Plotinus on the Making of Matter  
Part III: The Essential Background

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Abstract
Plotinus did not set out to be obscure. Difficulties of interpretation arise partly from his style of writing, compressed, elliptical, allusive. The allusions, easily enough recognisable by those he was writing for, are often not recognised at all by the modern reader who no longer has at his fingertips the texts of Plato and Aristotle that Plotinus undoubtedly alludes to, but whose authors he has no need to name. So it is pre-eminently with his subtle use of earlier ideas in tackling the difficult question of the nature of matter and its place in the scheme of emanation. The frequent references to matter as ‘non-being’ and as ‘privation’ can be understood only if they are seen as a radical adaptation of the paradoxical definition of a ‘form that is, of what is not’ in Plato’s Sophist (258 D 5-7) and as a deliberate correction of Aristotle’s unsuccessful attempt at including female desire in an analysis of privation in the Physics (19, 192 a 22-25). Only when the debt to Plato and Aristotle has been recognised for what it is are we able to appreciate that matter defined as ‘non-being’ is not therefore ‘non-existent’, and that the ‘privation’ that is matter is not a terminus a quo of change, but a permanent substrate of change. The adaptation and the daring syncretism lead to deliberate paradox in Plotinus’ own definition of matter as both ‘so to speak a form of sorts’ and ‘formless’ (18 [51] 3). The seeming inconsistency is Plotinus’ acknowledgment of the use he has made of earlier ideas when he writes of matter, so defined, as ‘made’ by a lower manifestation of soul, and therefore as the last and the least of the products flowing from, but not created by, the One.

Keywords
Matter, non-being, privation (steresis), creation, evil, darkness, form, negation, contrariety
Why has Phillips been seemingly so oblivious of the carefully constructed architecture of Plotinus’ universe, material and immaterial? No doubt his preoccupation with finding in the text of the *Enneads* the philosophy that is familiar to him from the pages of Proclus is very largely to blame. But no less significant is his apparently total neglect of the detailed and penetrating account that Plotinus gives of matter in a treatise that is never even referred to in Phillips’ article.

For incredible though it may seem, and despite the appearance of the word ‘matter’ in the title of his article, Phillips appears to have taken no account of Plotinus’ treatise *On matter*. Not surprisingly, he is therefore unable to recognise even the clearest of clear allusions to matter to be found in writings that, according to Porphyry, followed soon after the highly idiosyncratic—and therefore all the more easily recognisable—account given of the ultimate substrate of the sensible world in the second half of that treatise.

Even at this late hour, let me therefore enlighten Phillips by summarising, as briefly as I can, the content of the crucial last chapter of the treatise, where the matter of the sensible world is said to be both ‘non-being’ (µὴ ὄν) and ‘privation’ (στέρησις), ‘non-being’ with a silent bow to Plato, ‘privation’ with silent bow to Aristotle.¹

§ 25. Aristotle on ‘Privation’²

*Privation as a permanent substrate of change*

When Plotinus declares, in the opening sentences of his final chapter, that matter is ‘non-being’ and therefore ‘identical to privation’ (16.3), he is looking back to Aristotle’s conception of non-being as privation, but with a significant difference. Aristotle’s ‘privation’, as defined in the concluding chapters of the first book of the *Physics*, is the absence of form that marks the *terminus a quo* of change, and that is therefore brought to an end by the

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¹ The following two sections of my essay aim to bring to light the Platonic and Aristotelian background of *Enn.* II 4 [12] 16 (the final chapter of the treatise *On matter*), drawing principally on Plato, *Soph.* 258 D 5-259 A 1, and Aristotle, *Phys.* 1 7-9 (esp. cap. 9, 192 a 22-25).

² The numbering of the sections picks up from ‘Plotinus on the Making of Matter, Part II: ‘A Corpse Adorned’ (*Enn.* II 4 [12] 5.18)’, published in an earlier issue of this Journal.
advent of form.\textsuperscript{3} By claiming that matter is identical to privation, Plotinus deliberately alters Aristotle's definition, so as to make 'privation' a permanent substrate of change.

To the obvious objection that, if privation persists, then there has been no change, Plotinus replies that that is precisely why matter is impervious to change, and therefore indestructible (16.4-16). Lacking any positive determination, lacking in 'thought, virtue, beauty, strength, shape, form or quality' (16.21-27), matter is unable to acquire any one of those positive characteristics without ceasing to be itself, were it to do so. The matter of the \textit{Enneads} therefore remains forever in a state of total deprivation, both 'utterly ugly' (cf. 16.23-24: πάντη αἰσχρόν) and 'utterly evil' (cf. 16.24: πάντη κακόν).\textsuperscript{4}

\textit{The desire of the female for the male'}

Although, in the final chapter of \textit{On matter}, Plotinus does not refer to Aristotle by name, he clearly marks his disagreement with what he has read in the \textit{Physics} by taking over the example that in Aristotle's text had been chosen to illustrate the extension of change and privation to cover 'desire', while at the same time twisting around that very same example to match his own theory of matter as 'privation' and 'non-being'.

In Aristotle's argument, the desire of the female for the male supposedly illustrates privation as the \textit{terminus a quo} of desire as of change, and therefore, so Aristotle's argument should imply, the substitution of form for privation.\textsuperscript{5} When Plotinus repeats the same example, it is to make the opposite point. In the text of the \textit{Enneads}, the desire of the female for the male illustrates the persistence of privation. The female 'becomes more female' (16.15: 3) Aristotele, Phys. i 7-9.

\textsuperscript{3} This is not, so Plotinus would claim, inconsistent with the matter of the sensible world 'becoming something definite', earlier in the same treatise \textit{On matter} (Enn. II 4 [12] 5.16-17), nor therefore with the object 'utterly indefinite', engendered by soul in \textit{On the daemon}, 'taking on form' so that it 'becomes body' (Enn. III 4 [15] 1.14-15). For the first passage, see § 13 above; for the second, see § 20 above. The conjunction of matter and form is never such as to modify the intrinsic formlessness of matter. When Plotinus asks how matter can 'participate without participating' (Enn. III 6 [26] 14.21-22), his answer is that it does so as a mere surface reflection (Plotinus' own image), without any inner transformation of matter itself. See O'Brien, 1993: 58-60.

\textsuperscript{4} Aristotele, Phys. i 9, 192 a 22-25.
μᾶλλον δηλώνεται) in her desire for the male. Similarly, matter does not cease to be privation in the presence of form.6

If modern commentators have failed to take the measure of Plotinus’ innovation, it is because the text of the Enneads is here defective. The passage from Aristotle’s Physics provides the verb (192 a 18 and 20: ἐφίεσθαι) needed to complete the lacuna in On matter, Enn. II 4 [12] 16.13-15: . . . ὅταν τὸ θῆλυ τοῦ ἄρρενος < ἐϕίηται >, οὐκ ἀπόλλυται τὸ θῆλυ, ἀλλὰ µᾶλλον θηλύνεται. Literally: ‘When the female < desires > the male, the female is not destroyed; she becomes, on the contrary, more female still.’

The parallel, once it has been pointed out, is to my mind unmistakable. Both Aristotle and Plotinus write of the ‘desire’ of the female for the male, Aristotle to illustrate a ‘privation’ that is the terminus a quo of change, Plotinus to illustrate a ‘privation’ that is the permanent substrate of change.7

§ 26. Plato on ‘Non-Being’

‘A form that is, of what is not’

The premiss to Plotinus’ identification of matter with privation lies in his prior identification of matter with non-being. His debt, at this point, is not to Aristotle, but to Plato. In the opening three lines of his chapter (16.1-3), Plotinus takes up and adapts the definition of non-being put forward by the Stranger of Plato’s Sophist as the culmination of a long and complex reaction to the opposition between ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ in the poem of Parmenides.8

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6) For a less breathless account of Plotinus’ borrowing-cum-criticism of Aristotle’s presentation of female desire, see O’Brien, 1996 and 2005, 77-80.
7) The sentence following in the text of Plotinus runs, 16.15-16: τὸ τοῦ δὲ ἐστιν ἰ ἐστὶ µᾶλλον γίγνεται, literally: ‘That is: what it is, it becomes more so.’ The expression τὸ τοῦ δὲ ἐστι occurs a number of times in the Enneads, and the sentence may therefore be authentic. But it could easily be heard as a gloss, designed to explain the unusual expression µᾶλλον δηλώνεται.
8) The complexity of Plato’s reaction has not, I think, been fully understood in any commentary that I have ever had occasion to read of that fascinating but troubled dialogue. The most recent author (N. Notomi) is also the most obdurate, as I have occasion to point out in my contribution to the proceedings of two recent colloquia (2009) on the Sophist, held in Benasque (Spain) and in Prague.
The Parmenidean opposition is breached by the Stranger’s discovery of a ‘form that turns out to be, of what is not’ (258 D 6). This is the form of ‘non-being’, one of all the many ‘parts of otherness’ that give rise to a whole series of negative forms (‘non-beautiful’, ‘non-just’, ‘non-large’ . . .), with in this case the second term of the opposition (‘other than . . .’) supplied successively by ‘being’ as form (256 D 11-E 4) and by ‘being’ as instantiated (258 E 2-3). For being as instantiated, the negative form, defined therefore as ‘the part of the nature of otherness opposed to the being of each thing’, is again said to be ‘the very thing that is really what is not’.

The repeated paradox, the seemingly contradictory conjunction of is and is not, is essential to Plato’s purpose. ‘Otherness’ and all the ‘parts’ of otherness participate, as do all the forms, in ‘being’ (the form), since otherwise there would not even ‘be’ a form of otherness at all. The paradoxical conjunction of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ arises therefore when the part of otherness that participates in being is also opposed to being. ‘The form that turns out to be, of what is not’ (258 D 6) is a form of ‘what is not’, because it is the very part of otherness that is opposed to being, but a form that nonetheless ‘turns out to be’, because even the very part of otherness that is opposed to being cannot but participate in being.

Negation and contrariety

The paradox enables the Stranger to distinguish—a distinction essential to his critique of Parmenides—a ‘form of non-being’ (258 D 6: ‘the form that turns out to be, of what is not’) from ‘what is not in any way at all’ (237 B 7-8: τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν).

The form of non-being is not sheer non-existence. It is not an impossible and inconceivable ‘contrary’ of being. The part of otherness that is opposed to ‘the being of each thing’ itself participates in being and therefore ‘is’. A ‘contrary’ of being would have to ‘be’—sit venia verbo—what simply did not participate in being at all. Just nothing. A mere flatus vocis.

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9) Soph. 258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος δὲ τυχαίως ὑπέρ τοῦ µὴ ὄντος.
10) Soph. 258 E 2-3: τὸ πρὸς τὸ δὲ ἐκάστου µόριον αὐτῆς [sc. τῆς θατέρου φύσεως] ἀντιτιθέμενον ἐτολµήσαµεν εἰπεῖν ὡς αὐτό τοῦτό ἐστιν ὄντως τὸ µὴ δὲν. Literally: ‘Of that part of the nature of the other (τὸ [.] µόριον αὐτῆς [sc. τῆς θατέρου φύσεως]) that is opposed to the being of each thing (πρὸς τὸ δὲ ἐκάστου [. . .] ἀντιτιθέμενον), we dared to say (ἐτολµήσαµεν εἰπεῖν) that just that (ὡς αὐτό τοῦτό) is really (ἔστιν ὄντως) what is not (τὸ µὴ δὲν).’
'Being' has a negation, the 'form of non-being'. But there is, and there can be, no 'contrary' to being. Contrariety, for being as for any other form, would require lack of participation. But whatever did not participate in being would not 'be' at all. Therefore there is, and there can be, no contrary of being.11

'Non-being' and 'privation' in Plotinus

That same distinction explains Plotinus' reference to 'non-being' in his treatise On matter. When Plotinus defines matter as 'non-being' (16.1-3), he does not refer to Plato's—impossible and inconceivable—‘contrary’ of being, ‘non-being’ as synonym of ‘non-existent’. His definition is an adaptation of the Stranger’s definition of the ‘form’ of non-being, and would have at once been recognised as such by a contemporary audience, since it begins with the question (16.1): ‘Is matter the same as otherness?’, and continues (16.1-2): 'No: it is the same as a part of otherness…’12

With those words, we are at once taken back to the heart of Plato’s dialogue, to the Stranger’s definition of the form of non-being as a ‘part of otherness’, with the difference, the crucial difference, that in the Enneads the second term of the opposition is not, as it is in the text of Plato’s Sophist, ‘the being of each thing’, but ‘the beings properly so-called’, specified as ‘forms’ (logoi).13

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11) For the Stranger’s dismissal of a ‘contrary’ of being, see the remarks immediately following his announcement of a ‘form of non-being’ (Soph. 258 E 6-259 A 1). For the importance of the distinction to the Stranger’s critique of Parmenides, see O’Brien, 1987, 135-302, and 1995, 57-59.

12) Enn. II 4 [12] 16.1-2: ἄρ’ οὖν καὶ ἑτερότητι ταὐτόν [sc. ἡ ὕλη ἐστί]; ἢ οὔ, ἀλλὰ μορίῳ ἑτερότητος… The opening question reads in full: ‘Is matter then (οὖν) also (καί) the same as otherness?’ Having demonstrated (cap. 15) that matter is the same as the indefinite, Plotinus now asks, in this, the final chapter of the treatise, whether matter is therefore also the same as ‘otherness’. The initial answer is ‘no’ (ἡ οὔ). The difference between ‘otherness’ and what is only ‘a part of otherness’ will be a crucial feature of Plotinus’ borrowing from Plato. See the continuation of my main text above.

13) Enn. II 4 [12] 16.1-3: … μορίῳ ἑτερότητος ἀντιταττοµένῳ πρὸς τὰ ἄντα κυρίως, ἢ δὴ λόγοι [sc. ἡ ὕλη ταὐτόν ἐστι]. Matter is the same (ἡ ὕλη ταὐτόν ἐστι, taken over from the words preceding) as a part of otherness (μορίῳ ἑτερότητος) set in opposition (ἀντιταττοµένῳ) to the beings properly so-called (πρὸς τὰ ἄντα κυρίως), that are none other than logoi (ἡ δὴ λόγοι). ‘Plotinus’ definition is an adaptation of the Stranger’s definition of the form of non-being in the Sophist (258 E 2-3, quoted above, n. 10).
The adaptation is essential to Plotinus’ use of Plato’s definition of non-being as a definition of matter. The part of otherness that is opposed to ‘the beings properly so called’, the ‘forms’ or logoi, is able to take over the role of the ‘nurse of becoming’ in Plato’s Timaeus, precisely because, in being opposed to all the forms, matter can have no positive determination of its own and is therefore able to reflect any and every form without interposing any positive character peculiar to itself.

Plotinus’ tour de force

Matter, so defined, is therefore ‘privation’. But privation conceived as a permanent substrate of change. No longer the privation of Aristotle’s Physics, no longer therefore a mere terminus a quo of change…

This is one of the high spots in the philosophy of the Enneads. Plotinus has succeeded in joining Plato’s definition of a form of non-being to Aristotle’s conception of privation in the Physics. That remarkable tour de force has been achieved by substituting ‘the beings properly so called’ for ‘the being of each thing’, in the Sophist, and by making Aristotle’s privation a permanent substrate of change, a permanent lack of form and definition since it can never be anything other than a ‘part of otherness’.

