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New Observations

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This article was originally published in
*Platonism Through the Centuries, Selected Papers from the 20th
Annual Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies*

Edited by R. Loredana Cardullo, John F. Finamore and Chiara Militello

ISBN 978 1 898910 541

Published in 2025 by The Prometheus Trust, Chepstow, UK.

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Neoplatonic Influence in the Works of Robert Grosseteste: New Observations

Marcin Trepczyński

I. Introduction¹

Robert Grosseteste (1168?–1253) holds a significant place in the history of the reception of the Neoplatonic tradition within Latin medieval thought. This outstanding philosopher, theologian, and Bishop of Lincoln (from 1235)² was among the earliest medieval authors inspired by three distinct sources of this tradition at the same time. The first source is the legacy of St. Augustine of Hippo. The second source comprises the works of Pseudo-Dionysius in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, which Grosseteste deemed so crucial that he chose to compose a commentary on one of its most extensive and renowned texts, the *Divine Names*. While the first two sources had influenced previous Western thinkers, Grosseteste was among the first to embrace a third source, the “Arabic”³ philosophical texts, which carried both Aristotelianism and important elements of Neoplatonism.

All these streams converged in Grosseteste’s writings, coalescing to form the philosophical foundations for his innovative solutions. Among these, his renowned contributions to Western thought, including his cosmogony and metaphysics of light, deserve special attention.

¹ This article was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under grant agreement No. 2020/39/D/HS1/03200.

² For the most recent biographical studies, see McEvoy (2000) 19-30; Ginther (2004) 1-5. Let us only mention that this thinker was famous for applying mathematics in the natural sciences, for his theory of light (see below), for being the first in the Latin West to comment on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, and for being a committed and uncompromising bishop, who even opposed the pope. Let us also briefly list a few dates marking the milestones of his long life: in c. 1200, he becomes a teacher at Oxford University; in 1209, he studies theology in Paris; in 1214, he becomes the first chancellor of Oxford University; in 1225–1230, he is a master of theology, and from 1230 he gives lectures for the Franciscans; in 1235, he is elected Bishop of Lincoln.

³ For the sake of brevity, I use this traditional label. I want to refer to texts composed in the Arabic “world,” although some of their authors were not actually Arabs, like Ibn Sina (Avicenna).

According to these intertwined theories, the world began with a point of light (*lux*), which is a first form of corporeity, possessing the power to infinitely multiply and extend matter, and which has actualized the firmament as a first body. The firmament, in turn, produced its own light or luminosity (*lumen*), also of spiritual nature, which gathered the mass below and finally actualized the first celestial sphere, which again produced luminosity. The process continued until Earth was formed at the center.⁴ It is evident that these theories drew from “Arabic” texts, a fact supported by insightful analyses.⁵ Furthermore, James McEvoy contends that through these texts, Grosseteste was inspired by Neoplatonic ideas. As he states:

There can be little doubt but that the Neoplatonic theme of emanation conceived of as a cascade of light descending from the One—a theme or scheme that finds a general parallel in *De luce*—reached Grosseteste through Avicbrol, Avicenna, and the *Liber de causis*. The entire conception of the derivation of the visible world from simple light echoes Plotinus or Proclus.⁶

Moreover, recent efforts to trace Neoplatonic influences in Grosseteste’s writings have yielded very interesting results. John S. Hendrix has identified numerous examples of this influence by comparing Robert’s theories to Plotinus’ *Enneads* with respect to the issue of light and matter, as well as to the cognitive sphere, including perception, imagination and intellection.⁷ Sebastián Ricardo Cristancho Sierra has explored the impact of Neoplatonic thought on Grosseteste’s cosmology.⁸

In this article, I would like to follow this path. My aim is to present new examples which evidence this influence. According to my knowledge, the passages analyzed here have not been previously discussed in the literature. These examples lead to interesting observations concerning the way in which this influence works in Grosseteste’s theories.

⁴ Cf. Robert Grosseteste, *De luce* (see Panti [2013] 226-238).

⁵ Cf. Panti (2012) 397-414.

⁶ McEvoy (2000) 90.

⁷ Hendrix (2010).

⁸ Sierra (2017) 259-290.

In what follows, I present the results of my studies on lesser-known texts by Grosseteste, such as his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*,⁹ and *On the Six Days of Creation (Hexaemeron)*,¹⁰ which is a commentary on the first two chapters of Genesis, providing rich theological and philosophical content. I will also refer to Robert's commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*.¹¹ My analysis will proceed in four stages. First, I will examine Grosseteste's direct references to Plato and his legacy to determine the extent of his understanding of Platonism and the elements of Plato's ideas that he was willing to embrace. Second, I will delve into his metaphysical analysis of the concept of privation as presented in Robert's commentary on the *Physics*. Third, I will explore the concept of participation in Grosseteste's writings and assess the applicability to his theory of four kinds of universals. Finally, I will scrutinize Robert's concept of a special power impressed in matter, as described in Grosseteste's *Hexaemeron*. In my opinion, it constitutes one of the most interesting examples of Neoplatonic influence on Grosseteste's thought.

