

Badness, Plotinus on Evil¹

ANNE SHEPPARD AND JOHN DILLON*

1. Platonic Approaches to the Problem of Evil

Before approaching the position on the nature of Evil taken up by Plotinus himself, it is necessary to review, at least briefly, the positions on this subject taken up by Plato and various of his chief earlier followers, as Plotinus will be necessarily drawing upon, or reacting to, these.

To begin with Plato himself, in a well-known passage of the *Republic* (II 379c), he presents Socrates as uttering the following:

Since God is good, he cannot be responsible for everything, as is commonly said. He is responsible for only a small part of human life, and many things cannot be attributed to him – I mean, there's far more bad than good in the world. He and he alone must be held responsible for the good things, but responsibility for bad things must be looked for elsewhere, and not attributed to God. (trans. Waterfield)

He then goes on to criticise such distinguished poets as Homer and Aeschylus for attributing to Zeus or others of the Olympian gods responsibility for various types of evil. The most that Socrates will allow to the agency of God is punishment for human bad behaviour designed to make the recipient better (380bc).

Furthermore, in a notable passage of the *Theaetetus* (176a), Socrates declares, “Evils, Theodorus, can never be done away with, for the good must always have its contrary; nor have they any place in the divine world, but they must needs haunt this region of our mortal nature.”

Again, in the *Statesman*, in the context of the myth of the two world orders (373b-d), mention is made of the world's “previous state” and

¹ The bulk of the paper, which concerns Plotinus, is the work of Anne Sheppard and is drawn from the *Introduction* to her forthcoming translation and commentary in the Parmenides Press Plotinus series on the treatise I.8 of Plotinus. The introductory portion of the article is contributed by John Dillon. The reuse of some material from the *Introduction* was made possible with the permission of Parmenides Publishing.

* Anne Sheppard, Professor Emerita of ancient philosophy at Royal Holloway, University of London, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham Surrey, TW20 0EX, UK, A.Sheppard@rhul.ac.uk; John Dillon, Regius Professor of Greek (Emeritus), Trinity College Dublin, Katounia, Thormanby Road, Baily, Howth, Dublin D13YD71, Ireland, dillonj@tcd.ie.

“ancient disharmony” (*palaia anharmonia*), which is always ready to reassert itself, reducing the world to evil and disorder; and, last but not least, in *Laws* X, 896d-898c, we find the troubling postulate that the world is ruled, not just by one, good soul, but by another as well, “of the opposite capacity.”

On the other hand, in the *Timaeus* (30a, and 52e–53a), the Receptacle, though portrayed as a source of disorderly motion, is really no more than the minimum postulate necessary to explain the diversity of a cosmos worthy of the name, that is, a system exhibiting the whole spectrum of possible varieties of being – even if some of them turn out to be not favourable to, or convenient for, us, and therefore “evil” to that extent.

Furthermore, if one ventures to adduce also the two chief cosmic principles postulated (according to Aristotle, *Met.* A 6, 927a29 ff.) in Plato’s “unwritten doctrines”, one can take it that the Indefinite Dyad, while in a certain sense antithetical to the One, is not to be viewed as in any way a positively evil principle. It is to be seen, rather, as simply the condition of there being a world at all – anything other than the absolute and self-sufficient simplicity of the One. The role of this latter entity will become, I think, a concept of basic importance for Plotinus’ world view, though he is, presumably for “strategic” reasons, unwilling ever to acknowledge its existence explicitly, preferring – as notably in *Ennead* V 2, 1 – to speak simply of an “overflowing” of the One that, in successive stages, produces the cosmos, including the various degrees of imperfection that progressively arise, as the cosmic process completes itself, down to the level of Matter.