§ 27. Errors of Text and Translation

The linking sentence

If that whole network of ideas has not been recognised by modern editors and by modern commentators, it is in part because, in the treatise On matter, the sentence linking ‘non-being’ to ‘privation’ has been misconstrued and mistranslated, 16.3: διὸ καὶ µὴ ὄν οὐτω τι ὄν καὶ στερήσει ταὐτόν. The meaning is not, as in Armstrong’s Loeb translation, and all too often elsewhere: ‘Therefore (διό), though it (sc. matter) is non-existent (καὶ µὴ ὄν), it has a certain sort of existence in this way (οὕτω τι ὄν), and is the same thing as privation (καὶ στερήσει ταὐτόν).’

Armstrong’s translation, though not impossible syntactically, takes no account of the Platonic background. Once the words are read, as they

14 Armstrong, 1956, ad loc. (p. 147).
should be read, in the light of Plato’s definition of a form of non-being in the *Sophist*, the syntax, and therefore the meaning of the sentence, is quite different. ‘Non-being’ is the complement in the main clause of the sentence, not a concessive aside, as it is in Armstrong’s translation. The first two words of the sentence (διὸ καί) have therefore to be taken together, as they often are in Aristotle and elsewhere in the *Enneads*. The meaning is: ‘That is exactly why (διὸ καί) matter is non-being (μὴ ὄν sc. ἡ ὕλη ἐστίν), being in this way something (σὺν τι δὲν), and is the same as privation (καὶ στερήσει ταὐτόν).’

‘Being in this way something’ refers to the definition of matter in the sentence preceding, 16.1-3: ‘Matter is the same as a part of otherness opposed to the beings properly so-called, that is the forms.’ It is because matter, as a part of otherness (‘being in this way something’), has been identified with the ‘non-being’ of Plato’s *Sophist* that it can also be identified with the ‘non-being’ that is defined, in Aristotle’s *Physics*, as ‘privation’.

*The false reading in Plato’s Sophist*

The Platonic background to Plotinus’ definition of matter as ‘non-being’ has also been obscured for the modern reader by needless uncertainty over the text of Plato’s *Sophist*. Plotinus’ adaptation of Plato’s theory has given rise to a change in Plato’s text, recorded by Simplicius in his commentary on the *Physics*.

In the text recorded by Simplicius (Phys. 238.26-27), the ‘part’ of otherness that constitutes the form of non-being (258 E 2) is opposed to ‘each being’ (τὸ δὲν ἐκαστὸν), so as to match Plotinus’ definition of matter as the ‘part’ of otherness opposed to ‘the beings properly so-called’ (Enn. II 4 [12] 16.2: τὰ ὄντα κυρίως). Whether the second term of the definition is given as a plural (Plotinus: ‘the beings’) or distributively as a singular (‘each being’, the text of the *Sophist* recorded by Simplicius), the definition is the same.

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15) ‘Non-being’ in Plato: *Soph.* 258 E 2-3. ‘Non-being’ in Aristotle: *Phys.* i 8, 191 b 15-17. See also i 9, 192 a 3-6. When Plotinus asserts that matter is ‘the same as privation’ (Enn. II 4 [12] 16.3: στερήσει ταὐτόν [sc. ἡ ὕλη]), he asserts exactly what Aristotle denies: ‘We say that matter and privation are different’ (Phys. i 9, 192 a 3-4: ἡμεῖς µὲν γὰρ ὕλην καὶ στέρησιν ἑτερόν φαµεν εἶναι). The allusion to female ‘desire’ (16.13-15, see above § 25) is sufficient proof, if proof were needed, that Plotinus is fully conscious of the contradiction.
But this is not the definition required by the Stranger's argument. The Stranger's argument requires as the second term of the opposition not a multiplicity of forms, but a single form, whether ‘being’ itself or ‘being’ as instantiated. This is exactly what we are given by the unanimous reading of the manuscripts, and it is also the reading to be found in an earlier passage of Simplicius' commentary (Phys. 135.26-27). The form of non-being is the part of otherness opposed to ‘the being of each thing’ (258 E 2: τὸ ἄνεχάστου).

Modern editors who adopt the variant recorded in the later passage of Simplicius' commentary do so simply because, here as elsewhere, they have failed to recognise for what it is the Neoplatonic adaptation of Plato's text.

§ 28. ‘Privation’ and ‘Non-Being’

The complex background

With even that briefest of brief summaries of the play of ideas, Parmenidean, Platonic and Aristotelian, that lie behind the complexities of Plotinus’ account of matter in the final chapter of his treatise, we are equipped, as Phillips, in his article, so obviously is not, to return with some hope of understanding to what Plotinus is talking of in On the daimon and in Various investigations.

When Plotinus writes of what is produced by soul in On the daimon as an ‘utter lack of definition’, the expression he uses is no more than a repetition of that complete lack of any positive determination (lack of ‘... shape, form

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6) See again (cf. § 26 above) Soph. 258 E 2-3: τὸ πρὸς τὸ ἄνεχάστου μόριον αὐτῆς [sc. τῆς θατέρου φύσεως] ἀντιτιθέμενοι ἐπείειν ὡς αὐτὸ τοῦτό ἐστιν ὄντως τὸ μὴ ὄν. Literally: 'Of that part of the nature of the other (τὸ [...] μόριον αὐτῆς [sc. τῆς θατέρου φύσεως]) that is opposed to the being of each thing (πρὸς τὸ ἄνεχάστου [...] ἀντιτιθέμενον), we dared to say (ἐπείειν) that just that (ὡς αὐτὸ τοῦτό) is really (ἐστιν ὄντως) what is not (τὸ μὴ ὄν).

7) 'Modern editors' include Burnet, in his two Oxford editions of Plato (1900 and 1905), and the editors of the first volume of the revised edition (Duke et alii, 1995). Failure to recognise anachronistic variants in ancient texts transcribed by scholars fully conversant with, and anxious to propagate, the 'truths' of Platonism and of Neoplatonism, is a common source of error in modern editions. For examples, see O'Brien, 1987b.
or quality’) that he had spoken of when adapting to his own purposes Aris-
totle’s theory of ‘privation’ in the concluding chapter of On matter.\textsuperscript{18}

So too when he writes of the object produced by soul in Various investi-
gations as ‘non-being’ or ‘what is not’ (3.11: τὸ µὴ ὄν), the expression he uses
looks back to his adaptation, in the treatise On matter, of the Stranger’s
paradoxical definition of a form of ‘non-being’ in the Sophist.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{A ‘making’ of the ‘non-existent’}

With even that briefest sketch of the background to Plotinus’ ideas, it is at
once obvious that the ‘non-being’ made by a partial soul in Various investi-
gations is not, as Phillips thinks it is, ‘non-existent’.\textsuperscript{20} How could it be? What
could it mean even to ‘make what does not exist?’\textsuperscript{21} When Plotinus writes of
what the soul ‘makes’ as ‘non-being’ or ‘what is not’, he is drawing on the
definition of non-being put forward in Plato’s Sophist, suitably adapted to
his own purposes so as to become a definition of the matter of the sensible
world, a ‘non-being’ that is a ‘part of otherness’ opposed to the forms, and
therefore lacking in any positive determination of its own.

For Plotinus as for Plato, the ‘non-being’ that is a ‘part’ of otherness loses
its whole meaning and purpose if it is conflated, as it has been by Phillips,
with sheer non-existence. Phillips’ translation of τὸ µὴ ὄν, in Various investi-
gations (3.11), as ‘non-existent’ confuses negation with contrariety, the ‘form
of non-being’ with ‘what is not in any way at all’ (cf. Soph. 237 B 7-8: τὸ
µηδαµῶς ὄν).

\textit{‘Utter non-being’}

It is of course all too easy to overlook that distinction if, like Phillips, we
read Various investigations without reference to what Plotinus has written
in the treatise immediately preceding, On matter, and if we read On matter
without recognising the deliberate allusion to Plato’s definition of the form
of non-being in the Sophist.

\textsuperscript{18) The comparison here lies between On matter, Enn. II 4 [12] 16.21-23, and On the daimon,
Enn. III 4 [15] 1.8-14. The essential background is provided by Aristotle, Phys. i 7-9.
\textsuperscript{19) The comparison here lies between On matter, Enn. II 4 [12] 16.1-3, and Various investigations,
Enn. III 9 [13] 3.9 and 11. The essential background is provided by Plato, Soph. 258 E 2-3.
\textsuperscript{20) Phillips, 2009, 108 and 134. Cf. § 10 above.
\textsuperscript{21) For the flights of fancy inspired by such a notion, see § 10 above.
The distinction is nonetheless crucial. Plotinus does say of the object that is made by a partial soul in Various investigations that it is ‘utterly dark’ (3.13: πάντη σκοτεινόν) and ‘utterly without thought’ (3.13: ἀνόητον πάντη). He does write of the product brought to birth by soul in On the daimon as ‘utterly other than herself’ (1.6: πάντη ἕτερον αὐτῆς), an ‘utter lack of definition’ (1.11-12: ἀφοριστίαν [...] παντελὴ) and ‘utterly lacking in definition’ (1.14: πάντη sc. ἀφοριστον). He does say, of matter, in the last chapter of On matter, that it is ‘utterly ugly’ (cf. 16.23-24: πάντη αἰσχρὸν) and ‘utterly evil’ (cf. 16.24: πάντη κακόν). But in none of those three texts does Plotinus ever write of matter as ‘utterly non-being’.

The omission is not fortuitous, as may be seen when the expression does occur, but preceded by a negation, in On the Good and on the One, a treatise written shortly before On matter.22 The soul, in turning away from her vision of the One, ‘will not come to what is utterly non-being’ (11.35-36: οὐ γὰρ δὴ εἰς τὸ πάντη μὴ ὄν ἥξει). ‘In her descent’, Plotinus continues (11.36-37: κάτω µὲν βᾶσα), ‘she will come to evil’ (εἰς κακὸν ἥξει), ‘and in that sense to non-being’ (καὶ οὕτως εἰς μὴ ὄν), but ‘not to utter non-being’ (οὐκ εἰς τὸ παντελὲς μὴ ὄν).23

Exactly so. Plotinus’ emphatic adjectives and adverbs (παντελής, ‘utter’, πάντη, ‘utterly’) are not, as the casual reader may all too easily suppose, scattered about with wild abandon. The object produced by soul may be

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22) On the Good and on the One, Enn. VI 9 [9]. Porphyry has chosen to place this text as the final tractate in his edition of the Enneads, perhaps because he too was moved, as so many later readers have been, by the concluding words, ‘the flight of the alone to the Alone’. Chronologically, the text falls immediately before The three principal hypostases, Enn. V 1 [10], where we have already had occasion to note the composite expression ‘the darkness of matter and non-being’ (2.26-27: σκότος ὕλης καὶ µὴ ὄν). The two treatises precede almost directly the treatise On matter (see § 14 above).

23) The ‘non-being’ synonymous with ‘evil’ in On the Good and on the One (11.37: µὴ ὄν) is undoubtedly matter, as is the ‘non-being’ referred to in The three principal hypostases (2.26-27: µὴ ὄν), and in On matter (16.3 µὴ ὄν). In On the Good and on the One, it is not therefore ‘utterly non-being’ (11.36: τὸ πάντη µὴ ὄν) or ‘utter non-being’ (11.37-38: τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν). The denial that matter is ‘utterly non-being’ will be repeated in On what evils are and where they come from (Enn. I 8 [51] 3.6-7: τὸ παντελές µὴ ὄν, see § 29 below). The same expression is used in On matter, when Plotinus argues that coming-into-being in the sensible world cannot arise ἐκ τοῦ παντελές µὴ ὄντος (6.6). To bring out the repetition of a common prefix (παν-) in πάν-τη, παν-τελῶς and παν-τελές, I translate the adjective (παντελής) as ‘utter’ and the two adverbs (both πάντη and παντελῶς) as ‘utterly’. See also the footnote following.
‘utterly dark’, ‘utterly without thought’, ‘utterly other’ than soul, ‘utterly lacking in definition’, an ‘utter lack of definition’, ‘utterly ugly’ and ‘utterly evil’. But, although it is indeed ‘non-being’, it is not therefore ‘utter non-being’ or ‘utterly non-being’, for in that case it would be simply non-existent.\(^{24}\)

*An easily recognisable adaptation*

Fumble that distinction, and Plotinus’ theory of matter slips from your grasp. Matter is not ‘utterly non-being’, and it is not therefore ‘non-existent’. It is the ‘non-being’ that Plotinus has defined, with a silent but eloquent bow to the Stranger of Plato’s *Sophist*, as the ‘part of otherness’ opposed to ‘the beings properly so called, the forms’. It has no positive determination of its own, but it is not therefore ‘non-existent’.

The friends and students for whom Plotinus was writing in Rome would have had no difficulty in recognising the adaptation of Plato’s definition of a ‘form of non-being’ in the account given of ‘non-being’ in Plotinus’ treatise *On matter*. They would therefore have at once recognised, as Phillips has so signally failed to do, that the ‘non-being’ made by a partial soul in *Various investigations* (3.9 and 11: τὸ µὴ ὄν) is not therefore ‘non-existent’.

*Deliberate reminiscences*

But the Platonic and Aristotelian reminiscences that form the very backbone of the final chapter of the treatise *On matter* would have told Plotinus’ friends and associates far more than that. Amelius or Porphyry would have at once realised, as I hope the readers of this article will by now also have done, that when Plotinus describes the object ‘made’ or ‘brought to birth’ by soul in *Various investigations* and in *On the daimon* as ‘non-being’ (*Various investigations*) and as ‘utterly without definition’ (*On the daimon*), he is

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\(^{24}\) When the expression τὸ πάντη µὴ ὄν recurs in *Enn.* III 6 [26] 14.20-21 (τὸ δὲ πάντη µὴ ὄν ἄµικτον τῷ ὄντι), the reference is not to matter, as the punctuation of the sentence by Henry and Schwyzer would lead one to believe. The words are still part of the parenthesis that begins in the previous line, where it is correctly marked, in Henry and Schwyzer’s edition, by an opening dash (14.19), but carries on to include the words quoted (14.20-21). The dash marking the end of the parenthesis should therefore be placed not, as it is in Henry and Schwyzer’s edition, before the words quoted (and therefore at 14.20, before τὸ δὲ πάντη), but after the words quoted (and therefore at 14.21, after τῷ ὄντι).

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merely repeating the description already given of the matter of the sensible world in the concluding chapter of his treatise On matter.

The members of Plotinus’ school would therefore at once have recognised, as Plotinus obviously intended them to recognise, that in ‘giving birth’ to an object ‘utterly without definition’, the soul of On the daimon ‘gives birth’ to the matter that had been defined as lacking any positive qualification, and therefore as ‘privation’, in the concluding chapter of his treatise On matter, with the meaning given to that word by Plotinus’ adaptation of Aristotle’s definition of ‘privation’ in the Physics.

They would also have at once recognised, as Plotinus obviously intended them to recognise, that in ‘making’ an object said to be ‘non-being’, the soul of Various investigations is ‘making’ the matter that had been described as ‘non-being’ in the concluding chapter of his treatise On matter, with the meaning given to that expression by Plotinus’ adaptation of the form of ‘non-being’ in the Sophist.

