

On the Generation of Matter in the Enneads. A reply.

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In a recent article in *Dionysius* Jean-Marc Narbonne¹ has taken me to task for my 1986 *Phronesis* article, "Is there more than one generation of matter in the *Enneads*?"², in which I tried to show that certain difficult passages in the *Enneads* may well constrain us to accept that Plotinus views the generation of matter in several, rather different ways, and consequently that a rigid two-tier theory of matter, Intelligible and Sensible matter, is not entirely adequate to the subtlety and richness of all Plotinus' analyses. M. Narbonne, it seems, strongly disagrees with just about everything in my article³, and what I want to do here is to answer his criticism point by point, and this for two reasons: firstly, because I do not recognize my own article in his criticism, in which I find my "position" misrepresented, and secondly, because M. Narbonne is altogether wrong in his assessment of the major passages in question.

A. Misrepresentation

Let me take up the question of misrepresentation. Firstly, I do not argue anywhere that there are *three different generations* of *sensible matter* ("on trouve dans les *Ennéades* trois générations différentes de la seule matière sensible" (Narbonne, p. 3) is not equivalent to my "it is possible to argue that there are three different generations of the matter of the physical universe" (Corrigan, p. 167, which I then go on to reject)).⁴ In particular, the ambiguity I am trying to bring out in Plotinus' different accounts between pre-cosmic and cosmic matter is certainly not reflected in "*une même chose ne peut guère être engendrée trois fois*" (N. p. 5). Secondly, Narbonne puts much emphasis upon the preposition *sur* in his presentation of my position: "on trouve dans les *Ennéades*

1. Jean-Marc Narbonne, "Plotin et le problème de la génération de la matière: a propos d'un article récent", *Dionysius* XI, 1987, pp. 3-31.

2. *Phronesis*, 1986, 31, no. 2, pp. 167-181.

3. I was relieved to find that he agreed with me on at least one point, but even this is in an aside in note 27, p. 23.

4. Narbonne continues to emphasize this in a way which is simply inappropriate. See p. 5 ("... cette matière est en réalité engendrée deux autres fois. . .") and especially p. 12 ("Mais II 5, 5 est introduit dans la discussion parce que Corrigan veut montrer que la matière sensible, qu'il suppose être engendrée une première fois en III, 4, 1 par l'âme partielle (sans l'avoir démontré), le serait une nouvelle fois à partir de la matière intelligible"). This is just not true).

trois points de vue *sur* la génération" (p. 3) and "que peut signifier d'ailleurs, dans ce contexte, trois points de vue sur (. . .)?" (p. 5, note 6); "ou que l'engendrement d'une partie (?) d'un constituant (?) ou plus vaguement de quelque chose (ti) de la matière" (p. 5). But this is *not* my formulation in the place to which he expressly refers: "I propose that the three accounts of the generation of matter cannot be understood as three different generations, but only as three different viewpoints". (p. 176 *tout court*). Let me add that, try as I may, I cannot see what is wrong in speaking of three different viewpoints in three different accounts. Such a position does not commit me to any of the absurdities which Narbonne envisages.

Thirdly, and more importantly, Narbonne accuses me of projecting "le schéma de l'Ancienne Académie" (p. 20) upon the texts in question, which is to say that I am simply forcing my own preconceived interpretation upon the *Enneads*. But where in the article, I ask, do I do this? Nowhere. This is simply Narbonne's construction of my supposed intentions and there is no evidence in my article to support it. I must avow, on the contrary, that this article arose out of a genuine sense of *aporia* concerning the texts in question and that it was only by following the principle of charity of interpretation that I was led to propose a rather different view of matter (than the simple two-tier quasi-hypostatic approach) in the final pages of my article. I deny that this is the view of the Old Academy *simpliciter*. My whole intention was to point to the subtlety and ambiguity of Plotinus' analyses, not to prejudice them.

