IS PLOTINUS' BODY TOO ETHERIALIZED?

‘Genuine California Burgundy: Beware of Imitations’ (Daninos)

John M. Rist

Unclarity may be helpful, even fruitful, in philosophy. Historians of philosophy, and, in so far as they are different, philosophers themselves, are often prodded by it to try more diligently to discover what a philosopher is getting at. If a thesis is hard to understand, it may not be merely muddled. Perhaps it needs rephrasing; perhaps it can be developed into something clearer and more persuasive; perhaps we have lost sight of its original meaning or context. At any rate, one of the most notorious and influential bits of philosophical unclarity is Plato’s account of the receptacle in the Timaeus (49A ff.; cf. Aristotle, Topics 6.1393B33ff.). Aristotle thought that Plato must have been making a crude attempt to grasp the notion of matter (Physics 4.209B11–16), perhaps some sort of prime matter,1 or matter without qualities, though Plato does not use the word ‘matter’ in the relevant sections of the Timaeus. But Plato’s language in the Timaeus makes clear the sort of role the receptacle is meant to play: she is the nurse of becoming (49A6), or its mother (50D2, 51A4–5). She is the matrix of the physical world (50C2). Her nature (50B6) receives bodies and what appear to be sensible qualities (49D5ff.), the ‘bodily’ of 31B4, whatever that is, from the Father or Demiurge as a human mother receives seeds. In her the qualities appear (50C4–5) as ‘copies’ (μιμήματα) of eternal things, a strange sort of impressions, as in a mirror. But unlike mirrors, despite Aristotle, she is not material, but that site or place or container (52A8, 52B4) in which material objects exist. Nevertheless, she is a third factor, along with forms and the Demiurge, recognized only by some sort of ‘bastard reasoning’ (52B2) — that is, she can only be referred to, not clearly identified — to which appeal must be made if the world is to be explained. But she is independent of the forms and the Demiurge and is the product of neither of them. And since she is somehow independent, she is the guarantee that a genuinely Platonic system cannot be monistic, that is, derived exclusively from a first principle or One.2

1 Cf. R. Sorabji, Matter, Space and Motion (Ithaca, 1988), 33. Sorabji seems to be mistaken in saying that Aristotle identified Plato’s ‘space’ with his own (my italics) prime matter, but he is obviously right that from Plato’s own day an identification of the receptacle as some kind of prime matter was very widespread.

For although her existence is tenuous, she somehow clings to it 'lest she become nothing at all' (52C5).

Aristotle's puzzlement with this is not difficult to understand, and there is no doubt that Plato's comparison of the receptacle to a mother (who was often thought to make no active contribution to a conception, but, like a prenatal nurse, only to support the growth of a child) is as useful to him as it is confusing to us. The problem with what Plato says is, roughly, how the quality-likenesses turn into bodies, or become bodily. But although that problem is acute enough for Plato, he does not compound his difficulties by saying that the mirror-like mother is nothing at all; she still somehow survives as a being, a forerunner, to use alien language, of a material cause seen as 'bare matter'. We see in her the origin, but not yet the reality, of that underlying matter which Locke called a 'something, I know not what' (Essay 2.32.2).3

Such, roughly, is the puzzling Platonic original, but my present concern is with the Plotinian copy.4 Plotinus has two kinds of matter, intelligible and sensible. I shall have nothing further to say about the intelligible sort, and I shall also prescind from the whole question of the relationship between matter and evil. What I should like to consider in this paper is the relationship between matter and actual physical bodies within Plotinus' monistic framework: that is, a framework in which everything which has any claim to 'being' or existence at all, must somehow derive from the One. In particular, I shall focus on the problem of how a physical object (a body) emerges in (or

3 The text from Locke is the theme-music of Sorabji's Matter, Space and Motion (see note 1 above). Cf. also A. C. Lloyd in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy (Cambridge, 1967), 292, and R. Sorabji (again drawing attention to interpretations of Aristotle, Met. 7.1029A12–19) in Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science (Ithaca, N. Y., 1987), 18–19. As already noted, it should not be assumed that Plotinus was (or thought he was) the originator of the notion of 'bodiless matter'. Armstrong (in his Loeb Plotinus [London/Cambridge, Mass., 1967], vol. 3, p.232, note 2) reminds us that bodiless matter is a feature of the Aristotelianism on which Plotinus was nourished and which he discussed in his seminars (cf. Porphyry, V.P. 14); cf. Alex. Aphr., De Anima 5.19–22 Bruns. My present concern, however, is not with the origin of this concept, but with what Plotinus does with it. In any case, it is at least possible that Alexander, if not necessarily all second-century Peripatetics, retained enough grasp of what Aristotle originally intended by 'prime matter' or 'bodiless matter' — that is, that it really is a formal concept — to leave the notion philosophically innocuous. For an introduction to the tricky waters of bodiless matter in the Aristotelian tradition before Plotinus see P. P. Matter, Zum Einfluss des Platonischen 'Timaios' auf das Denken Plotins (Winterthur, 1964), 202–207 and more generally, in a romp through the ages, Sorabji (note 1 above).

