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VOLUME 115

Physics and Philosophy of Nature in Greek Neoplatonism

Proceedings of the European Science
Foundation Exploratory Workshop
(Il Ciocco, Castelvechio Pascoli,
June 22–24, 2006)

Edited by

Riccardo Chiaradonna and Franco Trabattoni



BRILL

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2009

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

European Science Foundation Exploratory Workshop (2006 : Il Ciocco, Castelveccchio-Pascoli, Italy)

Physics and philosophy of nature in Greek Neoplatonism : proceedings of the European Science Foundation Exploratory Workshop (Il Ciocco, Castelveccchio-Pascoli, June 22–24, 2006) / edited by Riccardo Chiaradonna and Franco Trabattoni.

p. cm. — (Philosophia Antiqua)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-90-04-17380-4 (hardback : alk. paper) 1. Neoplatonism. 2. Philosophy of nature. 3. Physics—Philosophy. I. Chiaradonna, Riccardo. II. Trabattoni, Franco. III. Title. IV. Series.

B517.E87 2006
113.0938—dc22

2008052343

ISSN 0079-1687

ISBN 978 90 04 17380 4

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

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PLOTINUS ON QUALITY AND IMMANENT FORM

*George Karamanolis**

I

In this paper I intend to discuss Plotinus' view of quality, because, I believe, it would shed some light on Plotinus' ontology and on the relation between sensible and intelligible world, most especially. Plotinus discusses quality in *Enn.* II.6 [17], a short, dialectical, and obscure treatise, and then in *Enn.* VI.1–3 [42–44], especially in *Enn.* VI.2 [43] 14 and in *Enn.* VI.3 [44] 8–15, in the framework of his criticism of Aristotle's theory of the categories. There are some considerable differences between *Enn.* II.6 [17] and *Enn.* VI.1–3 [42–44], both as regards the treatment of quality and also, more generally, in the nature and the spirit of Plotinus' writing. In *Enn.* II.6 [17] Plotinus raises questions about what is substance and quality and tries ways to address them, but it remains unclear to what extent he commits himself to these answers. In *Enn.* VI.1–3 [42–44] on the other hand Plotinus is much more assertive and in *Enn.* VI.2 [43] 14 he appears to modify the position he takes in *Enn.* II.6 [17] about quality. And the question is how, if at all, in *Enn.* VI.2–3 [43–44], where Plotinus speaks about quality in some detail, he is guided by his polemics against Aristotle, or, if this is his personal position on the matter, how it squares with his earlier position.

I will try to show that Plotinus does have a coherent theory about quality which is considerably different from that of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, and is quite distinct in the history of philosophy. Plato in the *Theaetetus* (182 b) was the first to introduce the term 'quality', with the caution that this is a strange term, to signify what is affected ($\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\chi\omicron\nu$) in a certain way by an active cause ($\pi\omicron\iota\omicron\delta\upsilon\nu$).¹ Aristotle on the other hand

* I have greatly benefited from a set of critical remarks by Riccardo Chiaradonna and from discussions I had with Pavlos Kalligas, who answered several of my questions also by making available to me his unpublished paper 'The Structure of appearances. Plotinus's doctrine of the constitution of sensible objects'. Yet neither of them is responsible for any shortcomings of my paper.

¹ See Burnyeat (1990) 311–312.

in the *Categories* groups quality with the kinds of predicates which are in a subject, as opposed to substance (οὐσία) which can never be in a subject (*Cat.* 2 1 a 20 ff; 4 1 b 26; 5 3 a 7–21) and later on in the *Metaphysics* (V.14 1020 a 33–1021 b 25) he distinguishes between essential and accidental qualities, that is, between features qualifying the genus to which something belongs (*e.g.* man being a rational animal) and features qualifying the individual substance (*e.g.* Socrates being white), which count as accidents (cf. *Met.* VII.6 1031 b 22–28). Finally, the Stoics conceive of qualities as being corporeal, inseparable from the body they qualify.²

Plotinus' understanding of quality is, as we would expect, inspired by Plato, but it is also very much influenced by Aristotle's relevant views. The result is, as often with Plotinus, a highly personal doctrine about quality. Plotinus appears to believe that all features of sensible entities are nothing but qualities. He strongly opposes Aristotle's mature view (*Met.* VII esp. 8, 17) according to which the immanent Form (εἶδος), such as the Form of man in Socrates, is substance on the grounds that this is the cause of something being what it is.³ In Plotinus' view immanent Form is by no means the cause of something being what it is, but one quality among others of a sensible entity (ποιόν/ποιότης). That is, for Plotinus a big, white man has the qualities of bigness, whiteness, and humanity.

Such a view has its origins in Plato, yet urges an investigation into the sense in which Plotinus uses the term 'quality', because we would like to know why Plotinus takes the view that a sensible entity, *e.g.* a man, is considered not as being a man, that is, a substance, but as having the quality of a man, which turns out to be like all other qualities a man can have, such as big, white, or smart. To answer that, we first need to understand how Plotinus conceives of substance, because it is this that guides him to conceive of immanent Form as quality.⁴

Plotinus, we know, takes over from Plato the distinction between Forms which are immanent in matter, that is, in sensible entities, and transcendent Forms, which exist only in the intelligible realm, arguing that only the latter qualify as substance (οὐσία). One reason why Plotinus argues this is because he, following Plato, believes that only

² See Kupreeva (2003) 299–303.

³ For a philosophical exegesis of Aristotle's view, see Frede and Patzig (1987) I 36–57.

