

The Doctrine of Reception According to the Capacity of the Recipient in *Ennead* VI. 4-5

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In his recent study of Plotinus, Dominic J. O'Meara remarks that "On trouve . . . dans VI 5 la notion d'un 'rapprochement' de la matière vers l'Idée, par lequel peut se réaliser la constitution des formes sensibles."¹ This conception of a causal "rapprochement" on the part of matter, O'Meara argues,² stems from Plotinus' use in *Ennead* VI. 4-5 of what A. H. Armstrong has described as "the doctrine of 'reception according to the capacity of the recipient.'"³ I shall argue here that this aspect of O'Meara's interpretation of Plotinus is seriously mistaken and, further, that this exegetical result has profound consequences for the philosophical evaluation of the Plotinian version of metaphysical Platonism.

I

Platonism and Eidetic Causation

Before turning to the doctrine of reception, I shall sketch briefly a few central features of metaphysical Platonism as formulated by Plato and as explicated by Plotinus. This introductory review is meant to set the stage for the philosophical (as opposed to the exegetical) dimension of my critique of O'Meara.

The fundamental metaphysical doctrine of Platonism is that there is a distinction between two different modes of existence: on the one hand, there is the realm of Being, the intelligible world, composed of entities (τὰ εἶδη, αἱ ἰδέαι, τὰ νοητά) which are (in some sense) universal, immutable, and objects of some sort of non-perceptual rational intuition (νόησις); on the other hand, there is the realm of Becoming, the sensible world, composed of the more-or-less particular things with which we interact in our daily experience, things which are constantly in a state of flux and which are objects of sense perception.⁴ This fundamental metaphysical doctrine generates the basic question that faces any

1. Dominic J. O'Meara, *Structures hiérarchiques dans la pensée de Plotin: Étude historique et interprétative* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), p. 68.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-60.

3. A. H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940; reprint ed., Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1967), p. 60.

4. Cf., *Timaeus* 51b6 - 52d1.

Platonic metaphysics: what is the relation between the intelligible world and the sensible world? The metaphysical difficulty here is, of course, what is traditionally known as “the problem of participation.”

In a much-discussed passage of the *Phaedo*, 100c4-7, Plato (through Socrates) provides what is perhaps his most important characterization of the participation relation:

It seems to me that if there is anything beautiful other than beauty-itself, then it is beautiful in no other way than because it participates [μετέχει] in beauty-itself — and I give the same account for all things. Do you agree with such an account of causality [αἰτία]?

Here, the relation of participation (μέθεξις) which obtains between things in the sensible world (e.g., things that are beautiful) and *eide* in the intelligible world (e.g., beauty-itself) is described in an account of causality (αἰτία). By implication, the *eide* in the intelligible world are described as the (possibly unique) *causes* (τὰ αἴτια) of particulars in the sensible world.

At *Phaedo* 100d4-8, this causal account of participation is expanded in the following way:

That which makes [ποιεῖ] a thing beautiful is nothing other than the presence of that beauty [i.e., beauty-itself], or the sharing of it, or whatever way that it comes about. For I do not yet confidently affirm this, except that it is by beauty [i.e., beauty-itself] that all beautiful things are beautiful [τῷ καλῷ πάντα τὰ καλά καλὰ].⁵

From these two passages of the *Phaedo*, it can be concluded that Plato regards the relation between the *eide* and sensible particulars as some sort of causal relation, the explication of which will reveal the manner in which the *eide* cause the particulars of the sensible world. This interpretation of the *Phaedo* is supported somewhat by Aristotle’s critical analysis of the Platonic theory at *De Generatione et Corruptione* B.9, 335b7-24, where Aristotle maintains that the Platonic Socrates believes the *eide* to be “of necessity the causes [αἴτια] both of coming-to-be and of passing-away.”⁶ Thus, the *Phaedo* makes the significant point that the problem of participation is to be resolved by the development of a theory of what might be

5. Similar uses of the instrumental dative as a dative of (eidetic) cause are frequent in Plato: e.g., *Euthyphro* 6d10-e1: . . . ἄλλ’ ἐκεῖνο αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος ᾧ πάντα τὰ ὄσια ὄσιά ἐστιν; ἔφησθα γὰρ που μὴ ἰδέα τὰ τε ἀνόσια ἀνόσια εἶναι καὶ τὰ ὄσια ὄσια.

6. 335b 15-16: . . . τὰ εἶδη οἶεται ἐξ ἀνάγκης αἴτια εἶναι καὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς.

called "eidetic causation," i.e., a theory of the manner in which the *eide* are the causes of sensible particulars.⁷ It must be noted, however, that Plato does not, either in the *Phaedo* or in any other dialogue, provide an explicit elaboration of a theory of eidetic causation; the myth of the *Timaeus* is perhaps the closest thing to such a theory to be found in Plato.