II. References to Plato

The first explicit reference to Plato in Grosseteste's *Hexaemeron* is related to the topic of the beginning of the world. Robert asserts that the first clause of the Book of Genesis ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth") conclusively settles the dispute on this subject. In his view, this clause "overthrows the error of the philosophers who said that the world has no start in time." He illustrates this "error" with the examples of Aristotle and Plato:

Hex. I, viii, 1

Aristotle said this, and tried to prove it, in the eighth book of the *Physics*, and Plato, likewise, in the *Timeus*, brings in someone who claims that there have previously been an infinite number of Deluges. (tr. Martin, 56)

⁹ Abbreviation: *In Phys.* I will use and cite the critical edition of Richard C. Dales (1963), additionally providing the page numbers of this edition to make it easier to identify the fragments. The English translation used will be that of Nicola Polloni (2021) and my own translation.

¹⁰ Abbreviation: *Hex.* I will cite the critical edition of Richard C. Dales and Servus Gieben (1982) and use the translation by Christopher F.J. Martin (1996).

¹¹ Abbreviation: *In An. Post.* I will use and cite the critical edition of Pietro Rossi (1981), and apply the English terminology proposed by Christina Van Dyke (2010).

He, thus, refers to information found in the *Timaeus* (23B-C), a dialogue that was one of the few of Plato's texts known in the Middle Ages. It is important to note that the "heavenly flood" that occurs "after usual numbers" is not mentioned in the context of a discussion about the beginning of the world. In the *Timaeus*, 23B-C, we can hardly find a suggestion that there was an "infinite" number of such floods, which could mean that there was no beginning. Hence, Grosseteste seems to be wrong if he is taking it as an expression of the idea that the world had no beginning. Robert is a very careful reader, and so it may be argued that he did not have the *Timaeus* before his eyes when he was writing these words.

Furthermore, this figure appears in the story told by Critias, who recounted what Solon had heard from an Egyptian priest asserting that the Greeks were a relatively young people. Hence, first, it was not incorporated into the central narrative of *Timaeus* about the creation of the world. Second, it was an opinion by "someone else," not a participant of the dialogue. Grosseteste seems to be aware of that, as he emphasizes that Plato introduced into the dialogue someone who mentioned such floods.

To sum up, Robert uses Plato's text as a source in which he finds (though erroneously) a certain idea, which he refutes. He does not actually assert that this idea is Plato's own. However, we should not forget that, in the quoted passage, Plato's example is given together with the opinion of Aristotle (who explicitly stated that the world had no beginning) and put on the same level through the use of the term "likewise" (*similiter*). This suggests that even though Plato uses a character ("someone") to voice this idea, he might be endorsing it himself. Consequently, while Grosseteste may not be entirely certain about Plato's personal stance, he remains suspicious.

After a few paragraphs, the pair of Plato and Aristotle comes back in a similar role. Grosseteste is still analyzing the meaning of the word *principium*, this time as a principle of the world. And like before, he claims that by this first sentence Moses, who was thought to be the author of Genesis, "yet again smites down Plato and Aristotle together." Robert explains:

Hex. I, ix, 1

For Plato said that there were three origins (*principia*), and Aristotle two—though he added one which he called the operative origin. Many, however, have seen nothing wrong in what these two claim. For *hyle* is the material origin of all bodies, and the

form which Aristotle posited is the formal origin. Meanwhile, God is the effective origin of all things; the Idea being the reason, form and art of all things in the mind of God. But you should be aware that these philosophers understood the word “origin” or “*principium*” to include in its meaning not having a beginning. They said that an origin was something that was the cause of the existence of other things, and that did not come from anything else, nor came to be out of nothing, nor came to be from a temporal beginning. (tr. Martin, 61)

It is clear that Grosseteste is referring to Plato’s view presented in the *Timaeus*, and that he employs merely an interpretation of this view, because we do not find the Greek term *hyle* in this dialogue. His reading of Plato’s theory seems correct, as it indeed includes three principles: matter, Forms and God. Robert shows it can be to some extent compatible with the Christian view, as the form (Forms) can be accepted as existing in the mind of God. However, he rightly underlines that for the ancient philosophers matter and form (Forms, Ideas) were absolute principles, which had no beginning and which were ontologically independent from anything. This fragment reveals that Grosseteste is familiar with Plato’s theory concerning the principles. Robert shows that some of its elements (especially the theory of Forms) are acceptable and applicable. Nonetheless, he cannot accept that matter and form existed independently from God.