⁴ For a full and documented account of Plotinus' doctrine of substance, see Chiaradonna (2002) ch. 2.

intelligible transcendent entities, such as transcendent Forms, the Intellect, the Soul, all of which eventually are accounted by the presence of the One, have natures or essences. This means that for Plotinus only such entities are F or Y and can be truly predicated as such, while the so called sensible substances are never fully F or Y but they are always in the process of becoming F or Y. And the crucial reason for this is that only intelligible transcendent entities are not subject to change and corruption because they have no contact with matter, while sensible entities, because of their material nature, are always in the process of change and alteration. The upshot is that only intelligible transcendent entities are beings strictly speaking because only they subsist as such, while sensible entities are not beings in the same sense but rather belong to the realm of becoming. In the eyes of Plotinus, Aristotle is open to criticism because he uses the term 'substance' synonymously for both intelligible and sensible entities, while, Plotinus maintains, a real genus, such as substance, cannot include items which are prior and posterior to each other, as intelligible and sensible entities are.⁵

Plotinus thus argues that sensible entities are only homonymously substances (*Enn.* VI.3 [44] 6.3–8) and can be called thus only catachrestically (VI.3 [44] 2.1, 9.1). Sensible entities, he argues, are rather imitations, reflections or resemblances of the real substances, which are purely intelligible.⁶ In his view, a sensible F is not an F, or anything (τὸ εἶναι), but rather *like* an F (τοιόσδε/τοιόνδε, VI.3 [44] 9.30–33).⁷ In more concrete philosophical terms Plotinus maintains that sensible entities are an agglomeration of matter and perceptible qualities, such as size, colour, and shape (VI.3 [44] 8.20–21), which means that immanent Form is also one such quality.

It is not immediately obvious why it is so. It is actually quite puzzling that Plotinus does not distinguish between qualities which are subject to change, or accidental qualities, and qualities which make something the thing it is. Interestingly, Plotinus appeals to sense perception to support his view. He distinguishes sharply between being and sensible 'being', arguing that in the case of the latter it is sense-perception which guarantees its 'being', since a sensible substance is made up by the

⁵ This has been well emphasized by Hadot (1990) 126; Strange (1987) 965–970; Chiaradonna (2002) 56–59.

⁶ VI.3 [44] 9.27–31.

⁷ See also *Enn.* VI.3 [44] 15.24–31; 16.1–6. On the use of τοιόνδε in this context and its Platonic antecedents see Chiaradonna (2004a) 21.

differences which can be perceived by the senses. The following passage is significant in this regard.

For this sensible substance is not simply being, but is perceived by sense, being this whole world of ours; since we maintained that its apparent existence (δοκοῦσαν ὑπόστασιν) was a congress of perceptibles (σύνοδον τῶν πρὸς αἴσθησιν), and the guarantee of their being comes from sense-perception. But if the composition has no limits, one should divide according to the species-forms (εἶδη) of living things, the bodily species (εἶδος) of man, for instance. For this, a species-form of this kind, is a quality of body, and is not out of place to divide by qualities (VI.3 [44] 10.14–20; Armstrong's trans.).

The passage clearly shows that for Plotinus sensible entities are not beings strictly speaking exactly because they are made up of perceptible qualities, which means that the criterion for their existence is perception, not reason. What is perceived is subject to change, which is the case with sensible entities. Yet the passage also shows that Plotinus singles out immanent Form as the quality by means of which we recognize sensible entities, especially living ones, as such, *e.g.* as man or horse. The idea apparently is that we come to know reality (or, in Plotinus' terms, 'divide reality') through Forms of X or Y, rather than through shapes, sizes, colours, or other such qualities.

This seems to be right. When we encounter Socrates, we do not see something short, ugly, and moving, but a man who is short, ugly, and moving. This, however, seems to suggest that immanent Form plays a more important role in the perception of reality than any other feature of a sensible entity; it is the immanent Form which helps us identify something as such. If this is so, one may be tempted to argue against Plotinus that the immanent Form should not be considered as merely one of the qualities of a sensible entity, such as colour and size, but it should enjoy a more elevated ontological status, since it is through this that we recognize something as such.

Plotinus appears to reply that it is the transcendent Forms which account for something coming into being and hence also for the existence of any sensible entity, while immanent Forms are derivative entities which come about through the activity of the transcendent Forms.⁸ This alone is sufficient to establish (for a Platonist at least) that immanent

⁸ See V.9 [5] 5.17–19 and the comments of Chiaradonna (2002) 60–61.

Forms are ontologically inferior to transcendent ones, because, as Plotinus standardly maintains, a generated entity is of an inferior genus to that of its cause.⁹ For Plotinus then immanent Forms are bound to be qualities, since their cause of existence is substance. Yet things are more complex, because Plotinus maintains that transcendent Forms do not act directly on matter, that is, they do not bring about immanent Forms directly, but rather operate through intermediate intelligible entities, the λόγοι. It is the λόγοι which inform matter so that the sensible entity comes into being as a sum of such qualities.¹⁰ One reason why Plotinus postulates this process is because he, following Plato and Numenius, maintains that matter is disordered and 'taints' whatever comes in contact with it, so the intelligible entities should be kept as distanced as possible from matter (ἐν ὕλη ὁ λόγος χείρων, VI.3 [44] 9.33–34). It actually seems that the λόγοι stem from the world-soul, not from the transcendent Forms themselves,¹¹ in which case the distance between the transcendent Forms and the sensible entities is as wide as possible. There are two reasons then accounting for the low ontological status of the immanent Forms in Plotinus, first their generation through substances, secondly their contact with matter.

A critic can grant all this but still argue against Plotinus that the immanent Form differs from all other qualities of a sensible entity, in that the immanent Form, though derivative from the λόγοι, which ultimately make something what it is, *e.g.* human, has a special role in the causal process of something becoming X or Y. That is, the critic would continue, the immanent Form is the ultimate link in the causal chain of the coming to be of a sensible entity, which involves the world-soul, the λόγοι, through which the immanent Forms come into being.

Plotinus does not seem to deny this. He rather appears to maintain that the immanent Form accounts for something becoming F, while it is the transcendent Form which accounts for being F (VI.3 [44] 2.1–4). But if this is so, then the immanent Form, one may insist on objecting, should not be ranked together with all other qualities observable in a

⁹ For a discussion of this Plotinian principle see Chiaradonna (2002) 280–281.

¹⁰ See II.7 [37] 3.6–14, III.8 [30] 2.19–34, VI.3 [44] 15.28–31.

¹¹ See IV.3 [37] 10.29–42. It is Pavlos Kalligas who has drawn my attention to this passage in his unpublished paper 'The Structure of appearances. Plotinus' doctrine of the constitution of sensible objects', in which he discusses the role of λόγοι in some detail.

sensible entity but rather should enjoy a special status, since it is in virtue of that Form that something, according to Plotinus, becomes F.