In the treatises of his middle period and, in particular, in the remarkable "On the Integral Omnipresence of Being," *Ennead* VI.4-5 [22-23],⁸ Plotinus elaborates in considerable detail a theory of eidetic causation which provides an account of the manner in which the *eide* cause sensible particulars. According to the Plotinian account, sensible particulars are collections of sensible qualities or λόγοι (in one important sense of this troublesome term) in matter which owe their existence as such to the presence in matter of certain powers (or parts) of the *eide*. This presence of the powers of the *eide* in matter is effected by the self-conscious discursive contemplation of the *eide* which is exercised by various individual *psychai* (including that *psyche* which Plotinus describes as "Nature [φύσις]").⁹ These individual *psychai* are to be understood, in turn, as the parts or powers of a single, all-inclusive *Psyche*, the unity of which *Psyche* guarantees the inter-subjective accessibility and the facticity of the sensible world.¹⁰

What is noteworthy about Plotinus' theory of eidetic causation is the role that individual *psychai* and the hypostasis *Psyche* play in the causal account of the sensible world: the *psyche* emerges as the

7. A conflicting interpretation of this aspect of the *Phaedo* is offered by Gregory Vlastos in "Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*," *The Philosophical Review*, 78 (1969), pp. 291-325. For a critique of Vlastos, see my "D. M. Armstrong and Platonic Realism," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 17 (1979), pp. 371-385, especially pp. 378-380.

8. All references to Plotinus are to the critical edition of Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer (Paris and Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer, 1951-1973). The bracketed numerals indicate the chronological position of the treatise cited, as given by Porphyry in chapters 4-6 of his *Vita Plotini*. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations in this paper are those of the author.

9. The *locus classicus* for this doctrine of productive contemplation is chapters 3-7 of *Ennead* III.8 [30].

10. On the general issue of Plotinus' account of the relations among individual *psychai*, cf., J. Pépin, "La connaissance d'autrui chez Plotin et St. Augustin," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 55 (1950), pp. 128-148; the same author's "Note nouvelle sur le problème de la communication des consciences chez Plotin et St. Augustin," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 56 (1951), pp. 316-326; and Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition*, 2d ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).

central link in the chain of eidetic causation. It is by virtue of *psyche's* self-conscious discursive contemplation of the intelligible world that the sensible world both comes to exist and continues to exist. This doctrine of the *psyche* as the central link between the intelligible and the sensible no doubt derives from Plato's account of the intermediate composition of the world-*psyche* at *Timaeus* 35a1-b2; however, the emphasis which Plotinus places upon the dynamic role that *psyche* plays in relating the intelligible and the sensible marks this doctrine as distinctively Plotinian and Neoplatonic. Distinctively Plotinian also is the view, elaborated in the treatise on omnipresence at VI.4.14.16-22 and VI.5.7.1-8, that each *psyche*, both before becoming involved in the sensible world (i.e., before directing its activity toward self-consciousness) and even during its life in the sensible world, was and remains a part of the intelligible world; i.e., each *psyche* was and continually is an *eidos*.^{10A} Thus, Plotinus' account of the derivation of the sensible from the intelligible is truly an account of *eidetic* causation: it is the *eide* themselves, as the contemplative agents called "*psychai*," which effect the presence of the powers of the *eide* in matter, thus bringing sensible particulars into existence.

The preceding discussion has revealed two central features of metaphysical Platonism: the distinction between the intelligible world and the sensible world and the claim that the relation between the intelligible and the sensible (i.e., the participation relation) is to be explicated by a theory of eidetic causation. The latter of these features (with the Plotinian development of which I shall be concerned in what follows) may be reformulated as the claim that the particulars which make up the sensible world owe both their coming to exist and their continuing to exist as sensible particulars to the *eide* which make up the intelligible world, i.e., the claim that the existence and nature of the sensible world are completely (and solely) explainable in terms of a theory of eidetic causation.

II

The Doctrine of Reception and Causal Dualism

One of the most important lines of argument in *Ennead* VI.4-5 is Plotinus' rejection of emanationism as an adequate account of the relation between the intelligible and the sensible. This rejection

10A. This interpretation of Plotinus' doctrine of the relation between *psychai* and particular *eide* is essentially that of Harold Cherniss; cf., *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962), p. 508.

extends both to emanationism as a metaphorical description of this relation (cf., VI.4.7) and to a theoretical account of this relation in terms of emanationistic "powers" (cf., VI.4.9-10 and VI.5.3). The positive side of Plotinus' critique consists of his development of a theory of the integral omnipresence of Being to the sensible world, which omnipresence is effected by certain kinds of psychical activity (as is made clear in the later chapters of VI.5). It is this theory of integral omnipresence that lies at the heart of Plotinus' account of eidetic causation.