In the next example, Grosseteste does not mention Plato directly; however, he supplements his argument with a passage from St. Augustine’s *Retractationes*, in which the Bishop of Hippo addresses the Athenian philosopher. The passage cited below is a part of a long analysis concerning the concept of firmament. At a certain point, Robert quotes St. John Damascene, who wrote: “Let no-one think that the heavens or the lights of heaven have souls. They are soulless and senseless.”¹² The English thinker reacts to this utterance in the following way:

Hex. III, vii, 1

This is the view of John Damascene on the heaven and the firmament, though he was well aware how much effort the philosophers had spent on proving that the heavens had souls. Some of them thought that there was one soul for all the ensouled

¹² John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, XX, 11 (John Damascene [1955] 83), tr. Martin, in Grosseteste (1996).

heavens, others that each had a different one. Some thought that the heavens were moved, not by a soul that was joined to them in the unity of an individual, but by an intelligence, or intelligences, that could not be united with a body in the unity of a person. (tr. Martin, 107)

As we can see, all the options concerning the ensoulment of heavens have been listed. The one soul moving all the heavens is mentioned first. The subsequent sentences leave no doubt that Grosseteste is taking into account also Plato's own view. Notably, Robert does not reply in his own words, but reports St. Augustine's and St. Jerome's opinions. According to Grosseteste, the latter claims that the heavens and the heavenly bodies are not ensouled.¹³ The opinion of Augustine from his *Retractationes* is, however, surprisingly moderate, and—what is important here—refers directly to Plato:

Retractationes I, x, 4

That this world is an animal, as Plato and many other philosophers thought, I have not been able to find out by any certain reasoning, nor have I found it to be something of which one can be convinced by the authority of the divine scriptures. (...) This is not because I now confirm that it is false, but because I cannot grasp it as true, that the world is an animal. (tr. Martin, 107; CSEL XXXVI, 55)

Hence, Augustine, the most important theological authority of the Middle Ages, in his last work, in which he revisited all his opinions to correct what was wrong or unclear, still hesitates and admits that he is not saying that Plato's claim is false, but just that he cannot grasp it as true. Grosseteste does not feel ready to attack Plato's position either. He sees no sufficient grounds to follow the Damascene. In consequence, the English thinker decides to leave the question of the soul of the world or the souls of heavens unresolved. He frankly concludes:

Hex. III, vii, 1

Since on this subject of the nature of the heavens, and the movers of the heavens, and the moving powers they have, so many philosophers and authorities have given so many and such uncertain opinions, what can I do except admit and bewail my own ignorance on the point? (tr. Martin, 107-108)

¹³ The editors of *Hex.* indicate the following sources of Jerome's utterance: *Epist.* CXXIV, 4 (CSEL LVI, 99-100) and *Contra Ioannem Hierosolymitanum*, 17 (PL XXIII, 385 B-C).

Let us sum it up. Grosseteste is familiar with Plato's idea of the soul of the universe and the figure of the world as a Living Thing, presented in the *Timaeus* (34B-C, 37D, 41D-E), and he considers it as one of the possible options. He knows the opinions of various authorities,¹⁴ but he finds no sufficient arguments to decide (like Augustine). Hence, he does not refute Plato's position. A question arises: did he have any particular interest in leaving the "animalistic" interpretation on the table? We can speculate that it was not neutral for him, if we take into account his belief that light, which is the first form of corporeity, also has a spiritual nature.

The last reference to Plato in the *Hexaemeron* is related to the figure of the creator. From the passage about God who "rested from all the work of creating that he had done," Robert draws a conclusion that "it is one and the same God who gives to things their beginning in matter and their completion in form." He also claims that this passage "overthrows the two-fold error of philosophers," and explains it as follows:

Hex. IX, vi, 2

Some said that God was the craftsman and moulder of things out of unbegotten matter that was co-eternal with him, which he had not created. Others said that he formed the first substances of the heavens and entrusted to them the formation of the things of the lower world. Hence Plato represents the supreme God as making lesser gods in his own right, and, once these gods are made by him, not playing any part in the bother of forming the bodies of mortals. (tr. Martin, 280)

As is clear, Grosseteste confidently refutes two opinions about the creator. First, that the creator used matter which was not created by him, but co-eternal with him. Second, that he created lesser gods to finish the work of creation and form the bodies of mortals. Although Robert explicitly ascribes to Plato only the latter opinion, it is obvious (also in the light of the previously analyzed fragment) that he thinks that the ancient philosopher also adopted the former one. Thus, in this fragment, he opposes both of Plato's positions.

III. The Concept of Privation

Although "privation" (*stêresis*) is an Aristotelian term,¹⁵ this concept is one of the most important elements of Neoplatonic metaphysics, in

¹⁴ See a list of such authors in McEvoy (1982) 373-374.