on) a substrate of ‘so-called matter’ (2.4.1.1), seen, more or less as Plato had described it, as a ‘receptacle of bodies’ (2.4.6.1), or as a ‘receptacle of forms’ (2.4.1.2) — though ‘substrate’ itself is an Aristotelian word (cf. Phys. 1.192A33) — when strictly speaking that substrate is no thing (but not nothing), and when there is no room for at least some of the ambiguities disguised in the Timaeus by the language of physical parenthood. For although in the Timaeus the Demiurge is mind, and immaterial, and imposes forms which are immaterial,5 the analogy of the father sowing his seeds in the mother-receptacle enables Plato to evade (under mythological language) the problem of how the immaterial can ‘generate’ the material: the solid, tangible physical objects.

Plotinus takes over the Platonic receptacle (2.4.6.1; 2.4.16.6; 3.4.1.15; 3.6.14.30; 3.6.19.17–19) with some, but not all of the related language: it is a nurse, a place, a mother, a sort of sizeless ‘bulk’ (όγκος, 2.4.11.34), or better a ‘shadow of bulk’ (3.6.7.13), though without body (3.6.6.3; 3.6.7.4) because bodies have size (2.4.8.21–22), and therefore quality. It is not, apparently but interestingly, a matrix: that might perhaps suggest something too active. Above all, as we have seen, the receptacle is a substrate (though the word is not used in the Timaeus); it lies inert, without size (and therefore I know not what), a receptacle of ‘qualified’ bodies (2.4.6.1), though itself qualitatively indeterminate. Its uniqueness (ιδιότη τα) is to be identified as an otherness than all things, and as a ‘deprivation’ of all qualities (2.4.13.9–11). Thus, it is a shadow on which (rather than in which) particulars, subject to the flux of becoming, appear, for in Plotinus’ ‘technical’ idiom, if qualities appeared in matter, one would infer that they were created by matter.7 The mirror image, however, though it is a mirror without glass, or any other form, is developed more specifically, and the mirror itself is brought within the range of the causal power ultimately deriving from the One (1.4.10.13; 3.6.7.25; 3.6.9.16–19; 3.6.13.49). On this shadow-mirror a shadowy sketch — that is, the sketch that is physical objects — appears (6.3.8.36).

Matter then is in itself a shadow, and sometimes that shadow becomes or exhibits an ‘image’ of what is (1.8.3.8). Plotinus rejects the radical suggestion that, since it has no size, it is nothing at all, an empty name (2.4.11.13): in fact

5 For an account of the implied relationship between form and the demiurgic Mind in the Timaeus see Rist (note 1 above), 196–205, but the truth or falsity of that analysis in no way affects what follows below.

6 2.4.8.23–25; 3.6.6.34; 3.6.7.2; 5.9.2.13–14; cf. J. N. Deek, Nature, Contemplation and the One (Toronto, 1967), 75.

7 For ‘in X’ as meaning ‘created by X’ (Hence the body is in the soul because it is created by the soul.) see R. Arnou, Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin (Paris, 1921), 162–165; Arnou’s is still in many ways the best book on Plotinus.
that matter does not exist — a view with genuinely Platonic features — and that there are only qualities and ‘size’. Matter must exist in order to ‘receive’: thus since it is not completely ‘non-existent’ (1.8.3.8; 2.4.16.3), it must have a ‘nature’ (2.4.11.43; 4.8.6.18). It could not derive from the One if it were ‘nothing at all’ (though allusion could, of course, still be made to it): for it would then be ‘something’ not derived from anything. But then unless it were either identical with the One or some inexplicable further causal ‘principle’ in the world — which Plato had held, but which for Plotinus is unthinkable — it would have to be quite simply nothing at all, not even a shadow. But if it were nothing at all — but only speakable as if it were something — it could not be the bearer of anything. That is why Plotinus finds it appropriate to think of it as like a corpse adorned (2.4.5.18). It is not nothing at all; it is ‘something’ which can do nothing, and experience nothing (3.6.10.24–26), which is simply inert precisely because it has no character and no form — in that at least like the nurse and unspecifically characterized womb of the Timaeus. Thus matter plays the ‘role’ of magnitude (It is its ‘nature’ to be conceived like that in an ‘imaginary representation’. 2.4.11.33).

though, as we have seen, without itself being any bulk except the curiously sizeless sort (2.4.11.34).