B. III.4.1 and related passages.

In the light of M. Narbonne's rebuttal, my original claim that "III, 4, 1 . . . is the only text which yield's *conclusive* proof, without need of further comment, of matter's generation" (p. 168) does require a little more investigation. Narbonne points out that the term *hule* does not occur in the passage and that we can not demonstrate the commutability ("cette démonstration se révélerait périlleuse, pour ne pas dire impossible", p. 6) of *hule* and *aoristia*. Therefore, the passage can not yield conclusive proof. In reply, I must make it clear that I would be glad to retain any ambiguity in the passage, just as I would also wish to affirm, with Schwyzer, that matter can not be generated in the same sense as any *entity* in Plotinus' philosophy.⁵ In the last analysis, however, ἀοριστίαν . . . παντελή is simply unambiguous. Plotinus is speaking of *matter*. The passages which M. Narbonne cites, III, 6, 7, 38ff., IV, 3, 9, 28 (and

5. A genuine *epistrophe* in the active sense is lacking in III, 4, 1, 8-17.

we may add the difficult III, 9, 3),⁶ are not parallels. In III, 6, 7, 38ff τὸ ψευδὸς in matter has “no sort of likeness to that which has produced it” (οὐδαμῆ ἔχοντος ὁμοιότητα πρὸς τὸ ποιήσαν). This is equivalent to πάντη ἕτερον αὐτῆς in III, 4, 1 but *not* to ἀοριστίαν . . . παντελῆ. In III, 6, 7 Plotinus is speaking of body from the perspective of matter which is characteristic of the later chapters of that treatise. In III, 4, 1, Plotinus is speaking of the pre-cosmic or cosmic indefiniteness (and there *is* an ambiguity in this) which will result in body. This is the same as the σκότος of IV, 3, 9, 25 which the soul saw and shaped into body (τὸ ἀμυδρὸν ἐν ἀμυδρῶ). One may go on to argue that “what is produced” in III, 4, 1 is either body or the potential for body or matter. It is certainly not body, but it may well be either of the latter two possibilities. Therefore, it must be ambiguous (as, for instance, τὸ μετ’ αὐτηγύ designated as τὸ μὴ ὄν in III, 9, 3, 10-13 is ambiguous). However, one must reply that what is potentially body together with shaping form *must* be matter, for despite Narbonne’s claim “que Plotin prend la peine de spécifier que cet indéterminé devient un corps ce que la matière, c’est sa doctrine courante, ne devient jamais” (p. 8), body *is* “indwelling form and matter” (II, 7, 3, 12: 4. III, 8, 2, 25ff.; IV, 7, 2, 22ff.). Where else would we look for matter! True it is that matter does not have actual existence, but is rather potential to all (II, 5, 5, 5: τὸ δυνάμει οὐ τι, ἀλλὰ δυνάμει πάντα). But Plotinus does not say γίνεται σῶμα τι in III, 4, 1, merely σῶμα with a definite generic ring to it. (It is in this sense that I continue to interpret II, 5, 5, 13-15: οὔτε δὲ ἦν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐνεργεῖα τι ἀποστάσα πάντων τῶν ὄντων οὔτε ἐγένετο: (with A.H. Armstrong) “It was not anything actually from the beginning since it stood apart from all realities, and it did not become anything”). On the other hand, it is not impossible for Plotinus from a different point of view to make an entirely different claim. See for example II, 4, 5, 16-18: ἡ δὲ (ὑλη) ὠρισμένον μὲν τι γίγνεται, οὐ μὴν ζῶν οὐδὲ νοῦν, ἀλλὰ νεκρὸν κεκοσμημένον. Therefore, from the point of view of soul or of form (which is in question in III, 4, 1) if indefiniteness is not shaped, or if matter does not become body under the influence of the shaping soul, there will be no body at all. Hence, what is potentially body may well be both *logos* and matter (and even the *logos* of matter, see III, 3, 4, 37ff), but if it is “absolute indefiniteness”, then this must be matter. In my view, therefore, III, 4, 1 is conclusive. “In whatever way we are to understand it, an isolated or partial soul does generate matter in III, 4, 1” (*Phronesis* p. 168). If Narbonne can show that the phrase “ἀοριστίαν . . . παντελῆ” may genuinely be understood in a different way, then, and only

6. For an analysis of this passage see my *Phronesis* article, p. 168, note 5.

then, will I be convinced to the contrary.

At the root of Narbonne's criticism of my article there is the belief that I am overdetermining the text. Instead, Narbonne wishes to argue for "le caractère aporétique de cette question chez Plotin" (p. 12), by which "Plotin évite habilement, dans sa description de la genèse de l'univers, de dire que la matière est engendrée" (pp. 11-12). With this intention I am not really at odds, for I would like to see ambiguity retained rather than dismissed. In my view, however, this should not be achieved by underdetermining the text of Plotinus. We can take 'lack of closure' just a little too far, as Derrida's own recent deconstructions of the deconstructionists have implicitly shown!

