

## VII

# Spiritual or intelligible Matter in Plotinus and St. Augustine

The philosophical doctrine of matter is one of the most important items in the inheritance which the Greeks bequeathed to Christian thinkers : but like other elements in that inheritance it appears to have undergone a radical transformation in its taking over. In the current Platonism which the Christian Apologists and their successors knew from their text-books and compendia of philosophy matter was an ultimate principle, independent of the divine formative intellect and co-eternal with it, though not on the same level<sup>1</sup>; and in some Neo-Pythagorean and late-Platonic thinkers, and notably in Plotinus, matter in the sense-world is not only an independent principle but a principle of evil. This was of course unacceptable to the Christians. For them matter was created, wholly dependent for its existence on God, and necessarily good, as the creature of a good Creator. The bringing together of the philosophical doctrine of matter and form and the Christian doctrine of creation resulted in a doctrine of creation in two stages (not necessarily successive in time but distinguishable in thought), the creation of unformed matter and its information by the Creator, which is admirably expounded by St. Augustine in his comments on the first verses of *Genesis* and has been generally accepted by Christian philosophers.

The purpose of this paper is to study one particularly interesting part of the process of taking over and adapting the Greek philosophical doctrine of matter for Christian purposes, the use made by St. Augustine of Plotinus's conception of an unformed or potential element in derived spiritual or intellectual being. The thought of Plotinus is at this point much closer to Christian doctrine than it is in his account of matter in the sense-world as an independent principle of evil; and it is interesting to note in passing that it is also much more consistent with itself. Not only the Christians but the later pagan Neo-Platonists rejected the doctrine of matter as principle of evil independent of the Source of being and goodness, and it is in fact an ill-fitting anomaly in Plotinian Neo-Platonism, though we should not for that reason deny

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1. The real thought of Plato on this point was perhaps different, and nearer to Christian doctrine, cp. C. J. DE VOGEL, *Het Christelijk Scheppingsbegrip en de Antieke Wijsbegeerte* (with French résumé) in *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* September 1953, pp. 409-425.

that it is really there. St. Augustine had not a very wide gap to bridge in order to bring Plotinus's doctrine of « intelligible matter » into effective contact with Christian thought, and the study of the way in which he adopted and adapted it seems to me of very great philosophical and theological interest.

In the thought of Plotinus the generation of derived spiritual or intellectual being (i. e. the lower hypostases, *Noûs* and Soul) is a process in two stages — an eternal process, of course, without temporal succession. The lower hypostasis is timelessly produced by the higher as an unformed, unbounded and indefinite potentiality and timelessly turns back to it in contemplation and so, on Aristotle's psychological principle « becomes what it thinks » and is informed and filled with definite content<sup>1</sup>. This doctrine involves two admissions which are important for our purpose. The first is that indefiniteness or formlessness is in no way evil in itself, provided that it submits itself for information to the higher principle which has generated it (II, 4, 3): and the second is that the formless, unbounded element in the highest intelligible reality (*Noûs*) is not an ultimate principle but derived from the One (II, 4, 15; cp. V, 1, 5 where the One generates and then delimits the Dyad). We should also note how Plotinus safeguards the transcendence of the One in his account of the process of informing-by-contemplation by his doctrine that *Noûs* cannot receive the One in His primal simplicity but only as a plurality, a one-in-many, which is stated very clearly in V, 3, II.

We have, then, in Plotinus the conception of a formless, potential element in the intelligible world which is good, not evil, and not independent but generated or made by the One, which is formed and given definite reality by returning in contemplation to its Source. We should observe that in his thought matter, the formless unbounded element, is never simply static and neutral but always a dynamic tendency, a movement either towards form (in the intelligible world) or away from and against form (in the sense-world), either to greater unification — to be informed for Plotinus always means to be unified, to participate according to a thing's capacity and degree of being in the One — or

1. Cp. II, 4, 3; V, 1, 5; V, 3, 8 et II; V, 4, 2. I cannot agree with P. Merlan when he says (*From Platonism to Neoplatonism* (Nijhoff, 1953), p. 115) « the introduction (and defense) of the concept of intelligible matter [in II 4] i.e. matter present in what is for Plotinus the first sphere of being (*νοûς*) is a departure from the standard doctrines of Plotinus. Generally the process of emanation... is a one-track process and matter appears only at the end of it. » I agree that Plotinus does not use the term « intelligible matter » (*νοητὴ ὕλη*) elsewhere. But the doctrine of II, 4, about the unformed, potential element in intelligible being and its information by contemplation seems to me the same doctrine which is found elsewhere in the *Enneads* and which is a normal and important part of Plotinus's thought. And in V, 1, 5 and V, 4, 2 this formless element is identified with the Platonic indefinite Dyad. The process of « emanation » in Plotinus is not precisely a « one-track process » but has an alternating rhythm of outgoing and return.

to indefinitely increasing multiplicity; and on the direction of that tendency its good or evil depends. We shall see that this last point is not without relevance to St. Augustine's adaptation of his thought.