Is Plotinus then dealing in what we might prefer to call a formal concept of matter, rather than with any kind of physical object? Is matter something which we must invoke to explain the nature of physical bodies but which is itself no kind of physical object? Certainly not, for a formal concept is not only identified by but also conceived in our minds. A formal concept could not be a last product of the One, nor could it begin to do the philosophical work which Plotinus demands of matter. For matter is not part of the description of physical objects (or ‘bodies’), but part of their nature. It plays a cosmological role, even if it can do so neither actively nor (in the ordinary sense of the word) passively. For forms are inscribed on it even though it experiences nothing, for if it could have experiences, it would be some thing to have experiences. Thus, as we shall see, if it can be changed, it can only be changed ‘accidentally’.

We may wonder whether Plotinus could have extracted himself from this ‘Lockean’ dilemma. His options were certainly restricted: he could have insisted that the lowest level of ‘reality’ from the One is not bare matter, but something at least minimally formed; or he could have claimed that physical

9 The translation is Armstrong’s.
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objects at their most minimal are formed *ex nihilo*; or he could have attempted to ‘save’ Plato’s ‘original position that the receptacle is an ultimately independent principle in the cosmos. But, as we have seen, the last alternative is unacceptable to him since it compromises the principle that all derives from the One. (Where else could it ‘come’ from?) For reasons which do not need to be explained here, but which spring from the common Greek assumption that Parmenides was right to insist that nothing comes from nothing, *ex nihilo* creation is not even directly considered. That would seem to leave only option 1 as a possible alternative to the position which Plotinus does in fact maintain. But why should Plotinus not allow that the creativity of the One comes to an end with whatever body possesses the smallest possible ‘amount’ of form? We cannot be sure, but reasons may be surmised. If a being has any form at all, it may be supposed to be creative — at least in the sense of being somehow able to affect what is done to it; in which case it would not be the last. But why can Plotinus not say that the last being is that which is in no way creative? That, in fact, is what he does say, and, as we have seen, what is unable to create is matter, the corpse adorned. Hence his difficulty appears to lie in the fact — which he apparently takes to be axiomatic — that only that which has no form is wholly uncreative.

If we ask what further assumption lies behind such an axiom, we are probably brought up against Plotinus’ unwillingness wholly to abandon Greek vitalism. To exist in any finite form is in some way to live (cf. 3.8 passim). There is no precise cut-off point — which is much more than to say that there is no precisely definable cut-off point — between the animate and the inanimate. Similarly (and perhaps even more importantly) the case of fire (‘which almost escapes bodily nature’, 3.6.6.40-41; cf 1.6.3.20) suggests that there may be no unambiguous demarcation between the material and the immaterial: a view which, as we shall see, serves Plotinus in good stead. In any case, there can be no formed matter (or body) without creativity or at least affectivity; hence whatever is formed in any way cannot be the ‘last’ product of the One. Thus, while Plotinus cannot avoid holding that the last product of the One must both exist ‘somehow’ and be totally without form, he must also allow it to have a ‘nature’, though its nature cannot be that of a being (3.6.6.8); for if it had the nature of a being, it would have a character or form.

Part of the difficulty of understanding Plotinus’ position is terminological, and before considering his attempts to identify what ‘matter’ is not in more detail — by way of considering various proposals of others about what it is — we should try to make the terminology clearer. We have seen that Plotinus will allow that matter can be called some kind of substrate. It is

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not, of course, the only substrate, or the only kind of substrate. Any lower item in the Plotinian hierarchy is a substrate for its superiors. Or (in another use of the term) Man and a particular man can be called 'substrates' of one's feelings and activities (6.3.4.33). In the latter case a sensible is the ultimate subject of reference: when we refer to A's actions, these actions are only intelligible if we think of the man (and the form) lying behind the sensible appearances. But there is no need to be confused about what kind of substrate matter is; it is a 'physical' object considered to be devoid of all its qualities, yet as a physical object 'underlying' everything above itself.

