

A Puzzle in Plotinus: From Intelligible to Sensible Bodies

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A Puzzle in Plotinus: From Intelligible to Sensible Bodies

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One significant puzzle or question about Plotinus' *Enneads* I want to identify here is the following: When people think of Neoplatonism, and particularly Plotinus, they may well simply assume that Plotinus is against body. This, indeed, appears to be the view of Porphyry—strikingly so at the beginning of his *Life of Plotinus*: “Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed to be ashamed of being in the body” (*Life of Plotinus* 1, 1); and such a view may also be confirmed for many by things that Plato and Plotinus actually do say. Socrates, of course, famously suggests that the body is a prison (or tomb) in the *Phaedo* and elsewhere,¹ however we are to interpret this in its broader context.² Plotinus employs similar negative language about body—and certainly too about matter in a series of works, early, middle, and late.³ Nonetheless, these are still only parts of a much bigger picture that, I think, should be recognized if we want to take the fuller range of Plotinus' thought into account, no matter how puzzling parts of this thought may be. I cite two instances: In V 8 [30] chapter 7, Plotinus argues that matter is a ‘last form’ and in VI 2 [43] 21, matter and bodies are clearly said to exist in Intellect. How are we to understand these passages? If we take them seriously, do they change our understanding of Plotinus' thought?

I do not know if I have an answer to these questions, but I think that such puzzles should nonetheless be articulated, for they provoke a different view of major elements in Plotinus' thought and in Neoplatonic thought generally. I will concentrate on Plotinus here.

Let me take up this question of matter, body, and form.

We know the privative side of the question of matter in such *Enneads* as II 4 [12], II 5 [25], III 6 [26], I 8 [52]: matter is ultimate privation, even resistance to form--a kind of negativity, residual, but persistent in the frame of things--the infinite sea of dissimilarity (as Plato puts it in

¹ *Phaedo* 62b; see also *Cratylus* 400c; *Phaedrus* 250c; *Gorgias* 493a.

² For broader context in the *Phaedo* see Corrigan 2023, 11-47.

³ On this see below.

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the *Politicus* and Plotinus in I 8),⁴ the null point where unity starts to disappear, where formlessness intervenes, and contradiction emerges since the principle of identity disappears and nothing is straightforwardly *x* without also equally being *-x*. In a sense, this negativity of privative matter is the breakdown of discourse that Plato seems to envisage in the negative hypotheses of the *Parmenides*,⁵ where in the absence of the One to define and limit the others, there are only unlimited magnitudes that disappear as soon as one attempts to see or name them.

How is it, by contrast, with the perspective of matter as full of creation?⁶ In a sense, matter emerges out of form and yet also form emerges out of matter.⁷ From this perspective, matter is full of hidden form as possibility, potentiality, and power—all buried deep within it. Even in its descent into the sensible cosmos, the soul can realize this fecundity in new ways; in order to do so, it has to ‘escape;’ this is the famous existential/ontological separation of soul from body that we find in the *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* that is crucial to the proper soul-body orientation even in embodied existence; even in this embodied existence, the experience of fecundity is striking. So, in IV 8 [8] 5 Plotinus writes:

“If it escapes quickly it takes no harm by acquiring a knowledge of evil and coming to know the nature of wickedness, and manifesting its powers, making apparent works and activities which if they had remained quiescent in the spiritual world would

⁴ Plato, *Politicus* 273d6-e1; cf. *Phaedo* 69c6; Plotinus, *Ennead* I [52] 8, 13, 16-17.

⁵ *Parmenides* 160b-166c.

⁶ By ‘creation,’ I mean no more (and no less) than this: if the Good can be said (however improperly) to make itself out of nothing in VI 8 [39] 7, 52-54, then how much more so might everything else be made from nothing by the Good (however improperly)?

