotinus: we need to remain pure and without affection for the body (φιλοσωματεῖν)¹⁵.

In the same vein, it is worth remembering that, at the first Council of Constantinople in 381, the humanity of Christ is precisely emphasized, against those who, as Apollinaris of Laodicea, defended that He was the incarnate divinity, but without fully assuming human flesh, will and reason; and, above all, that the Council of Ephesus, in 431, insisted to the point of redundancy on the carnality of Christ, and on the total belonging of the human flesh of Christ to the divine Logos: the presence of the derivatives of σάρξ in its decrees and in its anathemas is simply overwhelming. It seems clear that the question was the subject of intense debate among the intellectuals of the day, and, no doubt, carnality presented problems especially for Christians more dependent on a Neoplatonist background. Suffice it to consider the extreme example of Origen, who, commenting on the proximities between *Genesis* (3, 21) and Plato's *Phaedrus* (246c), considered that the same phenomenon—the incarnation of the naked soul—was described in both, and went so far as to assert that Adam did not actually have a body until he committed the first sin:¹⁶ not that Adam and Eve realized that they were naked, but that it was only then that their soul was clothed by a body of flesh, so that the flesh is thus excluded even from the original creation.

On the contrary, early Christianity affirms that corporeality is the place of spirituality, since God has become incarnate and has risen in the flesh: the new Christian philosophical life—represented particularly by the monks who populated the deserts during the fourth and fifth centuries—clearly presents the paradox of the flesh, tortured as a cause of fall and sin, but at the same time the only place where spirituality and salvation are possible, in the sense of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6, 15: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?”, οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν μέλη Χριστοῦ ἐστίν (See [Margel 2016](#)).

4. Synesius of Cyrene's and Eunapius of Sardis' Perspective: The Dangers of Christian Obsession about the Body against the Soul, and the True Formation of an Intellectual

The contemporary reaction of some Neoplatonists at the end of the fourth century allows us to see even more clearly the specificity and novelty that early Christianity represented in comparison with the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition that was contemporary to it. In particular, the perspective of Synesius of Cyrene, a Neoplatonic intellectual who ended his days as a Christian bishop, provides an insight worthy of comment. In fact, as he himself declares in *Letter* 41, written in approximately 412, at the end of his life, he did not in fact practice philosophy in public, in the Cynic style, nor did he open a school, nor did he act as a sophist before audiences: he cannot therefore be described as a philosopher, although his doctrines are clearly of Neoplatonic origin¹⁷, as he was always

a faithful disciple of the famous Hypatia of Alexandria, who survived him by only a few years—Synesius did not, therefore, witness her gruesome end.

He was no ordinary bishop either:¹⁸ in recent years there has been a certain consensus among scholars that Synesius was already a Christian at least since his marriage, blessed by the Patriarch of Alexandria in 403, or perhaps even earlier, after his return from his embassy to Constantinople in 401¹⁹; but his Christianity cannot be described as orthodox. He himself honestly expressed his reluctance to accept the episcopal charge of his city in an open letter to the patriarch Theophilus in 410 (*Letter* 105, 73–99):

It is difficult, if not quite impossible, that convictions should be shaken, which have entered the soul through knowledge to the point of demonstration (τὰ δι' ἐπιστήμης εἰς ἀπόδειξιν ἐλθόντα δόγματα). Now you know that philosophy rejects many of those convictions which are cherished by the common people (πολλὰ φιλοσοφία τοῖς θρυλουμένοις τούτοις ἀντιδιατάσσεται δόγμασιν). For my own part, I can never persuade myself that the soul is of more recent origin than the body. Never would I admit that the world and the parts which make it must perish. This resurrection, which is an object of common belief, is nothing for me but a sacred and mysterious allegory, and I am far from sharing the views of the vulgar crowd thereon (ἀμέλει τὴν ψυχὴν οὐκ ἀξιῶσω ποτὲ σώματος ὑστερογενῆ νομίζειν. τὸν κόσμον οὐ φήσω καὶ τὰλλα μέρη διαφθείρεσθαι. τὴν καθωμιλημένην ἀνάστασιν ἱερὸν τι καὶ ἀπόρρητον ῥηγναι, καὶ πολλοῦ δέω ταῖς τοῦ πλήθους ὑπολήψεσιν ὁμολογῆσαι). The philosophic mind, albeit the discernor of truth, admits the employment of falsehood. [. . .] What can there be in common between the ordinary man and philosophy? Divine truth should remain hidden, but the vulgar need a different system (τὴν μὲν ἀλήθειαν τῶν θείων ἀπόρρητον εἶναι δεῖ, τὸ δὲ πλῆθος ἑτέρας ἕξεως δεῖται). I shall never cease repeating that I think the wise man, to the extent that necessity allows, should not force his opinions upon others, nor allow others to force theirs upon him. No, if I am called to the priesthood, I declare before God and man that I refuse to preach dogmas in which I do not believe (οὐκ ἀξιῶ προσποιεῖσθαι δόγματα). Truth is an attribute of God, and I wish in all things to be blameless before Him. [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

