

THE CONCEPTS OF 'POWER' AND 'MASS' IN PLOTINUS' METAPHYSICS

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Abstract: In *Ennead II 9* [33] 17 9-10 [Henry-Schwyzzer] Plotinus says that, 'there (in the intelligible world) magnitude manifests itself as (pure) power, while it appears as mass in the sensible world' (τὸ γὰρ ἐκεῖ μέγα ἐν δυνάμει ἐνταῦθα ἐν ὄγκῳ).

The paper will explain what this expression means and point out the importance it could have for a profounder understanding of the fundamental tenets of Plotinus' metaphysics.

In particular, the paper will assess whether the relationship between the material and the spiritual/intelligible dimensions can be understood more precisely by making use of the concept of 'power' to explain the formation of the primordial matter by the 'shaping power' emanated from the ideas of the intelligible world. In order to reach this goal, all occurrences of the term 'power' (δύναμις) in the *Enneads* will be duly assessed and discussed; the same will be done with regard to the term 'mass' (ὄγκος) and 'magnitude' (τὸ μέγα).

On the basis of the results of the research carried out, the paper will be able to judge the thesis that the interaction of the concepts of 'power', 'mass' and 'magnitude' can shed a better light on Plotinus' conception of the formation of the material dimension by the intelligible one.

Introduction

In *Ennead II 9* [33]¹ Plotinus criticizes his 'Gnostic' disciples' dualistic interpretation of Plato and their contempt for the sensible world and the physical body, regarded by them as the product of the creative activity of an inferior demiurge.² In chapter 17 of *Ennead II 9* [33], after exhorting his disciples not to justify their

¹ Plotinus, *Ennead II 9* [33]; here and hereinafter cited according to Henry P. and H.R. Schwyzzer (eds.), *Plotini Opera*, vol.1 (Leiden, 1951).

² With regard to this see Narbonne J.M., *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics* (Studies in Platonism, Neo-Platonism and the Platonic Tradition 11; Leiden-New York-Köln, 2011); Spanu N., *Plotinus, Ennead II 9 [33] 'Against the Gnostics' – a Commentary* (Studia Patristica supplementary Series 1; Leuven-Paris-Walpole, Ma., 2012).

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depreciation of both the sensible world and the material body³ by misinterpreting Plato's thought, he gives them the advice to understand the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible dimensions by having recourse to a process of mental abstraction of the intelligible world from the material one, which he calls ἀφαίρεσις.

Let us describe now how the process of ἀφαίρεσις works. Given that the sensible world is a mere image of the intelligible one,⁴ by pushing logical reasoning (ἡ δίανοια) to its utmost limits, it is possible, with an act of the mind, to remove the material shell of the sensible world from its intelligible core and to conceive the world as an intelligible sphere (σφαίρα νοητή) that constitutes the exemplar form of the cosmos (τὸ ἐπὶ τῷ κόσμῳ εἶδος); once the upward movement of the mind has reached its tipping point, the downward movement starts and the mind can then go over the process of creation of the sensible world, by visualizing disembodied souls (ἄνευ τῶν σωμάτων) that shape matter according to its intelligible model (κατὰ τὸ νοητόν), so that the creation (τὸ γενόμενον), in proportion to its power (εἰς δύναμιν) and the extension of its magnitude (τῷ μεγέθει), may become equal (ἐξισωθῆναι) to its intelligible archetype (τὸ παράδειγμα).⁵ Plotinus then, with his usual concision, expresses a fundamental concept of his philosophy, which so far has received little attention from scholars: he says that in the intelligible world magnitude manifests itself as (pure) power, while it appears as mass in the sensible world (τὸ γὰρ ἐκεῖ μέγα ἐν δυνάμει ἐνταῦθα ἐν ὄγκῳ).⁶

What does Plotinus mean with this expression? How does he understand the concepts of 'magnitude' (τὸ μέγα), 'power' (ἡ δύναμις) and 'mass' (τὸ ὄγκος)? What kind of role do these concepts play in Plotinus' philosophy? These questions are important because they open-up a new perspective on Plotinus' metaphysics, which has generally been reconstructed by referring almost exclusively to concepts like 'hypostasis', 'being', 'oneness', 'wholeness' and so on.⁷

³ Plotinus, *Ennead II* 9 [33] 17. 1-4.

⁴ Ibid., 4. 25-26; 8. 16-22, 27-29.

⁵ Ibid., 17. 4-9.