St. Augustine's thought about the unformed, potential element in created spiritual being is to be found in his exegesis of the first verses of *Genesis*, especially in *Confessions* Book XII and *De genesi ad litteram* Book I. (I propose to ignore his perplexities about a *spiritalis materies* for the human soul in *De gen. ad litt.*, VII, 6 ff: the question under discussion there is of quite a different kind.) It is a thought curiously difficult to summarise, because of the tentative way in which St. Augustine states his own views and his readiness to accept as possible other interpretations which do not conflict with Christian orthodoxy. But the essential points for our purposes, I think, are clear. We may start from a passage (XII, 15) where he establishes some common ground with his Christian *contradictores*. They agree that all formed nature or formable matter is created by God: and they agree « *sublimem quandam esse creaturam, tam casto amore coherentem deo vero et vere æterno, ut, quamvis ei coæterna non sit, in nullam tamen temporum varietatem et vicissitudinem ab illo se resolvat et defluat, sed in eius solius veracissima contemplatione requiescat, quoniam tu, deus, diligenti te, quantum præcipis, ostendis ei te et sufficis ei, et ideo non declinat a te nec ad se* ». This spiritual creation is called *domus dei* and *creata sapientia*<sup>1</sup>. And later in the chapter he speaks of it in language which reveals very clearly, if we read it carefully, the twofold origin, Scriptural and Plotinian, of his conception: « *ergo quia prior omnium creata est quædam sapientia, quæ creata est, mens rationalis et intellectualis castæ civitatis tuæ, matris nostræ, quæ sursum est et libera est et æterna in cælis... etsi non invenimus tempus ante illam, quia et creaturam temporis antecedit, quæ prior omnium creata est, ante illam tamen est ipsius creatoris æternitas, a quo facta sumpsit exordium, quamvis non temporis, quia nondum erat tempus, ipsius tamen conditionis suæ* ». In the course of his own preferred exegesis, in Chapter II, he shows that this spiritual creation transcends its intrinsic creaturely mutability (which none the less remains) and is raised above the vicissitudes of time because God makes Himself continually present to it in its loving contemplation, and he speaks of it, again in language both Scriptural and Plotinian, as « *domum tuam contemplantem delectationem tuam sine ullo defectu egrediendi in aliud, mentem puram concordissime unam stabilimento pacis sanctorum spirituum civium civitatis tuæ in cælestibus super ista cælestia* ».

The questions about the *cælum cæli* or *spiritalis creatura* on which he admits the possibility of disagreement without danger to the faith concern in the first instance the precise interpretation of the text of *Genesis* and are not relevant here except for one doubtful point that

1. Cp. *De Gen. ad litt.* 17 for the relationship of this to the Eternal Wisdom, the Word.

emerges from their discussion. This is the question whether or not it is desirable to speak of a *spiritalis materies* out of which the spiritual creation is made, or, alternatively of a common *informis materies* of both the spiritual and corporeal creation (*Conf.*, XII, 17, 20 cp. *De Gen. ad litt.*, I, 1, 14-15). St. Augustine does not reject the idea of *spiritalis materies*, though in the earlier chapters of *Conf.*, XII he seems to prefer to do without it, and to speak of matter only in connection with the material creation: and he seems to recognise that it is a question of language rather than doctrine when he states as a certainty (*Conf.*, XII, 19, cp., *De Gen. ad litt.*, I, 14) *verum est, quod omne mutabile insinuat notitiæ nostræ quandam informitatem*, since in his earlier account he insisted on the intrinsic *mutabilitas* of the spiritual creation. He describes *spiritalis materies* in highly Plotinian language. Thus in *De Gen. ad litt.*, I 1, the *informis materia* of the spiritual *cælum* is « *spiritalis videlicet vita, sicut esse potest in se, non conversa ad creatorem — tali enim conversione formatur atque perficitur; si autem non convertatur, informis est* » —: and in *Conf.*, XII, 17, he interprets « *tenebræ autem super abyssum spiritalis materies ante cohibitionem quasi fluentis immoderationis et ante inluminatorem sapientiæ* » (cp. again *De Gen. ad litt.*, I, 1).