Adjectives and adverbs

The members of Plotinus’ school would also presumably have known enough Greek not to suppose, as Philips has done, that both πάντη and παντελῆ are ‘adverbs’.\footnote{Phillips, 2009, 107: ‘… the adverbs πάντη and παντελῆ.’ For the single use of παντελῆ, see On the daimon 1.12 (when the same word appears in On the Good and on the One, it is as a neuter, 11.37: παντελῆς). For the multiple uses of πάντη, see the many references given above.} Seeing that error staring at one from the page of Phillips’ article, a chill grips the heart. There are several other errors in the Greek of Phillips’ article.\footnote{For ἀνόλεθρος (p. 105 and p. 105 n. 6), read ἀνώλεθρος. For γένητος (p. 105), read γενητός (ibid.). For ὧδε (p. 115 n. 28), read ὧδε. For ἁµαρτία (p. 115 n. 30), read ἁµαρτία. For σκία (ibid.), read σκιά. For ὅσον (p. 130 n. 61), read ὅσον. For σωµατειδόν (p. 131), read σωµατοειδές. For εἶδος τι (p. 134), read εἶδος τι.} Is it possible that all these are not, as one might otherwise have supposed them to be, mere printer’s errors?

The days when printers knew Greek are now, alas, long passed. But I do still expect the author of an article on Plotinus to know enough Greek to be able to distinguish an adverb (πάντη or παντελῶς) from an adjective (παντελῆς, with the accusative singular, feminine or masculine, παντελῆ), and therefore to know enough Greek to be able to read the Enneads in the original.
But my suspicions are perhaps unfounded. I voice them only as a kindly warning to Phillips, should he be inclined to look askance at my various innovations, whether my adopting the less favoured reading of the text in Plato’s *Sophist* (258 E 2: ἑκάστος, not ἕκαστον), or my solution of a long-standing crux in the text of the *Enneads* (*Enn.* II 4 [12] 16.14: < ἐϕίηται >), or my translation of Plotinus’ definition of matter as ‘non-being’ and ‘privation’, giving his words a syntax different from that adopted by Armstrong and others (*Enn.* II 4 [12] 16.3). However disconcerting Phillips may find these innovations, I would urge him to think long and hard before expressing dissent if, as I suspect, his knowledge of Greek is perhaps not quite up to scratch.  

§ 29. ‘Non-being’ and ‘Non-existent’

‘On matter’ and ‘On evil’

Phillips’ being unable to hear what Plotinus has to say of the origin of matter in the *Enneads* does not of course stem merely from his being unable to distinguish an adjective (παντελῆ) from an adverb (πάντη). What is at stake here is the significance of either word in relation to the difference between ‘non-being’ and ‘non-existent’ (or ‘non-existence’).

In neglecting that distinction, and therefore translating τὸ µὴ ὄν, in *Various investigations* (3.11), as ‘non-existent’, failing therefore to see, in the description of the object made by soul as ‘non-being’, a description of matter, Phillips not only pays the penalty for disregarding what Plotinus has to say of matter in his treatise of that name. He has also failed to take the

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27) In describing both πάντη and παντελῆ as ‘adverbs’, Phillips has presumably been misled by the form of the word, by the fact that both words end, fortuitously, with the same vowel. Even so, one might have expected a more conscientious reader of Plotinus’ text, having failed to recognise the form of the word, at least to have paused to reflect on the oddity that what he supposed to be an adverb (παντελῆ) should be attached to a noun (ἀοριστίαν, *Enn.* III 4 [15] 1.11-12). However idiosyncratic Plotinus’ use of what may, or conceivably may not, have been his native tongue, the text of the *Enneads* still conforms to the fundamental norms of Greek syntax. The so-called ‘adjectival’ use of the adverb, though admittedly not impossible, would have been unusual in our text. See the examples of an ‘adjectival’ use quoted by Kühner-Gerth, 1898, 594-596 (§ 461.6).

28) Phillips, 2009, 108 and 134. See above § 28.
measure of what Plotinus say of matter in one of his last treatises, written a good ten years later, shortly before his death, when Porphyry had already left Rome for Sicily, the treatise On what evils are and where they come from (Enn. I 8 [51]). In this late treatise, Plotinus' debt to Plato and in particular the distinction between the ‘non-being’ of matter and sheer non-existence, will be spelled out more loudly and more clearly than ever before.29

Form and contrariety

When Plotinus, in On evils, defines what will prove to be matter as ‘a certain form that is, of what is not’ (3.4-5: εἶδός τι τοῦ µὴ ὄντος δὲν), his words repeat the paradoxical conjunction of being and non-being to be found in the Sophist, when the Stranger claims that he and Theaetetus have brought to light ‘the form that there turns out to be, of what is not’ (258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος δὲν γεγράφη ὅν τοῦ µὴ ὄντος). Plotinus’ reference to the text of the Plato is here unmistakable, as unmistakable as it is in On matter, when, drawing on the Stranger’s very next sentence, he defines the ‘non-being’ of matter in terms of a ‘part’ of otherness.30 What is also unmistakable, in the text of On evils, is Plotinus’ repetition of the distinction, drawn by Plato’s Stranger in the lines of the dialogue almost immediately following, between non-being as the form of non-being, non-being therefore as ‘the form that is, of what is not’ (cf. 258 D 6), and what is referred to, obliquely and with due circumspection, as an impossible and inconceivable ‘contrary’ of being (cf. 258 E 6-259 A 1), non-being therefore as sheer non-existence.

29) For the chronology of the treatises, see again Vita 5, and Goulet’s commentary (1982).
30) At Enn. II 4 [12] 16.1-3, Plotinus repeats, with a crucial variation, what the Stranger says at Soph. 258 E 2-3. See above § 26. I comment below (§ 33) on the use of the indefinite pronoun (τι) and on the change in the order of words. Plotinus’ definition, translated literally, would be ‘a certain form of what is not (εἶδός τι τοῦ µὴ ὄντος), that is (δὲν). But this is too barbarous, in English, and is also superficially ambiguous, since it is not immediately clear, in English, that ‘form’ is the antecedent of the relative clause (‘that is’). The translation adopted above, in so far as it gives the same order of words for the two quotations, from the Enneads and from the Sophist, does therefore make Plotinus’ reminiscence even more obvious, in English, than it is in Greek, but the point is hardly of consequence for my argument, since no-one could seriously doubt that Plotinus is here alluding to the paradoxical definition of the form of non-being taken from the very same passage of the Sophist (258 D 5-E 3) that he had already made use of in his treatise On matter.
For just as Plato’s ‘form of non-being’ is distinguished, in the *Sophist*, from ‘what is not in any way at all’ (cf. 237 B 7-8: τὸ µὴ βαθµιῶς δῦν), the Stranger’s ‘contrary’ of being, so too Plotinus’ definition of matter, in *On evils*, is distinguished from ‘what is utterly non-being’ (3.6-7: τὸ παντελῶς µὴ δῦν), the very word, only now in the form of an adverb, that he had used in essentially the same context, and for essentially the same purpose, several years earlier, in his treatise *On the Good and on the One*, when he distinguished ‘non-being’ (11.37: µὴ δῦν) from ‘utter non-being’ (11.37-38: τὸ παντελὲς µὴ δῦν).31

In the *Enneads*, as in the *Sophist*, the addition of the adverb or the adjective (µηδαµῶς in the *Sophist*, παντελῶς or παντελὴς in the *Enneads*) points to ‘non-being’ as sheer nothingness, sheer non-existence therefore, as distinct from ‘non-being’ as the ‘part of otherness’ that is opposed either to the form of being or to ‘the being of each thing’, in the *Sophist*, or to all the ‘beings’, when a part of otherness is defined as matter, in the *Enneads*.32

‘Absolute non-existence’

The distinction between ‘non-being’ as a part of otherness and ‘non-being’ as sheer nothingness, as non-existence, is crucial for an understanding of what it is that Plotinus is saying in the *Enneads*, as crucial as it is in the *Sophist*, where the distinction lies at the very heart of the Stranger’s critique of the historical Parmenides. Only the reader who has a clear grasp of that distinction, and of its Platonic background, will be fully able to grasp the implication of the reference to ‘non-being’ as a description of the object ‘made’ by soul in *Various investigations*.

Plotinus does not say here that the soul makes what is ‘non-existent’, the translation given of τὸ µὴ δῦν (3.11) by both Phillips and Armstrong.33 His claim, for those who have ears to hear, is that the soul makes ‘non-being’ or ‘what is not’. The difference is not only a difference of translation; it is a difference of meaning and of substance. But a difference of meaning and of

31) See again § 28 above. The context of the expression and its purpose is ‘essentially the same’ in *On the Good and on the One*, in so far as the ‘evil’ there referred to (11.37: κακέν) is none other than matter. What is lacking in *On the Good and on the One*, and what will be found in *On evils*, is Plotinus’ repetition of the Stranger’s paradox (258 D 6: ‘a form that is, of what is not’) as a match for his own definition of matter as ‘non-being’ (3.4-5).

32) For Plotinus’ adaptation of Plato’s definition, see again § 26 above.

33) Phillips, 2009, 108 and 134. Armstrong, 1967, ad loc. (p. 147).
substance that can perhaps most easily be brought home to the hard of hearing by insisting on the difference of translation.

If ‘non-being’, the product of a partial soul in Various investigations (3.11: τὸ µὴ ὄν), is translated as ‘the non-existent’, as it is by both Phillips and Armstrong, what difference of translation and of meaning can be given to the expression τὸ παντελῶς µὴ ὄν, in On evils (3.6-7), or to the expression τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν, in On the Good and on the One (11.37-38)?

Happy the man who can distinguish ‘non-existence’ or ‘the non-existent’, Armstrong’s translations of τὸ µὴ ὄν in successive sentences in Various investigations (3.9 and 11), from ‘absolute non-existence’, Armstrong’s translation of τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν in the earlier treatise (On the Good and on the One, 11.37-38).34 What can it mean to qualify ‘non-existence’ as ‘absolute non-existence’? Can there be degrees of non-existence? Is ‘absolute non-existence’ somehow more non-existent than ‘non-existence’ simpliciter?

Surely what does not exist… does not exist. Is the attempt to distinguish degrees of non-existence, by supposedly distinguishing ‘non-existence’ from ‘absolute non-existence’, any more than simply playing with words? What difference is supposedly brought to mind when we are given ‘the non-existent’ as a translation of τὸ µὴ ὄν, in Various investigations (3.9), and ‘absolute non-existence’ as a translation of τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν, in On the Good and on the One (11.37-38)?35

34) Armstrong, 1967, ad loc. (p. 413), translates Enn. III 9 [13] 3.9: τὸ µὴ ὄν, as ‘non-existence’, and the same expression, two lines later (3.11), as ‘the non-existent’. For the discrepancy, see the footnote following. Armstrong, 1988, ad loc. (p. 345), translates Enn. VI 9 [9] 11.37: µὴ ὄν, as ‘non-existence’, and both τὸ πάντη µὴ ὄν (11.36) and τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν (11.37-38) as ‘absolute non-existence’.

35) In the pages that follow, I let pass the difference between ‘non-existence’ and ‘non-existent’, Armstrong’s successive translations of the same expression, τὸ µὴ ὄν, in Various investigations 3.9 and 11 (see the footnote preceding this). I am not quite sure what difference, if any, Armstrong had in mind by his choice of one or other word. Presumably he found it a little less odd to write of soul ‘making the non-existent’ (3.11: τὸ µὴ ὄν preceded by ποιεῖ) than he would have done if he had written of the soul ‘making non-existence’, a form of words that almost suggests some strange periphrasis for ‘destroy’ or ‘obliterate’. Conversely, it presumably sounded a little more plausible to write of soul ‘going towards non-existence’ (3.11: Armstrong’s choice of verb for φεροµένη preceding εἰς τὸ µὴ ὄν) than it would have done to write of soul ‘going towards the non-existent’, as though ‘the non-existent’ could serve to mark a boundary or a destination or even a goal. Since, as will be seen, I think that either translation is wrong, there hardly seems any point in trying my reader’s patience by pursuing the difference, even though, philosophically and linguistically, exploration of a possible
'Absolute non-being'

That first puzzle leads to a second, when we look up Armstrong’s translation of τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν, in On evils (3.6-7), only to discover that the expression is now translated, not as ‘absolute non-existence’, as it is in On the Good and on the One, but as ‘absolute non-being’.36

For the Loeb Classical Library, Armstrong follows Porphyry’s systematic ordering of the treatises. His translation of On evils (Enn. I 8 [51]) appears therefore in the first volume of the Loeb series, and his translation of On the Good and on the One (Enn. VI 9 [9]) in the final volume. More than thirty years separate the publication of the two volumes. The seemingly slight difference in translation is therefore hardly to be wondered at.

The vacillation is nonetheless intriguing. Except for the difference between an adjective (παντελές, in On the Good and on the One) and an adverb (παντελῶς, in On evils), a difference which Armstrong has not attempted to reproduce in English, the two expressions, in the Enneads, are the same, τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν, in On evils (3.6-7), and τὸ παντελὲς μὴ ὄν, in On the Good and on the One (11.37-38). Does it follow that Armstrong’s two translations, ‘absolute non-being’, in the first volume, ‘absolute non-existence’, in the final volume, are intended to be synonymous?

A Latinate newcomer

The question is not as nugatory as it may be thought to be. The difference does admittedly stem in part from a mere difference of language. Ancient Greek has no well-established synonym for what grammarians and lexicographers sometimes like to call a ‘substantive’ use of εἶναι, no word therefore corresponding to our Latinate ‘exist’, which does fulfill that role in relation to the composite English verb ‘am-was-be’.37

difference (how do we distinguish ‘non-existent’ from ‘non-existence’?) would perhaps not be without interest.

36) Armstrong, 1956, ad loc. (p. 283), translates Enn. I 8 [51] 3.6-7: τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν, ‘absolute non-being’. As noted above, Armstrong, 1988, ad loc. (p. 345), translates Enn. VI 9 [9] 11.37-38: τὸ παντελὲς μὴ ὄν, ‘absolute non-existence’.

37) For the description of εἶναι, when used to form a ‘complete’ predicate, as a ‘substantive’ use of verb, in contradistinction to its use as a copula, see LSJ, s.v. εἰσί (sum), A (p. 488). For the composite English verb ‘am-was-be’, originally three different verbs, but now treated as parts of one and the same verb, see OED, vol. i, s.v. ‘be’ (pp. 715-719).
Thanks to that relatively late addition to the language, a 'substantive' use of εἶναι may as often as not, in English today, be translated equally well by 'there is' and by 'exists', since in many contexts the two expressions are virtually synonymous. The fool who continues to say in his heart 'There is no God' will be heard, by any native speaker of English to-day, as denying that 'God exists'.

It is, obviously enough, that virtual synonymy that has led Armstrong to substitute 'non-existence' for 'non-being' in his translation of the Enneads. But does it follow that one can qualify either expression in the same way? Is 'absolute non-existence' synonymous with 'absolute non-being'?

Two questions

We end up not with one question, but with two. What is the difference, if any, between 'non-existence' and 'absolute non-existence'? What difference, if any, is there between 'absolute non-existence' and 'absolute non-being'?