But if matter is a substrate, it is neither an hypostasis nor an ousia. Plotinus presumably regards nous and the Forms as the clearest examples, indeed the paradigmatic examples, of an hypostasis. Sometimes he is prepared to say even of the One that it is only a 'sort of hypostasis' (6.8.7.47), but when being less of a 'negative theologian' he will apply 'hypostasis' to the One readily enough (e.g. at 6.8.15.28), and generally he will hold (for example against the Gnostics) that there are three hypostases: the One, nous and soul. At the moment, however, we need spend little time on the term 'hypostasis'. Suffice it to say that to hesitate over calling the One an hypostasis is similar to hesitating (or refusing) to call the One an ousia. Rather, on Platonic authority, the One is 'beyond ousia'. Thus if an hypostasis is a finite being, then the One may not be an hypostasis, though in one place (6.8.20.11) its activity is said to be like an hypostasis. But, in so far as an hypostasis is an active power, a cause of its sequents, the One is an hypostasis; and so is Soul. On the narrower account of hypostasis as being, the One is not an hypostasis, but Plotinus is not much concerned with that. For there is little reason to confuse the One with a finite being, even an eternally finite being. Hence hypostasis in its stricter sense can be used of it to refer to its primacy as cause.

From our present point of view, however, what matters about all the hypostases is that they are active — they cause their sequents — and that they are eternal and unchanging. If anything is even partly material (3.6.12.10), it is not strictly an hypostasis, though, as Porphyry seems to put it accurately enough, 'things in themselves (that is, immaterials) give an appropriate share in their power to bodies by the hypostasis that arises from their inclination towards them. For this inclination supports a secondary kind of power that is connected to bodies' (Sententiae 4). Thus, since 'nature', when viewed as a power of the soul, is active as the creator of the world of plants (what we

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10 Three hypostases in 2.9.1-2, and in the title of 5.1, but the title itself may be due to Porphyry.
11 On the application of 'hypostasis' to the One see Deck (note 6 above), 9.
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might call the lower reaches of the animate). Plotinus is even prepared on
one occasion to call it an hypostasis on its own (5.2.1.26). I take it,
however, that this is merely a somewhat imprecise way of referring to the
active, creative part of soul, so strong is the linguistic pressure to tolerate the
title hypostasis for any creative phenomenon.

At all events, the One is always the One, nous is always itself, as are the
Forms which are constituents of it; the Soul is always soul, always creative,
but as an hypostasis, though not in its parts, always unchanging. (It is only the
partial soul which falls.) For our purposes, what matters about the three
hypostases is that they are unchanging reality. In contrast to all of them, what
lies below the level of soul, the products of soul, are changing. Just as in the
universe of Plato himself, so there is a dichotomy in the universe of Plotinus;
there are beings which are eternally unchanging, and 'beings' which change.
The latter group, strictly speaking, are not beings but becomings. They are
'so-called' beings (6.3.5.1). The lowest of them, matter, is once described
hyperbolically as a tendency or striving towards hypostasis, towards stable,
finite and creative existence. But we should know by now that such language
is little more than an example of the pathetic fallacy. For the 'desire' of
matter can be nothing more than gaping formlessness and possibility.

Yet be sure that there is no suggestion that even the 'so-called' beings do
not exist. Unlike even Porphyry, Plotinus (in this following strictly Platonic
language) does not use the word 'hyparxis', by his time the normal word for
existence, though the corresponding verb appears in the Enneads. He merely
assumes (pace Gilson) that the One, Nous, Soul, physical objects and even
matter exist. Their distinctiveness lies in the unchangeability or changeability
of their natures, and correspondingly in whether they are individually eternal
or only eternally of the same sort: thus, particulars are always (eternally)
particulars, but always they are changing particulars.

The existence of the world being established, our problem can now be
identified as that of characterizing Plotinus' view of the nature of physical
objects (that is, of bodies) against a background of matter itself. From time to
time Plotinus considers and rejects a number of suggestions about the nature
of matter which, if true, would have important implications as to the nature of
what is 'sketched' on matter, namely the physical objects. We shall, therefore,

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12 3.8; cf. 3.4.1.3-5; 4.4.27.11-17; 5.2.1.26.
13 For further comment see J. M. Rist, Plotinus: The Road to Reality (Cambridge, 1967),
92-93.
14 Cf Arrou (note 7 above), 64-68 on active and passive desire, on the Poros and Penia of
the Symposium in Plotinus.
15 E. Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers (Toronto, 1952).
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first notice a few views he rejects, in order to understand the account of matter we have presented thus far in a little more detail, before returning directly to our particular concern, the physical objects of the world.