The above objection is also supported by the following consideration. Plotinus argues in *Enn.* II.4 [12] (*On Matter*) that it is the Form which brings along with it qualities such as size, shape, and colour and thus informs matter (II.4 [12] 8.23–28). That is, if something is to become an elephant, the Form of the elephant brings with it also the suitable size, shape, color and so on. One may argue that Plotinus refers to the transcendent Form here. But this does not seem to be true, because, as I said above, the transcendent Form does not come in any contact with matter, which is the subject of II.4 [12]. This receives some confirmation from statements like the following: ‘when the form comes to the matter it brings everything with it; the form has (ἔχει) everything, the size and all that goes with and is caused by the formative principle’ (II.4 [12] 8.24–26; Armstrong’s trans.). The fact that the Form enters in matter is a clear indication that Plotinus refers to the immanent Form here. Besides, only immanent Forms can relate to size. In the present context Plotinus advances the idea that matter is organized so that it becomes something through a Form which is immanent in it. This is in accordance with Plotinus’ general view I mentioned above that matter is organized when it receives qualities, such as shape, size, and density, through the activity of the λόγοι. The upshot is that immanent Forms do play a significant role in the coming to being of something.

It seems then that we have both epistemological and metaphysical reasons to be reserved against Plotinus’ idea that the immanent Form is a mere quality. It is actually Plotinus himself who provides us with reasons to believe that immanent Forms enjoy a special ontological status. What is worse, Plotinus can be accused of being inconsistent in holding that the immanent Form is a mere quality like all other qualities, and at the same time maintain that this is what makes us recognize a thing as such, *e.g.* a man. This would mean that Plotinus’ ontology is at odds with his epistemology. In the following section I will try to show that this charge does not apply to Plotinus.

II

Before coming to Plotinus, it is useful to remember that such a question of consistency applies to philosophers of all ages—sometimes is called

the integration challenge.¹² The issue is basically the following. Ontology and epistemology must be reconciled in such a way that epistemological explanations do not assume entities excluded by a certain ontological theory, and ontology should be constructed in such a way so that an adequate epistemology can be drawn from it.

Plato is clearly conscious of this challenge. Plato’s Forms are initially introduced in order to allow for epistemological accounts of a certain kind, that is accounts explaining why we recognize F’s as such, that is, as we name them, *e.g.* tree, man, or piety. When we recognize a tree as such, this is not in virtue of its colour or its size, but rather in virtue of something that makes the size and the colour, the size and the colour of a tree. Plato calls this ‘the Form of the tree’. Yet for Plato colour and size also have a being, since they also exist in the tree. Plato does not seem to distinguish between the being of size, such as big or large, and the being of a tree. For Plato a sensible F participates both in the Form of tree as well as in the Form of largeness, greenness, and so on. Plato, however, appears to maintain that it is the Forms which make something the thing it is and also make us recognize it as such, which means that the epistemological role of Forms is in line with their ontological role. For, I take it, Plato’s idea is not that we are made in such a way so that we are able to know the things of the world in virtue of Forms, but rather that the world is made in such a way so that the Forms play the role they do in human cognition. And this is because the Forms are the entities which make things being what they are, that is, the Forms are the essences of things. For Plato then there is some correspondence between how the world is and how we perceive it. This leads Plato to suggest in the *Republic*, for instance, that true knowledge cannot be obtained without reference to the Forms. Plato’s epistemology may seem to require a distinction between substances and qualities, which Aristotle later makes, since, as I said, for the most part we do not perceive merely properties but things having properties. It is this Aristotelian suggestion that Plotinus denies, arguing that sensible entities only appear to be F or Y, but they are neither F nor Y.

The above simplistic account of Plato’s theory of Forms aims only to show that Plato is sensitive to the integration of epistemology and ontology, and so must be also Plotinus who tries to defend Plato’s

¹² Peacocke (1998) 349–375.

philosophy—as he understands it. We must bear in mind, however, that neither of them appears to distinguish between these branches of philosophy in the way we do today. Yet in both Plato and Plotinus the questions of what kind of being something is and how can be known are indeed addressed as distinct problems and do bear on each other. In dialogues like the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, for instance, the discussion about how things can be known is inextricably connected with the discussion about kinds and ways of being. The objections against the Forms presented in the *Parmenides*, on the other hand, such as the objection whether we should assume Forms for everything we perceive including worthless things like hair and dirt, show that there is awareness that epistemological and metaphysical questions should be treated jointly.

The epistemological and ontological role of the Forms was an issue for Platonists long before Plotinus. The first who attempted to reconstruct a system of Platonic philosophy, Antiochus, appears to have been seriously confronted with this problem. Antiochus tends to interpret Platonic Forms as equivalent to the Stoic *notiones* and *rationes* of the mind (Cic., *Acad.* I.31–32), a move which suggests that one role he attributes to Plato's Forms is that of concepts. Yet Antiochus also appears to maintain that Plato's Forms are both transcendent and immanent (*Acad.* I.30, 33), which leaves open to discussion the question of how he actually squared the Platonic theory of Forms with the Stoic common notions.¹³ Antiochus' theory gives rise to two related questions, first how transcendent Forms become immanent in sensible entities and also in human minds, a question non applicable to the Stoics who rejected the existence of transcendent Forms and also of a priori knowledge, and secondly whether Forms account only for the essences of sensible entities or for all their features.

Those who rejected Stoic epistemology, like Plutarch, also encountered difficulties in integrating the epistemology with the metaphysics of the Forms, though of a different kind. One such difficulty is how the cognitive role of the Forms (when, for instance, a man knows different kinds of beings through them) squares with the metaphysical role that the Forms play in the use the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* makes of them in order to bring the world about. It is open to discussion whether in the case of the Demiurge the Forms play a cognitive role, as they do

¹³ On Antiochus' view of Plato's Forms and his epistemology, see Karamanolis (2006) 60–70.

in humans, or only a metaphysical role, that is, they operate only as models for everything that comes into being. Platonists in late antiquity are divided into those who maintain that Forms have a cognitive role for both humans and God, and those who believe that Forms are cognitive for humans only.¹⁴ While for the former the Forms exist only in the divine intellect,¹⁵ for the latter they exist separately and constitute a distinct principle.¹⁶ A way out of this the one that Plotinus develops. Plotinus maintains that the Forms exist outside the demiurgic mind but in the cosmic soul. Porphyry would abandon Plotinus' view adopting a position closer to that of Amelius, as he would identify the demiurge with the cosmic soul.¹⁷