⁶ Ibid. 17. 9-10. A similar process of ἀφαίρεσις is described by Plotinus in *Ennead V* 8 [31] 9 1-15; here and hereinafter cited according to Henry P. and H.R. Schwyzer (eds.), *Plotini Opera*, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1959).

⁷ Few studies have been specifically dedicated to the concepts of 'power', 'mass' and 'magnitude' in Plotinus's metaphysics; see, for example, Smith A., *Dunamis in Plotinus and Porphyry*, in: id., *Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus – Philosophy and Religion in Neoplatonism* (Collected Studies; Farnham, Surrey, England-Burlington, VT, 2011); Aubry G., *Dieu sans la puissance: Dunamis et energie chez Aristote et chez Plotin* (Paris, 2006).

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The concept of 'magnitude' (τὸ μέγα)

We will confine ourselves to analyzing the word τὸ μέγα, leaving out of our investigation other Greek words that express the idea of 'magnitude', such as the cognates of τὸ μέγα or the Greek word that more specifically translates this concept, that is, τὸ μέγεθος. The objective of our investigation will be to ascertain what the term 'magnitude' means in *Ennead II 9* [33] 17 9-10. But, in order to achieve our goal, it is necessary first to discuss briefly how Plotinus understands the concept of 'magnitude' in other passages of the *Enneads*.

Τὸ μέγα is used by Plotinus in a variety of ways. In *Ennead II 4* [12] 11 33-36 he uses this term in connection with his discussion of the concept of primordial matter. Given that matter always remains indefinite (ἀόριστος οὐσίας) and unstable (μήπω στήσα), even when it receives the forms of sensible beings or *rationes seminales* from the Soul, matter cannot be shaped by a specific form to the exclusion of other forms, for example, by the form of greatness to the exclusion of the form of smallness; on the contrary, the radical indefiniteness of matter implies that this must be the receptacle of all forms at the same time, including opposing forms. Incidentally, it must be pointed out that the *rationes seminales* are regarded as powers by Plotinus. This is clearly said in *Ennead II 3* (52) 17 2-5, where he writes:

The *ratio seminalis* acts on matter and, according to the laws of nature, this active principle is neither thought nor (active) contemplation (of the superior hypostases), but a power (δύναμις) that causes change in matter, which does not contemplate but is (merely) active, as a form or shape (reflected) on (the surface) of the water [...] (οἶον τύπον καὶ σχῆμα ἐν ὕδατι).⁸

But let us go back to the primordial matter. This, Plotinus says, is like a vision (εἶδωλον) or phantom (φάντασμα) of a mass (ὄγκου), to which non-being is much more appropriate than being. No form pertains to it properly and exclusively, because '[matter] represent forms that are always contrary to each other, (such as) smallness and greatness, the little and the many, lack and surplus' (τὰ ἐναντία ἀεὶ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ φανταζόμενον, μικρὸν καὶ μέγα καὶ ἥττον καὶ μᾶλλον, ἐλλεῖπόν τε καὶ ὑπερέχον).⁹ For this reason, Plotinus says that matter is 'great-and-small' (μέγα καὶ μικρὸν) at the same time.¹⁰

The fact that the *rationes seminales* have a limited capacity to shape matter implies that their 'shaping power' must be inferior to that possessed by the intelligible ideas. In particular, this means that the form of magnitude that appears in matter

⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead II 3* (52) 17. 2-5. See also Plotinus, *Ennead III 6* [26] 17. 30-31; 8 [30] 2. 30-34, here and hereinafter cited according to Henry P. and H.R. Schwyzer (eds.), *Plotini Opera*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1951); Plotinus, *Ennead VI 2* [43] 5. 14, here and hereinafter cited according to Henry P. and H.R. Schwyzer (eds.), *Plotini Opera*, vol. 3 (Leiden, 1973).

⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead III 6* (26) 7. 16-18, 21-23; 16, 1-13, 24-27.

¹⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead II 4* [12] 11. 33-36.

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as a *ratio seminalis* cannot be regarded as identical with the idea of magnitude located in the intelligible world, but it will be a reflection of this, an image of it projected by the Soul onto the chaotic surface of matter. As the reflection of a thing is less real than the thing reflected, although it cannot be conceived of as a mere illusion, so the material reflection of the idea of magnitude has an inferior degree of 'being', 'shaping power' and 'form' compared with its intelligible model. The magnitude of sensible beings is nothing but a dim reflection of the ideal magnitude located in the intelligible world; therefore, it represents the most partial, incomplete, imperfect and weak manifestation of it.¹¹

