

Beyond Parhypostasis? A Negation of the Existence of Extra-Moral Evil in Proclus and its Contexts

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In a lecture entitled “How could one defend those divine myths that seemingly accuse the gods of being the cause of evils,”¹ held on Plato’s birthday,² Proclus expresses a view on evil and its ontological reality that seems to be at odds with his own elaborate theory of evil, as developed in the treatise *De malorum subsistentia* and sketched in several places of his Commentaries and the *Theologia Platonica*. This lecture of Proclus, which forms part of his “Commentary” on the *Politeia*, is an attempt to exculpate Homer from Plato’s severe criticism of the “immorality” of the Homeric gods,³ focusing on a place from the last rhapsody of the *Odyssey*, where the poet – at least as quoted by Plato⁴ – says that “two urns

1. “Πῶς ἂν τις ὑπὲρ τῶν θεῶν ἀπολογῆσαιτο μύθων τῶν δοκούντων τοὺς θεοὺς αἰτιᾶσθαι τῶν κακῶν,” *In Remp.* I 96 – 100, 18 ed. W. Kroll, Leipzig 1899-1901; it is the fourth chapter of a lengthy lecture with the title: “By Proclus the Successor [of Plato], about what is said in the *Politeia* concerning Homer and the art of poetry” (*Πρόκλον διαδόχον περὶ τῶν ἐν Πολιτεία πρὸς Ὀμηρον καὶ ποιητικὴν Πλάτωνι ῥηθέντων*, *In Remp.* I 69,20-1).

2. *In Remp.* I 69, 22 sqq.

3. Exculpating Homer was an essential task for Proclus, for whom the perennial truth that found its utmost, insuperable expression in Plato’s philosophy had also had an age-old literary tradition, hidden in the poetical form of Homer’s and Hesiod’s works, the Orphic hymns and others (see the introduction of the *Theologia Platonica*, where Proclus presents in summary his view of the history of true philosophy, according to which Homer is the father of the poetic and mythological line of the heritage of true philosophy, whereas Pythagoras is the father of the scientific-philosophical line of this heritage; see *Theologia Platonica* I 5 ed. H.-D. Saffrey/L.G. Westerink, *Théologie Platonicienne*, vol. 1, Paris 1968, p. 25, 24-26, 22; cf. Hierokles, who is probably a source of Proclus in this respect, apud Photios, *Bibliothèque* 214 ed. R. Henry, vol. 3, Paris 1962, 173a5-40; also cf. R. Lambertson, *Homer the Theologian. Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*, Berkeley 1986, 172-6; C. van Liefferinge, *Homère erre-t-il loin de la science théologique? De la rehabilitation du “divin” poète par Proclus*, in: *Kernos* 25 2002, 199-210; L.G. Westerink, *Proclus et les Présocratiques*, in: J. Pépin/H.D. Saffrey edd., *Proclus lecteur et interprète des anciens*, Paris 1987, 105-112. Accordingly, harmonising these works with Plato is the main objective of the *Theologia Platonica* and forms part of the exegetical agenda of Proclus’ commentaries.

4. *δοῦναι γὰρ τε πίθοι κατακείαται ἐν Διὸς οὐδει/Κηρῶν ἔμπλειοι ὁ μὲν ἐσθλῶν,*

are set on Zeus' threshold full of fates, the one of good, the other of bad (δειλῶν) ones". Proclus' apology of Homer could by no means be a direct rejection of Plato's criticism, of course, since Plato is for him above criticism, being himself the only measure to judge all other writers and ideas.⁵ For Proclus' apologetic strategy, Plato's criticism was per se correct, i.e., it rebuked a wrong idea with the right arguments, only that Homer was not the right addressee of this correct criticism, for in reality, he had never maintained the erroneous idea that the gods were the cause of evils. There had been a misunderstanding, no real incongruence, between the two most venerable classics of Proclus' own tradition.

Proclus explains that this misunderstanding was primarily due to two essentially different meanings (and understandings) of the notion of evil(s). We call "evil(s)" two very different sets of objects: On the one hand, actions deriving from human freedom of choice (προαίρεσις),⁶ on the other hand, natural procedures like sickness and death, natural calamities or even material conditions of life, such as poverty – all external to and independent from the human being's free will. However, only the first category is evil in the proper sense.⁷ As for the objects of the second category, they are not evil "for those who truly philosophise,"⁸ nor for God, of

ἀντάρ ὁ δειλῶν (Iliad Ω 527sq), according to Plato's (Rep. 379d) and Proclus' citation. This text of Plato's Homer-quotation – that could well be cited from memory – deviates substantially from the rest of textual tradition: the second verse reads in the edition of D.B. Monro/Th.W. Allen (Homeri opera, vol. 2, third edition, Oxford 1920): δῶρων οἷα δίδωσι κακῶν, ἔτερος δὲ ἑάων ("For two urns are set on Zeus' floor of gifts that he gives, the one of ills, the other of blessings", transl. by A.T. Murray/W.F. Wyatt, Homer, *Iliad. Books 13-24*, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, p. 601).

5. See e.g. *De mal. sub.* 1,18-20 (Procli opuscula, ed. H. Boese, Berlin 1960): "Above all and before all, we must get a grasp of Plato's doctrine on evil, for if we fall short on this theory, we opine that we will have achieved nothing" ("ἐφ' ἅπασιν δὲ et pre omnibus Platonis de ipso (sc. malo) doctrinam sumendum, ἢ μηδὲν πεπραγματεῦσθαι οἰόμεθα εἰ διαπέσοιμεν τῆς θεωρίας ἐκείνου") (transl. by J. Opsomer/C. Steel, Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, New York, 2003, p. 57, here slightly modified).

