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A Study of the Concept of Matter in the Philosophy of Plotinus

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A STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF MATTER
IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLOTINUS

by

Maurice Joseph Moore, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
<p>I. INTRODUCTION</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Importance and value of the topic--Goal of the thesis--Procedure--Clarification of the subject of the thesis--Neoplatonism--Life of Plotinus--Works of Plotinus--Importance of Plotinus.</p>	1
<p>II. A CONSPECTUS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLOTINUS</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Need for a conspectus of the whole system--Emanation--The One--Nous--The Great Soul--The material universe--Necessity of emanation--Images expressing the notion of emanation--The return of reality to its source.</p>	11
<p>III. MATTER AS SUBSTRATUM</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Proof of the existence of matter--Matter lacks all qualities--Not a body--Uncomposed, simple--Matter and magnitude--Matter not empty space--Matter is infinity itself--Not distinguished from privation--Matter is non-being--Matter is the purely potential--Matter is not simply nothing--Knowledge of matter--Necessity of matter--Origin of matter not clear.</p>	21
<p>IV. THE IMPASSIVITY OF MATTER</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Foundation of impassivity--Change occurs in composite, not in matter--Answer to an objection--Matter has no contrary--Matter and magnitude--Impassive participation in the Good--Corollaries of the impassivity of matter.</p>	48
<p>V. MATTER AS PRINCIPLE OF EVIL</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Matter as evil is not a late development in Plotinus' thought--Nature of evil as non-being--Evil is essential indeterminateness--Evil is not purely</p>	60

nothing--Matter is the source of evil--Answer to an objection--Essential contrariety of matter and the Good--Knowledge of evil--Necessity of evil--Goodness of the material universe--The alleged contradiction in Plotinus' doctrine on matter.

VI. THE METAPHORICAL DESCRIPTION OF MATTER 75

Function of metaphors in Plotinus' philosophy--Images depicting matter as non-being--Matter is known as darkness--The metaphor of the mirror and the impassivity of matter--Other images depicting the impassivity of matter--Unsuitability of comparing matter with a mother--Summary.

VII. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS 83

Summary of main points--Nature of material bodies--Some differences between Plotinian matter and Scholastic matter--The real problem in Plotinus' philosophy of matter--Motivation of Plotinus' philosophy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY 93

APPENDIX 96

Nature of intelligible matter--Differences between intelligible and sensible matter.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Few philosophers have ever given more consistent emphasis to the value and reality of the spirit than did the Neoplatonist Plotinus. Indeed, the reality of the material universe is suppressed almost entirely; whatever degree of reality it has is merely a reflection of the true reality, which is spiritual.

In view of this dominant note in the thought of Plotinus, some defense of the subject matter of this thesis seems in order. Why bother to discuss an aspect of Plotinus which at best can be of relatively little importance? This question becomes even more relevant in the light of a not unjustifiable remark by a recognized Plotinian scholar that the treatment of matter, particularly of matter considered as the principle of evil, is the "least coherent and satisfactory part of Plotinus's system."¹

The discussion proposed in this thesis is not, however, altogether irrelevant and unimportant in the study of Plotinus. Matter may well be the "outlaw" in his system, an element to be

¹Arthur H. Armstrong, "Plotinus's Doctrine of the Infinite and Its Significance for Christian Thought," Downside Review, LXXIII (January, 1955), 49.

fought against and overcome in the struggle to find one's true self and to attain union with the ultimate reality of the One. Nevertheless, matter fits into the system as a necessary part of the whole; and Plotinus is by no means reluctant to treat of it and its function in his philosophy.

One of the positive benefits of the study to be undertaken here is that it may serve to indicate some of the inherent difficulties of an emanational metaphysics. Much of the confusion and "incoherence" in Plotinus' treatment of matter arises, it would seem, from an attempt to reconcile his theory of emanation from the Good with his theory of matter as both a non-entitative substratum and the principle of evil.

The explicit aim of this thesis is simply to expose the doctrine of Plotinus concerning matter. The point of emphasis will be to discover the nature of matter as Plotinus sees it, whether it be considered as the substratum of material beings or as the prime evil and source of all other secondary evils. Hence, there will be no lengthy discussion of the relationship between soul and material bodies or of other such side issues. Even the question of the origin or "creation" of matter will be touched upon only briefly in Chapter III.

A question which is closely connected with the subject of this thesis is that of the so-called contradiction which at least two commentators² claim to find between matter as a substratum

²A. H. Armstrong and W. R. Inge. This point will be dis-

and matter as the principle of evil. It was precisely an interest in this contradiction that eventually led to the choice of the present subject for this thesis. The investigations made in preparation for this work have led the author to the conclusion that the contradiction in Plotinus' philosophy of matter--if there is any contradiction--does not lie where Armstrong and Inge find it.

Though it must be insisted that the direct aim of this thesis is not to justify any personal opinion concerning this alleged contradiction, the subject matter and order of treatment has been so arranged, especially in Chapters III and V, that a case may be made at the end of Chapter V for the author's view in this question.

In accord with the general purpose of this thesis, the procedure to be followed will consist almost exclusively in an exegesis of the text of Plotinus, use being made both of the original and of translations. Chief consideration will be given to Plotinus' ex professo treatises concerning matter, and these will be supplemented by enlightening secondary texts. Of the fifty-four treatises which comprise the Enneads four may be said to be ex professo discussions of matter: "On the Nature and Source of Evils," "On Matter," "On Potential and Actual Being,"

cussed in Chapter V, where references to Armstrong and Inge will be cited.

and "On the Impassivity of the Unembodied."³ The purpose of working directly with these primary sources is that whatever conclusions are reached concerning the nature of matter will be based on Plotinus himself and not on the opinions of his commentators.

A sparing use of secondary sources will be made for the purpose of obtaining leads into the meaning of Plotinus himself. Such sources will also be used to indicate concurrence of opinion and, in a few instances, divergence of opinion.

Mention must also be made of the fact that this thesis is concerned only with an exposition of Plotinus' theories of sensible matter, i.e., the matter which is involved in the material universe. Sensible matter is to be distinguished from the intelligible matter about which Plotinus also speaks. The same treatise⁴ which provides the main source for Plotinus' doctrine on sensible matter as the substratum of material beings is also the chief source concerning the nature of intelligible matter. A brief discussion of the nature of intelligible matter and its differences from sensible matter will be taken up briefly in an appendix to this thesis.

By way of further introduction to the subject of this thesis, the general reader will find a brief historical sketch of Plotinus and an account of his writings very helpful.

³I. 8; II. 4; II. 5; and III. 6 respectively. For an explanation of the references to the Enneads of Plotinus see Chapter II, p. 12, n.3.

⁴II. 4.

The Neoplatonic school of philosophy arose in Egypt in the third century A.D. Its reputed founder is Ammonius Saccas, a porter at the docks of Alexandria.⁵ The first formulations of Neoplatonism, however, come to us from a pupil of Ammonius and the greatest exponent of that mystical philosophy, Plotinus.

As a philosophical system Neoplatonism did not spring full-blown from the head either of Ammonius or Plotinus; but, with its elements of Platonism and Aristotelianism as well as Neo-Pythagoreanism and Stoicism, it shows itself a true progeny of the Greek tradition of thought. The vigor and appeal of Neoplatonism is attested to by the fact that within a short time it came to dominate philosophical speculation in the Mediterranean world.⁶

Very little is known of the personal history of Plotinus; practically everything that is known comes down to us from his most famous disciple, Porphyry. The reason for this lack of information must be attributed chiefly to Plotinus himself, whose shame at being imprisoned in the body was so great, his biographer tells us, that he could never be induced to relate the facts of his life or even to sit for a portrait painter.⁷

⁵William Turner, "Neoplatonism," Catholic Encyclopedia (New York, 1907-12), X, 742.

⁶William R. Inge, "Plotinus," Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago, 1939), XVIII, 81.

⁷Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, c. 1. Porphyry's Life of Plotinus can be found in the original Greek in Plotini Opera,

Plotinus was born in Egypt (at Lyco or Lycopolis, according to the word of Eunapius⁸) in either 204 or 205 A.D. He began the study of philosophy in Alexandria at the age of twenty-seven. After experiencing dissatisfaction with the teachers he encountered there, he was finally introduced to Ammonius Saccas; and after hearing him lecture Plotinus is said to have remarked: "This is the man I have been looking for."⁹

Plotinus spent eleven years with Ammonius and made such progress that he conceived a desire to investigate Persian and Indian thought. To fulfil his desire he joined the ill-fated expedition of Emperor Gordian against Persia in 242. After the death of Gordian Plotinus barely escaped with his own life. He returned to Rome around the age of forty and there established his school. In his last years Plotinus contracted diphtheria, became hoarse, and began to lose his sight. He retired to Campania, where he died in 270.

From Prophyry's description of him, Plotinus was apparently a man of very noble character. He seems to have made few if any enemies and was able to inspire trust in himself. He led an

eds. Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer (Paris, 1951), vol. I, 1-41. An English version may be found in Plotinus, the Enneads, translated into English by Stephen MacKenna, 2nd ed. revised by B. S. Page (London, [1956]).

⁸Eunapius, Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists, n. 455. The text referred to is that in Philostratus and Eunapius, with an English translation by Wilmer Cave Wright (London, 1922), p. 352.

⁹Porphyry, Life, c. 3.

ascetical life of contempt for the body. He is described as kindly, gentle, and singularly engaging.¹⁰

Porphyry met Plotinus when the master was about fifty-nine years old. Porphyry says that by that time he had already written twenty-one treatises, the first of which were composed ten years previous to their meeting. During the next six years Plotinus composed twenty-four more treatises, and in the last year of his life he wrote another nine. Porphyry divides the quality of the works according to this temporal scheme, the early ones manifesting less power and maturity, the middle group representing the peak of Plotinus' efforts, and the last nine revealing a decline in mental strength.¹¹

Plotinus personally entrusted the task of revising and editing his works to Porphyry. Porphyry says that Plotinus was very careless in the mechanical details of composition, such as the joining and spelling of words. The style of the fifty-four treatises reflects the fact that Plotinus wrote them out quickly after having thoroughly worked them out in his mind. The emphasis is on the thought rather than the mode of expression, and Plotinus himself would never reread what he wrote.¹²

In editing Plotinus' work Porphyry divided the treatises

¹⁰Ibid., c. 23.

¹¹Ibid., c. 6.

¹²Ibid., c. 8.

topically into six groups of nine treatises, whence the title Enneads. Although such a grouping was bound to be somewhat arbitrary, the first Ennead deals in general with ethical questions, the second with physical questions, the third with the philosophical implications of the world, the fourth with the Soul, the fifth with the second hypostasis (Nous), and the sixth with such topics as being, the Good, and free will.¹³

The philosophical synthesis which Plotinus achieved has shown itself capable of winning enthusiastic admirers in our own times as well as in the third and fourth centuries. Doubtless much of the "popularity" of Plotinus is accounted for by the mystical turn which his thought takes, especially in the desire of the soul to return "home" in union with the One. The stress which he lays on the dignity of the human person and the importance of spiritual values over the merely material also attract admiration and acceptance.

An estimate of the value and importance of Plotinus' philosophy can best be sought from recognized authorities in the field. Those who seem to show excessive admiration for Plotinus can be passed over.¹⁴ Therefore, two outstanding Plotinian scholars

¹³Ibid., cc. 24-26.

¹⁴E.G., see William R. Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus (London, 1929), I, 7-10. See also Thomas Whittaker, The Neoplatonists, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Eng., 1928), p. 33, where Plotinus is styled as "the greatest individual thinker between Aristotle and Descartes."

whose evaluations seem moderate and well-balanced have been selected.

Concluding a chapter of critical analysis of Plotinus, Armstrong has this to say of the value of his philosophy: "Plotinus is not only the most vital connecting link the history of European philosophy, as being the philosopher in whom the Hellenic tradition in full development and maturity was brought into touch with the beginnings of Christian philosophy. He is also one of the few ancient philosophers whom we can still honor, though not uncritically, as a master, and not simply study as a historical curiosity."¹⁵

On the point of Plotinus' importance in the history of philosophy Father Henry makes the following evaluation:

Heir to the great philosophies of the ancient world, those of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, he borrowed from all of them the insights which he needed, but without surrendering at any point the dominant influence of Platonism. Eclectic in appearance but powerfully unified by the strength of a single pervading impulse, his system has, by various channels often obscure and indirect, come to be and remained one of the guiding forces in the thought of the West, whether Christian or secular, from Augustine and Scotus Erigena to Dean Inge and Bergson. He is the last great philosopher of antiquity, and yet in more than one respect, and notably in the stress which he places on the autonomy of spirit, he is a precursor of modern times.¹⁶

¹⁵ Arthur H. Armstrong, The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus (Cambridge, Eng., 1940), p. 120.

¹⁶ Paul Henry, S.J., "Plotinus' Place in the History of Thought," an introduction to Plotinus, the Enneads, trans. by Stephen MacKenna, 2nd ed. revised by B. S. Page (London, 1956), p. xxxiii.

The subject of this thesis, then, is simply one phase of the highly unified system of Plotinus. After a short conspectus of his whole philosophy, a close examination will be undertaken of his theories concerning the nature of sensible matter.

CHAPTER II

A CONSPECTUS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLOTINUS

Before a beginning can be made on the question of the nature of matter in Plotinus' system, it is essential that a broad outline of his entire philosophy be sketched. It is true of any metaphysic, and especially so of that of Plotinus, that one part involves all the others, and that any one part can be understood adequately only when seen in view of the whole.