A manifestation of the idea of magnitude more perfect than that which belongs to sensible beings can be seen in the wise man, who has what Plotinus calls 'great merit' (ἄξιος...ἔχων τὸ μέγα), because he has overcome the material body and reached the transcendent Good.¹² A still higher degree of magnitude can be attributed to the Soul of the world, which represents the more perfect manifestation of the intelligible idea of magnitude. In *Ennead III 5 (50) 8 11* Plotinus identifies the 'great' Soul, that is, the Soul of the world, with Zeus,¹³ the father of the gods of Greek mythology. Plotinus explains that the magnitude of the Soul is different from the magnitude of mass: this is great when it possesses more parts compared with another mass, while the Soul of the world is great because it has no parts, so that it can 'embrace the All, or, more precisely, be the All' (τὸ γὰρ πᾶν κατείληφε, μᾶλλον δὲ αὐτὴ ἐστὶ τὸ πᾶν), since all beings have come into existence from it.¹⁴ The last step of the ascent to the highest degree of magnitude brings us to the Intellect, which, being identical with its own objects of thought,¹⁵ that is, the Platonic ideas among which the idea of magnitude is included, is also identical with the magnitude itself. In several passages of the *Enneads* Plotinus attributes the concept of magnitude to the Intellect.¹⁶ Above the Intellect, the One too is great, even though its greatness or magnitude transcends the idea of magnitude itself and is therefore totally unintelligible.¹⁷ Plotinus confines himself to saying that the One is great in the sense that 'nothing is more powerful than it or equal to

¹¹ Plotinus, *Ennead III 6 (26) 17-18*; Plotinus, *Ennead V 5 [32] 11. 8-10*; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 3 [44] 11. 25-31*; 12. 3; 6 [34] 1.

¹² Plotinus, *Ennead I 4 [46] 16. 1-13* here and hereinafter cited according to Henry P. and H.R. Schwyzer (eds.), *Plotini Opera*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1951).

¹³ Plotinus, *Ennead III 5 (50) 8. 11*.

¹⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 4 [22] 5*.

¹⁵ See, for example, Plotinus, *Ennead II 9 [33] 1. 46-50*.

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead II 9 [33] 9. 34-35*; Plotinus, *Ennead III 5 (50) 8. 11*; Plotinus, *Ennead IV 8 (6) 3. 15*; here and hereinafter cited according to Henry P. and H.R. Schwyzer (eds.), *Plotini Opera*, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1959); Plotinus, *Ennead V 5 [32] 3. 12-13*; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 2 [43] 20. 17*; 21. 6-11, 29-30; 6 [34] 18. 47.

¹⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead III 8 [30] 10. 34*; Plotinus, *Ennead IV 3 [27] 17. 18*.

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it' (τὸ δὲ μέγα αὐτοῦ τὸ μηδὲν αὐτοῦ εἶναι δυνατώτερον παρισυῖσθαι τε μηδὲν δύνασθαι).¹⁸

The idea of magnitude has then for Plotinus different degrees of completeness, from the One, which can be said to be great in the proper sense of this term, to the sensible beings, which appear to be great to the eyes of men, but whose greatness is only a dim reflection of the superior one.

The Concept of 'Power' (δύναμις)

As we have done before, in order to elucidate the meaning of the concept of 'power' as it appears in *Ennead II 9* [33] 17 9-10, we will discuss first its occurrence in other parts of the *Enneads*.

In the *Ennead II 5* [25] entitled 'What is Potentiality and what is Actuality' (ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΔΥΝΑΜΕΙ ΚΑΙ ΕΝΕΡΓΕΙΑΙ) Plotinus starts his examination by distinguishing 'potentiality' (δυνάμει) from 'potency' or 'power' (ἡ δύναμις), which refers to the 'power to do something'.¹⁹ We agree with A. Smith who in his paper 'Dunamis in Plotinus and Porphyry' points out that Plotinus distinguishes much more clearly than Aristotle the concept of 'potentiality' from that of 'power'.²⁰ Plotinus points out that 'potentiality plays the role of the underlying foundation of properties, figures and forms, which it takes upon itself, being by nature disposed to do so' (τὸ μὲν δὴ δυνάμει τοιοῦτον ὥσπερ ὑποκείμενόν τι πάθεσι καὶ μορφαῖς καὶ εἶδεσιν, ἃ μέλλει δέχεσθαι καὶ πέφυκεν).²¹

