Were the Neoplatonists Itealists or Realists?

John Bussanich
University of New Mexico, john.bussanich@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, Ancient Philosophy Commons, and the History of Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
Bussanich, John, "Were the Neoplatonists Itealists or Realists?" (1992). The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter. 177.
https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/177

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.
Were the Neoplatonists Idealists or Realists?

by John Bussanich
University of New Mexico
SAGP, Pacific APA, March 27, 1992

It has become increasingly common during the past decade to encounter idealist interpretations of the Greek Neoplatonists. This development is more important, from a scholarly point of view, than the confident assertions by Berkeley in the Siris or Hegel in the Encyclopaedia that the Neoplatonists were already promulgating in late antiquity their own respective forms of idealism. One concern that prompts the present inquiry is, therefore, whether we too indulge in anachronism when we employ terms like ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ (or even ‘universals’ and ‘particulars’1) when talking about Greek philosophers. In general, I think it is legitimate—in any case, it’s inevitable—to attempt an overall estimate of the metaphysical tenor of Neoplatonism, as long as we resist the temptation to crown the effort with a neat taxonomy of their ontologies and epistemologies. Diagnoses by several recent interpreters that individual Neoplatonists—especially Plotinus and Porphyry—are idealists or manifest idealistic (or generally antirealist) tendencies articulate fruitful approaches to many of the most intransigent exegetical problems in Neoplatonic studies. I should like first, then, to take an inventory of the various indications of idealism or antirealism recently detected, noting the Neoplatonic ways of thinking or positions these rubrics aim to characterize. Then, since it has not been done systematically, the suitability of applying idealist criteria will be matched against the sort of realist principles that are commonly attributed to Plato. Most attention will be directed to Plotinus (205-270 C.E.), with brief appearances by Porphyry (232-c. 305). As a counterpoint, Proclus (412-485) will be called occasionally to speak for the later Athenian school of Neoplatonism, which is widely held to maintain an extreme form of metaphysical realism.

To specify the limits of this investigation it should be noted that besides numerous varieties of idealism and realism there are two rather distinct uses of realism. On the first realism is opposed to phenomenalism; this opposition will be the primary focus of the discussion. The second concerns the difference between realist and nominalist about ‘universals’, which I intend to address on another occasion.2 The two forms of realism often go together, even if it is correct, as Dummett points out, that nominalists need not be antirealists; still, it is noteworthy that some idealistic readings of Neoplatonism detect nominalism as well, most notably A.C. Lloyd’s.3

The most general reason for characterizing Neoplatonists as idealists is their uncompromising insistence that reality is transcendental, supersensible, and spiritual, and that the sensible world depends for its existence on the intelligible world.4 On this antimaterialistic principle (first described as “idealism” by Leibniz) Plato too is an idealist, not to mention theists of various stripes.5

1 Even if in the end one does not agree with his claims, it is therapeutic to entertain the doubts raised by Turnbull about assuming that Plato and Aristotle work with a fully articulated distinction between universals and particulars; cf. his 1985, 24-25.
2 Dummett 1978, xxxi.
3 See Dummett 1963, 147. Lloyd’s Neoplatonic nominalism (see Lloyd 1955-1956, 58ff. and 1990, 68-95) exemplifies the theoretical possibility adumbrated by Frede: “Realism in this original sense, where the genera and species of objects also are res not nomina, of course, res of a special kind, is a view which, it seems to me, has recently been hardly considered, though it was the dominant view, in one form or another from late antiquity to Abelard’s time. What is not at issue is whether there are things like Platonic ideas because these can also be accepted by nominalists, as being ideas in the divine mind” (Frede 1978, 367n3). Though space is lacking to argue the point it seems to me that a divine-ideas theory need not be nominalist.
Few would dispute ascribing idealism in this sense to the Neoplatonists. At any rate it does not challenge the sweeping claim made by Bernard Williams, and echoed by Myles Burnyeat, that idealism is not to be found in the ancient world. Williams has it that Greek philosophers did not arrive at the view—held by some modern philosophers—"according to which the entire world consists of the contents of mind," the position he distinguishes from the perspective dominant in antiquity, that the material world is formed and governed by the mind. On the basis of this distinction, Neoplatonic immaterialism unambiguously exemplifies this familiar and readily understandable form of mind-dependence.

When considering the shadowy status of matter, particularly in Plotinus and Porphyry, some interpreters subscribe to the stronger thesis that matter does not exist. Michael Wagner stresses Plotinus' "strongly idealistic denial of matter" (1986, 59), Irwin the "unreality" of matter, one aspect of his quasi-empiricist interpretation of Plotinus (1989, 188). Lloyd observes that in presenting his theory of causation Proclus "finds it almost superfluous to mention matter" and that matter is "at most...a name for the logical substrate and is reducible to co-causes" (1990, 104, 119). For Porphyry, on Lloyd's view, the embodiment of the soul is an "illusion," as is "the 'descent' of the forms into nature." Correlatively, the insubstantiality of sensible objects suggests two additional theses. In Plotinus, for example, the unreality of matter leaves open the possibility that material particulars are nothing but bundles of properties. Considerable evidence supports this view, as we'll see, but the additional claim is more controversial: namely, that the bundles of qualities comprising sensible particulars depend for their existence somehow on their being apprehended by our sense-organs. A particularly striking formulation of this stronger thesis is offered by Irwin who argues that "perceptible properties are simply appearances, not properties of the external matter in its own right" (1989, 188). A systematic examination of the ontological status of either matter or sensible particulars for various Neoplatonists is beyond the scope of this paper. But it will be useful to see how claims about the unreality of the material world have encouraged idealistic readings of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists.

Now if it is relatively uncontroversial to characterize all Neoplatonists—and here, at least, one might simply go with Platonists—as metaphysical idealists or immaterialists, i.e, that the material world is a product of transcendental realities—the ascription to some of them of explicit arguments for

---

4 From this perspective, Plotinus is "one of the greatest idealists of all time," since "the world of sense has merely a second-rate reality" in comparison with the "unperceived world of concepts" (Pistorius 1952, 1). Similarly, Wagner 1986, 57: "Plotinus' Neoplatonism is strongly idealistic. It not only adopts immaterial principles as its true causes, but it also denies any positive reality to matter...the sensible world owes its existence and nature solely to the hypostases, renouncing even Plato's receptacle of Becoming." (The status of matter will be discussed below in greater detail.) Moreover, he claims that for Plotinus "our cosmos is nothing but an effect of the hypostases' vertical causation" (59). For another illuminating discussion of immaterial causation in Plotinus and Proclus see Barnes 1983. Barnes believes that "the chief precursors of Berkeleianism are to be found among the Platonists" (170), but he stops short of invoking idealism.

5 Hamlyn puts it well: "Plato's so-called Idealism is...a theory to the effect that sensible things, the objects of perception, are to be explained by reference to Ideas or Forms, the ideal entities postulated by Plato" (Hamlyn 1984, 15n4).

6 Williams 1981, 204-05 and Burnyeat 1982, discussed below in some detail.

7 Lloyd 1990, 136; 1967, 288, 293. Particularly in the earlier study Lloyd develops the notion that Porphyry departs from Plotinus in "telescoping" the second and third hypostases, that is to say, reducing the soul, and its "creation" the material world, to appearances of the intelligible world. His interpretation is based in large part on a rather speculative reading of a brief passage in Porphyry Sententiae x Lambrerz. While I admire the flair Lloyd's 'illusionist' interpretation brings to this aspect of Porphyry's thought, I prefer the less exciting, but more likely, position that Porphyry is quite close to Plotinus, on which see Wallis 1972, 112-13.

epistemological idealism is controversial and problematic. It is important to note, first, that idealistic explanations of how and what we apprehend (whether by perception or intellection) may pertain to two different sorts of objects, viz. intelligibles and sensibles, or, at least, to two different ways of apprehending the same objects. All epistemological configurations cannot be canvassed here, but we should recall that as Platonists these philosophers inevitably characterize quite differently these two modes of apprehension. (Recall the combinations of Kant’s empirical realism and transcendental idealism, and Berkeley’s empirical idealism and transcendental realism.) Thus, it will be necessary to consider Neoplatonic attitudes toward perception of an external material world, but also toward the direct intellectual “perception” of the Forms.