2. Earlier Platonist Views on Matter: Plutarch, Atticus, Numenius

The question of the origin and nature of evil is thus left open, and it is a question that Plato and his successors continue to grapple with down the centuries between Plato himself and his distinguished follower Plotinus, in the third century A.D. The prevailing tendency, indeed, in the “Middle Platonic” period of the first and second centuries A.D., just preceding Plotinus, as represented by such figures as Plutarch, Atticus and Numenius, was firmly dualist. In his work *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus*, which takes the form of an extended commentary on *Timaeus* 35a-36b, Plutarch adduces the troublesome passage of *Laws* X mentioned above (a passage, we may note, which is ignored by Plotinus)

to argue that there are two world souls, one good and one bad, the bad being responsible for evil in the world and in individual souls. Atticus, like Plutarch (as we learn from Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, I 381, 26ff. Diehl), argues that, for the Receptacle of the *Timaeus* (which is matter) to be in disorderly motion implies that it is driven by a Maleficent (*kakergetis*) Soul (“for whence could motion come, if not from soul?”), which is duly brought to order by the World Soul. Numenius, in turn, as reported by Calcidius (Numenius, Fr. 52 Des Places) holds that evil is due to Matter, which he takes to be an independent principle, to be identified with the Pythagorean Indefinite Dyad, co-ordinate with, and not subordinate to, the Monad.

3. The Theory of Matter in Plotinus

This dualistic tendency in the Platonic tradition is one to which Plotinus is firmly opposed, as indeed he is opposed to the dualistic tendencies of the Gnostic sects with which he was familiar, and certain adherents of which would seem to have attended his seminars (Porphyry. *Vit. Plot.* Ch. 16), specifically their view that the world in which we live is the product of an error by a lesser divine being, the Gnostic “Demiurge”, and is therefore essentially evil. His treatise “Against the Gnostics” (*Enn.* II 9) – itself only the last segment of a large treatise divided up by Porphyry into four (III 8, V 8, and V 5, as well as II 9), and actually given the alternative title by Porphyry in chapter 23 of the *Life* as “Against those who say that the Universe and its Maker are evil” – is an explicit attack on this variety of dualism.

Plotinus’ most comprehensive treatment of the problem of the nature of evil occurs in his late treatise, *Ennead* I 8, “On what are and whence come evils” (*Peri tou tina kai pothen ta kaka*), and it is on that that we shall focus in this essay.

There has been considerable scholarly discussion over the interpretation of I.8. Dispute has focused on the question of how far this treatise is consistent with the views about evil, matter and the soul found in earlier treatises of Plotinus. The interpretation which we shall present here is essentially that which Denis O’Brien has argued for and defended in numerous publications from 1971 onwards.² As we have seen, Plotinus

² See in particular Denis O’Brien, “Plotinus on Evil: A Study of Matter and the Soul in Plotinus’ Conception of Human Evil,” in *Le Néoplatonisme: Royaumont 9–13 Juin 1969* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971), 113–46;

wishes to avoid the kind of dualism espoused by Numenius as well as to distance himself from the views of the Gnostics. Although he regards matter as evil, he does not believe that it is an independent principle, of equal status with the Good. He uses Plato's *Sophist* in Chapter 3 and Aristotle's *Categories* in Chapter 6 to argue that evil has a peculiar metaphysical status: it "is not" in the sense that it is "other than what is" and exists as a contrary to the Good. This allows Plotinus to recognize the existence of evil in the world (and indeed to regard such existence as inevitable, as Socrates does in Plato's *Theaetetus*), but at the same time to insist that the Good is primary and that even evil depends upon it.

In identifying evil with matter, Plotinus is identifying it with the lowest level in a world ultimately derived from the Good. Each level in Plotinus' metaphysical system is generated by the level prior to it. Thus the Good (the One) generates Intellect, and Intellect generates Soul. (See V.1.6–7, V.2.1, V.4.2.) The One and Intellect generate by a kind of "overflowing" which is also described, somewhat paradoxically, in terms of a lower hypostasis turning back towards a higher one and contemplating it. So, for example, in V.2.1, 7–18 Plotinus writes:

The One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing and needs nothing, overflows, as it were ... and its superabundance makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back upon the One and is filled, and becomes Intellect by looking towards it ... Resembling the One thus, Intellect produces in the same way ... This activity springing from the substance of Intellect is Soul, which comes to be while Intellect abides unchanged.