The nature of the Enneads themselves demands that some preliminary summary of their content be made before taking up one particular point. Both their style and the word of Porphyry¹ testify to the fact that the individual treatises were written by Plotinus as the result of discussions in his philosophical circle. The treatises were not written in any systematic order; and, as Brehier observes,² any one Ennead will take up all the problems of the system or, at least, will presuppose the whole system as already known. Thus in the four ex professo treatises concerning matter Plotinus presumes that the reader is familiar with his

¹Porphyry, Life, c. 4.

²Emile Bréhier, La philosophie de Plotin (Paris, [1928]), p. 10.

doctrine of emanation and his ethics of purification and return.

Though Plotinus did not coin the word himself, it is customary to characterize his metaphysics as "emanational." Emanation amounts to an explanation of all reality in terms of a progressive production of all levels of reality from one ultimate source.

Plotinus calls the ultimate source the One (τὸ ἕν). The One then produces the next level of reality, which is Intellect or Mind (ὁ νοῦς). Nous, in its turn, produces Soul (ἡ ψυχή), and Soul brings matter to order to produce the material, sensible world.

Plotinus' continual striving after higher unification and his realization of the imperfection of multiplicity led him to posit absolute simplicity and unity as the supreme reality in his metaphysics. The unity of the primal hypostasis, the One, is such as to exclude the slightest shadow of duality. Not only does this preclude the gross multiplicity of quantitative extension, but even intelligence must not be ascribed to the One, since, as Plotinus sees it, intelligence always involves the duality of knower and known.³

³E.G., see Enneads, III. 8. 9; VI. 7. 40; VI. 9. 6. In the citations from Plotinus throughout the rest of the thesis, since the Enneads will always be referred to, the title will be omitted. The Roman numeral refers to the Ennead, the first Arabic numeral indicates the treatise within a particular Ennead, and the second Arabic numeral indicates the chapter number. When a reference is made to specific lines in the Greek text, the chapter number will be followed by a comma and then the line numbers. For Enneads I-III line numbers will refer to the edition of Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer, Plotini Opera, Vol. I (Paris, 1951). Line references in Enneads IV-VI will refer to the text of Emile

Almost as frequently as he calls the primal principle the One, Plotinus will refer to it as the Good ($\tau\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\theta\acute{\omicron}\nu$). This does not mean, however, that the first hypostasis is good as, for example, a man is good. The use of the term indicates that the first principle is the Absolute Good, the Good by essence.⁴ Even when the term "the One" is used of the first principle, it is not an indication of what that principle is, but it is merely a denial of any multiplicity.⁵

The One, then, is the Unknowable, the Undefinable; and the only approach to a science of the One is through a "negative theology." Strictly speaking, no predication can be made of the One. Even the terms One and Good merely point out the reality of the first principle in the best terms available;⁶ and if the One is said to be a cause, all that this indicates is a dependence in the effect rather than any modification of the One.⁷

The utter supremacy of the One is further brought out by the fact that it completely transcends the realm of "beings." Being for Plotinus, and for the general run of Greek philosophers, is that which is limited and determined to some particular form. But

Bréhier, Ennéades, Vols. IV-VI² (Paris, 1927-38).

⁴E.g., II. 9. 1; V. 5. 13; VI. 7. 38.

⁵V. 5. 6.

⁶II. 9. 1.

⁷VI. 9. 3.

the One, as the source of all forms, is itself without form and determination; hence, it is beyond being in the sense that it is not limited to being "this" or "that."⁸ The One, then, is infinite and undetermined in the sense of being above "being," form, and limitation.⁹

The One, as has been said, is the principle from which all proceeds.¹⁰ Itself not a being, it produces by the infinity of its productive power¹¹ the whole realm of beings, from the second hypostasis, Nous, on down to the last vestige of reality in the material universe. This production is either mediate or immediate.¹²

The perfection of the One results naturally in the production of the levels of reality beneath itself.¹³ The next level below the One and produced directly by that first principle is the

⁸v. 5. 6.

⁹Cf. Leo Sweeney, "Infinity in Plotinus, Part I," Gregorianum, XXXVIII (1957), 530. Together with Part II, Ibid., pp. 713-732, this article is a good, detailed account of the notion of infinity in Plotinus. The author shows that Plotinus predicates infinity of the One, in two senses, one by negation of determination and form, the other in relation to the active power of the One to produce an infinity of beings.

¹⁰E.g., v. 2.

¹¹See note 9 above.

¹²v. 4. 1.

¹³Ibid.

second hypostasis of the Intelligible Realm, Nous.¹⁴ Nous is the image of the One and the most perfect of beings; but, since it proceeds from the One, it is necessarily of a lower degree of perfection.

Whereas the One transcends the category of being, Nous is the first reality which is limited to a determined form and, thereby, to the realm of being. In fact, Plotinus says that all beings are contained in Nous and are even identical with Nous, since all the rest of reality is produced from its according to the ideas which it has.¹⁵

Though the second hypostasis approaches as close as possible to the perfection and simplicity of the One, nevertheless, it is an essential duality. Nous is the vision of the One; and--not to go into all the complexities of its procession from and conversion toward its Prior--it is brought to form and determined precisely by its vision of the One.¹⁶ Moreover, from the vision of the One Nous comes to a vision or knowledge of itself.¹⁷ Obviously there is not here the perfect unity of the non-intellective One. "But

¹⁴Nous is variously translated as Intelligence, Mind, Spirit, Intellectual-Principle. Some commentators have compared it with Aristotle's First Mover as Thought thinking Itself. Throughout this thesis the second hypostasis will simply be designated by the English transliteration "Nous."

¹⁵v. 3. 5.

¹⁶v. 2. 1; v. 4. 2.

¹⁷v. 3. 7; v. 6. 5.

if Intelligence [i.e., Nous] is both thinker and thought, this implies duality and Intelligence is not simple and hence not the One. If, moreover, Intelligence contemplates some object other than itself, then surely there is an object better than and superior to it. Even if Intelligence contemplates itself and simultaneously that which is better than it, it still is only of secondary rank."¹⁸

Plotinus also makes Nous the locality of Ideas (τὰ εἶδη or αἰδέατ). But Plotinus makes an advance over his professed master, Plato, who left the Ideas hierarchically arranged but distinct entities. In Nous the Ideas are unified into a single hypostasis as the various propositions of a science form one totality.¹⁹ There remains distinction within unity. There are ideal archetypes even for individual beings,²⁰ and it is according to these Ideas in Nous that all else comes to be.

According to the degree of perfection which it possess Nous also produces the next level of reality beneath it; this is the Great Soul.²¹ Just as Nous is an image of its source, so too

¹⁸VI. 9. 2, 36-40. Trans. by Joseph Katz, The Philosophy of Plotinus (New York, 1950), p. 141.

¹⁹V. 9. 8.

²⁰V. 7.

²¹Plotinus frequently calls the third hypostasis merely Soul (ἡ ψυχή). He also will refer to it as the Soul of the Universe (ἡ ψυχή τοῦ ὅλου). In this thesis the third hypostasis will be referred to as the Great Soul to distinguish it from individual souls.

the Great Soul is an image of Nous.²² The immanent activity of the Great Soul is a contemplation of its prior principle; and in contemplating Nous it participates in the Ideas according to which it produces material realities.²³ The Great Soul is the third and last hypostasis of the Intellectual Realm and is the intermediary between the intelligible and sensible orders.²⁴

Besides its immanent activity of contemplation the Great Soul is also productive of its image, which is the sensible universe.²⁵ Having within itself the images of the Ideas of all beings, the Great Soul acts upon matter to bring into existence the beings of this sensible realm.²⁶ The nature of matter will, of course, be treated at length in the chapters to follow, but it may be noted here that Plotinus views material beings as tending toward non-being. Whatever reality they have comes from a reflection of the Ideas passed along to them from the Great Soul.

Plotinus conceives the whole emanational process as a result of a certain natural necessity. All levels of reality which participate in the reality of the One have the power to produce an image of themselves. Although Plotinus does have some difficulty

²²V. 2. 1.

²³IV. 3. 11.

²⁴Ibid.; IV. 8. 7.

²⁵IV. 8. 7.

²⁶II. 3. 17.

in assigning a reason why the all-perfect and completely self-contained One should ever produce anything below itself,²⁷ he tries to give some explanation for it from the analogy of other beings which, upon reaching the maturity of their perfection, generate offspring.²⁸ This communication of perfection he observed not only in living beings, but to some extent even in lifeless entities; e.g., fire imparts warmth, ice cools, drugs produce their various effects. On the other hand, the One can be said to produce other beings freely in the sense that it has no need of anything else for the plenitude of its perfection. When a lower level of reality emanates from its source, this involves no change or diminution on the part of the source itself.

In his effort to explain what he means by production of the various hypostases, Plotinus has recourse to images to illustrate his point. His favorite image for the emanational process is that of light radiating from the sun.²⁹ The One is the light illuminating the second hypostasis. Nous, in its turn, illuminates the Great Soul; and the Great Soul shines on the darkness of matter to produce the last level of reality in the sensible world. Again, Plotinus compares the process to an overflowing spring.³⁰ He uses

²⁷Cf. Bréhier, La philosophie de Plotin, p. 41.

²⁸V. 4. 1.

²⁹E.g., I. 7. 1; V. 1. 6; V. 3. 12.

³⁰E.G., III. 8. 10; V. 2. 1.

other examples too, but the source is always considered to remain unchanged in the process. For this reason the example of radiation from the sun was his favorite, since he thought that the sun remained undiminished in its shining forth.

Paralleling the outward and downward movement of emanation in Plotinus' philosophy is an upward, returning movement of all reality back to its source. It would probably be a fair estimate to say that it is the movement of return to the One that sets the tone to Plotinus' philosophy, which is centered in man. It is by rising from the knowledge of himself to higher and higher unity that man comes to a knowledge of the Intelligible Realm to which he is fundamentally united.³¹

At every level of reality there is a return back upon the source, Nous contemplating the One and the Great Soul contemplating Nous. Plotinus' doctrine of return is most manifest, however, in the return of man to his true self in union with the Intelligible Principles. Individual souls, which are unified in the Great Soul,³² fulfil their productive power and produce their image in the material world. This is natural and necessary. But while the individual soul always retains some contact with the Intelligible Realm, it may nevertheless become forgetful of its source through an excessive concern with the individual body with which it is

³¹v. 1.

³²E.g., IV. 3. 4.

joined.³³ This distraction from the Intellectual Realm and concern for things of sense is the "fall" of the soul; it can redeem itself only through a conversion or return toward its higher, intellectual phase.

In the treatise entitled "On Dialectic"³⁴ Plotinus maps out the route which the soul must take in its journey back to its source in the One. The first stage consists in a conversion and purification from the lower life of the senses and the material world. Once within the Intellectual Realm the quest for higher unity leads the soul onward to union with the One.³⁵ Thus does the human soul join the whole of reality in a return to the source from which it proceeded.

Plotinus' philosophical system, as has been seen, is a two-fold movement, namely, the emanational pattern of production from a primal principle and the ascetical return of the soul back to its source by purification and higher unification. The role of matter in the context of these two movements remains to be explained and constitutes the subject proper to this thesis.

³³IV. 3. 15; IV. 8. 4.

³⁴I. 3.

³⁵Plotinus conceives this union as an ecstatic experience. Porphyry relates that Plotinus enjoyed this union four times during the years in which he knew the master. See Porphyry, Life, c. 23.

CHAPTER III

MATTER AS SUBSTRATUM

In the treatise which he explicitly devotes to exploring the nature of matter Plotinus opens with a point of common agreement. "All those," he says, "who have spoken concerning what is called matter (ἡ ὕλη), and who have arrived at a conception of its nature, unanimously assert, that it is a certain subject and receptacle of forms."¹ In this passage Plotinus uses two words to describe matter. He calls it a subject or substratum (ὑποκείμενον) and a receptacle (ὑποδοχή), the former being the Aristotelian term, the latter the Platonic.² In the course of this chapter and the one to follow, it will become clear that, while both elements are involved, the notion of "substratum" is the chief one in the mind of Plotinus, and that matter is not so much a recipient of forms as it is a surface, so to speak, upon which they come and go.

In an effort to establish the existence of matter in the sensible realm Plotinus closely follows the argumentation of

¹II. 4. 1, 1-4. Trans. by Thomas Taylor, Select Works of Plotinus, ed. G. R. S. Mead (London, 1929), p. 22.

²See Emile Bréhier, Plotin, Ennéades (Paris, 1924-38), II, 56, n. 1.

Aristotle in the Metaphysics.³ From observation of the changes in sensible substances Aristotle concluded to a common underlying principle which is capable of possessing both terms of the change. Matter is the potentiality for that which will actually exist after change takes place; and this is true of the four types of change, namely, substantial, quantitative, qualitative, and local.

Though Plotinus restricts the use of the term "matter" more than Aristotle does,⁴ he employs the same basic argument as Aristotle to show that bodies (σώματα) have a substratum different from themselves.⁵ In the changes which occur in the basic elements (στοιχεῖα) it is found that there is a continuity between the terms of the change. One element does not suddenly cease to be and another suddenly arise from non-being. What actually happens is that one form (εἶδος) replaces another. Matter is the stable member which receives one form upon the loss of another.

Decay, Plotinus says, is also an indication that bodies are compounds of matter and form.⁶ The force of this argument is from analogy. For example, a drinking vessel is reduced to its gold,

³Aristotle, Metaphysics, XII, 2, 1069 b, 3-27.

⁴Plotinus uses the term "matter" to designate what would compare roughly with Aristotle's "first matter." This restricted use will become more evident below when the question of matter as potentiality is treated. Cf. Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 74.

⁵II. 4. 6.

