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Philoponus' Notion of Prime Matter

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Philoponus' Notion of Prime Matter

Honors Thesis 3992

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Introduction¹

It has always proven a difficult task to distinguish exactly what it is that plays the role of prime matter in the ancient world and also to identify what prime matter's role is within the universe. Although the notion of matter in the ancient world is absolutely essential to the structure of the universe, it has always proven difficult to define. The Late Neoplatonists construct a view of prime matter, which combines the doctrine of Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonist Plotinus. This traditional view maintains that prime matter is the lowest layer of the physical realm and the substratum of the universe. It is entirely formless and also incorporeal. This is the view of prime matter that John Philoponus inherited from the ancient tradition² and had in mind when writing his book entitled *de Aeternitae Mundi contra Proclum*. In this book, Philoponus sets out his new definition of prime matter in which he completely discards the traditional notion. He states that prime matter is indefinite three-dimensional extension. It is important to understand Philoponus' motivation for changing the traditional notion of prime matter because even though he was educated at the Alexandrian school of Neoplatonism, he proclaimed to be a Christian and the pagan tradition assumed his writings to be written with the intent of proving various Christian doctrines. This assumption of intention effected and still effects the reception of his works and the amount of credibility attributed to him. In order to appreciate why Philoponus should be studied and read, it is important to recognize that his motivation for proposing a new notion of prime matter can be attributed to his dissatisfaction with the traditional notion. This dissatisfaction arose

¹ This paper is based on F. De Haas' book entitled *John Philoponus' New Definition of Prime Matter*

² From this point on the ancient tradition will be referred to as simply the 'tradition'. The ancient tradition refers to commonly accepted thoughts extending from Plato to the Late Neoplatonists

because there were many fundamental notions within the physical realm that traditional prime matter could not account for, not because the traditional notion failed to coincide with Philoponus' Christian beliefs.

Philoponus wrote the *contra Proclum* in 529 AD, the events of this year proved influential in the acceptance of his ideas. During this year, the Emperor Justinian closed Plato's Academy in Athens, this act resulted in resentment from the pagans toward the Christians. This resentment is clearly stated by Philoponus' opponent, who was writing about the same time as him, the pagan Neoplatonist, Simplicius. Simplicius felt that Philoponus was not a proper commentator of Aristotle, and that his writings were useless as far as philosophy was concerned. He also felt that Philoponus was writing solely for the purpose of condemning the pagan philosophers and alternatively, promoting Christianity. Simplicius expressed his feelings about Philoponus quite clearly:

But since this individual who gives himself the title of Grammarian clearly seeks once again to persuade his peers to think of the world as destructible and as created at a certain moment of time; since he flies up against those who show that the heavens are uncreated and indestructible; since he releases a great mud-bath of arguments against the claims of Aristotle – come, let us call the mighty Heracles to our aid, and let us get down to cleansing the filth which is contained in the arguments of our adversary³ (*in Cael* 119, 7-13)

Simplicius states that Philoponus is writing only to 'persuade his peers' and in the process defiles the philosophical tradition. He refers to Philoponus as 'the Grammarian', this is a derogatory term used to reflect the fact the Philoponus was a rhetorician. Given his occupation, Simplicius thought that Philoponus did not have the ability to be a proper commentator of Aristotle. The ironic thing about Simplicius' comments is that both he and Philoponus came to the same conclusion concerning prime matter, namely that it is

³ P. Hoffman 'Simplicius' Polemics', *Philoponus* (1987) p69. Translation Heiberg

three-dimensional extension. During Philoponus' life, he was completely rejected by the pagan philosophers, but after his death the Christians also abandoned his doctrines. In 680 AD, the church had him anathematized for his views concerning the Trinity.⁴ Philoponus was a Monophysite, which meant that he believed Christ to be of one nature, the combination of human and the divine. He did not accept the commonly held belief that Christ had two separate and distinct natures, human and divine. Late in his life, Philoponus became a Triphysite, believing that the Trinity was composed of three distinct gods. This was not a view considered by the church and led to his eventual expulsion from the church. Philoponus' ideas were not seen again until they were taken up in the Islamic world much later.⁵ It would not be until the Renaissance, when Galileo recognized him as one of the founders of the impetus theory, that Philoponus' ideas would be properly attributed to him in the Western world.⁶ This history reveals that due to Philoponus' professed belief in Christianity and the mistaken idea that he wrote only to support these beliefs, his writings were rejected and his influence was not acknowledged for centuries.

Henry Chadwick picks up the idea of Philoponus' Christian motivation again in modern scholarship. Chadwick writes that it was Philoponus' Christian beliefs that impelled him to challenge Proclus and write the *contra Proclum*, whereas this might be true concerning Philoponus' ideas about the eternity of the world it is certainly not the case for his ideas about prime matter. Chadwick also says that Philoponus was conscious of the fact that three dimensionality as prime matter was a 'new discovery' and he

⁴ R. Sorabji 'John Philoponus', *Philoponus* (1987) p1

⁵ *ibid.*, p1

⁶ *ibid.*, p1

thought this discovery could be useful for the logical problems of Christology.⁷

Chadwick also offers the suggestion that since Philoponus wrote the *contra Proclum* the same year that Justinian closed the Platonic school in Athens, he could have been writing to “lend a hand in support of his own party”.⁸ All of these approaches to Philoponus’ writings are misguided, they assume that Philoponus wrote for the sole purpose of defending his religion and completely ignore that he wrote because there was something fundamentally wrong with the accepted traditional notion.