One text Narbonne rightly draws attention to is V, 1, 2, 23-27, where Plotinus states that before soul entered into the body of the heaven, the heaven was a dead body, "the darkness of matter and non-being". Since this sequence represents a logical priority, Narbonne concludes that matter existed "without the intervention of soul", indeed "*avant l'intervention de cette puissance (végétative)*" (p. 7). Thus, the partial soul can not generate matter.

We must ask the following question. What does *πρὸ ψυχῆς* mean in this context? Clearly it means *before the soul entered into the body of the universe* and shaped it (*ψυχὴ ἔλθοῦσα εἰς σῶμα οὐρανοῦ ἔδωκε κ. τ. λ.*, 21-22). But if soul were to generate matter, it would have to do so "before" it entered into it.⁷ Therefore, matter does not exist without the intervention of soul, whereas it is also clear that matter was what it was before soul entered into it.

This established, we are left with two questions. In what sense could it be the partial soul which generates matter in connection with this passage? And what does Plotinus mean when he refers to matter as a dead body? Let us start with the first question. We must not think of the partial soul as if it were frozen in some physical compound, any more than Plotinus will allow us to think of *phusis* in III, 8, 2 as a compound of form and matter. Rather, the partial soul *is* ambiguous. It may descend into the compound and identify itself solely with that. Yet it is also intelligible if it remains intent upon what is before it (cf. III, 9, 3, 7-8: 14-15; see my *Phronesis* article, p. 176, note 24). Hence the power of the Intelligible World contains partial souls, just as the power of the World Soul in VI, 7, 7 must also contain the "*puissance végétative*" before its articulation and actualization in particular individuals (cf. VI, 7, 7, 8-16; and for the distinction between *dynamis* and *energeia* see also IV, 3, 22-23). We may conclude,

7. Cp. IV, 3, 9, 12-23. For an interpretation of this in relation to other passages see below.

therefore, that V, 1, 2, 23-27 is not inconsistent with III, 4, 1, although a careful consideration of the implicit ambiguities in both passages is essential.

What then does Plotinus mean when he refers to matter as a dead body "before soul"? Perhaps no more than that it is in death that we come closest to the true nature of matter, that the object becomes merely such — no longer the dynamic shaping of form in matter drawing matter up into its potential, but rather an apparent solidification which is really the falling away of matter from form. Here it is necessary, since "there was never a time when matter was not set in order" (IV, 3, 9, 15-17) and since matter is potentially all bodies (which are genuinely compounded of matter and form), that there should be a coalescence of viewpoints. What is Intellect/Soul from the top down, so to speak, is matter/dead body from the bottom up, when the latter/pair is implicitly or explicitly separated from the former (See V, 1, 2, 25-26; IV, 3, 9, 12-29; II, 3, 9, 443 ff., cf. V, 4, 2, 43; VI, 9, 2, 24-25; II, 4, 5 15-18). Thus while I agree that the field of pre-cosmic/cosmic matter can not be abstractly separated from body, the "absolute indefiniteness" of III, 4, 1, nonetheless, refers to matter.

To sum up: either Plotinus is simply inconsistent or he wishes to leave the question open ("le caractère aporétique de cette question") or it is legitimate to speak of different points of view. We have made a case for ruling out major inconsistency and this suggests that the first disjunct is false. The second and third disjuncts are not necessarily opposed to each other, despite Narbonne's belief to the contrary. Considered exclusively, however, the second disjunct must also be eliminated since it is just not true that Plotinus leaves the question open *to the degree upon which Narbonne insists*. Therefore, it is legitimate to speak of different points of view. Indeed, this was the major impetus of my *Phronesis* article.

c. II, 5, 5, 10-28; II, 4, 5, 28-29; I, 8, 14, 51-55

II, 5, 5, 10-28; I, 8, 7, 16-23.

