ABSTRACT *In both popular and scholarly perspectives, the religious ideas and practices labeled Gnostic are widely considered to be almost incomprehensibly distant from contemporary thought, both because of their deliberate mystery and because they are so insistently theological. This essay argues that at least one important Gnostic concept, the idea of Limit in Valentinianism, can actually take its place in and make interesting contributions to contemporary philosophical debates about materiality.*

The reputation of Gnostic practice and doctrine is that of something covert – hidden, suppressed, possibly dangerous. Hollywood films and popular literature suggest that some version of Gnosticism is the long-repressed other of Christianity, a shocking truth that could destroy the Catholic Church in particular, a beautiful egalitarianism that threatens the ecclesial hierarchy. A somewhat more knowledgeable tradition reads Gnosticism, broadly construed, as the other *within* Christianity, officially denied but responsible for most of the detrimental elements of the latter.[1] As one might expect, the actual history is more complex. Christian Gnostic sects do become officially heretical in Christianity, but they did not begin as distinct rejections of an established orthodoxy, nor are they without lasting influence. In this essay, I would like to return to one particular aspect of thought in one particular Gnostic mode – specifically, to the role of Limit in Valentinian thought – which has *not* had a clear enduring influence.[2] However, the theories of existence and knowledge that we find there turn out to have some intriguing intersections with the humanities' recent returns to materialism. I should warn the reader now that in order to make these comparisons, I offer a rather offbeat reading of the Valentinian mythos, and only a few salient points and positions from some very diverse and contentious present-day traditions. In the references here,

1 One seminal figure in this line of thought is Eric Voegelin, whose criticisms rest on the realized eschatology of many Gnostic groups – the claim that redemption is not only to be found in an otherworldly afterlife. He saw this tendency in many political as well as theological attempts at reform. The most relevant works are collected in Voegelin 1999. For the nearly opposing criticism that Gnosticisms are hostile to the world that God has made, we can go all the way back to Irenaeus 1992, 1.21.3, where he describes a baptismal ceremony that includes the words "I redeem my soul from this world and from all things derived from it." For a summary of other relevant texts, see Brons, undated c.

2 Valentinian doctrine comes very close to Christian orthodoxy in many ways, so that some people who accept the term Gnostic nonetheless would not include Valentinianism there. Fortunately, this open debate is not germane to my argument here.

however, there will be resources for further exploration, should anyone be drawn (as I always am) by the complications.

It is a theological commonplace to say that human comprehension of divine things is limited, but few have done as much with the idea of limit as the Valentinians, who flourished from the second to the fourth centuries of the common era. In their cosmology (that is, their theory of how the world comes to be), Limit acts as a restriction, but a creative one. In their soteriology (their theory of salvation), Limit acts as a revelation, and a salvific one. An understanding of these multiple roles of Limit requires a detour through Plato, from which we shall finally emerge into a rather fascinating entanglement of reality, knowledge, and desire, one that offers both a complication of and an alternative to some recent philosophical proposals and positions.

Cosmology

Valentinian cosmology begins with a One, "the inconceivable uncontained," as the Gospel of Truth repeatedly says. And it adds, "The entirety was inside of him – the inconceivable uncontained, who is superior to all thought."[3] If the All (a more common translation of entirety) are inside the One, how do they ever become anything that is not the One? This is where Limit comes in. The One thinks itself, and brings forth Limit. In the Valentinian Exposition, we read, "And the Boundary…[separated] the All…… …is totally ineffable to the All, and the confirmation and actualization of the All."[4] (The term *Horos* is sometimes translated into English as *limit*, other times as *boundary*. I have used *limit* in my own text but kept to the translations I have used when quoting.) There are many components of the All (they are called Aeons), but they all have their root in the One, and are made other than One by Limit. Limit is what allows any one thing to *be*, apart from another.

In other words, that creation might be, the One (also called the Father) establishes Limit within itself, by some mode of thought (we shall have to inquire later about that mode).[5] Across the Limit is every state of being, every thing, that is not One. It is by Limit that *any*thing is, that *all* things are. What makes this even more strange is that according to Irenaeus, who carefully chronicled Valentinian and other "heresies," the Father emitted the Limit in his own image, without another, "as part of no conjugal couple."[6] So the Limit, which seems to keep other things apart from the One, is the image of the One, which cannot have parts or divisions. The Limit is in the image of the illimitable. Whatever knowledge this gives us, of whatever complex cosmos, is going to have to be something other than comprehension.

In the realm of the All, the Aeons are paired, masculine and feminine. These pairings are reflective of the androgyny of the divine. Despite the name "Father," the One is

3 Layton 1987b, 17.5-6.

4 Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 25. Ellipses original.

5 Brons undated d also notes Irenaeus 1992, 1.2.1, and Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 27.36-37.

6 Irenaeus 1992, 1.2.4.

neither male nor female, or both male and female; the paired Aeons are not so much reinforcements of heterosexual bonding as they are aspects of a One beyond binaries. As one might expect, there are many variations and details regarding the layers and the sequence of this creation. To maintain clarity, I will not detail these here; they most often have to do with the order, the names, and the exact number of emanations, and do not directly affect the description of Limit.[7]

As the One is designated Father, the Limit is called the Son. Only the Son knows the Father, because there is nothing between them (if there were, what came between would be another limit, another edge or boundary).[8] The Limit keeps the Aeons from knowing the Father completely. Only by this can their existence be sustained, as otherwise they would be absorbed into Oneness. One of the Aeons is Sophia, wisdom. She thinks that she can know the father through thinking alone, and she tries to do so, without the aid of her consort, who is variously called the ordained, the longed-for, or the perfect. Not only does she not succeed in her pursuit of knowledge; in punishment for her rejection of limitation she is excluded from the All by another, narrower limit, and she and her consort are separated.[9] This punishment, of course, also protects her from absorption.