The idea that Philoponus wrote the *contra Proclum* and developed his new account of prime matter to advance his Christian beliefs is proven incorrect simply by the fact that he did not need the notion of three dimensionality as prime matter to defend the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The pagan Neoplatonist Proclus tried to show that matter was eternal, because eternal matter renders an eternal cosmos. Proclus’ arguments against the generation of matter (the Christian doctrine) depend on the Aristotelian concept of *reductio ad infinitum*.⁹ This concept states that if matter were generated then that would require another matter, and the generation of this matter would require another matter, and so on *ad infinitum*. Philoponus attacks this concept by questioning whether matter needs another matter in order to be generated, for if it does not, then the cosmos is not eternal, i.e. matter was created.¹⁰ Philoponus begins his argument by giving reasons why matter does not need another matter as its substrate. He lists two reasons: “(1) because neither the form nor the composite need something like themselves (namely of form or composite) for them to come into being. (2) it is evident that things come into

⁷ H. Chadwick ‘Philoponus the Christian Theologian’, *Philoponus* (1987) p41

⁸ *ibid.*, p42

⁹ De Haas p281

being from a material cause *unlike* themselves”.¹¹ From (2), he states that prime matter, likewise, does not need a substrate of matter to come into being, instead, it needs a form. So, from this, prime matter is portrayed *not* as needing another matter to come into being, but as needing form. When argued this way the *reductio ad infinitum* cannot even get started.¹² Since there is no infinite regress, the Aristotelian proof for the eternity of matter is removed and along with it, the claim that since matter is eternal, so is the cosmos. Philoponus has defended the Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo* without even mentioning his new definition of prime matter. Therefore, it is obvious here that his motivations for writing a new account of prime matter were not based upon the desire to defend Christian doctrine, but something completely different. The viewpoint that Philoponus was writing solely to defend Christian notions takes away from what he was actually trying to do in redirecting the Neoplatonist view of prime matter.

Philoponus writings followed from a history of dissatisfaction with the traditional notion of prime matter, he felt that an incorporeal, formless prime matter could not account for any physical phenomena such as extension or division. This background information about Philoponus is essential for understanding his significance in the philosophical tradition and for identifying his motivation in writing the new definition of prime matter. This paper attempts to set out the traditional notion of prime matter, focusing especially on those passages believed to be predecessors of Philoponus’ new definition of prime matter. By developing the Neoplatonic notion of prime matter and unqualified body (proximate matter), it will become obvious that Philoponus’ definition

¹⁰ De Haas p7

¹¹ De Haas quote p282

¹² De Haas p283

directly follows from the Neoplatonic notion of unqualified body. Throughout the *contra Proclum* Philoponus presents many arguments against his definition of prime matter. It is by countering these arguments that he is able to present and defend his own notion of prime matter. In *contra Proclum* XI.7, Philoponus presents his arguments against the formlessness of prime matter. It is absolutely necessary for Philoponus that prime matter is proven to be informed, or his definition will suffer a major blow. In this essential argument, Philoponus' defense of his own definition of prime matter falters. However, even though Philoponus is not able to completely defend his definition, he points out some fundamental weaknesses of the traditional notion of prime matter and produces the arguments which ultimately render the traditional notion insufficient and useless.

Chapter One

Philoponus' Notion of Prime Matter

The notion of prime matter is attributed to certain texts from both Plato and Aristotle. In order to understand the traditional account of prime matter that Philoponus refutes, it is necessary to set out a basic account of that traditional notion. Many commentators refer to Plato's receptacle of the *Timaeus* as an analogical account of prime matter's characteristics (or lack of characteristics). The receptacle is the third principle introduced in Plato's account of the universe; he says describing the receptacle's nature is a difficult, but necessary task.

Not only does it [the receptacle] always receive all things, it has never in any way whatever taken on any characteristic similar to any of the things that enter it. Its nature is to be available for anything to make its impression upon, and it is modified, shaped and reshaped by the things that enter it.¹ (*Tim.* 50 b9-c4)

We also must understand that if the imprints are to be varied, with all the varieties there to see, this thing upon which the imprints are to be formed could not be well prepared for that role if it were not itself devoid of any of those characters that it is to receive from elsewhere. For if it resembled any of the things that enter it, it could not successfully copy their opposites or things of a totally different nature whenever it were to receive them. It would be showing its own face as well.² (*Tim.* 50 d5-e4)

The receptacle is described as something having no characteristics, or properties of its own, nor does it take on any of the characteristics of the things which enter it. Any properties of its own would interfere with the receptacle's perfect receptivity. This description of the receptacle greatly influenced the pagan commentators account of prime matter, especially in the idea that prime matter should be devoid of all characteristics of

¹ J. Cooper, ed. *Plato's Complete Works* (1997) Translation D. Zeyl

² *ibid.*, Translation D. Zeyl

its own. Although the account of Plato's receptacle was influential, Aristotle's search for a primary subject (*hupokeimenon prôton*) is the basis for the traditional account of prime matter³. Aristotle wanted to find the most fundamental subject that properties inhere in, within a body. For example, the matter of a bed is metal; the matter carries the bed's properties, such as hardness and greyness. The metal is made up of four elements: earth, air, fire and water. Aristotle is looking for a subject which underlies the four elements, this would be the most fundamental subject. This most fundamental subject, or prime matter, has proven difficult to identify or describe. This is partially due to the fact that Aristotle never specified *what* prime matter was, within the physical realm. However, both ancient and modern commentators have made guesses as to what Aristotle meant, or what he should have meant by this concept. The following texts have been comprised to give an outline of Aristotle's concept of prime matter.