In the case of Plotinus the alleged tension between his epistemology and metaphysics can be expressed as follows. Plotinus maintains that the immanent Form is a mere quality of a sensible entity like all other qualities, such as size and shape, but he also appears to suggest that the immanent Form plays a significant role in our perception of sensible reality and also that it brings along with it qualities like size and shape. The first, epistemological, question which arises is this: if immanent Form is just a quality and sensible entities a mere conglomeration of matter and qualities, as Plotinus argues, how do we perceive sensible things as they are? Why do we not perceive them as a sum of qualities, that is, as clusters of colours, sizes and shapes, but instead we perceive them as Fs and Ys? And how are we able to name them F or Y unless we recognize their Form as an essential feature, *i.e.* as a feature that makes them the thing they are? If immanent Forms do play a significant role in our perception of sensible reality, then how justified is Plotinus in arguing that immanent Form is a quality and the individual Fs or Ys are a mere conglomeration of matter and qualities (VI.3 [44] 8.19–23)?

Plotinus appears to have a coherent and elaborate answer to the above questions. Following Plato, he contends that man can perceive things as they are, and inspired by the *Theaetetus*, he argues that perception cannot take place without reason,¹⁸ which practically means that perception

¹⁴ See Armstrong (1960) and Karamanolis (2006) 32–33.

¹⁵ This was notoriously the view held in the circle of Plotinus by people like Amelius, Porph., *VPlot.* 18; cf. V.5 [32]. Porphyry also falls in this category. See n. 17.

¹⁶ This is the case with Atticus and most probably also Plutarch.

¹⁷ He notoriously maintained that the Forms exist in the demiurgic intellect, going as far as to identify the two (Procl., *In Tim.* II 1.306.32–307.4, II 1.322.1–7, II 1.431.20–23).

¹⁸ *Theaet.* 186 a–187 a; cf. Alcin., *Didasc.* 4 154.10–156.23.

amounts to judgment (κρίσις).¹⁹ The question, of course, is what the judgment is about. If sensible entities are composite of matter and Form, εἶδος,²⁰ as Plotinus argues, then one would be tempted to maintain that the judgment must be about the Form of a sensible entity. That is, the judgment 'this is a tree' is a judgment about the Form of the perceived entity, as this is the crucial element for knowing it as such. Plotinus, however, opposes this idea. According to Plotinus sensible entities cannot be known as such, because there is nothing in them to guarantee stability and also meaning. What we perceive through our sense organs is a bunch of images which is not informative about what something is (V.5 [32] 1.12–19). Reason is needed for the reconstruction of what is the object which gives rise to sense affections. And for Plotinus reason operates by resorting to transcendent entities.²¹ Only they, which are characterized by stability, can bring about stability and meaning, which means that only they can convey knowledge. Plotinus maintains then that every time we come to know this or that sensible entity, this happens because our mind gains access to transcendent intelligible entities which are the ultimate causes of the sense impressions. Such intelligible entities are not the transcendent Forms but rather the λόγοι, of which the perceptible qualities are manifestations.²² According to Plotinus 'the soul's power of perception need not be of sensibles but rather it must be apprehensive of representations produced by perception in the organism' (I.1 [53] 7.9–11).²³ If this is so, then for Plotinus the immanent Form does not play any special role in the process of knowing a sensible entity.

This account seems to me to leave room for the following question. We can grant to Plotinus that man's mind comes to know a sensible entity through reference to intelligible, transcendent entities, but how can one do that without being guided through the Form which is immanent in matter? One could argue that it is the immanent Form which our sense organs perceive and it is through this that we are guided to the intelligibles. In this case then the immanent Form does play a special role in the way we come to know reality and should be distinguished

¹⁹ See III.6 [26] 1.1–7.

²⁰ VI.3 [44] 8.7–9.

²¹ See Emilsson (1996).

²² Emilsson (1988) 120.

²³ On this passage see the comments on Emilsson (1988) 114–116.

from the other qualities of a sensible substance like shape and size, even if one rejects Aristotle's doctrine of substance, as Plotinus does.

This is not a puzzling question for Plotinus who appears to make a sharp distinction between sensation and perception. Sensory affections like vision, hearing, or touch, he argues, are merely affections (πάθη). Perception on the other hand is a way to cognize, to understand reality, and for this to happen sensing is only the initial stage.²⁴ Affections become Forms (IV.4 [28] 23.29–32) and perception is a kind of awareness (ἀντίληψις) of these Forms which pre-exist in the soul²⁵ and are intermediate between transcendent and immanent Forms. It is these Forms the ones which account for perception,²⁶ as it is through them that we come to recognize the various sensible qualities as such.²⁷ This is a process within the soul which has little to do with external reality, as it is basically an act of thinking, a process of reflection of the transcendent reality (I.1 [53] 7.9–16). Through the process of awareness of the Forms, the soul, which according to Plotinus (IV.8 [6] 8) never fully descends in the sensible world, becomes united with them (VI.5 [23] 7.1–8) and hence connects man with the intelligible world and more precisely with the Intellect, which accounts for all thinking. If for Plotinus the human soul perceives through the Forms in an act of thinking, which is ultimately possible thanks to our relation to the Intellect, then the Form in matter does not play any special role in human perception. Of course, one can insist that the Forms in the soul are stimulated by the immanent Forms, but Plotinus would respond that perception is an intellectual process which is carried out entirely in the human soul through the Forms, and in this the immanent Forms, like all external stimuli, play hardly any role.

If this is so, then whatever objections one may have against Plotinus' theory of cognition, that of inconsistency with his own ontology, as

²⁴ See III.6 [26] 1.1–3 and the comments of Fleet (1995) 72–76; Kalligas (2004) 461–463. Cf. IV.3 [27] 3.21–25. As Fleet rightly points out, Plotinus is inspired by the *Theat.* 186 b 2 f., where Socrates argues that affections of sensible qualities (παθήματα) reach the soul through the body but the soul then employs reasoning (συλλογισμός) in order to make a judgment about them.