Various Gnostics had suggested that matter is pre-existing, but formless — not entirely unplatonically, though their favourite image, that of darkness, is not to be found in the *Timaeus*. Nevertheless, their view was that it is a pre-existing darkness. Soul descends to this darkness, and somehow illuminates it (2.9.11.2). The result of this illumination is some sort of active power, able to produce ‘soul-like’ images (εἰδωλα ψυχικά, 2.9.11.14). Plotinus’ chief objection to this is precisely that it turns ‘matter and an image’ into a maker, and that thus since matter is ‘darkness’, the maker of the physical universe is evil. Furthermore, if the ‘darkness’ already existed, ‘Where did it come from?’ If the soul made it by darkening, it is not pre-existent. If it did exist, then how did soul ‘decline’ towards it? The objective of this questioning is thus to show either that darkness pre-existed (and thus a first principle of the world is evil), or that if it did not pre-exist, then the ‘nature’ of the soul is solely responsible for its own decline. Thus, the soul would be evil. It is worth noticing, of course, that there is a sense in which the soul’s nature (that is, its *tolma* or pride in the case of individual souls, but not presumably, in the case of soul as a whole) really is responsible for its decline even in Plotinus’ own account, but Plotinus does not want to raise that complication here. His argument in 2.9 is *ad hominem* against the Gnostics, at least to the extent that, whatever the reasons for the soul’s (or for some soul’s) decline, the consequences of a pre-existent ‘darkness’ are unacceptable: that is, that a basic evil principle is incompatible with the other principles of a necessarily monistic world-system.

The Gnostics, and others, supposed that the soul (or Soul) descended in time: that the creation of the ordered world is a temporal event. That, it should be needless to say, is not Plotinus’ view.\(^{16}\) It is legitimate, he would...

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\(^{16}\) D. O’Brien has claimed that I attributed this view to Plotinus in two different sets of comments on *Enn.* 4.8.6. In ‘Plotinus and the Gnostics on the Generation of Matter’, in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong* (London, 1981), 109, he says that ‘Rist continues to believe that matter, for Plotinus, is generated’, and that ‘there is a temporal generation of matter’. His footnote refers to *Plotinus: the Road to Reality* (Cambridge, 1967), 118-119, and ‘Plotinus on Matter and Evil’, *Phronesis* 6 (1961), esp. 157-158. Happily, my remarks were as follows: ‘Plotinus’ second alternative is therefore that even if matter is a temporal creation, not even so is it apart from the One, for how could the One not be equal to any achievement? The fact that this is not his own view (new italics) makes the words ‘not even so’... doubly appropriate’ (*Plotinus* p.119). In the *Phronesis* piece I observed that ‘It is quite certain that Plotinus’ final view is that matter exists eternally and is not in any sense a temporal creation, and it is highly probable that his support, even at this comparatively early date, was given to this view.’ Ah, for rigour in Neoplatonic
allow, to say that matter is generated, but not temporally generated. One hopes that the word ‘generated’ is not misunderstood. Of course, if matter were not generated, it would exist on its own, and if it existed on its own it would have a certain power of its own, if only to exist on its own. But if it had a power of its own, it would have some sort of a form of its own — which means that the door is at least open for it not only to have the ‘activity’ of existing, but necessarily some sort of activity of affecting, for in Plotinus’ view the two necessarily go together.⁷

But if it had the power of ‘actively affecting’, it might even be the cause, as the Gnostics thought, of some sort of life;¹⁸ and if that is true, then the whole Plotinian universe is overturned. Thus, matter cannot be any kind of pre-existing darkness; rather it is an absolute privation of form and eternal being, and quite without possession of any sort of dangerous quality (1.8.10.14) — except that its non-possession can be found curiously attractive to the falling soul. Yet it is not inappropriate for Plotinus, a philosopher proud of his membership in the Platonic tradition, to hold that a corpse (for that we have seen matter to be) can exercise (though inertly) a strange fascination: Leontius in Plato’s Republic, the star example of an ‘acritic’, finds looking at corpses perversely attractive (439E6–440A3).

Before proceeding to our ‘knowledge’ of matter, we should finally note that the Stoics too (as well as, supposedly at least, the Aristotelians) knew of a qualityless variety, for as Plotinus put it in at least Stoic terminology, ‘quality exists in affirmation’ (τὸ δὲ ποιοὺς ἐν καταφάσει, 2.4.13.23); hence matter must be ‘qualityless’ (ἀττόιος· 1.8.10). Nothing if not characteristically ‘ecumenical’ when he wishes, Plotinus can now throw in further Aristotelian language. For Plotinus’ matter looks like what Aristotelian matter was often supposed to be, and he himself strengthens the misleading assimilation of Platonism, Stoicism and Aristotelianism, as we have already noticed, by calling it a ‘deprivation’ (2.4.13.9-11; 2.4.16.3) — another Aristotelian term of which Plato in the Timaeus is innocent.