⁶Ibid.

the gold to water; water too may be changed into something else. He then goes on to conclude: "It is necessary, also, that the elements should either be form, or the first matter, or that which consists of matter and form. But it is impossible, indeed, that they should be form. For how, without matter, could they have bulk and magnitude? Nor are they the first matter; for they are corrupted. Hence, they consist of matter and form. Their form determines them according to quality and shape; their matter is an indefinite subject, because it is not a form."⁷

Once he has proved the existence of matter as the substratum of forms in sensible bodies, Plotinus goes on to investigate what sort of thing this matter is. He does this by way of negation. The fundamental requirement of matter is that it be matter for all sensible beings, not merely for some, as clay is matter for the products of the potter, but is already something in itself.⁸ Hence, it must be none of those things which are found in fully constituted bodies.

Plotinus practically takes it for granted that matter is that which lacks all quality. "The distinctive characteristic of matter is the negation of form, since to lack quality is to be without form."⁹ Any qualification that matter might have would

⁷Ibid., 14-19. Trans. revised from Taylor, pp. 27-28.

⁸II. 4. 8.

⁹II. 4. 13, 23-24. See also II. 4. 8.

be a reflection in it of the Ideas or *logoi*¹⁰ of the Intellectual Realm, and this would constitute it as some particular thing. But matter is precisely *ἄλογος*,¹¹ and only as such is it capable of providing a substratum for all sensible beings.

The first conclusion which Plotinus draws from the fact that matter lacks all qualification is that it is in no sense of the word a body. Matter itself is incorporeal in contradistinction to objects of sense perception, which are said to be corporeal. Materiality in this sense already implies a participation in the *logoi*.¹²

Since the substratum of material bodies cannot itself be a body, it follows that all the attributes of body must also be denied of matter. Hence, matter is colorless; it is neither hot nor cold, though it can receive either heat or coldness. Furthermore, matter cannot have any of those properties which accompany

¹⁰Plotinus speaks of both *εἶδος* and *λόγος* as determining elements of sensible bodies. The *εἶδη* are archetypes of material beings and are located, in different degrees of unity, in both Nous and the Great Soul. The *λόγοι* are, roughly speaking, productive principles of material beings. They are also spoken of as existing both in Nous and the Great Soul, though most frequently in connection with the latter, since the Great Soul is the creator of the material universe. There are also *λόγοι σπερματικοί*, which are principles of determination immanent within sensible beings.

In this thesis *εἶδος* (pl., *εἶδη*) will be translated as Idea or form. *Λόγος*, which is variously translated as reason, Reason-Principle, raison formelle, will simply be rendered by the English transliteration from the Greek, i.e., *logos* (pl., *logoi*).

¹¹VI. 3. 7, 8.

¹²II. 4. 12.

quantity, such as a particular size, shape, or weight. Quantity, no less than quality, is a sign of logos and Idea.¹³

Matter, then, as lacking all quality, must be utterly uncomposed and simple in itself, since composition would mean the presence of both a qualifying and a qualified element. Matter, rather, is that which is completely open to whatever comes to it; and whatever quality it does receive is outside of and foreign to matter itself. Whatever qualifications matter has come not from itself but from the forms which mould matter.¹⁴

A problem which seems to have held particular interest for Plotinus was the relationship of matter and magnitude (δ μέγεθος). His thesis was, of course, that matter itself is without any magnitude. He had to face as adversaries to this position not only the Stoics, but also others whom Bréhier conjectures to be interpreters of Plato's Timaeus.¹⁵ The Stoics held that all reality is a body with a determined size; hence, matter too has a certain size. The others based their objection on Plato's concept of space (η χώρα) as a receptacle of qualities; they concluded that a receptacle of qualities must be of a certain volume and have magnitude.

In answer to the Stoic objection that all reality is

¹³ II. 4. 8.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 50-51.

corporeal and extended, Plotinus contents himself with merely recalling to mind the fact that there are realities which are not quantified.¹⁶ Though he does not mention particular examples but simply lays down the general principles that whatever is unembodied (ἀσώματον) lacks quantity, it is not difficult to find examples of such realities in his system, e.g., the hypostases of the intellectual Realm and, in the sensible world, the whole range of qualities, which even the Stoics themselves admitted have no magnitude.¹⁷ But matter, he says, is ἀσώματος, and so it has no quantity and magnitude.

To explain how bodies do become quantified, Plotinus distinguishes between the form or Idea of quantity and that being which has quantity. Quantity (i.e., the form) is not itself quantified, but only those things are quantified which participate in quantity.¹⁸ Just as a being becomes white through the presence of the logos of whiteness, which has no color of itself, so too that which gives a being a certain size has no size of itself, but is the logos of size or quantity.¹⁹ But does this mean that quantity enters into matter and extends that which was previously condensed? "Not at all. The matter was not contracted in a

¹⁶ II. 4. 9.

¹⁷ Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 50-51

¹⁸ II. 4. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

small place; but principle [which gives forms to matter] gives it a magnitude which it did not previously possess, just as it gives qualities which it had not previously possessed."²⁰

But suppose, as Plotinus did suppose, that someone should ask what more is needed to constitute a body in existence beyond magnitude and the other bodily qualities. If the answer is that some substratum is needed to receive these qualifications, then the objection based on the Timaeus can be raised. This substratum, as recipient of the various bodily qualities, must be of a certain size or mass (ὄγκος), hence of a certain magnitude. Otherwise, how could it be a receptacle for forms? If all extension and magnitude is due to form, matter will have no function in bodies. Matter without magnitude would seem to be a name signifying nothing.²¹

Plotinus begins his reply by admitting that in the ordinary experience of man that which is shaped, moulded, and changed does have a definite mass. But he goes on to observe that such things as wood or gold or anything else from which various products are fashioned are not the matter about which he is talking. These are already entities in their own right. The case is altogether different with pure matter, i.e., the matter which is the

²⁰Ibid., 13-15. Trans. based on the French of Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 63.

²¹II. 4. 11.

substratum of all sensible beings.²²

It is not necessarily true, Plotinus observes, that volume or mass is essential to being a recipient. The Great Soul, for example, contains everything within it in an unextended unity. The reason why matter receives its forms in spatial extension is that it is the type of substratum which is capable of receiving extension. But it must receive its magnitude and volume, like everything else it receives, from something outside itself.

Matter, then, is merely an image or phantom (φάντασμα) of mass or a primary aptness for extension; whence some have identified matter with the void (τὸ κενόν).

Plotinus summarizes his doctrine on matter and mass as follows:

Hence we have something which is to be described not as small or great but as the great and small; for it is at once a mass and a thing without magnitude, in the sense that it is the matter on which mass is based and that, as it changes from great to small and small to great, it traverses magnitude. Its very indeterminateness is a mass in the same sense--that of being a recipient of magnitude. . . .

In the order of things without mass, all that is Idea possesses delimitation, each entity for itself, so that the conception of mass has no place in them; matter, not delimited, having in its own nature no stability, swept into any or every form by turn, ready to go here, there, and everywhere, becomes a thing of multiplicity. Driven into all shapes, becoming all things, it has that much of the character of mass.²³

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 33-43. Trans. revised from Stephen MacKenna, Plotinus, the Enneads, 2nd ed. revised by B. S. Page (London, [1956]), pp. 112-13.

Is matter simply empty space for Plotinus? One recent commentator thinks so,²⁴ but Whittaker interprets the very passages considered above as Plotinus' argument against those who would make matter merely the void or empty space.²⁵ Plotinus himself remarks that the description of matter as "size without content" has led some to identify matter with the void.²⁶ The implication is, however, that Plotinus is not one of those who have made such an identification. Though he insists on the unreality and non-being of matter, as will be brought out below, his theory of matter as having no extension or magnitude, while at the same time being a potency for magnitude, seems to give it more reality than the nothingness of empty space.

Early in his treatment of sensible matter Plotinus remarks that matter, because it is not a form, is the indeterminate substratum (τὸ ὑποκείμενον ἄόριστον) of the elements composed of matter and form.²⁷ Later on in the same treatise he takes up the question of the relationship between matter and infinity (τὸ ἄπειρον) and indeterminateness (τὸ ἄόριστον), and he comes

²⁴Philip V. Pistorius, Plotinus and Neoplatonism (Cambridge, Eng., 1952), p. 3.

²⁵Whittaker, The Neo-Platonists, p. 70.

²⁶II. 4. 11, 29. "Ὅθεν τινὲς ταῦτόν τῳ κενῷ τὴν ὕλην εἰρήκασι. Aristotle (Physics, IV, 7, 214 a, 13) makes the same observation without specifying those about whom he is talking.

²⁷II. 4. 6, 18-19.

to the conclusion that matter is infinity and indeterminateness itself.²⁸

Plotinus establishes this conclusion by showing that infinity cannot be an attribute or qualification of matter entering from outside. Whatever qualifies something else belongs to the order of the logoi and forms as a specifying and determining principle, and it is in itself limited and determined. But that which is limited and ordered by the principles of determination is different from those limiting principles. As that which needs to be brought to order and limitation, it is in itself a lack of determination. It is infinity, in the negative sense of a lack of all determination. But matter is that which must be brought to order by the forms which it receives; and so it is infinity itself, and not infinite merely by reason of an attribute entering in from outside. "Matter, then, must be described as infinity of itself, by its natural opposition to logos. Logos is logos and nothing else; just so, matter, opposed by its indeterminateness to logos, is infinity and nothing else."²⁹

In a discussion of the principles of change in his Physics³⁰ Aristotle opposes himself to the Platonists and distinguishes matter from privation (ἡ στέρησις). Plotinus undertakes to defend

²⁸II. 4. 15.

²⁹Ibid., 33-37. Trans. revised from MacKenna, p. 117.

³⁰Aristotle, Physics, I, 9. 191 b, 35 - 192 b, 6.

the Platonic identification of the two against the Stagirite and his interpreters.³¹ Anyone maintaining, he says, that matter and privation are identified in substratum (ὑποκειμένῳ) but differ in definition (λόγῳ) must be prepared to give a definition of each which will not include the other.³²

Plotinus takes up the argument by stating three ways in which two definitions can be distinct from one another. First of all, they can be altogether different, neither one involving the other. But, as Bréhier points out, such distinction in the definitions of matter and privation is not consonant with Aristotle's view in which matter and privation mutually involve each other. Since Aristotle holds that definitions refer to the essential natures of things,³⁴ he should also hold that totally different definitions would involve totally different natures.

The second way in which two definitions can be differentiated is the way in which snubnose is differentiated from snubness, a familiar Aristotelian example. But this cannot be the required definitional distinction between matter and privation, because the two definitions would mutually involve each other.

The third and last way according to which Plotinus allows

³¹See Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 52-53.

³²II. 4. 14.

³³Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 53.

³⁴E.G., see Posterior Analytics, II, 3, 90 b, 30.

that two definitions can be distinct is a distinction in which only one definition involves the other, as, for example, the definition of fire involves the concept of heat but the definition of heat does not involve the concept of fire. This, however, is the distinction of a form from the subject in which it is found. If privation is merely a form under which matter appears, there can be no identifying them in substratum.³⁵

The conclusion to be drawn from this argumentation,³⁶ though Plotinus does not draw it in so many words, is that, since completely distinct definitions of matter and privation cannot be given which will be consistent with identifying them in substratum, there is no distinction at all between matter and privation. Plotinus clearly affirms that matter is identified with privation,³⁷ which is "neither a quality nor a qualified entity; it is the absence of quality or of anything else, as noiselessness is the absence of noise and so on. A privation is a negation."³⁸

Why was Plotinus so anxious to insist upon a complete identification of privation and matter? The reason is not altogether

³⁵II. 4. 14.

³⁶The line of Plotinus' argument has been filled out here with the aid of Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 53.

³⁷II. 4. 14. See also II. 4. 16, 3-4.

³⁸II. 4. 13, 20-23.

clear, but some considerations do present themselves. As will be brought out at greater length below, Plotinus insists upon the negative aspects of matter, calling it non-being, utter destitution, and essential lack of all qualification. If matter is simply absence of form and quality, and if privation is defined in the same terms, their complete identification in Plotinus' philosophy becomes more consistent, at least within his own system. Furthermore, the beings of the Intellectual Realm, though graded on different levels, are completely determined and perfect in themselves; hence, they are not deprived of anything. As far as the present author has been able to observe, Plotinus speaks of privation only in connection with the beings of the sensible realm; the individual human soul, which is in contact with both worlds, suffers privation and evil only to the extent to which it is involved with matter.

A recurring theme in Plotinus' treatment of matter is the completely negative status which he assigns it in the hierarchy of existents. Matter is altogether outside the realm of being; it is the non-being ($\tau\acute{o} \mu\grave{\eta} \acute{o}\nu$). This non-entitative aspect of matter is particularly insisted upon when Plotinus takes up the question of evil, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter of this thesis. He is hardly less insistent, however, when dealing with matter as the substratum of sensible bodies.

"The distinctive character of matter, then, is not ~~nothing~~ ^{nothing} ~~else~~ ^{else} than its very essence. This character is not accidental, but it

consists rather in a relation to other things, the relation of being other than they."³⁹ Plotinus goes on to add that everything except matter has not only the relationship of being "other" than everything else, but that it is also its own form and is an entity in itself. Matter is simply the "other" and has no entity of its own, since it has no form of its own. Plotinus even adds that it would be better to call matter the "others," since the singular form might imply a certain determination even in its otherness.⁴⁰

It is clear, as Plotinus notes,⁴¹ that matter cannot simply be identified with alterity or otherness (ἡ ἕτερότης). Any individual entity will be different from or "other than" every other entity. But matter is identified with that aspect of alterity which stands in opposition to authentic beings. In other words, matter is that which is opposed to or is "other than" being. It is in this precise aspect that matter is identified with privation, since privation too is that which is opposed to the true beings.

Matter, then, as is evident from the foregoing consideration and as Plotinus clearly states,⁴² is essentially relational. As a substratum, it necessarily implies a relation to that which is

³⁹II. 4. 13, 26-28. Trans. revised from MacKenna, p. 114.