²⁵ These forms are called τύποι (IV.3 [28] 26.27–29; IV.6 [41] 1.19–40; V.3 [49] 2.10; 3.1–2) or φαντάσματα (IV.3 [27] 31.11; V.3 [49] 2.8). Plotinus makes clear that these τύποι are intellectual, not physical, as the Stoics maintained, that is, they pertain to the intellect (νοητά; I.1 [53] 7.9–11; cf. also IV.3 [27] 26.29–32, V.3 [49] 3.1–2).

²⁶ See IV.3 [27] 30 and the comments of Emilsson (1988) 132–137. See also Gerson (1994) 164–170.

²⁷ See Chiaradonna (2005b) 36–41.

regards the role of immanent Forms in particular, is ruled out. If a sensible entity is known through the mind's access to transcendent Forms, this does not make it necessary to raise the status of the immanent Form to that of substance. Quite the contrary is the case.

III

So far so good, but there are also metaphysical reasons against the idea that the immanent Form is a quality like all other qualities in a sensible entity, which can be characterized as accidental, that is, they are either subject to change or happen to occur but have nothing to do with the kind of being that something is, *e.g.* a man. As has been seen above, Plotinus himself appears to maintain that the immanent Form brings about the qualities necessary for something becoming X. This seems to suggest that the Form of a man should not be equalled with qualities, like big, white, clever, or dirty, which are accidental for being a man.

Aristotle was the first to distinguish between substantial and accidental differences. As a substantial difference he appears to consider a feature which is characteristic of a certain genus, the characteristic of man being biped animal, for instance. Aristotle counts as accidental differences, on the other hand, individual differences which are not characteristic of a genus, like differences in temperature, in colour, in weight of bodies, or virtue and vice (*Met.* V.14 1020 a 33–1021 b 25). Aristotle considers both substantial and accidental features to be qualities, yet in a different sense. Quality in the first sense is a quality of the genus in which something belongs, *e.g.* animal, but not a quality of the species which qualifies, *e.g.* man, in the case of the being biped feature (*Met.* VII.14 1039 b 2–7). Such a quality is not subject to change insofar as genera on the whole are not subject to change. Quality in the second sense, however, qualifies an individual F and can be subject to change; a man's colour does not change but temperature and weight do. In the scheme of the categories presented in the *Categories* quality in the first sense is not classified under quality but rather as a difference of the species, that is, as a predicate of substance (*Cat.* 5 3 a 33–b 9). The category of quality is rather reserved for accidental qualities which characterize individuals.

Later generations systematized this distinction as a distinction between qualities which complement substance and qualities which do not, that

is, accidental qualities.²⁸ The problem which arises here is that according to Aristotle substantial qualities are not in a subject, because they constitute the subject, but on the other hand they are not said of a subject either, because from the Aristotelian point of view this is at odds with his own conception of substance. As regards primary substance, which is confined to individuals, this is not the case because substantial differences concern only genera, which in the *Categories* are considered as secondary substances. But even as regards secondary substances, which are universals, substantial differences are not said of a subject either, because in their case all features are part of the universal they qualify and none of them is an accident. In the case of man, for instance, being biped, rational, having a head are not accidents.

This poses a problem which attracted the attention of both Plotinus and Porphyry. Attention to such a problem is indicative of their strong interest in Aristotle's ontology. This interest is driven first by the fact that Aristotle both in the *Categories* and in *Metaphysics* VII presents a theory of substance which powerfully contradicts that of Plato, and secondly by the fact that Aristotle has a systematic theory about quality which Plato lacks. Plotinus and Porphyry differ in their attitude to the problem of substantial qualities, and this is telling about their different appreciation of Aristotle's ontology as a whole. Porphyry includes substantial qualities (οὐσιώδεις ποιότητες) in his definition of substance, which suggests that for him these qualities are intermediaries between substance and quality but side more with substance.²⁹ Plotinus on the other hand does use the term οὐσιώδης ποιότης (VI.3 [44] 14.31) but only in the sense of a quality pertaining to a substance (*i.e.* a transcendent entity), not in the sense of a quality which complements a sensible entity. Plotinus maintains that the so-called substantial qualities are not part of substance and should not be included in the definition of substance, as Porphyry would argue later, but rather that they are in subject (VI.3 [44] 5.24–30). This means that Plotinus opposes Aristotle's distinction between two kinds of qualities.

Plotinus rejects the difference between substantial and accidental qualities on twofold grounds: first, because he does not accept the view that sensible entities are substances; secondly, because he seems to believe

²⁸ See Lucius *apud* Simp., *In Cat.* 48.1–11, Dex., *In Cat.* 23.17–24.1 and the comments of Kalligas (1997b) 292–295.

²⁹ Porph., *In Cat.* 94.29–96.1, Simp., *In Cat.* 78.20–24, 98.1–35.

that there is not room for an intermediary ontological entity between substance and quality, and since substance cannot produce substance but only an ontologically lower entity, immanent Form is bound to be a quality.³⁰ What underlies all this is Plotinus' understanding of substance as a simple and unified entity. If one accepts Aristotle's view that there are substantial qualities which complement substance, this amounts to suggesting that substance is composite. Plotinus agrees that sensible entities are composite, as Aristotle himself maintains. He actually argues that sensible substances can be seen as composite in several ways, as composite of matter and form, as composite of parts, as composite of qualities and matter.³¹ Yet for Plotinus matter is not something real but a non-being, a function rather than an entity, because it lacks characteristic features, being something indefinite (II.4 [12] 13.30–32). This means that matter does not contribute anything to the constitution of a sensible entity.³² This in turn means that for Plotinus a sensible entity is composite strictly speaking only insofar as it is constituted by qualities. Matter accommodates these qualities (*e.g.* size, shape, colour) but does not possess them.³³ It is in this sense that Plotinus considers sensible entities as being composite. Given their composite character, Plotinus refrains from considering them as substances. Qualities, however, can be part of composites, *i.e.* composite sensible entities.

The above account gives the impression that Plotinus does not distinguish between the kind of quality that immanent Form is and all other qualities which we, following Aristotle, would consider as accidental. Yet this is not very precise. Plotinus does distinguish between two kinds of qualities in *Enn.* II.6 [17], a short treatise dedicated to the distinction between substance and quality.³⁴ As I already said in the beginning of this paper, one problem with this difficult, if not obscure, treatise lies in its dialectical or even aporetic character. Plotinus tries different views about the question of how substance should be distinguished from quality, but remains unclear if he eventually commits himself to one.