6. On προαίρεσις in Proclus see J.-P. Schneider, *La liberté dans la philosophie de Proclus*, [s.l.] 2010, 265-274 (<http://doc.rero.ch/record/20578?ln=fr>).

7. See *In Remp.* I 96,27-97,17, esp. 8-10: "They (sc. the Pythagoreans) do not use here (sc. in the συστοιχία transmitted by Aristotle. *Metaph.* 986a 24-26 [ed. W. Jaeger, Oxford 1957], i.e., as regards metaphysical and natural evil) evil in the same sense, as when we consent that the unjust and lewd habitus of the soul is evil" "οὐχ οὕτω τὸ κακὸν ἐνταῦθα δῆπου λέγουσιν, ὡς τὴν ἄδικον καὶ ἀκόλαστον τῆς ψυχῆς ἔξιν κακὸν ὁμολογοῦμεν ὑπάρχειν"; cf. *ibid.* 100,6-15.

8. *In Remp.* I 100, 10-11. To underpin this opinion, Proclus refers, strangely, to *Leges* 661b-d, ed. J. Burnet, Oxford 1907, where Plato says something quite different,

course.⁹ In reality, they are only an inferior kind of good, which is being fully integrated in the overall order governing the universe by the Intellect.¹⁰

This clear-cut Stoic distinction¹¹ declaring moral evil to be the only real evil and refusing the existence of natural and metaphysical evil, actually of any evil other than deriving from human free will/choice, contradicts, as already said, the thesis of Proclus' systematical treatise on the problem of evil, *De malorum subsistentia*. There, Proclus develops an elaborate theoretical "auxiliary structure" allowing him to postulate the existence of natural as well as of ethical evil, both conceived of as one phenomenon, while at the same time leaving undisturbed the strictly monistic character of his philosophical system, according to which all things ultimately derive, through a shorter or longer succession of causal mediations, from the absolutely good One.

This open contradiction to the *De malorum subsistentia* is not the only reason why Proclus' adoption of this Stoic rejection of the existence of non-ethical evil is interesting. Taking this step, Proclus departs from a fundamental principle – perhaps even *the* fundamental principle – of all ancient Platonist traditions, namely the unity of ontology and ethics. This unity implies, of course, that ethics cannot be simply separated from the rest of Being when discussing the problem of evil or any philosophical issue whatsoever. It is all the more puzzling, therefore, to see an author as zealous for both systematic coherence and loyalty to tradition as Proclus contradicting himself and at the same time deviating overtly from a Platonic axiom. This deep self-contradiction calls for an explanation: What theoretical (or other) necessities may

namely "that what are called 'evils' are good for the unjust, but evil for the just" (τὰ μὲν κακὰ λεγόμενα ἀγαθὰ τοῖς ἀδίκους εἶναι, τοῖς δὲ δίκαιους κακὰ) trans. G. Bury, Plato with an English translation IX, London/Cambridge, Mass. 1952.

9. In *Tim.* I 374, 8-9, ed. E. Diehl, Leipzig 1903-6: "for God nothing is evil, not even any of the things we describe as evil" (θεῷ μὲν οὐκ οὐδὲν ἐστὶ κακόν, οὐδὲ τῶν λεγομένων κακῶν) trans. D. Runia/M. Share, *Proclus, Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, vol. II, Cambridge 2008, p. 239.

10. In *Remp.* I 98, 16-22; In *Tim.* I 374, 27-375, 5. The Intellect is represented in *Timaeus* by the Platonic Demiourgos, according to Proclus.

11. On the Stoic influence on Proclus' theory of evil, see Opsomer, J. – Steel, C.: *Evil Without a Cause. Proclus' Doctrine on the Origin of Evil, and its Antecedents in Hellenistic Philosophy*, in: *Zur Rezeption der hellenistischen Philosophie in der Spätantike*, Trier 1997, 229-260 1997, at p. 260; cf. Steel, C.: *Proclus on the Existence of Evil*, in: *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy 1998 1999*, 83-109.

have brought Proclus to this point?

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: ITS INSOLUBLE DIFFICULTIES IN NEOPLATONISM AND PROCLUS' ATTEMPT TO SOLVE IT

Understanding this self-contradiction presupposes taking a step back to envisage the philosophical challenges that the problem of evil posed to Proclus' system and the way he faced these challenges in *De malorum subsistentia*.

The core difficulty that the philosophical definition of evil poses to Proclus is, as already mentioned, its apparent incompatibility with his – to an even higher degree than with the previous Neoplatonist tradition¹² – strict Monism. For Proclus holds that the entire being is (a) a chain of causes and effects (there is nothing without a cause),¹³ (b) hierarchically structured, so that every effect is inferior to its cause and superior to its own further effects,¹⁴ and (c) derives, lastly, from a single principle, the One that is absolutely Good or even beyond Good.¹⁵ At the same time, he acknowledges the existence of evil, which means that he is obliged to designate and classify this existence in ontological terms. For all other beings (or existing things) such a classification would consist in postulating its cause(s) and thus integrating and localising it in the causal chain of Being. Exactly this must be avoided by all means, though, in the case of evil(s): because integrating evil in this “normal” way, in the causal chain of Being, would mean making it, in the final analysis, an effect of the absolutely good One – something impossible, of course. The other straightforward solution would be to postulate a second underived principle beside the One and attribute to this principle the causation of evil(s); but this Dualist alternative was out of the question for Proclus, and

12. Cf. W. Beierwaltes, “Die Entfaltung der Einheit. Zur Differenz plotinischen und proklischen Denkens,” in: *Theta-Pi* 2, 1973, 126-161, XXX.