§ 30. Plato's Paradox

'Be' and 'exist'

The reader who sees no point in pursuing what he may think to be such pedantic questions may like to consider the consequences of taking 'be'

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38) For the late introduction of 'exist', see OED, vol. iii, s.v. (p. 413). The earliest use quoted for the verb is from Shakespeare (King Lear, Act 1, scene 1, lines 110-111: '. . . the orbs / from whom we do exist and cease to be'). For the use of 'there' as a way of giving emphasis to the verb that follows, and specifically to forms of 'be', see OED, vol. xi, s.v., B, 4, d (p. 281). With the semi-impersonal use of the older verb ('there is . . .'), the 'logical' subject follows the verb ('there is no God').

39) 'There is no God' is the conventional translation of the opening verse of Psalm 14, taken by Anselm as the starting point for the so-called ontological argument of his Proslogion. The fool says in his heart οὐκ ἔστι Θεός (in the Septuagint), non est Deus (in Anselm's text, repeating the translation traditionally ascribed to Jerome).

40) I would merely repeat here, by way of encouragement for the faint-hearted, who may think that I have gone on for too long already, that only by working out the answer to those two questions will the modern reader of Plotinus be able to achieve a firm grasp of the conceptual issue at stake in Plotinus' repetition, and adaptation, of the paradox of non-being in Plato's Sophist, and therefore a firm grasp of what Plotinus has in mind when he speaks of the soul as 'making non-being' in Various investigations (3.10-11).
and ‘exist’ as synonymous in translating the paradox of the *Sophist*. Were Plato’s Stranger to claim, when translated into English, that he and Theaetetus had discovered ‘a form that does exist, of what does not exist’ (cf. 258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος δὲ τυχχάνει δὲ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος), he would rightly be suspected of having crossed the line from paradox to contradiction. But why is that so?

We need to return to the distinction between what the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* call an ‘absolute’ use of ‘am-was-be’ and a copulative use of the same verb. That distinction answers, well enough, to the distinction between what Liddell, Scott and Jones call a ‘substantive’ use of εἶναι and the common-or-garden use of the same word as a copula.

English therefore allows us to arrive at a close match for Plato’s paradox, provided we keep to a repetition of the older verb, as in the translation adopted earlier in this essay: the form of non-being is ‘the form that there turns out to be, of what is not’ (258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος δὲ τυχχάνει δὲ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος).

The substantive verb and the verb as copula

With this translation, the paradox arises, in English as in Greek, from the juxtaposition of different uses of the same verb. The form of non-being is a part of otherness which, like all the parts of otherness, participates in ‘being’ and therefore ‘is’ (258 D 6: ὄν). A ‘substantive’ use of the verb. But that same part of otherness is, at the same time, a part of otherness opposed to

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40) See *OED*, vol. i, s.v. ‘be’, B, I: ‘absolutely’ (pp. 717-718), and B, III: ‘acting as simple copula’ (p. 718).

41) See *LSJ*, s.v. εἰµί (sum), A: ‘as the Substantive Verb’ (p. 488), B: ‘most frequently, to be, the Copula’ (*ibid.*).

42) I pause only to remark that it is a sign of philosophical illiteracy and of linguistic ignorance to suppose, as some of my less enlightened colleagues do, that the distinctions drawn by Kahn and others have somehow ‘outdated’ the basic difference, as noted in *LSJ* (see above), between a common-or-garden use of εἶναι as a copula, and the less frequent, but perfectly well-attested, occasions when the same word is used as what Liddell, Scott and Jones call ‘the Substantive Verb’ (see above). In its substantival use, the verb forms of itself a complete predicate, as it does for example when Socrates, in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, puts Strepsiades firmly in his place by telling him, to his obvious astonishment: ‘There is no Zeus’, ‘Zeus doesn’t exist’ (v. 366: οὐδ᾿ ἔστι Ζεύς).

43) To ‘be’, in the *Sophist*, is to participate in ‘being’. See 256 A 1-2. The Stranger goes out of his way, 258 A 7-9, to insist that all the ‘parts’ of otherness are so many ‘beings’ (ἕντα). The clear implication, in the context of the dialogue, is that they are ‘beings’ because they participate in ‘being’.
being, whether the form of being (256 D 11-E 4) or the particularisation of the form (258 E 2-3: ‘the being of each thing’), and is therefore a form of ‘non-being’ (258 D 6: τοῦ µὴ ὄντος) in so far as it is ‘other than being’. By implication, a copulative use of the verb (‘is other than…’ implying ‘is not…’).

The paradox is therefore still audible, in English, if we keep to the older verb (‘am-was-be’), taken successively in its substantival use and as a copula. By keeping to the older verb, we arrive, in English as in Greek, at the paradoxical, but not contradictory, assertion that the part of otherness that constitutes the form of non-being both ‘is’, in so far as it participates in being (a substantival use of the verb), and ‘is not’, in so far as it is other than being (a copulative use of the same verb).

If we no longer keep to a repetition of the older verb (‘am-was-be’), if instead we substitute ‘exist’ for the substantive use of εἶναι, as logically we are entitled to do, the Stranger’s form of non-being will be ‘a form that exists (ὄν), of what is not (τοῦ µὴ ὄντος)’. We retain the meaning therefore, but we lose the paradox.

A step further, and we lose both the paradox and the meaning. If we substitute ‘exist’ for both uses of the verb, as in the opening paragraph of this section, the Stranger’s form of non-being becomes ‘a form that exists (ὄν), of what does not exist (τοῦ µὴ ὄντος)’. With both ὄν and ὄντος translated by ‘exist’, and therefore with nothing to represent a copulative use of the verb, we come within a hair’s breadth of asserting that what does exist (cf. ὄν), doesn’t exist (cf. τοῦ µὴ ὄντος). Paradox spills over into contradiction.

The Stranger’s ‘contrary’ of being

Once we have appreciated that the force of the paradox rests on successive uses of the same verb, a positive use of the verb with its substantival meaning, followed by a negative use of the same verb as at least by implication a copula, we see why the Stranger should choose to speak, at this precise moment in his argument, of a ‘contrary’ of being (258 E 6-259 A 1), looking back, as he does so, to the expression ‘what is not in any way at all’ (237 B 7-8: τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν).

‘What is not in any way at all’, in the context of the Sophist, cannot but be taken as a negation of the substantival use of the verb, that very same substantival use of the verb that constitutes the first and positive term of the Stranger’s paradox. The Stranger’s dismissive allusion to a ‘contrary’ of
being, looking back to ‘what is not in any way at all’, is designed to tell us that, in speaking of ‘what is not’ as a ‘form that there turns out to be . . .’ (258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος ὃ τυγχάνει ὄν . . .), he is not speaking of ‘what is not in any way at all’, and that he is not therefore asserting of one and the same thing both that it is and that it isn’t.

The Stranger’s indirect allusion, at this point in his argument (258 E 6-259 A 1), to the formula ‘what is not in any way at all’ (237 B 7-8) marks the radical difference between what does, and what does not, participate in being—except of course that there isn’t anything that doesn’t participate in being. ‘What is not in any way at all’ is just that: sheer nothingness, an impossible and inconceivable ‘contrary’ of being, in so far as it is a negation of the substantival use of the verb, and therefore has meaning—if meaning it can be called—only as a denial of any participation in being.45

The ‘being’ of ‘non-being’

What we learn from the Stranger’s allusion to an impossible ‘contrary’ of being as ‘what is not in any way at all’ (cf. 237 B 7-8) is therefore that the form of non-being, since it is not a ‘contrary’ of being, is not sheer nothingness. It does participate in being. That is why it is a form that ‘turns out to be . . .’ (258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος ὃ τυγχάνει ὄν . . .).

The paradox may continue: ‘. . . of what is not’ (258 D 6: τοῦ µὴ ὄντος). But the addition of what is, by implication, a copulative use of the verb, accompanied by a negation, does nothing to weaken the prior assertion that the form of non-being ‘turns out to be’. The addition of the negation in the second part of the paradox, a negation attaching to a different, copulative, use of the same verb, is not a half-way house, a half-hearted approximation to the sheer nothingness of ‘what is not in any way at all’.

The form of non-being is firmly and irrevocably marked off by the Stranger from ‘what is not in any way at all’, precisely because, although a form of ‘what is not’, it has nonetheless to be recognised, in virtue of its participation in being, as first and foremost a form that ‘turns out to be’.

The Stranger’s avoidance of contradiction

By introducing, at this precise point in his argument, a reference to the impossible ‘contrary’ of being (258 E 6-259 A 1), and therefore to ‘what is not

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45) For lack of participation as a condition of ‘contrariety’, see O’Brien, 1993, 57-59.
in any way at all’ (237 B 7-8), the Stranger aims to set aside the contradiction that would arise if the verb in the two expressions ὄν and τοῦ µὴ ὄντος, in his definition of the form of non-being (258 D 6), had the same meaning, the meaning that would arise if both the participle and the negation of the participle were an expression of the substantival use of the verb.

He wants it to be known that he is not asserting of one and the same thing that it both is (cf. ὄν) and is not (cf. τοῦ µὴ ὄντος), with the verb in both expressions bearing the same substantival meaning. To revert to our modern idiom, he is not asserting that what exists (cf. ὄν), does not exist (cf. τοῦ µὴ ὄντος). The participle that is negated in the second part of the paradox (τοῦ µὴ ὄντος) does not have the same ‘substantival’ meaning as the participle that is affirmed in the first part of the paradox (ὁν).

Different negations

The reader of the Sophist has therefore to appreciate that the paradoxical definition of the form of non-being as ‘the form that turns out to be, of what is not’ (258 D 6), with its rider, the Stranger’s dismissal of a ‘contrary’ of being (258 E 6-259 A 1, looking back to 237 B 7-8), rests on different uses of the verb and therefore on different uses of the negation.

The wording of the paradox itself turns on the opposition between a positive use of the substantival verb (ὁν, a form that ‘is’) and a negation of the same verb in its use as a copula (τοῦ µὴ ὄντος, a form of ‘what is not’), the negation, in the context, is an expression of otherness. ‘What is not’, although it participates in being, and therefore ‘is’, participates in otherness in relation to being, and is therefore ‘non-being’.

A second, and quite different, negation is provided by the expression ‘what is not in any way at all’ (237 B 7-8: τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν). This is a substantival use of the verb. ‘What is not in any way at all’ will be categorised, in the context of the Stranger’s argument, as an impossible and inconceivable ‘contrary’ of being—impossible and inconceivable because it would point to whatever does not participate in being, and there ‘is’ nothing that does not participate in being.

For the paradox to have meaning, the two forms of negation have to be kept distinct. A negation of the substantival use of the verb (the Stranger’s impossible ‘contrary’ of being) is not implied by the conjunction of ‘is’ and ‘is not’ in the Stranger’s paradoxical definition of a ‘form that turns out to be, of what is not’. The negation embedded in the paradoxical definition of the form of non-being (258 D 6: ‘the form that turns out to be, of what
is not’) is a negation of the verb used, if only by implication, as a copula. There is no negation of the substantival use of the verb. The Stranger does not assert of ‘the form that turns out to be . . .’ that it is not.

A negation that is not a contrariety

The distinction, clear enough once it has been drawn attention to, is essential to any understanding of the Stranger’s argument. The form of non-being is not the same as ‘what it not in any way at all’. Negation is not the same as contrariety. The form of non-being constituted by a part of otherness, like all the parts of otherness, participates in being and therefore ‘is’. It is not a contrary of being, even though it is a negation of being.

The form of non-being is a negation of being, in so far as it is ‘other than being’: a copulative use of the verb therefore (‘is not . . .’, ‘is other than . . .’), with ‘being’ providing the second term in the relationship (what is ‘other than being’ is ‘non-being, just as what is ‘other than beautiful’ is ‘non-beautiful’). But the form of non-being is not therefore the contrary of being that would be indicated by a negation of the substantival use of the verb: ‘is not’ as a denial of participation in being.

The paradox does not therefore contravene what Aristotle calls the firmest of all principles, the principle of contradiction.46 It does not assert, of one and the same thing, that it both ‘is’, in so far as it participates in being, and ‘is not’ by not participating in being. To avoid just that contradiction, the Stranger is at pains to point out (258 E 6–259 A 1) that, in speaking of a form that ‘is’, even though it is a form of ‘what is not’, he is not therefore speaking of an impossible ‘contrary’ of being, a expression which, in the context, looks back to the impossible ‘what is not in any way at all’, and therefore to a complete absence of any participation in being.47

46) Aristotle, Met. Γ 3, 1005 b 17-18.

47) If I so labour a point that to any attentive reader of the Sophist should be obvious, it is because commentators, even the most recent, unwittingly obliterate the distinction by asserting, for example, that ‘Plato deliberately leaves open the question about the being of what in no way is’ (Notomi, 2007, 184, with the author’s own italics). Plato’s Stranger does no such thing. He does not for one moment assert, nor even ‘leave open’, as the author of the words I have quoted would have us believe, the possibility that what is specifically said ‘not to be in any way at all’ (cf. 237 B 7–8: τὰ µηδεµῶς ἄν, Notomi’s ‘what in no way is’) might nonetheless, somehow, just possibly ‘be’. For all the years that he has devoted to a study of the Sophist (cf. Notomi, 1999), my friend has still no glimmerings of the whole point and purpose.
Plotinus and Plato’s Stranger

Those same two points are essential to Plotinus’ definition of matter as ‘non-being’ in the Enneads. When Plotinus repeats, in On evils, what is virtually Plato’s definition of a form of non-being as a form of words answering to his own definition of matter (3.4-5: ‘a form that is, of what is not’), he is casting back, as he does so, to the use that he had made of Plato’s definition several years earlier, in his treatise On matter (16.1-3). The repetition implies what had been stated explicitly in the earlier treatise, namely that matter is ‘a part of otherness’.

The second term in the relation of ‘otherness’ may not be the same, in the Sophist and in the Enneads (‘being’ as form and ‘the being of each thing’, in the Sophist, ‘the beings properly so called’, in the Enneads). Even so, Plotinus’ adaptation of the Stranger’s words leaves intact the point that the negation in the definition of ‘non-being’ (τοῦ µὴ ὄντος) is, if only by implication, a negation of the copulative use of the verb (‘is other than . . .’, ‘is not . . .’).

For the adaptation of Plato’s theory to be complete, that point cannot be left to stand alone. When Plotinus distinguishes the non-being that is matter from ‘utter non-being’, in On the Good and on the One, or from ‘what is utterly non-being’, in On evils, he is therefore repeating, in the context of his own theory, the distinction that the Stranger had drawn in the Sophist, between the form of non-being and ‘what is not in any way at all’. In both treatises, as in the Sophist, the sheer nothingness of ‘utter non-being’ or of ‘what is utterly non-being’ (the form of words that Plotinus uses in the Enneads), as of ‘what is not in any way at all’ (the form of words that Plato’s Stranger uses in the Sophist), has been introduced as a deliberate foil to the ‘non-being’ that is a ‘part’ of otherness, and that is therefore not sheer nothingness.48

of the paradox that lies at the heart of the dialogue. He also lets it be seen, incidentally, that despite a recent essay replete with dismissive allusions to myself (Notomi, 2007), for the most part wildly inaccurate, he has not taken the trouble to read O’Brien, 1995, 57-59, where the distinction between negation and contrariety, and its importance for the argumentative structure of the dialogue, is set out in some detail. See also the footnote at the end of this section.