Or, on the contrary, does what *is* include earth as well as fire, whereas what *is not* is matter – the matter of earth and fire alike? And again, is the matter of each different? Or is it the same, since otherwise they would not come-to-be reciprocally out of one another, i.e. contraries out of contraries? For these things-fire, earth, water, air, - are characterized by the contraries. Perhaps the solution is that their matter is in one sense the same.⁴(Arist. *GC* I.3, 319a29-b4)

We must reckon as a principle and as primary the matter which underlies, though it is inseparable from, the contrary qualities; for the hot is not matter for the cold nor the cold for the hot, but the *substratum* is matter for them both. Thus as principles we have *firstly* that which is potentially perceptible body, *secondly* the contrarities (I mean, e.g., heat and cold), and *thirdly* fire, water and the like. For these bodies change into one another.⁵ (Arist. *GC* II.1, 329a24-35)

³ However, it is still a matter of debate whether Aristotle intended a notion of prime matter, or whether it is required to complete his philosophy.

⁴ These two texts suggested by R. Sorabji in *Matter, Space and Motion* (1988) p11n28. Translation H. Joachim, my emphasis: J. Barnes ed, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (1984).

⁵ *ibid.*, translation H. Joachim, his emphasis

In these passages, Aristotle is clearly talking about the substratum for the elements, and he suggests here that their matter is 'in one sense the same'. He also states here that the elements must have a common substrate in order to account for elemental change, or 'coming-to-be reciprocally out of one another'. He includes one clue about prime matter here; the first substrate is 'potentially perceptible body', which means that it is nothing in actuality.

Aristotle's describes the thinking part of the soul in his *De Anima*, this description possibly indicates certain characteristics, necessary for a substratum.

The thinking part of the soul must therefore be, while impassible, capable of receiving the form of an object; that is, must be potentially identical in character with its object without being in the object.⁶ (Arist. *DA* III.4 429a15-18)

Thought is in a sense potentially whatever is thinkable, though actually it is nothing until it has thought. What it (thought) thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing-table on which as yet nothing actually stands written.⁷ (Arist. *DA* III.4 429b31-430a2)

The thinking part of the soul, here, can be said to have the same nature as the traditional commentators give prime matter. This same nature can also be seen in Plato's receptacle. The commentators state that prime matter is not anything in actuality, but only pure potentiality and the example given of the writing-table could be used as an explanatory device for the potentiality of prime matter. Even though Aristotle does not state the similarity between the thinking part of the soul and prime matter, the commentators certainly used a similar description for traditional prime matter.

Aristotle's account of how one is suppose to think of the first subject is explained in the *Metaphysics*.

⁶ *ibid.*, translation J.A. Smith

⁷ *ibid.*, translation J.A. Smith

When all else is taken away evidently nothing but matter remains. For of the other elements some are affections, products, and capacities of bodies, while length, breadth, and depth are quantities and not substances. For a quantity is not a substance; but the substance is rather that to which these belong primarily. [But when length, breadth and depth are taken away we see nothing left unless there is something determined (*horizomemon*) by these]. So that to those who consider the question thus matter alone must seem to be substance.⁸ (Arist. *Metaph.* VII.3 1029a11-20)

In order to think about the first substrate, one must strip away everything, each layer of reality, to see what is left. Aristotle states that when everything is stripped away, nothing but matter remains, but what is this matter that he refers to? It has been suggested that what is left, when everything else is stripped away is length, breadth, and depth, or extension.⁹ There is 'nothing left, unless there is something determined by these' (length, breadth, and depth), so from this, what is left is pure extension. F. De Haas presents a contradictory interpretation of this passage. He states that in this passage, Aristotle is arguing against a different view from his own, which states that the dimensions (length, breadth, and depth) have a claim to the title of substance. In order to prove this claim wrong, Aristotle intentionally points out that the dimensions are not substances, they are quantities. In this passage, matter is substance and the dimensions are the first determination of matter. This interpretation of the passage seems the most likely because it corresponds to Aristotle's other passages concerning prime matter, which give prime matter no characteristics or individuation of its own.

The early Neoplatonist Plotinus is possibly responsible for giving Philoponus an idea about what prime matter could be. Plotinus is arguing for his own view of matter, it

⁸ *ibid.*, translation W.D. Ross; Bracketed text indicates translation by De Haas (pg61), as this translation suits the explanation intended

⁹ This interpretation is explained by R. Sorabji *Matter, Space, and Motion* (1988) pg 7, who attributes it to Simplicius

must be without any determination or that would interfere with its ability to be always potentially everything in the universe. He creates an objection to his view by putting it in the mouth of a member of his audience.