13. Plato's sentence, “without a cause it is impossible for anything to attain becoming” (*παντι γὰρ ἀδύνατον χωρὶς αἰτίου γένεσιν σχεῖν*) Plat. *Timaeus*, 28a 5-6, ed. J. Burnet, Oxford 1902. trans. R.G. Bury, *Plato with an English Translation*, vol. 7, London/Cambridge, Mass. 1952, p. 49-51, is an axiom of Proclus' thought; this sentence is commented upon in *In Tim.* I 262, 1-29, and referred to in *De mal. sub.* 50, 6-7. cf. Opsomer-Steel, *Evil Without a Cause*, 255.

14. See e.g. *Elem. Theol.* 25-27, ed. E.R. Dodds, Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 2nd edition, Oxford 1963, p. 29-33

15. Cf. L.J. Rosan, *The philosophy of Proclus – the final phase of ancient thought*, New York 1949, 100-1.

for post-Plotinian Platonism in general.

Facing this paramount difficulty, Proclus postulated an exception, or rather a set of exceptions, from his monistic system and the rules governing it. Unlike all existing things, evil(s) does not have a cause preceding it – and, thus, ontologically superior to it – in the causal chain of Being. Instead, it has an infinite, undefinable multitude of “causes”¹⁶ – thus causes that can only be termed metaphorically as such: causes and non-causes (*causis et non causis entibus*).¹⁷

What this position that evil things have no causes in the proper sense means, can be seen in the case of moral evil. Even if an evil human act, an immoral decision, is committed by a human soul, its cause is not soul as such – for the soul as such is derived by way of the Intellect from the One. Its cause(s) are innumerable different “mistakes” that share a common structure: a privation of and, at the same time, opposition to the noetic power of the soul renders the individual soul unable to discern what is really good for it (i.e., what fosters its existence and development) from what is only seemingly good, but in reality evil (i.e., damages its existence and development), resulting in choosing the latter over the former.¹⁸ It must be emphasized here that this object of the evil

16. The paradigmatic causes of evils are “unlimited and indeterminate and are borne along in other things –which are also unlimited themselves” (ἄπειρα καὶ ἀόριστα καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις φερόμενα, καὶ τούτοις ἀπείροις) *De mal. sub.* 48,19-20. trans. J. Opsomer/C. Steel, slightly modified.

17. *De mal. sub.* 50, 1-2. Opsomer-Steel, *Evil Without a Cause*, 253-255. Syrianus, Proclus’ teacher, had said that fate (τύχη) is an ἀναίτιος αἰτία (see *ibid.*); this *contradictio in adiecto* seems to have been the direct source of Proclus’ formulation about the causes of evils, “*causisque et non causis entibus*” (*De mal. sub.* 50, 1-2).

18. See *In Remp.* II, 276-8, esp. *In Remp.* II 278,2-6: “But when the soul prefers imagination instead of the intellect for the choice of a life, and the senses instead of reason, considering things necessary to be venerable, overseeing thereby truly good things, then it falls to the real evils; thus, the soul must blame its own judgements for the bad choices” (ὅταν τοίνυν ἀντι μὲν νοῦ ψυχῆ φαντασίαν ἐφέλκῃται πρὸς τὰς αἰρέσεις τῶν βίων, ἀντι δὲ λόγου τὴν αἴσθησιν, τὰ μὲν ἀναγκαῖα τίμια νομίζουσα, τὰ δὲ ἀληθινῶς ἀγαθὰ παρορῶσα, περιπετῆς γίνεται τοῖς ὄντως κακοῖς· καὶ οὕτω δὴ τὰς ἑαυτῆς ὀφείλει κρίσεις αἰτιάσθαι τῶν μοχθηρῶν αἰρέσεων...). This choice is the activity of the προαίρεσις, which is defined as the “rational power which aspires to the good things, the real and the seeming ones... by which (the soul) arises and descends, fails and succeeds. Seeing the operation of this power, they called its inclination towards both (the real and apparent good) a crossroad within us. Thence, the (power of) choice and what depends on us (<le> in nobis = τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν) is one and the same thing (*potentia rationalis appetitiua bonorum verorumque et apparentium... propter quam ascendit et descendit et peccat et dirigit. Huius potentie*

choice is not evil per se, but only in the relation to this individual soul that chooses it instead of what is good for it. Per se, this object of the soul's evil choice is good, though it is good not for this individual soul, but for another being. Neither the soul, the subject of the evil choice, nor the object of it are therefore the cause of this evil. The cause is the mistake described above, and previously to this mistake the weakening of the soul's noetic component that has conditioned it.¹⁹ This weakening, in turn, is privation of and opposition to the power of the λογιστικὸν τῆς ψυχῆς, and is, like all causes of evils, multifarious and undefinable. Whereas the power of the λογιστικὸν τῆς ψυχῆς is one, its shortcomings are infinite in variety.²⁰

Other forms of evil, including natural evil like illnesses, calamities, etc., and their causes can be described along the same lines. The power that in each being upholds order, unity, and identity decreases, and this brings about various different opposites of order, unity, and identity.²¹ Their causation and their existence can only be appended to the causal chain of Being as an altogether exceptional area, where the ontological rules governing the chain of Being cease to apply. Accordingly, the evils are not a part of Being proper; their existence is an existence in quotation marks, a para-existence, a *parhypostasis*.²²

This term that Proclus uses to express the altogether exceptional character of the evil's mode of existence also denotes the

operationem videntes, biviam in nobis vocaverunt ad ambo ipsius inclinationem. Quare erit electionale et <le> in nobis idem...") De providentia 59, 1-6, ed. H. Boese, Procli opuscula, Berlin 1960.