In addition to having to give up hunting and his wife, Synesius found it difficult to accept certain Christian dogmas, and, just as a good Neoplatonist, he clung to the pre-existence of the soul, the eternity of the uncreated universe and the immortality of the soul, but he did not accept the resurrection of the flesh, and, above all, he attacked head-on the possibility of popularizing, of vulgarizing, the truth. Basically, however, it is nothing other than the reluctance of a Neoplatonist to abandon the pure theoretical life, the βίος θεωρητικός proper to a philosopher, and to adopt the practical life of busy politics that corresponds to a bishop (*Letter* 105, 25–30)²⁰.

It is precisely in his work *Dio*²¹, which he sent to his revered master Hypatia in 405, that Synesius discusses his personal proposal of παιδεία, closely linked to his notion of what is to be understood by philosophy and by a philosophical life in progress towards contemplation²². Although it was undoubtedly written a few years earlier—in response to the criticism he had received for the publication of his lost work *Cynegeticus* in 392, as he himself explains in *Letter* 154—the work is presented as a protreptic to philosophy addressed to his future son Hesychius, who was to be born in 404. In reality, it is a vital and literary apology, which defends the unity of knowledge, overcoming the old conflict between philosophy and rhetoric, along the lines of his model, who gave his name to the book, the philosopher and sophist Dio Chrysostom. For Synesius, a full education should include the study and practice of literature, contrary to the opinion of the uneducated, whether pagan or Christian, each characterized by the color of his cloak, as was common at the time (*Letter* 154, to Hypatia, dated in 405):

Some of those who wear the white [the Neoplatonists] or dark [the Christian monks] mantle²³ have maintained that I am faithless to philosophy (με παρανομεῖν εἰς φιλοσοφίαν), apparently because I profess grace and harmony of style (ἐπαίοντα κάλλους ἐν λέξεσι καὶ ῥυθμοῦ), and because I venture to say something concerning Homer and concerning the figures of the rhetoricians. In the eyes of such persons, one must hate literature in order to be a philosopher and must occupy himself with divine matters only (ὥς δὴ τὸν φιλόσοφον μισολόγον εἶναι προσήκον καὶ μόνον περιεργάζεσθαι τὰ δαιμόνια πράγματα). [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

In chapters 7 and 8, in particular, the way to the contemplation of the divine is contrasted between Neoplatonists and Christians. Both have identical aims, but the method employed by the philosopher makes him superior (*Dio* 9, 48cd):

But as regards the intervening process, our native philosopher has shown himself the sounder thinker (τὰν μέσῳ δὲ ὁ ἡμεδαπὸς φιλόσοφος ἄμεινον ἔσκεπται), for he has prepared himself a road and ascends it as if it were a ladder (ὁδὸν γὰρ παρεσκευάσατο καὶ κλιμακῆδὸν ἄνεισιν), so that the ascent is in some degree his own achievement, since as he advances he will probably encounter somewhere his soul's desire. And even if he does not encounter it, at all events he has advanced on his road, and this is no small matter; even thus he would differ from the bulk of mankind as much as they do from the beasts of the field. [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

Christian monks, in contrast to the Neoplatonic philosophers, are markedly antisocial (*Dio* 7, 45d):

I have ere observed even men of foreign race, of both these noble classes (βαρβάρους ἀνθρώπους ἐξ ἀμφοῖν τῶν ἀρίστων γενῶν), men who professed a contemplative existence (θεωρίαν μὲν ὑπεσχημένους), and for that reason took no part in public life and became unsociable (κατὰ τοῦτο ἀπολιτεύτους τε καὶ ἀκοινωνήτους ἀνθρώπους) in their haste to release themselves from nature. They had sacred songs, holy symbols, and certain ordered approaches to the Divinity (πρόσοδοι πρὸς τὸ θεῖον). All these things cut the men off from turning to matter, and they pass their lives apart from each other (βιοτεύουσι χωρὶς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων), so as neither to see nor to hear anything pleasant (μή τι χάριεν ἰδεῖν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι).