³⁰ See the comments of Rutten (1961) 71–82.

³¹ See Wagner (1996) 130–134.

³² See Wagner (1996) 134. See also O'Brien (1999). Cf. II.4 [12] 1.6–12, II.4 [12] 16.25–28, II.7 [37] 3.

³³ See II.4 [12] 13.30–32, III.6 [26] 17.1–12. I am grateful to Pavlos Kalligas who has drawn my attention to these passages.

³⁴ For a discussion of the distinction between substance and quality in *Enn.* II.6 [17], see Chiaradonna (forthc.) and below.

Let us first see what the distinction precisely is before we decide if Plotinus is committed to it.

The first distinction Plotinus makes in *Enn.* II.6 [17] is between intelligible and sensible qualities. The former, he says, are nothing but activities which act on matter in such a way that they bring about sensible qualities (II.6 [17] 3.3–9). Intelligible qualities are the λόγοι, the intermediate intelligible entities, I mentioned above.³⁵ Sensible qualities are invariably considered to be manifestations or reflections of these intelligible qualities, a view supported also by the evidence of VI.3 [44] 8.

This is all very complex and several questions arise. The first is the following. How can the term 'quality' apply both to the intelligible and the sensible realm? Plotinus, we remember, argued against Aristotle that the term 'substance' cannot be used for both the intelligible and the sensible realm but homonymously. What is more, Plotinus uses the term 'quality' in a rather perplexing way. He appears to use the term 'quality' both in an active and in a passive sense. Intelligible qualities, the λόγοι, are qualities in an active sense, as they act in such a way as to qualify sensible entities. Sensible qualities on the other hand are the result of the activity of the intelligible qualities, that is, they are affections of matter.

Plotinus' reply is that he uses the term 'quality' only homonymously for the intelligible realm. Intelligible qualities, he argues, are ἐνέργειαι strictly speaking (VI.1 [42] 10.20–24).³⁶ True qualities are only those of the sensible realm. Plotinus consistently maintains that qualities pertain to bodies, they are incorporeal affections (ἀσώματα πάθη) accommodated in matter (II.7 [37] 2.24–28). And this happens as the result of the mediated activity of transcendent entities, the λόγοι, on matter, which thus becomes qualified, that is, it becomes something definite (III.8 [30] 2.19–25).

³⁵ See II.6 [17] 2.17–20, VI.2 [43] 5.10–14, VI.3 [44] 15.7–38.

³⁶ 'But the specific differences which distinguish substances in relation to each other are qualities in an equivocal sense, being rather activities and rational forming principles, or parts of forming principles, making clear what the thing is none the less even if they seem to declare that the substance is of a specific quality. And the qualities in the strict and proper sense, according to which beings are qualified, which we say are powers, would in fact in their general character be a sort of forming principles and, in a sense, shapes, beauties, and uglinesses in the soul and in the body in the same way' (VI.1 [42] 10.20–26; Armstrong's trans.). Cf. VI.1 [42] 11.16–21.

Now, Plotinus appears to distinguish two kinds of qualities in the sensible realm, qualities which complement a so called sensible substance and qualities which are merely accidental properties. In the case of fire, for instance, Plotinus argues, the heat of the fire complements what is fire, and in this sense it is part of the substance of fire (μέρος οὐσίας II.6 [17] 3.13). If you take the heat in any other sensible entity, say a glass of milk, then, Plotinus suggests, this is not any longer part or shape of substance (μορφήν οὐσίας II.6 [17] 3.21) but only a shadow, an image of it, and this, he maintains, is a quality strictly speaking (II.6 [17] 3.14–20). Plotinus continues as follows.

All, then, which is incidental (συμβέβηκε) and not activities and forms of substance, giving definite shapes, is qualitative (ποιὰ τὰντα). So, for substance, states and other dispositions of the underlying realities are to be called qualities, but their archetypal models, in which they exist primarily, are the activities of those intelligible realities. And in this way one and the same thing does not come to be quality and not quality, but that which is isolated from substance is qualitative, and that which is with substance is substance or form or activity; for nothing is the same in itself and when it is alone in something else and has fallen away from being form and activity. That, then, which is never a form of something else but always an incidental attribute, this and only this is pure quality (II.6 [17] 3.20–29; Armstrong's trans.).

The Aristotelian terminology is striking in this passage. Plotinus uses it on purpose in order to make a distinction of qualities which is different from Aristotle's distinction between accidental and substantial qualities. Plotinus rather distinguishes between accidental and non-accidental qualities. The former are accidents (συμβεβηκότα), while the latter are constitutive of a sensible entity (ὅσα λέγονται συμπληροῦν οὐσίας, II.6 [17] 2.19–21). Non-accidental qualities mark off an entity as such, say fire or man, contributing to them what is their characteristic feature, heat and reason respectively. Such qualities are the result of the activity of the λόγοι.³⁷ When Plotinus argues that matter becomes qualified through the activity of the λόγοι (III.8 [30] 2.19–25) he refers to such non-accidental qualities which he also calls properties (ιδιότητες, II.6 [17] 3.4, 10). Accidental qualities on the other hand differentiate entities of the same kind. As Plotinus says earlier in the same treatise, these qualities contain what is extra and comes after substance, such as virtues and vices, ugliness and beauty (II.6 [17] 2.25–27). The source

³⁷ II.6 [17] 2.20–22, 3.10–14, III.8 [30] 2.27–30.

of such accidental qualities is not specified, but clearly their source is not the λόγοι. Plotinus argues that only accidental qualities are qualities strictly speaking, while non accidental qualities are parts of the sensible entity (II.6 [17] 3.24–28).

This theory, though different from that of Aristotle, is very close to Aristotle's distinction between substantial and accidental qualities. Plotinus does not call the qualities which come into being through the intelligible, transcendent λόγοι 'substantial' because he does not accept the existence of sensible substances in the first place, yet he preserves the Aristotelian distinction of qualities.