19. Ibid. 46, 11-13; 24, 1-3; 25, 14-15 et passim; ibid. 52, 3-5; 7, 31-37. On this weakness of the human soul, see John Phillips, *Order from Disorder: Proclus' Doctrine of Evil*, Leiden 227-257, esp. 238-240.

20. Like all "forms", metaphorically speaking, of evils; see *De mal. sub.* 48, esp. 13-15 and 19-20.

21. Cf. *De mal. sub.* 53.

22. See *De mal. sub.* 54; cf. A.C. Lloyd, "Parhypostasis in Proclus," in G. Boss - G.Seel edd. *Proclus et son influence. Actes du colloque de Neuchatel, juin 1985*, Zürich 1987, 145-157, in G. Boss - G.Seel edd. *Proclus et son influence. Actes du colloque de Neuchatel, juin 1985*, Zürich 1987, 145-157, here: 152-5; Abbate, M.: Parypostasis: il concetto di male nella quarta dissertazione del Commento alla Repubblica di Proclo, in: *RSF* 53, 1998, 109-115, 112. This term appears for the first time in Porphyry, but not referring to evil (*Sententiae* 42, 19, ed. E. Lamertz, Leipzig 1975); it first designates the mode of existence of evil in Iamblichus, according to Simplicius (*In Categorias* 418, 3-6, ed. C. Kalbfleisch, Berlin 1907). In this sense, the term is also used by St. Gregory of Nyssa (*De officio hominis*: PG 44, 164a).

“parasitic”²³ character of this existence. Having absolutely no existence or power of its own, evil is absolutely dependent on the existence and power of the Being it corrupts, just as sickness, a natural evil, is dependent on the existence and power of the body it befalls.

RESTRICTING EVIL TO ETHICS? THE IMPASSE OF PROCLUS’ THEORY OF EVIL AND ITS INNER TENDENCY

Proclus’ efforts end up creating a sort of parallel ontology applicable to evil alone. It is clear that, for a decidedly systematical philosophy like that of Proclus, such bulky exceptions are hardly tolerable. The fact that Proclus made this compromise shows that he was aware that the systematical difficulties of the problem of evil were otherwise insuperable. He was also well aware that these systematical difficulties had earnestly occupied his intellectual ancestors, beginning with Plotinus himself²⁴ – the first genuine exegete of Platonic thought²⁵ after the Middle Platonist slumber in Proclus’ eyes. As the first one to introduce rigid Monism in Platonist tradition, Plotinus was also the first Platonist forced to face up to the philosophical problem of evil in its full severity. The solution proposed by Plotinus was the identification of matter, which is the lowest end of his ontological hierarchy, as the cause and principle of all evil, natural and ethical alike.²⁶ This straightforward solution seemed, however, to be incompatible with Plotinus’ Monist stance. Postulating the One as the ultimate cause of all that is should imply that also matter is, even in a very

23. This is Lloyd’s rendering of *parhypostasis*; see Lloyd, *Parhypostasis in Proclus*, adopted by C. Steel (C. Steel, “Υπαρξις chez Proclus, in: F. Romano ed. *Hyparxis e Hypostasis nel Neoplatonismo*, Firenze 1994, 79-100, at p. 80).

24. See *De mal. sub.* 1.

25. See *Theol. Plat.* I 1, p. 6, 16-20.

26. At least this is the position of the treatise I.8 (edd. P. Henry/H.R. Schwyzer, Oxford 1964-82). A comparison with Plotinus’ treatise against the Gnostics (II.9) shows that he also must have been aware of the difficulties of this theory, for he accuses the Gnostics of doing with the Soul exactly what he does with matter, namely of making the Soul a principle of evil and, in this way, rendering the hypostases superior to the Soul, i.e., the Intellect and, lastly, the One, responsible for evil; furthermore, Plotinus rejects the Gnostics’ attempt to postulate an exception of the evil turn of the Soul from the “normal” rules of causation (see II.9.4, esp. 1-10; on the overall issue, see J.-M. Narbonne, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, Leiden 2011, 11-29).

indirect matter, a derivative – the last derivative – of the One. Thus, identifying matter as the principle of evil means making the absolute Good bring forth the principle of all evil. This anomaly could not escape Plotinus, who tried to eliminate it by postulating an overall exception of matter, its genesis and function, from the rules applying to all other levels of his ontological hierarchy.²⁷ However, Plotinus' identification of matter²⁸ as the principle of all evil was so obviously incongruent with the new Monistic orientation in Platonism he himself had initiated, so reminiscent of earlier Middle-Platonist Dualism,²⁹ that even Porphyry distanced himself from it and avoided making use of it, even though he takes it up in one place.³⁰ One generation later, Iamblichus would reject explicitly this identification.³¹

The problem of evil(s) became thus a vexed question in post-Plotinian Platonism. This was, as we have seen, quite expectable