⁴⁰II. 4. 13.

⁴¹II. 4. 16.

⁴²VI. 1. 27, 28.

not a substratum but is external to it and acts upon it to bring it to form and order. In other words, matter is the potential (τὸ δυνάμει), and in the treatise "On Potential and Actual Being"⁴³ Plotinus takes up the question in some detail.

Before categorizing matter as the potential, Plotinus very carefully distinguishes the meaning of the terms the potential (τὸ δυνάμει), the actual (τὸ ἐνεργεία), potency (ἡ δύναμις), and act (ἡ ἐνέργεια).

Being in potency cannot be independent of that to which it is in potency. Bronze, for example, is potential to the finished statue. But if it were simply bronze, incapable of any further modification or change, it would simply be itself and in no sense potential. The potential, therefore, signifies that a being is already, in a sense, something other than itself, since it can become something else.⁴⁴

Now there are two possible ways in which a potential being can be actualized; either the being in potency will remain after the change what it was before, as when a statue is fashioned out of bronze, or it will be entirely changed in the process, as air is changed when it becomes fire--to use Plotinus' example. In the first case, the being in act is not entirely different from the being in potency, but consists in the addition of a form to

⁴³II. 5.

⁴⁴II. 5. 1.

the being in potency. In the second case the being in act is altogether different from the being in potency.⁴⁵

Briefly, then, the potential or being in potency is the substratum of the various modifications, shapes, and forms which it can receive. The actual or being in act is the composite of a form and the substratum. Potency, as Plotinus employs the term, refers to the productive force which brings a potential being to actualization, while act is the form of a particular being, which makes that being exist in act and no longer in potency.⁴⁶

In which of these categories will matter fall? As Bréhier remarks,⁴⁷ it is not easy for Plotinus to fit his concept of matter into categories which were not made for it. All beings which exist in potency to something else also exist as beings in act in their own right. But matter is precisely that which underlies all sensible beings and is in potency to them all. It follows, then, that matter is in itself nothing actual at all; it is non-being. No objection to this conclusion can prevail, since matter cannot be any sensible being--these are founded upon matter--nor can it belong to the realm of forms, since it is utterly formless. Failing on both these counts to be classified among true beings,

⁴⁵II. 5. 1 & 2.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 74.

it is all the more emphatically non-being.⁴⁸

Matter, then, can be considered as the purely potential. Unlike all other beings in potency, matter is nothing actual of itself; otherwise it would be matter merely in the limited sense in which bronze is the matter of a statue. The existence of matter is merely the existence of what is to become. Moreover, the potentiality and non-being of matter is comparable to the potentiality of bronze under change, i.e., just as bronze remains bronze after becoming a statue, so matter remains simply matter, and, as such, retains its utter potentiality and its status as non-being. "But matter is outside and apart from being. It cannot change, and so it remains forever what it always was; that is, it is forever non-being."⁴⁹

The non-entitative status of matter lies at the heart of Plotinus' theory of matter considered both as substratum of sensible beings and, as will be seen, as the principle of evil. He is capable of waxing eloquent on the point, and his own words will serve to emphasize his doctrine.

It [matter] is a sort of feeble and obscure image which cannot assume any form. Matter thus has the actuality of a phantom (εἴδωλον), the actuality of an illusion [it., a lie--τὸ ψεῦδος]. It is illusion in the

⁴⁸II. 5. 4.

⁴⁹II. 5. 5, 11-13. Trans. revised from Katz, The Philosophy of Plotinus, p. 133. The unchangeableness of matter will be taken up at greater length in the following chapter.

absolute sense of the term and thus that which is not real. If matter then is actual non-being, non-being preeminently, that which really is not real, it is far removed from being an actual thing; for non-being is its real nature. If it exists at all, it must not be an actual thing, but, far from real being, must have its being in not being.⁵⁰

The question arises here and demands some sort of answer as to what Plotinus means when he says that matter is non-being. Does he mean to deprive matter of every vestige of reality and make it equivalent to pure nothing? Or is there some positive element of existence left to matter, even though it stands outside the realm of beings?

Any answer to this question will have to take into consideration what Plotinus understands by being. First of all, it should be clear from a consideration of the whole philosophy of Plotinus that being is not transcendental; not everything that exists is ipso facto a being. The One certainly is something real for Plotinus, but it is not a "being."⁵¹ Plotinus is clearly within the Greek tradition of thought. For the Greeks "being" is that which is limited, determined, formed; it is that which is intelligible, and they had no conception of an infinite intellect capable of comprehending an infinite being.⁵²

⁵⁰II. 5. 5, 21-27. Trans. by Katz, p. 133.

⁵¹See Chapter II, pp. 13-14. See also V. 2. 1.

⁵²For Plotinus' words on "being" as that which is limited and determined see V. 1. 7, 19-26.

The One, then, is non-being is the sense of something greater than or beyond being. It is precisely because it is no particular being that it can beget all beings.⁵³ Now matter, too, is non-being; but obviously it is not non-being in the same way that the One is. It is non-being because it is formless, unlimited, undetermined; but it is not that which is beyond limitation and being, but that which is lacking limitation and form. It is below being. But can it be that matter exists even though it is not a being, just as the One exists but is not a being?

In the opinion of the present author Plotinus does want to preserve that much of a positive element in the non-entity of matter. The whole tone of his discussion of matter seems to militate against making matter simply nothing. Even though he says that matter is "nothing in itself,"⁵⁴ the context indicates that he means nothing of actual being or nothing in act. If matter is in potency for everything and is truly a substratum, it seems hard to conceive of this as purely nothing.

Some indications that Plotinus did not wish to remove all existence from the ultimate substratum can be found in his text.⁵⁵

⁵³v. 2. 1.

⁵⁴II. 5. 5, 5-6. Μηδὲν δὲ ὄν καθ' αὐτό.

⁵⁵The indications are even clearer when Plotinus treats of evil as non-being. This will be brought out in Chapter V.

In a passage which has already been considered,⁵⁶ Plotinus asks whether or not matter is simply the same as "otherness" or alterity. His answer is that it is the same as that part of alterity which is opposed to true being. "In this sense," he says, "the non-being has a certain measure of being."⁵⁷ Again, in the passage cited above⁵⁸ where Plotinus is describing the non-being of matter, he speaks of it as a "feeble and obscure image," "the actuality of a phantom," an "illusion," having "its being in non-being." All of these modes of expression point to the fact that for Plotinus the non-being of matter is not the non-being of absolute and unqualified non-existence.

If matter is non-being and if only beings, as possessing form and determination, are knowable, the question arises as to how matter ever comes to be known. The answer is that matter is known only through the intellect by means of a reasoning process (λογισμῶ).

Certainly matter is unknowable to the sense faculties. "For it is not perceived by the eyes, since it is without color. Nor by the hearing; for it has no sound. Nor by the smell, or the taste; for it has neither moisture, nor vapor. Is it, therefore, perceived by the touch? Certainly not, because it is not a

⁵⁶See p. 34.

⁵⁷II. 4. 16, 3. Διὸ καὶ [τὸ] μὴ ὅν οὕτω τι ὄν.

⁵⁸See pp. 37-38.

body."⁵⁹ Plotinus goes on to conclude that it is known only by reasoning, and this reasoning process, he says, is not intellectual (οὐκ ἐκ νοῦ); it is empty (κενός).

This last statement, that the process of knowing matter is not of the intellect, must be balanced against Plotinus' statement earlier in the same treatise where he affirms that it is the intellect which knows the constituents, i.e. matter and form, of compound beings.⁶⁰ The intellect is capable of analyzing compound beings into their elements. The last element in bodies is matter; and this the intellect affirms as a sort of impenetrable darkness devoid of form and of the illumination which is in beings as a result of form.

To give a further explanation of the knowledge of matter,⁶¹ Plotinus has recourse to the "spurious reasoning" (νόθος λογισμός) of Plato's Timaeus. Since matter is the indeterminate, it can only be known through an indeterminate knowledge. It is achieved not so much through an act of the intellect (νόησις) as by a negation of this act.⁶²

The indetermination of the soul in this "spurious reasoning" is not complete ignorance and absence of knowledge. There is a

⁵⁹II. 4. 12, 28-31. Trans. revised from Taylor, p. 37.

⁶⁰II. 4. 5.

⁶¹II. 4. 10.

⁶²This is what Plotinus has in mind when he said that matter

positive element to this indetermination, much like the awareness that the eye has of darkness. In knowing matter the soul puts aside all sensible forms, which correspond to light; and what is left is a residue which it cannot bring to determination. There is, then, a quasi vision of shapelessness, colorlessness, sizelessness. This vision of matter is not the same as having no understanding whatsoever; in the latter case there is no affirmation or experience, whereas in the knowledge of matter there is the impression or experience of the formless.⁶³

In view of the overwhelmingly negative treatment which Plotinus gives to matter, some question may arise as to what part matter as a substratum plays in the emanational scheme. A brief consideration of the necessity of matter will give evidence of the essential role it plays in Plotinus' philosophy.

Whatever may be the place of liberty in Plotinus' thought, the message of his text is that the emanational process proceeds by way of necessity.⁶⁴ Each level of being that has productive potency must give rise to the next level below;⁶⁵ and if there is something after the First, the emanational process will

is known by a non-intellectual, empty reasoning process.

⁶³II. 4. 10.

⁶⁴See Chapter II, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁵IV. 8. 6.

necessarily arrive at a last.⁶⁶ Thus matter is a necessary element in the emanational process. It stands as the outer limit to which the energy of being can reach.

More specifically, the Great Soul receives its being and perfection from Nous, but in a less tight-knit unity, since it is another step removed from the perfect unity of the One. Since the Great Soul also has its communicable perfection, "it must unfold from some unified principle as from a seed, and so advance to its term in the sense world."⁶⁷

In answer to the question which he poses to himself on the way in which the Great Soul comes to its intercourse with the sensible world, Plotinus notes that without the existence of bodies the Great Soul could not have gone forth in accord with the law of emanation.⁶⁸ This does not mean that bodies ever existed apart from soul or that matter was ever entirely devoid of order. It simply means that the Great Soul engendered a place for itself by producing bodies. Plotinus describes this production of the sensible world in the following terms: "The Great Soul . . ., as a hugh illumination pouring outwards, comes at last to the extreme bourne of its light and dwindles to darkness; this darkness, now lying there beneath, the Great Soul sees and by

⁶⁶See I. 8. 7.

⁶⁷IV. 8. 6, 8-10. Trans. revised from MacKenna, p. 362.

⁶⁸IV. 3. 9.

seeing brings to shape; for in the law of things this ultimate depth, neighboring with Soul, may not go void of whatsoever degree of logos it can absorb."⁶⁹

The necessity of bodies and the sensible universe in the emanational process involves with it the necessity of matter, because matter is required for the existence of bodies. If there were no such thing as matter to be a substratum for the Idea-forms of bodies, the Idea-forms would simply remain united in the Great Soul. Furthermore, matter is the basis for the unity in beings composed of several forms.⁷⁰

In connection with the necessary existence of matter, the interesting and philosophically relevant question of the origin of matter can be raised. If all reality and goodness ultimately come from the One, where does matter as the total absence of being and goodness come from?

In one of the very few places in which he even touches on this question Plotinus gives us a choice. Either matter is eternal, or it is a necessary consequence of the causes prior to it.⁷¹ This disjunction of eternal matter and caused matter hardly seems pertinent, since Plotinus clearly holds an eternal

⁶⁹Ibid., 24-28. Trans. revised from MacKenna, p.268.

⁷⁰II. 4. 12.

⁷¹IV. 8. 6.

emanation of the universe.⁷² The sense of the disjunction, then, is probably that the former member implies that matter is a principle uncaused by the emanational process, while the latter member stands for matter as a caused principle.⁷³

If matter is eternal, Plotinus says, the very fact of its existence renders it impossible for it not to have some share in the principle of good, which communicates itself to everything in the measure in which each can receive that communication. On the other hand, if matter follows from the causes which precede it, then it is necessarily bound up with the principle which gave it existence.⁷⁴ This principle would, of course, ultimately be the One. Plotinus himself makes no choice between these two alternatives, but he is careful to avoid a total break between matter and the source of being, regardless of which choice is made. In this way he avoids any radical dualism in his philosophy.

On this point a difference may be noted in the opinions of two commentators on Plotinus. Pistorius, attending to the negative aspect of matter as non-being, denies that it is created either in time or from eternity.⁷⁵ How, he asks, can that which is not be created? Dean Inge, on the other hand, interprets

⁷²See III. 2. 1.

⁷³Cf. Bréhier, La philosophie de Plotin, p. 206.

⁷⁴IV. 8. 6.

⁷⁵Pistorius, Plotinus and Neoplatonism, pp. 68, 70.

Plotinus as holding that matter is created, though not in time.⁷⁶ Inge, however, is not thinking of creation in the Christian sense of ex nihilo. Such a concept, he feels, has no meaning when the question is of eternal creation. Eternal creation signifies only a relation of dependence on the creator.

It is not at all obvious what Plotinus himself wishes to hold on the subject. If matter is the same as "nothing," then there is no problem and Pistorius is certainly correct. On the other hand, if there is any positive element or reality to matter, then from the point of view of preserving a monistic philosophy, as Plotinus seems to want to do, he ought to have matter proceed somehow from the First Principle; again from the point of view of the total opposition of matter and true being he ought to maintain a radical distinction between the substratum of the sensible world and the productive hypostases of the Intellectual Realm.

Pistorius, it may be said, overlooks the possibility that matter is more than mere nothing. Inge, according to Pistorius' criticism of his interpretation,⁷⁷ apparently confuses matter with the sensible universe.