Let us now consider in some detail the Plotinian elements in this description. First of all, who except a Christian steeped in the thought of Plotinus would pass so naturally, in a single sentence, from speaking of the *spiritalis creatura*, the company of angels, as *cælum* and *domus dei* to speaking of it as *mens* (*Conf.*, XII, 11 and 15); and where else except in Plotinus can we find the conception of a Mind transcending the material world which is both one and many, a community of minds or spirits formed by and united in a single contemplation? St. Augustine's insistence, too, that the spiritual creation is prior to and not subject to time is exactly in accord with the thought of Plotinus<sup>1</sup>. What we have here, in fact, is a wonderful Christian transposition and adaptation of the Plotinian doctrine of *Noûs* applied to the Created Wisdom, the Heavenly City, the company of blessed spirits. (This line of adaptation seems to me a more helpful one for a Christian concerned to make use of the thought of Plotinus than that which we normally find in St. Augustine and other Christian writers, which refers what Plotinus says about *Noûs* to the Uncreated Wisdom, the Eternal Word<sup>2</sup>: an interpretation which cannot be maintained without either a radical distortion of the thought of Plotinus or a grave danger of subordinationism.) The essential Christian element in St. Augustine's account of the *spiritalis creatura* is of course his insistence that it is a creature,

1. Cp. e. g. *Enn.* V, 8, 3-4, VI, 7, 15.

2. Cp. *Enn.* III, 7.

3. Cp. *Conf.* VII, 9; *De Civ. Dei*, X, 28, 29.

made by God's free act and only delivered from the consequences of its intrinsic creaturely *mutabilitas* and raised above time and change by his free gift of grace. Plotinus in his account of *Noûs* combines the idea of total ontological dependence<sup>1</sup> on the One with the idea (to the Christian way of thinking contradictory) that the being of the lower hypostasis is divine, necessary, and eternal in its own right and not by grace. But, here as elsewhere, the Christian and Plotinian elements are not disjoined in the thought of St. Augustine; neither looks extraneous or superadded; the unity and integration of both thought and expression are complete; it is the thought of someone who has always read his Plotinus with Christian eyes. This may provide a little additional confirmation (if confirmation is needed) for the view that Christianity and the thought of Plotinus had already been brought together in the thought of St. Ambrose and his circle at Milan, for which M. Courcelle presents such convincing evidence in his recent book on the *Confessions*. We should note here, though, that St. Augustine in his doctrine of the Created Wisdom goes, apparently, beyond St. Ambrose, and provides a more adequate Christian interpretation of *Noûs* considered as creature than St. Ambrose was able to find<sup>2</sup>.

The Plotinian element is even more marked in St. Augustine's account of how the spiritual creation is brought into existence and sustained in its transcendent being by God. Admittedly, Plotinian phraseology is more apparent in the interpretation which he tolerates, i. e. that in which *spiritalis materies* is explicitly assumed, than in that which in the *Confessions* he apparently prefers. Spiritual matter is a *vita, sicut esse potest in se, non conversa ad creatorem*<sup>3</sup> — an exact parallel to the dynamic unformedness of *Noûs* as described by Plotinus; it is informed and perfected by a *conversio*, a contemplative turning to God; its formation is at once a *cohibitio quasi fluentis immoderationis* and an *inluminatio sapientiæ*<sup>4</sup> — again closely parallel to the information of *Noûs* by the One and Soul by *Noûs* as described by Plotinus in the passages already referred to. But on St. Augustine's own admission<sup>5</sup> the doctrine in those passages where he speaks in terms of an intrinsic *mutabilitas* of the creature is essentially the same as that where he speaks of *spiritalis materies*; and in the former passages we can still find distinctively Plotinian features. In *Conf.*, XII, 11, the spiritual creation is maintained

1. A dependence involving an intrinsic metaphysical inferiority, a lack of absolute simplicity.

2. Cp. what Courcelle says about St. Ambrose's elimination of Plotinus's Second Hypostasis in his use of *Enn.* I, 6, in the sermon *De Isaac*. « Il se garde d'ériger l'Intelligence en hypostase, et entend seulement que l'intelligence humaine est ce qu'il y a de plus proche de la divinité. » *in Recherches sur les Confessions de S. Augustin*, p. 116.

3. *De Gen. ad litt.* I, 1.

4. *Conf.*, XII, 17.