οὐ γὰρ σῖτον ἔδουσ', οὐ πίνουσ' αἴθοπα οἶνον

For bread they eat not at all, nor drink they the wine that is ruddy (Homer, *Iliad* V 341).

In saying so much about the men in question, one would not overshoot the mark.

[Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

The image of these asocial men living apart from each other is of course reminiscent of the Cyclops, as presented by Homer in the *Odyssey* (ix, 112–115), although the Homeric verse quoted here by Synesius²⁴, besides fitting well for the Cyclops themselves, is usually applied, as is well known, to the gods, so that Synesius must have also had in mind the famous passage from Aristotle (*Politics* 1253a):

Man is by nature a political animal (ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον), and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless is either low in the scale of humanity or above it—like the “clanless, lawless, hearthless” (ἄφρήτωρ ἀθέμιτος ἀνέστιος) man reviled by Homer (*Iliad* IX 63). [Trans. H. Rackham]

This denunciation of the antisocial and inhuman character, more characteristic of beasts or gods than of men, is a criticism similar to that already made of the monks by the emperor Julian named the Apostate, although with a fierier tone (*Letter to the high priest Theodorus* 89b6-9):

There are those who seek the deserts instead of the cities (τὰς ἐρημίαις ἀντὶ τῶν πόλεων)—although man is by nature a social and civilised being (ὄντος ἀνθρώπου φύσει πολιτικοῦ ζῶου καὶ ἡμέρου)—led astray by the power of evil spirits, by whom they are forced into such hatred of their own humanity (μισανθρωπίαν).

In contrast to the careful education of the Neoplatonic elites, the Christian monks must certainly have appeared to be rude and profoundly uneducated peasants. For Synesius, the monks are βάρβαροι, while the philosophers, trained in the traditional παιδεία, are the only Greeks, Hellenes, in the double sense already known in this period: pure Greek for some, pagan for the others. The association with the barbarians is not trivial: Eunapius of Sardis, in his *History* (written in approximately 400), believed that the barbarians had used Christian monks in their attacks against the Roman Empire (fr. 48, 2. 14-19 Blockley):

They also had with them some of the tribe of so-called “monks” (τῶν καλουμένων μοναχῶν), whom they had decked out in imitation of the monks amongst their enemies. The imitation was neither laborious nor difficult, but it sufficed for them to trail along grey cloaks and tunics (ἐξήρκει φαῖα ἱμάτια σύρουσι καὶ χιτῶνια) to both become and be accepted as evildoers. The barbarians used these devices to deceive the Romans, since they shrewdly observed that these things were respected amongst them. [Trans. R. C. Blockley]

The historical context is particularly harsh in this respect: in 395, Alaric’s troops had invaded parts of Greece and devastated Corinth, Argos and Sparta, among other cities, where temples were destroyed, and pagan intellectuals murdered. Regardless of the historical reality of the mimetic phenomenon for delusory purposes that Eunapius denounces here, it is clear that the association between monks, evildoers and barbarians was common among the Neoplatonists of the time.

On the other hand, as is well known, Christian thinkers unhesitatingly adhered to the defence of the so-called βάρβαρος φιλοσοφία: in debate with various pagan intellectuals, echoes of which can still be read in the preface of Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the eminent philosophers* (I 1-3), many Christian authors—such as Tatian, Eusebius of Caesarea, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus, to give only the most obvious examples—defended Egyptian, Indian, Persian and Jewish philosophy as the source from which the first Greek philosophy drew and even identified the mythical poet Musaeus with Moses. There were also Neoplatonic philosophers who favored the exoticism of non-Hellenic peoples, in particular the Chaldeans, who were seen as purer and simpler, especially when it came to the practice of theurgy: well-known are the statements of Iamblichus in favor of the Barbarian philosophy in his opusculum *On the Mysteries*, and the insistence of the *Chaldean Oracles* on preserving even the ὀνόματα βάρβαρα because they lose their theurgic efficacy if translated into Greek²⁵.