The problem now is that in *Enn.* VI.2 [43] 14 Plotinus explicitly denies that there are qualities which complement substances. I quote:

We did think right (ἀξιούμεν) to say elsewhere that the elements which contributed to the essential completion of substance were qualities only in name, but those which came from outside subsequent to substance were qualities [in the proper sense], and that those which came after them were already passive affections. But now we are saying that the elements of particular substance make no contribution at all to the completion of substance as such;³⁸ for there is no substantial addition to the substance of man by reason of his being man; but he is substance at a higher level, before coming to the differentiation, as is also the living being before coming to the 'reasonable' (VI.2 [43] 14.14–22; Armstrong's trans.).

Plotinus' reference to his difference from his previous position, apparently the one held at *Enn.* II.6 [17], could not be clearer. To begin with, Plotinus makes clear that at II.6 [17] he did commit himself to the position I ascribed to him above, namely that there are two kinds of qualities, one of which contributes to the completion of sensible entities and one which does not, the accidental qualities. The verb ἀξιούμεν is a verb of commitment to a view.³⁹ If this is so, then the problem becomes more accentuated. Does Plotinus change his mind? Is his new position incompatible with his previous one?

Scholars have been divided. K. Corrigan has argued that in *Enn.* VI.2 [43] Plotinus takes a different point of view without changing his thinking about substance and quality.⁴⁰ But this rests on a certain interpretation of VI.1–3 [42–44] that Corrigan takes, according to

³⁸ νῦν δὲ λέγομεν οὐκ οὐσίας ὅλας εἶναι συμπληρωτικὰ τὰ τῆς τινὸς οὐσίας.

³⁹ See LSJ, *s.v.*, sense IV.2. Plotinus often uses the term to say that this is what he thinks is right. See Sleeman and Pollet (1980), *s.v.*, d. Cf. I.2 [19] 1.40, I.4 [46] 6.21.

⁴⁰ Cf. Corrigan (1996a) 312–314.

which Plotinus does not reject Aristotle's theory of substance but he modifies it from a Platonist point of view. This does not seem to me a charitable interpretation of VI.1–3 [42–44].⁴¹ As I have tried to show elsewhere,⁴² Plotinus does reject Aristotle's theory of substance in *Enn.* VI.1–3 [42–44] even as regards the sensible world. If this is so, then we have to admit that Plotinus does change his mind and takes a different position from that maintained in *Enn.* II.6 [17]. This is what Riccardo Chiaradonna has argued. In his view, Plotinus revises his earlier position, in which he adopted a more Peripatetic conceptual apparatus, to a position more strictly Platonist, which is understandable given his confrontation with Aristotle's doctrine.⁴³ In a more recent contribution to the question Chiaradonna appears to qualify this view maintaining that Plotinus' later position is a development of his earlier one.⁴⁴ This seems to me to be going in the right direction. Plotinus does take in *Enn.* VI.1–3 [42–44] a position different from that outlined in *Enn.* II.6 [17], but the two are not incompatible. On the contrary, they can well be part of a single theory.

Let me explain. As I have already said, Plotinus is committed to the view that only transcendent entities qualify as substances because only they have natures or essences, which means that only they have identities (τὸ εἶναι). Sensible entities do not have essences, so they are not substances with identities X or Y but they rather are *like* substances (ποιόα). A sensible entity is not a man or a tree but *like* a man or a tree (VI.3 [44] 15.27–31). Sensible entities then consist in qualities, ποιότητες in a very specific sense, namely in the sense that they resemble real substances. This is because real substances, which are transcendent entities, bring about such resemblances of themselves through their activity on matter. Plotinus finds the term ποιότης suitable for conveying the sense of something resembling a substance. In this sense ποιότης applies especially to immanent Form. As I have argued above, Plotinus maintains that this Form has a constitutive role in the becoming of X, such that a number of essential features of X are determined by it. If X is an elephant, it is bound to have a certain size, shape, and colour. But of course, it may also be a particularly big, tall, heavy, or aggressive

⁴¹ Good arguments against such an interpretation have been advanced by Chiaradonna (2002). For a brief exposition of Plotinus' position, see Karamanolis (2006) 234–236.

⁴² See n. 41 above.

⁴³ Chiaradonna (2002) 140–143.

⁴⁴ Chiaradonna (forthc.).

elephant. These are also qualities, but they are not what make X becoming *like* a real substance, *i.e.* an elephant. They are rather accidental qualities, as they do not play a role in something becoming X. Such qualities are not accounted for by the λόγοι which inform the matter so that something comes into being. And the reason is that they do not account in any way for the x being the kind of thing it is.

Plotinus makes this distinction also in *Enn.* VI.1 [42] 10, when he distinguishes between the rationality of man and man's ability to box (VI.1 [42] 10.16–17). In this context Plotinus again distinguishes between qualities strictly speaking (κυρίως), namely what I call accidental qualities which do not contribute to the coming to being of a sensible entity (VI.1 [42] 10.53–56), and qualities homonymously (ὁμωνύμως) speaking, which contribute to something being a thing of a certain sort (ποιᾶν οὐσίαν) and are the result of the activity of λόγοι (VI.1 [42] 10.20–27). This appears to square with what Plotinus says in *Enn.* II.6 [17] 3, when he argues that the heat of the fire should not be considered as its quality but as its form or activity, unless we use the term quality in a different sense, that is, in the homonymous sense mentioned above.⁴⁵

Plotinus appears to operate with a narrow and wide sense of quality. In a wide sense all features of a sensible x are qualities. In a narrow and strict sense, however, only accidental features are qualities, while immanent Forms, as the results of the activity of λόγοι, contribute to the coming to being of something, man or elephant. Yet immanent Forms remain mere resemblances of the λόγοι, they are like them (ποιᾶ οὐσίαι), and in this sense ποιότητες. Depending on the aim of his treatises, Plotinus changes his focus. In *Enn.* II.6 [17] he uses quality for two different kinds of features, namely the imprints of the activity of the transcendent λόγοι on the sensible world which make something becoming X, and accidents which differentiate Xs. In *Enn.* VI.1–3 [42–44], however, Plotinus wants to show that immanent Forms, which fall in the first class of features, do not qualify as substances but as qualities, because they are derivative from intelligible entities and because of their instantiation in matter.