¹⁵ According to Aristotle, matter, form and its privation are three "principles of nature" (cf. *Phys.* 1.7).

which evil does not exist as a substance, but is understood as a lack of good. Everything that exists is positive, and we can say something is bad or negative when it lacks certain positive qualities.¹⁶ As Plotinus puts it, “the better precedes the worse, that is, among Forms, and some [of the worse] are not Forms but rather a privation [of Form]” (*Enn.* I, 8, 1). According to this view, “ugliness is matter not conquered by form, and poverty is a lack or privation of that which we need owing to the matter to which we are joined, a nature that has neediness” (*Enn.* I, 8, 5). Furthermore, natural things often (or always) do not possess positive qualities absolutely, but to some extent, and at the same time they lack them to the extent that they do not possess them. For instance, according to Plotinus’ view, the One has an absolute being, and other things may be closer or further to the One, and so they have more or less of being, where matter is almost non-being. To quote Proclus’ treatise known as *The Nature and Origin of Evil*, “that which is Being itself and the nature of Being in the intelligible world is really real and is being alone, whereas in subsequent [sensible] things, nonbeing is somehow mixed in with them; for that is in one way being and in another nonbeing.”¹⁷ This passage additionally gives us another important insight concerning the concept of privation in the Neoplatonic approach, namely the entanglement and co-existence of being and nonbeing in natural things. The term “privation” (*privatio*) is sometimes used in Grosseteste’s works. For instance, in his commentary on the *Physics* and in the *Hexaemeron*, he applies it to judge if he understands privation in a Neoplatonic way. Let us start with a fragment from the first of the two texts, in which Robert speaks about the privation of the first form:

In Phys. I (p. 21-22)

I say that it is impossible that the first form and its privation existed in the same thing. But it is necessary that both of them

¹⁶ Let us emphasize that in Neoplatonism, the application of the concept of privation is not restricted to defining the ontological status of evil. Let us also point out that regarding the concept of evil, Neoplatonic authors represented different approaches, e.g., Plotinus is said to have identified evil with matter, whereas Simplicius and Philoponus, as R. Loredana Cardullo has demonstrated, proposed a “correct and faithful interpretation of the problem, which also had to agree with Plato’s text,” which refutes this view and emphasizes the “privative” character of evil (Cardullo [2017]). We can say the same about Augustine of Hippo. As John N. Martin shows, the concept of privation and total privation is also necessary to grasp the idea of scalar and privative negations in Proclus’ syllogistics (Martin [2001] 231).

¹⁷ Proclus, *The Nature and Origin of Evil*, 8, in Proclus (2004) 351.

existed in some way in any changeable body, for privation of the first form in an absolute way (*simpliciter*) would be the absence of the first form in the thing that received it, which is impossible to come to an act in any way. This privation is an impurity of the first form and a defect of its maximally pure and complete being, and its inclination to its origin, namely to nothing. For from itself every thing tends to nothing, and this privation, according to the fact that it is in an act with what is possessed and what is incomplete (as its counterpart), is a principle and a root of the subsequent privations, just like what is possessed is a principle and a root of all subsequent ones which are possessed. For from the first form, which is light, begets every natural substantial and accidental form, and from its privation every privation. (own tr.)

Grosseteste states that it is not possible to admit that something may absolutely lose its first form, which is light. It cannot be an act of a thing, as the privation of the first form is absolute non-existence. Thus, according to the first sentence, the first form and its privation cannot exist in the same thing in an absolute way. However, Robert argues, in some way they co-exist, for in bodies which are changeable, there is always some lack of maximal purity and completeness. It seems that, when he emphasizes an inclination to nothing which is a feature of bodies, he also addresses the contingency of bodies. In order to exist, they need something to depend on.

Next, Grosseteste presents: a sequence of forms (which are being possessed), in which the beginning, the principle, the root is the first form, and the opposite sequence of privations, where the principle is the privation of the first form. Both principles are in relation with what follows them, as they are their roots, hence they constitute some sorts of orders. There is a parallel between such orders. However, we should note that there is also an important difference. The first order is related to the possession of a form, hence to being, existence, substance and its properties, whereas the second is an order of what does not exist in a strong sense.

Although Grosseteste is commenting on a work written by Aristotle and combines the concept of privation with the concept of form, in my opinion, his understanding of privation is Neoplatonic. First, it seems that he takes into account that privation is not a definite lack of some form. Although he speaks about an absolute privation, he also considers a “partial” privation: a body has a form (here: the first form) to some extent, but at the same time, to some extent it lacks it. Second, he

understands such a partial (or not-absolute) privation of the first form as an inclination to nothing, which is also a genetic origin of each being, which previously had not existed and, in some moment, started to exist. Thus, every being is somehow between nothing and complete being (which is close to the Platonic concept of *metaxy*). Furthermore, this privation, as an inclination to nothing, co-exists with the presence of the first form which in some way guarantees existence. Hence, we find an idea which is similar to what Proclus expressed in one of the quotes given above.