48) ‘Utter non-being’, Enn. VI 9 [9] 11.37-38: τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν. ‘What is utterly non-being’, Enn. I 8 [51] 3.6-7: τὸ παντελῶς µὴ ὄν. ‘What is not in any way at all’, Soph. 237 B 7-8: τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν. The impossible ‘contrary’ of being: 258 E 6-259 A 1.
For Plotinus as for Plato, ‘non-being’, defined in terms of ‘otherness’, does not imply non-existence. The negation of a copulative use of the verb (‘is other than…’, ‘is not…’) does not imply a negation of the verb in its substantival use. When Plotinus writes of ‘utter non-being’ or of ‘what is utterly non-being’, he is repeating, in his own words, but for essentially the same purpose, the Stranger’s reference to a ‘contrary’ of being as ‘what is not in any way at all’.

The ‘part’ of otherness that is a form of non-being for Plato, and that has been taken over and adapted by Plotinus as a definition of matter, is marked off, as firmly and irrevocably in the Enneads as it is in the Sophist, from sheer non-existence, from sheer nothingness, from ‘what is not in any way at all’ (Plato), from ‘utter non-being’ or ‘what is utterly non-being’ (Plotinus).49

49) The plot of the Sophist is a good deal more complicated than I have made it appear in the simple summary of the dialogue outlined in the preceding paragraphs. When the Stranger contrasts the form of non-being with an impossible and inconceivable ‘contrary’ of being (258 E 6-259 A 1), he is introducing a distinction that had not been made in the earlier part of the dialogue. His quotation of the same pair of verses from Parmenides’ poem (fr. 7.1-2), before and after the account of ‘the very great gene’ (the first quotation: 237 A 8-9, the second quotation: 258 D 2-3), is intended to show up the ambivalence of the notion of ‘non-being’ in a world that is ruled by the simple opposition of ‘is’ and ‘is not’, as portrayed in the poem of Parmenides, an ambivalence that is dissipated by the Stranger’s account of the parts of otherness and his resulting definition of ‘the form that is, of what is not’ (258 D 5-E 3), designed to introduce a ‘non-being’ that is not a ‘contrary’ of being (cf. 258 E 8). The argumentative structure of the dialogue, Plato’s subtle portrayal of a world lacking the distinctions brought to light in the course of the dialogue, is a theme that I have pursued at some length elsewhere (1995, 2000). Here, my only concern is to present the outcome of the Stranger’s argument, and the use that is made of it, for his own purposes, by Plotinus.—A final caveat: in writing, as I do above, of Plotinus’ adaptation of Plato’s thesis, I do not imply that he and Plato see eye to eye on the notion of ‘contrariety’. So much is at once obvious from Plotinus’ remarks in On evils (cap. 6). But the divergence, although it will loom large in the commentators, notably Simplicius, is, for our present purposes, incidental. My point here is simply that, for Plotinus as for Plato, ‘non-being’ defined as ‘the form that is, of what is not’ is not the sheer nothingness that Plato’s Stranger has chosen to allude to as a ‘contrary’ of being.
§ 31. The Perils of Translation

Gilding the lily

That whole complex of ideas has been compromised by the seeming synonymy in Armstrong’s translation of τὸ παντελές μὴ ὄν as ‘absolute non-existence’ and of τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν as ‘absolute non-being’.\(^{50}\)

The clear parallel between the emphatic qualification added to the verb by Plato, when he writes, in the *Sophist*, of ‘what is not in any way at all’ (237 B 7-8: τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν), and the no less emphatic qualification added to the verb by Plotinus, when he writes, in *On the Good and on the One*, of ‘utter non-being’ (11.37-38: τὸ παντελές μὴ ὄν) and in *On evils* of ‘what is utterly non-being’ (3.6-7: τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν), is sufficient indication that, in the *Enneads* as in the *Sophist*, the participle points to a substantive use of the verb.

Whether the negation has been emphasised by the addition of an adjective (παντελές) or by the addition of an adverb (παντελῶς, in the *Enneads*, µηδαµῶς, in the *Sophist*), the point is, in either case, that the emphatic negation, in the *Enneads* as in the *Sophist*, is a negation of the verb in its use as a ‘complete’ predicate. The expression that Plotinus uses in the *Enneads* may therefore properly be paraphrased, in English, as ‘non-existent’ or ‘non-existence’. But once that has been done, a repetition of the adverb or the adjective is strictly speaking superfluous.

To repeat the qualification, to write of ‘non-existence’ as ‘absolute non-existence’, or as ‘utter non-existence’, is to gild the lily. The meaning ‘non-existence’ or ‘non-existent’ already conveys the meaning that has been given, in Greek, by the addition of the adjective (παντελές) or the adverb (παντελῶς). To repeat the qualification, and therefore to speak, not simply of ‘non-existence’, but of ‘absolute non-existence’, is strictly speaking a pleonasm.

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\(^{50}\) I return to the discrepancy noted earlier (§ 29 above). Armstrong (1988, *ad loc.*, p. 345) translates τὸ παντελές μὴ ὄν (*Enn. VI* 9 [9] 11.37-38) as ‘absolute non-existence’. The same author (1956, *ad loc.*, p. 283) translates τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν (*Enn. I* 8 [51] 3.6-7) as ‘absolute non-being’.
'Absolute non-existence' and 'what is not in any way at all'

Pleonasm do of course have their use. They serve, rhetorically, to give emphasis. 'Certainty' does not, properly speaking, admit of degrees. One is 'certain', or one is not. But if you hesitate to believe me when I say I am 'certain', I may well be moved to protest that I am 'absolutely certain'.

So too, in the appropriate context, we may perfectly well speak in English, as Armstrong has done, of 'absolute non-existence'. Someone objects: 'You don't mean to tell me that outside an expanding universe there's just nothing at all, nowhere even for it to expand into?' The speaker may well reply: 'Yes, I do mean just that. There isn't anything at all "outside". No empty space. Not even extension. Just nothing at all. Absolute non-existence.'

But when we use the expression in this way, it is not, properly speaking, a synonym of 'what is not in any way at all'. The expression 'what is not in any way at all' marks off one of the two possible uses of the older verb ('am-was-be'), and indicates that what is negated is the substantive use, as opposed to the use of the same word as a copula. There is no equivalent duality in the use of the English word 'exist'. 'Exist' may properly be used as a synonym for the substantive use of 'am-was-be' (in English), and therefore by way of paraphrase for the substantive use of εἶναι (in Greek). But that is all: 'exist' can no longer, in modern English, serve as a copula.51

If we add a qualifying expression to 'exist', as Armstrong has done when he writes of 'absolute non-existence', in his translation of τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν in On the Good and on the One (11.37-38), we are not therefore indicating, as we are when we add the same qualification to the older verb ('am-was-be'), any difference of use or of meaning, simply because, for the neologism 'exist', there is no difference of use or meaning.

If we choose, even so, to speak of 'absolute non-existence', we are merely adding emphasis, as we are when we choose to speak of 'sheer nothingness' or an 'absolute void'. If the void wasn't 'absolute', it wouldn't be a void. If 'nothingness' wasn't 'sheer', it wouldn't be nothingness. What does not

51) 'Exist' is frequently accompanied by an adverbial expression ('He exists only in your imagination') or by 'as' ('He exists only as a figment of your imagination'). Its use with a simple complement (he chose 'to exist a mastiff or a mule'), is now obsolete. See OED, vol. iii, s.v. 'exist' (p. 413).
exist... does not exist. There is no 'absolute' non-existence waiting, as it were, to engulf what is merely 'non-existent', but not 'absolutely' so.

A misleading synonymy

That mis-match between 'absolute non-existence' and 'absolute non-being' explains why the seeming synonymy of Armstrong's two translations, of τὸ παντελές μὴ ὄν as 'absolute non-existence', in On the Good and on the One (11.37-38), and of τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν as 'absolute non-being', in On evils (3.6-7), is potentially misleading as a guide to the philosophy of the Enneads.

There is a significant difference between 'what is not' in the Stranger's statement of his paradox (258 D 6: τὸ µὴ ὄντος), where it represents a copulative use of the verb, and 'what is not in any way at all' (237 B 7-8: τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν), where the negation bears on a substantival use of the same verb. There is essentially the same difference when Plotinus repeats Plato's paradox as a definition of matter in On evils, and adds the warning, as Plato's Stranger had done, that 'non-being', so defined, is not 'what is utterly non-being' (3.6-7), with only a variation in the choice of adverb (Plato's τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν is replaced by τὸ παντελῶς µὴ ὄν in Plotinus). And there is the same difference when Plotinus writes of 'non-being' (µὴ ὄν) and of 'utter non-being' (τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν) in On the Good and on the One (11.37-38).

But that difference is no longer audible once we translate in terms of 'non-existent' and of 'absolutely non-existent' (or of 'absolute non-existence'). Once either of Plotinus' two expressions, τὸ παντελῶς µὴ ὄν (On evils) or τὸ παντελές µὴ ὄν (On the Good and on the One), has been translated as 'non-existent' or 'non-existence', there is no further distinction of use or of meaning to be marked by the addition of an adjective (παντελές) or an adverb (παντελῶς). If, as we may well wish to do, we maintain, in the translation, some equivalent qualification ('utterly' non-existent, 'absolutely' non-existent), it can be heard only as adding emphasis, not as indicating a difference of use or meaning. 'When I say it doesn’t exist, I mean just that: it doesn’t exist at all.' Preferably accompanied by a thump on the table.

But when Plotinus distinguishes the 'non-being' of matter from 'utter non-being' or 'absolute non-being', the distinction is not only one of emphasis. The distinction is a distinction of use and meaning. When Plotinus draws on the paradox of the Sophist for his definition of matter, he distinguishes, as Plato had done, 'non-being' as a part of otherness, by
implication therefore a copulative use of the verb (‘is other than . . . , ‘is not . . . ’), from a substantival use of the same verb, ‘what is not in any way at all’ (Plato), ‘utter non-being’ or ‘what is utterly non-being’ (Plotinus).

That distinction cannot be conveyed, in English, by a distinction between ‘non-existent’ and ‘absolutely non-existent’ for the simple reason that ‘exist’ cannot be used as a copula. The difference, in English, between ‘non-existent’ and ‘utterly non-existent’ or ‘absolutely non-existent’ can be only a difference of emphasis. But when Plotinus repeats, in his own words, Plato’s distinction between ‘non-being’ or ‘what is not’ (τὸ µὴ ὄν) and ‘what is not in any way at all’ (τὸ µηδαµῶς ὄν), he does not indicate only a difference of emphasis. He appeals, as Plato himself had done, to a difference of use and of meaning essential to the expression of his thesis.

A vacuous distinction

Matter, for Plotinus, is ‘non-being’. But it is not therefore ‘non-existent’. That distinction cannot be replaced by a supposed distinction between ‘non-existent’ and ‘absolutely non-existent’ (or ‘absolute non-existence’). If matter doesn’t exist . . . it doesn’t exist. The distinction between ‘non-existent’ and ‘absolutely non-existent’, except as a rhetorical flourish, will get you nowhere. Except for the heightened emphasis provided by the adverb, it is a distinction without a difference. A distinction that is vacuous.

Plotinus cannot therefore assert, without contradiction, as he does assert in Armstrong’s translation of Plotinus, that matter is ‘non-existent’ and that it is not ‘absolutely non-existent’. Such a translation obliterates precisely the distinction that Plotinus is at such pains to establish. From the point of view of sense and meaning, it matters not one wit whether you say that matter is ‘non-existent’ or ‘absolutely non-existent’. In either case, you consign matter to the tender mercies, the bottomless pit, the sheer nothingness, of ‘what is not in any way at all’. Exactly what Plotinus seeks to avoid.52

52) Armstrong (1988, ad loc., p. 345) translates Enn. VI 9 [9] 11.37: µὴ ὄν, as ‘non-existence’, and both τὸ πάντη µὴ ὄν (11.36) and τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν (11.37-38) as ‘absolute non-existence’. In the context, the point is that soul, in her descent, arrives at µὴ ὄν (evil, and therefore matter), but not at τὸ πάντη µὴ ὄν or at τὸ παντελὲς µὴ ὄν (sheer nothingness). See above § 29 for the distinction, or the lack of a distinction, between ‘non-existent’ and ‘non-existence’.
§ 32. Sense and Nonsense

*Twin errors*

It is only once these distinctions and differences have been brought to light that the student of Plotinus can hope to avoid either one or both of two complementary errors, the error of failing to recognise, in the text of the *Enneads*, a distinction that is essential to the author’s purpose (the difference between ‘what is not’ and ‘what is utterly not’), and the error of thinking to find a distinction where there is none (thinking to distinguish ‘non-existence’ from ‘absolute non-existence’).

Those twin errors—either or both, if the student is sufficiently confused—lie waiting to entrap the foolish and the unwary who think to derive an essential ingredient in their interpretation of the *Enneads* from Armstrong’s misleading translation of τὸ µὴ ὄν, a description of the product ‘made’ by soul in *Various investigations* (3.11), as ‘the non-existent’.

Plato’s paradox (258 D 6), repeated by Plotinus in *On evils* (3.4-5), is reduced to virtual contradiction if we translate both verbs by ‘exist’ and claim therefore that the form of non-being (in the *Sophist*) and the definition of matter (in the *Enneads*) is ‘a form that does exist, of what does not exist’. No less contradictory, no less nonsensical, is it if we translate the second term of the paradox, and therefore the negation of a copulative use of the verb, ‘non-being’ or ‘what is not’ (258 D 6: τοῦ µὴ ὄντος), as though it were a negation of the substantive verb, and therefore write of ‘non-existence’ or ‘the non-existent’. Plotinus is then made to claim, in *Various investigations*, drawing on the language of Plato’s paradox, that what the soul ‘makes’ is ‘non-existent’ (cf. 3.11: τὸ µὴ ὄν).

*Nonsense*

Both Phillips and Armstrong have been happy enough to adopt that form of words in their translation of τὸ µὴ ὄν in *Various investigations* (3.11). The

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53 See again Phillips, 2009, 134, Armstrong, 1956, *ad loc.* (p. 147). Cf. § 29 above. I do have a certain fellow-feeling for Phillips’ having been led astray by Armstrong’s translation. I have myself, in my younger days, under the same influence, been led to write of ‘non-existence’ when I would now write of ‘non-being’. I leave the reader with sufficient curiosity to track down just when, and where.
meaning that results is quite simply impossible. Ask any native speaker of English what he understands when he is told that what the soul ‘makes’ is ‘non-existent’. Unless he has been bamboozled into believing that philosophers can get away with saying almost anything, he can only truthfully answer: ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

If what the soul ‘makes’ is ‘what doesn’t exist’, then it hasn’t ‘made’ anything at all. The very notion of ‘making’ falls by the wayside. If what is ‘made’ is ‘non-existent’, then there has been no ‘making’. The claim that the soul ‘makes’ what is ‘non-existent’ is the nonsense that it appears to be.

