

J.-M. Narbonne on Plotinus and the Generation of Matter: two corrections

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In a recent article entitled 'Plotin et le problème de la génération de la matière; à propos d'un article récent', published in *Dionysius* XI (1987) 3-31, J.-M. Narbonne makes two claims concerning my published writings; both claims are manifestly false.

He asserts that in an analysis of *Ennead* IV 8 [6] 6.18-23 (εἴτε . . . , εἴτε . . .) I gave utterance to the following view (Narbonne, p.22 n.27 = p.23):

'L'"alternative" ne présenterait plus deux matières différentes, mais deux origines différentes d'une même matière sensible engendrée de toute éternité (une fois par l'Un, une autre fois par l'âme).'

Narbonne refers for this interpretation to pages 114-115 of an article entitled 'Plotinus and the Gnostics on the generation of matter', which was published in *Neoplatonism and early Christian thought, Essays in honour of A. H. Armstrong*, edited by H. J. Blumenthal and R.A. Markus (London, 1981), where I in fact wrote as follows (p. 114):

'On the *first* hypothesis, matter "existed always"; the implication, I would suggest, is that on this hypothesis matter belongs among "the beings" which are "generated from the One". On the *second* hypothesis "the generation" of matter follows from causes "prior" to matter; the implication is that these causes are subsequent to the One, and that matter—since it cannot be equated with soul — belongs among "the things that take their origin from souls".

The distinction will be in effect the same as that which Plotinus establishes at the end of his treatise *On matter*, between the matter of the intelligible and of the sensible world: "divine" matter is itself "being" or substance, since the principle prior to it is "beyond being"; the material principle of the sensible world is "non-being", since the principle prior to it is "being".'

And I continue (pp. 114-115) to explain various differences between intelligible matter and the matter of the sensible world which would allow one to suppose that for the first branch of his alternative Plotinus has in mind intelligible matter, while for the second branch of his alternative he means to describe the matter of the sensible world. Nowhere do I say, nor anywhere do I *Dionysius*, Vol. XII, Dec. 1988, pp. 25-27

imply, that it is the same matter, the matter of the sensible world (cf. *'une même matière sensible'*) which is described by Plotinus in both branches of his alternative.

There is a second and no less egregious error when Narbonne solemnly informs his reader (p. 25 n. 32):

'O'Brien postule que la création de la matière "is incidental to the question of evil".'

Narbonne here refers to page 128 note 6 of an earlier article, entitled 'Plotinus on evil: a study of matter and the soul in Plotinus' conception of human evil', published in *Le Néoplatonisme, Colloques internationaux du Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (Royaumont, 9-13 juin 1969). The concluding two paragraphs of the note which Narbonne has quoted read as follows:

'There are of course several differences between the soul's production of matter and the production of intellect from the One or of soul from intellect. One of the most significant is that in these other cases what is produced "is informed by its turning towards the source which produces it" (III, 4 [15] 1, 9-10, cf. V, 2 [11] 1, 9-12 and 19-21); whereas matter has no power to turn towards its source in this way, but is informed by a second initiative on the part of soul.

'But to pursue these differences would require a separate study, and is incidental to the question of evil.'

It is not the 'creation of matter' (cf. *"la création de la matière"*) which I claim here is 'incidental to the question of evil', but the modalities of its creation ('differences between the soul's production of matter and the production of intellect from the One or of soul from intellect') which are incidental to the particular aspect of the problem of evil which I was studying in this article (namely the relation of matter and the soul in Plotinus' conception of human evil, as specified in my title).

Since Narbonne fails to understand my straightforward English, it is perhaps hardly surprising that, more often than not, he fails to grasp the meaning of Plotinus' elliptical and tortured Greek. But we had better start with the living. May I please ask you to put the record straight as regards myself?