Now that we have reached a definition of potentiality, let us focus our attention on the relationship between potentiality and the primordial matter, because it is in it that the idea of potentiality properly manifests itself; Plotinus says: 'Since (matter) is none of the beings that (appear) in it, and these are real beings, (it) could be regarded as non-being' (Ἦι μὲν δὴ οὐδὲν ἐστὶ τούτων τῶν ἐπ' αὐτῇ, ταῦτα δὲ ὄντα, μὴ ὄν ἄν εἴη).²² Matter, according to Plotinus, cannot be actual (ἐνεργεία), because it is none of the actual forms that appear in it;²³ as a consequence, there remains only the possibility to consider it as pure potentiality (δυνάμει δὲ μόνον ἐγκαταλείπεται εἶναι), a weak (ἀσθενές) and dim (ἀμυδρόν) image (εἶδωλον) that can obtain no form (μορφοῦσθαι μὴ δυνάμενον).²⁴

¹⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 7* [38] 32. 17-20.

¹⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead II 5* [25] 1. 17-26.

²⁰ Smith, *Dunamis in Plotinus and Porphyry* (n. 7), 64. We cannot discuss here how Aristotle's conception of 'potentiality' and 'actuality' differs from Plotinus'. We refer to A. Smith, who analyzes briefly *Metaphysics* 8. 1-9, in: *ibid.*, 64 and to G. Aubry, *Dunamis et energie chez Aristote et chez Plotin* (n. 7).

²¹ Plotinus, *Ennead II 5* [25] 1. 29-31.

²² *Ibid.*, 4. 9-10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5. 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 5. 19-21. See also *ibid.*, 5. 34-35.

Plotinus comes to say that if we wanted to give matter a sort of existence, this could be defined, in an oximoric way, as actual non-being (ἐνεργεία μὴ εἶναι).²⁵ But, one could ask, what kind of relationship exists between primordial matter and δύναμις in the sense of ‘power to do something’ or ‘potency’? Plotinus answers this question in *Ennead III 6* [26] 7 7-9, where he resolutely denies that matter is a power or has power of any kind; this is so, because matter has no autonomous power to create, but it can only co-operate in the creation of the sensible world by performing the function of passive receptacle of the forms projected onto it by the Soul. In this *Ennead*, which is the twenty-sixth treatise in chronological order, Plotinus repeats what he had already said in *Ennead II 5* - which, being the twenty-fifth treatise, directly precedes *Ennead III 6* -, pointing out that matter must not be regarded as being or a being, but must be thought of as pure non-being.²⁶ This conclusion leads Plotinus to depart from what he considers as the position of the Stoics, who regarded matter as the principle of beings; matter, Plotinus says, cannot be the ἀρχὴ πάντων because what is pure potentiality cannot become actual by itself, but needs an actual being that can make it move from potentiality to actuality; if this is so, matter, which is pure potentiality, cannot be the principle of beings.²⁷

Differently from matter, the forms or *rationes seminales*, as we have pointed out above, are not ‘potentialities’ (δυνάμει) but ‘powers’, (δυνάμεις) to which belong the second meaning of the term δύναμις, that is, the one that refers to the ‘power to do something’; this is so because they have the power to shape matter by giving it a form, though temporary and impermanent; they are beings endowed with power that they communicate to matter in the same sense in which all beings communicate their own being to the beings that are generated by them.²⁸ This is a fundamental principle of Plotinus’ metaphysics, which is clearly expressed in *Ennead V 1* [10] 6 30-34

And by necessity all beings, as long as they exist, emanate their own substantial being (which is, so to speak, an image of the beings by which they have been generated) both around themselves and towards the beings that are different from themselves, (doing so) by virtue of their own being (ἐκ τῆς αὐτῶν οὐσίας) and of the power at their disposal (ἐκ τῆς παρούσης δυνάμεως).²⁹

By giving matter infinite shapes, the *rationes seminales* create substances, that is, σύνολοι, of matter and form; substances are powers for Plotinus, because, as he

²⁵ Ibid., 5. 27.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 1* [42] 26. 1-7.

²⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead III 6* [26] 17. 18-21, 30-31; 8 [30] 2. 30-34; Plotinus, *Ennead V 1* [10] 6. 30-34; 3 [49] 16. 1-5; 8 [31] 2. 19-24; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 2* [43] 5. 12-15.

²⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead V 1* [10] 6. 30-34.