In the same commentary, we find a fragment in which “privation” does not seem to indicate Neoplatonic influence; however, it may be somehow addressing this tradition.

In Phys. I (p. 30)

Accordingly, matter is corruptible not *per se* but by means of its link to privation. However, matter in itself is incorruptible and unborn, because everything that is born and corrupted has matter. (tr. Polloni, 404)

Robert juxtaposes the concept of privation with the concept of corruption of bodies. He explains that matter is necessary for a body to be able to corrupt, as it enables bodies to accept and lose forms. But, as he emphasizes, it does not mean that matter itself, in a natural way, can corrupt. In the sentence which follows this fragment, he argues that “if matter were corrupted, it would yet endure after its corruption, and likewise matter would be corrupted before being corrupted.” He also felt obliged to add that “if Aristotle thought that matter is not generated, that is to say, eternal, (...) he would be mistaken.” Robert points out that matter is made from nothing (created *ex nihilo*), and as such “it is itself corruptible, that is to say, it has the possibility to return from its existence into nothingness.”

It seems that in this context, the concept of privation is used merely to express and discuss Aristotle’s ideas, and thus, this fragment is not evidence of Neoplatonic influence. However, it is also in line with Neoplatonic metaphysical views. Moreover, the possibility to “return from existence into nothingness,” mentioned a few sentences later, seems to correspond with the ideas of inclination to nothing and privation of the first form, introduced in the previous fragment. Finally, the term “return” (*redire*) recalls the Neoplatonic scheme of returning to the Father, namely to the One. However, in this case, Grosseteste is not writing about the order of being, but non-being, and returning to nothing,

as the root of every natural thing. Thus, to some extent, it is a reverse Neoplatonic scheme: with a tendency in the opposite direction. In my opinion, it is meaningful that Robert takes into account also this negative order of privations, which mirrors the order of the forms and being.

Lastly, the commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* contains an interesting fragment in which Grosseteste describes three ways in which we can consider matter:

In Phys. I (p. 28)

Matter, being subject to something being in itself, is numerically one and has one being, according to the fact that it is matter; and it also has another being, according to the fact that it is a privation; and has in its potency a third being which comes from participation in form. Hence, matter regarded in itself, does not exist as accidental (*per accidens*), for it is by privation, which in itself does not exist (...). (own tr.)

Hence, privation is a crucial concept for describing the second way in which we can consider the existence of matter, and as such it does not have being, because "privation in itself does not exist." There is no doubt that this approach is Neoplatonic and follows Plotinus' views.

Now, in the *Hexaemeron*, we find two fragments in which Grosseteste seems to be using the concept of privation in a typically Aristotelian context. However, it is worth taking a closer look at them.

Hex. I, xviii, 2

The deep is said to be dark, according to the meanings stated, because of the privation of form, which is light, which it has not yet received from the higher thing that forms it. For every form is some kind of light, since every form shows itself forth. (tr. Martin, 77)

Hex. II, vi, 2

We can say without any qualification that light and day are the formed thing or the forming of the thing; while night and darkness are a thing's lacking or being deprived of its form. Every creature has this privation, either actually or potentially. For every forming is by nature preceded by the privation of the form, and in every thing that is formed there is by nature a possibility of ceasing with regard to that form. (tr. Martin, 93)

In the first example, Robert is explaining the meaning of the biblical passage "darkness was upon the face of the deep." He describes the

situation in which privation of light precedes receiving it. Thus, he assumes that there is a process in which light is being given, by which the world is being formed, as “every form is a kind of light.” Furthermore, it is said to be given by a higher thing. Thus, the concept of privation is again presented in the context of an order, this time hierarchical one, and related to the light, hence, to being, which to some extent may resemble a Neoplatonic scheme, especially if we take into account that Plotinus was prone to present such a process as a light spread.

In the second quote, which refers to the biblical passage in which God saw that the light was good and divided it from the darkness, we find the Aristotelian conceptual framework, including also terms like “actually” and “potentially.” The fragment is also compliant with Aristotle’s idea of the form and its privations as principles of nature. And this point, it seems that there are no clear traces of Neoplatonism, apart from the figure of light itself, of course, although, as we see here, inspiration was drawn in this case, above all, directly from the Bible.

Finally, we find a fragment in the *Hexaemeron* in which privation is indeed considered in a Neoplatonic way.

Hex. I, xxiv, 1

But the error of these people is completely destroyed by all the proofs which the commentators on holy scripture use to prove that evil and privation and darkness are not any kind of essence, but the lack of an essence. (tr. Martin, 83)

Grosseteste wanted to oppose the Manicheans, who tried to interpret the Book of Genesis by adopting two absolute principles as being equal substances, namely light and darkness (good and evil). In this context, it is not enough to say that such darkness is not a form. He needed to emphasize that it is not an essence, and so it does not have a substantial character. Thus, he used a Neoplatonic privative concept of evil, borrowed from St. Augustine, as well as from the entire Neoplatonic tradition.