A further aspect of the account of eidetic causation in VI.4-5 is brought out by A. H. Armstrong, when he notes that, in the place of an "idea of emanation," there ". . . is substituted the doctrine of 'reception according to the capacity of the recipient.' . . . [T]he doctrine that each thing participates in the One-Being [i.e., the intelligible world] according to its capacity removes the need for or possibility of a doctrine of emanation."¹¹ In support of his interpretation of the doctrine of reception, Armstrong cites chapter 11 of VI.4, where Plotinus writes as follows:

But why, if it is everywhere as a whole, do not all things participate in the intelligible world as a whole? How is it that there is the first there [in the intelligible world] and, besides, the second and others after it? One must deem that which is present to be present because of the capacity of that which receives it [τοῦ δεξομένου]. On the one hand, Being is everywhere in Being, never standing in need of itself. On the other hand, that which is capable of being present to Being [αὐτῷ τὸ δυνάμενον παρῆναι] is present to Being to the extent that it is capable; it is present to Being, not in terms of place, but like that which is transparent is present to light; the participation of that which is turbid is different. And thus, the firsts and seconds and thirds are such by rank, by power, and by differences, but not by places. [VI.4.11.1-10]

What is noteworthy about this passage is its ambiguity: although it does offer a formulation of the doctrine of reception according to the capacity of the recipient, the passage provides no clear idea of the nature of the recipient in question. 'τοῦ δεξομένου' and 'αὐτῷ τὸ δυνάμενον παρῆναι' are essentially neutral expressions, expressions which could refer to a number of different sorts of things in Plotinian ontology; the scope of these expressions includes, for example, the hypostasis *Psyche*, individual *psychai*, bodies, and matter. The ambiguity present in VI.4.11 infects Armstrong's formulation of the doctrine of reception based on this passage: Armstrong writes of

11. Armstrong, *Architecture*, p. 60.

“each thing” which participates in Being, but what this expression refers to is left somewhat up in the air.¹²

In the study cited at the beginning of this paper, D. J. O’Meara goes to some length to elucidate the doctrine of reception, arguing that one of the central theses of the treatise on omnipresence is that “matter [ὕλη]” plays a causal role in the derivation of the sensible world. Developing this casual role of matter on the basis of a passage from VI.5.8 (to be quoted below), O’Meara writes:

La matière se présente plutôt en rapport avec l’Idée grâce à un certain “rapprochement” vers les Idées, un rapport dans lequel la matière reçoit l’Idée autant qu’elle en est capable . . .¹³

Here, O’Meara clearly interprets Plotinus as using the doctrine of reception to describe the relation between matter and the *eide* which make up the intelligible world. The passage on which O’Meara is commenting, VI.5.8.17-22, runs as follows:

. . . it is as if matter is, on all sides, touching (and yet not touching) the *idea*. By this approach, matter itself comes to possess from the *eidos* all that it is capable to receive, since there is nothing between them. The *idea* neither passes through nor is diffused throughout the whole of matter, but remains in itself.

This passage seems to offer a clear confirmation of O’Meara’s claim that the relation between matter and the *eide* is described by Plotinus in terms of the doctrine of reception. What emerges from O’Meara’s discussion is, then, a theory of the derivation of the sensible world, a theory according to which the nature of particular sensible things is due to the potentialities of their respective portions of matter to receive different *eide*. Thus, for example, this stone is a stone and not a cat, because the matter underlying the stone has the capacity to receive the *eide* which are constitutive of a stone but not the *eide* which are constitutive of a cat.¹⁴

It should be noted that the reconstruction of the Plotinian theory that is entailed by O’Meara’s account of the doctrine of reception is significantly different from the reconstruction sketched earlier in this paper. My sketch shows Plotinus’ account to be essentially monistic: in effect, the *eide* (as both intelligible objects and

12. E.g., in a later discussion, Armstrong uses VI.4.11 to show that “. . . Soul receives *Nous* in proportion to its capacity;” cf., *Architecture*, p. 76.

13. O’Meara, *Structures*, p. 60.

14. In fairness to O’Meara, it should be noted that he recognizes the fact that Plotinus uses the doctrine of reception to describe a number of different relations and not just the relation between matter and Being; cf., in particular, *Structures*, p. 56, note 15. For a full discussion of the variety of uses to which Plotinus puts this doctrine in VI.4-5, see section III below.

contemplative agents) are the unique causes of the sensible world. O'Meara's interpretation, in contrast, shows the Plotinian theory to be essentially dualistic: if O'Meara is right, the *eide* are not the unique causes of the sensible world; rather, both the *eide* and matter must be counted as causal factors in the generation of the sensible. Moreover, as O'Meara himself notes, this analysis exhibits "un renversement du mouvement, plus courant dans le platonisme, de l'intelligible vers le sensible."¹⁵ In addition to a "downward" relation from the *eide* to matter, O'Meara argues that the Plotinian theory involves an "upward" relation from matter to the *eide*.

The conflict raised in the preceding paragraph may seem purely exegetical; however, embedded in this problem of exegesis are the seeds of a philosophical problem of great importance that faces the Plotinian version of metaphysical Platonism. This problem can be put in the following way. If the causal dualism entailed by O'Meara's interpretation of the Plotinian use of the doctrine of reception is actually representative of Plotinus' theory of eidetic causation, then this causal dualism appears to undermine (i.e., to be inconsistent with) the theory as a theory of eidetic causation, insofar as the dualism suggests that matter has a positively specifiable nature which is causally independent both of the *eide* and of psychical activity.