This distresses her. She weeps, and the other Aeons join in her pleas for help and for mercy.[10] Limit comes to the rescue, dividing her into higher and lower Sophias. Higher Sophia is re-included in the all, and returns to her consort.[11] Once more she is part of a pair, an image of completeness. Lower Sophia, however, continues to suffer. Her suffering generates materiality. But she too receives assistance, first in the form of memory. When she remembers the goodness where she once was, she repents of her actions, and her repentance gives rise to soul.[12] Then the Son, the Limit, now in its role as savior, descends into materiality to free her from sadness.[13] Thus saved, she gives birth to spirit. The seeds of the spirit are within material beings, however, and not in some alternate realm. Matter from sorrow, soul from repentance, and spirit from recollected joy are all in the world.

It sounds as if matter is bad, the product of suffering, cut away twice from the divine source of all that is. It turns out, though, that the Valentinian attitude toward matter

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7 See especially Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 29.25-37. Glossed in Brons undated d.

8 For a list of the sources for these variations, see Brons undated d.

9 There is another version of Valentinian cosmology, which is closer to some other ideas collected under the heading of Gnosticism, in which Sophia's error is not this quest for knowledge but the desire to imitate the Father by creating on her own. Without pretending that this tradition is the least bit unimportant, here I attempt only a reading of the knowledge-seeking story.

10 Brons undated d. Brons refers to Irenaeus 1992, 1.2.3, and Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 34.25-31.

11 Brons undated d, with reference to Irenaeus 1992, 1.2.4, and Hippolytus 1886, 31.5.

12 Irenaeus 1992, 1.4.1-2; Hippolytus 1886, 6.27; Thomassen 2007, 81.22-83.33. All referred to in Brons, undated d.

13 See Irenaeus 1992, 1.4.5; Hippolytus 1886, 6.27; Clement of Alexandria 1934, 43.2-45.2; Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 35-36; Thomassen 2007, 90.14f.

may not be especially negative.[14] First, matter provides a place for instruction, where the seeds of the spirit that Sophia has generated can take the necessary time to remember their divine source – just as Sophia had to do.[15] Memory is a crucial step toward gnosis, that is, knowing what one is and what is true. Second, and crucially, matter provides not just time, but helpful hints: Sophia works together with the descended savior to form matter into the image of the divine fullness, the All.[16] Matter calls to our memories with the voice of the divine. The redemptive knowledge in Valentinianism is knowing how to hear it.

Limits exist, then, between the One and the All, and between the All and the material world. The limits do not cross a vertical line, in the matter of the famous divided line of knowledge and reality in Plato's *Republic*.[17] Rather, they form concentric circles. A Valentinian limit does not close out, but seals within. As a generative restriction, Limit creates first the All of the Aeons, and then the realm of lower wisdom and matter, each in its way an image of the Father, though the images are not equally vivid.

Oddly enough, this insistence on the incomprehensible and provocative nature of matter is echoed in some contemporary philosophical movements, often in resistance to the view of matter that becomes particularly strong after the seventeenth century, holding that matter is inert, passive, and mechanical, awaiting human knowledge and action. What is called object- oriented ontology insists that objects – things, at any scale – not only evade full human comprehension, but trouble human supremacy, which we have based on our supposedly unique ability to know objects and act upon them.[18] Objects are not infinite, but their finitude and ours are mutually evasive, mutually limited: we cannot control them completely and we cannot know them completely. Humans are not uniquely agents in the world; objects act on us, too. There is an opacity to every object, a limit to every knowing.

The various ideas gathered under the heading of new materialism, on the other hand, emphasize the constant relations, even entanglements, among things.[19] Here the status of things is not more closed off than we had thought, but less individuated and

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14 This is a matter of some argumentation, and of course either side – matter is an evil source of ignorance; matter offers a revelation – can be supported more or less from various texts. I do not pretend to offer here any sort of definitive claim, only one strand that I think can be followed through this strange and intriguing mode of thought.

15 Thomassen 2007, 122.32-123.22.

16 Ibid.

17 Plato 2008, 509D-511E.

18 The term "object-oriented philosophy" was coined by Graham Harman in 1999; see Harman, 2010, 93-104. According to Harman, the modification to "object-oriented ontology" comes from Levi Bryant. See "Series Editor's Introduction", in Bryant, 2014, ix. Both volumes provide useful introductions to the position and some of its variations.

19 The term "new materialism" is credited to independent coinages by Rosi Braidotti and Manuel DeLanda. See Braidotti 2000; DeLanda 1995. There are several good anthologies that provide introductions to the relevant range of ideas, including Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Frost and Coole 2010; and in relation to theology, Keller and Rubenstein 2017.

self-contained. Here too, however, the impossibility of perfect knowing is central, now *because* of the extent of that interaction, and once more humans are not understood to be the world's only active beings; indeed, interactivity is complex and dazzling to the point of incomprehensibility.

These ideas are not cosmologies, nor do they have Valentinianism's self-consciously mythical poeticism. If anything, they reject myth in search of a rapport with post-Enlightenment science. But they do suggest that our understanding of objects and the ways in which we know them might move toward an unexpected common ground with the sense of the world as a place that harbors mystery. All three theories of existence lead us to suspect that the world is active upon us in ways that we do not always understand, and that even the world that we think we know often evades comprehension.