IV. The Concept of Participation

The concept of participation (or: sharing, *méthexis*) is crucial for understanding both Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysical systems, because it describes the relationship between sensible things and

forms.¹⁸ As Plato puts it in one of his most famous passages: “if there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in that Beautiful.”¹⁹ In this context, it is striking that although Robert, in his *Hexaameron*, uses Neoplatonic concepts and solutions, the term *participatio* does not occur in this work at all, and there is no mention about any relation which could be characterized as participation. We can try to explain it by saying that, in this mature and at the same biblically oriented work, he is trying to use only those metaphysical tools which he finds useful for interpreting biblical texts, to concentrate more on the word of God and its theological interpretation.

The situation is different when we take the commentary on the *Physics*, which is an earlier work and which deals more with metaphysics. There are a few places where the term *participatio* and the verb *participare* do occur. Let us consider a few examples. When Robert discusses the problem of coming to be and the role of non-being in this process, he states:

In Phys. I (p. 27)

Whatever participates of being, indeed, was previously participating of being and did not come to be from absolute non-being. I mean the natural things that are here considered by the philosopher [Aristotle in the *Physics*], and certainly I am not currently considering at all the creation from nothing of matter and the souls. Likewise, it is impossible for whatever participates of absolute non-being to come to be. (tr. Polloni, 410)

As we can see, Grosseteste considers participation in being and emphasizes that such a relationship is basic and inextricably linked to natural things. Thus, no natural thing comes from absolute non-being, leaving aside creation of nothing. Hence, in this fragment, the English thinker uses the Neoplatonic concept to explain Aristotle’s view on becoming or generation.

Additionally, it seems interesting that he also introduces the idea of participation in non-being. Although he is far from substantialization of non-being, he proposes a parallel to the standard way of thinking about

¹⁸ See Stephen R.L. Clark’s (2015) considerations on participation in Plato and his followers both on a grammatical level and on a metaphysical one. Cf. *Enn.* I, 7, 2. It is also a concept used to describe the relationship between multiplicity and unity, see *ET*, §1.

¹⁹ *Phd.* 100C.

participation, which is restricted to what exists and to positive properties, by mirroring participation of being with participation of non-being, similarly to how he juxtaposed the order of possessing forms and the order of privation. On these grounds, we can formulate a hypothesis that Grosseteste has an inclination to build conceptual frameworks which include opposite concepts and orders.

There is also a fragment, quoted in the previous section, in which Grosseteste speaks about participation in a form. When listing three ways in which one can consider matter and its being, after presenting two options, he points out “a third being” which matter has in potency and which “comes from participation in form.”²⁰ Obviously, he considers form according to the understanding presented by Aristotle, not by Plato, since he is commenting on a text written by the former and so has no reason to switch to the Platonic approach. If so, it means that the English thinker combining two concepts from two different metaphysical systems.

In the same work, we also find a special case of participation, namely participation in light. The sentence quoted below is a part of a reasoning which supports a claim that every existent body is sensible. However, I will not focus on this context. I am going to present an interpretation of this sentence only.

In Phys. III (p. 65)

There is no body which does not participate of light, which is visible by itself. (own tr.)

One could argue that Grosseteste means being subject to light, namely that light can shine on every existent body and, thus, make it visible. However, according to the previous example, bodies participate in forms. And Grosseteste claims that light is the first form. Hence, it is highly probable that, in this fragment, he also means participation in light as in form. If so, by such a participation, every existent body would have the nature of light, and so it would be visible not because something shines on it, but because it has a principle of visibility in itself.

Finally, there is a fragment in which Grosseteste speaks about participation in an accidental form: quality. He considers a situation in which a thing is in between: when it changes from being white to being not-white.

²⁰ *In Phys.* I, 28.

In Phys. VI (p. 122)

We should know that in any instant of time in between, this what moves participates in the other contradictory of the opposites (*altero contradictorio oppositorum*), however, the whole thing does not participate in any of the contradictory opposites; as if the whole *a* is white and changes to be entirely not-white, in the middle of time between the two extremes of change, entire *a* is neither white nor not-white. (own tr.)

Thus, in the case of change of qualities, when a thing is in between two opposite states, in every moment of such a change, we can speak about partial participation in two contradictory opposite qualities. In part, the thing participates in a quality Q1, and in part, it participates in the opposite one, Q2, which is not-Q1. And the thing taken as a whole neither participates in Q1 nor in Q2.