This inconsistency can be developed as follows. The positively specifiable nature of matter, i.e., its possession of various different potentialities or capacities in different regions, entails the positively specifiable nature of the sensible world (independent of any psychical or eidetic activity), given Plotinus' claim that sensible particulars are compounds of matter and immanent form (or *logos*) (cf., II.7 [37].3.7-12 and VI.3 [44].8.19-23) and given his view that matter in itself is impassible and without form (cf., II.4 [12].13.26-30 and II.5 [25].5.1-7). For a portion of matter to be characterizable (e.g., as having particular capacities) is for it to have form and, thus, is for it to constitute a sensible particular. Thus, the causal dualism at issue here seems to involve the claim that the sensible world itself has a positively specifiable nature (and existence) which is causally independent both of the *eide* and of psychical activity. In this way, the dualism of causal factors effectively undermines one of the fundamental doctrines of metaphysical Platonism as formulated above, by entailing that the existence and nature of the sensible world are *not* completely (and solely) explainable in terms of a theory of eidetic causation.

15. O'Meara, *Structures*, p. 56.

If the sensible world has some positively specifiable nature apart from its relation to the *eide* (as it appears to on the dualistic interpretation of Plotinus), then the explanatory need for the *eide* seems to be greatly reduced. The obvious questions raised are these: If eidetic causation is not necessary for the sensible world to have *some* positively specifiable nature, what reason is there to maintain that eidetic causation is necessary for the existence of *any* positively specifiable characteristic of the sensible world? If matter can be informed apart from the *eide*, why are the *eide* necessary for a complete causal account of the informing of matter (as, on Platonic principles, they must be)? Why does a theory of matter not constitute a complete theory of the sensible world? If questions such as these can genuinely be asked of Plotinus, then the status of the Plotinian system as a cogent version of metaphysical Platonism is cast into grave doubt. In the final section of this paper, I shall examine closely Plotinus' use of the doctrine of reception in *Ennead* VI.4-5, with the aim of determining the extent to which Plotinus is committed to a form of causal dualism which is at odds with basic principles of metaphysical Platonism.

III

The Doctrine of Reception in VI.4-5

A close reading of *Ennead* VI.4-5 reveals that the passages in which Plotinus uses the doctrine of reception divide themselves naturally into four basic groups.¹⁶ (A) A number of passages appeal to the doctrine in describing the relation between body and *psyche*. (B) Others appeal to the doctrine in accounting for the relation between body and the intelligible world. (C) One (*viz.*, VI.5.8.17-22, quoted by O'Meara) and perhaps a second use the doctrine of reception to describe the relation between matter and the intelligible world. (D) Finally, several passages are neutral in their characterization of that which is recipient of the intelligible world. I shall consider each of these groups of passages in the present section, and my aim with respect to each is essentially threefold: first, to provide a characterization of Plotinus' use of the doctrine of reception in the passages within each group; second, to determine whether or not the passages at issue entail the causal dualism considered above; and, finally, to demonstrate (if possible) that Plotinus' appeals to the doctrine of reception in no way undermine the viability of the Plotinian account of the relation

16. The following analysis should be compared with that of O'Meara; cf., *Structures*, p. 56, note 15.

between the intelligible and the sensible as a cogent version of metaphysical Platonism.

(A) In a number of passages in VI.4-5, Plotinus describes the body as "approaching" the *psyche* and as "receiving" the *psyche* to the extent that it is capable. For example, at VI.4.6.1-3, Plotinus writes of the individual *psyche* as follows:

Why, then, does [a *psyche*] not go into another body [i.e., in addition to that which it at present animates]? Because, it is necessary for that other body to approach, if it is capable; but that [body] which already has approached has already received [the *psyche*].

At VI.4.5.8-11, Plotinus writes of the relation between the hypostasis *Psyche* (or, perhaps, the world-*psyche*) and the sensible universe in similar terms:

For, [the *Psyche*] contains the sensible universe, or, better, the *Psyche* is the universe. Moreover, being something greater than bodily nature, the *Psyche* might reasonably be thought to give no more than a little to the universe: as much of it as the universe is capable to receive.

A similar use of the doctrine of reception to describe the relation between the body and the individual *psyche* is implicit in chapter 15 of VI.4, in the context of Plotinus' discussion of the "intruder" (i.e., the body "already having approached [τὸ προσεληλυθός]") which is responsible at least in part for the *psyche*'s fall from the intelligible world, and again at VI.4.16.1-22, in the context of Plotinus' attempt to reconcile his account of *psyche* with that involved in the Platonic myths.¹⁷

Now, it should be clear that this use of the doctrine of reception in no way entails the sort of causal dualism sketched in section II, above. The passages referred to here do not concern eidetic causation in any direct sense whatsoever. What is at issue here is the manner in which different sorts of bodies in the sensible world become animated by different *psychai*, *psychai* of varying capacities. The eidetic causation of these bodies is taken for granted. Thus, the present passages provide no ground for a causal dualism involving matter in the generation of the sensible world.

To see that Plotinus' use of the doctrine of reception in this context is perfectly consistent with the monistic reconstruction of his account of eidetic causation, we have only to note that the recipients

17. Cf., also, the analogical account of the *psyche*'s presence to the body in the latter half of VI.4.12.

involved here — bodies, particulars in the sensible world — are already products of eidetic causation. As such, these bodies are constituted by the contemplative activities of the *eide* as *psychai*, and, hence, the relation between a *psyche* and its body is to be understood as in effect an interrelation of this *psyche* with those *psychai* (i.e., *eide*) which are responsible for the existence of its body.

