

## VIII

The Theory of the Non-Existence of Matter in Plotinus  
and the Cappadocians

At the beginning of the 15th chapter of the treatise *On What Are and Whence Come Evils* – I 8 (51) – Plotinus writes “If anyone says that matter does not exist, he must be shown the necessity of its existence from our discussions about matter, where the subject is treated more fully”<sup>1</sup>. The reference is to the earlier treatise *On Matter* – II 4 (12). Here, in the section devoted to defending the Aristotelian conception of an incorporeal *ύλη* without size or quality, we find, at the beginning of ch. 11, an objection whose conclusion is as follows “. . . there is no need for the primary bodies to have matter; they can each of them be what they are as wholes, with a more varied richness of content when they have their structure produced by the mixture of a greater number of forms: so that this sizelessness of matter is an empty name”<sup>2</sup>. Bréhier is probably right in thinking (cp. his introduction to the treatise) that this objection was one which Plotinus had really encountered and that it was made (as the context suggests) by Platonists who interpreted *Timaeus* 52A 8ff. (probably correctly) as meaning that Plato identified the “receptacle” with space, and who therefore rejected the Aristotelian conception of dimensionless *ύλη* as un-Platonic. The passage is of great interest, since it is perhaps the only example in late Greek philosophy of a total rejection of the idea of *ύλη* and an attempt to conceive reality as constructed exclusively of forms<sup>3</sup> (a position which Plotinus himself sometimes comes very near, but which he

<sup>1</sup> εἰ δέ τις τὴν ὕλην μὴ φησιν εἶναι, δεικτέον αὐτῷ ἐκ τῶν περὶ ὕλης λόγων τὴν ἀνάγκην τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτῆς διὰ πλείονων ἐκεῖ περὶ τούτου εἰρημένον.

<sup>2</sup> οὐδὲ τὰ σώματα τὰ πρῶτα ἀνάγκη ὕλην ἔχειν, ἀλλὰ ὅλα ἕκαστα εἶναι ἃ ἐστὶ ποιηλιώτερα ὄντα μίξει τῇ ἐκ πλείονων εἰδῶν τὴν σύστασιν ἔχοντα· ὥστε τοῦτο τὸ ἀμέγεθες ὕλης ὄνομα κενὸν εἶναι.

<sup>3</sup> Quantity and corporeality are of course forms for Plotinus as well as his opponents.

never quite reaches, and in the chapter we are considering argues vigorously against). The Stoics, of course, whose position Plotinus has been criticising in the preceding chapters, by no means denied the existence of *ύλη*, but insisted that it must be a body extended in space. In St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nyssa we meet the same total denial of the existence of *ύλη*. The relevant passages are Basil *In Hexaemeron* I 21A–B and Gregory *De hom. opificio* 213c<sup>1</sup>. The thought and language are very similar in both. Their argument is that if you abstract the qualities (*ποιότητες*), the formal, intelligible characteristics of a material object, nothing whatever remains; there is no substrate, *οὐδὲν ἔσται τὸ ὑποκείμενον*, as Basil puts it: body is the result of the meeting of intelligible universal forces, and there is nothing else but these purely intelligible constituents, in Gregory’s version.

What, then, is the relationship of these passages in St. Basil and St. Gregory to the passage in Plotinus? Pure coincidence seems to me unlikely, especially in view of the fact that the two Cappadocians were reasonably well read in later Greek philosophy and, in particular, knew their Plotinus. It is conceivable that one or other of them might have read a commentary on the *Timaeus*, or some other unknown late Platonist philosophical work in which the doctrine criticised by Plotinus was put forward. But this seems unlikely because 1) we have no evidence that any such written work ever existed and 2) there is no sign in the Cappadocians of any particular emphasis on size or extension, and even Gregory does not seem to be aware of the relevance of this interpretation of the *Timaeus*, according to which space is the receptacle of formal qualities, to his own way of thinking<sup>2</sup>. The most economical supposition seems to me to be that St. Basil (probably) had come across the passage in *Ennead* II 4 and been struck by the value of its argument for his own theological purposes. It would be natural enough for him to ignore the highly technical discussion about the sizelessness of matter of which it forms a part and to be unaware of the point of Platonic exegesis involved, which is by no means obvious in the text. His theological purposes, of course, are to stress the mysteriousness of the act of creation and to eliminate as completely as possible the

<sup>1</sup> For references to further relevant passages in Gregory and a discussion of this theory in the context of his thought cp. H. U. von Balthasar, *Présence et Pensée* pp. 20–23.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. von Balthasar l. c., p. 20 n. 3.

pagan idea of a matter co-eternal with God. It is worth remarking that in their radical solution of this problem by denying the existence of matter St. Basil and St. Gregory stand rather apart from the general patristic tradition, just as the author (or authors) of the objection in Plotinus does from the general tradition of pagan Neoplatonism. Origen<sup>1</sup> and Augustine<sup>2</sup> both admit the existence of an Aristotelian prime matter, though they insist that it was created "in the beginning" by God. Perhaps now, when few people except strict Thomists have very much use for the concept of *materia prima*, the ideas of the objector in Plotinus, of St. Basil and St. Gregory, may seem to be of more than merely historical interest and to merit more attention from Christian theologians and philosophers than they have so far received.

<sup>1</sup> Contra Celsum IV 56. De Principiis 2. 1. 4: 2. 9. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Confessions XII 17ff.

## IX

PLATONIC *EROS* AND CHRISTIAN *AGAPE*

AN increasing number of people who have seriously studied and thought about Plato, Plotinus and the later Neoplatonists are increasingly dissatisfied with the sharp antithesis between Greek philosophical *eros* and Christian *agape* which was given currency by Nygren's famous book. In this contrast *eros* appears as essentially acquisitive and self-centred, the passionate impulse to the satisfaction of the lover's need, the fulfilment of his desire. So man's *eros* for God can, in the last resort, be only his desire for his own perfection and fulfilment, and God, who is perfect and needs nothing, can have no *eros* at all. *Agape*, on the other hand, is essentially unselfish, gratuitous, generous, giving love. God's *agape*, manifested in his giving of his only Son for us, is primary, and is the source, cause and exemplar of *agape* in man. Now those who are dissatisfied with this contrast have no quarrel with the account given of *agape* as it is revealed in the New Testament. What they maintain is that Nygren and those who follow him have failed to grasp the depth, range and value of the conception of *eros* in Plato and the later Platonists. It is not only a question of finding a place for *eros*-love, as defined above, in Christian life and thought, and of justifying the important place which it has occupied in that life and thought in the past. It is of course necessary to find a place for the passionate love of desire and aspiration, even if that place is far below that held by the love of divine generosity and sacrificial self-giving, if we are not to repudiate a great deal of our Christian past, and be content to present Christianity as something which has no connection with one of the most important parts of human life and some of the strongest and noblest forms of human religion. But the purpose of this paper is to show that the conception of *eros* was so deepened and widened by Plato and later Platonists