If matter is other than being, it is becoming, not wholly non-existence, though a unique form of ‘becoming’ indeed, since in itself it does not change, having nothing to change from or to. It must be referred to, not merely as a total absence, but as a total absence of form. When we speak of its indefiniteness and sizelessness (2.4.10.10ff.; 2.4.12.33-34), we do so in an odd

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⁷ Cf. Enn. 5.4.2.27-33, with 2.5.2.31 and C. Rutten, ‘La doctrine des deux actes dans la philosophie de Plotin’, RevPhil. 146 (1956), 100-106.

¹⁸ Cf. 2.9.5.16-18 on the Gnostics’ ‘second soul’ composed of the physical elements.
way. Plotinus refers, of course, to the bastard reasoning of the *Timaeus*, but gives an even odder explication of it. We reason about matter (ὕλη), but our reasoning does not derive from the mind (presumably because we cannot 'envisage' what we are discussing), but in ‘a vain fashion’ (κενώς, 2.4.12.33). That is, we can talk about matter, form propositions about it, or, as we would say, refer to it propositionally, but in propositions which do not refer to any ‘simple’ (formed) thing. Our propositions about what we cannot envisage, but of which we form a ‘spurious mental-image’ (2.4.10.9), are about something we speak of as if it were some particular thing, but which is no particular thing.

Elsewhere, Plotinus suggests that the process of ‘referring’ involves the ‘reconstruction’ of our mind as ‘another mind’, since what it sees is not its own (1.8.9.15-23). It is natural for the mind to pick out clear objects, each, in the case of forms, distinct. But now the mind, in order to envisage darkness, has to leave its own light behind; otherwise it would not be able to see its contrary. And when we ‘conceive’ darkness, we grasp the formlessness within ourselves (1.8.9.16): a comment as informative on Plotinus’ view of our own metaphysical structure as it is of his difficulties with the concept of referring. In any case, note that the idea of darkness is back in this late (#51) treatise: darkness is ‘not-mind’, that is, not-form, not ‘its own’. But the mind ‘dares’ to see it, Plotinus adds, invoking a word which not only suggests something out-of-character, but often something rash; there is a sense in that in referring to something formless, the mind is getting out of its depth; we cannot understand how it functions. A parallel which might give some (limited) idea of the perplexity Plotinus wants to express would be an attempt to envision recurring decimals rather than to use them mathematically.

For the *tolma* of individual souls sinning see 5.1.1.4; for a denial that *tolma* motivates the world-soul (as it does various Gnostic equivalents) see 2.9.11.21-22. In the first case *tolma* is a desire to be self-supporting, independent of the ‘Father’; in the second it refers to the attempts of various arrogant ‘principalities and powers’ to create from their own power and on their own authority. It is not clear in our present passage (1.8.9.18) that the *tolma* of the mind in ‘referring’ to — in more Plotinian language ‘envisioning’ — matter is sinful, but the language suggests that it is at least risqué. A second passage, similarly baffling, is to be found at 6.9.5.29, again of *nous*, but this time of *nous* ‘facing up to’ living apart from the One: for discussion see J. M. Rist, ‘Monism: Plotinus and Some Predecessors’, *HSCP* 69 (1965), 329-344, esp. 341. There may be a broad distinction to be drawn between Gnostic *tolma* which tries to climb to heaven, to the ‘first God’, and the Plotinian version which tries to forget about him, sometimes (regrettably) of necessity; cf., perhaps, 3.8.8.34-36, where there may be direct echoes of the Neopythagorean habit of calling ‘procession’ *tolma*. Note that in both 1.8.9.19 and 6.9.5.29 the verb *διψτημι* or its cognates is associated with *tolma*. That suggests that in every case *tolma* has something to do with turning (contrast *epistrophē*) in the regrettable but necessary ‘wrong’ direction, but that to do so is not necessarily one’s own fault.

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We conclude, then, that Plotinian matter seems to be both proposed and conceived on the basis of Plato's account of the receptacle, but a receptacle redescribed — with Stoic and Aristotelian help — within the parameters of Plotinus' own monistic universe wherein everything other than absolute non-entity must derive from the One. But those 'Aristotelian' and Stoic descriptions of prime matter and qualityless substance respectively may affect the Plotinian concept of matter in other and more unexpected ways. In considering the original Platonic receptacle, we noted that Aristotle misrepresented it as a 'material cause', thinking, roughly, that it must have some kind not merely of bulk, but of solidity. Though he is mistaken as a Platonic exegete, his mistake arises through genuine philosophical puzzlement, for if matter is not solid, where does the solidity of physical objects come from? It might be supposed that it cannot come from the mind, if that is supposed to be immaterial. Perhaps it is spirited out of the air, or more precisely out of the metaphor in which the construction of the cosmos is viewed in terms of its begetting by father Mind on mother receptacle. But there was always something wrong with that when Plato seemed to take advantage of it, and Plotinus, who does not treat the receptacle as an 'independent' cause (or even factor), has the opportunity to remedy it. But perhaps the Stoic language that matter is qualityless substance (combined with the adoption of a supposedly Aristotelian 'prime matter') enables him to evade that opportunity.