The nature of matter as the substratum for sensible bodies has been considered. The non-entitative status of this sub-

⁷⁶Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus, I, 143-44.

⁷⁷Pistorius, Plotinus and Neoplatonism, p. 68.

stratum, as well as the necessity of it in Plotinus' total metaphysic and the manner in which it is known, have also been treated. In the following chapter a closer study will be made of a peculiarly Plotinian view of matter, namely, its absolute impassivity and constancy in the changes which bodies undergo.

CHAPTER IV

THE IMPASSIVITY OF MATTER

Reference has already been made¹ to the fact that Plotinus views matter as a changeless constant, totally unaffected by the comings and goings of various forms which enter into the constitution of bodies. A very clear instance of this occurs in the last chapter of the treatise "On Matter," in which Plotinus affirms the identification of matter and privation.² To the objection that privation and indetermination must cease to exist when the absent form is at last present, he merely replies that form and determination, far from destroying privation and indetermination, actually confirm that native state. Plotinus finds analogous situations in sowing, which brings out the natural quality of the land, or fecundation, which makes the female more decidedly female.³

¹Chapter III, p. 37.

²II. 4. 16.

³As Bréhier notes (Ennéades, II, 55), this is hardly an answer to the Aristotelian position that privation ceases to exist after change takes place. The answer simply shows the radical difference between the thought of Aristotle and Plotinus.

In a treatise entitled "The Impassivity of the Unembodied,"⁴ chronologically later than II. 4, Plotinus takes up the question again and at much greater length. The purpose of the treatise is to show that whatever is not a body cannot undergo any change. The first five chapters are devoted to showing that individual souls remain unchanged despite the activities in which they engage and the passions to which they are subject in conjunction with their bodies. The last fourteen chapters of the treatise undertake to show that matter, incorporeal in its own fashion, is an impassive substratum, unmoved, as it were, by the changes which take place in bodies.

Plotinus lays the foundation of his doctrine of an impassive substratum on the non-entitative status of matter. He prefaces his discussion of the question by pointing out the unreality of the sensible universe--the more bodily, massive, and inert a thing is, the further removed it is from the life and movement of the true beings of the intellectual Realm--and reiterating the profound opposition between matter and being.⁵ His doctrine here is a restatement of what has already been considered concerning the non-being of matter.

Since the very nature of matter is to be other than true being, it can maintain itself only by being closed (ἀδεκτον) to any

⁴III. 6.

⁵III. 6. 6 & 7.

assimilation of being or even an image of being. Only thus can it maintain its complete "otherness" to all being; once it were united with any form, it would cease to be matter, the all receptive. "It is necessary, however, that matter should remain the same, while forms enter into it, and that it should be impassive during their egress from it, in order that they may always enter into and depart from it."⁶

The necessity of the impassivity of matter can be further demonstrated by a consideration which Plotinus evidently borrowed from Aristotle. In the De Generatione et Corruptione Aristotle shows that only contraries, which are generically "like" and specifically "unlike," are mutually related as agent and patient in change.⁷ Thus, as both Plotinus and Aristotle note, that which is hot is changed by that which is cold. Another example of change between contraries, Plotinus points out,⁸ is a fire burning out and changing into another element. It is the fire which has changed; one would not say that matter burned out or changed. The conclusion which Plotinus draws from this is that there is passivity and changeableness only where corruption is possible through the interaction of contraries. But, he says, it is impossible for matter to corrupt, since there is nothing into

⁶III. 6. 13, 29-31. Trans. by Taylor, p. 103.

⁷Aristotle, De Gen. et Corr., I, 7, 323 b, 16 - 324 a, 9. See Bréhier, Ennéades, III, 106, n. 1

⁸III. 6. 8.

which it can change. The idea here seems to be that if matter changed into anything, it would have to become some particular being and thereby cease to be matter.⁹

It may strike us as amazing, Plotinus remarks,¹⁰ that matter remains impassive despite the presence of various forms which come and go. The answer is, though, that the forms expel one another; and so it is the composite of matter and form which is affected by change, while matter alone remains unaffected. "Matter does not increase in its composition with an approaching form; it does not then become what it is through the approach of form, nor does it decrease with its departure. Matter remains what it was from the beginning."¹¹

Plotinus was well aware that an entirely impassive matter would not be congenial to everyone's philosophical thought; Aristotle in particular comes to mind.¹² It would seem, Plotinus says by way of objection to his own position, that matter is necessarily affected by the changes that take place in bodies, since it is the receptacle for qualities which interact upon one another. Matter is caught up in the middle of all this activity as being the ground for the various qualities. Furthermore, it cannot be said that matter is separate from qualities, since it is

⁹Cf. III. 6. 10.

¹⁰III. 6. 11.

¹¹Ibid., 15-18. Trans. based on Bréhier, Ennéades, III, 109.

¹²Cf. Bréhier, Ennéades, III, 92.

their substratum. But whatever is present to a substratum imparts to it something of itself.¹³

Plotinus undertakes to answer this objection which he proposes to himself by distinguishing two general ways in which one thing can be present to another.¹⁴ In one type of presence one thing changes the other to which it is present, as is especially true in the case of living beings. Though Plotinus does not elaborate the point, it may be assumed that he had in mind such changes as growth, disease, and death, which are effected in an animal through some qualifying "presence."

The second type of presence which Plotinus claims to find is, of course, that in which the subject is not changed by the presence of something else. An example of this latter type of presence can be found in the impassivity of the individual soul, which, Plotinus says, remains essentially unchanged for all its acts of knowledge and desire.¹⁵ Other examples of this type of presence are designs in wax, light on an illuminated object, coldness in a stone, color in a line or surface. The point which Plotinus is bringing out in these examples is that the subject of these various modifications remains what it was; i.e., wax remains

¹³III. 6. 8.

¹⁴III. 6. 9.

¹⁵The first part of the treatise "On the Impassivity of the Unembodied" was devoted to establishing this point.

wax, stone remains stone, etc. This latter type of presence is the type of presence which is claimed for qualities in matter. The substratum or subject remains what it is for all the changes which occur, as it were, on its surface.

One may well wonder whether this distinction which Plotinus makes between types of presence really answers the difficulty. At best it has the air of an ad hoc distinction; and it may well be doubted that Aristotle would accept the examples offered as proving the point. The wax and stone certainly remain wax and stone, but not in the altogether unqualified sense which Plotinus wants to hold for his impassive matter. Logically Plotinus must hold that matter is altogether impassive, once he has established it as non-being. It appears to the present author, however, that he would make a much better defense of his doctrine if he would appeal exclusively to the unique character of matter as non-being instead of trying to compare it with other types of substrata. Ultimately, it seems, he is going to have to hold, at least in principle, that matter is a substratum which is "outside of" or "apart from" its qualifying forms.¹⁶

Plotinus moves on to another consideration which provides a

¹⁶Such "separation" of substratum and forms seems to be implied in III. 6. 9, 37-44. It should be noted that III. 6. 9 is an answer to an objection in III. 6. 8, 12-20, part of which implies that a substratum cannot exist "apart from" (ἔξω) its qualifying forms. This point will be discussed again below in a brief evaluation of Plotinus' concept of an impassive matter.

more constructive answer to the Aristotelian objection and one which is more pertinent to his own doctrine on matter. Again Plotinus has recourse to the thought of Aristotle that only contraries act on one another, and that qualities which are simply different leave each other unaffected. "But things which do not have a contrary cannot undergo the effects of a contrary."¹⁷ But matter, Plotinus leaves us to infer, has no contrary.¹⁸ The conclusion of this reasoning is:

Hence it is necessary that, if anything suffers, it should not be matter, but something which is a composite of matter and form, or, in short, that it should be at one and the same time many things. But that which is alone and separate from other things and which is entirely simple will be impassive to all things, even if it is caught up in the midst of their interaction on each other. . . . Granted that there is a mutual interaction according to the natures of those things which come together in matter; matter itself, however, is much more impassive than such qualities in it, which, if they are not contraries, are unaffected by each other.¹⁹

Plotinus' interest in the problem of matter and magnitude has been discussed above.²⁰ He returns to the question here because one of the reasons why matter is thought to be passive is that it

¹⁷III. 6. 9, 34-35. Trans. based on Bréhier, Ennéades, III, 107-108.

¹⁸In the treatise "On the Nature and Source of Evils" (I. 8) Plotinus explicitly states that matter as essential evil is the contrary of the Good or the One. A comparison of these two views will be taken up in Chapter V.

¹⁹III. 6. 9, 35-44. Trans. revised from Taylor, p. 96. Cf. also III. 6. 19.

²⁰Chapter III, pp. 25-28.

is thought to be an extended magnitude capable of division into various parts.²¹ Plotinus reiterates the same teaching in this treatise²² as he proposed in II. 4, namely, that matter of itself is unextended but takes on the appearance of extension through contact with the Idea or logos of magnitude.

Once it is admitted that matter is essentially devoid of extension, then it is easy for Plotinus to explain how matter remains impassive under various changes in the magnitude of bodies.²³ Magnitude is simply an imaging on matter of the Ideal-magnitude and pertains to the composite of matter and form rather than to matter alone. Consider, for example, the magnitude of a man or a horse. When the man or horse cease to exist, their magnitudes also cease to exist. What remains constant is the magnitude of mass in general, which is manifested in various bodies at various times. Magnitude, then, is one of the components of bodies; indeed, it is implied in the very notion of a body. But matter, since it is certainly not a body, has nothing to do with magnitude and is totally unaffected by dimensional variations of bodies. "Matter preserves its nature; magnitude is only a garment which it wears because it must follow magnitude wherever the latter's course leads it. But if that in which it is clothed were to with-

²¹Cf. Bréhier, Ennéades, III, 93.

²²III. 6. 16-18.

²³III. 6. 16.

draw, it would remain what it is in itself. Matter has only that magnitude which the form present in it gives to it."²⁴

Another problem which gives some trouble to Plotinus in maintaining an entirely impassive matter is that of matter's participation in the Ideas. He evidently feels that Plato held some sort of participation when he speaks in the Timaeus of the images of real existences passing in and out of space.²⁵ The trouble is that the ordinary notion of participation involves change or passivity on the part of the participating subject.

Plotinus attempts to solve this difficulty by devising a type of participation which does not involve passivity; but here again his solution seems a bit weak.²⁶ He says that matter's participation in the Good is not an authentic participation, but one which is adapted to the nature of matter, leaving it unchanged; any true participation in the Good and in the Ideas would be destructive of the formless and non-entitative status of matter. What the solution amounts to, it would seem, is that Plotinus tries to preserve the name of participation for matter--out of respect for Plato?--and at the same time to deny the fact.

Later on in the same treatise Plotinus once more takes up the

²⁴Ibid., 19-23. Trans. based on Bréhier, Ennéades, III, 120.

²⁵Plato, Timaeus, 50 c, 4-5.

²⁶III. 6. 11.

problems of participation.²⁷ He asks himself how matter, as the non-participant, can participate in being. This time his answer is more positive, but it may well be doubted that what he describes is really any sort of participation. Matter participates in being, he says, by flinging back all that comes to it, just as an echo is flung back from a sounding surface. Because the surface cannot absorb the sound and really receive it into itself, it flings it back as an echo; this is what matter does with the images that come to it from the Ideas and the logoi. "Matter remains as it was, taking nothing to itself; it is the check to the emanation [of being]; it is a ground that repels."²⁸

Plotinus' doctrine on the impassivity of matter seems to admit, at least logically, of several corollaries which serve to bring into relief the difference of Plotinian matter from Aristotelian--and Scholastic--matter. Although Plotinus clearly states that matter was never without form²⁹ or was never unordered,³⁰ and, furthermore, that the basic elements of the sensible universe are composites of matter and form,³¹ it would seem that this is merely a de facto situation, not de jure. Because the production

²⁷III. 6. 14.

²⁸Ibid., 29-30. Trans. revised from MacKenna, p. 217.

²⁹II. 4. 3, 14-15.

³⁰IV. 3. 9, 17.

³¹II. 4. 5, 2-4; II. 4. 6, 14-19.

of the cosmos is from eternity, as has been noted above,³² there simply never was a time when matter and form were not conjoined. But if matter is altogether unaffected, changeless, and constant despite the variations of the images reflected upon it, there would seem to be nothing in the nature of matter to prevent its existing without any forms. Plotinus would probably reply that, in the emanational pattern, matter exists only to be the ground or substratum for bodies; if bodies did not exist, matter would not exist either. This would undoubtedly be consistent with his overall view of emanation, but an altogether impassive matter does leave the impression that it possesses an independence of its own.

Another corollary of the impassivity of matter is that matter and form do not unite into a single, substantial compound. Plotinus notes with approval that Plato held this precise position;³³ and the ways in which he himself speaks about bodies clearly indicate that such is his own view too.³⁴ Matter becomes merely a condition for the existence of bodies. If the Ideas and logoi are not to remain in a unified state in Nous and the Great Soul, they

³²Chapter III, pp. 44-45.

³³III. 6. 12, 1-4.

³⁴Bodies, he says, are images of the Ideas in matter, comparable to reflections in a mirror. Or again, matter reflects back the forms that come to it like an echoing surface reflects back sounds. Plotinus' imagery concerning matter will be further considered in Chapter VI.

must be received in a substratum which is apt for extension.³⁵

Thus matter does not enter into a body as an intrinsic cause; the radical difference in the nature of matter and form prevent their intermingling.³⁶ One may even wonder whether there is any point in looking for intrinsic causes in bodies as Plotinus sees them, since they do not seem to be true beings in any case.

It is clear from the discussion thus far that Plotinus views matter as the substratum of the material universe. Furthermore, this substratum is simply the inert and impassive ground on which the images of the Ideas come and go. Matter can be said to be a receptacle for these image-forms in the sense that the forms are reflected on it; but it is not a receptacle in the sense that it truly harbors the forms within itself or enters into composition with them.