The analysis of Plotinus’ theory of perception has convinced some that knowledge of—and perhaps even the existence of—sensible objects is completely dependent on us. Irwin, for example, claims that from the reality of form and the unreality of matter Plotinus “infers that the only reality is mind-dependent, essentially an object of awareness for some soul” (1989, 189). Others who discern idealistic tendencies in Plotinus’ accounts of our relation to the sensible world include Strange (1981, 143) and Wagner (1982). Wagner’s description is particularly vivid (he’s talking about iv.4.23): “But what the object thereby is—what it is a physical copy of—depends solely upon the discernment” (19); “qua discerned, the object just is as I discern it to be and it is nothing beyond what I discern it to be” (20). Moreover, invoking the provocative terminology of ‘appearance & reality’ he asserts that for Plotinus “the multiplicity which we are tempted to attribute to perceptibles is apparent only and not real” (31). Finally, he, like others, claims that sensibles lack essential properties: “Being a perceptible is not a defining characteristic of a certain set of Plotinian entities but an accidental characteristic which beings possess insofar as we discern them by means of sense organs” (36). Irwin’s briefer (and less carefully argued) assessment amounts to a strongly subjectivist interpretation of Plotinus’ theory of perception and the reality of sensibles; he leaves the impression that sensibles have no extra-mental reality, whereas Wagner (and cf. Strange 1981, 150-51) construe mind-dependence less radically.

The ontological dependence of the sensible world on the intelligible, or supersensible, is, as we have seen, essential to the contention that Neoplatonists are metaphysical idealists or immaterialists. But this interpretive principle can be construed as overlapping with or even as expressing a type of epistemological idealism, when supersensible reality is some sort of mind, which would seem to be the case for Neoplatonists. Strange describes Plotinus’ version as “causal idealism,” according to which “all of sensible reality becomes mind-dependent in a causal way” (1981, 150), a theory that he distinguishes from Berkeley’s. Yet he still wants to argue that “the mind somehow causes the being of sensibles.” Specifically, it is soul that acts as a productive cause, projecting logoi as immanent forms into a materialized state. Soul is the vehicle by which Forms as (formal)

9 I have given only Wagner’s conclusions to a series of detailed analyses, while ignoring (for lack of space) his carefully nuanced arguments. Moreover, as I read the claims quoted here they do not impute to Plotinus the Berkeleyan claim that esse est percipi. One of the purposes of the author’s italics in these passages is, I think, to assert the ontological priority of the sensible form qua discerned, not to claim the latter’s utter lack of existence. This would seem to be his position as stated elsewhere. Referring to the “non-reality of sensible objects” in iii.6.12, Wagner clarifies in a note that by “calling them ‘non-real’, Plotinus does not deny the existence of sensible objects or their appearances” (1985, 273 with 290n7).

10 Irwin bolsters his claim that perceptible properties are mere appearances with a reference to Berkeley’s Siris (1989, 188n10). Here, it seems to me, he rather uncritically follows Sorabji 1983, 293, who too closely assimilates Plotinus’ bundle-particulars to those of Gregory of Nyssa (discussed below), and, with the addition of Gregory’s assertion that matter is non-existent but is only a thought, Berkeley is added to the picture. Irwin’s interpretations are noteworthy, despite the dearth of careful argumentation for which he is well-known, because they appear in what may become one of the standard surveys of Greek philosophy.
causes become present in their sensible (and psychic) effects. Notice how in Corrigan's formulation of this process immaterial causation develops into a version of epistemological idealism: "As demiurgic soul we create the object; as perceptive soul we give it logos or simply qualify it further...In a real sense, therefore, it is 'ourselves' who generate not only substrata (to the degree that they are formed) but also universals, quality and quantity." It remains to be determined what is the referent of 'ourselves' in this sort of reading, a challenge that surfaces as well in the various idealisms attributed to Plotinus and Porphyry by Lloyd.

Now Lloyd directly raises the question about what sort of idealism we should find in Plotinus (1990, 173, 177; cf. also 95, 126). Despite being rather undogmatic about his judgments in this regard (as well as confusingly unsystematic in his discussion of the idealistic tendencies in Plotinus), Lloyd provides cogent arguments for the mind-dependence of both sensible and intelligible reality. A key facet of the former sort emerges in Lloyd's interpretation of iii.8 On Nature, Contemplation and the One. He begins by interpreting (his word) θεωρία as "consciousness." Roughly the first half of this treatise is fertile territory indeed for Lloyd's purposes, for here nature, soul, and then Intellect "create" by means of increasingly real and truer degrees of θεωρία. And, strikingly, what are created also seem to be forms of θεωρία. These are Lloyd's central points (1990, 182-84):

a. perfection is identical with consciousness
b. thinking is identical with consciousness
c. "every real thing is a thought"
d. "a true thought is not just an object of thought but the thinking of it"
e. this amounts to "a thought without a thinking subject...a strange idea" that is "often attributed to eighteenth-century idealists"
f. both the universal Intellect and we individual human minds are creative qua the degree of consciousness or thought exercised
g. "when Nous creates it can be seen as the spontaneous multiplication of reality"

Taken together these features of the Plotinian theory of consciousness, if we may call it such, convince Lloyd that Plotinian idealism is closer to Hegel's than to Kant's. (Earlier in the book he rejects describing Plotinus as a subjective idealist: 134). In Plotinus at least Lloyd sees "consciousness überhaupt."

Strange 1981, 146 provides a succinct account: "it is soul which is the proximate productive cause of sensibles. The Forms are causes of sensibles only at second remove: both because as nous they are the productive cause of soul, which is proximate cause of sensibles, and because they contribute to the being of sensibles by providing soul with the logoi by which it produces sensibles." It should be noted, however, that often Plotinus "shrinks" the causal chain by emphasizing the direct presence of the intelligibles, or Forms, in sensibles. The two alternatives are framed in this passage: "Are we then going to maintain that it [τὸ πᾶν = Intelligible Being] is present itself, or that it is on its own but powers from it come to all things, and this is why it is said to be everywhere? For in this way they say that the souls are like rays, so that it is set firm in itself but the soul-rays sent out come now to one living thing and now to another" (vi.4.3.1-6, tr. Armstrong & unless indicated otherwise). The direct presence of the intelligible to the sensible is stressed too in passages like vi.5.8.17-22 where Plotinus argues that there is "nothing between" the Form and matter. See Wagner 1986, 65ff. for an incisive discussion of the complexities in Plotinus' theory of participation.

11 Strange 1981, 118, author's italics. Cf. also Lloyd 1990, 134: "the logoi which are sometimes called the 'semenal' logoi have the task of conveying the proceeding forms to their recipients."

12 Corrigan 1981, 118, author's italics. Cf. also Lloyd 1990, 134: "the logoi which are sometimes called the 'semenal' logoi have the task of conveying the proceeding forms to their recipients."

13 Corrigan refers to several passages to support his talk about "creation." iii.3.4.37-40 does speak about qualifying sensible objects, but not about 'creating them'; in any case, the causal agents under discussion are λόγοι. ii.6.3 addresses the issue of the dependence of sensible qualities on intelligible qualities, not the former's 'creation by us'. More significantly, the dramatic passage at vi.2.21.11-59 envisions the 'creation' or generation of Forms, categories, universals, intelligible qualities etc. by the Universal Intellect—but not by 'ourselves'. Thus, it is crucial to discover what or who is the creative cause. Scare-quotes cannot bear the metaphysical weight that here is placed upon them.
Though Lloyd seems unaware of the fact, his Hegelian version of Plotinus was tendered long ago, if rather sketchily and less convincingly. For the great French Plotinus scholar Émile Bréhier Hegel's interpretation of Plotinus as an absolute idealist is on the mark. Like Lloyd Bréhier argues that the Forms are thoughts: the Forms are “modes or states of Intelligence and no longer things”; for “nothing like things exists in true reality. There exist only subjects which contemplate”; “the forms of the real cannot be considered inert realities existing independently of the spiritual activities which posed them” (Bréhier 1928, 192, 196). These comments, however brief, seem rather close to Lloyd’s more comprehensive interpretation, which can be summed up in his phrase: “the hypostases are experiences” (Lloyd 1990, 126).