27. Cf. *Enneads*, IV.8.7, 18 sqq.; I.8.14; III.4.1,5-16 and III.9.3, 7-16, with the interpretation of E. Varessis, *Die Andersheit bei Plotin*, Göttingen 1996, 256-262; the study of Varessis demonstrates in detail how Plotinus conceived the paradoxical generation of matter by the Soul. J.-M. Narbonne has argued against attributing the generation of Plotinian matter to the soul, see *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, 38-45. The generation of matter by the Soul, seeing that it is excepted from the rules of causation, is so different from, e.g., the generation of Soul by the Nous, that one could say with J.-M. Narbonne that the problem of the genesis of matter remained unresolved until the end in Plotinus' writings. Plotinian matter is "*cet engendré-inengendable, et ce parce que, dès lors qu'engendrée, la matière du monde sensible était incapable de jouer désormais ce rôle perturbateur que Plotin... exigeait qu'elle remplisse.*" (Les deux matières, 268). One could add that it is exactly the insoluble problem of the causation of evil which Narbonne calls the "*rôle perturbateur*" of matter, that makes the problem of the generation of matter insoluble. These difficulties of the generation of matter in Plotinus have given rise to various interpretations: Schwyzer 1973, 275f. has maintained that Plotinian matter does not have a cause and is ungenerated. This position had first been launched by Pistorius 1952, 122, and was further adopted by Benz 1990, 110f, and refuted by O'Brien 1971, 165 (cf. also Corrigan's thesis of the multiple generations of Plotinian matter) (1986, S.167-181). On the entire controversy, see Narbonne, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, 38-45.

28. That is, the matter of sensible things, not the "intelligible matter" of ideas (on the distinction between them, see Th. A. Szlezák, *Platon und Aristoteles in der Nuslehre Plotins*, Basel/Stuttgart 1979, 73; cf. J.M. Rist, *The indefinite Dyad and intelligible matter in Plotinus*, in: *CQ* 1962, 94-107).

29. Cf. John Phillips, "Platonists on the Origin of Evil," in: H. Tarrant/D. Baltzly edd., *Reading Plato in Antiquity*, London 2006, 61-72, pp. 66-70, esp. 70.

30. *Sent.* 30, 3-5; see Hager, F.P.: "Die Materie und das Böse im antiken Platonismus," in: *MH* 19, 1962, 73-103, 93f.

31. See *De communi mathematica scientia* IV S. 15, 12 (edd. N. Festa/U. Klein, Stuttgart 1975).

already for purely systematical reasons: once Platonism became, with Plotinus' turn, a fundamentally Monistic system of thought, explaining the existence of evils in a Being (comprising ethics and ontology in an inseparable unity) emanating from the absolutely good One became impossible, at least without violating the Monist system's rules. Such a violation of these rules had been, as we saw, Plotinus' identification of matter as the principle of evil. With this definition, however, Plotinus stood in a long Platonist tradition, probably beginning with Plato himself. But his definition and the exception of matter from all rules applying to the rest of Being – systematically necessary if it was to avoid making out of the last cause, the One, the last cause of evils – left the strong impression of implicitly postulating a second principle. Not only did this identification of evil with matter seem to imply that the entire sensible world, whose substrate is matter, is evil, or at least participates in evil by nature, it also looked very much like a regression to earlier forms of Platonic Dualism, where matter had been the second, evil principle opposed to the good One. However, the almost unanimous tendency of post-Plotinian Platonism to revise³² Plotinus' identification of the principle of evil with matter must have been related also to a more general trend that can be observed in almost all major religious and philosophical milieus in Late Antiquity in the eastern Mediterranean: A trend to overcome, at least in part, the diverse matter-spirit dualisms – Gnostic, Middle Platonist, Neopythagorean or Manichean ones – that had marked the Imperial Period,³³ and disconnect matter per se, as well as the material world per se, from the causation of evil.³⁴ This new

32. For a short overview, see E. Schröder, *Plotins Abhandlung πῶθεν τὰ κακὰ* (Emn. I,8), Rostock 1916, 186-195.

33. On this diffused dualism of the imperial period, see Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy*, New Haven, Conn. 2000, 74-107; on Middle Platonist Dualism, see Karin Alt, *Weltflucht und Weltbejahung: zur Frage des Dualismus bei Plutarch, Numenius, Plotin*, Stuttgart 1993; cf. A.H. Armstrong, "Dualism: Platonic, Gnostic and Christian," in: R.T. Wallis/J. Bregman edd. *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, Albany, NY 1992, 33-54, and J. Dillon, "Monotheism in the Gnostic Tradition," in: P. Athanassiadi/M. Frede edd. *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, 69-80.

34. A certain tendency toward a Monist approach can even be observed in Zoroastrianism of late antiquity, marked also by the novel idea that even the evil principle, Ahriman, is generated by the good principle, Ahura Mazda, or, alternatively, that they were both generated by an even superior divine entity, Zurvan (on this development in late antiquity, see Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation. Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*, London 2005, 16-18, who does not

trend, and its conflict with the older Dualist approaches, produced a variable discourse on the origins of evil, which stayed lively undiminished up to the end of the “long Late Antiquity.”³⁵

In the development of Neoplatonist thought on this issue, Proclus’ treatment of the problem of evil seems to represent a temporary conclusion of the criticism previously leveled at the Plotinian thesis. Taking up arguments raised by Iamblichus³⁶ and by his own teacher Syrianus,³⁷ Proclus undertakes a lengthy refutation of Plotinus’ stance, which cannot be examined in this place.³⁸ It may suffice to say here that Proclus practically bases

consent, however, to considering this innovation as an attenuation of Zoroastrian Dualism); a Monist tendency is discernible also in the major extant source on late Sasanian Zoroastrianism, the *Dēnkard*, which considers the entire creation as the work of an exclusively beneficent Creator, leaving behind the original Zoroastrian doctrine of a good and a bad creation, see Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 101.

