

Porphyry's Notion of Matter in the Light of Recent Discoveries

ed. Porphyry, *'On Principles and Matter': A Syriac Version of a Lost Greek Text with an English Translation, Introduction, and Glossaries*. Scientia Graeco-Arabica 34. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021.

[1] Philoponus, *Against Proclus* VI.14 (transl. by Share): *PM* §86:

Porphyry himself is a witness that this is true. Although he has previously stated that the world is said to be generated in that it is composed of matter and form, later, when commenting on the words "the god, taking over all that was visible, not at rest but moving in a discordant and disorderly manner", he, to quote his exact words, writes this:

"The making of the world and the creation of body are not the same thing, nor are the beginnings of body and of the world the same. For the world to come to be, both bodies and God must exist, for bodies to exist, there must be matter, God, and supervening form <...>"

While they (i.e. Atticus and Plutarch) assume that Matter possesses movement due to the discordant motion of Soul that is in it, they completely fail to differentiate (two things): one thing is the constitution of the world, and another is that of the bodies. For the constitution of the world as world has primary bodies as principles, while that of bodies as bodies has matter, form, and shapes. So, they assume that the words which Plato uttered about the constitution of the world refer to the constitution of bodies. And they and those who followed them were sized by great error, following opinions that are foreign to Plato's aim.

[2] Porphyry on Matter:

(§40) As these things have been defined in this way, first we will speak about Matter. That Matter is a principle seems good also to the Pythagoreans, to Socrates and Plato, to those who were after Plato, to the Stoics, and to Aristotle. Those who were after Plato called it "matter" (ύλη).

(§42) And the Stoics called it "substance" (οὐσία) and defined it as follows: substance is matter of everything. And in general, it is acknowledged by all of them that there is Matter which is passive and alterable and wholly and in all respects changeable. However, there is no unanimity on this question. For the Stoics consider (Matter) in the account of its essence to be changeable and becoming qualified, as nothing is associated with it, except in regard to how it exists. Thus, it should become apparent that quality is nothing else, except Matter. But in the way substance is, so is quality. And similarly about the rest.

(§45) Further, they say in general that it is unqualified, unspecified, and formless in its essence. Not as though there is a time when these (categories) are absent from it, but rather in the account of its essence it does not possess them, nor even a single particular quality. But even if in (our) intellect we differentiate it in its essence from qualities, we nonetheless say that it has them potentially.

(§47) Now, if someone says according to the first meaning that Matter in itself potentially possesses qualities, and together with them also forms and shapes, so that all these appear from it and come to completion, then the active (cause) is not necessary for the constitution of the activity. But it is proper that there be an active (cause) together with Matter if an activity is to take place. And if in the second way we say that these exist potentially in it (i.e. Matter), then we also exclude the active (cause). But this is absurd and does not follow the reason.

[3] Porphyry on First Principles:

(§36) In that case when the First Principles are reduced to two, it is necessary that they be opposite to each other. For this is also how some people before Plato taught. Some of them stated that principles of existing things are the hot and the cold, while others that they are the wet and the dry. One of them (stated that it is) Love and Victory (i.e. Strife). Still, others (said) that it is One and Many, or Even and Odd (number). This is Monad and Dyad, as the Pythagoreans said. All of them agreed that the First Principles were opposite to each other, though they differed (from each other) in that some of them considered them as secondary, some as primary, and some only as material.

(§37) However, it also seems good to us that, when the First Principles are reduced to two and are thus opposed to each other, one of them is like an active one and the other is like one that is affected by it. But it is necessary that these principles not originate from something else or from each other. And two of them that are characterised as being in primary opposition, because they are primary, cannot originate from something else, and because they are opposed, they cannot originate from each other. Those opposites in each of them exist in them by accident, in that they are generated things. And consequently, they originate from each other, while the primary ones do not. For if they had come to be or are coming to be, they would no longer be primary in the proper sense.

(§38–39) So, of two First Principles which are opposed to each other, as we said, one is active and the other is passive. The active one is God, and the passive one is Matter. And because He is the active (cause), it is necessary that He performs His actions in accordance with the Idea, Form, and Thought that are in Him. This made apparent to us that there is a third principle of existing things. These are, namely, the three First Principles of existing things: God, Matter, and First Ideas of existing things. God is the principle by which originally something was acted. The First Idea is the principle after the likeness of which something which was acted was acted. And Matter is the principle out of which originally some activity acted.

[4] Plotinus, Longinus, and the Middle Platonic Interpretations of the *Timaeus*:

(§94) With these arguments Severus precisely explained this passage, having shown that with these words Plato did not refer to Matter, and certainly not to the state of bodies, but rather to the formation and setting in order of the world from bodies. This is how it comes that we say that the opinion concerning the constitution of the world as world is one thing, and that concerning the constitution of the bodies as bodies from which the world appeared is another.

(§95) Our teacher Plotinus also shared this view, when he interpreted the *Timaeus*. Boethus, instead, who was followed by our teacher Longinus, thought that these words of Plato refer to Matter while he was explaining why Plato provided Matter with movability rather than with immovability and attributed creation to God.