Soul too generates, but not in quite the same way, as Plotinus goes on to explain in V.2.1, 18–21: "But Soul does not abide unchanged when it produces ... It looks to its source and is filled, and going forth to another opposed movement generates its own image." This image is nature, the power which animates the physical world in a way which is described in III.8 as a kind of contemplation; this forms part of Plotinus' argument against the Gnostic view of the world as evil.³ In III.4.1 Plotinus describes how nature, as the lowest level of soul, also generates. Its product,

idem, *Théodicée plotinienne, théodicée gnostique* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); idem, "Plotinus on Matter and Evil," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 171–95.

³ For a brief account of what Plotinus means by "nature," with references to further passages of the *Enneads*, see: Dominic J. O'Meara, *Plotinus. An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 77.

matter, is described as “lifeless,” “shapeless,” and “absolutely indefinite.” In III.9.3, 7–16 the generation of matter is ascribed to “the partial soul” which “wishing to be directed towards itself ... makes an image of itself, the non-existent, as if walking on emptiness and becoming more indefinite.”

These passages present matter in very passive terms; similarly, in II.4.5, 18 matter is described as merely “a decorated corpse.” A few passages in I.8 appear to describe matter in more active terms. This has led some interpreters to argue that I.8 is closer to dualism than earlier treatises.⁴ However, it is clear from I.8.2 and 3 that Plotinus’ overall view of the place of matter and evil in his system remains the same as before.⁵ He uses the vivid imagery of passages such as 4, 20–25, 8, 13–24 and 14, 35–36 at points where he is particularly concerned to argue that evil is not intrinsic to the soul and that without the existence of matter, there would be no evil. Such imagery should not be taken at face value.

Matter, then, for Plotinus, is evil in the sense that it is a necessary cause of the inevitable existence of evil in the world, but it does not produce evil on its own. Rather, in his view, evil arises from the interaction of matter with the individual soul. In some passages in earlier treatises Plotinus writes as though souls are responsible for cutting themselves off from the intelligible world. We have seen above that the account of the generation of matter in III.9.3, 7–16 describes the partial soul as “wishing to be directed towards itself.” Similarly, V.1.1, 1–6 declares that “the beginning of evil for them [souls] was audacity (*tolma*)... and the wishing to belong to themselves.” However, he offers what looks like a rather different view in treatise IV.8, where moral evil is treated as a product of the soul’s association with the body rather than as the cause of that association. In IV.8.5, 24–33 he describes the soul as descending “by a spontaneous inclination”, but says that “if it escapes quickly it takes no harm,” while in the previous chapter, at 4, 13–30, he explains how “being in the fetters of the body” prevents the soul from “acting by intellect.” The view for which Plotinus argues in I.8 is similar to that presented in IV.8.

⁴ See especially Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer, “Zu Plotins Deutung der sogenannten platonischen Materie,” in *Zetesis: Bijdragen op het Gebied van de Klassieke Filologie, Filosofie, Byzantinistiek Patrologie en Theologie – Door Collega’s en Vrienden Aangeboden aan Prof. Emile de Strijcker naar Aanleiding van zijn Vijfenzestigste Verjaardag* (Antwerpen–Utrecht: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1973), 266–80.

⁵ See *Enneades* II.4.16, 16–25; *Ibidem*, III.2.5, 26–29; *Ibidem*, III.6.11, 27–45 with the comments in Barrie Fleet, *Plotinus: Ennead III.6, Greek Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 206–8; *Enneades* V.9.10, 18–20.