On the contrary, Synesius defends the formative path of the traditional Greek παιδεία, which allows philosophers to be better prepared to reach union with divinity, because they are trained for it and rationally control the process, while monks reach it only by divine possession, as in a completely irrational and uncontrollable Bacchic frenzy²⁶ (Dio 8, 47d-48c):

But their procedure is like Bacchic frenzy—like the leap of a man mad or possessed (βακχεία καὶ ἄλματι μανικῷ δὴ τινι καὶ θεοφορήτῳ)—the attainment of a goal without running the race, a passing beyond reason without the previous exercise of reasoning (καὶ μὴ κατὰ λόγον ἐνεργήσαντας εἰς τὸ ἐπέκεινα λόγου γενέσθαι). For the sacred matter [contemplation] is not like attention belonging to knowledge, or an outlet of mind, nor is it like one thing in one place and another in another. On the contrary—to compare small and greater—it is like Aristotle’s view (*About philosophy*, fr. 15 Rose) that men being initiated have not a lesson to learn, but an experience to undergo and a condition into which they must be brought, while they are becoming fit (for revelation). Now, the state of fitness for revelation also is irrational, and if reason play no part in

preparing it, much more so (ἡ ἐπιτηδειότης δὲ ἄλογος· εἰ δὲ μηδὲ λόγος αὐτὴν παρασκευάζοι, πολὺ μᾶλλον). [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

Thus, Synesius follows Plotinus, who defended rationalism against those who claimed to have special revelations (*Enneads* II 9)²⁷. The only ones who are dispensed from this long process of παιδεία in their ascent to the contemplation of the divine are, for Synesius, four representatives of religious excellence, divine men who are capable of direct contact, without prior preparation, with the divinity: Hermes (Trismegistus, probably), Amus, Zoroaster and Anthony—surely saint Anthony the first hermit, according to the tradition inaugurated by the famous biography dedicated to him by St. Athanasius (*Dio* 9, 48d)²⁸.

There is, moreover, a theme that is also fundamental in the παιδεία that Synesius defends: since the human being is not a pure intellect, philosophy must be sensitive to beauty, the philosopher must want to experience pleasure (*Dio* 6, 45a):

For God has made pleasure to be a fastening for the soul by which it supports the proximity of the body (ὁ γὰρ θεὸς τὴν ἡδονὴν περόνην ἐποίησε τῇ ψυχῇ, δι' ἧς ἀνέχεται τὴν προσεδρείαν τοῦ σώματος). Such then is the beauty of literature. It does not go down towards matter, nor does it dip the mind in the lowest powers, but rather gives it force to rise up in a moment and to hasten upwards to real being, for even the low part of such a life is high. [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

This is the meaning of χαρίειν in Synesius, contrary, of course, to the way of life of the Christian monks, who distrust leisure, τὴν σχολὴν ὑφεωρῶντο (*Dio* 7, 46c), and who live separated from the world precisely “so as neither to see nor to hear anything pleasant” (μή τι χάριεν ἰδεῖν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι), as we have seen above (*Dio* 7, 45d). On the contrary, according to Synesius (*Dio* 8, 47c):

Thus the Greek trains his perceptions by his pleasures, and even out of sport derives advantage for his most important object (ἀνὴρ Ἑλλήν καὶ οἷς τρυφᾷ τὴν ἐπιβολὴν γυμνάζει, καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς παιδιᾶς εἰς τὴν πρώτην ὑπόθεσιν ὄφελος ἄρνυται). Further, to exercise the critical faculty, to compose a prose or poetical work, is not outside of the province of mind (οὐκ ἔξω νοῦ). Again, to purify and polish one's style, to find the main argument, to arrange it in order, and to recognize it when arranged by another, how can all these things be matters devoid of interest, and mere toys (ἀσπούδαστα παίγνια)? [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

The model for this vindication of the pleasure of the wise man, against Christians and some Neoplatonists, is sought by Synesius (*Dio* 15, 59a) in none other than Aspasia of Miletus²⁹, the famous mistress of Pericles, usually described as a hetaira, whom Socrates claims to have been his master of rhetoric (Plato, *Menexenus* 236bc)³⁰ and with whom a certain erotic relationship is also attributed to him (Athenaeus V 219de; XIII 599ab). Synesius' argument in favor of the pleasure that the philosopher must wish to derive from literature, therefore, provocatively covers the image of the relations between Plato's own hero, Socrates, and a prostitute, while at the same time attacking the practices of the Christian monks: when they descend from the heights of divine contemplation, they run the risk of sinking into matter after the fall, whereas the philosopher can rest his spirit in an intermediate stage, that is the cultivation of literature (*Dio* 8, 47a), which allows him to rest without sinking into the mire of matter (*Dio* 6, 44c–45b). Instead, the anchorites fill their idleness by making wicker baskets (*Dio* 7, 46c):