35. Even the shortest overview of this vast literary production would not be possible in this place. One can only point out very few texts of key significance: These difficulties with regard to the problem of evil make up the core of the opposition between Neoplatonism and Gnosis as perceived by Plotinus in II.9, whereby the latter argues primarily against the Dualism of the Gnostics he had to deal with. These same difficulties are central topics in works that intend to present Christian thought to non-Christians, such as the *Contra gentes* of St. Athanasius of Alexandria, or to proselytes, like the *Great Catechism* of St. Gregory of Nyssa; and they became the core issue of the onto-theological quest that led St. Augustine first to Manicheism, and then to orthodox Christianity. This selfsame set of problems is the crucial subject of the very first work of Armenian theological literature, Eznik of Kolb’s *De Deo*. In all of these cases, we have to do with refutations of Dualism, guided by a rather Monistic intention. Finally, to mention an example from the finale of the intellectual history of late antiquity, the question: Who can explain evil better figures as the question that should decide if Christianity, Islam, or Zoroastrianism is the optimal religion also in the Zoroastrian treatise *Škand Gumānik Vičār*.

36. See G. Bechtle, *Das Böse im Platonismus: Überlegungen zur Position Iamblichs*, in: *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 4 1999, 63-82, esp. 81.

37. Cf. Syrianus, In *Metaphysica* 184sq., ed. W. Kroll, Berlin 1902; cf. A.D.R. Sheppard, “Monad and Dyad as Cosmic Principles in Syrianus,” in: H.J. Blumenthal ed., *Soul and the Structure of Being in Late Neoplatonism – Syrianus, Proclus and Simplicius*, Liverpool 1982, 1-14, particularly pp. 9-11

38. On this, see D. O’ Meara, “Das Böse bei Plotin (Enn. I, 8).” in *Platon in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte*, eds. Th. Kobusch - B. Mojsisch, Darmstadt 1997, 33-47; J. Opsomer, “Proclus vs. Plotinus on matter” (*De mal. sub.* 30-7), in *Phronesis* 46, 2001, 154-188; C. Schäfer, “Proklus’ Argument aus De malorum subsistentia 31, 5-21 in der modernen Interpretation,” in *Antike Philosophie mit einem Schwerpunkt zum Meisterargument*, eds. U. Meixner - A. Newen, Paderborn 1999, 173-185; N. Kavvadas, *Die Natur des Schlechten bei Proklos*, 45-58; cf. also D. Skliris, “The Theory of Evil in Proclus: Proclus’ Theodicy as a Completion of Plotinus’ Monism,” in *Philothéos* 8, 2008, 137-159, esp. pp. 148-150.

his argument on his refusal to accept that the causation of matter should be exempted from the general rules of Plotinian (and Neoplatonist in general) emanation. Once we subject matter to these rules, designating it as the principle of evils implies unavoidably either making the One the cause of all evils or introducing a second principle.

However, Proclus' alternative solution, roughly sketched above, cannot escape the very same self-contradiction Proclus accuses Plotinus of. In the place of the one big exception from the rules of the causation system that Plotinian matter-evil had been, his solution makes an innumerable, unintelligible multitude of exceptions, which is as arbitrarily postulated as with Plotinus. If one decides instead not to accede to this Proclan "set of exceptions" – as its author himself had not acceded to Plotinus' exception – then Proclus' solution can also be confuted with the very same "Monistic" argument that he had directed against Plotinus: the innumerable, undefinable multitude of causes-and-again-non-causes of evils postulated by Proclus must either, like everything else, derive from the absolutely good One, which therefore must be considered as the last cause of evils, or it must constitute an underivable, evil principle other than the One, subverting Monism. The inner contradiction in Plotinus' – and any Neoplatonist, or even any Monistic – view of the existence of evil is not really overcome, but rather passed on or cut up into uncountable little pieces.

But if we put aside this "antirrhetical" point of view for one moment, Proclus appears to have had a clear intention. Cutting up the evil principle and simultaneously disconnecting it from the material substrate of all sensible Being has a double aim. On the one hand, it attenuates the reality of the evil principle(s) – if not (onto)logically, then at least in terms of impression: one may assume that uncountable accidents make the impression of being something far less "real" than matter itself, the substrate of all things sensible.³⁹ On the other hand, it allows for a very different philosophical approach to and a very different sentiment towards the material, sensible world, which leaves behind the overall "negative" attitude that is predominant in Plotinus' writings.⁴⁰

This new attitude is most clearly expressed in Proclus'

39. Cf. W. Beierwaltes, "Die Entfaltung der Einheit. Zur Differenz plotinischen und proklischen Denkens," in *Theta-Pi* 2, 1973, 126-161, see particularly p. 160, fn. 2.