This cursory survey of mostly recent discussions of forms of Neoplatonic idealism is necessarily partial and incomplete, but the following seem to be the most prominent features. (1) the material world’s dependence on and derivation from the supersensible. (2) the unreality or non-existence of matter. (3) the dependence of the reality of sensible properties on being perceived. (4) the insubstantiality of material particulars. (5) the argument that infers from the causal dependence of the sensible world on the intelligible that sensibles are mind-dependent. (6) the notion that Forms and Being are thoughts, which, in turn, are perfect states of consciousness.

Before testing some of these interpretations, consider the objections to finding idealism in the ancient world registered by Burnyeat. He argues that Greek philosophers entertained no skeptical doubts about the existence of the material world and hence did not confront the problem of proving its existence. Idealism does not become a live possibility, he suggests, until, in the wake of Cartesian doubt, the question whether there is anything besides mind becomes the central philosophical problem. Many of the idealistic readings we have considered do depend, it seems to me, on a less radical formulation of this view, insofar as they assume an appearance vs. reality distinction. Lloyd, for example, argues that for the Neoplatonists reality is being or thought, whereas the psychic and material worlds are mere appearances; but, he adds, being’s “appearances are not illusions” (1990, 138). If pressed hard enough the caveat undermines the strongly idealistic reading of the Neoplatonists inasmuch as it empties “appearance” of the meaning it bears in modern and contemporary philosophy. If, in fact, the lower degrees of reality are not illusory appearances for the Neoplatonists, it is misleading to think of them as appearances of the higher orders of being. Lloyd waffles a bit, perhaps, when he offers that “Neoplatonism is only half reductionist, since while it is a philosophy of appearance and reality, the appearance cannot be dispensed with” (1990, 95-96). I want to press his final point further than he would wish, arguing that Plotinus’ idealistic tendencies are considerably weaker than he supposes, and that they fail to undermine his basic realist assumptions. Now to test this general hypothesis on the various topics considered in the first part of the paper.

First, the unreality of matter—a key part of the argument for idealistic tendencies in the

---

14 Burnyeat 1982, 19, 33. In what follows I work from his point that “What I have ascribed to antiquity is an unquestioned, unquestioning assumption of realism: something importantly different from an explicit philosophical thesis” (33, his italics). For some doubts about Burnyeat’s threshold for acknowledging the presence of idealism see Sorabji 1983, 288.

15 A stimulating comparison of modern idealisms with Platonism is made by Hardie 1936, 168-69: “The relation of the Absolute to its ‘appearances’ is not that of the One to its ‘emanations’. The relation of the One to what ‘proceeds’ from it, mind and its objects, is one of dependence; the relation of the Absolute to is appearances is one of inclusion. The Argument for a Noumenon or ‘supra-rational Absolute’ rests on contradictions alleged of certain categories of thinking, and involves rejecting as appearance all that we commonly take for real. But Neoplatonism does not assert that minds or even bodies are other than they appear to us to be. It does not argue that to judge that they exist is false.” For another statement that the Neoplatonists ultimately avoid the appearance–reality distinction cf. Dodds 1963, 217.
Neoplatonists. I am not convinced that Plotinus has a consistent theory of matter; at the same time, it seems to me a mistake to suggest, as Irwin does, that, because Plotinus, for example, defines matter as non-being, privation, real falsity, and pure indeterminacy, he thinks matter is an "illusion," that Plotinus "refuses it a place among the realities," and that he "denies it a degree of independent reality" (1989, 194-95). Setting aside the current disputes concerning the generation of matter, for the purposes of the present discussion we need only recall that matter derives from the activity of the cosmic Soul (cf. v.1.7.47-48; v.2.1.17-18, i.3.18.10-13, ii.4.5, ii.5.5). The question is: once "generated" what sort of ontological status does Plotinus assign to sensible matter? It is well known that he follows Aristotle in identifying matter (i.e., the prime matter that underlies the physical elements) with Plato's Receptacle (ii.4.1; so too Porphyry: cf. Lloyd 1967, 292). In fact, throughout his discussions of the nature of matter Plotinus repeatedly refers to the Timaeus or echoes the dialogue's account of the Receptacle. In his assertion that matter is ἀοιώς, Plotinus is closely following Tim. 50d-51a. We need only juxtapose a few passages from the Enneads with these essential characterizations of the Receptacle from the Timaeus: "It must be called always the same; for it never departs at all from its own character; since it is always receiving all things, and never in any way whatsoever takes on any character that is like any of the things that enter it" (50b6-c2); "it is free from all those characters which it is to receive from elsewhere" (50d7-e1); "that which is to receive in itself all kinds must be free from all characters" (50e4-5); "we call it a nature invisible and characterless, all-receiving, partaking in some very puzzling way of the intelligible and very hard to apprehend" (51a7-b2); "Space, which is everlasting, not admitting destruction; providing a situation for all things that come into being, but itself apprehended without the senses by a sort of bastard reasoning" (52a8-b2, tr. Cornford).

§ i.8.10.2-5: "it [sc. matter] is called 'without quality' because it has in its own right none of the qualities which it is going to receive and which are going to be in it as their substrate, but not in the sense that it has no nature at all." (For matter as ὀποῖος cf. also ii.4.7.11, 8.1-2; vi.1.26.10.)

§ Matter is incorporeal (iii.6.7.4), invisible (iii.6.7.14; 13.40); as in Tim. 50c4-5, imitations—phantoms in Plotinus' phrasing—appear in it (iii.6.7.25-30); matter is indestructible (iii.6.8.12, ii.9.3.16) and unchangeable (iii.6.10.25-29); matter must exist as a base (ἐδρα) for sensible appearances (iii.6.14.7-8). In certain respects Plotinus departs from or embellishes the description of the Receptacle—as when he compares it to a mirror in which things appear (iii.6.13.49)—but this cursory comparison of passages indicates that the Plotinian position is close to the Platonic. It would be a mistake to conclude that Plotinian matter does not exist because for him (and for Plato as well) though matter lacks being, it exists as an independent explanatory factor in Plotinus' metaphysics of Becoming. Hence the insistence that matter is an αἰτία τῆς γενέσεως (iii.6.14.35), an αἰτία ἐκλογής τοῦ φαινεσθαι (iii.6.15.27). Matter is independent not in the sense that it does not derive from or depend on immaterial causes, but rather in that it does exist as a dim sort of reality that has effects on the nature of the material world and on human life.

A particularly striking way in which the independent existence of matter is asserted is the evil effects it causes, the primary topic of i.8: "matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. Even if soul had produced matter, being affected in some

16 Irwin 1989, 244n12 accurately refers to ii.4.14, 16.3; ii.5.4.11-12; ii.5.5.25-26.
17 For an illuminating recent discussion see Corrigan 1986.
18 Cf. the excellent discussion by Strange 1981, 122-23, 136-37 to which I am indebted. Note also Corrigan: "matter is 'positive' in genesis, for it is comprehended by form; but, as matter, it goes beyond conceptualization and exhibits a fundamental identity with privation in the sense of absence and even negativity" (1987-1988, 105-06).
way, and had become evil by communicating with it, matter would have been the cause by its presence: soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth” (i.8.14.50-54). This explanation makes clear that despite the generation of matter by soul (qua hypostasis), matter remains an independent factor in the operations of the cosmos. In some passages matter even becomes almost anti-substance (see i.8.6.31-59, iii.6.17.35-37). Thus, I dispute Irwin’s contention that, because soul (in some sense) is responsible for the generation of matter, and hence evil, that matter lacks independent existence. If matter amounts to anti-substance and it is one of the primary causes of evil, neither prime matter nor the proximate, elemental matter constitutive of sensible composites should be reducible to other entities—either soul or sense-data.