Stoicism being a 'materialism' (or perhaps better a vitalism), qualityless substance is still 'material'; it would still seem to have a certain solidity — just what Plotinus must have known that he needed to discover somewhere. But his problem, of course, is quite different from that of the Stoics. They have no need to account for the materiality, or solidity, of physical objects; that, for them, is a given.20 Everything that is real is material, at its thinnest an air current, perhaps. But the reduction of the existence of solidity to a non-problem is no legitimate solution for Plotinus. For him, the problem of the origin of solidity in a world in which reality is immaterial would seem to be substantive. His solution seems to be at least startling, if not convincing. To see what it is, and to evaluate it, we must turn at last to his descriptions not of matter, but of physical objects themselves.

As A. Graeser points out (Plotinus and the Stoics [Leiden, 1972], 13), though Plotinus was well aware of Stoic ideas of qualityless matter, he could not (and did not) accept their view that such matter is 'being' (3.6.6.3-7; 6.1.27.2ff.). For their part, the Stoics could not accept Plotinus' 'offensive' description of matter as dead, as a 'corpse', for then matter (for the Stoics 'substance') would receive qualities in a wholly unstoic way.
It looks as though Plotinus wants to define loss of form as itself being solidity; using a metaphor, one might say that to become formless is to become crass, where mindless crassness would leave one both physically and psychologically ‘thick’. Now if loss of form is to become material, the converse might also apply, and we have already noticed how in the case of fire we seem to identify an item on the very boundary of becoming immaterial. Within the realm of the intelligibles there is contemplation, and production is a by-product of contemplation. In 3.8.4 nature describes her life, saying that ‘When I contemplate, the lines of bodies come to be as if they fall away from my contemplation’.21 Presumably from lines we get planes, and from planes we get solids. For lack of unity brings plurality and plurality brings extension (6.6.1.8ff.). But that extension is itself a by-product, an ‘implication’, virtually an accident of contemplation (2.9.3.16; cf 4.8.6.20).

In 6.3.8.18-21 Plotinus defines sensible substances as a combination (συμφόρησις) of qualities and matter.22 That might seem to be a Stoic-sounding description, since the Stoics talked about the blending of qualityless substance with quality — which latter is itself material, that is, an air-current. In Plotinus’ (cruder) version the qualities are somehow stuck together on matter, thus forming the apparent unity of a sensible body (6.3.8.21; cf 6.3.9.3). Matter, as he has said earlier (6.3.4.3), is a base and ‘seat’ (ἐδρα) for form, though form of course is not ‘of matter’, that is, a quality of matter, but part of the compound (6.3.4.16) or mixture (2.4.12.8) to which we give the name ‘body’. Thus, when form and matter are coagulated, we have a qualified sensible substance. Yet though the so-called substance is a mixture (6.3.8.26), it is a mixture of non-equal ‘parts’; the matter is sterile (6.3.8.35). As we have seen, it is rather the shadow for a sketch drawn out by the descending qualities.

Rutten once claimed — not for the first time — that Plotinus’ system is a pure idealism,23 that the objective realism of Plato has disappeared, and that while being in the intelligible world has been reduced to knowing, nominalism reigns supreme in the realm of sense. That is certainly wrong, and it is

21 Cf. F. R. Jevons, ‘‘Lumping’ in Plotinus’s Thought’. _AGP_ 47 (1965), 139: ‘Contemplation can produce material bodies’. See also his ‘Dequantititation in Plotinus’s Thought’. _Phronesis_ 9 (1964), 65-71, though Jevons seems to go wrong in claiming that Plotinus differed from Plato in removing quantities as well as qualities from the receptacle.

22 Cf. K. Wurm, _Substanz und Qualität_ (Berlin, 1973), 255.

unnecessary to rehearse the refutations once again here. But the unsatisfactory solution of Rutten highlights a genuinely serious problem. Where does the ‘body’ of physical objects, and of matter itself, come from? Rutten’s view, in effect, is that it does not come from anywhere, that it is essentially an illusion, at least as far as we are concerned. For us the physical world consists of no more than thoughts. That is wrong; for Plotinus the physical world is composed, by the imposition of sketches which look like forms, of mirror-images of forms. But Plotinus seems to have rephrased Plato’s problem, and even to have exacerbated it by denying the receptacle any trace of ‘independent’ status, perhaps partly deceived by an unusable Stoic model of qualityless matter. For while Plato supposed that the sensible is generated in the strictly non-formed, glass-less and womb-like mirror, Plotinus has preserved the glass (or rather the effect of glass in a bulk which cannot be characterized as glass), simply because, it appears, bulk just cannot arise from nothing — an alternative which, as we noted in passing, he could not consider to be philosophically kosher.