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explains in *Ennead VI 4* [22] 9 24-25, 'as it is not possible for a substance to exist without power, so a power (cannot exist) without substance.' (καίτοι οὐχ οἷόν τε, ὥσπερ οὐσίαν ἄνευ δυνάμεως, οὕτως οὐδὲ δύναμιν ἄνευ οὐσίας).³⁰ Substances are in turn given additional characteristics through the action of qualities. Qualities are regarded by Plotinus as powers that add their qualitative being to the essence of substances.³¹

The creation of sensible beings from substances and qualities represents then a further step forward in the ascent from the inferior powers to the superior ones. The sensible powers, like the four elements, the sky, the stars, the minerals, the vegetables and the animals are certainly powerful beings, even if their power is inferior to that of the superior hypostases. With regard to these, Plotinus says:

One could certainly regard the powers of fire and of the other bodies as big; however, (it) is only because of (our) ignorance of the true power that these (powers) can seem to be (the only ones) capable of burning, destroying, consuming and causing the generation of living beings. But (if) these powers indeed destroy, (they) are also destroyed, (if) they cause the generation (of beings), they are also generated; on the contrary, the superior powers simply are, and only what is beautiful truly exists.³²

According to Plotinus, not only the forces of nature can be regarded as powers, but also the several organs and faculties of the human being. Man is in fact a microcosm, that is, a miniature representation of the cosmos. In *Ennead IV 4* [28] 36 7-9 Plotinus clearly expresses this concept; he says:

Or (it could) rather (be said that) the powers of the body (are) a representation (ἵχνος) of those of the universe, (where) an indescribable and marvellous variety of powers (δυνάμεων) can be found [...]³³

The term 'powers' is used by Plotinus not only to describe the faculties of the human body³⁴ or the sensory faculties³⁵ in general, but also in a more specific sense; for example, in the *Ennead IV 3* [27] 23 5 he talks of the faculty of sight (τὴν ὀρατικὴν) as the power located in the eyes (τὴν μὲν ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς δύναμιν),³⁶ while in *Ennead IV 4* [28] 5 1-2 he describes memory as a power (δύναμις) that

³⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 4* [22] 9. 24-25.

³¹ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 1* [42] 10-12.

³² Plotinus, *Ennead V 8* [31] 9. 32-37. See also Plotinus, *Ennead III 8* [30] 2. 9-15; 3. 14-15; Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4* [28] 26. 1-4; 36. 1-2; 37; 40. 1-4; 43. 7-8; 45. 27; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 4* [22] 7; 16. 32.

³³ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4* [28] 36. 7-9.

³⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead I 6* [1] 3. 1; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 4* [22] 7. 9-18.

³⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 3* [27] 23. 9-27; Plotinus, *Ennead IV 6* [41] 2. 1-3, 7-8; 3. 16-19, 61-62; Plotinus, *Ennead V 2* [11] 2. 7-8 (ἡ τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι δύναμις), 9 [5] 6. 11 (τῶν σπερμάτων δὲ δύναμις); Plotinus, *Ennead VI 1* [42] 29. 35; 7 [38] 1. 13, 44; 3. 31; 5. 15-18; 7. 22; 12. 27-28.

³⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 3* [27] 23. 5. See also Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4* (28) 23. 47; 5 [29] 4. 15.

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activates the capacity to remember things (καθ' ἣν τὸ μνεμονεύειν, εἰς ἐνέργειαν ἔγει).³⁷ But the highest power of man is the power to think rationally, by which he can transcend his sensory constraints and reach the higher beings.³⁸

This last statement leads us to the discussion of the use by Plotinus of the term 'power', interpreted as 'power to do something', to describe the activity of the three superior hypostases, the Soul, the Intellect and the One. Let us start with the Soul. In the *Ennead IV 3 [27] 8 35-38* Plotinus explains the infinite nature of the Soul of the World by describing it as 'an infinite power'; he writes:

How (will the Soul be) infinite, if (it) (also has to) be stable? Actually, (the Soul is) infinite by virtue of its infinite power (ἢ τῆ δυνάμει τὸ ἄπειρον), because (its own) power is infinite, (but) not in the sense that (the power of the Soul) is infinitely divisible, seeing that even God is infinite (without being divisible).³⁹

The Soul then is infinite in the same sense as God is such: by virtue of its own infinite power to create; in *Ennead IV 8 (6) 5 25-27* Plotinus writes: 'The Soul is the last God (that) comes here freely and for the sake of its power to give form to what comes after it.'⁴⁰ Finally, another fundamental characteristic of the infinite nature of the Soul is the fact that '(this) is a single nature in a multitude of powers' (φύσεως γὰρ οὔσης μιᾶς ἐν δυνάμεσι πλείοσιν).⁴¹ This means that the Soul is and remains one, although it manifests itself in a multiplicity of powers, such as, in the case of the human soul, the power of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, touching, which allow it to 'apprehend (things) through the senses' (τὴν δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι δύναμιν).⁴²