If a strongly idealistic denial of matter is not to be found in Plotinus, we still might agree with Sorabji that such a radical claim is made by certain Christian Neoplatonists, the Greek Cappadocian Fathers Gregory and Basil. Sorabji cites three fascinating passages in which Gregory claims that material bodies consist only of qualities, which are nothing but ideas. Interestingly, in his discussion Sorabji ignores the suggestions made by Hilary Armstrong, first, that the non-existence of matter—inferred in part from the claim that material particulars are merely bundles of qualities—is explicitly proposed by one of Plotinus’ imaginary interlocutors, but rejected by Plotinus; second, that Basil and Gregory may have come to their view about matter from reading this very passage in the Enneads.

With Plotinus too there is considerable evidence that he maintained a version of bundle-particulars. Lloyd first called attention to this many years ago and he has been followed by many. As Lloyd points out, Neoplatonic bundle-particulars derive from Timaeus 49-50 and Theaetetus 157b. At vi.3.8.20-21 sensible substance is described by Plotinus as σωματοφύσις τις ποιοτήτων και ὠλης; similarly, Porphyry defines individuals as ιδιοτήτων ἀθροίσμα (Isagoge vii.21-23; Lloyd 1955-1956, 158). Whatever Plotinus’ views are on the ontology of the sensible object, what is important here is to determine, first, whether the qualities or attributes that comprise sensibles are independent of our minds. And second, are these immanent forms, the substantial properties of sensibles, internal or external to the mind? Now sensible qualities are the result of (or are identical to) the activities of

19 It is not unlikely that Plotinus read that puzzling phrase in the Timaeus about the Receptacle’s “participation in the intelligible” as indicating the former’s ontological derivation from the latter. The claim that “matter is a sort of ultimate form” (v.8.7.22-23) might hint at this. Given the ‘mythic’ character of the discourse in the dialogue, inferring from the eternity of the Receptacle that it is also a non-derived entity is questionable. I would also endorse Corrigan’s suggestion that when Plotinus suggests that matter somehow participates in the intelligible he thinks he is following Tim. 51a: see Corrigan 1986, 177 & n28.

20 Irwin admits that if matter has an evil “effect on the soul, it seems to have real causal influence.” But he avoids confronting the textual evidence in what follows: “If, however, the soul’s self-assertion is the origin of evil, and if matter is an illusion, a figment of a deceived and self-assertive soul, its role in evil seems very slight.” And finally: “We might infer that the bad aspects of the world result from the recalcitrance of matter, and the good aspects from the presence of reason. But this conclusion would accord to matter a degree of independent reality that Plotinus denies it” (Irwin 1989, 195).


22 The passage is ii.4.11.1-14. See Armstrong’s note ad loc. in his Loeb edition and also his 1962. He also points out that the objection—that matter does not exist—is also stated at the beginning of i.8.15, which refers back to ii.4.11.


24 See Strange’s valuable discussion of whether Plotinus’ sensible particulars are bundles of particulars or of universals: 1981, 186-87. In general I agree with Turnbull’s assertion that Plotinus’s theory of predication closely follows Plato’s and that his account of the sensible world closely follows the Timaeus: see Turnbull 1985, 43-44. It’s a mystery to me why this important study continues to be neglected by Neoplatonic scholars.
logoi, which separate off images of intelligible forms and implant them on or in matter (ii.6.1-2). The true being of a thing is in its intelligible logos; sensible being is merely an imitation or shadow of the intelligible (vi.3.8.27-30).

In his argument that for Plotinus sensibles and their properties are mind-dependent Irwin (1989, 188) cites the last two lines of the following passage:

For there is a lack of confidence about even those objects of sense-perception which seem to inspire the strongest confidence in their self-evidence, whether their apparent existence may be not in the underlying realities, but in the ways the sense-organs are affected, and they need intellect or discursive reason to make judgments about them; for even if it is agreed that they are in the underlying sense-realities which sense-perception is to grasp, that which is known by sense-perception is an image of the thing, and sense-perception does not apprehend the thing itself: for that remains outside (τό τε γινωσκόμενον δι' αισθήσεως τοῦ πράγματος εἰδωλόν ἐστι καὶ σῶκ αὐτὸ τὸ πράγμα ἢ αἰσθήσεως λαμβάνει· μένει γὰρ ἐκεῖνο ἡξο.). (v.5.1.12-20).

Other passages as well have been adduced as evidence of Plotinus' antirealist position, notably i.1.7.25 Note first that this passage states directly that there is something external to the senses and the mind, raising doubts about the supposed "unreality of sensibles" or the notion that everything must be an object of awareness for some soul, that is to say, that Plotinus unambiguously subscribes to some form of phenomenalism. On the contrary, Plotinus shares the basic attitude of Plato or Aristotle towards the reality of the external world: no Cartesian doubts plague his surprisingly detailed accounts of perception and the sensible world.26 However, the existence of material particulars that are independent of the mind goes along with the derivation of sensibles' quasi-being from their intelligible originals.

If Plotinus avoids explicit antirealism, is he a perceptual realist? Emilsson (1988,120) has argued recently that Plotinus' theory of perception is a form of direct realism, according to which sense-perception grasps the qualities or accidental properties (i.e., images of the forms) of the sensible object; while the essence is apprehended internally by the soul in contact with the intelligible forms. But the derivative, imagistic nature of the immanent qualities is an objective feature of sensibles, and these are in fact "grasped in themselves" in the act of perception.27 (Evident here is Plotinus' Platonized version of the Aristotelian reception of the form without the matter in de An. iii.4 & 7; cf. Emilsson 1988, 7). In fact, unlike the passage from v.5.1 cited above, Plotinus elsewhere argues against a representational theory of perception while continuing to maintain the causal role of the sensible object in perception. In iv.6.1, for example, he claims that when the soul looks at a sensible object "no impression has been or is being imprinted on it. For there would have been no need for it to look outwards, if it already had in the form of the visible object...Most important of all: if we received impressions of what we see, there will be no possibility of looking at the actual things we see, but we shall look at images and shadows of

25 "And soul's power of perception need not be perception of sense-objects, but rather it must be receptive of the impressions produced by sensation on the living being; these are already intelligible entities. So external sensation is the image of this perception of the soul, which is in its essence truer and is a contemplation of forms alone without being affected" (i.1.7.9-14). For antirealist readings of this passage see Blumenthal 1971, 71-72 and Zeller 1903, 637-38.

24 Cf. Turnbull 1985, 47: "Neither Plotinus nor, for that matter, any early Greek philosopher betrays any sort of Cartesian problem concerning the status and place of sensed colors, sounds, hards, softs, flavors etc." See also Emilsson 1988, 32, 145-48.

27 The following passage presents a very different picture than that suggested by v.5.1: "the soul must somehow be connected with sense-objects through things which are very much like them and establish a sort of communion of knowledge or affection with them...through these [sense-organs], which are in a way naturally united to or continuous with sense-objects, the soul must somehow in some way come to a unity with the sense-objects themselves" (iv.5.1.7-13).
the objects of sight, so that the objects themselves will be different from the things we see” (iv.6.1.19-32). This passage illustrates the rather uncomplicated naturalism to which Plotinus sometimes subscribes when he talks about the sensible world without any consideration of the intelligible world. Hence, the subjectivist tone of v.5.1 (& i.1.7) may derive largely from the sharp contrast Plotinus wants to draw between sensation and intellection. Despite these challenges to antirealist readings of Plotinus, it is perhaps going too far to describe him as a consistent direct realist about perception of the material world as does Emilsson, for some passages sound representationalist. We must now confront the same nest of problems in the intelligible world.