This, then [that which is needed to receive all forms] is the volume. But if volume, then presumably magnitude. But if it is without magnitude, it will not even have anywhere to receive them. And if it were without magnitude, what would it contribute, if it contributes neither form and quality, nor to dimension and magnitude, which, wherever it occurs, is thought to come to bodies from their matter. And in general, just as acting and making and times and movements are things that exist without having a foundation of matter in them, so there is no need either for bodies, which come first, to have matter. They can each be what they are as wholes, and be more complex when their structure is produced by the mixture of a larger number of forms. So this “without magnitude” of matter is just an empty name¹⁰ (Plotinus *Enneads* II.4 [12] 11.3-13)

Plotinus’ audience member does not have much time for Plotinus’ account of matter, he feels that this notion of matter is not able to contribute anything and is an empty word. This audience member describes the same concerns about prime matter’s accountability as Philoponus does. Plotinus’ opponent says that matter should contribute extension to bodies. Philoponus’ new definition of prime matter performs exactly this function, in fact it is extension. Plotinus replies that matter is not an empty word, but is something underlying which cannot have any determinate characteristics of its own. Although Plotinus presents an excellent defense of his matter, it is possible that Philoponus took the idea of extension as matter from the audience member.

Philoponus sets out the traditional notion of prime matter in the *contra Proclum* XI.2, before presenting his new definition of prime matter. He enumerates the characteristics of the traditional first level of matter as follows: it is “(1) one in number, (2) the common substrate and matter of all physical forms, (3) in itself unchangeable, and

¹⁰ Translation R. Sorabji, *Matter Space and Motion* pg 31

(4) incorporeal, even entirely formless”.¹¹ Given, what is identified above as the traditional notion of prime matter, it is obvious that Philoponus sets out a clear and accurate description of the tradition. He then proceeds to set out the arguments by which the proponents of the traditional view arrive at their conclusions for prime matter. According to Philoponus, the tradition argues that change is not possible without one unchangeable, underlying substrate. An analogical example is given of a bronze statue maintaining the same matter and substrate throughout the recasting process. Bronze itself remains unshaped (or formless) because it does not have, as a constitutive part of its nature, any of the shapes it receives. It is in this same way that the matter of underlying bodies remains different from the forms received. The matter must be formless, incorporeal and unchangeable or during the process of change, bodies would change into non-being instead of other bodies.¹² This construction of the traditional notion of prime matter produces a completely formless, unchangeable substrate which receives all forms, but does not take any of them as a part of its nature. The account of prime matter given here is exactly what the Neoplatonic tradition of Philoponus’ time held prime matter to be.

Philoponus finds this definition of prime matter, held by his contemporaries, unsatisfactory and useless. He believes that matter should be able to account for physical phenomena such as elemental change, division and volume. Philoponus tries to show in *contra Proclum* XI.3, how one could arrive at the opposite conclusions (that prime matter is not incorporeal and formless) by looking at elemental change. As his opponents have

¹¹ De Haas pg 29, interpretation of *contra Proclum* XI.2

¹² De Haas pg 29-30, interpretation of *contra Proclum* XI.2 410.9-412.11

done above, he tries to identify whether there is a need for a first substrate which is formless, indefinite and unchangeable, in order to account for change:

In the change of bodies into each other the three-dimensional is seen to remain unchanged. Eg. Water, when changing into air, does not change *qua* body. For the three dimensional, the substrate of the water, remains unchanged as such even when the water changes into air. Neither do we see the three-dimensional coming from the non-three-dimensional, nor the non-three-dimensional from the three-dimensional. For never did a body change and become incorporeal nor, conversely, did anything formerly incorporeal become body. So the three dimensional, or body generally, is unchangeable *qua* body.¹³ (Philop. *contra Proclum* XI.3 412.17-28)

Philoponus shows here that there is no need for the concept of an incorporeal, formless substrate, in order to account for elemental change. The three-dimensional remains unchanged during elemental change, just as his example of the substrate of water (i.e. the three dimensional) remaining unchanged during an elemental change into air. Philoponus asks the question: since three-dimensionality remains throughout an elemental change, why is there still a need for some incorporeal substrate? The three-dimensional itself performs the task of remaining unchanged throughout an elemental change so there is no need for a further substrate. He does admit that if there ever were change observed from the three-dimensional to the non-three-dimensional then there might be a reason to allow for an incorporeal substrate, but since nothing like this has been observed within the physical realm, there is no reason to assume an incorporeal substrate. Philoponus proceeds to ask the following question: since there is not some incorporeal substrate underlying the three dimensional, why can't three-dimensionality be considered the first substrate of all things? He concludes this section by claiming that since the three-

¹³ Translation De Haas

dimensional does not change, then no further substrate is needed. Hence, he promotes the three-dimensional to the level of first substrate (or prime matter).

The three-dimensional is considered to be a body of types, by the tradition. In order to properly defend his new definition of prime matter, Philoponus must give a detailed account of what type of body the three-dimensional is. He must make it clear that this type of body is not the composite of form and matter.