We have come now to the end of the ascent from the lowest to the highest powers, that is, the Intellect and the One. As we have said above, for Plotinus the Intellect is identical with its own objects of thought, that is, the Platonic ideas that form the so called 'intelligible world'; as a consequence, what Plotinus says of the Intellect also applies to the intelligible world and vice versa. In *Ennead II 9 [33] 8 25-26* Plotinus defines the intelligible world as a 'marvellous power indeed' (δύναμις δὲ θαυμαστῆ), which is so great that it cannot remain confined to its own

³⁷ See also Plotinus, *Ennead IV 3 [27] 29. 29; 6 [41] 3. 38-46, 58-60.*

³⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4 [28] 5. 8; 8 [6] 7. 16; Plotinus, Ennead V 1 (10) 1. 32-33; 3 [49] 3. 14-15, 35-40; 4. 1-10; 8 [31] 10. 42; Plotinus, Ennead VI 6 [34] 18. 25-26; 7 [38] 35. 32-33.*

³⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 3 [27] 8. 35-38.*

⁴⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 8 (6) 5. 25-27.* See also Plotinus, *Ennead II 9 [33] 2. 15; 4. 15-17; 17. 19-20; Plotinus, Ennead III 2 (47) 5. 23-25; Plotinus, Ennead IV 3 [27] 10. 29-30; 8 [6] 2. 50-53; 4. 1-10; Plotinus, Ennead V 1 [10] 2. 38-40; Plotinus, Ennead VI 7 [38] 8. 29-32.*

⁴¹ Plotinus, *Ennead II 9 [33] 2. 6.*

⁴² Plotinus, *Ennead I 1 [53] 7. 9.* See also Plotinus, *Ennead I 8 [51] 14. 34; Plotinus, Ennead III 4 [15] 6. 23-30; Plotinus, Ennead IV 3 [27] 23. 35-40; 7 [2] 4. 7; 8¹. 1-9; 8 [6] 5. 29; 9 [8] 3. 10-22; Plotinus, Ennead V 3 [49] 7. 7-9; Plotinus, Ennead VI 2 [43] 5. 17; 3 [44] 17. 27-31; 7 [38] 7. 11; 9 [9] 8. 24-29.*

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boundaries but must of necessity transcend them and generate another reality (the Soul).⁴³ If the term 'intelligible world' describes the Intellect as object of its own thinking activity, the term 'Intellect' describes it as thinking subject that thinks of itself. In *Ennead VI 8* [39] 17-18-21 Plotinus clearly defines the Intellect as 'power' of the One, from which it has come into existence; he says:

But if the Principle (is) before the Intellect, (the Principle is) indeed adjacent to that entity which is endowed with reason (that is, the Intellect) and this one, of which we are (now) talking, will in turn be in line with the Principle and will participate in it and will desire what the Principle (wants) and will be the power of that (καὶ δύναμις ἐκείνου).⁴⁴

As Plotinus explains in the *Ennead V 2* (11) 1-14-16, the power of the Intellect is essentially a creative power,⁴⁵ which, 'by pouring forth (its) mighty power' (δύναμιν προχέας πολλήν), generates the Soul, that in turn could be regarded as the power emanated by the Intellect, in the same sense as the Intellect was the power emanated by the One and from the One.⁴⁶ Finally, given that Plotinus equates the Intellect and the Being, because the Intellect comes into existence when the Being becomes aware of itself, thus being able to say 'I am what I am',⁴⁷ the Being too is power, as Plotinus points out in several passages of the *Enneads*.⁴⁸

The top of the hierarchy of beings has now been reached; it is time to examine how the concept of 'power' is linked with the One, the first hypostasis of Plotinus' metaphysical system. Among the several passages of the *Enneads* that deal with this topic, *III 8* [30] 10-1-2 seems to be the clearest; Plotinus writes: 'What is then (the One)? It is the power of all things (δύναμις τῶν πάντων), without which neither would all beings exist nor would the Intellect (be) the original and universal life'.⁴⁹

⁴³ Plotinus, *Ennead II 9* [33] 8. 25-26; 12. 29-30; 17. 1-15; Plotinus, *Ennead III 2* [47] 2. 1-11; 7 [45] 3. 1-11; 5. 23; Plotinus, *Ennead V 3* (49) 5. 31-35; 8 [31] 4. 44; 9. 14-18; 9 [5] 6. 7-9; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 2* [43] 21. 6-11.