At a number of points in the *Enneads*, Plotinus suggests that the relation between a *psyche* and its body is in effect the interrelation between that *psyche* and the world-*psyche*. For example, at IV.3 [27].6.10-15, he writes:

It might be said that there is a rather great difference between *psychai*: on the one hand, the world-*psyche* has not fallen away from *Psyche*, but, being there, it kept body around it; on the other hand, the other *psychai* received parts of the [body] which already existed, their sister-*psyche* [i.e., the world-*psyche*] being in command and having (as it were) already prepared homes for them.

Here, Plotinus claims that the world-*psyche* produces the bodies which are animated subsequently by other individual *psychai*. Similar claims come up at IV.3.13 and at VI.7 [38].7.8-16.¹⁸ Given Plotinus' identification of *psychai* with *eide*, the upshot of the present discussion is that, although particular bodies exist prior (at least logically or metaphysically) to their animation by individual *psychai*, this prior existence does not compromise the unique role of the *eide* (as both intelligible objects and contemplative agents) in the eidetic causation of sensible bodies.

(B) In a number of passages in the *Enneads*, Plotinus describes the relation between body (or the sensible world as a totality of bodies) and the intelligible world in terms of the doctrine of reception. The doctrine is clearly implicit in VI.4.8.12-17, where Plotinus writes:

Now, that which inhabits body might come to be affected, at least in an accidental manner; and because of this it might be said to be passible and divisible, since it is something like a state or immanent form [οἶον πάθος ἢ εἶδος] of body. But, that which is in no way of body, but which body attempts to resemble, is necessarily completely unaffected by the various attributes of body,

Later in the same chapter (lines 38-40), the doctrine is made quite explicit:

Thus, if many things desire Being, it is clear that they desire it as a

18. Cf., Henry Blumenthal, "Soul, World-Soul and Individual Soul in Plotinus," in *Le Néoplatonisme* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971), pp. 55-63, especially p. 60.

whole; so that if a thing is able to participate in Being, then it participates in it, to the extent that it is capable, as a whole.

However, the use of the doctrine of reception is made even more explicit in two passages from the fourth *Ennead*. At IV.7 [2].8⁵.47-50, Plotinus writes:

For, the whole of the corporeal is said [by Plato, at *Timaeus* 28a3-4] to be Becoming, and not Being, "coming-into-being and perishing, never really existing," being preserved by participation in Being, to the extent that it participates in Being.

A similar clear statement of the doctrine of reception can be found at IV.8 [6].6.23-28, where Plotinus writes:

Thus, that which is most beautiful in the sensible world is a manifestation of the things that are best among the intelligibles, of both their power and their goodness. Moreover, all things are linked together forever, both the intelligibles and the sensibles; the former [existing] by themselves; the latter forever receiving existence by participation [μετοχή] in the intelligibles, imitating the intelligible nature to the extent that they are capable.

In the last two passages quoted above, Plotinus clearly states that the sensible world, the world of bodies, is related to the intelligible world in such a way that it receives the intelligible world to the extent that it is capable. Thus, Plotinus clearly seems to use the doctrine of reception to describe the relation between body and the intelligible world.

Once again, it should be clear that this use of the doctrine of reception in no way entails the sort of causal dualism adumbrated in section II, above. What is at issue here is not the relation between matter and the intelligible world but the relation between sensible body and the intelligible world, and, since body as such has a positively specifiable nature as the result of its eidetic causation, the claim that body is such as to receive the intelligible world to the extent that it is capable need not involve Plotinus in any sort of causal dualism. There is no need to interpret these passages as suggesting that body has a positively specifiable nature apart from and prior to eidetic causation, as there might be if Plotinus used the doctrine of reception in his treatment of matter.

What these passages do entail is that the Plotinian theory of eidetic causation involves a complex account of the interrelations among *psychai* (i.e., *eide*) which are engaged in productive contemplation. The central feature of this account of *psychai* is that the *psychai* form a complex organic system. Plotinus makes this point at IV.3 [27].8.16-22, where he writes:

The fulfillment and perfection for *psychai* are not the same for all of them. But, if the whole made up of *psychai* [i.e., the hypostasis *Psyche*] is an order [σύνταγμα] of variety — for, every *logos* is a unity of multiplicity and variety, as if it were a psychical living being possessing many shapes — if this is the case, then [the *Psyche*] is a system [σύνταξις], and beings in general are not separated from one another, nor is there anything random in the system of beings, since there is not anything random even among bodies. Moreover, it follows that [the *Psyche*] is a determinate number [and, thus, has a finite number of parts].

The fact that Plotinus uses the doctrine of reception to characterize the relation between sensible body and the intelligible world (as well as the relation between body and *psyche*) makes it fairly evident that a key part of the psychical σύνταξις demanded by the Plotinian theory of eidetic causation is an interrelation among *psychai* that might be described as the “sharing” or the “overlapping” of the contents (the sets of *logoi*) of various *psychai*’s discursive contemplation of the *eide*. Although the full elucidation of the systematicity of *Psyche* is far from simple, Plotinus’ use of the doctrine of reception to describe in a shorthand manner basic features of the psychical σύνταξις in no way undermines his account as a version of metaphysical Platonism.