As we have suggested, if the specific bulk, the sheer solidity of physical objects does not arise from nothing, it can only arise, in Plotinian language, ‘from its priors’. Thus, encouraged by the ‘Stoicizing’ notion that certain material objects ‘verge on’ the immaterial, arises the strange thesis we have suggested: that for Plotinus, literally as well as metaphorically, by losing form, by thinking less ‘clearly’ or more ‘muddily’, one comes to exist — and things come to exist — as crass, but accidentally, as a side-effect.

Furthermore, this crassness becomes marked by the qualities which soul imposes on it. But then how does the immaterial quality mark (or mix with) the material? The Stoics would have wanted an answer to that — it is part of their general challenge to the Platonists as to how the material (i.e. body) can form a unity with the immaterial (i.e. the soul, if it really is immaterial). Plotinus, as we shall see, has a general, if less than philosophically powerful, answer to that. For although his images might suggest that the qualities blend with the indeterminate matter, in something of the Stoic manner, Plotinus only admits that they transform it by adorning it — in a sense a transformation from death to apparent life, certainly from inertness to the apparent capacity to be active, affected and even sensible. For Plotinus is careful about the language of mixing. There is no real assimilation, only an association, or, he would be willing to add, a ‘presence’ of the immaterial with the crass, just as elsewhere (e.g. 4.3.22.3) he is willing to talk more generally.

24 For sensible comment (in a generally sound book) see M. I. Santa Cruz de Prunes, La genèse du monde sensible dans la philosophie de Plotin (Paris, 1979), esp. pp. 131-32. See also in more detail Wurm (note 22 above).
and Platonically enough, of the presence of soul to body. (But here again he softens his problem ‘Stoically’ by making a comparison with (quasi-immaterial) light being present with air: the light is present with the air but ‘mixed’ with none of it.)

Of course, though Plotinus’ position is hardly defended, the Stoic alternative is wildly counter-intuitive. One thing that must be in Plotinus’ mind — and not unreasonably — is that we should be able to predicate both justice and fatness of a human being without indisputably committing ourselves, as the Stoics would suppose, to the view that such predication entails that fatness and justice must be material, i.e. that justice must be something like an air-current.

Rutten’s solution, that Plotinus is an idealist, would avoid this difficulty too: immaterials would blend with one another. The fact that Rutten thus ‘solves’ the problem for Plotinus, and solves it wrongly, merely leaves the problem for Plotinus to solve. How does the immaterial even associate (or mix), let alone blend, with the material: or perhaps, since the material is sterile, how does the immaterial ‘insinuate’ itself into the material with the effect that the material becomes qualified. Rutten’s solution would have left Plotinus with immaterial physical objects; Plotinus seems to be left with the more realistic, but philosophically unexplained, compounds. Thus the explanation of the receptacle has left him not only with the thesis that solidity or ‘body’ arises simultaneously with the end of form, being simply the accidental ‘crassness’ of things, but also (again) in need of a thesis to account for the relationship of the immaterial with the material.

The problem about the relationship between the material and the immaterial is not new to Plotinian scholarship, or indeed, as we have seen, to criticism of Platonism by philosophical opponents like the Stoics. The problem of the ‘disappearing’ body of things, or rather of the mysterious and non-metaphorical appearance of their ‘body’ has been less prominent, though it is certainly an ancestor of the problem that bothered Locke about the ‘something, I know not what’. In fact, since the mysterious something was often attributed to Aristotle, in the guise of various sub-Aristotelian theses, it is worth noting that various later versions of Plotinus’ attempt to save the Platonic receptacle contributed (though not entirely) to giving the Aristotelian dog a bad name.

But that is another story. Suffice it to say that in offering this paper in honour of Godfrey Tanner, I should advise him against celebrating his

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25 For the presence of the soul to body see also 1.1.4, and for quality coming to matter 2.7.3.6.
Plotinus' Body

Festschrift with a bottle of Plotinian burgundy. He might find that though it is material, it is lacking in body, or has only the appearance of body, being in reality rather flat: little more than a corpse adorned.26

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26 It occurs to me that Plotinus might claim that my problem with his view of sensible objects is at least partly misconceived, since I failed to take due account of the fact that his primary concern is with their cause or origin. My reply would be that in discussing the cause of sensible objects he has lost sight of the fact that he is discussing sensible objects.