By 'matter as such' and 'body as such' I do not mean the universal, in a way generated, and studied only in our thought and by reason. No I mean what is in existence and has already become a part or even an element of the composite, though according to its own definition it is free from any of the qualities which it is able to receive one after another. So this I call 'body as such': that which is determined by the three dimensions, because in itself it is neither warm nor cold, heavy nor light; nor does it receive any such further determination according to the characteristic definition of its nature, so as to be called a heavy body or a warm body. Let 'body as such' be understood in this sense everywhere.¹⁴
(Philop. *contra Proclum* XI.3 414.5-17)

Here, Philoponus identifies what type of matter, or body, he is concerned with. It is not the universal concept of matter which is only studied by our thoughts, but a concrete part of a composite. This is the type of matter which is part of an actual physical entity, it is able to account for the physical phenomena that Philoponus wishes. Philoponus presents an extremely specific definition of 'body as such', it is only 'that which is determined by the three dimensions', it has no qualities or characteristics of its own. The type of body described here is distinctly different from the type of body which is a composite of matter and form, this type of body is pure extensionality. After Philoponus states his definition above, he reiterates his conclusion that his 'body as such' is prime matter.

Let us summarize Philoponus' definition and in turn, give the consequences of it on the traditional notion of prime matter. Philoponus is dissatisfied with the traditional

notion and posits a prime matter which is able to account for physical phenomena such as elemental change. This notion of prime matter is a type of body, that which is determined by the three-dimensions. It is not the type of body which is a composite of matter and form, it is only pure extensionality with no definite size. Philoponus' definition of prime matter is therefore, indefinite three-dimensional extension. Philoponus and the tradition held that the three-dimensional belonged to the category of quantity within Aristotle's scheme of categories. By stating that the three-dimensional is prime matter, Philoponus moves something which inheres in the category of quantity (the three-dimensional) into the category of substance (prime matter). So, for Philoponus, quantities are now substantial. This is an extremely different view than that described by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* VII.3 above. In that passage, Aristotle was extremely careful to state that the three-dimensions must remain in the category of quantity, while only matter is in the category of substance. For Aristotle, quantities are not substantial. This movement of categories represents an extreme diversion from the Aristotelian categories, and subsequently Aristotelian prime matter. Another resultant from Philoponus' new definition is that three-dimensionality (a form) is now considered to be a substrate (or matter). Philoponus must address the question of how a form can underlie another form. The answer Philoponus gives to this question and the one above are presented in Chapter Three. It is obvious from these questions raised, that Philoponus' new definition offers a significant diversion from the traditional account of prime matter.

¹⁴ Translation De Haas

Chapter Two

The Neoplatonic Account of Unqualified Body: Is Philoponus' Definition Completely Original?

The pagan Neoplatonists conceive of a level in the physical realm called unqualified body. This level is remarkably similar to Philoponus' new definition of prime matter. Both of these notions seem to develop out of dissatisfaction with the traditional notion's ability to account for physical phenomena such as elemental change and division. In the *contra Proclum* XI.1, Philoponus sets out his opponents' intricate view concerning the bottom layers of the physical world. It is summarized as follows:

“The first substrate is incorporeal, formless matter, also designated as prime matter. Many people maintain that this matter is also eternal, because it is devoid of all generation, corruption or any change whatsoever.

Coupled with quantity this incorporeal matter constitutes ‘the three dimensional (*to trikhê diastaton*), also designated as unqualified body, body spoken of as such, or second substrate after matter.

This body-as such, defined by the three dimensions, is a bulk undetermined as to size; the differentiae of the large and small provide further determination.....

Most Stoics refer to ‘the three-dimensional’ when they speak of matter.

When quality supervenes on this unqualified body, the nature of the elements is constituted. For instance, when warm and dry supervene, fire comes into being; warm and wet generate air, and so on.

The four elements are not matter as such, but relative to the composite bodies which come into being when the four elements combine. These composites in their turn become matter in relation to other things.”¹

Philoponus starts here by stating the accepted view of the tradition concerning prime matter, it is incorporeal, formless, and eternal. However, he goes on to add that when this incorporeal, first substrate is coupled with quantity, it becomes the three dimensional, which he synonymously refers to as unqualified body, the familiar ‘body as such’, and

¹ Summary of *contra Proclum* XI.1 407.23-409.20 and 409.20-410.1; summarized by De Haas, his emphasis

the second substrate of matter. This level of the universe identified by the pagan Neoplatonists as 'unqualified body', is Philoponus' prime matter. Unqualified body, as described here, is undetermined as to size and when coupled with quality, constitutes the nature of the elements. It is also the substratum of the elements, and the level of the universe which is one level up from prime matter.

The texts of pagan Neoplatonists reveal that Philoponus gives an accurate reconstruction of Neoplatonic doctrine. The Neoplatonist, Syrianus sets out an account of unqualified body and states what the notion consists of, and what it should account for within the physical realm.