(C) There is only one passage in the treatise on omnipresence in which Plotinus appears to use the doctrine of reception explicitly to describe the relation between matter and the intelligible world: this is that passage quoted by O’Meara, VI.5.8.17-22.¹⁹ Here, Plotinus writes:

. . . it is as if matter is, on all sides, touching (and yet not touching) the *idea*. By this approach, matter itself comes to possess from the *eidos* all that it is capable to receive, since there is nothing between them. The *idea* neither passes through nor is diffused throughout the whole of matter, but remains in itself.

Now, as I noted above, this passage does seem to offer a clear confirmation of O’Meara’s claim that Plotinus uses the doctrine of reception to describe the relation between matter and the *eide*. Taken in isolation from its context, VI.5.8.17-22 clearly seems to entail that matter (or regions of matter) possesses various potentialities or capacities to receive different *eide* and, thus, seems to entail that matter has a positively specifiable nature which is

19. A second, much less explicit and more problematic, passage may also be open to this interpretation, but see below.

causally independent of the *eide*. Moreover, as I have argued, this has the further consequence that the sensible world itself has a positively specifiable nature (and existence) which is causally independent of the *eide* and of the contemplative activities of *psychai*. This being the case, it appears that Plotinus may well be committed to a causal dualism which undermines or is inconsistent with the basic principle of metaphysical Platonism that the existence and nature of the sensible world are completely (and solely) explainable in terms of a theory of eidetic causation. In the following discussion, I shall argue (i) that Plotinus' apparently dualistic use of the doctrine of reception to describe the relation between matter and Being is inconsistent with a fundamental feature of his conception of matter and (ii) that the dualistic interpretation of VI.5.8.17-22 stems from a misunderstanding of Plotinus' text.

(i) If we grant for the sake of argument that O'Meara's interpretation of VI.5.8 is correct and that Plotinus in this passage is committed to the (ultimately dualistic) use of the doctrine of reception in his account of matter, we can show nevertheless that the resulting account of matter is seriously inconsistent with the conception of matter that is developed elsewhere by Plotinus.

One of the most fundamental features of the Plotinian conception of matter is that matter is regarded as essentially impassible: not only is matter in itself without qualities, but in its relation with *logoi*, the immanent forms which constitute sensible particulars, matter remains completely unaffected by the intelligible world (or by anything else, for that matter). The thesis of matter's impassibility is, in effect, the claim that matter does not change its nature as the result of any sort of relation it may bear to the *eide* or the *logoi*. Given that matter's nature is such that it is essentially without qualities (cf., the passages discussed below), it follows that matter's impassibility is roughly equivalent to its being in a permanent quality-less state. Émile Bréhier expresses this aspect of Plotinus' conception as follows:

. . . Plotinus, with exceptions, means by matter only prime matter which is altogether indeterminate, not even possessing a certain measurability. Over this matter, form passes like a reflection without leaving any traces.²⁰

The thesis of the impassibility of matter is to be found in two

20. Emile Bréhier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, translated by Joseph Thomas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 174.

treatises of the second *Ennead*. In the early treatise "On Matter" (II.4 [12]), Plotinus writes:

So, then, [matter's] distinctive characteristic is not something else other than what it is; it is not an addition to it but rather consists in its relationship to other things, its being other than they. Other things are not only other but each of them is something as form [II.4.13.26-30]²¹

In the treatise on potentiality and actuality, II.5 [25], Plotinus develops the conception of matter as "being other than other things" in terms of potentiality. He writes:

How, then, do we speak of [matter]? How is it the matter of real things? Because it is they in potentiality. Then, because it is they already in potentiality, is it therefore just as it is going to be? But its being is no more than an announcement of what it is going to be: it is as if being for it was adjourned to that which it will be. So its existence in potentiality is not being something, but being everything in potentiality; and since it is nothing in itself — except what it is, matter — it does not exist in actuality at all. [II.5.5.1-7]

It should be emphasized that the claim here that matter is all things in potentiality offers no support for the claim entailed by VI.5.8.17-22 (on the dualistic interpretation) that matter possesses certain qualities corresponding to its capacities (or potentialities) to receive various *eide*. All that II.5 commits Plotinus to is a conception of matter as bare potentiality; there is no suggestion of the specific potentialities to receive form which are the source of the causal dualism to be found in VI.5.8.

As if passages such as these did not establish clearly Plotinus' acceptance of the thesis of the impassibility of matter (and, hence, his acceptance of the thesis of matter's essential lack of qualities), Plotinus devotes chapters 6-19 of his treatise "On the Impassibility of Things Without Body" (III.6 [26]) to this very issue, arguing at length the claims that matter is incorporeal and that, thus, it is impassible. The most striking statement of matter's impassibility is found at III.6.7.16-29, where Plotinus writes as follows:

[Matter] always presents opposite appearances on its surface, small and great, less and more, deficient and superabundant, a phantom which does not remain and cannot get away either, for

21. The translation here and in the following two passages is adapted from that of A. H. Armstrong in *Plotinus*, with an English translation by A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press [Loeb Classical Library], 1966-).

it has no strength for this, since it has not received strength from intellect but is lacking in all being. Whatever announcement it makes, therefore, is a lie, and if it appears great, it is small, if more, it is less; its apparent being is not real, but a sort of fleeting frivolity; hence the things which seem to come to be in it are frivolities, nothing but phantoms [εἰδῶλα] in a phantom, like something in a mirror which really exists in one place but is reflected in another; it seems to be filled, and holds nothing, it is all seeming. "Imitations of real beings pass into and out of it [*Timaeus* 50c4-5]," ghosts [εἰδῶλα] into a formless ghost, visible because of its formlessness.