It is, of course, on the intelligible level, Plotinus claims, that we can know real being in itself, the real essence of things. The knowledge of the essences of things, afforded by the direct intellectual intuition of intelligible Forms, grounds Plotinus’ theory of perception, on which there is an exact fit between the sense-organs and material particulars, specifically, their accidental properties. Grasping essences in themselves, however, requires ascent to the intelligible, at which point one achieves—very literally for a Platonist—the ‘god’s eye view’. On this sort of transcendental realism, Plotinus treats the Forms as celestial paradigm, the productive source of instantiated properties—both ‘substantial’ (i.e., images of real, intelligible substance) and accidental. But the identity between Forms and minds on the intelligible level—portrayed in the passage cited above (cf. also v.3.5.17-23, v.3.8, v.8.4)—seems to lead to the conclusion that reality is indeed mind-dependent, or rather that reality is Mind. The aspiration, even the expectation, that one can become the Intellect or Universal Mind (vi.7.15.1-2) (this, Plotinus’ position, is considered wildly optimistic by Proclus and Iamblichus, for example), lends considerable support to Lloyd’s contention that “the hypostases are experiences; they are types of consciousness; while, therefore, they have abstract and objective properties, they have also what we call phenomenological properties” (1990, 126). Hence, “all the elements in the Neoplatonic hierarchy are thoughts” (134). First, a terminological point. Though he knows as well as anyone that νοέων, as non-discursive thought, is distinct from our ordinary notion of knowing, Lloyd continues to employ “thought” to render the Greek term, notwithstanding its transcendental and non-propositional character. This practice gives a false impression of the similarity of normal (or discursive) and supersensible mental states, recalling also his identification of θεωρία with consciousness. Lloyd, it seems to me, is making a valiant effort to hint at the “intellectual”

28 Cf. Turnbull 1985, 75n83: “No Platonist would dream of putting sensations, the results of causal interactions of the physical environment with sense-organs, ‘in the mind’ nor for that matter ‘in the soul.”

29 I agree with some of Modrak’s objections to Emilsson’s thesis. While admitting, with Emilsson, that Plotinus’ theory of perception is “arguably a causal theory” she asserts that it is “an eccentric one since the causal chain is psychic not physical and the object perceived is necessary but not sufficient to bring about the perception”; thus for her “it does not appear to be a form of direct realism.” On the other hand, her claim that “the soul is in direct contact only with the sensory affection” is too inexact to explain the passage from iv.6.1 cited above. And in the following—also relevant to iv.6.1—her definition of realism is perhaps too “scientific”: “If the quality in the organ were identical to the quality in matter, the account would be realist, however the quality in the organ is only similar to the quality in matter and thus the claim that the quality in the organ is what is directly apprehended defeats the claim to realism.” (All quotes from Modrak 1989, 113). Note that Modrak does not quote or discuss any of Plotinus’ specific terms or descriptions.

30 A succinct statement is the often discussed v.5.2: “since one must bring in knowledge and truth and watchfully preserve reality and the knowledge of what each thing is—but not only the knowledge of each thing’s qualities, since if we only had that we should have an image and a trace of realities, and not possess and live with and be fused with the realities themselves” (v.5.2.5-9).


32 Cf. Armstrong 1978, 71, 75-76.

33 For his remarks on the differences see 1990, 168; see also his 1986, 263 where he argues that νοέων too should be translated as “thought.”
transparency within Plotinus' intelligible world by practicing a kind of lexical transparency, or of discovering unmitigated identity everywhere in the intelligible. And, analogously, he recognizes, but does not sufficiently stress the radical disjuncture between discursive thought and awareness/consciousness and their noetic exemplars. I would also emphasize more strongly than Lloyd (cf. 1990, 181) the great difference between the empirical and the transcendental selves: the former cannot be said to be a 'creator of forms' except in the most derivative and inferior manner.

What does this have to do with questions about Neoplatonic idealism? First, by stressing the identity of νοῦς, νόσησις, and νοητά, Lloyd blurs metaphysical distinctions that Plotinus wishes to maintain. His conclusions about "thought without a thinking subject" (reminiscent of 18th century idealism) and that "every real thing is a thought" (1990, 182-83) open the door—in one swoop—to an extreme abstract impersonalism, or, paradoxically, a radical subjectivism. Developing the first possibility yields the (to my mind) rather unidealistic formulation: "since consciousness at its best does not have a thinker who is distinct from it, we cannot ask whose consciousness creates what exists" (183). The "thinking" engaged in by a trans-personal self eludes the sort of analysis we might apply to discursive reasoning or perception. If this sounds Hegelian to Lloyd, it is important to recall that Hegel's account of Plotinian Neoplatonism is notorious for focusing heavily on noetic self-identity, while ignoring the hyper-transcendence of the One, a tendency that surfaces now and then in Lloyd's own analysis.

What motivates this emphasis on noetic identity is, of course, some of Plotinus' own statements, like the following: "We have here, then, one nature, Intellect, all realities and truth (νοῦς, τὰ ὄντα πάντα, ἡ άλήθεια)" (v.5.3.1-2); "for Intellect does not apprehend objects which preexist it—as sense does sense-objects—Intellect itself is its objects... But it is here with its objects and the same as and one with them" (v.4.2.44-49). Note, finally, the following passage, the first part of which is perhaps the strongest statement of the peculiar kind of constructivism that one can find in the Enneads; but the latter part (after the asterisk) casts a very different light on the whole: "But each of them [sc. the Forms] is Intellect and Being, and the whole is universal Intellect and Being, Intellect making Being exist in thinking it, and Being giving Intellect thinking and existence by being thought." But the cause of thinking is something else, which is also cause of being; they both therefore have a cause other than themselves" (v.1.4.26-31). Thus, Lloyd claims that neither Being nor Intellect is prior to the other. He intends his interpretation to cover the generation of Intellect as well: "there can be no answer to the question whether it is making or discovering" its objects or contents. Unlike Lloyd I prefer to see Plotinus, and the other Neoplatonists too, describing the awakening and the activity of noetic thought as a process of discovery, followed by an inexpressible fusing with what is.

34 See the excellent discussion of the difficulties of rendering νοῦς into English by Rist 1989, 190-97. Note his conclusion: "it seems unacceptable to limit our translation of nous to words associated primarily with thinking rather than with being: being, that is, in a state of awareness of metaphysical reality, or rather, for Plotinus, of the living spiritual reality of the universe" (197). In the end, Rist settles on "spiritual self" as the best we can do.

35 See the excellent survey of the evidence by Beierwaltes, especially 353 where he shows how Hegel "denatures" the Plotinian One and elevates pure thought to the supreme goal of Plotinian philosophizing.

36 Ἐκαστὸν δὲ αὐτῶν νοῦς καὶ δὲ ἔστι καὶ τὸ σύμπαν πάξ νοῦς καὶ πάν ὅτι, ὁ μὲν νοῦς κατὰ τὸ νοεῖν ὑφιστάται τὸ δὲ, τὸ δὲ δὲ νῦν νοεῖσθαι τῷ νῷ διδόν τὸ νοεῖν καὶ τὸ εἶναι. Τὸ δὲ νοεῖν αἰτίων ἔλλα, δ καὶ τῷ ὅτι ἀμφότεροι οὐν ἢμα αἰτίων ἔλλα.

37 Lloyd 1990, 178. He identifies this explanation as specifying one aspect of Plotinus' idealism. Cp. the remarks of Dummett 1959, 185, which, though directed to the philosophy of mathematics, are analogous to Lloyd's description: "it seems that we ought to interpose between the platonist and constructivist picture an intermediate picture, say of objects springing into being in response to our probing. We do not make the objects but must accept them as we find them...but they were not already there for our statements to be true or false of before we carried out the investigations which brought them into being."
In light of the passage from v.1.4 (and others) Lloyd’s emphasis on noetic self-identity or, again, on the abolition of the subject-object distinction ignores the overarching causal efficacy of the One or Good in the generation of Intellect, as well as bracketing the role of the One in the mystical reversion.38 To oversimplify: Intellect’s self-knowledge or self-intellection is only one phase of its life, notwithstanding the universality of its noetic ἐνέργεια. The important distinction at vi.7.35.20-22 is relevant here: “Intellect ...has one power for thinking, by which it looks at the things in itself, and one by which it looks at what transcends it by a direct awareness and reception.” So even if there is a certain kind of mind-dependence in Plotinus’ intelligible world, viz. its self-reflexivity, this is only part of the picture. Even within the intelligible sphere the priority of Being to thought is asserted rather strongly.39 For the full picture we still have to reckon with the crucial fact in Plotinus’ thought that the One, qua transcendent object of thought, is ontologically prior to Intellect (see v.4.2.5-13, v.9.5-7, vi.5.7.1-6).40 Add to this the emphasis throughout the Neoplatonic tradition on the First Principle’s utter inexpressibility and transcendence of all categories and thought (in Plotinus cf. especially vi.7.37-41), any interpretation suggesting that at the highest level reality is mind-dependent or is a form of thought is misleading.41 In the end there is a fundamental difference between the reality of the One and the activity of thought.42