5. *Conf.*, XII, 19, and *De Gen. ad litt.* I, 14.

above time and change by its continual turning to God in loving contemplation, and the unrealised possibility of its falling away is described in very Plotinian language, *sine ullo defectu egrediendi in aliud*<sup>1</sup>, and again in Chapter XV *et ideo non declinat a te nec ad se* — for Plotinus the basic sin, the cause of the fall of the soul, is self-isolation and self-interest, the desire to be « on one's own », a turning from the higher common good to a self-centred interest in one's petty affairs as an individual cut off from the whole<sup>2</sup>. Even St. Augustine's reluctance to use the conception of « spiritual matter » may be due to the influence of Plotinus. It seems unlikely that he had read the treatise II, 4, with its difficult school-discussion of Aristotle's doctrine, himself (though whoever first employed the concept of *spiritualis materies* in the exegesis of *Genesis* is likely to have done so). And from the rest of the *Enneads* he would certainly gain the impression that the term « matter » was best avoided in discussing spiritual being and confined to a description of the generation of the sense-world. (In both Plotinus and St. Augustine, as we have seen, the idea of an unformedness in the spiritual world which is informed by contemplation extends far more widely than the use of the term « spiritual matter ».) And matter, i. e. the matter of the sense-world, in the early chapters of *Conf.*, XII is, though certainly not evil, decidedly inferior, the lowest of created things (ch. 7).

The closest parallels I can find in the *Enneads* to the language St. Augustine uses about the informing and illumination of *spiritualis materies* are in the late treatise V, 3, and especially ch. 8, which deals with the information of Soul by *Noûs*. I cannot find even here the sort of close and extensive parallelism which would make it possible to speak of citation or paraphrase, though there are one or two phrases in the chapter which it is tempting to connect with phrases in St. Augustine's account of the spiritual creation: « *ante cohibitionem quasi fluentis immoderationis* » (*Conf.*, XII, 17) looks rather like a reminiscence, rhetorically amplified, of *σκίδνασθαι οὐκ εἴασεν* (V, 3, 8, 31 Bréhier) and the word *ἀγλαΐαν* in the second part of the same sentence (*ἀλλ' ἀγαπᾶν ἐποίησε τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ ἀγλαΐαν*) might have suggested the second part of St. Augustine's phrase *ante inluminationem sapientiæ*; and, though this is more fanciful, the *contemplantem delectationem tuam* of *Conf.*, XII, 11, might be a kind of inverted reminiscence of the same Plotinian phrase. But the correspondence is not close enough for any sort of certainty. I draw attention to V, 3 here mainly because the account given in this treatise of the relationships of the Hypostases, and especially of the relationship of *Noûs* to Soul, with its language of illumination, used perhaps more persistently here than anywhere in the *Enneads*, and its sharp stressing

1. Cp. e. g. *Enn.* III, 7, 11.

2. Cp. e. g. *Enn.* IV, 8, 4.

of transcendence and of the total dependence of the lower on the higher, seems to me closer than anything else in Plotinus to St. Augustine's account of the relationship of the spiritual creation to God. This may serve to remind us that we have no need to be surprised if St. Augustine almost in the same breath applies elements taken from Plotinus's description of *Noûs* now to the Created Wisdom, the spiritual creation, and now to the Uncreated Wisdom, the Eternal Word (as he does here if he is really applying what Plotinus says about the informing and illumination of Soul by *Noûs* to the informing and illumination of the spiritual creation by the Eternal Wisdom). Only an extreme Subordinationist after the manner of Origen could be consistent on this point in his use of Plotinus.

The excellences of St. Augustine's account of the spiritual creation, the splendour of his language and the inexhaustible richness and suggestiveness of his doctrine, will appear much more clearly to anyone who reads the relevant passages of his works than they do in my very imperfect and necessarily one-sided exegesis. What I have tried to show is how much the richness and power of this doctrine are due to the use which he makes of Plotinus; a use in which Christian truth is not distorted to make it fit into the framework of Plotinian philosophy, nor are Plotinian phrases evacuated of their original content in order that they may be pressed into service in the exposition of Christian dogma, but a natural concordance is seen between some real and important elements of Plotinus's thought and the teachings of Scripture interpreted by the tradition of the Church, which enables St. Augustine to use that thought clear-sightedly, independently and masterfully to illuminate and discover new depths of meaning in the truths of Revelation. That this was the way in which he used Plotinus, and that in so using him he was following a path already traced by Marius Victorinus and the Christian Plotinians of Milan, has been thoroughly demonstrated by Professors Henry and Courcelle. All I have done is to indicate that their general conclusions about the relationship of the thought of St. Augustine to that of Plotinus apply perfectly to the small corner of the vast Augustinian field which I have here investigated.

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