From this passage and from those above, it should be clear that Plotinus has a strong commitment to the thesis of the impassibility of matter.

It should be equally clear that Plotinus' apparent use of the doctrine of reception at VI.5.8.17-22 to describe the relation between matter and the intelligible world entails that matter in itself (apart from any relation to the intelligible world) possesses a number of qualities (e.g., the quality of having within a certain region the capacity to receive the *eidos* of fire) and, thus, is not impassible. Thus, VI.5.8.17-22 (if we grant its dualistic interpretation) is clearly inconsistent with the thesis of the impassibility of matter. Given the fact that this passage both is inconsistent with a fundamental feature of the Plotinian conception of matter and raises problems for the viability of Plotinism as a cogent version of metaphysical Platonism, I conclude that if O'Meara's dualistic interpretation were correct, then it would be reasonable to dismiss VI.5.8.17-22 as being unrepresentative of Plotinus' metaphysical views. However, as I shall argue next, a strong case can be made for the claim that O'Meara's reading of VI.5.8 is simply incorrect and, thus, that VI.5.8.17-22 does not commit Plotinus to any problematic form of causal dualism or to any inconsistency in his conception of matter.

(ii) Chapter 8 of VI.5 falls into two distinct parts: lines 1-15 contrast the Plotinian theory of the omnipresence of Being with an emanationistic account of the relation between the *eide* and matter, while lines 15-46 elaborate this contrast with the aim of showing the preferability of the Plotinian theory. The latter part of the chapter naturally divides into three sections: lines 15-22 (including the central passage at issue here) show the Plotinian account to be non-emanationistic, by insisting that "the *idea* neither passes through nor is diffused throughout the whole of matter, but remains in itself;" lines 22-39 elucidate this account, by drawing an important

distinction between the *idea* or *eidos*, which is transcendent to matter, and the immanent μορφή which the *eidos* produces "throughout the whole of the . . . matter;" lines 39-46 constitute a critique of an Aristotelian theory which denies the need for transcendent *eide*.

This structural analysis brings to light a peculiar feature of Plotinus' discussion: although the doctrine of reception is introduced in connection with matter in lines 17-22 and although lines 22-39 have the appearance of merely elucidating the previous lines,²² the latter passage neither mentions the doctrine of reception nor embodies implicitly any suggestion of the doctrine. Rather, lines 22-39 serve to draw the distinction between forms transcendent to and immanent in matter, which distinction clarifies the non-emanationistic character of Plotinus' theory. We can make sense of the disparity between these two sections of VI.5.8, by considering the epexegetical remark of lines 23-24. In turning from the doctrine of reception to the distinction between two sorts of form, Plotinus explains himself as follows: ". . . — for the account ought to handle matter as that which underlies the elements — . . .".²³ In Aristotelian terms, the matter which underlies the elements is prime matter, and we may interpret lines 22-39 as explicitly concerning the relation between the *eide* and prime matter. Since these lines do not involve the doctrine of reception, they do not entail any sort of problematic causal dualism. Moreover, the very fact that Plotinus adds the epexegetical sentence of lines 23-24 strongly suggests that the previous discussion of the doctrine of reception in lines 17-22 is not concerned with prime matter, "matter as that which underlies the elements," but with matter in some other sense. A solid candidate for this other sort of matter is, of course, the Aristotelian notion of "proximate matter," i.e., body describable as matter (though no longer matter in the strict sense) in relation to something else, as bronze is describable as the matter of a statue, though the bronze is itself a body composed of both matter and form.²⁴ Thus, the course of the argument of VI.5.8 suggests that Plotinus is treating here of two different sorts of matter: in the case of *prime* matter, the doctrine of reception is not descriptive of the relation between matter and the intelligible world (lines 22-39); in the case of *proximate* matter (matter other than "that which underlies the elements"), the doctrine of reception is (at least partially) descriptive of the relation between matter and the intelligible world.

22. Note, for example, the use of 'γάρ' in line 22.

23. . . . — τὴν γὰρ τοῖς στοιχείοις ὕλην ὑποβεβλημένην ὁ λόγος λαμβανέτω — . . .