³⁵III. 6. 18.

³⁶III. 6. 15.

CHAPTER V

MATTER AS PRINCIPLE OF EVIL

Not long before he died Plotinus wrote and dispatched to Porphyry a group of four treatises which proved to be his last. Among these, chronologically listed as the fifty-first, was the treatise which is to be considered in this chapter, namely, "On the Nature and Source of Evils." Concerning these last four treatises, Porphyry remarks that they show the effects of Plotinus' declining powers and that there is a noticeable difference in them from a group of five treatises which had been written not much earlier.¹

Though the powers of Plotinus may well have been declining when he wrote the treatise on evil, the style and method of approach is that of the Plotinus of earlier years. Furthermore, the thought of this present treatise, in which he describes matter as the absolute, essential evil and the source of all derived evils, is merely an elaboration of elements contained in his previous work. In one of his very first treatises he wrote that the ugliness of the soul is due to its "inclination towards body and

¹Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, c. 6.

matter."² In another of his early works he states that the evil in this world is a condition of matter or of that which is assimilated to matter.³ Again, in the two main treatises on matter which have already been considered, Plotinus affirms that matter is evil because of its utter destitution and lack of any real participation in the Good.⁴ The treatise on matter as the principle of evil is, therefore, merely a development of Plotinus' earlier thought and is consistent, as this chapter will attempt to show, with his philosophy of matter as already explained.

Those who inquire into the source of the evil in beings would do best, Plotinus says, to discover first the nature of evil; its source would then become apparent at once. But evil cannot be known directly, since knowledge is had through similitude with Idea-forms and evil is the very absence of such forms. The only way in which we can come to a knowledge of evil is indirectly through knowledge of good; the act of knowing the good will also include a knowledge of its contrary, which is evil.⁵

²I. 6. 5, 49. This is the first treatise in Porphyry's chronological list (Life of Plotinus, c. 4). His chronological list may not give the absolute order of Plotinus' works, but I. 6 is certainly among the first of them.

³V. 9. 10, 18-21. This treatise is fifth in Porphyry's chronological list.

⁴II. 4. 16 and III. 6. 11. Porphyry lists II. 4 as the twelfth treatise and III. 6 as the twenty-first.

⁵I. 8. 1.

In accord with this program for attaining a knowledge of the nature of evil Plotinus goes on to define what he means by good. This he does by defining the nature of the Good and the other two hypostases of the Intellectual Realm. The Good is that upon which all others depend but which is entirely sufficient to itself. Nous and the Great Soul proceed from the Good, but they possess true being none the less and are in their own way the source and term of beings on lower levels; they are, in a proportionate way, truly good. Among such beings as these, Plotinus says, there is no evil, but only the primary, secondary, and tertiary good.⁶

Since there is no evil to be found in the Intellectual Realm, which is the realm of true being, it will be necessary to look for evil in the realm of non-being. There it will be found to be a quasi form of non-being (οἶον εἰδός τε τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ὄν)⁷ and will pertain to whatever participates in non-being. Some idea of the nature of evil can be had by considering what something would be which lacked all measure, limit, and form; such are the characteristics of evil. Evil is "forever undetermined, entirely unstable, utterly passive, never settled, completely poor."⁸

Moreover, we must not mistake the true nature of evil by considering these characteristics as merely accidental attributes;

⁶I. 8. 2.

⁷I. 8. 3, 4-5.

⁸Ibid., 15-16.

indeed, they define the very essence of evil. Wherever evil itself is found, there too will be found all the characteristics mentioned above. Whatever participates in evil becomes like to evil, but it does not become essential evil.

The properties of evil, i.e., formlessness, indeterminate-ness, etc., do not inhere in some alien subject (here, ἡ ὑπόστασις), but they are their own subject. This is necessarily so, Plotinus says, since the lack of form and determination, which is the essence of evil, must have a prior existence in itself before it can accidentally qualify another being. Just as there is the absolute Good and secondary goods deriving from it, so there must be the absolute evil (κακὸν τὸ αὐτό) and secondary evils which are accidental to other beings.

It must be, therefore, that there exist an absolute limitlessness, an absolute formlessness, and so of all the other properties which characterize the nature of evil; and, if besides evil itself there be some evil thing, it is so either because it is mingled with evil or tends toward evil or is productive of evil. Indeed, reason discovers that the substratum for patterns, forms, shapes, measures, and limits--a substratum which is reduced to order by an order not its own and which of itself has no share in good and is merely an image of being--is the very essence of evil, if there can be an essence of evil. This is the first and absolute evil.⁹

Plotinus notes that the non-being of evil is not equivalent to that which is altogether non-existent.¹⁰ When evil is said to

⁹Ibid., 30-40. Trans. based on Bréhier, Ennéades, I, 118.

¹⁰Ibid., 6-7. Μὴ ὄν δὲ οὔτι τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν.

be non-being, the meaning is that it is something other than being. Plotinus attempts to specify what he means by saying that the difference of evil from being is not the difference of motion and rest from being; it is the difference of an image of being from true being.

Up to this point in his treatment of evil Plotinus has merely been determining the nature of evil in itself. Not once has he mentioned matter. Yet it is clear that his description of evil is almost exactly the same as that of matter. Both evil and matter are the very lack itself of all form and determination; both are said to be non-being; and both are ultimate substrata with which other beings are mingled or on which they are reflected. The identification of matter and evil is virtually established; it only remains for Plotinus to make it explicit.

Plotinus introduces matter into his discussion of evil by showing that beings are evil to the extent that they are associated with matter. This is true of bodily beings and also of individual souls. It is natural to bodies to be evil in some way or other, because they necessarily participate in matter.¹¹ Even the forms in them are not true forms, but merely images of the Idea-forms. Bodies are in a constant state of flux, unable to maintain for long whatever degree of reality they may have. Matter, the purely potential, prevents them from attaining to the

¹¹I. 8. 4.

stability of true goodness and being.¹²

While bodies have some degree of evil natural to them, souls are in themselves entirely good; evidence of this fact is that there are some souls which are not at all evil. The evil soul is the one which is enslaved to that phase of itself from which vice naturally arises. This phase of the soul is the irrational element, which is open to evil either through excess or defect. The soul which is in the service of this phase of itself suffers intemperance, cowardice, involuntary affections, false opinion, and all the other vices observed in evil souls.¹³

But how explain an irrational element in that which is of itself good? It is simply that the evil soul, though not vicious in itself, is associated with matter through its material body.¹⁴ Even the rational part of the soul is influenced by this association with matter. The passions of the body obscure its clear vision and turn its attention from the consideration of true being

¹²Cf. III. 9. 8.

¹³I. 8. 4.

¹⁴It is frequently difficult to reconcile the modes of expression which Plotinus uses in isolated statements with the whole of his thought. Here, for example, one might think that every soul connected with body is eo ipso an evil soul and that good souls are only those separated from their material bodies. It is fairly clear, however, that Plotinus' thought is that those souls which attend exclusively to affairs of sense are evil, but that those which strive to purify themselves and attend to the Intellectual Realm are good and pure. This thought is made explicit in I. 8. 5, ad fin.

to this material realm of becoming. It is not that the rational part of the soul is itself joined to matter; but matter is so evil that it can contaminate even that which merely looks toward it.¹⁵

Clearly, then, matter is the source of all the evil which is found in beings below the three hypostases of the Intellectual Realm. For matter is "altogether without part in the Good and is the very privation and absolute lack of it; whatever comes into any contact at all with matter becomes like matter."¹⁶

The teaching of Plotinus on this point is clear enough; but can it explain the particular evils in the sensible universe? Fire, for example, burns, causes pain, and destroys; sharp instruments cut; some things are poisonous to man and animals. In such cases it is not matter which causes evil, but rather the body which is composed of a form in matter. Hence, the evil ought to be ascribed more to the particular form than to matter.

Plotinus takes up this objection and, on the basis of his own cosmology, is able to give an answer.¹⁷ Bodily qualities which produce evil do so precisely because they are qualities engaged in matter. The forms which have entered into matter are merely images of the true forms, i.e., the Ideas, which remain in themselves separated from matter. The true, separated forms do

¹⁵I. 8. 4.

¹⁶Ibid., 22-25. Trans. by the author.

¹⁷I. 8. 8.

not produce evil; absolute fire does not burn, nor, in general, do any of the absolute forms produce those effects which their images in matter are said to produce. The reason why forms engaged in matter produce evil effects is that matter comes to dominate the forms and corrupt them by opposing its own lack of form and determination to their order and determination. Thus matter is able to bring it about that the forms cease to belong to themselves as forms only and that they take on the characteristics of matter, just as food takes on the nature of the animal which consumes it.¹⁸

Evil, as Plotinus observes, does not consist in just any defect whatsoever, but in the complete lack of the Good. Even Nous and the Great Soul fall short of the supreme perfection of the Good, but they are not thereby evil. But where the lack of the Good is total and complete, there is found true evil. This total lack is found nowhere but in matter.¹⁹

Matter, then, is the principle of evil precisely because it is the absolute lack of all true participation in the Good. Matter is the contrary of the Good; and the contrariety here is the greatest possible, since it is the contrariety of essences. The examples of contrariety with which we are familiar are the contrarieties of qualities, e.g., sickness and health, hot and cold.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹I. 8. 5.

But the Good (i.e., the One) has no qualities; hence, nothing can be contrary to it merely by virtue of some accidental attribute. Therefore, if the Good is to have a contrary, there will be contrariety of essences.

The contrary of that which is true being will be that which is non-being; the contrary of the Good and the source of all good things will be evil and the source of the evil in things. In all other cases of contrariety the opposed members have some common element between them, either belonging to the same genus or species or at least to the same subject. But in the case of the contrariety of essences between the Good and evil, there is no common element; all the characteristics of the one are entirely opposed to those of the other.²⁰ Thus, whereas the One is not good attributively but is essential Good, matter is not evil attributively but is essential evil.

In his treatment of the impassivity of matter Plotinus makes the statement that change can occur only through the interaction of contraries, as has been seen; he goes on to imply that matter has no contrary, since it is not subject to change.²¹ Does the present doctrine that matter as evil is the contrary of the Good represent a contradiction of Plotinus' earlier work on the impassivity of matter? Does it indicate a change in his theories?

²⁰I. 8. 6.

²¹III. 6. 9. See above, Chapter IV, p. 54.

It would seem that an inspection of the contexts in which the various statements occur offers the possibility of reconciling the two opinions. In the earlier treatise on the impassivity of matter Plotinus was concerned to show that the substratum of material bodies remains unaffected by the changes which occur in bodies. Bodily changes occur by contrary forms replacing one another, while those which are not contrary leave each other unaffected. But these bodily qualities act on each other only through a medium. Heat, for example, acts on coldness by making a cold body hot; or, in the case of the basic elements, fire replaces air by acting upon their common substratum, namely, matter. But, since matter is the ultimate substratum, there can be no contrary to it which could act upon it through the medium of some further substratum. In other words, there can be nothing contrary to matter as hot is contrary to cold. Hot and cold are contrary qualities which modify something else; matter is not a quality, but it is the very ground for all the qualitative changes of bodies.

On the other hand, when Plotinus is treating of the opposition between Good and evil, he is concerned to show the difference between two ultimates. Here there is no question of the Good displacing matter, the evil, or vice versa, through action upon some third thing as medium. It is simply that the whole nature of matter as the formless, sub-entitative substratum is opposed to the whole nature of the Good as the formless, supra-entitative source of all being and goodness. It could well be that Plotinus' later

doctrine of the essential contrariety between the Good and matter as evil represents a modification and correction of his earlier thought. But there is no indication that he ever changed his mind about the impassivity of matter and its lack of a qualitative contrary.

It is interesting to note that in two incidental points, namely, the knowledge of evil and its necessity, Plotinus' treatment of matter as the principle of evil parallels his treatment of it as the substratum of bodily qualities. The substratum of the material world is known, as has been seen,²² by a sort of "spurious reasoning" in which the intellect comes to affirm the existence of the formless, just as the eye knows darkness. The process is similar in the case of evil. Vice is not knowable directly but only as a divergence from virtue. From a knowledge of partial evils, such as vice is, we can conclude to what absolute evil must be, which is altogether without form or any share in good.²³ Thus Plotinus holds that matter, both as evil and as a substratum, is known by abstraction from the order and determination which we know in beings.

The necessity for matter as a substratum is to be sought in the inexorable law of emanation. Matter and the material universe must exist in order that the productive power of being be exhaust-

²²Chapter III, pp. 41-42. See II. 4. 10.

²³I. 8. 9.

ed.²⁴ The necessity of evil is also bound up with the emanational process. "Since the Good is not the only existing thing, it is inevitable that in the procession outward from it . . . there be a last term after which nothing more can come to be; this term will be evil. There must necessarily be something after the First; so too there must be a last. This last is matter, which has no part in the Good. This is the necessity of evil."²⁵

It would be a mistake to conclude from Plotinus' doctrine on matter as the essential evil and the principle of all other derived evils that he considers the material universe to be wholly evil. The universe is a reflection of the true beings of the Intellectual Realm; as such, it has its own beauty, order, and perfection.²⁶

Evil never exists by itself, as Plotinus remarks at the close of his treatise on evil.²⁷ Thanks to the power of the Good, "evil necessarily appears bound around with the bonds of beauty."²⁸

Some commentators on Plotinus profess to see a contradiction in his treatment of matter as the potential substratum and as the principle of evil. Armstrong, for example, says: "[W]e must ex-

²⁴See Chapter III, pp. 42-43, and the references to Plotinus cited there.

²⁵I. 8. 7, 17-23. Trans. based on Bréhier, Ennéades, I, 123.