What, after all, is the meaning of their baskets (κάλαθοι) and of the wickerwork objects which they handle, if not to signify first of all that they were human beings at a given moment; in other words, were paying attention to matters here below? For they are not in a state of contemplation at the moment when they are dealing craftily with the wicker objects. [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

Of course, Synesius is here accusing the monks—particularly the Egyptian monks, who are reputed for this kind of manual labor—of something that goes directly back to

Plato: βανανυσία. As Andrea Wilson [Nightingale](#) (1995, pp. 55–59) convincingly argued, Plato seizes on the rhetoric of βανανυσία, typical of aristocrats in expressing their contempt for manual, menial labor, and reuses it to define the opposition between the philosopher, engaged in the divine, and the non-philosopher, engaged in manual labor. The most significant passage is *Symposium* 203a:³¹

The gods do not mingle with men, but all dealings and dialogue between the gods and men takes place through him, whether while they are awake or while they are asleep. And he who is skilled in such things is a demonic man, while he who is skilled in anything else, whether in a trade or in manual work, is a craftsman (ὁ μὲν περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφὸς δαιμόνιος ἀνὴρ, ὁ δὲ ἄλλο τι σοφὸς ὢν ἢ περὶ τέχνας ἢ χειρουργίας τινὰς βάνανυσος).

The daily grind of manual labor, then, associated with the baseness of the material and the corporeal in its coarsest and most pressing sense, forms part of the Neoplatonic critique against the habits of the supposed Christian philosophers: although the aims are similar, Synesius is blunt in describing the asceticism practiced by Christian monks as excessive and irrational, in contrast to the Neoplatonic tradition. On the contrary, he advocates the defense of gradual and rationally controlled asceticism, which implies the safeguarding of pagan παιδεία, and particularly of pagan literature (*Dio* 9, 49d–50a; 10, 51ab; 52a; 52d), in any case not tied to manual work, to the material: to the body. Literature is, for Synesius, that intermediate state between the soul and the body that allows us to flee from the corporeal even in the moments when pure contemplation ends. Not having this option, monks run the constant risk of falling into the vileness of the body from the heights of contemplation: they are thus always more subject to the flesh, since, despising literature and the pleasures associated with it, they have no middle way between vile manual labor and pure contemplation. In this sense too they are barbarians, because of their deliberate lack of Hellenic παιδεία, which is the very criticism also by Eunapius, as we have seen: their attachment to the corporeal (τὸ φιλοσώματον) is not only considered to be opposed to philosophical practice (*VS* VIII, 1, 3) but also something that belongs to barbarians (*VS* VI 5, 8).

In the same vein, the definitive argument by Synesius focuses on what is, as we pointed out, the most notable difference between Christians and Neoplatonists at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century: the monks—this supposedly new way of philosophy claimed by Christians—seek to reach the divine *with their whole body*, when it is only the pure intellect that is capable of rising in this way. This is how Synesius puts it (*Dio* 9, 49c; 50c):

For it seems dangerously near impiety to suggest that the Divinity will dwell in any other part of us than in the mind (ἄλλῳ τῷ τῶν ἐν ἡμῖν οἶσθαι τὸν θεὸν ἐνδημήσειν ἀντὶ τοῦ νοῦ), since that is God's own temple (νεὼς γὰρ οὗτος οἰκεῖος θεῷ). [...]

In very truth we should gain benefit from the virtues in becoming disentangled of a partiality for matter (τῆς ὑλικῆς προσπαθείας). But an uplifting force is needed (δεῖ δὲ καὶ ἀναγωγῆς), for it is insufficient that a man be not evil, he must even be a god (δεῖ καὶ θεὸν εἶναι). And this state most resembles the turning away from the body and as many things as are of the body, and the turning, through the intellect, to God (καὶ ἔοικεν εἶναι τὸ μὲν οἶον ἀπεστράφθαι τὸ σῶμα καὶ ὅσα τοῦ σώματος, τὸ δὲ οἶον ἐπεστράφθαι διὰ νοῦ πρὸς θεόν). [Trans. Augustine Fitzgerald]

It is the same statement by Plotinus, as we have seen above: contemplation of the divine can only be exercised *from the body*, never *with the body*. Thus, the monks, according to Synesius, made a serious mistake, despite, so to say, their good intentions and their proximity to the aim of Neoplatonic philosophy, because of their attachment to the corporeal, which is the result of their lack of a true Hellenic philosophical education—an absolutely

repulsive love of the corporeal, especially in relation to the cult of the martyrs, in the less sympathetic view of Eunapius.