Therefore, first, participation is gradable. We can also assume that a scale for possible participation is not discrete, but continuous. This seems to be both a Platonic and Neoplatonic trace. Second, the spectrum of change does not extend between a quality and the lack of it, that is, Grosseteste does not think about a scale of participation in Q1 which extends from 0% to 100%. The scale range extends from 100% of Q1 to 100% of Q2, or from 100% of Q1 to 100% of not-Q1, and only in these extremes does the thing fully (as a whole) participate in one of them. This approach resembles the previously presented framework based on the idea of opposing contrary concepts. And it seems that this approach departs from the Neoplatonic scheme, which generally avoids treating negative properties as something parallel to their positive counterparts and rests on the idea of privation.

Finally, it is worth considering Grosseteste's theory of universals in the light of the idea of participation. In this theory, presented in his *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, Robert points out four kinds of universals, which create a hierarchy, ordered by the relation of being a principle of existence/being (*principium essendi*) and the relation of being a principle of cognition (*principium cognoscendi*).²¹ In such a situation, a question arises: is there is a corresponding relation of participation?

Grosseteste lists the following kinds of universals: (1) the principles "called Ideas by Plato and the archetypal world," existing in the first cause (God); (2) cognition and representation of the created things in the

²¹ *In An. Post.* I, 7, 139-142.

created light which is intelligence (so a spiritual intellectual creature, which in some interpretations is an angel); (3) causal ideas of terrestrial species placed in celestial bodies; (4) forms which constitute a thing insofar as they are the principles of cognizing the composites. The universals of the first kind are “reasons” (*rationes*) and “formal exemplar causes” of all things to be created, and as such: principles of existence and of cognition, as they can be cognized by a pure intellect. Such a cognition by the intellect of the created intelligence (created light) constitutes the universals of the second kind, which are “exemplar forms” and “causal reasons” of things to be subsequently created. It may also be the case that they are also principles of cognition for human beings, but only for the purified minds (Robert describes it as reception of irradiation). Finally, celestial bodies are causes for things that happen below (under the moon). Thus, their “powers and lights” are “causal reasons” for the terrestrial species. They are also principles of cognition, as a human intellect can cognize them as such causes.

Christina Van Dyke rightly recognizes “an illuminationist, Neoplatonic framework” in this fragment.²² We find here both Platonic ideas and Neoplatonic emanation. There are also two kinds of relations, which are key elements of the Neoplatonic emanation scheme: the top–down one (the *exitus*, here: giving existence), and the bottom–up one (the *reditus*, here: cognition). However, in this case, Grosseteste does not use the term *participatio*. Are there any grounds to give a positive answer to the question of whether there is a corresponding relation of participation?

In my view, although there is no clear textual evidence, we can consider at least some of the above-mentioned relationships as participation. The cognition of the “formal exemplar causes” in the first cause by the pure intellect can be presented as participation in God’s knowledge. Similarly, the cognition of exemplar forms received from the created light by a human purified intellect can be interpreted in terms of participation in the knowledge of intelligence. It would be a corresponding relationship to the reception of irradiation. Finally, we should remember that according to Grosseteste, the universals of the first kind are principles of existence for all created sensible things. This means that there is strong ontological dependence. At the same time, those universals are formal exemplar causes, so they determine what the things to be created are. Thus, the created things depend on them by

²² Van Dyke (2010) 158.

receiving essence and existence/being from them, and this is what I understand to be participation according to the Platonic approach.

V. Power that Gives a Tendency to Improve Matter

The last and, in my opinion, the most compelling example of Neoplatonic influence in Grosseteste's writings to be analyzed in this article, is a reasoning in which the English thinker speaks about a special power giving a tendency to improve matter. Robert presents this reasoning in the *Hexaemeron*. At a certain point he shows that when we compare the words which God uses to create the world, in some cases we find expressions like "let there be," and in others: "let them be gathered" or "let it sprout," or "let it bring forth." He indicates that the first expression is used in the case of "light and the heaven and the luminaries, whose existence is more formed and whose form is closer to existence."²³ In the other expressions, the verbs which are used are "farther away from the verb of existence." Those expressions apply to "lower things." Thus, the criterion is closeness of the form to existence. And the verb which is used informs about this closeness.

However, Robert considers also a different possible criterion, which is related to matter, or literally: "material passive potency." When God created something without pre-existing material passive potency, the Bible says "God created." When there was such a potency and it was purely receptive, we read "God said, let there be." When a potency was "not merely passive and receptive, but also one which gave a tendency and moved [matter] towards the act of existence," we find the expressions listed above, indicating actions like gathering, sprouting and bringing forth. According to Robert, the matter of creatures such as light, the heavens and the luminaries, does not have such a special tendency. And to prove it, he formulates the following reasoning, in which he characterizes the power giving such a tendency:

Hex. IV, i, 2

This is because any power in matter that moves and gives a tendency (*vis motiva et inclinativa*) to make the matter better and more formed (*formacius*) is impressed in that matter by a higher power. This, once impressed, strives to return to its origin in its own way, and to renew the matter in which it is impressed, making

²³ All quotations in this section are from: *Hex.* IV, i, 2; Robert Grosseteste (1996) 123.

it have the same form as its origin, in so far as it can. In the impressing of powers of this sort there is a kind of lowering of the greater to the lesser, and the greater which is lowered brings the lesser to its own higher status, according to the degree of receptivity that is in the thing to which it has been lowered. So the power that impresses itself on matter, and which once impressed gives the matter a tendency to something better, is previously separated, either in a univocal or in an analogous sense. (tr. Martin, 123)

The final step of the reasoning is showing that there could not be anything more noble than light, the heavens and the luminaries, to impress itself on their matter. Thus, he concludes, they do not have such a tendency. Nevertheless, what is interesting here is not the reasoning itself and its conclusion, but rather the above-mentioned power and the relationship it establishes.