Soteriology

As I have said, Limit functions redemptively as well as creatively; salvation is in knowing, and knowing comes through the power of Limit. Like lower wisdom, humanity is both comforted and taught by the Son's assistance – the Son, remember, who *is* Limit. For the Valentinians, Jesus, the personification of the son, really is a rabbi; he saves by teaching, and salvation is not atonement, but learning. (This is probably the primary tension between Gnostic Christianities and those that will become orthodoxy.) One of the key things that he teaches is how to read. This is particularly clear in the Gospel of Truth, which tells us:

> He came forward and uttered the word as a teacher. The self-appointed wise people came up to him, testing him, but he refuted them, for they were empty, and they despised him, for they were not truly intelligent.[20]

Valentinianism, like many other forms of Gnosticism, is strongly influenced by Platonic ideas, but the Platonic resonance here is somewhat unusual: in these actions the Son sounds very like Socrates, who famously questioned wise people, determined that they were never as wise as they thought they were, and realized that his own form of wisdom was the knowledge of limits – that is, the knowledge of how much he did not know.[21] Indeed, says Socrates, human wisdom is always limited, and it can never comprehend the ultimate, divine truth.[22] Socrates taught anyone who would listen to seek self-knowledge, which must include this knowledge of limitation. The Son teaches those who can hear him to read: "In their hearts," says the Gospel of Truth, "appeared the living book of the living, which is written in the father's thought and intellect. And since the foundation of the entirety it had been among his incomprehensibilities…."[23]

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20 Layton 1987b, 19.17-26.

21 Plato 1996a, 21B-23A.

22 Plato, 1996a, 20D-20E and 23A.

23 Layton 1987b, 19.24-20.5. Ellipsis mine.

The audience learns to read, in other words, what cannot be comprehended, and they learn to read it within themselves, "in their hearts." Those whose opinion of their own human knowledge is too high will be shown to be foolish by this incomprehensible truth – a warning that Socrates and the Valentinians both take seriously. The first thing we must know is the limits of knowledge.

The strange living book of the living contains all the names of the saved. When the children of the father learn to read, they read their own names, which preexisted any individuated self. The "living enrolled in the book of the living," says the Gospel of Truth, "learn about themselves, recovering themselves from the Father, returning to him."[24]

Like matter in the image of the All, this book in which names are written is a reminder. So that it can be revealed, the book is bodily; "and no one had been able to take it up, inasmuch as it was ordained that whoever should take it up would be put to death. … Jesus appeared, wrapped himself in that document, was nailed to a piece of wood, and published the father's edict upon the cross."[25] An incarnate, materialized Son, wrapped in the skin-document of the living book, presents divinity so that material human beings can grasp it, learning through the senses. "Acquaintance from the father and the appearance of his son gave them a means to comprehend. For when they saw and heard him, he let them taste and smell himself and touch the beloved son…"[26] In the First Apocalypse of James, Jesus assures James, "I shall complete what is destined here on earth, as I once said from the heavens. And I shall reveal to you your deliverance."[27] This revelation requires careful attention to flesh, to what is "here on earth." Indeed, it requires that we attend to the limit or the boundary of flesh, to the skin, which serves as scripture's divine parchment. "Reading," the means of knowledge, is a way of seeing, hearing, touching – of sensing and interpreting, of responding to the call formed in the material world. The book can only be published in flesh – in matter, which can no longer be reductively understood.

Each reader of the book, reading her or his own name, reads the book itself. What is more, each reader is the flesh, the body as which the book is published. The reading and the fleshly being cannot be extricated from one another. David Brons explains, "the incarnation is … in effect the simultaneous redemption of all who are part of [Jesus's] body."[28] Who are these parts? Brons says, "the body of the human Jesus is consubstantial with the Church. According to Theodotus, 'the body of Jesus…was of the same substance as the Church'" (this is not an unorthodox claim, but the Valentinian spin on it does not become doctrine).[29] It is in the body that the divinity within each member is awakened, because each member of the church is a member of the divine body. The

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24 Layton 1987b, 21.1-7.

25 Layton 1987b, 20.3-5, 20.26-27. Ellipsis mine.

26 Layton 1987b, 30.23-32. Ellipsis mine.

27 Funk 2007, 28.5-30.15.

28 Brons, undated a, with reference to Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 30: 28-30.

29 Brons, undated a. For the canonical version, see the Pauline first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12. Brons also refers to the canonical books Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, Ephesians 4:16,

book and the flesh alike reveal the divine Father, but what they tell is unsayable, invisible, and incomprehensible.

The layering of levels here is extraordinary. The word and the body are there at the cross – not just *at* the limit, but *as* the Limit (who is the Son). The body on the cross is the published book; the book is the many-membered body of the church, containing all the members' names; and the Son, whose body it is, is the image of the Father, stretched out both to mark a limit and to draw back together. And those written in the book learn from it how to read themselves and the world in which they are already implicated. The body becomes a book, and the book a body: the word is made flesh, and it is published on a cross.[30]

This crucifixion is not merely an ending, of course – limitation must be more complex than that. All Christian notions of bodily resurrection are more or less weird. While many early Christians did believe that it was in some sense our presently lived flesh that rose, they also argued that it would, of necessity, be transformed – that it had to be changed if it was to be a place of pure joy and celebration.[31] The Valentinians think so too – but for them, again, the change is now, through learning, and not later, through atonement. With revelation, the person's experience of the body and the world it inhabits is transfigured; "and the world has already become the eternal realm," as the Gospel According to Philip declares.[32] Some of the Valentinian bodily metaphors are very much like those of orthodoxy: in the eucharist, for example, "one receives the spiritual flesh and blood of the resurrection body and becomes joined to the 'body of Christ.'"[33] What is missing is not the transfiguration of the flesh, but the end of the world, with its corresponding emphasis on afterward.