The nonsense is no less nonsensical if, as Armstrong has done, we translate μὴ ὄν, in *On the Good and on the One*, as ‘non-existence’, and τὸ παντελὲς μὴ ὄν, in the same sentence (11.37-38), as ‘absolute non-existence’. In the context, Plotinus’ point is that matter (here referred to as ‘evil’) is ‘non-being’ (μὴ ὄν) and is not ‘utter non-being’ (τὸ παντελὲς μὴ ὄν). Can we possibly convey that same distinction, in English, by asserting that matter is ‘non-existence’, and is not ‘absolute non-existence’?

No nonsense

If Plotinus is not talking nonsense in the *Enneads*, and specifically in the sentences quoted from *Various investigations* and from *On the Good and on the One*, it is because neither passage provides a context where ‘be’ and ‘exist’ may be used indifferently as a translation of εἶναι (or of ὄν) in ancient Greek.

When we are told, in *Various investigations*, that the soul makes ‘non-being’ or ‘what is not’ (3.11: τὸ μὴ ὄν), the verb in that expression is not, as it is in the opening words of the Stranger’s paradox (258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος ὃ τυγχάνει ὄν . . ., ‘a form that there turns out to be . . .’), repeated by Plotinus in *On evils* (3.4-5: εἶδός τι followed by ὄν, ‘a form that is . . .’), an instance of the ‘substantial’ use (‘is’ synonymous with ‘exists’), a use of the verb that, preceded by a negation, would indicate that the object supposedly in question does not exist. The participle in *Various investigations* represents a copulative use of the verb, ‘is not . . .’ understood as ‘is other than . . .’.

When Plotinus asserts, in *Various investigations*, that the soul makes τὸ μὴ ὄν (3.11), he is not for one moment therefore asserting that what the
partial soul ‘makes’ does not exist. His point is that the soul makes the ‘non-being’ that has been defined in the concluding chapter of _On matter_ as a ‘part of otherness’, a copulative use of the verb therefore.

The ‘non-being’ that Plotinus identifies with matter is a part of otherness opposed to ‘the beings properly so called’, and in virtue of that opposition properly designated ‘non-being’. It is a part of otherness nonetheless, and not therefore the sheer nothingness that Plato had spoken of, in the _Sophist_, as ‘what is not in any way at all’, the sheer nothingness that Plotinus himself writes of as ‘what is utterly non-being’, in _On evils_, and as ‘utter non-being’, in _On the Good and on the One_, and the sheer nothingness that the English reader cannot but think is referred to by Armstrong’s misleading translation, ‘the non-existent’.

_Nonsense and contradiction_

However simple, however obvious it may be, once it has been pointed out, that correction to the translation of τὸ µὴ ὄν as the ‘non-existent’, in _Various investigations_ (3.11), is not a correction that any serious student of Plotinus can afford to ignore. It is because he has all unthinkingly repeated Armstrong’s misleading translation that Phillips’ presentation of his thesis contains within itself the seeds of its undoing. The claim that the soul makes ‘the non-existent’ is not only meaningless in itself; it establishes a flagrant contradiction at the very heart of Phillips’ attempted reconstruction of what Plato has to say of matter, and its origin, in the _Enneads_.

The ‘non-being’ made by a partial soul in _Various investigations_ is not, as Phillips thinks it is, ‘non-existent’. It is ‘non-being’ defined as a ‘part of otherness’, a definition taken over from Plato’s definition of a form of non-being in the _Sophist_, and therefore with the specific meaning given to Plato’s definition when, in the concluding chapter of his treatise _On matter_, Plotinus adapts Plato’s form of words in order to encapsulate his own conception of the ultimate substrate of the material world as the ‘part of otherness set in opposition to the beings properly so-called, namely _logoi_’ (16.1-3): 

₅₆) For the adaptation, see again § 26 above.

Once the ‘non-being’ of _Various investigations_ has been read, as it has to be if we are to avoid sheer nonsense, in the light of Plotinus’ definition of ‘non-being’ in his treatise _On matter_, it cannot therefore be, as Phillips
claims it is, the ‘“qualified body” that results from the blending of the trace-
soul with matter’. To be a ‘body’, in the Enneads, is to be an instantiation
of the form of ‘bodilyness’, and that is exactly what is excluded by the defi-
nition that Plotinus has adopted of matter as ‘non-being’ in his treatise On
matter. ‘Bodilyness’ is one of the many ‘beings properly so-called’, the
‘beings’ that are logoi or forms. ‘Body’ is therefore one of the many things
that matter, once it has been defined as ‘non-being’, is not, and cannot be.

The ‘non-being’ made by a partial soul in Various investigations cannot be
a ‘body’. Still less therefore can it be, as Phillips claims it is, a ‘qualified body’
(τὸ τοιόνδε σῶµα), with the meaning given to that expression in the only
context where it occurs in the Enneads: a body endowed with both sensa-
tion and emotions, and therefore not merely ‘body’, but a living body.58

Ruit tota thesis

Phillips’ whole thesis crumples. By claiming that the object of the soul’s
‘making’, in Various investigations, is ‘non-existent’ (cf. 3.11: τὸ μὴ ὄν), and at
the same time—comprene qui voudra!—a ‘qualified body’ endowed with
the attributes of a living being (sensation and emotion), Philips shows, not
only that he has no conceptual grasp of the words he is using, but that he
has wholly misunderstood Plotinus’ carefully articulated account of matter
as a ‘non-being’ that is not therefore ‘non-existent’, but that is, nonetheless,
lacking in all the forms that make up the world that we see and feel around
us, including the form of ‘body’.

Matter in the Enneads is ‘non-being’, not because it is ‘non-existent’, but
because it is opposed to all ‘the beings properly so-called’, namely the forms
or logoi, including therefore the form of ‘body’ or ‘bodilyness’, the form that
has to be added to the object ‘utterly indefinite’ and ‘non-being’, if soul is to
be able to enter into the object that she has made and, in so doing, to take
up her dwelling within the visible cosmos.

57) Phillips, 2009, 134.
58) The expression τὸ τοιόνδε σῶµα, the origin of Phillips’ often repeated expression ‘qualified
body’, occurs in only two related passages, Enn. IV 4 [28] 18.9 and 20.24-26 (four occurrences
in all). Cf. § 18 above. Phillips, 2009, 134, seeks to appropriate the expression as a description
of the object made by soul in Various investigations.
§ 33. ‘Form’ and ‘Formlessness’

An obvious anomaly

That conclusion does throw up an obvious anomaly, but an anomaly that, however obvious, will be grasped only by someone who has taken the measure, as Phillips so plainly has not, of the use that Plotinus makes of the paradox of non-being put forward in Plato’s *Sophist*.

The paradox of the *Sophist* is specifically introduced by Plato as the definition of a ‘form’ (cf. 258 D 6: τὸ εἶδος), admittedly a ‘form of non-being’, but a form nonetheless, one more of all the many negative forms constituted by all the many ‘parts’ of otherness, with the difference only that the part of otherness opposed to being participates in the very form to which it is opposed, so constituting, in the words of the paradox, ‘a form that there turns out to be, of what is not’.

A form of ‘what is not’, but a form nonetheless… How then can Plato’s form be identified with matter? Plotinus writes specifically of matter as ‘without form’ (ἀνείδεος). How can what is ‘without form’ be a form?59

Conscious contradiction

Plotinus can hardly not be conscious of the contradiction. In the continuation of the chapter of *On evils* where what will prove to be matter is spoken of as a ‘form’ (3.4: εἶδος), he twice refers to that same object as being ‘without form’ or ‘formless’ (3.14 and 31: ἀνείδεος), and the same point is a recurrent theme in the remaining chapters of the treatise.60

If Plotinus is willing, as he obviously is, to tolerate the contradiction, it is because the inconsistency, a ‘form’ that is ‘formless’, is inherent in the very genesis of his conception of matter, in the bold syncretism that has led him

59) For the adjective ἀνείδεος, applied specifically to matter, see Enn. II 5 [25] 4.11-12 (quoted below). The implication is no different when Plotinus writes of matter as a ‘penury of form’ in the concluding lines of *On matter*, Enn. II 4 [12] 16.22-23 (πενία […] εἴδους), and when he writes of the product of soul as ‘utter indefiniteness’ in relation to form, in *On the daimon*, Enn. III 4 [15] 1.12-14. For the same theme in *On evils*, see the continuation of my main text and the footnote following. For matter as ‘form’, see again *On evils*, 3.4-5: εἶδος τι τοῦ µὴ ἄντος δὲν, an obvious borrowing (cf. § 29 above) from Plato’s *Sophist*, 258 D 6: τὸ εἴδος ὃ τυγχάνει δὲν τοῦ µὴ ἀντος.

60) See esp. Enn. I 8 [51], cap. 9.11-18 (matter as complete lack of form), cap. 10.12-16 (matter as ‘contrary to form’), and cap. 11.1-4 (matter as the ‘privation’ that is opposed to form).
to run together, albeit with appropriate adjustments, the non-being of the *Sophist* with privation in Aristotle.

Privation, in Aristotle, is non-being. So too is the part of otherness opposed to being in the *Sophist*. Plotinus has drawn on both sources for his own conception of matter as non-being. The price he has to pay is that the non-being of matter, although opposed to form, an opposition inseparable from Aristotle’s analysis of ‘non-being’ as ‘privation’, nonetheless still has clinging to it the word ‘form’, inseparable from Plato’s paradox of non-being as ‘a form that there turns out to be . . .’

‘So to speak a form of sorts . . .’

The wording of the passage in *On evils* makes it pretty clear that Plotinus is conscious of, and assumes, the contradiction. When he writes of matter as "εἶδός τι τοῦ µὴ ὄντος ὄν (3.4-5), he cannot but be referring to the paradox of the *Sophist*: τὸ εἶδος ὃ τυγχάνει ὂν τοῦ µὴ ὄντος (258 D 6). Even so, the words repeated almost literally from the *Sophist* are preceded by that maid-of-all-work, here as so often pressed into service when Plotinus wants to warn his reader that the image or the words that follow are not to be taken *au pied de la lettre*. Matter is ‘as it were a form’, ‘so to speak a form’ (3.4-5: οἷον εἶδος . . .).

Almost as though to heed his own warning, the words that frame the opposition of ‘being’ (ὁν) and ‘non-being’ (τοῦ µὴ ὄντος), although unmistakable as an allusion to the substance and to the wording of Plato's paradox, are not, in any simple sense, a ‘quotation’ of the words that Plato has put into the mouth of the Stranger in the *Sophist*. When Plato’s Stranger speaks of a form that there ‘turns out to be’ (τυγχάνει ὂν), his choice of verb (τυγχάνει) fits very prettily into the context of the dialogue at that point. There is, if I dare attempt a modern image, more than a hint of the conjuror pulling a rabbit from his hat. ‘Well what’s turned up here, girls and boys? Goodness me, a form of *non-being*, but a form that is.’

The slight but deliberate flippancy, very much at home in the style of Plato’s dialogue, would be wholly alien to the tone of Plotinus’ treatise *On evils*. Plotinus therefore omits the verb (τυγχάνει). But, as he does so, he puts in its place an indefinite pronominal adjective. He does not deny that the object in question is a form, but insists that it is only a ‘sort of’ form, a

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61) For ‘privation’ as ‘non-being’, see Aristotle, *Phys.* i 9, 192 a 3-6. For ‘non-being’ as a part of otherness in the *Sophist*, see 258 A 2-3. For the syncretism, see § 26 above.
form ‘of sorts’, a form ‘in a way’ (εἰδός τι). The use of the pronoun, in this context, is deliberately depreciative.62

‘A last form’

It can hardly be a coincidence that the same depreciative use of the pronoun occurs in the only other place where matter is spoken of as ‘form’, the treatise *On intelligible beauty* (*Enn.* V 8 [31]). Plotinus here toys with the idea that, even in a world perceived by the senses, what we perceive is form piled upon form, so that yes, even this lower world is, all of it, form, if we go so far as to include matter as ‘a sort of final form’, ‘a form of sorts, the last’ (7.22-23: εἰδός τι ἔσχατον).

The use of ἔσχατος as a description of matter is given prominence in *On evils* (7.16-23), and is spelled out even more clearly in the treatise that Porphyry understandably placed immediately after the treatise *On matter, Enn.* II 5 [25], entitled *On potency and actuality*. Not only are we told here, as we are in the companion passage of *On evils*, that matter appeared only when the stream of ‘beings’ issuing from the One had come to an end (5.17-18); we are also told (5.18-19) that matter is ‘last’ (ἔσχατον) even in relation to ‘the things that come into being after it’ (τῶν µετ’ αὐτὴν γενοµένων).

The allusion is to the immanent forms which matter is ‘taken hold of by’ (cf. 5.20: καταλειϕθεῖσα), although without being in any way changed by them (5.19-22). The point is that the immanent forms come into being ‘after’ matter because they are provided by soul as a covering for matter. But matter is still the ‘last’, the ‘final’ product in the scheme of emanation.

*A repeated contradiction*

So much is simple enough, as it also is when, in the preceding chapter of *On potency and actuality*, we are told in no uncertain terms that the matter

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62) For the ‘depreciative’ use of τις, see LSJ, s.v., A, II, 6, a (p. 1796: ‘with a sense of contempt’). A good example of the depreciative use of the pronoun (or the pronominal adjective) in a philosophical context is provided by Plato’s reference to Empedocles (‘the Sicilian Muses’) earlier in the *Sophist*. The opposition between Empedocles’ two divine powers is presented as an opposition between Aphrodite and ‘a certain Strife’, ‘some Strife or other’ (243 A 1-2: Νεῖκός τι). There is an audible curling of the lip. The Stranger (Plato) jibs at speaking of a god of evil as equal in power and status to a god of goodness. So too in our passage of the *Enneads*, the non-being that, in the continuation of the argument, will prove to be matter is ‘so to speak’ a form (cf. οἷον εἶδός), ‘a form of sorts’ (cf. εἰδός τι). See also the footnote following.
that will be described as ‘last’ is not a form. Since matter has to be imagined as ‘something formless’, so Plotinus argues, it could not itself be a ‘form’ (4.11-12: οὐ µὲν δὴ ἀνείδεόν τι φανταζοµένη εἶδος ἄν εἴη).

In *Potency and actuality*, matter therefore, in so far as it is ‘last’ (5.18-19), is not a form (4.11-12). The verbal contradiction is only the more striking when matter is said to be both ‘last’ and a ‘form’, as it will be when it is called an εἶδός τι ἔσχατον in *On intelligible beauty* (7.22-23).

Even so, in *Intelligible beauty*, the ‘form’ that is ‘last’ is only ‘a form of sorts’ (7.22: εἶδός τι), just as, in *On evils*, the matter that will be said to be ‘formless’ (3.14 and 31: ἀνείδεον) is again no more than ‘as it were, a form of sorts’ (3.4-5: οἷον εἶδός τι). In both places, the depreciative use of the pronoun attenuates the contradiction. In neither place is the contradiction denied.63

A prestigious pedigree

The explanation of that repeated contradiction is the explanation I have already given. Even when adding, as he does in *On evils*, both a warning οἷον and a distancing τι, Plotinus clings to a repetition of the wording inherited from Plato’s paradox. In *On evils*, he even goes one better than Plato. With no τυγχάνει to take account of, the order of the two participles, in *On evils*, is reversed, so that the paradox ends up not, as in Plato, with a form ‘that is, of what is not’ (258 D 6: . . . ὁ τοῦ µὴ ὄντος), but with the two participles directly juxtaposed, ‘what is not’ (τοῦ µὴ ὄντος) followed directly by ‘is’ (οἷον).64

The paradoxical combination of ‘non-being’ and of ‘being’, given full force by the change in the order of words (3.4-5: . . . τοῦ µὴ ὄντος ὄν), is essential to the purpose that Plotinus has in mind when repeating the paradox of the *Sophist*. The specific mention of ‘form’, in this context, is ancillary.