38 See my 1988, 159-71.
39 “For its self-directed activity is not substance, but being is that to which the activity is directed and from which it comes: for that which is looked at is being, not the look; but the look, too, possesses being, because it comes from and is directed to being” (Ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἐνέργεια ἢ εἰς αὐτὸν ύπὸ ὑποστάσεις, εἰς δὲ δὲ καὶ ἄρ’ ὑπό, τὸ δὲ τὸ γὰρ βλέπομενον τὸ δὲν, οὐχ ἡ βλέψις· ἔχει δὲ καὶ αὐτὴ τὸ εἶναι, δεὶ ἄρ’ ὑπὸ καὶ εἰς δὲν, δεν. vi.2.814-16).
40 On this point and with respect to the question of whether or not the Neoplatonists are idealists, I think Proclus’ position is very similar to Plotinus’. At Elements of Theology §161 Proclus argues that “while the Intelligence is an existent because of primial Being, this primial Being is itself separate from the Intelligence, because Intelligence is posterior to Being.” Proclus’ “primial Being” plays, roughly, the causal role in his system that the One-as-intelligized does in Plotinus’; for the differences between Proclus’ primial being and Plotinus’ noetic being, i.e. internal to Intellect, cf. Dodds 1963, 281, 285.

In his exhaustive discussion of Socrates’ suggestion to Parmenides that perhaps the Forms are thoughts (Parm. 132b), Proclus drives home from every possible angle both the transcendence of thought by a higher kind of being and the causal interdependence of a lower kind of being and thought within Intellect; cf. Proclus in Parm. 891-901. In short, Proclus’ view is close to that of Plotinus’ at v.1.4.26-31 and vi.2.8.14-16.

41 Lloyd is quite aware of these fundamental claims but, again, invests them with little weight—if I correctly understand the following elliptical and very compressed statement: “Since Intellect is what is thought as well as the thinking, we can infer that what is thought and what exists presuppose something which is neither thought nor existence. This is the second fact which has a bearing on Plotinus’ idealism. For ‘existence’—more commonly translated as ‘being’—has here the connotation which is appropriate to idealism, namely of being a distinct object of thought. But so far from exhausting the realist’s notion of ‘existence’ this has turned out to require there to be something which does not, in Plotinus’ and the realist’s terms, exist. At any rate, this something can have no fixed and concrete properties (for otherwise it would be an object of thought) but is there” (1990, 179).

42 Though his discussion is brief and general, Burnyeat’s claim that we don’t really find “idealism” among the Neoplatonists is largely justified on the grounds that (i) the duality between subject and object is not overcome on the level of the Intellect; and (ii) even if everything were reducible to the One, still we would not have a monism of mind. See Burnyeat 1982, 18.
Bibliography


—. 1963. Elementatio Theologica. see E.R. Dodds.


argument (353e; cf. 389a). Although this disengagement vitiates the educational function of the elenchus, it frees Socrates to take the argument wherever he wishes, winning Thrasymachus' "agreement", for example, to the proposition that justice is the excellence of the soul (353e).

At the beginning of book 2, Plato dissociates the arguments to be refuted from the personal character and beliefs of the interlocutors in a different way, by giving Glaucon and Adeimantus the role of devil's advocates. Unlike Thrasymachus, who claimed to care about the question at issue (344e), but withdrew from sincere participation in the argument, Plato's brothers are committed to the argument, but not to the views under scrutiny. By making an eloquent case for a position they do not believe in, they illustrate the positive value of intellectual disengagement. Socrates confesses that his aporia, caused by the brothers' dissatisfaction with his elenctic arguments, is exacerbated by their own detachment from the views they have put forward for his refutation (368ab). Since these are not their own views, he cannot use the elenchus to pick them apart and prove them inconsistent with the brothers' other convictions. He cannot refute the interlocutors themselves, in the elenctic manner, but must show what is wrong with these views regardless of who holds them. As Socrates says to Phaedrus in the Phaedrus, "To you perhaps it makes a difference who the speaker is and where he is from. For you do not consider this alone, whether what he says is or is not the case." "A justifiable rebuke," says Phaedrus (Phdr. 275bc).

Glauccon and Adeimantus' philosophical talents equip them to serve as effective devil's advocates, who can not only criticize a point of view but defend it as persuasively as possible, in order to give it a fair hearing. In this role they restate Thrasymachus' most serious charges against Socrates and his method. They do not accuse him of dishonesty. They understand that his irony is not, as Thrasymachus thinks (337a), a form of dissembling (cf. 362e1). Yet they are no more convinced than Thrasymachus is by his arguments (358b, 368b). When Glauccon complains that Thrasymachus was silenced prematurely (358b), he implies that Socrates might have fared less successfully with a different interlocutor. Though Plato's brothers never accuse Socrates of cheating, their restatement of Thrasymachus' views implies that Socrates' focus on a particular interlocutor has allowed him to get away with arguments which might not survive more rigorous scrutiny. As late as book 6, Adeimantus will recall the discomfort experienced by those respondents who cannot gainsay Socrates' arguments yet feel they have been led astray by them (487bc). To prevent such discontent, the case for justice must be made not just in a way that silences the interlocutor, but in the most convincing manner possible. This includes refuting not merely the interlocutor's arguments but the best arguments by the best speakers. Socrates obliquely acknowledges this when he claims to be defeated by Glauccon's case for injustice (362d), applauds the brothers' eloquence (368a), and confesses the magnitude of his task in face of their dissatisfaction with his previous arguments (368bc).

Glauccon and Adeimantus also restate Thrasymachus' other main complaint—that Socrates refuses to give a positive account of his own views. Of the three interlocutors scrutinized in book 1, only Thrasymachus tries to make Socrates in turn examine his ideas and assumptions about the subject under discussion. He points out that it is easier to ask questions than to answer them (336c; cf. 337e), demands a positive definition of justice (336cd), and sneers at Socrates' "wisdom" for its lack of positive teaching (338b). At one point, he declares that he dislikes the argument and could answer it, but that Socrates would call his argument demagoguery (350d). In other words, he remains unconvinced not only by the argument but by a method which eschews substantial speeches. His own positive statements, including a long oration, are presented only to be picked apart by the elenchus. But whatever his faults, he does at least put forward substantive

---

62 Cf. Blundell 147 n. 74.
63 Socrates explicitly distinguishes their character (tropos) from their logoi (368b).
64 Throughout his speech Glauccon makes it clear that he does not agree with the views he is expressing (e.g. 358c, 359b, 360c5, 360c8, 360d2, 360d4, 361e). Adeimantus does likewise (367a).
ideas about justice. Socrates' brand of argument in book 1 is essentially critical and negative, and as such is not a successful source of positive moral conviction. Even Polemarchus learns only to criticize (cf. 335e).

Like Thrasymachus, Glaucon and Adeimantus demand a substantial exposition of Socrates' own views on justice. A convincing defence of justice requires some positive substitute for Thrasymachus' position, some substantive advice on "how to live the most profitable life" (344e, cf. 352d). The brothers make the case for injustice as vehemently as possible in order to elicit this kind of response (358bcd, 367ab). Glaucon wants to hear such an account from Socrates in particular (358d), and Adeimantus regards him as having a special responsibility to provide one, because he (Socrates) has devoted his life to this question (367d, 506b). Adeimantus even links Socrates with other self-styled "praisers of justice", all of whom have failed to provide young men like himself with a satisfactory account of justice and its consequences (366d-67a). The brothers are thus challenging not only the arguments of book 1, but the efficacy of Socrates' method generally as a means of discovering and teaching moral truth. The elenctic Socrates is accustomed to scrutinizing the lives of others, but now his own way of life is on trial. This time the jury is composed not of hostile or indifferent fellow-citizens, but of men who share his philosophical concerns, including several talented and impressionable youths whose own lives may hang in the balance.