Such differences of focus, however, do not speak against the existence of a coherent theory of quality in Plotinus. From the above it emerges that for Plotinus 'quality' is a class of ontological entities pertaining

⁴⁵ II.6 [17] 3.14–20. See the comments of Kalligas (1997b) 303.

to the sensible world, to bodies; lack of qualities (*ἄποιος*) is indicative that something is not a body (I.4 [46] 8.2). Quality indicates an incorporeal (II.7 [37] 2.29, VI.3 [44] 16.18–19), an affection (*πάθος*; VI.3 [44] 16.39) of a body caused by the activity of an intelligible entity. But given Plotinus' views about the hierarchy of reality, quality is not merely an ontological class, as it is for Aristotle, but also a derogatory term, as it points to a lower reality of entities. A quality amounts to the degraded existence of a genus, be it intelligible substance or intelligible quality.⁴⁶ An individual man, Socrates, argues Plotinus, becomes a kind of human (*τούσδε*) through the participation to the Form of man (*μεταλήψει ἀνθρώπου ὁ τις ἄνθρωπος*, VI.3 [44] 9.29). The sensible Socrates, argues Plotinus, is not Socrates strictly speaking but colour and configurations of those parts which are imitations of real ones involved in his forming principle (VI.3 [44] 15.34–36). In other words, the category of quality is the mark of failure of a sensible entity to be this or that.

IV

One question which arises from the above is how the qualities which characterize sensible entities can ultimately constitute entities with some unity, like the ones we perceive around us. This question becomes particularly serious if we remember that for Plotinus matter is a non-being, which means that it is the qualities that constitute an entity so that this is of a certain sort X or Y and with certain features. The question is what guarantees the unity of such an entity.

As I have already said, Plotinus makes clear that immanent Forms which constitute a sensible entity derive from transcendent forming principles (VI.2 [43] 5.1–5), the *λόγοι*.⁴⁷ Yet not all characteristics of sensible entities have such a forming principle. Individual differences of entities of the same kind do not appear to have their origins in similar forming principles. Plotinus wonders whether such accidental characteristics are due to imperfect *λόγοι* (VI.1 [42] 10.60, 11.5), but

⁴⁶ Cf. VI.3 [44] 1.6 and the analysis of Chiaradonna (2002) 284–285.

⁴⁷ Plotinus is far from clear as regards the way the intelligible entities act as formative principles in the sensible world. He notoriously uses a metaphorical language which is far from being precise, as he himself admits (VI.5 [23] 8.6–7) and he acknowledges the difficulty for more precision (8.9–10).

he does not affirm that. Reason, human size and shape belong to the first category when it comes to the coming to being of a man, this or that shape and size belong to the second. This is because the former account for something being the kind of thing it is, whereas the latter do not. What comes about is an agglomerate of qualities but not a random agglomerate of qualities. Rather, the entity that comes about is determined as to what it becomes. So there is a certain degree of unity which is due to the activity of an intelligible, transcendent principle.

Yet this is a low degree of unity. For Plotinus sensible reality lacks unity strictly speaking which is characteristic of substance, it is a realm of images, appearances, and this is why he insists that sensible entities are made up of qualities only. As has been seen, Plotinus uses the testimony of perception to strengthen this conclusion. However, the testimony of perception also suggests that certain unity exists, and Plotinus is not blind to that. If there were no unity, we would not be able to know the worlds around us. To account for that limited unity of sensible entities Plotinus distinguishes between the immanent Form as a quality in one sense and accidental qualities or qualities strictly speaking, which are like Aristotle's accidents. The former brings about a reflection of the unity of its cause, while the latter do not. The fact that sensible entities are subject to change and destruction is an indication of some degree of unity.

Plotinus wants to affirm such a relative unity of sensible entities not only for epistemological but also for metaphysical reasons. Plotinus wants to affirm a continuity between the intelligible and the sensible realm. This continuity is important also if he is to avoid some clash between his epistemology and his metaphysics. If man has the ability to know the sensible world and this happens through the mind's ascent to the transcendent Forms, there must be something that is knowable, and this is the result of the activity of the *λόγοι*. The unity they bestow on the sensible realm stems from the world-soul and is ultimately guaranteed by the Intellect. Plotinus argues that everything is present in the Intellect, which is the source of all life and activity (II.5 [25] 3.36–41).

V

I have argued that Plotinus has a coherent theory of quality, despite his differences in focus in his treatises. This theory is marked by Aristotelian influence, since Plotinus does make a distinction similar to that of

Aristotle's between substantial and accidental qualities, but he transforms the metaphysics of it precisely because Plotinus does not accept that the sensible world contains substances. As a result, we have a distinction between accidental and non-accidental qualities; the former are qualities strictly speaking, while the latter are not. Plotinus' theory is characteristic of the way Peripatetic influence shaped his philosophy. His theory of quality is unique in the history of philosophy, differing much from the relevant views of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Originality though does not guarantee longevity. Porphyry will modify Plotinus' theory considerably in favour of a more Aristotelian position.

AS WE ARE ALWAYS SPEAKING OF THEM AND USING
THEIR NAMES ON EVERY OCCASION
PLOTINUS, *ENN.* III.7 [45]: LANGUAGE, EXPERIENCE
AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF TIME IN NEOPLATONISM

Robbert M. van den Berg

I. *Introduction*

The discussion of 'time' in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* starts by listing the classical definitions of time by Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Augustine, only to conclude that all of these are unhelpfully circular because they employ temporal notions. Time, the reader is told, might be too basic to admit of definition, but fortunately modern philosophy has made some progress in understanding time 'by analysis both of how we ordinarily experience and talk about time and of the deliverances of science'.¹

Even though the *Cambridge Dictionary* suggests otherwise, this approach to time is not something new. Ever since the Stoics and the Epicureans, ancient philosophers frequently appeal to concepts, often referred to as 'common notions', that are based on experience and that coincide with the meaning of words. Earlier generations of scholars had already noted that such common notions also figure in Plotinus' celebrated discussion of eternity and time. However, since their interest was mainly in Plotinus' doctrines about the nature of eternity and time, it is only now that there is a growing interest in Plotinus' arguments for his views, that the role of these notions receives closer scrutiny. In this paper I will examine their role in the treatment of time by Plotinus and other Neoplatonists. The first part of the paper will argue that in Plotinus we should distinguish between two types of common notions, one based on our perception of the phenomena in the physical world, the other on intuitions of metaphysical reality. To this difference in origin corresponds a difference in epistemological status and hence a

¹ Earman and Gale (1995) 803.

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