24. For the notion of proximate matter in Plotinus, cf., II.4 [12].11.21-25.

The above analysis of VI.5.8 is confirmed by a passage at the end of the penultimate chapter of the treatise on omnipresence, a passage which at first glance appears to support O'Meara's dualistic interpretation of the role of matter in Plotinus' account of the sensible world. At VI.5.11.34-35, Plotinus asks: "Why then is not the material triangle everywhere, since the immaterial triangle is everywhere?" Lines 35-36 answer this question in a way that recalls the doctrine of reception: "Because the whole of matter does not participate [in the *eidōs* of triangle]; rather, it possesses some other [*eidōs*], and the whole of matter is not present to all [*eide*]." ²⁵ Here, just as in VI.5.8.17-22, Plotinus attributes to matter a role in the generation of the sensible world, but the matter to which this role is attributed is clearly not prime matter (matter apart from any relation to the *eide*); rather, this matter is matter already possessing certain *eide*, matter already informed to some extent, i.e., proximate matter. In effect, then, Plotinus' apparent claim that different regions of matter have varying capacities to receive particular *eide* must be understood as the claim that these regions of matter have present to them various *logoi* of different *eide*, the presence of which *logoi* rules out the possibility of those regions' receiving the *logoi* of *eide* which are incompatible with the *eide* presently manifested in those material regions.

On the basis of the above discussion, I conclude that O'Meara's dualistic interpretation of VI.5.8.17-22 is unfounded and that Plotinus' use in VI.4-5 of the doctrine of reception with regard to matter is limited to the description of the relation between proximate matter and the intelligible world and does not extend to a description of prime matter. This result has the effect of showing that the passages treated here as group (C) in fact belong to group (B), since proximate matter is simply body, and the relation between body and the *eide* is treated in the passages of group (B). It follows that the present passages (like those of group (B)) do not entail any form of causal dualism and, thus, that they in no way undermine the Plotinian account of the relation between the sensible and the intelligible as a cogent version of metaphysical Platonism.

(D) Finally, there are a surprising number of passages in VI.4-5 in which Plotinus uses the doctrine of reception in a neutral manner, not clearly specifying that which is said to receive the intelligible world according to its capacity. These neutral passages include VI.4.2.47-49, VI.4.3.6-23, VI.4.11.1-10, and VI.5.3.13-15. The passage from VI.4.11 is quite representative of this group and is trans-

25. "Οτι οὐ πᾶσα μετέσχευ ὕλη, ἀλλὰ ἄλλο τι ἔχει, καὶ οὐ πᾶσα πρὸς πᾶν.

lated at the beginning of section II, above, in connection with Armstrong's treatment of the doctrine of reception. Here, Plotinus refers to the recipient as "that which receives [του δεξομένου]" Being and as "that which is capable of being present to Being [αὐτῷ τὸ δυνάμενον παρῆναι]." As noted earlier, these expressions could refer to a number of different sorts of things in the ontology of Plotinus. In the light of the present section, it seems clear that these expressions and those others like them could refer (consistent with the uses of the doctrine of reception in VI.4-5) to either sensible body or (what amounts to the same thing) proximate matter. That is, group (D) can be subsumed under group (B), and I think we can regard these passages as using the doctrine of reception to describe the relation between sensible body and the *eide* of the intelligible world, along the lines of the passages of group (B). Hence, on the basis of the discussion under (B), above, I conclude that these passages do not raise any insoluble problems for the viability of the Plotinian system as a version of metaphysical Platonism.

My analysis of Plotinus' actual use of the doctrine of reception according to the capacity of the recipient in *Ennead* VI.4-5 suggests that certain features of the received interpretation of the doctrine (sketched in section II, above) are either rather misleading or simply inaccurate. In the first place, Professor Armstrong's suggestion that the doctrine of reception is substituted for the "idea of emanation" has been revealed to be somewhat misleading, because it seems to make the doctrine of reception a central feature of the Plotinian theory of eidetic causation. As the argument of VI.4-5 makes clear, it is the theory of integral omnipresence that is substituted for emanationism; the doctrine of reception enters into the Plotinian theory as an expression of one aspect of the complex set of interrelations among *psychai* (i.e., among the *eide* as contemplative agents), which interrelations are necessary to account for the existence and nature of the sensible world, and, in particular, the doctrine serves to emphasize the systematicity of the physical σύνταξις. In the second place, D. J. O'Meara's claim that VI.4-5 attributes to matter (apart from any relation to the intelligible world) a causal role in the generation of the sensible world has been shown to be inaccurate as an analysis of the Plotinian theory of eidetic causation. I have argued that such a dualistic reconstruction of the Plotinian theory is simply inconsistent both with Plotinus' actual uses of the doctrine of reception in the treatise on omnipresence and with the thesis of the impassibility of matter, which thesis is fundamental to the Plotinian conception of matter.

My demonstration that Plotinus' theory of eidetic causation does not entail the sort of causal dualism suggested by O'Meara's interpretation of VI.4-5 amounts to a partial defense of the viability of the Plotinian theory as a version of metaphysical Platonism. At the very least, I have shown that Plotinus' use of the doctrine of reception in no way undermines the fundamental Platonic thesis that the existence and nature of the sensible world are completely (and solely) explainable by reference to the *eide* which make up the intelligible world. In doing this, I have allayed the philosophical doubts concerning the explanatory need for a theory of eidetic causation raised by O'Meara's dualistic interpretation of Plotinus. Moreover, in my analyses of his uses of the doctrine of reception, I have tried to indicate in a general way some of the central features of Plotinus' metaphysical system (in particular, the systematicity of the physical σύνταξις) that call for detailed examination in any philosophical evaluation of Plotinian Platonism.

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