Book 1 concludes with Socrates declaring that they must find out what justice is before investigating what it is like (354b). The question and the methodological stricture are both typical of the elenctic dialogues. But after Glaucon and Adeimantus have issued their challenge at the beginning of book 2, the question is pursued quite differently, and the methodological stricture abandoned. Plato makes Socrates voice positive and sustained ideas concerning the nature of justice, thus tacitly granting some legitimacy not only to Glaucon and Adeimantus' dissatisfaction, but to Thrasymachus' complaints about the negativity of the elenchus. Once Socrates turns to a new method, and starts to develop his own substantial theories, Thrasymachus is converted into an attentive, interested and even friendly listener (450a; cf. 498cd). Positive and successful dialectic requires cooperative interlocutors, but conversely, an intransigent interlocutor is more likely to cooperate when his own legitimate concerns are addressed. In book 1 Socrates adapted his manner, but not his method, to each respondent. Now he has conformed much more drastically and successfully to Thrasymachus' needs.

In their challenge to Socrates, then, Glaucon and Adeimantus not only question the adequacy of his arguments, but cast doubt on certain aspects of his method. Just as their speeches purport to restate Thrasymachus' philosophical position, their dissatisfaction with book 1 endorses some of his complaints against the Socratic method, in particular its negativity and its exploitation of the interlocutor's philosophical weaknesses. Their admirable phusis and firm convictions enhance the significance of this dissatisfaction. That such philosophically talented interlocutors take Thrasymachus' ideas seriously shows the extent of the threat he poses. That they find Socrates' refutation inadequate poses serious questions about the efficacy of his method. That they adopt Thrasymachus' own method—the long rhetorical discourse—suggests that Socrates' rejection of such methods was at best premature. The gadfly turns out to be an inadequate teacher not only for the ill-tempered sophist, but for Plato's brothers as well.

Glaucnon and Adeimantus' dissatisfaction with Socrates' methods, combined with Plato's own change of tactics, also suggests another kind of criticism of book 1. In that book, Plato represents Thrasymachus' response to the slipperiness of Socrates' arguments not as a legitimate

65 Cf. Annas Republic 39.
66 This may be in part attributed to Socrates' gentleness and good will (so Patterson 341-2), but his gentleness accomplishes little in book 1, where Thrasymachus remains harshly sarcastic to the end (354a).
uneasiness, but as crass and offensive rudeness which discredits the sophist personally. He allows Socrates to exploit his role as narrator to portray Thrasymachus as a contemptible beast, while at the same time subjecting him to an editorial mockery which belittles his objections (e.g. 336b, d, 344d). Socrates also interprets his interlocutor's motives for us, telling us, for example, that Thrasymachus has been "made angry by the logos" (336d)—when otherwise we might be forgiven for supposing that he had been made angry by Socrates. Later he informs us that Thrasymachus' reluctance to speak was a pretence, when he "clearly" wanted to show off (338a). This kind of interpretation of the sophist's motives undermines the legitimacy of his rage at what he experiences as philosophical sharp practice.

In response to Thrasymachus' other main charge, that his method is too negative, Socrates intimates that he would have given a positive definition of justice if he could, but that Thrasymachus prevented him (337abc, 337e, 339ab). Plato thus deploys Thrasymachus in such a way as to suggest that Socrates does have a positive account to give, even though this sits uneasily with his habitual claim to know nothing (cf. 337e, 354c). Once again Plato uses literary means (a blocking character) to evade a serious methodological challenge. In both cases, the resources of dramatic characterization rather than philosophical argument are mobilized to exonerate Socrates by belittling and discrediting his opponent.

But the intervention of Glaucon and Adeimantus suggests that any such criticisms of Socrates should be evaluated independently of the character of those who utter them. By introducing his brothers as talented, eloquent and good-natured spokesmen for injustice, Plato implicitly criticizes not only Socratic practice, but his own literary practice in representing it. Socrates himself may not be guilty of dialectical dishonesty, but Plato may still be guilty of allowing him too easy a victory. It is equally unfair to give Socrates a respondent who caves in too easily, like Polemarchus (cf.336c), and a feisty but dialectically incompetent opponent like Thrasymachus. As Glaucon puts it, the silencing of Thrasymachus is merely an appearance of persuasion (357ab), for Plato has allowed him to be prematurely "charmed like a snake" (358b).

It is also unfair to counter unpalatable ideas by discrediting the personality of the messenger. The literary strategy of book 1 suggested that Thrasymachus' peculiarly offensive character is inseparable from his ethics. But according to Plato's brothers, it is not just Thrasymachus who holds such views, but all kinds of ordinary people as well. They link Thrasymachus and his ideas (358b, 367a, 367c) with the anonymous multitude of those who value justice only for its consequences (358a, 358c2, c6, 358c, 361e, 366b), including fathers and guardians (362e), ordinary people and their leaders (366b), begging priests (364b-e) and poets (363e etc), ancient heroes and even Socrates himself (366de). The brothers blur the distinctions between a range of different ethical positions, but by doing so they link Thrasymachus with the consequentialism of ordinary inoffensive people such as Cephalus. Such views therefore cannot be impugned by focusing on the personal unpleasantness of this particular spokesman. Moreover this technique is unsuccessful. The presence of Cleitophon shows that Thrasymachus has admirers despite his deplorable manners (cf. Cleit. 410c), and even Glaucon and Adeimantus are subject to his influence. Plato therefore offers us retrospectively a new way of reading book 1, one which resists his own prejudicial use of characterization. He makes Glaucon and Adeimantus re-present Thrasymachus' views as powerfully as possible, without ridicule, abuse, or any other attempt to discredit personally those who hold them. Only if the sophist's views are successfully refuted under these conditions can we be sure that his anger at Socrates—as opposed to the argument—is not well founded.

67 Contrast 336b with the way Polemarchus breaks into the argument (331d). The difference is conveyed largely by editorial description. Cf. also e.g. 337a.
69 For the similarity between Cephalus and Thrasymachus cf. Murphy 2.
III. Nodding Mandarins

Having said their say at the beginning of book 2, Glaucon and Adeimantus quickly lapse into their familiar roles as the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of ancient philosophy. There is a marked shift away from Plato's earlier dramatic style, with its full and lively characterization. Despite the occasional touch of color, none of the speakers is richly or idiosyncratically characterized. Glaucon and Adeimantus become for the most part indistinguishable yes-men. Socrates himself becomes less ironic, elusive and provocative in manner. Though he remains committed to cooperative dialectic, he also becomes more paternalistic, didactic and uniformly earnest in tone. He no longer attacks the unfounded wisdom of others, but presents himself, despite protestations of personal uncertainty, as a teacher trying to demonstrate his ideas (e.g. 392d, 595c5). He lays claim to "keener vision" than his interlocutors, and they in turn are happy to acknowledge his intellectual superiority (595c-96a; cf. 533a). All three of them agree that the task of defending justice belongs to Socrates. The enterprise has become unabashedly hierarchical, and this is reflected in Plato's use of literary form. Socrates' style becomes largely expository, punctuated by expressions of formulaic agreement from his respondents.

Despite this asymmetry, however, the atmosphere remains collaborative. Since all the participants are now committed to the same methods and goals, their dialectical interaction is no longer agonistic, in contrast to Socrates' conversation with Thrasymachus in book 1 (cf. 474ab). Glaucon and Adeimantus share Socrates' interests and convictions, they do not get affronted, and they never seem to weary of hearing him talk. Their own positive contribution is slight, but Socrates still treats them as full collaborators in the argument, eliciting their agreement at every step, and attributing even the most outlandish ideas to them as well as himself. The brothers accept this, with only the occasional trace of hesitation or self-consciousness. Even at their most passive, then, Socrates' respondents remain implicated in the argument by their acquiescence.