The language used in III.9.3, 7–16 and V.1.1, 1–6 reflects the context of those passages: in III.9 he is more concerned with the generation of matter by the partial soul than with how evil arises, while in V.1 he starts from the situation of the fallen soul, which is like a child estranged from its parents. The use of the word “audacity” (*tolmā*) there does suggest that the soul’s descent is voluntary – but a related verbal form, *tolmēsas* (“daring”), also appears in I.8.9, 18. For Plotinus, the voluntary and the necessary do not exclude one another. In IV.8.5 he attempts to explain how souls voluntarily accept what is necessarily laid upon them, ascribing the descent of souls to a god in line 13, but referring, as we have seen, to “a spontaneous (*autexousios*) inclination” in line 26.⁶

In I.8 Plotinus’ position is most fully expounded towards the end of the treatise, in Chapter 14, but is also implied in earlier chapters. Souls descend from the intelligible realm and enter into bodies. Here they are in the presence of matter, the necessary cause of evil. Some souls become “infected” by contact with matter, to use Plotinus’ own metaphor in 4, 22 and 8, 16, and thus turn to evil. The fact that these souls are open to such infection, although not the cause of their becoming evil, is nevertheless a sufficient condition for it: they would not become evil if they were not liable to infection. but if they are so liable, becoming evil is bound to follow once they are in the presence of matter. The evil in such souls is thus due both to matter and to their own state. Nevertheless, just as not everyone who comes in contact with an infectious disease falls ill, so not all souls turn to evil and the soul is not intrinsically evil; it is always possible for a soul to turn in the other direction, back towards its intelligible source, as Plotinus stresses in 15, 23–28.

4. Conclusion

Plotinus’ position is thus complex, but consistent both within I.8 and throughout his work. He avoids both the Scylla of the view found in Plutarch, that there is an evil world soul, and the Charybdis of the view found in both Numenius and the Gnostics, that matter is an independent, evil principle. He does his best to preserve a belief in the dependence of all things on a single, supremely good First Principle, while admitting that there is evil in the world. He offers a subtle account of the origin of

⁶ See also Michael Atkinson, *Plotinus: Ennead V.1, Greek Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 4–6.

evil in the soul as caused not by either the soul or matter on its own but by the combination of the two. However, his position is open to criticism on two, related grounds. First of all, one might ask whether Plotinus' ingenious account of how matter can be evil and yet ultimately generated by the Good is really coherent. Secondly, he can be criticized for failing to offer an adequate explanation, either in I.8 or elsewhere, for the descent of the soul into body. It has been pointed out that for Plotinus, as for Aristotle and the Stoics, action can be voluntary without being chosen and that he is quite happy to describe the descent of the soul as both voluntary and necessary.⁷ While this makes it possible for Plotinus to reconcile the different approaches to the descent of the soul found in different Platonic dialogues, it does not solve the problem of how far souls which allow themselves to become "infected" by matter are responsible for what happens to them. In III.2.4, 36–44 he says that "living beings which have of themselves a movement under their own control (*autexousios*) might incline sometimes to what is better, sometimes to what is worse", and describes how "a deviation which is slight to begin with" may produce "a settled choice (*hairesis*)."⁸ This passage suggests a similar account to that offered in I.8 of how a soul may become evil but, like I.8, still leaves it unclear how far the soul is responsible for inclining one way or another.

Overall, however, our conclusion must be that Plotinus' doctrine of evil is monist rather than dualist; he is not prepared to allow that there is any other principle in the universe independent of, and antithetical to, the Good, or the One. Evil is merely the incidental consequence of there being a universe at all.

⁷ See *Enneades* IV.8.1, 29–48; *Ibidem*, IV.8.5, 1–4 and *Ibidem*, IV.3.13, 14–20 with the discussion by O'Brien, "Le volontaire et la nécessité: réflexions sur la descente de l'âme dans la philosophie de Plotin", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 167 (1977): 401–22.

⁸ See *Enneades* III.3.4, 47–48 and O'Meara, *Plotinus. An Introduction*, 85.