⁷ This is provocative, I realize, but I do not wish to contest the importance of form all the way down (to the extent that matter is a last form—in V 8 [31] 7), but rather to emphasize simultaneously the importance of ‘matter’—as, for example, in II 4 [12] 4, 17-20 and-5, 30-39, especially: “For Otherness There exists always, which produces intelligible matter; for this is the principle of matter, this and the primary Movement. For this reason Movement, too, was called Otherness, because Movement and Otherness sprang forth together. The Movement and Otherness which came from the First are undefined, and need the First to define them; and they are defined when they turn to it.² But before the turning, matter, too, was undefined and the Other and not yet good, but unilluminated from the First...” (trans. Armstrong).

have been of no use because they would never have come into actuality; and the soul itself would not have known the powers it had if they had not come out and been revealed. Actuality everywhere reveals completely hidden potency, in a way obliterated and non-existent because it does not yet truly exist.”

If the soul were to remain in the incorporeal world, its powers and activities would have remained ‘in vain’ (*matēn*). In other words, the existence of body provokes an abundance of psychic powers to emerge that would not have been possible without embodiment. *The sensible cosmos is an infinite reservoir of intelligible possibilities*. Even matter is a logos⁸ (that is, matter is meaning, not just dead stuff). Matter is a “final form” (in V 8, 7), and material body is already a logos animated by the soul (VI 7, 4-5).⁹

To the degree, then, that we look up toward form and downward to matter, this is to spatialize a hierarchy that is radically non-spatial right from the beginning. After all, matter and form emerge *together* unformed out of the One--a first ‘*otherness*’ limited only by Intellect’s vision of the One and of itself (II 4, 4-5). The pure *unformed* unity of both is closer to the One than Intellect, since Intellect, in order to think the One, has to break up this vision into ordered multiplicity.¹⁰ The crucial importance of this primordial unformed unity can be seen subsequently in Proclus’ hypostatization of the principles Limit and Unlimited¹¹--or again in the Medieval Jewish figure, Ibn Gabirol, who seems to have prioritized Matter, even over Form, in his *Fons Vitae*.¹² And the desire for this unformedness in Intellect characterizes its very nature since not only does Intellect have to go eternally in search of its own *ousia*, that is, in search of its reality as the ground of its being, which is the vision of the One in and for Intellect, but this desire and its eternal attainment are the radical grounds of its eternal incompleteness: “The Good, therefore, has given the trace of itself upon Intellect to Intellect to have by seeing, so that in Intellect *there is desire, and it is always desiring and always attaining*” (III 8, 11, 22-24, trans. Armstrong adapted slightly). This radical incompleteness that runs

⁸ III 3 [48] 4, 38-39. On this see Corrigan, 1996, 122-123, 252.

⁹ See especially V 8 [31] 7, 18-23 and VI 7 [38] 5, 1-5.

¹⁰ Cf. VI 7 [38] 16.

¹¹ See especially *Elements of Theology*, props. 89-92 and references in Dodds, 1963, 247.

¹² On this Pessin, 2013 *passim* (and especially 166-188).

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through everything is ultimately a function of matter, but not matter as utter privation; instead, this is matter, first, as the impulse and gateway to form and, second, as the real disclosure of form.

What does not perhaps get the attention it deserves, therefore, is not just the notional, though non-conceptual and real distinction between form and matter in Intellect, but the actual presence of bodies, matter, and qualities in Intellect itself.¹³ Plotinus' Intellect is actually *an embodied world*--though one would never realize this from most of the passages in the *Enneads*. I cannot see any way round this because this is what Plotinus explicitly says. In VI 2 [43] (part of his critique of the Aristotelian categories in VI 1-3 [42-44]), Plotinus writes about the inclusive nature of Intellect:

“Well then, see how in this great, this overwhelming Intellect, not full of talk but full of intelligence, this Intellect which is all things and a whole, not a partial or particular intellect, all things which come from it are present. It certainly has number in the things which it sees, and it is one and many, and the many are its powers, wonderful powers, not weak but because they are pure the greatest of powers, fresh and full of life, we may say, and truly powers, without any limit to their action: so they are infinite, and infinity [is there] and greatness.” (VI 2 [43] 21, 3-11; trans. A. H. Armstrong)

What then precisely is present in this ‘overwhelming Intellect? Apparently, there is not only magnitude, quantity, all quality, but also bodies and matter:

“for it was not possible or lawful for anything to be left out; for the intelligible All is complete, or it would not be the All--and since life is running over it, or rather everywhere accompanying it, all things necessarily become living beings, *and there are bodies there also since there is matter and quality* (καὶ ἦν καὶ σώματα ὕλης καὶ ποιότητος ὄντων). Since all things eternally come into being and eternally abide, and are in eternity comprehended in being, each of them being what it is and all again being in one, the complex and construction, as we may put it, of all in one is Intellect. And since it has the real beings in itself it is a “complete”

¹³ According to Aristotle and Simplicius, this must have been part of Plato's own thought: “And Plato made the Indefinite Dyad a Principle of the Ideas also, calling it Great and Small to signify Matter. . .” Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Physics*, 187a12; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987a 29-988a 17.

living being and “the absolute living being”... (Ibid. 21, 49-58; trans. A. H. Armstrong).

Of course, Plotinus is talking about Intellect in the broad sense, that is, not only Intellect as such but also Intellect as reaching into everything. But this does not mean that bodies are not fundamentally intelligible. In fact, bodies are intelligible *before* they are properly sensible, for this is what body is—primarily, *intelligible*. This is confirmed by several passages in VI 7, chapters 6-7—as Pierre Hadot recognizes in his commentary and A. H. Armstrong in a note to the translation of chapter 6.¹⁴ I cite Plotinus: “the power of sense-perception in the better soul ... would correspond to the sense-objects there” (VI 7, 6, 2-3); “the man in the sense-world receives the sense-perceptible harmony by sense-perception and puts it in harmony to the last degree in relation to the harmony there, and fire is attuned to the fire there, of which that better soul had a sense-perception corresponding to the nature of fire there” (ibid. 7-9). And Plotinus famously concludes this early section of VI 7 with the unforgettable sentence: “so that these sense=perceptions here are dim intellections, and the intellections there are clear sense-perceptions” VI 7, 7, 30-32.

What then are these intelligibly perceptible bodies? Of course, they are not physical but spiritual bodies. But this obscures their reality since they are no less real for being spiritual. In fact, they are apparently *more real* because they embody something that sensible bodies cannot embody concretely. Sensible bodies exhibit one quality after another. Intelligible bodies are themselves inherently holographic. One can see this not only at the level of Intellect and soul, where each Intellect is both itself and also everything else (as e.g., in V 8, 4), but it is also true in our own psychic experience where we come to understand that a single theorem contains virtually in itself the whole science—a common example Plotinus uses.¹⁵

We can see this too, and strikingly, in ambiguous passages where one is not exactly sure what Plotinus is speaking about—perhaps, intermediate spiritual bodies. How should reasoning be understood, Plotinus asks in IV 3, 18, before the soul descends into our sensible

¹⁴ P. Hadot, 1988, 100n76: “... ces choses sensibles préexistent sous une forme incorporelle dans le monde intelligible.” A. H. Armstrong, 1988, vol. 7, 108-9, note 1.

¹⁵ Cf. III 9 [13] 2. V 9 [5] 8, 3-7; VI 9 [9] 5, 12-20; and see Kalligas, 2014, note to III 9, 2, 1-4.

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bodies? “Reasoning is a kind of aid to our weakness, he replies, when we “are already in perplexity and full of care, and in a state of greater weakness; for feeling the need of reasoning is a lessening of the intellect in respect of its self-sufficiency; just as in the crafts reasoning occurs when the craftsmen are in perplexity, but, when there is no difficulty, the craft dominates and does its work.” So how is it then in the apparently disembodied world--I say, ‘apparently disembodied’ because this is what we might expect about the world prior to sensible bodies. But this is not the case. In IV 3, 18, Plotinus asks what reasoning is like in this ‘spiritual’ world, and he replies:

“one must understand reasoning in this sort of sense; because if one understands reasoning to be the state of mind which exists in them always proceeding from Intellect, and which is a standing activity and a kind of reflection of Intellect, they would employ reasoning in that other world, too. Nor do I think that we should suppose that they use speech in the intelligible world, and altogether, *even if they have bodies in heaven*, there would be none of that talk there which they engage in here because of needs or over doubtful and disputed points; but as they do everything they do in order and according to nature they would not give orders or advice and would know by intuition what passes from one to another. For here below, too, we can know many things by the look in people's eyes when they are silent; but *there all their body is clear and pure and each is like an eye*, and nothing is hidden or feigned, but before one speaks to another that other has seen and understood.”