40. Cf. Plotinus *Enneads* 4.8.1-5; Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* cap. 1, 1-9.

Commentary on Timaeus and his exegesis of the myth of *Politicus* in the *Theologia Platonica*. Proclus' reading of *Timaeus*, especially of the passages seemingly connecting matter with cosmic disorder ("natural evil") like the mentioning of a "bad and disorderly" motion⁴¹ in the "visible" (i.e., material) constituent of the cosmos, is essentially Aristotelian.⁴² Matter cannot be evil or the cause of evil, firstly, because its existence is necessary for the existence of the cosmos and secondly, because it is per se absolutely passive.⁴³ As for that "bad and disorderly" motion in matter, it is in reality only an inferior, deficient form of order – to be precise, an incomplete phase in the process of the in-formation of matter by the idea – on the way to the perfect order tantamount to the full realisation of the idea in matter.⁴⁴ In a corresponding manner, Proclus also reads the myth of *Politicus*⁴⁵ about the two phases of cosmic order and disorder that succeed one another. Proclus interprets the phase of increasing cosmic disorder, when, according to the Platonic myth, the governor takes his hand off the rudder of the universe⁴⁶ as a mere "decrease of order" that is always immanent and at work in nature. Indeed this "decrease of order" as the cause of corruption is necessary to keep the cycle of coming into existence and passing away – the mode of existence of temporal, sensible things – rolling: the passing away of one material thing is always at the same take (prerequisite for) of the genesis of another.⁴⁷ Obviously, this kind of scheduled "decrease of order" is just an aspect of the Intellect's governance; thus, Proclus' reading ends up contradicting the letter, at least, of Plato's text: For Proclus, the divine governor simply never "lets the rudder down" for real.⁴⁸

This reduction of "cosmic" or "natural" evil into a normal natural

41. See *Timaeus* 30a, 2-6.

42. Cf. J. Opsomer, "Proclus vs. Plotinus on matter (De mal. Subs. 30-7)," in *Phronesis* 46, 2001, 154-188, esp. p. 179ff., agreeing in this with D. O'Meara, "Das Böse bei Plotin (Enn. I, 8)," in *Platon in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte* (Hgg. Th. Kobusch - B. Mojsisch), Darmstadt 1997, 33-47.

43. *De mal. sub.* 34, 19-20.

44. See Proclus, *In Tim.* I 387, 8-19.

45. See *Theologia Platonica* V 6-7 and V 25; cf. B. Gleede, *Platon und Aristoteles in der Kosmologie des Proklos* (STAC 54), Tübingen, 2009, 462ff.

46. *Politicus* 272d: οἷον πηδάλιων οἰακος ἀφήμενος.

47. "Generation always comes about through the corruption of something else" (*omnis generatio per alterius fit corruptionem*) *De mal. sub.* 5, 9-10. trans. J. Opsomer/C. Steel; cf. *De mal. sub.* 60 1-4 u. 17-26; *In Tim.* 379, 11-26; this idea goes back to Aristotle, see Arist., *Metaph.* 1075a23-25.

48. See *In Tim.* I, 288, 14-16.

process fully integrated in the all-encompassing governance by the Providence of the One (a reduction inspired at least partially by Aristoteles) is characteristic of Proclus. His treatise *De malorum subsistentia* shows this as well. Also in the closing chapters, after having deployed the “system” of *parhypostasis*, which encompasses, of course, natural evil as well – the latter being conceived in traditional Platonist terms as an aspect or component of one and the same phenomenon with moral evil –, Proclus strongly relativises the reality of natural evil by demonstrating its compatibility in the final analysis with the providential governance of the cosmos or even its usefulness for it: corruption, aging, sickness, death may be perceived as evil by the particular being it befalls, but are indeed even good if considered from the universal point of view of Providence.⁴⁹ These deliberations, which close up *De malorum subsistentia*, mirror the crucial impact direction of Proclus’ thought on the problem of evil: An Aristotelian relativisation of its reality on the levels of both nature and metaphysics, combined with a Stoic concentration on its undiminished reality in the region of ethics.⁵⁰

It appears, then, that the contradiction between Proclus’ sheer negation of the existence of non-moral evils, as expressed in his aforementioned lecture on Plato’s criticism of Homer, and his other, much more systematic attempts to postulate a theory of evil, is only verbal. Indeed, this negation instead makes explicit what is already implied to a certain extent in the Proclan Commentaries and the *De malorum subsistentia*. In the freer setting of a festive lecture, Proclus might have taken the liberty to spell out what his thought was always leaning towards: the Stoic restriction of evil(s) in human choice, or decision (πρῶταίρεσις). In such a lecture, he could simply drop the thought without having to explain himself thoroughly or draw consequences,⁵¹ something that would have

49. *De mal. sub.* 58, 25-28: “why would it be absurd to admit that...the same thing will be evil to particular things, but good for the whole. Or rather, is it not the case that even for particular things it will only be evil insofar as it stems from those things themselves, but not evil insofar as it stems from the whole? (*quid mirum, si ... malum quidem erit singularibus, totis autem bonum, magis autem et singularibus secundum quod quidem ab ipsis malum, secundum quod autem a totis non malum?*) (trans. J.Opsomer/C. Steel).

50. Cf. the results of the research of J. Opsomer and C. Steel, “Evil Without a Cause. Proclus’ Doctrine on the Origin of Evil, and its Antecedents in Hellenistic Philosophy,” in Th. Fuhrer/M. Erler edd. *Zur Rezeption der hellenistischen Philosophie in der Spätantike*, Trier 1997, 229-260.

51. The consequence would be a radical revision or even rejection of the theory of *parhypostasis* (or of the infinite multiplicity of the causes of evil in both nature

been impossible in his Commentaries⁵² or, all the more, in a rigorous systematic treatise like the *De malorum subsistentia*, where the incompatibility of this thought with the Platonist framework would inevitably become evident.