If someone denied that [the limits of body] are substances, [Aristotle] says, we would not know what substance is. For neither is 'whiteness' nor whitening substance, but the former is an affection of the substance, the latter a movement. Nor is 'being to the right' or a so-called relation substance; nor health nor the accounts of them, but one is a disposition of substance, the others are signifying sounds. Therefore all these are in a substrate and none of them exists on its own. Water, fire, air and earth are not substances in virtue of the unqualified body, which as we say remains in a variety of changes.² (Syrian. *in Metaph.* III.5 1001b28-29, 49.8-17)

In this passage, Syrianus states that unqualified body can be defined as the limits of body (i.e. length, breadth and depth, or the three dimensional). He goes on to state that the elements, earth, air, fire and water, have substance in virtue of the quantity, unqualified body. Quantities, such as the three-dimensional or unqualified body, are now substantial. This is markedly different from what Aristotle states in *Metaphysics* VII.3 above. Aristotle is extremely careful to say that only matter is substantial. The dimensions, or in this case unqualified body, are not substantial, they are quantities. As stated earlier, Philoponus makes the same diversion from Aristotelian thought. It is easy to see why

² Translation De Haas pg 83, his emphasis

Philoponus felt justified in making this diversion; his predecessors had already made the same suggestion. Syrianus also states that unqualified body remains ‘in a variety of changes’, which can be assumed to indicate elemental change. It seems that in the Neoplatonic universe, unqualified body is able to account for the physical phenomena that Philoponus wants his *prime matter* to account for.

The Neoplatonist Proclus picks up this definition of unqualified body from his master Syrianus. He further clarifies the definition when he lists the ten manifestations of Limit and the Unlimited in his work *in Parmenides*. In both lists he places unqualified body in the position between prime matter and the qualities of the elements. The list of Limit-itself defines unqualified body as the substratum of the universe, and in the list of Unlimited-itself, unqualified body is defined as being divisible to infinity.³ Proclus places unqualified body in the next to last position in the universe, and in doing so, unqualified body assumes the role of primary substrate instead of traditional prime matter. In the list of Limit-itself, Proclus indicates that unqualified body is identified as the substratum of the universe, and that it is the first level of the universe that exhibits extension.⁴ In other words, it is the first level in the universe that can account for physical phenomena (extension and elemental change). Another text from *in Parmenides* states once again that something actual is desired to represent the substance of the elements.

For if you consider in itself that unqualified substratum of bodies which is between matter and the numerous proximate forms, you will find that it also has Being and Form and Otherness and Sameness. How could it be, without Being? How could it *have* three dimensions, without division? And how could it hold together without Sameness? But likeness and Unlikeness are not in it, for it is

³ *in Parm.* 1119.9-11, 1123.11-14, De Haas pg 78-79

⁴ *in Parm.* 1123.11-14

without qualities; these [Likeness and Unlikeness] are found in things already qualified. It is true that it has Motion and Rest – Motion, because it is in constant change, and Rest since it never goes outside its appropriate receptacle.⁵ (Procl. in *Parm.* 735.33-736.8)

Proclus clearly states here that unqualified body actually *is*, it has three dimensions and it is in constant change. These are the things that Proclus and his predecessors think necessary for the notion of unqualified body to consist. Because of the fact that it consists of these things, it should be able to account for physical phenomena and act as the substratum of the elements. These requirements are exactly what Philoponus wants his prime matter to account for.

Given the traditional account described above concerning unqualified body, it seems that Philoponus' prime matter directly follows from this Neoplatonic concept. Both notions point to unqualified body, or the three-dimensions, as that which subsists through elemental change. Both accounts also claim that the three-dimensional, which is in the category of quantity, is a substance. However, there are quite a few differences between the two notions. One difference between the two is that the Neoplatonists carefully point out that the unqualified substratum, one level above prime matter, *has* three dimensions, or *has* form. Philoponus states that his prime matter *is* three-dimensions, or *is* form, and therefore provokes the criticism that a form cannot underlie forms. The most important variation is that the pagan Neoplatonists maintain the traditional incorporeal, formless substrate as prime matter, the level below unqualified body. Philoponus completely discards the traditional notion of prime matter and simply moves unqualified body, or the three-dimensional, to the level of prime matter. Philoponus was not satisfied that *unqualified body* account for physical phenomena,

⁵ Translation G.R Morrow, J. Dillon, *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, (1987) 111

instead he insists that *prime matter* account for these things. Philoponus does not seem to give a reason why it must be *prime matter* that accounts for elemental change instead of unqualified body. It is possible that he is thinking of Aristotle's *GC* II.1⁶, which states that matter must underlie and act as a substratum for elemental change. If *matter* must account for elemental change, then Philoponus has a reason to claim that unqualified body is insufficient to play the role of substratum in elemental change; prime matter must play that role. If Philoponus is thinking of this Aristotelian text, he never refers to it in this context within his writings. Of course, Philoponus had many reasons for discarding the traditional notion of prime matter even if he does not properly defend all of those reasons. Since no one in the tradition had been able to give an account of prime matter, and since traditional prime matter was not actually anything in the physical realm, Philoponus was able to turn to something completely familiar, three-dimensional extension, and give it the title of prime matter⁷. However, it is important to take into account that Philoponus never used this defense for himself. Philoponus' defense for some of these problems is discussed in the next chapter.