In a thoughtful essay on the Valentinian Treatise on Resurrection, Ryann Craig notes that even critics as harsh as Tertullian and Clement, two of the early church fathers who helped to shape orthodoxy, acknowledge that Valentinus believed in a flesh that

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and Colossians 1:18, 2:19, as well as to Clement of Alexandria 1934, 42.3, 26.1, 17.1; Irenaeus 1992, 1.7.2, and Thomassen 2007, 122.12-17.

30 Here too there is an overlap with later canonical Christian scriptures. The fourth gospel in the Christian Bible includes the declaration "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), NRSV.

31 See 1. Corinthians 15:50-52: "What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed…and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." NRSV. See also discussions in Irenaeus 1992, Book 5; Tertullian 2016; Augustine 2003, Book 23. Outi Lehtipuu (2015) notes the ways in which Valentinian texts, in particular, complicate any easy dichotomy between spirit and flesh. See especially 146n228; 153f. I am grateful to the anonymous manuscript reviewer who recommended this resource.

32 Layton 1987a, 86.11-14.

33 In Brons, undated c, citing Layton 1987a, 56.26-57.22. "And what, too, is this flesh that will inherit it (the Kingdom of God)? It is Jesus's flesh, along with his blood. It is necessary to arise in this kind of flesh, since everything exists in it." Layton 1987a, 56.24-57.1. My parenthesis.

was the same in Jesus as in the redeemed.[34] As Craig points out, "the [Treatise] does not indicate any special qualities differentiating Jesus' flesh from the flesh of general humanity."[35] That makes sense if each of the redeemed is also a member of the body of Christ, which is complete in every part. The disciple in the Treatise is reminded, "you received flesh when you entered this world. Why will you not receive flesh when you ascend into the Aeon?"[36] The ascent is a re-knowing – not a destruction. We reread the body, too, and we learn that it is more than we thought. In contemporary philosophy, 'flesh' is often used to indicate a complex, new materialist sense of mobile and interactive matter, on the basis that 'body' might imply solidity and self-sufficiency. In this sense, the Valentinian word embodied is decidedly a word made flesh. Language and body, in their very limitation, show us that from them and beyond them is more than we can know.

I have said something of the flesh, but word too is complicated in its limitation and containment. The living book contains all names, and several Valentinian texts suggest that the revelation is itself a name; indeed, that "the Name of the Father is the Son."[37] In the Gospel of Truth, we read, "It is he who in the beginning named what emanated from him, remaining always the same. And he begot him as a son and gave him his name, which he possessed."[38] The Tripartite Tractate tells us, "He manifested [himself], though he cannot be spoken."[39] The name is paradoxical, at once revealed and unsayable.[40]

In many esoteric traditions, names are powerful, and are often associated with creation, where a thing comes to be by virtue of being named. Theodotus describes the Valentinian baptismal rite as the receipt of an angelic name, which pairs the human soul to its companion angel. These angels are less independent entities than aspects of Christ; they are another version of the Aeons. Thus, this joining in name echoes the membership in the body: the named human takes on an aspect of the divine, as the (baptized) member of the church becomes a member – a limb or a piece – of the divine body.[41] Theodotus writes:

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34 Craig cites Attridge 1985, n. 38, pp. 146-47.

35 Craig 2012, 487. Craig cites Treatise on the Resurrection 44.21-26; 45.25-26; 46.16-17.

36 Treatise on the Resurrection 47.2-8, cited in Craig 2012, 491.

37 Layton 1987b, 38.6.

38 Layton 1987b, 38.6-12.

39 Thomassen 2007, 72.

40 The Gospel According to Philip provides further complexity. "'Jesus' is a private name," it says; "'Christ' (the anointed) is a public name. … 'The Nazarene' is the public name of the private name." Layton 1987a, 56.3-13. Parenthesis original, ellipsis mine. This gospel also links the doubleness of names to the above and below marked out by the cross: "'Father' and 'son' are simple names; 'holy spirit' is a two-part name. For they exist everywhere—above, below; in the hidden, in the visible." Layton 1987a, 59.11-18.

41 Brons undated d. "The Savior is associated with a retinue of angels who are the prototypes of the spiritual element present in every Christian. Like rays of the sun, they are not distinct or self-sufficient individuals. Rather, they represent the dynamic richness of Jesus." Brons cites Irenaeus 1992, 1.2.6 and Clement of Alexandria, 1934, 39-40.

> when we, too, have the Name, we may not be hindered and kept back by the Limit and the Cross from entering the [All]. Wherefore, at the laying on of hands they say at the end, 'for the angelic redemption' that is, for the one which the angels also have, in order that the person who has received the redemption may be baptised in the same Name in which his angel had been baptised before him.

Human and angel, human and divine aspect, are joined by being given a joint name.[42] Moreover, they are given that joint name by a touch between bodies, specifically by the laying on of hands, bringing the word and the flesh together once more.