5. Some Concluding Remarks

Thus, the point of view of the Greek intellectuals trained in Neoplatonism, in the transition from the fourth to the fifth century, seems quite clear and generalized: the Christian majority—in particular its most exalted members, the monks—is irrational, abhors culture, inhumanly despises the pure pleasures associated with the cultivation of literature, and, while practicing an asceticism similar to their own, does so without knowing exactly why, while loving the corporeal, indulging in menial manual labor and resembling the barbarians, in their immediate historical representation but also, of course, in their literary image, common in the tradition of ancient Greek culture. All of which prevents them from adequately reaching the contact with divinity, which is the shared goal of both groups. Attachment to the body and the corporeal thus characterizes Christians at this time as a burden that prevents them from ascending to the heights of true Neoplatonic contemplation, which can be exercised only with the soul. Even worse: this markedly “philosomatic” character of early Christianity puts at risk the very formation of the intellectual and the continuation of the παιδεία itself.

These voices, before being silenced, still resounded loudly at a time when the Capadocian Fathers—no less Neoplatonist than Synesius or Eunapius, but of a Neoplatonism already filtered by the Alexandrian Christians, which accepts only what is not contrary to Scripture and Christian dogma—claimed that the true philosophy was Christian philosophy, identified with contemplation and monastic life³², and opposed precisely the cultivation of rhetoric and traditional παιδεία, which are understood as sophistications that kill the simplicity and plainness of the Christian message. On the contrary, for Synesius, no less than for Eunapius, the way of life of Christian monks is not and cannot be, in any way, a philosophical life, which can only be possible if it is purely spiritual, completely detached from the despicable garment of the body and its daily grind. Additionally, Christianity is undoubtedly, at this moment, a body friendly religion: the religion of the φιλοσώματον γένος.

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Notes

- ¹ I will only note, among the abundant bibliography, the already canonical studies by [Brown \(1988\)](#) and [Elm \(1994\)](#). For a more particularly sexually oriented approach, the following are essential references: [Clark \(1999\)](#); [Gaca \(2003\)](#); and [Harper \(2013\)](#).
- ² For a detailed analysis of Plato’s conceptions of the soul, among the vast bibliography, the studies by [Robinson \(1970\)](#); and [Steiner \(1992\)](#) are particularly interesting. For connections with Orphism and Pythagoreanism, see, specially, [Long \(1948\)](#); [Burkert \(1962\)](#); [Kalogerakos \(1996\)](#); [Casadesús Bordoy \(2008\)](#). See also a discussion in [Claus \(1981\)](#), pp. 1–7.
- ³ The main study about these traditional conceptions about the soul in ancient Greece is still [Claus \(1981\)](#). For a brief and clear summary of the evolution of the concepts of body and soul from Homer to Plato, [Bartoš \(2006\)](#) is particularly useful.
- ⁴ See specially Plato, *Phaedo* 81e–82b, 113a; *Menexenus* 81b; *Resp.* 620e; *Phaedrus* 248c–249b; *Timaeus* 41e–42d. However, there is some evidence for the existence of a transmigration theory before Plato: see [Burkert’s \(1962\)](#) and [Claus \(1981\)](#) analyses of Xenophanes, B 7; Herodotus II 123; Empedocles, B 115 and Pindar, *Olympica* II 56–70.
- ⁵ Particularly in Plato, *Cratylus* 400c; *Gorgias* 493a.
- ⁶ This is not the place, of course, to enter into the controversy about the extent to which dualism as it is presented in the philosophical tradition really belongs to the Platonic postulates or if it is a later philosophical construct: see [Vasiliiu \(2015\)](#).
- ⁷ See specially [El Murr \(2018\)](#); and [Tarrant \(2020\)](#). On the most controversial point, that of the sceptical drift of Platonism in the evolution of the Academy, see [Bonazzi \(2003\)](#).
- ⁸ See also the main argumentation in Plotinus, *Enneads* I, vi, 6, 13; III vi, 5, 18; IV iii, 4, 23, and Porphyry, *Sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes* 7.