²⁶E.g., see II. 2. 3; II. 9. 8; V. 1. 4.

²⁷I. 8. 15.

²⁸Ibid., 24-25.

amine shortly the well-known contradiction in Plotinus' account of matter in the world of the senses. He varies between regarding it as a purely negative conception, absolute potency, and as a positively evil, anarchic force with a power of resisting form."²⁹

Dean Inge also implies that the two viewpoints are irreconcilably opposed.³⁰

On the basis of the exposition of Plotinus' philosophy of matter and evil as given in this chapter and the two preceding, it would seem that the opposition between the two aspects of matter is not as great as Inge and Armstrong would have it. It becomes apparent upon reading the four main treatises on matter that the substratum of the material universe and the essential evil are described largely in the same terms. Both substratum and evil are said to be non-being, though not pure nothing. Both are the indefinite, the negatively infinite, the formless, that which has no share in the Good. Both substratum and evil are known by a certain indefinite or formless knowledge, which is had by abstraction from the order and determination observed in particular beings. Again, the necessity of matter as a substratum and as evil is the necessity of completing the outpouring of being from the One, the Good.

²⁹ Armstrong, The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus, p. 86.

³⁰ Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus, I, 134.

The crux of the whole question may very well lie in what meaning is given to the term evil. If one reads into evil some meaning of one's own, then there can very readily be a contradiction between evil as the reader sees it and the substratum as Plotinus sees it. If, however, Plotinus' concept of evil is kept in mind, the opposition between the two aspects of matter may not be so great. Now it seems fairly clear that Plotinus' concept of evil in the treatise devoted explicitly to the subject is largely negative. Evil is the formless, the unordered, the complete absence of Good; those things which are partially evil are so because they possess some excess or defect, which indicates some lack of order and determination.

It is quite true that Plotinus' concept of evil logically results in minimizing moral evil and reducing it to a sort of physical evil, since the vice of the soul arises through its contact with matter.³¹ But if we accept his definition of evil and compare it with his definition of matter as a substratum, the opposition between the two concepts does not appear to be as great as some would have it. Brehier, for example, says that the positive aspect of Plotinus' concept of evil is merely an appearance.³² He proposes to resolve the apparent conflict in Plotinus' two views

³¹Cf. B. A. G. Fuller, The Problem of Evil in Plotinus (Cambridge, Eng., 1912), p. 274.

³²Bréhier, La philosophie de Plotin, p. 206.

of matter on the basis of the dynamics of the procession and return of being. From the viewpoint of procession matter is evil, since it fascinates the Great Soul and attracts forms to itself; from the viewpoint of the return of the forms back to their intelligible principles matter appears as that which is illuminated by the forms and which receives from them whatever degree of existence it has.³³

The reason why evil in Plotinus' philosophy appears to some commentators as a positive force may be that they concentrate too exclusively on evil in connection with the soul. The question of the human soul and its conversion away from the solicitations of the sense world was, without doubt, an absorbing interest for Plotinus. In this context Plotinus envisages the soul struggling to regain or maintain its proper independence of material things. His philosophy as a whole, however, cannot be reduced simply to an ethic. If, then, we wish to reconstruct Plotinus' basic notion of matter, we must distinguish between his metaphysics and his mysticism.

³³Ibid., p. 207.

CHAPTER VI

THE METAPHORICAL DESCRIPTION OF MATTER

There has been a deliberate effort in the preceding chapters of this thesis to avoid reference to Plotinus' use of metaphors in the description of matter. The intention behind this approach was to gather these metaphors into a single chapter where they could serve as a confirmation and a review of the doctrines already discussed.

As anyone familiar with the Enneads knows, Plotinus makes liberal use of the metaphor to illustrate his point. Furthermore, Plotinus' use of the imaginative metaphor cannot simply be reduced to a literary embellishment; he very frequently uses it to suggest by analogy what language is not so well adapted to express directly.¹ Clear examples of this use of the metaphor are the radiation from the sun and water gushing forth from an undiminished spring to illustrate the idea of emanation. In his discussion of matter

¹E.g., see III. 6. 12, 6-8, where Plotinus explicitly ascribes this motivation for the use of examples to one of Plato's metaphors. On this point Brehier observes (La philosophie de Plotin, p. 20): "L'image, chez Plotin, n'est point un ornement extérieur, mais un élément intégrant de la pensée. Il vise, en effet, comme il le remarque souvent, à exprimer des réalités que de langue est impuissant à rendre. Il reste à les suggérer par analogie." See also Pistorius, Plotinus and Neoplatonism, p. 1.

Plotinus uses the metaphor to clarify and highlight what he has already said. It must be noted, however, that Plotinus does not simply abandon himself to the use of images in his philosophy; he is frequently the severest critic of his own metaphors,² as will be seen in the course of this chapter.

The sub-entitative character of matter is its most distinguishing note and the basis for all else that Plotinus says about it. Speaking precisely in the context of the non-being and unreality of matter, Plotinus says that it is "the image and phantasm of mass and the desire for subsistence."³ He goes on to add that, even though matter is an unstable (οὐ μένον) image, it does not have the strength to withdraw (φεύγειν), so utterly lacking is it in the power of true being.⁴ Basically the same metaphor of bodily weakness combined with phantom existence is also used in the treatise "On Potential and Actual Being" to emphasize the unreality of matter: "It [matter] is a sort of feeble and obscure image (ἀσθενές τι καὶ ἀμυδρὸν εἶδωλον) which cannot assume any form."⁵

²E.g., see the discussion of the divisibility of the soul into parts at the beginning of IV. 3 and of the use of the simile of radii to illustrate the union of all beings with their common source in the One in VI. 5. 5. Cf. Armstrong, The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus, p. 52, n. 3.

³III. 6. 7, 13.

⁴Ibid., 18-20.

⁵II. 5. 5, 21-22. Trans. by Katz, p. 133.

This non-entitative aspect of matter is brought out in other images as well. Plotinus likens matter to a beggar in its continual striving to attain some share in real being.⁶ Or again matter, as a limitation on the creative activity of the Great Soul, is said to be the "sediment of the superior beings, bitter and embittering."⁷ On another occasion, in an effort to distinguish between matter in the sensible world and in the intelligible world,⁸ Plotinus says that sensible matter is neither living nor intellectual, but that it is "a dead thing which has received order (νεκρὸν κεκοσμημένον)."⁹

In the sections treating of the knowledge of matter, both as substratum and as the principle of evil, it was seen that matter is known by a sort of "spurious reasoning" in which the soul becomes indeterminate, as it were, in order to know the indeterminateness and formlessness of matter.¹⁰ The comparison which Plotinus finds most helpful to bring out his meaning here is the "vision" which the eye has of darkness. Discussing the question of the knowledge of formless matter in the treatise "On the Nature

⁶ III. 6. 14, 8-10.

⁷ II. 3. 17, 23-24. οἶον ὑποστάθης τῶν προηγουμένων πικρᾶς καὶ πικρὰ ποιούσης.

⁸ For the distinction between sensible and intelligible matter see Appendix.

⁹ II. 4. 5, 18.

¹⁰ See Chapter III, pp. 41-42, and Chapter V, p. 70.

and Source of Evils," he says that, just as the eye withdraws from the light in order to see darkness (το σκοτος), so the intellect abandons its own interior light in order to see that which is its very opposite.¹¹ Matter is to the intellect, then, as darkness is to the eye; and both faculties have to perform acts contrary to their natures in order to have knowledge of these objects.

The same comparison of matter to darkness was used in the earlier treatise "On Matter," where Plotinus was considering matter as the substratum of the material world. Through the use of our intelligence we come to know that matter is the ultimate depth in each material thing. "Hence all matter is dark, because reason (ὁ λόγος) is light, and intellect is reason. Hence, too, intellect, in considering the logos in each thing, judges that what is beneath [the logos]--as a thing beneath light--is dark; just as the eye, which is a thing of light, extending itself to the light and to colors, which are modes of light, judges that what is beneath colors is dark and material and is concealed by the colors."¹²

The image which Plotinus uses most frequently in connection with matter is that of a mirror. The point which he wishes to emphasize through this metaphor is the impassivity of matter. "But

¹¹I. 8. 9, 19-26.

¹²II. 4. 5, 7-12. Trans. revised from Taylor, p. 25. See also II. 4. 10, 13-17.

if someone should say that mirrors (τὰ κάτοκτα) and transparent things in general suffer nothing from the images that are seen in them, he would adduce an appropriate example. Those things which are in matter are images, and matter is even more impassive than mirrors."¹³ The idea here is that the forms in material beings are merely reflections in matter of the Ideas and logoi in the Intellectual Realm, and that matter is even less affected by what is reflected in it than a mirror is by what appears in it.

Although a mirror was obviously Plotinus' favorite metaphor for illustrating the impassivity of matter, he was not altogether uncritical of it. The mirror itself is visible, since it possesses some degree of reality and has its own form. Matter, however, is not visible in itself, since it lacks all form in itself and has no share in true being. When we view things in a mirror, there is no inclination to mistake the reflections for real beings. We see the mirror itself and observe that the reflections come and go while the mirror remains constant. In no case, however, is matter visible; we cannot observe matter as such under the images reflected upon it, much less without any image whatsoever. It is precisely because we cannot see matter itself that we are inclined to accept the reflections upon it as real beings, just as we would not doubt the reality of reflections in an invisible mirror, if

¹³III. 6. 9, 16-19. See also III. 6. 7, 40-43

somehow the reflections could remain for observation.¹⁴

In line with his reservations on the metaphor of the mirror Plotinus offers another comparison which, he feels, gives greater emphasis to the invisibility of matter. "The condition of matter is much the same as that of air which is invisible even when illuminated, because, even when it is not illuminated, the air is invisible."¹⁵ The meaning of this is that matter is like air inasmuch as no one ever sees matter, whether with or without form, just as no one ever actually sees the air, whether it is illuminated or not.

Again, in taking up the problem of the impassivity of matter in participating in true being,¹⁶ Plotinus says that whatever share in being may come to matter reflects back from it "like an echo from smooth and even surfaces."¹⁷ He goes on to add that it is precisely because the sound is reflected back from echoing surfaces that we are led to think that it arises there. The unstated conclusion is that we are led to attribute reality to material beings for a similar reason.

In another comparison matter is likened to a mother. This

¹⁴III. 6. 13, 38-49.

¹⁵Ibid., 41-43. Ἄλλὰ τοιοῦτον τι πάσχει, οἷον καὶ ὁ ἀήρ φωτισθεὶς ἀφανῆς ἐστὶ καὶ τότε, ὅτι καὶ ἄνευ τοῦ φωτισθῆναι οὐχ ἐφ᾿αῖτο.

¹⁶See Chapter IV, pp. 56-57.

¹⁷III. 6. 14, 24-25.

metaphor is one handed down to Plotinus from other sources, the most likely one being the Timaeus.¹⁸ He accepts this metaphor only with reservation, because he feels that the role of a mother in the generation of offspring is too active to express the true nature of matter. If a mother is assumed to be simply a container (ὄς ὑποδεχομένης μόνον) of her offspring and to give nothing of her own substance to it, then Plotinus is willing to allow the comparison. He does feel that another comparison from Plato,¹⁹ that of "recipient and nurse (ὑποδοχή καὶ τιθήνη) ," is more suited to bringing out the receptive and unproductive aspect of matter. Matter is simply the substratum, impassive and unresponsive, to the Ideas and logoi which are reflected upon it.²⁰

From this brief study of Plotinus' metaphorical descriptions of matter the main characteristics of matter as they were seen in the preceding expository chapters are found to be confirmed. Physical weakness and phantom existence describe the non-being of matter; the knowledge of matter is the knowledge of darkness; the impassivity of matter is that of a reflecting surface such as a mirror; and the sterility of matter makes the time-honored comparison with a mother somewhat unacceptable. These metaphors, besides serving as a confirmation of Plotinus' doctrine on matter,

¹⁸ Plato, Timaeus, 50 d, 2-3 and 51 a, 4-5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49 a, 6.

²⁰ III. 6. 19, 17-25.

are also very useful aids for understanding Plotinus' meaning. It is for this latter purpose, of course, that he used them.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The preceding discussion of the nature of matter has elaborated the most important and significant aspects of Plotinus' doctrine. A brief restatement of the conclusions already obtained will serve to recall the main outline of his position.

Perhaps one of the best summary answers to the question "What is Plotinian matter?" would be that it is the inert, impassive ground of the material world. Matter is the ground for material beings in much the same sense that a movie screen--to employ an up-to-date analogy--is the ground for the scenes which appear on it. Matter thus conceived is a substratum, a ὑποκείμενον, and, to some extent, a receptacle or ὑποδοχή.

Other characteristics of Plotinian matter worth noting here are its sub-entitative existence, its necessity, and the fact that it is known by reason alone. Plotinus classifies matter as non-being because of his decidedly Greek concept of being. Being is the limited and determined. But matter is indeterminate and negatively infinite; hence, it is not a being. The One also is unlimited and undetermined and, therefore, not a being; but there is no room for confusion here, because the One is above being as its

source, while matter is below being as the bare substratum of that last outpost of being, the material world.

The necessity of matter, as has been seen,¹ is the very necessity of emanation itself. This necessity requires that the productive power of being, which has its source in the One, extend itself as far as it can go. An emanation advances through its various stages, there is increasing multiplicity and degradation of unity; Nous is less unified than the One, and the Great Soul is less unified than Nous. When the Great Soul comes to produce the next level of being below itself, multiplicity is already so far advanced that the only possibility is that these beings be actually distinct and separate from one another. But this would not be possible unless there were some ground or base capable of receiving such distinction and separation. This base is matter.