The names do not all merge into one name, yet each is contained in the other. The angels are aspects of the Son, and the Son is the name of the Father. According to Irenaeus, Valentinus's disciple Marcus amplifies this theme, by identifying the Aeons with the letters of the name. "So the pronunciation of the whole name consisted of thirty letters, but four combinations (of letters). Each of the characters had its own letters, its own impressions, its own pronunciation, shape, and images; and not one of them [characters] perceives the form of that [combination] of which it is a character."[43] The Aeons, like letters, do not know what words they spell. Like us, they are ignorant of the full name.[44] We read in the Gospel of Truth about that "higher redemption," the one that we join by joining names:

> For he revealed it to bestow an acquaintance in harmony with all its emanations, that is to say, acquaintance with the living book, and acquaintance which at the end appeared to the aeons in the form of [passages of text from] it. When it is manifest, they speak: they are not places for use of the voice, nor are they mute texts for someone to read out and so think of emptiness; rather, they are texts of truth, which speak and know only themselves. And each text is a perfect truth—like a book that is perfect and consists of texts written in unity, written by the father for the aeons, so that through its passages of text the aeons might become acquainted with the father.[45]

The book is perfect in each letter, complete, even though no letter knows what it says. The body is complete in each member, though no member knows the whole of the sacred flesh. The instructed reader's attention is drawn not to the abstract concept, but

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42 Clement of Alexandria 1934, 22.

43 Irenaeus 1992, 1.14.1. Parenthesis mine.

44 See Brons undated b. "This astonishing idea has its root in the notion that the emanation of the Name by the Father was a process of self-limitation. Valentinus himself admits that it is an surprising idea, 'It was quite amazing that they were in the Father without being acquainted with him and that they alone were able to emanate, inasmuch as they were not able to perceive and recognize the one in whom they were.' The Aeons can be thought of as unintegrated aspects of the Son's overall personality who are unaware of the Name even while they form part of it." Citing Layton 1987b, 22.

45 Layton 1987b, 22.35-23.17.

to the matter of words, the very letters making up the name from which all names are drawn. This name is knowable only when only when brought before the senses – and yet, at the same time, it remains incomprehensible and unpronounceable. The mode of truth here, the way in which the Son as name and body is the image of truth, is holographic. That is, in each bit, the whole image is present: the whole body in each member, the whole book in each letter, the whole name in each name. A smaller piece of a hologram gives us a somewhat smudged, less vivid image than a larger piece does, but each fragment contains the whole image nonetheless. What makes this particularly fascinating here is that the image can only be what it is insofar as it has each part; that is, it is not the image of an undifferentiated blob.[46]

Matter is formed in that image; when we learn to read the divine in the material world, the divine image shows forth. Learning will begin at baptism, when a person is joined to the community of the church, becomes the same flesh as that divine body, and receives a name that is one of the letters that fully contains the holy name. The name teaches reading, and what is read is the name. We do not find that flesh and meaning are separate here, that human intelligence gives meaningfulness to the passive inanimate world. Not only are meaningful word and flesh utterly entangled, each is also complete in the smallest part. There is a strong resonance with contemporary philosophies of materiality in the insistence on the world's agency and the giving of meaning as an act not restricted to humankind; there is, however, a difference as well, in this particular strangeness of part and whole, and of course in the cosmology giving rise to it. What is within and without, contained by limit or cut away by it, teaches us of the other.

Evocation

For a redemption by knowledge, all of this revelation is nonetheless weirdly elusive. Names may designate; that is, they may point out what they name, or pick it out of a group. This name does not seem to be a very good designator, because if it were, it would give us reasonably certain knowledge of the thing that it names, of an object or person's identity. Instead, it seems to pick out everything and nothing. But names do something else too: they call. This name calls everything; it is written by the All as itself/themselves; it is written by the Father as the Son. The world in its form calls to us, enchants us, reveals to us more than can be said. It is perhaps surprising to read an echo of this esoteric claim in conflicting contemporary paradigms of materiality. Jane Bennett, generally identified as a new materialist, tells us that she wonders "whether the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages

46 There is an even earlier precedent for this holographic reality, though we do not have evidence that the Valentinians knew of it. The Presocratic philosopher Anaxagoras (fifth century BCE) argued that "all is in all," and that the usual distinctions of mixture and separation were misconceived. An early account of his philosophy is available in Diogenes Laërtius 2014, 2.6-15. What remains of Anaxagoras's own work is available in a translation with commentary by Patricia Curd, Anaxagoras 2010.

affective attachment to that world. The question is important because the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life." To be enchanted, she explains, is "to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday."[47] The approach that she encourages, for ethical and political reasons, demands that we be susceptible to this call of the extraordinary, rather than resisting or ignoring it by insisting upon its mundane character. Bennett, to be sure, is firmly opposed to allowing theology into this delight: "My quasi-pagan model of enchantment pushes against a powerful and versatile Western tradition (in the disciplines of history, philosophy, and literature) that make enchantment depend on a divine creator, Providence, or, at the very least, a physical world with some original connection to a divine will."[48] And Graham Harman, the prototypical object-oriented ontologist, asks,

> Will philosophy remain satisfied with not addressing any of these objects by name, so as to confine itself to a 'more general' discussion of the condition of the condition of the condition of possibility of ever referring to them? …Or is there some possibility of an object-oriented philosophy, a sort of alchemy for describing the transformation of one entity into another, for outlining the ways in which they seduce or destroy humans and non-humans alike? [I] endorse[] the latter option.[49]

The seductiveness or destructiveness of things lies, in no small measure, in the ways in which they call to us. In their very different fashions, these two figures within these diverse materialist movements echo the enticement, the evocation, by which the Valentinians heard the divine name calling in the book and the body both; that is, in the very world rightly read. The gods to which the contemporary philosophers object, with their omnipotent distance from the world, are not the divinity that the Father's children read in the smallest thing.