- ⁹ Geffcken (1920, p. 217), pointed out the contrast between the criticism of Synesius, which, as we shall see, is more measured, and the furious and unmitigated attack of a pure pagan like Eunapius.
- ¹⁰ Eunapius is usually dated between 347–349 and 414, although the dates cannot be said to be certain: see Goulet (1980); Blockley (1981, I, ix, 1); Banchich (1987, pp. 164–67); Penella (1990, pp. 2–4); and, especially, the longer and more recent discussion of the testimonies in Goulet (2014, pp. 5–34).
- ¹¹ On this issue, see the recent comprehensive study by Loudovikos (2019).
- ¹² On early Christian philosophy, see Karamanolis (2021, pp. 166–99).
- ¹³ See specially *Against the Christians*, fr. 35, 92 and 94 Harnack = 117D Becker.
- ¹⁴ *Apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* VII 39.
- ¹⁵ *Enneads* II ix, 18, 41–42.
- ¹⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* IV 40.
- ¹⁷ His Neoplatonism is fundamentally Porphyrian, as is especially evident in the *Hymns*, where the difficulties of fitting the Neoplatonic triad habitual in the Chaldean Oracles with the Christian Trinity are also evident, as rightly explained by Vollenweider (1985); see also Garzya (1981). For an excellent summary of Synesius' position in the intellectual context of his time, see Di Pasquale Barbanti (1994).
- ¹⁸ See the seminal study by Lacombrade (1951), the summary by Ramos Jurado (1992), and, especially, the recent thorough analysis by Criscuolo (2016).
- ¹⁹ As proposed by Cameron and Long (1993, pp. 28–34), following Marrou (1952, p. 479), and Marrou (1963, pp. 141–42). Bregman (1982) and Tanaseanu-Döbler (2008, p. 286), considered Synesius a Neoplatonist who accepted the bishop's mitre out of pure pragmatism, without ever abandoning his pagan convictions, but these conceptions no longer seem to have any credibility among specialists today.
- ²⁰ See the excellent presentation of the problem by Toulouse (2016).
- ²¹ For a thorough analysis of the *Dio*, see the essential studies by Treu (1958); Garzya (1972); Piñero (1975); Quevedo Blanco (2011).
- ²² In order to properly contextualise Synesius ideological position, the study by Garzya (1968) is still important. More recently, Op de Coul (2012) has revised the subject.
- ²³ Or perhaps also cynical street philosophers, according to the comparison made by Julian the Apostate, *Orat.* VII, 244ac, as Treu (1958) remarked in his commentary on the passage, which is also argued by Vollenweider (1985, pp. 19–20). On the form of philosophical cloak dressing also adopted by Christians, see Urbano (2013).
- ²⁴ Synesius often uses Homeric passages in his exposition, for purposes well analysed by Pizzone (2006).
- ²⁵ According to the testimony of Michael Pselos (*expos. Or. Chald.* 1132C). It is the same idea that reappears in the *Corpus Hermeticum* xvi 2.
- ²⁶ It is worth remembering at this point that Orphic images are frequent both in Neoplatonism and among the authors of early Christianity: we refer to the study on the subject by Herrero De Jáuregui (2010).
- ²⁷ For Plotinus, even mystical union must follow a path of discipline of the intellect that has nothing to do with theurgy or magic, very similar to what Synesius describes here, although with particular nuances, of course. See, above all, *Enneads* I, 6, 9; VI, 7, 34.
- ²⁸ Some scholars have tried to identify Amun and Zoroaster with two Christian Gnostics: see Lacombrade (1988). Most likely, however, it is Amon, the Egyptian king of Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c, and the Iranian Zoroaster, well known in the Greek philosophical tradition.
- ²⁹ It has been clearly analysed by Azevedo (2003). Azevedo goes so far as to affirm that, under the figure of Aspasia, we must understand a transcript of Hypatia, Synesius' master, who is perhaps the one who would have instilled in him this desirable harmony between philosophy and rhetoric, between wisdom and pleasure.
- ³⁰ See also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III 6, 36; *Oeconomicus* III 14.
- ³¹ See also *Theaetetus* 176bd, *Republic* 495de, 522b.
- ³² See specially Basil of Caesarea, *Sermo Asceticus*, PG XXI, col. 891; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI 3, 9–12; Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI 33.

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