1. The sense in which I have interpreted Plotinus to be denying temporal generation in the phrase οὔτε ἐγένετο (II, 5, 5, 15), I have indicated above. As to the phrases οἶον ἐκριφεῖσα (11) and ἐκβεβηκός (28), Narbonne is against pressing any literal sense out of them, and I too am in sympathy with the thesis that they "jettent un certain doute, ou laissent entrevoir une certaine indétermination ou ambiguïté dans la pensée . . . de Plotin" (p. 12). However, there is one difficulty. Narbonne italicises the words "*qui sortent de lui*" in his translation of I, 8, 7, 16-23 in order to draw his major conclusion that there "pour la première fois dans les Ennéades (et peut-être du reste la seule fois) est affirmée avec

toute la vigueur et la clarté voulue non seulement la génération de la matière, mais la nécessité de cette génération" (p. 24). This is to put the full weight of his argument upon τῆ ἐκβάσει τῆ παρ' αὐτό. But this is plainly inconsistent. For, on the one hand, he makes his argument turn upon τῆ ἐκβάσει, while, on the other, he objects to my taking ἐκβεβηκός seriously. Hence, while I am in sympathy with his attempt to point out the importance of the late work I, 8, his argument is not sound, and this is not the first time in the *Enneads* that the generation of matter is "affirmed".

2. II, 4, 5, 28-29

Narbonne rejects my attempt to make some sense of *aei* in the phrase "what receives light, before receiving it, *eternally* has no light" for two reasons: Firstly, Plotinus tells us explicitly at the end of the chapter that he has been speaking of intelligible matter. Secondly, Plotinus can use *aei* in a way which, if pressed, would yield utter absurdity. Narbonne cites, then, as counter-example, II, 4, 15, 18-19, where Plotinus states that intelligible matter would be produced from the unlimitedness or the power or the eternity of the One (εἴη ἄν γεννηθῆν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ ἑνοῦ ἀπειρίας ἢ δυνάμεως ἢ τοῦ αἰεί). Narbonne writes: Comment ce qui est éternel pourrait-il lui-même être produit par l'éternité de quoi que ce soit? Ou faudrait-il penser que l'Un *produit* l'éternité, si bien que le matière intelligible, *avant* d'avoir été produite par elle, ou bien existait dans un temps qui pré-existerait en quelque sort á l'éternité, ou bien existait elle aussi de toute éternité, si bien qu'on aurait deux éternités?" (p. 13) Narbonne, therefore, concludes that we should not insist on the letter of certain formulae and that we should simply change the text!

Now, true it is that at the end of the chapter Plotinus makes it clear that he has been speaking about ἡ ὄλη ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς. However, the earlier part of the chapter (lines 1-23) contrasts the two matters and indeed points to a view of lower matter as the (certainly ambiguous) pre-cosmic/cosmic darkness which is discovered by the descending analysis of *nous* (4-12). If then lower matter was there "from the beginning" and if lower matter (as pre-cosmic and hence "intelligible" in a different sense) enjoys significant treatment in this chapter, (and indeed if Plotinus feels it necessary to admit that he has said "more than was fitting" about the matter in the intelligibles), then my attempt to point to the ambiguity of pre-cosmic/lower matter implicit in *aei* and my formulation of this in the *Phronesis* article⁸ are certainly justified.

8. "In II, 4, 5, 24-39 Plotinus is discussing intelligible matter and its generation, but the passage cannot be fully understood, I suggest, if a reference

However, Narbonne's supposed counter-example is most revealing, for he cites only II, 4, 15, 18-19 and *not* the clause which Plotinus adds to explain his ascription of infinity (and hence power and eternity) to the One, namely, οὐκ οὐσης ἐν ἐκείνῳ ἀπειρίας ἀλλὰ ποιούντος (line 20). Hence, there is no question of the absurdity of an eternity begetting an eternity, but rather of the One (which is not to be conceived of *simply as devoid of all qualities* (as lower matter is)) making eternity. II, 4, 15, 18-20, therefore, is *not* a counter-example. In addition, emending the text without good grounds should be the very last resort, not one's first and best impulse.