⁴⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 8* [39] 17. 18-21. See also Plotinus, *Ennead III 8* [30] 11. 1-2; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 2* [43] 20. 13-14; 7 [38] 15. 20-22; 17. 32-33; 35. 20; 8 [39] 18. 17-36.

⁴⁵ See also Plotinus, *Ennead VI 7* [38] 15. 18; 40. 13-14.

⁴⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead V 2* (11) 1. 14-16. See also A. Smith, *Dunamis in Plotinus and Porphyry* (n. 7), 68-73.

⁴⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead V 2* (11) 1.

⁴⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead III 7* (45) 6. 33-36; Plotinus, *Ennead V 5* [32] 5. 21-23; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 4* [22] 3. 7-10.

⁴⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead III 8* [30] 10. 1-2, 23-28. See also Plotinus, *Ennead II 4* [12] 15. 17-20; 9 [33] 9. 37-39; Plotinus, *Ennead III 2* [47] 7. 13-15; Plotinus, *Ennead IV 8* [6] 6; Plotinus, *Ennead V 1* [10] 1. 21; 7. 9-13; 3 [49] 16. 1-5; 4 [7] 1. 24-26, 33-37; 5 [32] 5. 10. 5-6, 12, 21-22; 12. 39; 6 [24] 4. 18-20; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 2* [43] 3. 19-33; 4 [22] 10. 15-24; 5 [23] 9. 31-37; 7 [38] 8. 13-14; 23. 1-4; 32. 6-9; 40. 54-56; 8 [39] 7. 6-10; 9. 3-4, 44; 10. 33; 20. 30-33; 21. 1-5; 9 [9] 5. 33-38; 6. 8-12.

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The examination carried out so far has shown that the concept of ‘power’ (δύναμις) has two antithetical meanings in Plotinus’ philosophy: in a first sense, this word means ‘potentiality’; in a second, ‘potency’ or ‘power’. How can this disparity of meanings be explained? We think that the answer to this question can be found in *Ennead VI 7* [38] 9 38-46. In this passage Plotinus explains that the more the power emanated by the One strays from the One, the more it weakens, that is, it loses its own actuality, which diminishes more and more until it stops and turns into pure potentiality when it reaches the level of the primordial matter. The creation of the sensible world represents then the first step of the opposite process, by which the emanated power, which in the primordial matter is reduced to pure potentiality, gradually regains its actuality: first in the sensible beings, second in the souls of human beings and, finally, in the souls and intellects of the stars and of the wise men, who, having reached the divine realm of the One, have also brought the power emanated from it back to its source. The circle is now closed and the process completed: the power emanated by the One has, in a way, become again ‘power of the One’, ultimate source of every being (δύναμις τῶν πάντων).

This argument also explains why in several passages of the *Enneads* Plotinus points out that the δύναμις of the Intellect and the One is not ‘potentiality’, which needs an actual being in order to move from potentiality to actuality, but pure ‘power’ or ‘potency’, that is, a power which is actual, a ‘power to do something’.⁵⁰

According to Plotinus, even the matter of the Intellect and the Soul, which he calls ‘intelligible matter’, is not potentiality but actuality; why? Because, as Plotinus says in *Ennead II 5* [25] 3 13-14, ‘at that stage even what performs the function of matter is form, since even the Soul, which is form, could perform the function of matter in relation to another being’ (ἢ καὶ τὸ ὡς ὕλη ἐκεῖ εἶδος ἐστίν, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ εἶδος ὄν πρὸς ἕτερον ἂν εἴη ὕλη).⁵¹

Finally, it must be pointed out that the One is not affected by the vicissitudes of the power emanated by it, on the basis of the principle (expressed by Plotinus in *Ennead V 4* [7] 2 21-39) according to which there is in the One an active power that remains in it and makes the One what it is and another which is emanated by the One and progressively strays from the One, generating all the beings that come into existence from it.

The meaning of ‘mass’ in the Enneads

Let us now analyze briefly the concept of mass (τὸ ὄγκος) in the *Enneads*. Plotinus does not dedicate a specific *Ennead* to this concept, but deals with it in

⁵⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead III 8* [30] 11. 1-2; Plotinus, *Ennead V 3* [49] 5. 30-48; 15. 30-35; 9 [5] 5. 1-2; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 7* [38] 37. 10.

⁵¹ Plotinus, *Ennead II 5* [25] 3. 13-14. See also *ibid.*, 4 [12] 2-5.