So the body of the name may, in its enticement, call us in surprisingly anachronistic ways. But here another puzzle intrudes: why does the Father need something else to be its name at all? Another way to ask this question might be: why would the One create Limit? We read in the Valentinian Exposition that the father "exists as Oneness, [being alone] in silence – 'silence' means tranquility – since [he was] in fact One, and nothing existed before him. He also exists [as] Twoness and as a pair – his partner is Silence."[50] Silence at the start, in the Monad and the Pair, thinks itself, as we saw in Valentinian cosmology, and thus "God [came] forth, the Son, Mind of All." "This, then, [is the] root [of] the All, Oneness before whom there is no one; [he is also] Twoness, dwelling in Silence and speaking only with himself…."[51] The Gospel of Truth adds,

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47 Bennett 2001, 3-4.

48 Bennett 2001, 12.

49 Harman 2010, 95.

50 Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 22.

51 Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 22-23. My ellipsis. The Untitled Tractate that David Brakke discusses in his consideration of Gnostic body and boundary makes a similar claim, as he writes: "the

"Since the time when they constituted the depth of his thought, uttered discourse has manifested them, and intellect uttering the discourse, and silent loveliness."[52] Silence befits what cannot be captured by words, but silence without speech is as meaningless as an uninterrupted buzz of sound. Silence is in the word and the word in silence, and it is only thus that the name can call, or be called. The Father, dwelling in depth and silence, needs a name.

It is important that this call transforms, but does not deny, the world. Like some other forms of Gnosticism, Valentinianism is not especially interested in life *after* death, in a disembodied time to come. And like the better-known Thomas Christians, it holds that "God is near at hand, and not far off."[53] Valentinus says of the baptized, "And it is in them that the father dwells, and in the father that they are…"[54] Both suggest an immanent divinity, but not a contained one: each is in each. Yet Christian authors who wrote against what they saw as heresies resoundingly condemned Gnostic Christianities, even Valentinianism, for their *rejection* of flesh, for identifying matter with ignorance – as that *from* which we require redemption.[55] The transformation in the view of the world is read, then, as an insistence that this world is illusory and even contemptible. I would not argue that this reading is baseless, but in some Gnostic variations, I do think that a more world-positive reading is possible. There may be a parallel in contemporary materialisms' frequent beginning in hostility toward philosophy's twentieth-century "linguistic turn," understood as the move away from an interest in things and matter and toward language alone, even to the point of declaring that things are made by discourse about them. In what is called the "material turn," language's formative role is firmly rejected, on the grounds that it paid no attention to real material conditions, and matter, however mute, is regarded as having agency. The proto-orthodox criticism seems similar: that is, because the Gnostic variations emphasize knowing, spirit, and the error of perceiving matter simplistically (or reductively) as everything, Gnostic Christianities are criticized as having rejected the material world altogether. The inextricability of flesh from word, however, suggests that it is misplaced – and that neither language nor matter, sense nor sensing, can successfully turn all the way from the other.

One, another

We have already seen that for the Valentinians, being in a material body gives the spirit time to learn and remember, and that the material world is shaped to prompt that remembrance: it is, rather literally, a form of divinity (that is, it is in the form of the divine). Matter may spring from suffering, but it is the image of joy. Redemption is

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Father whose spoken word penetrates both upper and lower regions is also a spring that pours forth silence." Brakke 2009, 212.

52 Layton 1987b, 37.7-12.

53 Pearson 2007, 115.10-23.

54 Layton 1987b, 42.46-47.

55 See Tertullian 2016, 16.

neither at a later time nor in another place, but here, and now. The Limit, which imposes unknowing, is also what reveals: the body and the name of the Son reveal the inconceivable Father. At the crucifixion as the Gospel of Truth describes it, what we think of as limitations – death as the limit of life, ignorance as the limit of knowing – are undone. This does not mean that they turn into their opposites. The limit of knowing does not somehow reveal unlimited comprehension. The death on the cross does not extend life limitlessly into time. But this is because the unlimited is not the opposite of limit.

Rather, what we learn is that the other is one and one is other. Knowledge is limited, and thinking by itself does not reach the One. This does not mean that there are more facts, with which we are currently unacquainted. It means that there is something that pulls at our desire to know, but is other than knowledge without being outside of it. Sophia's problem was that she thought the inconceivable One was a thing that she could think, and reach by thinking alone. But what else is there? The strangeness of matter is met by equal strangeness in knowing.

Oddly enough, we can actually clarify some of this with a brief detour through some of the weirdest and most confusing parts of Platonism, the late dialogues and the unwritten doctrines. One of the reasons that Plato's divided line from the *Republic*, a middle-period dialogue, became so famous is that it lines up ontology on one side and epistemology on the other. Existing things and the ways in which we know them are ordered in tidy pairs. True knowledge belongs to the intellectual realm, and opinion to the visible realm, where the constant transformation of things keeps us from certainty. In Valentinus's radiant cosmological circles, ontology and epistemology also work together. In the ways in which world and knowing interact, we will find a startlingly contemporary resonance, but we must find it through a quite different aspect of Plato's thought.