PROCLUS' TENDENCY AND DIONYSIUS' RECEPTION

Even this final step of the lecture on Plato's criticism of Homer cannot solve, however, the crucial problem of the Proclan theory of evil. The restriction of evil to human decision-making alone is merely yet another shifting or transferal of the problem, just like the *parhypostasis* theory. This is because any evil decision of a human soul is also something real, at least on Neoplatonist assumptions, even if it is much less real than a good action of an individual soul. Moreover, on Neoplatonist assumptions, a soul's action is indeed more real than matter. Nevertheless, Proclus must have thought that this position in his lecture on Plato's criticism of Homer better served his purpose of attenuating as far as possible the reality of evils and, above all, of disconnecting it from the causative activity of the One.⁵³ Why? Perhaps, he implicitly conceived moral evil, i.e., the evil decision of human free will, as something more deprived of "objective" (in modern terms) existence than any other form of evil. Or, in other words, he felt that there was absolutely nothing less dependent on the causative activity of the One than the evil decision of a human soul.

Be this as it may, that negation of the existence of non-moral evil passed virtually unnoticed from later Platonist thinkers. Proclus' theory of evils was for them, of course, the elaborate system of *parhypostasis* from *De malorum subsistentia*.⁵⁴ Among them, the case

and ethics), a theory that is based on the axiomatic unity of natural and moral evil and describes natural and moral evil with the same ontological terms.

52. However, there is a place in his *Commentary on Timaeus* where Proclus expresses this view in passing: *In Tim.* III 313, 17ff: "For, neither illness nor poverty nor anything else of this kind is really bad, but (instead) the malevolence of the soul, its debauchery and cowardice, and the entire malice. But of all this, we are guilty ourselves, when it appears in us" (*κακὸν γὰρ ὄντως ἐστὶν οὐ νόσος οὐδὲ πενία οὐδὲ ἄλλο τοιοῦτον οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ πονηρία ψυχῆς καὶ ἀκολασία καὶ δειλία καὶ ἡ ξύμπασα κακία. Τούτων δὲ ἡμεῖς ἐαντοῖς αἴτιοι*). However, this formulation remains isolated there, receiving no further development.

53. This was perhaps Proclus' primary motive for disconnecting evil from matter.

54. Cf. Schröder, *Plotins Abhandlung πόθεν τὰ κακὰ (Enn. I.8)*, 202-3 (on the reception of Proclus' position by Ammonius/Asclepius and Simplicius); cf. I.

of Dionysius the Areopagite, who was influenced more than any other by Proclus' theory of evil, presents an interesting peculiarity. In spite of his close textual dependence on *De malorum subsistentia*, Dionysius modifies substantially the argumentation of Proclus in the 4th book of his *De divinis nominibus*, adjusting it to his own intention. Dionysius' intention was firstly, to isolate the evil choice or decision of rational beings, i.e., men and demons, from all other phenomena that could be seen as evil or bad; secondly, to describe that evil decision as something at the same time absolutely evil – i.e., absolutely unjustifiable – and fully attributable to the rational being committing it; and thirdly, to declare this “moral” evil as absolutely non-real on the ontological plane.⁵⁵ The evil decision is, at the same time, absolutely evil and absolutely non-being – it simply does not exist in the ontological hierarchy. Thus, Dionysius aims at separating evil from Being as clearly as possible, whereas the Proclan theory of *parhypostasis* works with mixtures: For Proclus, evil is always and necessarily mixed with the good thing it befalls and evil's mode of being, the *parhypostasis*, is a mixture of being and non-being (ὁμοῦ τῶ ὄντι μὴ ὄν⁵⁶). Dionysius' paradoxical affirmation that an absolute evil does “exist”, but is absolutely non-real on the ontological plane, implying a radical separation of evil from Being, is made possible, it appears, by an equally radical separation, fundamental in Dionysius' thought, between “history” and “ontology”, one could say, or in traditional Christian terms, between “this world” and the “next” one. What is present and efficacious in history or in this world may well be absolutely absent from the perennial ontological hierarchy or from the eschaton, when the exclusive reality of the ontological hierarchy shall first become evident to all. Exactly this is the case with evil.

This stance of Dionysius the Areopagite, based as it is on the ancient Christian concept of the “two worlds” or “two Aeons,”⁵⁷ could never be maintained within a pagan Neoplatonist theoretical framework, seeing that in Post-Plotinian Platonism the One-ness of the world, a consequence of the absolute One-ness of its

Hadot, Introduction in: *Simplicius, Commentaire sur le Manuel d'Épictète*, ed. I. Hadot. *Philosophia antiqua* 66, Leiden 1996, 116.

55. See N. Kavvadas, *Die Natur des Schlechten bei Proklos*, 153-184.

56. *De mal. sub.* 8.22.

57. Cf. A.H. Armstrong's distinction between “cosmic dualism” (with two principles related to one another in different ways) and “two world” dualism, Armstrong, *Dualism*, 29sq.

principle, is incomparably stronger than the duality of ideal being and material being. But the fact that Dionysius decided to realise his complex intention by remodeling text portions from the *De malorum subsistentia* shows that he must have grasped, reading between the lines of *De malorum subsistentia*, that also Proclus had tended, like himself, to both eliminate the ontological reality of evil and restrict such a non-real evil to the decisions of rational souls. Thus, with his modifications on *De malorum subsistentia*, Dionysius made explicit what Proclus was probably always tending towards – and expressed only once.