This is a remarkable passage that makes clear that ‘in heaven’ there is a perhaps subtle, spiritual, body, that is, in the superlunary world, in between the Intelligible and sensible realms, which seems to work along the lines of the Intelligible Universe in the sense that it employs a kind of self-standing immediate understanding (*synesis*) of things--a kind of intelligible language that knows before the other speaks, a language prior to utterance along the lines of the *Phaedrus*’ ‘language written in the soul’--a forerunner of Levinas’ distinction between ‘dire’ and ‘le dit,’¹⁶ intimations of which we can find in Plotinus and perhaps too in the Stoic distinction between the *logos endiathetikos* and the *logos prophorikos*. Does Plotinus think that such speechless communication is abstract and ghostly or is it more real, substantial, and intimate? In the

¹⁶ See Corrigan, 2007, 227-235.

above passage, the latter would seem to be the case; the speechless language of understanding seems to pre-contain the essential connectedness of things in the soul, and yet simultaneously body is opened up to this precontainment: *all their body is clear and pure and each is like an eye*. In other words, bodies at this level intimate pure transparent communication, not of objects as objects, but intrinsically as intersubjective beings. As Plotinus makes clear elsewhere, nothing in Intellect is simply object but everything is also subject thinking. Bodies as intelligible subjects have a kind of synaesthetic transparency--a sort of radical openness, each to the other. Plotinus writes in VI 7, 12, five chapters after the conclusion to chapter 7 that I cited above ('intellections are clear perceptions'): "all things are filled full of life and, so to speak, boiling with life. They all flow, as it were, from one fountain-head, not like one particular breath or heat, but as if there were one quality that possessed and kept in itself all the qualities of sweetness with fragrance and was at once a quality of wine and the power of all tastes, sights of colors and all the cognition of touch; and all that hearings hear, all songs and every rhythm" (VI 7 [38] 12, 21-30). Even if in this description Plotinus is thinking of an activity immediately prior to, and paradigmatic of, the sensible universe, this synaesthetic openness evidently springs directly from Intellect itself.

What is striking from these interrelated perspectives is that although we have a distinction between form and matter, and although from the standpoint of form and matter in the sensible world, form is primary and everything depends on form all the way down and up, nonetheless, from different points of view, we cannot easily tell where form stops and where matter starts or, in a sense, where soul starts and body begins or vice versa, since body extends in different forms all the way into Intellect; and there is equally nowhere where soul does not extend, since body is *in* soul fundamentally (as both Plato and Plotinus insist),¹⁷ and soul, it would also seem, has the capacity to reach right up to the One--even beyond Intellect, if Plotinus' language in VI 7, for instance, and elsewhere, is to be trusted.¹⁸

So one answer to the puzzle we find in these different passages is that not only do souls come from above—but so also does everything, including bodies and matter. What we seem to find in Plotinus is a kind

¹⁷ Plato, *Timaeus* 36d-37c; 34b-c; Plotinus, *Enneads* IV 3 20-211 8 [51] 14, 33 (soul is not in matter as in a substratum; cf. Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On the Soul*, 13-17; *Problems and Solutions* 1.8,2.17,2.26).

¹⁸ See e.g., VI 7 [38] 35; VI 9 [9] 11.

of superposition of many different perspectives nestling together in tension and yet balance, all of which must be taken into account if we are to understand the subtlety and range of Plotinus' thinking. However, the view from above—and from nowhere—is the most important one, since if body and matter are not primordially the confluence of pre-substance and substance, then subsequent composite existence is impossible. In other words, this complexity is crucial even for understanding our own embodied, enmattered, relatively decrepit—and definitely entropic existences. I suggest then that these perspectives, namely, the superposition of different layers of connectivity, should be included when we talk about Plotinus' rejection of body and matter, or about his 'dualism.' Soul and body, like form-matter, are not altogether stark divides between different kingdoms, but waystations along a spectrum.

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