In many of his late dialogues, Plato argues that knowledge is a matter of collection and division. We must know how to tell apart things that are different from one another, and we must know what things should be gathered together. (Already we can hear the resonance of the Valentinian puzzles of oneness and difference.) The point first emerges in the *Phaedrus* – in which, uniquely, Socrates ventures outside the limiting wall of his beloved Athens. Here, Socrates declares that we must divide topics "where the natural joints are, and not trying to break any part, after the manner of a bad carver… just as the body, which is one, is naturally divisible into two, right and left."[56] Some version of this claim emerges again and again in dialogues including the *Theaetetus,* the *Statesman,* and the *Parmenides*. But it never seems to work – the arguments contradict themselves, or multiple entities appear with the same name, or the same appearance; even Forms start multiplying out of control.[57]

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56 Plato 1995a, 265E-266A.

57 In the *Theaetetus*, one character is a bright young man from Athens who is not very good-looking, but resembles Socrates. Plato 2014, 143C-144A. In the *Statesman*, one of Socrates' young interlocutors shares his name. Plato 1995b, 257C. In the *Parmenides*, the theory of Forms becomes entangled by the impossibility of including a Form within the set of things of which it is a Form. Plato 1996b, 128Eff.

If we do not assume that Plato was simply losing his intellectual powers late in life, then it must be that he was neither confused about nor blind to the tensions and contradictions in these texts. What if this consideration of what to include and exclude is actually meant to show us how strange and unknowable these limits really are? Some scholars have considered the possibility that traces of Plato's unwritten teachings actually make their way into some of the late writings, usually indirectly.[58] This might account for some of the confusing parts.

Saying that Plato had unwritten teachings sounds like the sort of conspiracy theory about ancient, hidden wisdom that the Internet loves, very like the use that popular culture makes of Gnosticism. But we actually have evidence from Aristotle, in his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*; from one of his students, who describes Plato's very weird public lecture on "the Good" that turned out to be about number; and from works by some of Plato's own students and successors, which pick up on some of the same ideas that Aristotle describes.[59]

The heart of the unwritten doctrines is that the beginning of all is a pair: the One and the Indefinite Dyad, which generate everything else that is.[60] The terminology for this primal pair is inconsistent: the One is also called Unity and Limit, and the Dyad is also called the Indefinite Two, the Great and the Small, and the Unlimited. The One gives the Dyad definition: *by limiting it*, making difference within it. That is: it is the One, undifferentiated, that generates difference, within the Dyad, which is two and thus differentiated, but indefinite and thus undifferentiated. The One must have within it the power of not-One. The indefinite Dyad must have within it the potential, the potency, for definition. Within each is the condition of its own other.[61] Within each is itself. Within each is the whole, which is made of itself and its other.

The puzzles of collection and division begin to make a paradoxical kind of sense. When we collect or gather together, we are performing two actions: drawing into one, and excluding all others. But the One cannot exclude any others, since exclusion always makes two. When we divide, we distinguish one from another, but the principle of division, or limit, belongs only to the (unlimited) One; it can never be included within the categories that it makes. In other words, the confusion induced by the late dialogues might be a hint to us that when we collect and divide, when we think delimitation and unlimitedness, we really do generate and encounter paradox, but this paradox is not mere nonsense.

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58 Important voices here include Sayre 1983 and Miller 1995. There is one fairly direct mention, in the *Philebus*, of a kind of being that is both limited and unlimited at once. Plato 1993, 27B-27C.

59 Aristotle 2008, 209b13–15; 1993, 987b20-22 and 988a10-15. The student who describes the lecture is Aristoxenus 1902.

60 Aristotle 1993, 988a10-15, and Theophrastus 2010, 6b10-15.

61 Cf. Turner: "Then I ascended to the Vitality as I sought it. I mutually entered it and stood, not firmly but quietly. And I saw an eternal, intellectual, undivided motion, all-powerful, formless, unlimited by limitation." 60.20-29.

To explore this paradoxical sense, let us return to Valentinianism. Remember, the Valentinian version of limit does not divide lines; it inscribes circles within circles. Rather than excluding, it encloses more tightly. The All is in the illimitable One by limitation. The One, like Plato's One, generates Limit and definition, creating inside of what can have no outside, as its own other. Collection and division cannot be opposed here. *Knowledge* in the sense of information *is* about collection and division, about knowing the natural places to cut, or knowing what kinds of categorization are useful for different purposes. The limit, as the place that is neither collected nor divided, as the source of creation and revelation, of cutting-off and unknowing, cannot belong to knowledge. And yet knowing *can* include the knowledge *that* the limit *is*. That is, we can know, like Socrates, that our knowledge is limited. In the *Symposium*, Socrates uses the voice of the prophetess Diotima to describe a love beyond philosophy (philosophy is the love of Sophia, of wisdom). The higher love takes as its object no part of a body, no item of knowledge, no thing. What it desires is in no place, at no time; its object is simply Beauty.[62] Knowledge is drawn beyond itself by *Eros*, by desirous love.

The thought of the unthinkable One makes two, Father and Son. But the two are One; there is nothing between them. Indeed, there is no division that does not contain wholeness. When the name of the Father, the Son, is called out, it calls both, the One and the Pair. This means that our binaries do not stay neatly apart. For the Valentinians, ascent is a deeper immanence, a deeper other-in-oneness. Silence must permeate language, so that we can read sense. Infinity must permeate skin-bounded flesh, so that matter can live. Deep in the depthless limit, not across it, is the divine that is depth and silence.