The similarity between unqualified body and Philoponus' prime matter shows that when Philoponus set out to define prime matter, he did not have to look any farther than Neoplatonic unqualified body. The use of the three-dimensional in order to account for physical phenomena is not highly original. However, Philoponus is the first to place unqualified body at the level of prime matter and in doing so he gets rid of an essentially useless notion to which the tradition clings. It has been suggested that the pagan

⁶ Quoted above, pg 8

⁷ I would like to thank Professor Sorabji for his suggestion of this defense Philoponus could have made for himself

Neoplatonists kept the traditional notion, even though it was rendered useless, because in this notion there remained the only remnants of Plato's receptacle in the *Timaeus*. The traditional notion of prime matter also had to be maintained because it was the only thing caused by the One alone, without any of the other causes participating.⁸ This notion of prime matter was like the One: eternal, unchanging and indefinite. In order to maintain the original structure of the universe, traditional prime matter had to remain untouched. Even though Philoponus had many reasons to abolish this type of prime matter, he still must offer convincing arguments in order to do so.

⁸ De Haas pg 289

Problems With Philoponus' Account

Philoponus presents his arguments against the formlessness of matter in the *contra Proclum* XI.7, especially 425,25-428,5. Philoponus must prove that prime matter cannot be formless in order to completely discard the traditional notion in favor of an informed prime matter. He summarizes the tradition's objection to an informed prime matter as follows: (1) prime matter must be formless, but the three-dimensional is not formless, it is a form itself (2) if the three-dimensional is prime matter then a form underlies forms (3) since it is absurd to say that a form underlies forms and since prime matter must be formless, three-dimensionality cannot be prime matter. Philoponus, in turn attacks the tradition by saying that the absolute formlessness of matter is merely a postulate and not a proof. However, he is aware that the tradition provides an argument for the formlessness of matter which says that if prime matter is to receive all forms without exception, then it cannot be characterized by any of them. If matter were to be informed then this would interfere with its perfect receptivity. Nevertheless, Philoponus simply says in response that this is not a convincing argument and a proof is not given by the tradition for the formlessness of matter.¹ The text is worth quoting in full, because the rest of the argument Philoponus presents here against the formlessness of matter indicates another discrepancy in his argument.

We can say, to solve this difficulty, it is a postulate (*aitêma*), not a proof (*apodexis*). For if it was impossible on the whole for something having a form (or imbued with form²) to underlie another form and to be, itself matter, then one

¹ De Haas pg 252

² De Haas' suggestion for the translation of *eidopepoiêmenai*

must agree that the common matter (*koinên hulên*) of all forms is certainly formless. And now (for all) generation, both natural and artificial, (is) not formless but informed matter³ (i.e. matter imbued with form) for its completed product. Wood, which is informed (*eidopepoiêmēna*), becomes (*ginetai*) the matter of the carpenter's tools (*skeuôn*) and similarly the bronze of the metal-worker.⁴ (*contra Proclum* XI.7 426.4-15)

It is in agreement the three-dimensional (*trikhê diastaton*) and unqualified body (*apoiōv soma*), if not prime matter, is at any rate second substrate (*deuteron hupokeimenon*) and proximate matter for all physical forms. For on the one hand the matter must not have a form which it is the matter of. For bronze has no forms which it accepts (i.e. receives) according to the *logos* of essence.....At any rate, one may call all matter formless (because) it does not have anything it receives. And it is not a necessity that (matter) is deprived of form in every way, if all proximate matter as far as, and (including?) the three-dimensional has a form (*eidopepoiêtai*) (i.e. is imbued with form).⁵ (*contra Proclum* XI.7 426.21-427.5)

If such a thing [matter] belongs to the things that *are* at all, there must definitely be some physical principle of its existence, even if that be inexpressible for us. For it does not have any *logos*, in virtue of which it exists and has being, it will not belong to the things that *are*. For each thing that *is* has some physical principle, in virtue of which it exists. If so, then nothing that *is*, is formless: for each thing's physical principle in virtue of which it *is*, is each thing's form and essence; conversely, each thing's form, being completive of its essence, is a physical principle in virtue of which it exists. Therefore, matter, too, if it is not an empty word but some physical existing thing, must clearly have a principle, in virtue of which it exists. Each thing's principle of existence is its form and essence; so also the principle of matter, in virtue of which it *is*, is its form and essence.⁶ (*contra Proclum* XI.7 427.10-26)

Philoponus states that if matter is to belong to the things that *are*, then it has to possess something which *is*, as a physical principle. He starts by saying that in order to be something which *is*, matter must *possess* a form. However, he concludes by stating that the principle of matter is its form. Of course, Philoponus wants to show that prime matter *is* the form of three-dimensionality, not just that matter *possess* the form of three-dimensionality, this possession would entail that matter was a composite. In order to

³ *eidopepoiêtai*

⁴ Translation Jennifer S. Reznik

⁵ Translation Jennifer S. Reznik, my emphasis

prove that prime matter *is* the form of three-dimensionality, Philoponus discusses artificial generation. In artificial generation wood, which possess a form, in turn acts as matter for construction equipment. Philoponus is trying to show here that in the Neoplatonic universe, things which possess form can in turn act as matter for another form. So, what is form in one circumstance, can act as matter in another circumstance. In this sense, that which acts as matter is never completely deprived of form in every way. From this perspective, nothing exists in the universe that is completely formless in every sense of the word. This explanation stands true when applied to proximate matter (the matter of the elements), but when applied to prime matter, it does not hold. Philoponus proves here that things, which *possess* form can act as matter, but he fails to prove that things which *are* form can act as matter. His example of artificial generation does not help to prove that something which *is* form can act as matter. With the inconsistency of definitions pointed out in this argument, Philoponus is forced to rely on a weaker argument against the tradition.