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63) In referring again to a ‘depreciative’ use of the indefinite pronoun, I obviously do not mean that, in either treatise, Plotinus is speaking of Plato’s form ‘with contempt’ or with a ‘curling of the lip’ (for both expressions, see the footnote preceding this). I mean only that, in both texts, when referring to matter as ‘form’, Plotinus is, to my mind, by his addition of the pronoun, very clearly holding his use of the word ‘form’ at arm’s length. In both texts, matter is only ‘a sort of form’, ‘a form of sorts’ (εἶδός τι).

64) Plato, *Soph*. 258 D 6: τὸ εἶδός ὃ τυγχάνει ὁ τοῦ µὴ ὄντος. Plotinus, *On evils* 3.4-5: εἶδός τι τοῦ µὴ ὄντος ὄν. For my comment on the difficulty of a translation that reflects, in English, the difference in the order of words, see above § 29.
'Form' is here the poor relation, introduced with ostensible diffidence: 'so to speak, a sort of form', 'as it were, a form of sorts' (3.4-5: οἷον εἶδός τι...). But even poor relations have their place and serve their purpose. The allusion to form, despite the diffidence, is indispensable. It is the price Plotinus has to pay, and is willing to pay, for investing his own 'non-being', the 'non-being' of matter, with an unimpeachably illustrious pedigree, at one and the same time the 'form' of 'non-being' in Plato’s *Sophist* and the 'non-being' that is 'privation' in Aristotle’s *Physics*.

It is only if we have learnt to savour the subtle fusion of Plato’s *Sophist* with Aristotle’s *Physics*, issuing in Plotinus’ own highly personalised concept of matter as ‘non-being’, ‘formless’ and yet ‘in a way, a form of sorts’, that we can hope to appreciate what Plotinus has in mind when he writes of a ‘non-being’ that is ‘made’ by a partial soul in *Various investigations*.

And it is only the modern reader who has had the patience to read through the argument set out in the preceding pages of this essay who will understand therefore how futile it is to kick against the goad, and to look for any other interpretation of words whose meaning would have been obvious enough to readers at the time, as familiar as Plotinus himself plainly was with texts from Plato and Aristotle that had no need to be cluttered with the author’s name to be easily recognisable.

§ 34. The Two Horns of a Dilemma

*An irredeemable naiveté*

Were it not for evidence to the contrary, to be found in other publications, one could only suppose that the author of ‘Plotinus on the Generation of Matter’ was simply unaware of that whole background to the philosophy of the *Enneads*. As it is, one can only suppose, from his article, that Phillips has no clear understanding of Plotinus’ debt to Plato, of the distinction between ‘non-being’ and ‘non-existence’ (or ‘non-existent’) and therefore of the anomaly inherent in describing matter as ‘a form’, albeit no more than ‘a form of sorts’. Lacking that essential background, the irredeemable *naiveté* that runs throughout Phillips’ presentation of his thesis confronts the critical reader with an impossible dilemma.

If τὸ µὴ ὄν, in *Various investigations* (3.11), is translated as ‘non-existent’, as it is by Phillips, the resulting assertion hardly makes sense. How can the
soul ‘make’ what does not exist? Even if we succeed in persuading ourselves that such an assertion has meaning, the meaning is certainly not what Plotinus intended. For τὸ µὴ ὄν taken as meaning ‘non-existent’ risks being confused with the very expression opposed to the description of matter, with the very expression designed to say what the ‘non-being’ of matter is not. The ‘non-being’ of matter is not to be confused with—it is explicitly distinguished from—the sheer nothingness, the non-existence, marked by the two expressions, ‘utter non being’, τὸ παντελέξ µὴ ὄν, in On the Good and on the One (11.37-38), and ‘utterly non-being’, τὸ παντελῶς µὴ ὄν, in On evils (3.6-7).

If, on the other hand, τὸ µὴ ὄν is translated as ‘non-being’ or as ‘what is not’, then it may indeed be heard as matching the definition of matter adopted in the Enneads, and spelled out in the treatise On matter, but for that very reason cannot be equated, as Phillips so forcefully asserts it is, with ‘qualified body’, since that is exactly what is excluded by Plotinus’ definition of matter as ‘a part of otherness set in opposition to the beings properly so-called, namely logos’ (16.1-3), including therefore the form of body or ‘bodiliness’.

Phillips’ whole thesis is firmly impaled on the two horns of that dilemma. If we keep to Phillips’ translation of τὸ µὴ ὄν, in Various investigations (3.11), as ‘non-existent’, then we end up with the meaningless, and impossible, claim that what the soul ‘makes’ does not exist. If, on the other hand, we correct the translation, so that the soul makes, not the ‘non-existent’, but ‘non-being’, with the meaning that that expression has, in On matter and elsewhere, as a borrowing, and an adaptation, of the non-being that is a part of otherness in Plato’s Sophist, then it cannot refer, as Phillips thinks it does, to the ‘qualified body’ that in the Enneads is the product of form, and that is therefore excluded from Plotinus’ definition of ‘non-being’ as a part of otherness opposed to the forms.

A fresh start

The author’s seeming total unawareness of such distinctions, as he continues for page after page heaping up miscellaneous references to the text of the Enneads, makes it hard for anyone at all conversant with the philosophy of Plotinus to know whether to laugh or to cry. Neither reaction is conducive to criticism. Even a critic not unduly endowed with the milk of human kindness will be reluctant to interrupt someone so happily intent
on pursuing an activity that apparently brings him great personal satisfaction, even though ultimately it leads nowhere.

Called upon by an unhappy fate to perform that thankless task, I have not attempted, in the preceding pages of this essay, to comment on all the many texts that Phillips has quoted, but only the one or two that loom largest in his article. Even so, my painstaking correction of even those few passages will in all likelihood have been wasted on the desert air. Phillips' misunderstanding of the fundamentals of Plotinus’ philosophy is far too radical a misunderstanding to be undone by a patient examination of the details of syntax and argument in one or other of his chosen texts.

If he is ever to arrive at an understanding of the *Enneads*, Phillips will need to start afresh. He will need to set aside his own ideas and his own preconceptions, to leave aside for later any attempt at comparing Plotinus with Proclus, and try instead to put himself in the place of the people Plotinus was writing for. To achieve that aim, he will need to preface his re-reading of the *Enneads* with a thoroughgoing refresher course on the history of the paired concepts of 'being' and 'non-being' in earlier Greek philosophy, including Parmenides, and with special attention given to Plato's critique of Parmenides in the *Sophist*.

Only once that has been done, only once he has familiarised himself with texts that would have been familiar to Plotinus himself and to his philosophically minded contemporaries—only then, if at all, will Phillips have any hope of being able to write usefully, or even intelligibly, on 'The Generation of Matter' in the *Enneads*.65

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65) Even when Phillips has found the time for a serious study of the remaining fragments of Parmenides' poem, and of Plato's elaborate reaction to the same in the *Sophist*, I would dare suggest, however immodest it may seem, that he should also spend a few moments looking through O'Brien, 1987 (on Parmenides), 1995 (on the *Sophist*) and 2000 (a comparison of Parmenides and Plato), before attempting to return afresh to the text of the *Enneads*. That additional reading will not be indispensable if he has studied the original texts with sufficient care. But a cursory study of all three essays is very advisable as an antidote, if he has been tempted, as newcomers so often are, to take a short-cut and, instead of reading the Greek text, to content himself with looking up one or more of the many handbooks that clutter the shelves of libraries and bookstores. A brief perusal of the three publications noted above will, I hope, at least make it clear that nothing can replace a close reading of the *ipsissima verba* of both Parmenides and Plato—Parmenides' own words having been very fortunately recorded at sufficient length by Sextus and Simplicius for us to be able to form a reasonably clear idea of what it was that Plato was tilting against in the *Sophist*. 
§ 35. A ‘Timeless’ Sequence

An ‘ontological conception of generation’

I return therefore, if only very briefly, in this section and the next, not to any details of the text, but to one or two of the more general principles alluded to in the opening pages of my reply, and first to Phillips’ formulation of what he calls an ‘ontological conception of generation’, defined as a generation ‘such that for each thing there is no specific moment of its creation’.66

What can those words mean? A ‘timeless creation’ of matter that is also its ‘eternal illumination’ (Phillips’ statement of the hypothetical theory that he attributes to Plotinus) does not have to exclude a ‘specific moment of creation’ for all the many individual items that populate the material world. Plants and animals, even if we suppose them to have been ‘created’, have all of them ‘a time for living and for generation’.

Attempting to follow—une fois n’est pas coutume—the so-called ‘principle of charity’, I have therefore taken Phillips’ principle to be, or at least to include, the principle that Plotinus states explicitly in the first book of Puzzles about the soul.67 Writing of a non-temporal generation of the visible universe (9.12-22), and specifically of soul’s relation to matter (9.22-26), Plotinus deliberately chooses to present his account in terms of a succession of events that he warns us are not successive in time (and that strictly speaking are therefore not ‘events’ at all), ‘for the sake of clarity’ and because the familiar language of time, so he tells us, will make his meaning ‘easier to convey’ (cf. 9.14-15: διδασκαλίας καὶ τοῦ σαφοῦς χάριν).

A ‘logical’ succession

The principle Plotinus appeals to in Puzzles about the soul, I take to be at work in the passages noted above, where Plotinus writes of the activity of soul ‘when she comes to be in plants’ (On the daimon) and of the activity of a ‘partial soul’ when she seeks to ‘turn towards herself’, and in so doing makes the ‘image’ of herself that is ‘non-being’ (Various investigations). In

66) Phillips, 2009, 136-137. See § 1 above.
67) Enn. IV 3 [27] 9. For the context, and for the repetition in this text of the terminology of Various investigations, see § 3 above.
both places, I take Plotinus to be talking of the generation of the matter underlying the sensible world, a ‘process’ which has had no first moment and which will have no end.

The same is obviously not true of all the individual items to be found within the sensible world. Plants and animals are born and die. The point is not therefore that ‘for each thing there is no specific moment of its creation’. It is only when writing of the generation of the sensible world as a whole that Plotinus does not suppose there to be any first moment nor any last moment, any more than he supposes there to be a first or last moment in the ‘overflowing’ of the One (Enn. V 2 [11] 1.8), the first move in the drama of which the soul’s production of matter is the last and final act.

Not only therefore do I find Phillips’ definition of what he calls an ‘ontological conception of generation’ in Plotinus puzzling and misleading; the very similar form of words that he uses in the opening pages of his article and that he ascribes to me is not mine at all. ‘What O’Brien calls the ontological generation of matter in the Enneads . . . ’68 But I never do. This is just one more of Phillips’ many errors in referring to myself. On the page of the publication that Phillips alludes to, I do no more than repeat Plotinus’ own statement of principle.69 My writing, as I have done frequently in this article, of a ‘logical’ succession (no mention here of ‘ontological’) is intended as no more than a convenient form of words, summarising the principle that Plotinus himself endorses in the passage I have quoted from Puzzles about the soul.70

A fictitious ‘absence’ of soul

The principle formulated in Puzzles about the soul applies not only to soul’s generation of the ‘non-being’ that is matter. Essentially the same principle, the description of events as successive that are not successive in time, in order to bring out the structure of relationships that are not temporally determined, is no less true of the soul’s illumination of matter.

So it is in the passage already quoted from The three principal hypostases, where Plotinus specifically asks us only to ‘think of’ the world as it would

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68) Phillips, 2009, 105 n. 7.
69) O’Brien, 1991, 61 n. 9.
70) See again Enn. IV 3 [27] 9.12-26.
be if deprived of soul (cf. 2.17: νοεῖτω, 'let the soul think...', 'let the soul imagine...'), and where we are therefore led to ‘think of’ the soul ‘flowing back’ into a world which in fact she has never left, and by her ‘return’ giving form and illumination to ‘the darkness of matter’, form and illumination that the world had only ever been deprived of during her fictitious absence.71

‘Illumination’ and ‘generation’

So much, one might have thought, would be clear enough. But is that quite what Phillips has in mind when he appeals to an ‘ontological conception of generation’ as the principle determining the ‘timeless creation’ of matter and its ‘eternal illumination’?

Part of what makes the principle that Phillips appeals to so baffling, in the context of his article, is that, earlier on in the statement of his thesis, he goes out of his way to condemn, with no little force, the erroneous belief that, ‘whenever Plotinus refers to the soul illuminating principles below it, he means that the soul generates those principles’.72 Is that not exactly the principle implied by Phillips’ own account of the ‘Generation of Matter’ in the Enneads? ‘The timeless creation of matter is its eternal illumination by the intelligibles.’73 What can those words mean, if not that soul in ‘illuminating’ matter ‘generates’ matter—given that Phillips appears not to distinguish ‘creation’ and ‘generation’?

In the passage quoted from The three principal hypostases, there is certainly no indication that the soul, in illuminating ‘the darkness of matter’, has therefore ‘created’ the darkness of matter. But is not that exactly what is implied when Phillips writes of the ‘eternal illumination’ of matter as a ‘timeless creation’ of matter?

A baffling inconsistency

The inconsistency is only the more baffling in that Phillips claims to find in my own words the principle that he both adopts and condemns.74

70) Enn. V i [10] 2. See § 14 above. For my association of ‘form’ and ‘illumination’, see § 2 above.
71) Phillips, 2009, 115 n. 30.
72) Phillips, 2009, 136.
73) Phillips, 2009, 115 n. 30 (second paragraph, referring to O’Brien, 1993, ‘40f.’).
merroré ni cet excess d’honneur, ni cette indignité. I am not responsible for the principle that Phillips adopts. I am not responsible for the principle that he condemns. I am equally undeserving of either praise or blame. For I have nowhere stated the principle that Phillips ascribes to me.

On the page that Phillips refers to, I do claim, as I have done earlier in this article (§ 3 above), that Plotinus speaks in one and the same breath of the ‘illumination’ of matter and of matter being ‘covered with form’, with both expressions referring to essentially the same phenomenon. But nowhere do I state, as Phillips claims I do, that the ‘illumination’ of matter is therefore tantamount to a ‘generation’, still less to a ‘creation’, of matter. Such a claim would run clean counter to my whole interpretation of the soul ‘making’ matter and only then (a logical ‘then’) covering the object that she has made with form.

On the page that Phillips has quoted, I do go on to make the remark, obvious enough in the context of my thesis, that soul cannot do otherwise than cover with form the matter that she has made, and that ‘illumination’ and ‘generation’ are therefore related.76 This is an essential feature of Plotinus’ theodicy. There never will be a time, so Plotinus assures his reader, when matter, or darkness, exists ‘alone’, without the ‘illumination’ of form.77 It does not at all follow, nor have I ever thought or said, that the soul’s covering matter with form is therefore the same as her making of matter.