Obviously, a perfect, stable fusion of all of these opposites is impossible. But Einar Thomassen, discussing the Tripartite Tractate, reminds us that "the [all] does not exist as a static structure but as a process, whose directing goal is knowledge of the Father, and unity, both with the object known and internal unity. But because the aeons are endowed with the freedom of will this unity must remain a potentiality and the process an unending one."[63] That is, their will cannot be altogether subsumed to the will of the Father, even though they are also not other than he is. And they cannot know entirely, even though they are not wholly other than the known. And we too ascend, in gloriously re-written flesh, into the All; or rather, we recognize that we have ascended, into the depth of the world, into the holographic all in all, where the world enchants us, and an epistemic alchemy shows the divinity even of dirt.

To think of the limits of our thinking, we must think of the beginning. In the beginning is the One. And the One thinks the thought of itself, and generates the Son, the Limit. But this thinking is not knowledge, which was not lacking. We might now suspect what can lead us past knowing: Hippolytus tells us in *The Refutation of All Heresies* that despite the peaceful quiet, "(the Father) was not fond of solitariness. For… He was all

62 Plato 1989, 21A-21C.

63 Thomassen 1980. He continues, "This is apparently what is meant by 'the Limit' which causes them to be silent about the Father but to speak of their desire to know him (75.13-17, cf. 72.25-27)."

love, but love is not love except there may be some object of affection."[64] The world comes to be in love thinking itself in order to have something to love. Desire moves only within difference. This is why the One, which imposes Limit, creates difference in the process; this is why the unlimited Dyad accepts limitation. And the two work together in the completeness and incompletion of the world. As Diotima told Socrates, it is eros that moves further than wisdom.

If we perceive the Limit intellectually, it is a barrier, as it was at first to Sophia. To thinking without desire, material bodies stand in the way of spiritual knowing, and human language stands in the way of true names. But this is wisdom, too – to know that there is a limit to what we can comprehend. At the limit, desire moves. When we read the world rightly, it speaks to us: we realize that reminders of divinity are everywhere, and we too can fall in love, can be enchanted and seduced by Beauty.

In the Gospel of Truth, we read, "from the moment that the father is known the lack will not exist."[65] Incompleteness does not exist, not because everything has become indifferent, but because every fragment is also complete. At each moment, the world is holographic. As a process, we might imagine it as fractal, each unfolding of a whole a new whole in itself. Completeness does not rest, because the truth in every bit is a paradox, and paradoxes are mobile. The Limit looks like a boundary, like a limitation or a barrier, when we perceive it with logic alone. But limiting knowledge, it sustains desire. The Valentinian Exposition tells us that the Son "is the producer of the All and the actualization [of the thought] of the Father – which is [Desire]."[66] The Aeons exist in order to love, because they are loved; they must, to love, to desire, remain other than the One.[67]

When we perceive limit with both knowledge and desire, it becomes revelation.[68] The anonymous medieval *Book of the 24 Philosophers* offers a definition of God as "an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere (and) circumference is nowhere,"[69] a definition that later mystics take up with pleasure. Much earlier, the limit of the Valentinians encircles nothing; everywhere is its center, and in every center its God is whole. In every letter, in every atom, there is the truth of divinity, of the multiplicity of one, of the unity of two.

The Limit stops our comprehension, but by doing so, it enables our desire. In this pairing, our spirit moves like the One. The Limit is revelation not of a body that is outside of our senses (somewhere in the ultraviolet range of light or subsonic sound waves, perhaps); not of a name that points us to a new thing (like a word learned for a

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64 Hipppolytus 1886, 219.

65 Layton 1987b, 24.29-32.

66 Thomassen and Meyer 2007, 24.

67 See Thomassen 2007, 71.

68 In the *Philebus*, Socrates argues that the best life belongs to the category of things that are at once limited and unlimited, and that it is a mix of pleasure and wisdom. If we grant that pleasure is desire's object, we see how closely the cosmology follows this late line of Platonic thought. Plato 1993, 27C-27E.

69 "Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferential nusquam." Anonymous 1997.

novel object or in a foreign language); not of facts of which we must remain perpetually ignorant – but of bodily infinity that has meaning, the name of silence that has body, the 'knowledge' of mystery: of what is, already, immanent. The letters of the name spell out the body, the body that puts on the book. The stretch of the body on the cross publishes the name.

In the epistemology of desire and thought, thinking desires completion: it seeks to comprehend and to be comprehensive. Desire knows incompletion: it must sustain its reaching. Desire generates more knowledge by always going further. Knowledge generates more desire by finding out new objects. The ontology that belongs to this pair is one of paradox: of pairs that both are and only seem to be different, like the Aeons in the All. And it is an ontology of completeness in each fragment, which does not undo the fragments' difference.

As we in the humanities work to take materiality seriously, we have tended to push away both words and gods, both the linguistic and the divine. Harman argues that we must resist modernity's confidence in our knowledge and control of objects; Bennett cautions us against allowing our view of modernity as disenchanted to disenchant our world in turn. For both, as for many modern and postmodern thinkers, theology could only be about a divinity that imposes control, fixity, and finality upon the cosmos, and anthropocentrism upon our part of the world. And of all theological variants, the Christian God must surely be the worst instance of these tendencies. Valentinianism is among the many versions of early Christianity to tell us otherwise. Here the necessity of the Longed-For as consort to Wisdom, of the Dyad as other within the One, of openness to the image told only in the world as the way of reading the Word, all give us an interactive, seductive, and enchanted cosmos. It cannot be dematerialized. In every bit of what is, everything is; and everything is meaningful, corporeal, bound, and illimitable, and made so by Limit. The revelation continues to unveil. The world acts, and we in it: it offers the image of desire, in all the multiplicity of its movements, and it is near at hand, and not far off.