Let us gather all features of that moving power which gives a tendency to improve matter, and of the processes in which it takes part. First, this power is impressed by a higher power. Second, it strives to return. Third, the aim of this process is renewal of matter. Fourth, it is performed by imitating, becoming similar to the origin. Fifth, the impressed tendency is oriented toward the better. It seems that these characteristics include key features which describe the Neoplatonic idea of *reditus*. Neoplatonic ideas such as the relationship between the higher and the lower and origin and impression are also referenced.²⁴

At the same time, from the perspective of the higher power, there is lowering of the greater, and raising of the lower by the higher. The Neoplatonic *exitus* is always directed toward the lower, and in a way, at least in the case of the Soul, it means lowering itself. At the same time it enables the lower to be raised.

If we consider whether the analyzed fragment is influenced more by the works of Aristotle or St. Augustine than by Neoplatonic inspirations, it is important not to exclude either. However, the active nature of matter as having a power giving a tendency toward something better and higher is not an Aristotelian idea. And even if Grosseteste grasped it when reading Augustine, it seems to be, in the first place, something coming from Neoplatonic metaphysical sensitivity and Neoplatonic way of thinking. In my opinion, this fragment is the most distinct example of

²⁴ Cf., e.g., in the context of purification related to a virtue defined as an impression which is embedded, *Enn.* 1, 2, 4.

the influence of Neoplatonism on Grosseteste's thought, out of all examples presented in this article.

VI. Conclusions

Let us sum up the key observations based on the analyses presented above. Direct references to Plato in the *Hexaemeron* reveal that Grosseteste knows and understands the main tenets of Plato's theory of Forms (Ideas) and he knows the contents of Plato's *Timaeus*. However, there are reasons to question whether he had access to this text when composing his work. While Robert treats Plato seriously, this does not preclude him from critiquing the ancient philosopher. Grosseteste carefully evaluates Plato's doctrine and precisely distinguishes elements that align with Catholic theology from those that are erroneous from the perspective of this theological tradition. Among other points, he cannot accept the idea of the pre-existing matter as not being created by God. He also objects to the idea that God did not create bodies, but delegated this task to assistants. Nonetheless, he does not rule out interpretations which, following Plato, portray the world as a Living Thing. Possibly this is due to his theory of light as a first form of all bodies which, in his view, has a spiritual nature. Likely influenced by St. Augustine, Robert affirms the existence of Forms or Ideas in God's mind, as archetypes of reality and as his wisdom.

Grosseteste employs two concepts which are crucial for describing Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysics, namely: privation and participation. Many instances of applying these concepts can be found in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*. Moreover, the concept of privation is also an important element of the Stagirite's conceptual framework. However, I believe I have sufficiently supported the hypothesis that Grosseteste interprets privation in a Platonic/Neoplatonic manner. Similarly, his use of the concept of participation, in my opinion, reflects a Neoplatonic influence on his thought. I have also shown that it is possible to apply this concept to his theory of universals, presented in his commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*.

Furthermore, the passages in which Robert employs these concepts illustrate his innovative approach to metaphysics. He appears inclined to treat oppositions as equally important. In consequence, he proposes an order of being and an order of non-being. The order of possessing a form, which has its beginning in the possession of the first form, stands in opposition to the order of privation, and the absolute privation,

namely the privation of the first form: the privation of the first form is a principle in the order of privation, just as the possession of the first form is a principle in the order of possession of forms. Similarly, in the case of change, the English thinker considers participation in both of the opposites: in the form which is initially possessed and in its contrary opposite. I have observed that this approach establishes a spectrum of participation ranging from 100% A to 100% not-A, as opposed to a spectrum of 0% to 100% participation in A.

Finally, Grosseteste's innovative approach is evident in his idea of the power which gives a tendency to improve matter. To explain why some bodies possess such a tendency while others do not, he describes the relationship between higher and lower powers, incorporating elements of the Neoplatonic metaphysics, such as the impression of this tendency or striving to return and becoming similar to the origin.

In my view, these examples not only show that Grosseteste was influenced by Neoplatonic ideas, but also prove that he employed them to present his own innovative explanations and solutions.

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