It is also worth noting that matter is known only through rational analysis and a so-called "spurious reasoning."² Plotinus was no materialist; in fact, he reacted violently to the materialism of the Stoics. Plotinian matter is not something one gets his hands on and sees and feels. In this sense it is a philosophical reality and is known only in terms of a search for the ultimate principles of the material world.

In addition to being the substratum of material beings, mat-

¹See Chapter III, pp. 42-43, and Chapter V, pp. 70-71.

²See Chapter III, pp. 41-42.

ter is also the essential evil and source of all secondary evils, as is clear from a study of the text of Plotinus. This aspect of matter follows as a corollary from its non-entitative indeterminateness. Plotinus defines good in terms of the Good (i.e., the One) and those beings which participate in the Good. The only choice then is to place evil outside this participation in the Good; and matter is the only thing which has no true participation in the Good.

With this picture of matter in mind one is led to wonder just what Plotinus thought a material body was. The whole tenor of the Enneads shows that Plotinus is inclined to emphasize the unreality of the material universe.³ A material being, as Plotinus sees it, is matter, which is non-being, plus an image of an Idea-form whose true existence is in the Intellectual Realm. It is slight wonder, then, that with this view of material beings Plotinus should assign them a minimum degree of reality.

Though Plotinus speaks in Aristotelian terms of forms existing in matter and of matter receiving forms, he obviously envisages no strong union between matter and form. Matter is a condition for the existence of image-forms and the material beings which result from a union of form and matter, just as a mirror is a necessary condition for the appearance of reflected images. It

³This idea is very clear in III. 6. 6, where Plotinus argues for the unreality of material beings despite their appearances of reality.

seems clear that Plotinus views the union of matter and form as being no closer than that of the mirror and the figures reflected in it. The only difference is that in the case of the mirror and the reflections the mirror has the greater reality, whereas in the case of matter and form the image-form has more reality than the matter in which it appears.⁴

It is instructive to note some of the differences between Plotinus' concepts of matter and material being and those of St. Thomas and the later Thomistic Scholastics. First of all, St. Thomas and the Scholastics include matter within the pale of being, though not without qualification. Plotinus had to exclude matter from the realm of being because his notion of being was univocal, at least to the extent that being was equated with a certain type of existence, namely, finite existence. The Scholastics, on the other hand, are able to include matter under being because their analogous notion of being extends from the purest potency (i.e., prime matter) to the purest act (i.e., God). Matter for them is a principle of being and rightly called a being because it is ordained to substantial existence.

Another point of radical difference in the two views of matter is concerned with its impassivity. As Plotinus saw it, the potency of matter is never really actualized by the forms which

⁴For a detailed description of the union between matter and form and the way in which it is achieved see VI. 5. 8.

appear in it.⁵ If, for example, the Idea of a horse is being imaged on matter, that matter is nevertheless still in potency to being a horse as well as anything else.⁶ The Scholastics, however, maintain that matter is not unaffected by its forms. When the substantial form of a horse is united with matter, that matter is no longer in potency to being a horse; its condition is really changed from its previous mode of existence.

A similar observation may be made with respect to the indeterminateness and infinity of matter. In the Scholastic cosmology prime matter, considered merely in itself, is indeterminate and negatively infinite. But prime matter never exists merely in itself; it is always limited and determined by some substantial form. Plotinus, however, holds that matter retains its radical indeterminateness and infinity, even though it is united with forms. He would agree that matter never exists without some form;⁷ but, since the forms never really get at matter and change it, matter retains its essential qualities.

As has already been noted in this chapter, the necessity of matter in Plotinus' system is an absolute necessity, at least as absolute as the necessity of emanation. In Scholastic philosophy

⁵Cf. Chapter III, p. 37, and Chapter IV, pp. 58-59.

⁶This view, of course, is ultimately connected with the lack of a close union between matter and form.

⁷See II. 4. 3, 14-15.

the necessity of matter is merely the consequent necessity of a fact. That the material universe exists is the result of an intelligent and free determination on the part of the Creator. There did not have to be any material creation; hence, there is no prior necessity for the existence of matter. But once God freely determined to create and did so create, then matter existed of necessity.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the Scholastic and Plotinian view of material being concerns the union of matter and form. There has already been occasion to remark that Plotinus does not conceive of any really strong union of matter and form, certainly not the substantial union which was taught previously by Aristotle.⁸ Given his concept of matter as the permanently impassive and indeterminate substratum, it was impossible for Plotinus to unite matter and form into a substantial unit, as St. Thomas did⁹ in adopting the solution of Aristotle. It could also be that granting substantial unity to material beings gives them a greater degree of reality than Plotinus wanted to give them.

One of the results of Plotinus' additive union of matter and form is that he comes up with a doctrine which greatly resembles the theory of a plurality of forms current in the Middle Ages.

⁸E.g., see Metaphysics, VII, 13, 1039 a, 3-9.

⁹E.g., see S.T., I, 45, 8c; 65, 4c.

Bréhier thinks that there is "a clear indication" of such a doctrine in Plotinus,¹⁰ and it is not too hard to find support in the text for such a view. "Fire and earth and the intermediaries," Plotinus says, "are matter and form, but composite beings are many substances united (τὰ δὲ σύνθετα ἤδη πολλαὶ οὐσίαι εἰς ἓν)."¹¹ Again, in the treatise "On Intellectual Beauty," Plotinus describes how the Ideas hold everything in their sway; matter is gripped by the Ideas of the elements, and to these elements are added other Ideas and still others. The result of this is that it is "difficult to find matter hidden beneath so many forms."¹² Certainly such a view of the composition of material beings is much different from the Aristotelico-Thomistic view, in which one substantial form confers all essential notes, such as corporeity, life, etc.

Since some commentators feel that Plotinus' treatment of matter is one of the most confused sections in his philosophy,¹³ a brief indication of some of the difficulties in which Plotinus

¹⁰ Bréhier, La philosophie de Plotin, pp. 200-201.

¹¹ VI. 3. 8, 8-9.

¹² V. 8. 7, 19-22. It is immediately following this that Plotinus goes so far as to call even matter a form, though it be the last of forms--αὐτὴ [ἄλη] εἰδός τι ἔσχατον. On this point Armstrong well observes (Downside Review, LXXIII, 49) that this remark by Plotinus is "unparalleled in the Enneads and is quite inconsistent with his normal thought."

¹³ See Chapter I, pp. 1, 2-3.

seems to involve himself would be pertinent before concluding this thesis.

The difficulty with Plotinus' philosophy of matter is not, as it seems to the present author, a contradiction between matter as substratum and matter as essential evil, as some have said.¹⁴ Bréhier even feels that the discussion of matter as substratum in II. 4 leads progressively to the conclusion that matter is evil, a conclusion which he calls the very heart of the Plotinian concept of matter. The problem of matter in Plotinus, he adds, is not so much a physical problem--as it is with Aristotle--as it is a religious problem.¹⁵ On the other hand, Inge thinks that, if we consider Plotinus' philosophy as a whole, there is no identification of matter and the principle of evil.¹⁶ In view of the investigation conducted in the preceding chapters concerning Plotinus' explicit thought on this question, and also in view of his philosophy as a whole, it is the opinion of the present author that Inge's conclusion is not justified.

The real difficulty with the Plotinian system, as it seems

¹⁴This point was discussed at some length in Chapter V, pp. 71-74.

¹⁵Bréhier, Ennéades, II, 47. "[C]ette discussion est destinée à nous amener progressivement à une conclusion (la matière est le mal), qui est le centre même de l'idée plotinienne de la matière. Le problème de la matière, qui, chez Aristote, était un problème physique, devient un problème de philosophie religieuse."

¹⁶Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus, I, 134-35.

now, is not that of reconciling matter and evil, but that of reconciling the existence of both of these with an emanational metaphysic. The whole point of such a system is that everything flows necessarily from one common source, which is the Good. Such a system is a thoroughgoing monism. There is only one principle or source for all reality; evil and matter cannot be an active principle, equal but opposite to the Good, as in the dualism of the Manicheans.

The question, then, is how there can be anything opposed to the One; i.e., how can there be any absolute non-being or absolute evil, if the One is also the Good and is productive only of goodness and reality? Much of the difficulty and obscurity in Plotinus' discussion of matter and evil seems to arise from an attempt to retain both the disorder of evil and the absolute monism of emanation. To give a clearcut answer it would seem that Plotinus should either completely deny the existence of matter and evil or introduce a second principle into his system alongside the One. As he actually worked the problem out in his philosophy, it appears that evil, particularly moral evil, loses most of its force and becomes little more than a necessary concomitant of the emanational process extending itself to the bitter end.¹⁷

Considering Plotinus' whole philosophy of matter, what, one might ask, was the basic motive which led him to adopt such the-

¹⁷Cf. Whittaker, The Neoplatonists, p. 68.

ories? The answer to such a question will ultimately have to be in terms of the basic motive of his entire system, since matter is merely a part of the total conception. Perhaps the best answer is that of Bréhier when he says: "The system of Plotinus, in its entirety, arises from an effort to suppress everything in reality which can be impervious to the life of the spirit."¹⁸ And in particular with respect to his treatment of matter it may be said that Plotinus' explanation of physical reality "consists in stripping matter, and then bodies, of every positive reality which we experience in them, since at every stage these realities are marks of soul. One will be a good philosopher of nature to the extent that one knows how to turn the sensible world toward the world of the spirit."¹⁹

¹⁸ Bréhier, La philosophie de Plotin, p. 57. "Le système de Plotin, dans son ensemble, naît d'un effort pour supprimer tout ce qu'il peut y avoir, dans la réalité, d'opaque à la vie spirituelle."

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 204-205. "[E]lle [i.e., l'explication physique chez Plotin] consiste à dépouiller la matière, puis les corps de tout ce que l'expérience nous montre en eux de réalités positives, alors que, à chaque degré, ces réalités sont des traces de l'âme; on sera bon physicien dans la mesure où l'on saura convertir le monde sensible vers l'esprit."

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APPENDIX

INTELLIGIBLE MATTER

The preceding discussion of Plotinus' philosophy of matter was limited to matter in the sensible world. Another type of matter, however, is referred to in the Enneads, a matter which has its place among the hypostases of the Intellectual Realm. Plotinus explicitly discusses this type of matter in the treatise "On Matter" already considered in Chapter III.¹ The purpose of this appendix is to explain briefly the nature of intelligible matter and to distinguish it from sensible matter.

Plotinus adduces several considerations by way of establishing the existence of matter in the Intellectual Realm. The fact, which he claims to have proven elsewhere, that there are many Ideas requires that they have some common element in their diversity. The particular form (μορφή) of each is the diversifying element; the common element is that which is brought to form by the Ideas, namely, a matter or substratum for the formative Ideas. Another consideration pointing to the existence of intelligible matter is

¹The full title of the treatise on matter (II. 4) is "On the Two types of Matter (Ἐπι τῶν δύο ὕλων)." The two types of matter referred to are intelligible and sensible matter.

the fact that this sensible world, composed of matter and form, is an imitation of the intelligible world; hence, there must be matter in the intelligible world also. Furthermore, though the intelligible world is indivisible, there exists there a certain diversity among entities; but diversity is a condition found only where there is a matter offering itself to division and distinction.²

Plotinus considers intelligible matter as necessarily bound up with emanation from the One. In the emanative process two distinct moments can be distinguished, the moment of differentiation or alterity (ἡ ἑτερότης) and the moment of return (the word used is a form of the verb ἐπιστρέφω). Alterity is the moment in which the derived being "moves away" from the source, while return is the moment of "movement back toward" the source. These moments in emanation are not temporal moments, since emanation is an eternal process; they are rather analytical moments of one reality.

The moment of alterity in the production of the intellectual hypostases from the One is the moment of indefiniteness and lack of form in the being which is produced. In the state of alterity the emanating being can be and needs to be formed and determined through a return to its source. This stage of the intellectual hypostases is what Plotinus means by intelligible matter.

The moment of conversion back to the source is the moment in

²II. 4. 4.

which the being takes on form and determination. Nous, for example, receives its form and determination through its intellectual vision of the One; this vision results in the multiplicity of Ideas which give form to the indeterminate and "material" moment of alterity.³

Plotinus himself points out some of the specific differences between sensible matter, i.e., the inert and formless substratum of sensible being, and intelligible matter, i.e., the moment of indefiniteness in the generation of the intellectual hypostases. Matter in this realm of generated beings is ceaselessly changing from one form to another, while intelligible matter is eternally possessed of the same form. Again, sensible matter becomes all things in succession, while intelligible matter is all things at once.⁴

Furthermore, although intelligible matter receives determination, just as sensible matter does, it has of itself a determinate and intelligent life; but sensible matter is neither living nor intelligent. Plotinus goes on to add that in sensible beings form and substratum are mere images ($\epsilon\psi\delta\omega\lambda\alpha$), whereas in the intelligible world both form and substratum are true beings.⁵

³The preceding analysis is an expansion of Plotinus' words in II. 4. 5, 25-37. Cf. V. 4. 2.

⁴II. 4. 3, 9-17.

⁵II. 4. 5, 15-20.

In short, then, "matter in the intelligible world is a being, for that which is prior to this matter is beyond being. But that which is prior to matter in this world is being; hence, [sensible] matter is not a being, since it is 'foreign' to the beauty of being."⁶

As is clear, the concept of intelligible matter is intimately connected with Plotinus' concept of emanation. Further questions may well be raised concerning the notion of intelligible matter; e.g., how is it a being if it is indeterminate? what is the distinction between intelligible matter and each hypostasis? what are the distinctions between the various Ideas themselves and between the Ideas and the hypostases? It would be going beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to clarify these questions, if, indeed, they can be clarified through additional study of the text of Plotinus.

⁶II. 4. 16, 24-27. Trans. by the author.

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by **Maurice Joseph Moore, S.J.,**

has been read and approved by three members of the Department of
Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 6, 1959
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