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relation to other aspects of his philosophy. A short definition of it can be found in *Ennead II 4* [12] 11 2-3, where Plotinus defines mass as the principle that contains any form (τοῦ ὑποδεξομένου πάντα. Οὐκοῦν ὁ ὄγκος). The concept of mass, Plotinus says, is inseparable from that of magnitude (τὸ μέγα or τὸ μέγεθος), because if mass were lacking in magnitude, it could contain no form (μέγεθος δήπου. Εἰ δὲ ἀμέγεθες, οὐδ' ὅπου δέξεται ἔχει).⁵² If mass were deprived of the form of magnitude, it would be reduced to be amorphous matter, which Plotinus duly calls 'the phantom of a mass' (φάντασμα ὄγκου).⁵³ At a higher degree of perfection mass manifests itself as physical magnitude (τὰ αἰσθητὰ μεγέθη)⁵⁴ and as the substratum of the time interval (τὸ διάστημα) during which a motion occurs.⁵⁵

Finally, mass coincides with man's physical body (ὄγκος ἡμῶν⁵⁶ or σώματος, ὄγκου ὄντος⁵⁷). But, apart from these scattered definitions, Plotinus identifies the fundamental characteristic of mass by differentiating it from the superior hypostases, the Soul, the Intellect and the One. What differentiates mass from them is its divisibility into a multiplicity of parts separable from each other. As a consequence, neither can the Soul,⁵⁸ nor the Intellect,⁵⁹ nor the One,⁶⁰ be a 'mass of a certain magnitude' (οὐκ ὄγκος τις οὐδὲ ποσόν), because they are simple, unitary, indivisible and transcendent entities.

Conclusions

Let us recapitulate the results of our examination, before applying them to the exegesis of *Ennead II 9* [33] 17 9-10. The paper has shown that the ideas of 'magnitude' and 'power' (but the same thing could be said with regard to the other ideas that compose the intelligible world) are regarded by Plotinus as 'shaping powers', which emanate their own power of giving things a form until, through the mediation of the Soul, it reaches the amorphous primordial matter; here, it becomes a *ratio seminalis*, a form which is able to give matter a specific, though impermanent, shape. On the basis of this reconstruction of Plotinus' metaphysics, a new light can be shed on *Ennead II 9* [33] 17 9-10.

⁵² Plotinus, *Ennead II 4* [12] 11. 1-4; see also Plotinus, *Ennead V 8* [31] 2. 27-28.

⁵³ Plotinus, *Ennead III 6* [26] 7. 13.

⁵⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 2* [1] 1. 15.

⁵⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead III 7* [45] 8. 44-45.

⁵⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 7* [2] 5. 20.

⁵⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 7* [2] 7. 24.

⁵⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead IV 7* [2] 12. 15-16. See also Plotinus, *Ennead IV 2* [1] 1. 47-50; 2. 16-18; 9 [8] 1. 7-8; 4. 9-13; Plotinus, *Ennead VI 1* [42] 25. 31; 4 [22] 5. 17-22; 13. 22-26.

⁵⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 4* [22] 12. 45-46; 5 [23] 12. 5-7; 7 [38] 14. 10-12.

⁶⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead VI 1* [42] 26. 27-35; 5 [23] 11. 1-21; 9 [9] 6. 30-32; 9.4.

What Plotinus wants to say in this passage is that in the intelligible world (ἐκεῖ) the idea of magnitude is powerful (τὸ μέγα ἐν δυνάμει) because it is one and the same with its own ‘shaping power’, with which it is identical, participating to the highest degree in its formative force. The idea of magnitude never loses its own power of giving things a form even when it emanates it towards the inferior beings, because, Plotinus explains, in every being, the highest hypostases included, there is an active power that remains in the being that possesses it and another that departs from it towards what is different from the being itself.⁶¹ However, although the power which remains within the boundaries of the intelligible ideas never increases nor decreases, the power which the intelligible ideas emanate is subject to a process of progressive weakening the more it strays from its source, until it finally turns into a *ratio seminalis* when it reaches the level of the primordial matter. At this stage, the ‘shaping power’ of the *ratio seminalis* not only is not powerful enough to give matter a permanent and definitive form, but is in a certain way entrapped inside the very matter which it gives a form to, thus becoming a mass, that is, a σύνολος of matter and form provided with magnitude and divisible into a plurality of parts.

Therefore, that same magnitude that coincides with pure formative power in the intelligible world, manifests itself as mass endowed with physical, divisible, magnitude in the sensible world. The sensible dimension could then be regarded as the material manifestation of the intelligible one, or as a progressive materialization and ‘massification’ of it or, finally, as the progressive and final reduction of it to the rank of sensible image of itself.

⁶¹ Plotinus, *Ennead* V 4 [7] 2.

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