He starts his weaker attack on formless matter by stating that his opponents (the pagan Neoplatonists) believe the three-dimensional serves as proximate matter of the elements. This proximate matter is also known as unqualified body and Philoponus is aware of this association. However, because the word 'matter' is used in the term proximate matter, Philoponus claims that the pagans have a concept of informed matter. He states that if the tradition is going to subscribe to a view of formless matter, then, they must adopt a universal view of matter as opposed to a dual view of matter, that it is sometimes informed, sometimes formless. In other words, he says that the traditional

⁶ Translation De Haas pg 268, his emphasis

prime matter must *always* be formless, in order to make the claim that matter in general is formless.⁷ This proves to be a weaker argument since Philoponus is well aware of the tradition's specific distinction between prime matter and proximate matter, which is synonymous with unqualified body and the three-dimensional. Because of the inconsistencies described above, Philoponus is not able to effectively prove that prime matter must be the form of three-dimensionality.

Another inconsistency within Philoponus arguments is in his defense against the Plotinian notion that matter is pure potentiality. The early Neoplatonist Plotinus envisages matter as the exact opposite of Philoponus' prime matter. Plotinus believes that matter must be formless, even non-being and writes this with the great assurance of support within the tradition.

But as for matter, which is said to exist and which we say is all realities potentially, how is it possible to say that it is actually something belonging to the things that *are*? For if it was, it would already have ceased to be potentially all realities. If, then, it does not belong to the things that are, it necessarily cannot be a being. How could it, then, be actually something when it is not something that is? But, even if it is not any of the realities which come into being upon it, there is no obstacle to its being something else, since it is not all realities which have a material foundation. In so far, then as it is none of these things which are founded upon it, and these are things that are, it is non-being. But certainly it could not be form, since it is imagined as something formless; so it could not be numbered among those form realities of the intelligible world. So it will be non-being in this way too. If, then, it is non-being in both these ways, it will be still more non-being.⁸ (Plotinus *Enneads* II.5 [25] 4.3-14)

Plotinus states here that matter cannot belong to the things that are, if it did, it would have already 'ceased to be potentially all realities'. In other words, matter must remain always potential, so that it can be potentially all realities (i.e. potentially everything). If matter were determined in any way, and certainly if matter were a form, this would interfere

⁷ De Haas pg 252

with its perfect potentiality. For Plotinus, matter belongs to the things that are only in the sense of announcing what it is going to be.

Philoponus discusses the potentiality of matter in *contra Proclum* XI.8 436.16-443.6.⁹ He states that matter must always be actually corporeal. Philoponus argues here that since form is incorporeal, the matter of bodies cannot also be incorporeal. Two incorporeals cannot constitute a corporeal body. It is strange that Philoponus uses a different notion of body here in order to launch another argument for the corporeality of body. In setting out his notion of prime matter, Philoponus had been extremely careful that the term 'body as such' was clearly defined. He defines 'body as such' as that which is determined by the three-dimensions. His claim that two incorporeal bodies cannot constitute a corporeal body relies on the Stoic definition of body as a 'stuff with resistance'.¹⁰ Once again, Philoponus sacrifices the consistency of his definitions in order to provide another argument against the tradition.

The discrepancies of these arguments indicate that Philoponus cannot fully defend his definition of prime matter against the traditional notion. Philoponus' reliance on weak arguments and polemical, not philosophical reasoning, indicates that he is not able to defend his definition to the full extent. Because of this, he is not completely justified in abolishing the traditional notion of prime matter. However, over time, many of his

⁸ De Haas pg 275 translation by Armstrong (1966)

⁹ De Haas pg 275

¹⁰ De Haas pg 276

arguments helped to eventually dispose of the traditional notion altogether by proving it quite insufficient and ultimately useless.

Conclusion

Philoponus has made a significant place for himself within the tradition, as the first commentator to explain in great detail, the problems that existed with the traditional account of prime matter. He had a genuine concern that the traditional definition could not account for anything within the physical realm. Philoponus wanted prime matter to be able to account for such physical phenomena as elemental change and division. He felt that Aristotle had indicated that it must be matter which accounts for these things, so he felt completely justified in making matter something actual and substantial which could account for these things. Although his notion of prime matter was not completely original, as it already existed in the Neoplatonic universe under the title 'unqualified body', nonetheless, Philoponus was the first to completely discard the traditional notion and indicate that unqualified body, or the three-dimensional, was prime matter. I assume that this step had never been taken before because of the need for commentators to strictly adhere to the doctrines of the tradition. Since Philoponus was a Christian, he was not bound by any of these restraints. He shared a dissatisfaction within the tradition notion of prime matter with the rest of the Neoplatonic tradition, as is shown by the fact that the notion of unqualified body had to be posited in order to account for physical phenomena. Because of Philoponus' freedom from the tradition, he is able to openly attack the tradition without being burdened with adhering to a certain doctrine. Even though Philoponus is not able to fully defend his definition against the tradition, his re-evaluation of prime matter offers a refreshing approach to some of the problems in the ancient philosophical tradition.

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