I admit to being utterly baffled. Phillips charges me with an error that is none other than the very principle encapsulated in Phillips’ own statement of Plotinus’ belief, a principle totally at odds with the interpretation that I adopt of Plotinus’ theory, and not a principle that is anywhere to be found in the pages of the publication that Phillips refers to.

75) O’Brien, 1993, 40 n. 13: ‘Je tiens pour synonymes l”illumination” de la matière et son “information”.’
76) O’Brien, 1993, 40: ‘L’âme qui engendre la matière doit aussi l’illuminer.’ In the sentence preceding: “Illumination” et génération ont ainsi partie liée.’
77) See Against the Gnostics, Enn. II 9 [33] 3.11-21. See also the passage quoted earlier in this section, from the first book of Puzzles about the soul, Enn. IV 3 [27] 9.15-29. My comment on the passage in question (Enn. II 9 [33] 3.11-21) is, as noted above (§ 2), a denial that the ‘illumination’ of matter is also a ‘generation’ of matter. See O’Brien, 1993, 37.
§ 36. ‘Creation’

A word of many meanings

Hardly less baffling is Phillips’ constant reference to ‘creation’, even when supposedly summarising my own thesis. Has it never crossed his mind that those of us who attempt to use words with at least a modicum of precision are deliberately sparing in speaking of ‘creation’ when discussing the various modalities attaching to Plotinus’ theory of emanation, not least when ascribing to Plotinus a theory of émanation intégrale (the theory that everything, including the matter of the sensible world, derives ultimately from the One)?

‘Creation’ is of course a word that can be used in many ways, to mean many different things. But which of these many ways can properly, or even usefully, be applied to Plotinus’ theory of the emergence from the One of whatever things do emerge from the One, whether or not including the matter of the sensible world?

Spinoza, for example, defines ‘a thing created’ as something that ‘presupposes nothing other than God for it to be in existence’. Spinoza’s definition would hardly apply even to the appearance of Intellect, which becomes what it is only when a proto-Intellect, issuing from the One, turns back to its source and, in so doing, generates the world of forms and thereby constitutes itself as an Intellect fully formed. His definition would clearly exclude the generation of the hypostasis of Soul, which issues, not directly from the One, but from Intellect, and it would no less clearly exclude my account of the origin of matter as ‘made’ or ‘brought to birth’ by one of the lower manifestations of Soul.

‘Begotten, not made’

The formula usually called upon to distinguish ‘creation’ from earlier theories, whether the cosmogony of Plato’s Timaeus or Aristotle’s very different

78) Phillips use of ‘creation’ in formulating his own ideas is too frequent to require specific reference. For his use of the same word in supposedly summarising my thesis, see Phillips, 2009, 104.

79) Cf. Spinoza, Cogitata metaphysica pars II, cap. X: «... res creata est illa, quae ad existendum nihil praeter Deum prae-supponit.» Spinoza’s use of the gerund (ad existendum) does not lend itself at all easily to translation. The repetition, whether or not deliberate, of praeter and prae-supponit is also lost in translation.
theory of an ‘unmoved’ first cause, is creatio ex nihilo. Plato’s demiurge is never said to be cause of the existence of the forms (even if later interpretations of Plato’s masterpiece would have it so), and he is certainly never said to cause the existence of the ‘receptacle’ that makes possible the appearance of those same forms in the world that we perceive by the senses.

Nor is it very different with Aristotle. Aristotle’s ‘unmoved mover’ (except in the pages of the Angelic Doctor) is never made out to be responsible for the existence of the objects that it maintains in movement.80 The many objects that, in the sublunary world, we see coming-into-being do so as a result of the movements and the mutual transformations whereby the elements reveal the existence, and the influence, of the ‘unmoved mover’. Even so, Aristotle nowhere presents the elements, or any one of all the many things formed from the elements, as ‘created’.

But does Plotinus’ originality perhaps lie specifically in his breaking away from the older conception, claiming, instead, that all that there is, including matter, is derived, directly or indirectly (very indirectly in the case of matter), from a transcendent first principle, the One? Very possibly. But if we choose to ascribe the concept of ‘creation’, implying therefore a creatio ex nihilo, to the philosophy of the Enneads, we are up against a fresh obstacle, in so far as that use of the word will almost inevitably be associated, by the modern reader, with a Biblical, and even a specifically Christian, concept of creation.

Plotinus’ conception of a transcendent first principle as the origin of all things is neither the one nor the other. Even if we include matter among the objects that spring, ultimately, from the One, there is still a world of difference between Plotinus’ philosophy of émanation intégrale and either of the two accounts of ‘creation’ in Genesis, or the significantly different account of ‘creation’ sketched out in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel.81

With the passing of the centuries, the gulf widens. Even in the few texts we have had occasion to consider in the preceding pages of this essay, Plotinus uses both ‘make’ (ποιεῖν) and ‘engender’ or ‘generate’ (γεννᾶν), to refer to one and the same process. For the orthodox Christian, at least from the

80) Cf. Dodds, 1963, 231 (on Aquinas).
81) Augustine would not agree. Enthused by his reading of what was almost certainly a Latin translation of part or all of the Enneads, he asserts, in the opening chapters of book seven of the Confessions, that he had already found the same truths expressed in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. But Augustine, for all his many virtues, was not an historian of philosophy.
early fourth century, the two words are clearly distinguished. The second Person of the Trinity is ‘begotten, not made’, ‘engendré, non pas créé’, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, *genitum, non factum*, in the familiar words of the Nicene creed (A.D. 325). Can we simply ignore that distinction in ascribing to the author of the *Enneads* a theory of ‘creation’?

The ‘theodicy’ of the Enneads

Such distinctions one might think out of place in discussion of a topic so specific as the origin of matter in the *Enneads*. But in Phillips’ loose, and seemingly unthinking, use of the word ‘creation’ do we perhaps see a major source of the error endemic in his haphazard treatment of the texts?

If we use the term ‘creation’ to embrace, indiscriminately, whatever issues from the One, including the matter of the sensible world, then we make it difficult, if not impossible, for matter to take on the role that it has to play in Plotinus’ philosophy as a whole, where it has to be both a principle of utter evil and a necessary, though not a sufficient, cause of evil in the soul. Why should a matter that has been ‘created’ be evil? If, as Phillips claims, the very ‘creation’ of matter is none other than an ‘illumination’ of matter, then how could matter possibly be not only evil, but intrinsically evil? And if matter is not intrinsically evil, then how does it come to be counted a cause, and a necessary cause, of evil in the soul?

Plotinus’ ‘theodicy’ rests, precariously, on the notion that matter is not only ‘non-being’ but ‘utter evil’, precisely because it is the last of all the products issuing, if only indirectly, from the One, and because the modalities of its emergence are therefore quite different from the way in which Intellect emerges from the One, and different again from the way in which Soul derives from Intellect.

One difference, and perhaps the most important, is that the product of the partial soul cannot itself turn towards the principle which ‘makes’ it, and cannot therefore be ‘illuminated’ otherwise than by a separate act on the part of the principle from which it is derived. Were matter to be ‘created’, and were the ‘creation’ of matter to be also an ‘illumination’ of matter, as Phillips claims it is (‘The timeless creation of matter is its eternal illumination by the intelligibles’), then that duality would have no

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82) I summarise the thesis of O’Brien, 1969.
83) Phillips, 2009, 136.
meaning. Matter, product of the soul’s ‘illumination’, would not be ‘utterly
dark’ prior to its illumination by soul, nor would it be intrinsically evil, nor
therefore would the ‘theodicy’ that Plotinus opposes to the theory of the
Gnostics be anything even remotely similar to what we find in his great
tirade (Enn. II 9 [33]) against beliefs that he no doubt supposed to be both
Gnostic and Christian (cf. Vita 16). 84

A surprising omission

By his repeated use of the word ‘creation’, Phillips has set aside that whole
conception of matter and evil, seemingly without even being aware that he
has done so. For by wrongly using the word ‘creation’ in his attempted sum-
mary of the thesis that he seeks to discredit, Phillips not only fails to take
the measure of my interpretation, he also fails to see the error in his own.
Even when attempting to replace one conception of ‘creation’ (falsely
ascribed to myself) with another (the hypothetical theory that he hopes to
put in its place), Phillips remains within the charmed circle of his own con-
ceptions, unaware that both the thesis he condemns and the thesis that
he adopts have been cast by him in a form that is alien to the philosophy of
the Enneads.

At some stage, at least as regards his own thesis, one might have thought
that Phillips would begin to smell a rat. It is hardly surprising that what
Phillips supposes to be ‘the essence of Plotinus’ own theory’, once it has
been embedded in a loosely thought out concept of ‘creation’, should find
no positive expression in the text of the Enneads. But why has Phillips
seemingly never faced up to what should be, for him, that surprising
omission? Has Phillips never asked himself why he cannot find a single

84) Phillips’ account of the ‘creation’ of matter as an ‘illumination’ of matter would appear to
betray confusion with the matter of the intelligible world, which is indeed said to be, in
virtue of its belonging to the intelligible realm, an ‘illuminated substance’ (cf. On matter
5,23: πεϕωτισµένη οὐσία). Neither word can apply to the matter of the sensible world, which
is neither ‘substance’ nor ever fused with form so as be ‘illuminated’ in the way that is true
of intelligible matter. Once again, Phillips betrays his neglect of Plotinus’ treatise On matter,
where the difference between the ‘two matters’ turns largely on the difference between
‘substance’ (intelligible matter) and ‘non-being’ (the matter of the sensible world), and
on the relation of matter to form (the forms are never more than ‘reflections’ in the world
of sense).
reference for a theory of creation-cum-illumination being given explicit approval, or even explicit expression, anywhere in the *Enneads*?

**The ‘oath of silence’**

Admittedly, the same question might be asked of my own interpretation. If Plotinus believes that the matter of the sensible world is ‘made’ or ‘brought to birth’ by a lower manifestation of Soul, why does he never say so *expressis verbis*? More puzzling still, why does he seem almost deliberately to skirt around giving a straightforward answer to the question of the origin of matter, in more than one of his earlier treatises?

Unlike Phillips, I have asked myself that question, and I do have an answer to it, though it is an answer that Phillips seems not to be conversant with. It is, admittedly, a more than usually speculative answer, since it aims to show that Porphyry has been decidedly economical with the truth in the strange and partly contradictory account that he gives in the *Life* (cap. 3) of the ‘oath of silence’ to which Plotinus, Origen and Erennius bound themselves on the death of their common master, Ammonius.85

Phillips seems not to be acquainted with that supplement to my thesis.86 If any readers of this Journal are in the same sorry state, I would urge them to catch up as soon as they can on the details of the thrilling tale. Even if they remain unconvinced by the results of my detective work, they will then at least know why I think that Plotinus is, to start with, not a little reluctant to broadcast his theory of the origin of matter to all and sundry by spelling it out in written form, even if in texts that were, for a while, not made generally available.87

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85) O’Brien, 1992 (in French), 1994 (in English).
86) I have inferred Phillips’ lack of familiarity with my thesis from the curious way in which he has formulated his remarks on p. 109 of his article. Either Phillips is not conversant with my account of the ‘oath’, or he has deliberately decided to leave his readers in the dark.
87) I am obviously tempted at this point to summarise my account of the ‘oath of silence’, and even more sorely tempted to outline my understanding of the ‘theodicy’ that underlies Plotinus’ criticism of the Gnostics. But I can already see the Editor scowling and the Assistant Editor fidgeting nervously with her blue crayon. First things first. Unless Plotinus’ own theory of the nature and the origin of matter has been understood, then his criticism of the Gnostics can be only a inscrutable puzzle, as it so obviously is for Phillips, in the first part of his article. The major misunderstandings in the earlier pages of Phillips’ article, largely given over to Plotinus’ criticism of the Gnostics, I may, or may not, take account of in a future
Plotinus and Proclus

Does Phillips have any equivalent explanation of why it is that his own reconstruction of Plotinus’ theory finds no explicit endorsement in the text of the *Enneads*? Has he even asked himself the reason for Plotinus’ seeming reticence? Why does what Phillips claims to be nothing less than ‘the essence of Plotinus’ own theory’ find no positive expression anywhere in Plotinus’ own writings?

More troubling still, has Phillips ever asked himself why the form of words that supposedly encapsulates ‘the essence of Plotinus’ own theory’, despite its absence from the text of the *Enneads*, nonetheless flows so effortlessly from his own pen—nonetheless seems to him so familiar, so easily obvious?

The answer, I hesitate to tell him, is plain enough to anyone but himself. Fresh from a study of Proclus, Phillips seemingly expects to find the essentials of Proclus’ theory put forward, if only less clearly, in the pages of the *Enneads*. Such an expectation is wholly false. Neoplatonism is not the seamless whole that Phillips appears to think of it as being. Proclus’ understanding of the origin and the nature of matter is radically different from the theory of his illustrious predecessor, not least on the point that matter, for Proclus, issues directly from the One and is not intrinsically evil.

By his theory of a ‘timeless creation’ that is none other than an ‘eternal illumination’ of matter, Phillips attempts to graft onto the text of the *Enneads* ideas that, seemingly without realising it, he has drawn from an author who was, indeed, thoroughly conversant with Plotinus’ writings, but who deliberately set out to replace Plotinus’ theory of matter and evil with a very different theory of his own. That is why Phillips has to single out my thesis as his whipping-boy. I have been at some pains to avoid the very anachronism that Phillips has bound himself to, hand and foot.

publication. Having failed to grasp Plotinus’ theory of the origin of matter, Phillips has not surprisingly failed to grasp what Plotinus has to say of the origin of evil, and therefore wholly fails to isolate what Plotinus objects to in the Gnostic theories that he sees as opposed to his own.

88) Cf. Phillips, 2007.
89) For Proclus’ theory of matter and evil, there is a useful study by Opsomer (2001).
William Blake’s question

'Then tell me, what is the material world, and is it dead?' 'No' is the answer that Blake was given. 'The world', is 'all alive', and 'every particle of dust breathes forth its joy.' That is not an answer that Plotinus would have endorsed, and one reason he would not have done so is that the matter of his sensible world is not 'created'.

Admittedly, Plotinus is not therefore a dualist. He does not believe that the universe can be explained as the result of a 'chance conjunction' of two or more first principles, existing and acting independently. But it does not at all follow that matter is therefore 'created' in any commonly accepted meaning of that word, still less that its 'creation' is none other than its 'eternal illumination by the intelligibles'. Such a conception is wholly alien to Plotinus' carefully thought out theory of matter as not existing independently of soul, and therefore of the higher realities, and yet as utterly evil.

That seemingly paradoxical conjunction of ideas is possible only because, in the philosophy of the Enneads, the generation of matter is not the same as its illumination. Matter, so Plotinus believes, has been 'made' or 'brought to birth' by one of the lower manifestations of soul. Its 'illumination' is an act subsequent, if only logically so, to its 'making' or 'generation'. That is why, when it is first 'made' or 'brought to birth' (a logical 'first'), matter is 'utterly dark' and 'utterly indefinite', and that is why, even when it has been covered with form, the matter of the sensible world is never more than a 'corpse adorned'.

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92) There is a second edition (1989). Where there is no substantial difference between the two, I prefer to quote the first edition, both because I have it conveniently to hand on my own shelves, and because I prefer the typography.