This is an important survival from the earlier Socratic method, but it imposes little restriction on Socrates' creativity, now that he is exploring his own ideas with the help of sympathetic and intelligent interlocutors. Rather than hampering Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus play the role of cheer-leaders, encouraging him in his daunting task, drawing him out on obscure points, and preventing him from getting away with things. The question is no longer how Socrates can best aid the interlocutor by clarifying his ideas, but how the interlocutor can best aid Socrates by answering, as Glaucon puts it, "more harmoniously than another" (474a; cf. 475e, 595b). It is this kind of sympathetic support that enables Socrates to run the risk of the exposure entailed by positive discourse (cf. 473e-74b, 450a-51b), the same risk that Thrasymachus jeered at him for avoiding (336c, 337e, 338b). His highly speculative and controversial ideas are greeted with support and admiration rather than the sceptical questioning of the elenchus.

But Glaucon and Adeimantus are not entirely uncritical. From time to time they slip into their earlier role of devil's advocate (e.g. 419a, 487bcd). This enables them to voice the objections

---

71 Cf. 358d, 367d, 368bc, 427de, 449b-50a, 506b.
72 Cf. Annas Republic 59.
73 E.g. 371c, 372a, 381c, 394d, 398e-99a, 400a, 402d.
74 Cf. 389a, 396b10/c4, 432d, 475a, 597a8-9.
75 E.g. 369b, 374e, 376cd, 427de, 449b-51b, 471e-72b, 473ab.
77 Cf. Meno 57de, Euthyd. 282c, Th. 185e, Parm. 137b.
of ordinary people without personal commitment, and so ensure that their habitual agreement does not allow Socrates to evade the larger challenge posed at the beginning of book 2. Only in book 9 does Glaucon finally surrender on behalf of the champion of injustice (590a). The brothers also voice occasional objections of their own (e.g. 372cd), but never in a hostile or personally offensive manner. Such friendly objections are entirely proper to the dialectical character, suggesting as they do close engagement and intellectual vigor. Plato uses these moments to facilitate the development of the argument. Glaucon's objection to the "city of pigs" (372cd), for example, is not really an obstacle, but prompts the necessary further development of the ideal state. And after making such objections, the brothers always accept Socrates' further explanations. Their more frequent—and often well justified—failures to catch the drift of his argument show that they have been paying attention, while obliging Socrates to clarify and develop his ideas.

These simultaneous changes in Plato's dramatic style and Socrates' dialectical method may be viewed as a response to the limitations of the elenchus, some of which emerged from book 1. One of the most serious of these problems with the earlier method was its negativity. As Guthrie and many others have suggested, the move towards positive exposition prompted Plato to provide Socrates with a broader canvas on which to develop his ideas. But this alone is not enough to account for the stylistic changes. The construction of the ideal state could have been a lively, cooperative venture, with real objections raised and discussed, and real contributions from several individualized characters. Instead, Plato makes little effort to differentiate the interlocutors and seems to willfully bypass opportunities for them to shine (e.g. 375d).

What made the earlier dramatic style uniquely appropriate to the Socratic method, however, was the personal character of the elenchus, its rootedness in the individual character of each interlocutor and their personal interactions with Socrates. As Plato moves away from this method, the lively characterization of the earlier style is no longer necessary. Since Socrates is no longer engaged in refuting ideas as held by particular persons, the proper representation of the argument no longer requires individual characterization of the respondents. Indeed, as Plato abandons the elenchus, the personal dramatic style becomes not only irrelevant but a positive liability. For individual characterization privileges the kind of personal idiosyncrasy that interferes with philosophical progress and undermines the universality of the argument.

It is the elenctic Socrates' preoccupation with the particular which causes at least some of his failures. His method is rooted in the scrutiny of the individual soul, in the optimistic hope that each in turn can be converted to the philosophic life. If he constantly fails, and succeeds primarily in alienating others, that is because his "testing" (a basic meaning of elenchos) is ironically one which shows up the particular weaknesses of character and intellect that incapacitate most people for such a life. His egalitarian search for the potential wisdom in respondents of all kinds seems doomed to failure.\(^7^9\) It also distracts him from developing his own ideas and making the most of his unparalleled philosophical skill and creativity. The method of Plato's later Socrates thus becomes not only more impersonal, but more didactic, authoritarian and hierarchical. Socrates is no longer testing idiosyncratic individuals for their philosophical potential, but trying to construct a positive argument of his own. He has been wasting his time talking to just anyone he happens to meet. He needs as interlocutors not flawed individuals but talented and sympathetic philosophy students, whose characters will show under what circumstances such positive progress can take place.

This new kind of dialectic still calls in principle for a sympathetic response to the individual interlocutor. But in practice, as we have seen, positive and cooperative dialectic calls for qualities which militate against individuality. If Socrates' respondents have all the necessary qualities for success at dialectic, he no longer needs to tailor his method to their particular needs. We must

\(^7^9\) For Socrates' willingness to tackle anyone indiscriminately cf. Apol. 29d, 30a.
therefore content ourselves with cardboard renditions of mutually interchangeable philosophy students. That is why Glaucon and Adeimantus are, as characters, virtually indistinguishable. What matters about them is not their idiosyncrasies, but their philosophical receptiveness, which is no longer a personal matter but appears identically in both of them. (Perhaps it was to make this point that Plato bothered to use two interlocutors at all.) If Glaucon and Adeimantus are uninteresting, it is not because Plato no longer cares about the qualities required for successful philosophizing, but because he has come to see those qualities as essentially uniform, and has become correspondingly suspicious of the kind of personal idiosyncrasies with which the elenctic Socrates wrestled in his opponents.

In speaking of Glaucon and Adeimantus’ philosophical talents, however, I have neglected one important fact—their lack of intellectual flair and creativity. They have the necessary character traits to serve as useful interlocutors for the newly creative Socrates. They also display many of the intellectual qualities required for dialectic, such as quick comprehension and a good memory. But they are not yet ready for the higher reaches of dialectic.87 As Socrates approaches the topic of the Good, he worries about misleading his interlocutors with inadequate explanations (506c-507a; cf. 504b-e). When he reaches a point where Glaucon will be able to follow him no further, he cuts his discourse short (533a; cf. 534b). Further dialectical progress requires rigorous propaedeutic studies in mathematics and astronomy (533a). Socrates’ bland and receptive students have yet to graduate from cheer-leading to creative autonomy. They have reached the limits of their current comprehension, and in doing so have finally imposed some constraints upon Socrates’ philosophizing.

The fact that Glaucon and Adeimantus have so little to contribute reflects Plato’s pessimism about the natural, social and educational conditions which may succeed in fostering the growth of a true philosopher. They have made a promising start, but the argument of the Republic, as well as its form, indicates just how far they still have to go. Yet even if they have not yet gained access to the truth, they still exemplify the character needed by one who wishes to work towards it. As such, the reader can and should identify with them and emulate their philosophical virtues, including the determination to keep on striving for something that may lie forever beyond our reach. Glaucon and Adeimantus themselves may perhaps seem too acquiescent—too stuck at the primary stage of the guardians’ education—ever to attain that goal. But even their most wooden responses invite resistance from the reader, by leaving us space to question what they unhesitatingly accept. Even in the later books, then, Plato’s use of dramatic form helps to lure us beyond simple acquiescence to pedagogical authority. In doing so, it invites us to identify with our other character model, Socrates himself, who exemplifies a higher level of philosophical creativity and insight. By offering us both teacher and students as models, Plato displaces onto his dramatic characters the tension between authoritarian dogmatism and creative autonomy which pervades his work.

Glaucon and Adeimantus, then, play a more interesting role than is at first sight apparent. However much we may regret the replacement of the colorful interlocutors who inhabit book 1 with the bland yes-men of books 2-10, we must not underestimate the philosophical significance of Plato’s changing cast of characters.

---

87 Glaucon seems to be familiar with the theory of Forms (475e), but this does not mean he has glimpsed the Forms himself.
WORKS CITED

Gill, C. "Plato and the education of character," *Arch. für Gesch. der Phil.* 67 (1985) 1-26
Jowett, B. and L. Campbell (eds), *Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1894) [= J/C]
Murphy, N.R. *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1951)
Patterson, R. "Plato on philosophic character," *JHP* 25 (1987) 325-50
Vlastos, G. 'The Socratic elenchus', *OSAP* 1 (1983) 27-58
--------. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca 1991)