3. I, 8, 14, 51-55.

My argument concerning these lines was, indeed, too involved, but M. Narbonne renders it unrecognizable. The lines are as follows: καὶ γὰρ εἰ αὐτὴ ἡ ψυχὴ τὴν ὕλην ἐγέννησε παροῦσα, καὶ εἰ ἐκοινωνήσεν αὐτῇ καὶ ἐγένετο κακὴ, ἡ ὕλη αἰτία παροῦσα ὅτι οὐ γὰρ ἄν ἐγένετο εἰς αὐτὴν μὴ τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτῆς τὴν γένεσιν λαβοῦσα. The problem is that in the absence of a main verb in the apodosis, the protasis may be either unreal or real. If the protasis represents an unreal condition, then Plotinus does not hold at least one of the conjuncts (and probably all) therein to be true. If it is understood as a real condition, then Plotinus holds the protasis to be true.

Let A = the soul generates matter, B = the soul becomes evil, and C = matter is the cause of the soul's descent. Narbonne caricatures my argument as follows: "faux de AB, vrai de C, donc vrai de AB \blacktriangleright C" (p. 16) or again: "Either AB is false and C is true or AB is true and C true. It is not the case that AB is false and C true because Plotinus doesn't say that AB is false. Therefore, AB is true and C is true" (pp. 17-18). This betrays a resolute intention to misunderstand the argument. My argument was very different and I shall paraphrase and interpret it as follows. If AB entails C, and if AB is false and C true, then AB *can not in any way represent Plotinus' own position*. Hence, a further assumption: AB can be interpreted in this case as representing a situation where soul is somehow primarily responsible for evil, a position, for instance, which might well be similar to that of Plutarch or Atticus or the Gnostics (=AB¹). Therefore, AB¹ \blacktriangleright C. But if AB¹ \blacktriangleright C (and C is true in every instance according to Plotinus), then AB¹ must ultimately be self-defeating under this particular interpretation of AB. Therefore, it makes sense to look for another interpretation of AB such that AB is true (case # 2 on Narbonne's truth table). Now, (leaving aside the questions of Plotinus only having to state his belief,

to the pre-cosmic matter of the physical world is not included" (*Phronesis* p. 170). Cp. Narbonne, *Dionysius*, pp. 12-13.

if he so wishes, and of soul's priority to matter, by which Narbonne was unfortunately misled) the crux of my argument was that if AB could be shown to represent *in any way* Plotinus' own position, then this would provide an additional basis for showing that the condition was real (and here the evidence could be circumstantial, since I would only have to show that this was *possible* in order to cast sufficient doubt upon the first assumption, that AB was false). For these reasons, I then went on to show that for each element in the protasis there were parallels in the *Enneads* (e.g. αὐτὴ ἢ ψυχὴ: cp. IV, 3, 9, 12-26, IV, 2, 1, 41-45; παθοῦσα: cp. III, 7, 11, 11-40, IV, 8,5, 16 ff., I, 8, 4, 28-32; ἐκοινώνησεν: I, 8, 12, 5-7; 8, 37-41; ἐγένετο κακὴ I, 8, 13, 12-26). Hence, my conclusions were as follows: the protasis is ambiguous, depending upon the interpretation one gives it. Since, on the unreal interpretation, the *very order of the thought* leads to the position of Plotinus, then perhaps the ambiguity is intentional, in order to show that whatever interpretation one gives, one is nonetheless compelled to the same conclusion. But what starts as quite possibly an unreal condition (and what, therefore, must remain as one interpretation) can also turn out to have another value, if the protasis *may* represent Plotinus' thought. Hence, while there is an ambiguity which must be retained, there are good grounds for thinking the condition is real. In my view, this is not "denuée de sens", it is not illogical, it is not tautologous, but rather an attempt to catch a subtlety which I believe to be present in the text and which, I think, does not "obscure Plotinus' originality".

In conclusion, I propose that M. Narbonne is wrong in his representation and criticism of my views and also in the developmental position he espouses on this subject. What disturbs me most, however, is the charge that my article obscures the originality of Plotinus. This I should most certainly not like to do. However, I do not see that this originality is something which can only be encapsulated in such a masterwork as Kraemer's *Geistmetaphysik*, or reflected only by the *imprimatur* of M. Narbonne. The passages I have discussed present us with several *aporiae*, which require a sense of balance and fairness in our approach to any solution. The solution I have advanced is in no way opposed to the authorities Narbonne cites. At the same time as M. Narbonne argues for an underdetermination of Plotinus' text, he drastically overdetermines my own reading and intentions. In short, M. Narbonne has misunderstood both the letter and the spirit of my communication.