

# A Doctrinal Evolution in Plotinus? The Weakness of the Soul in its Relation to Evil.<sup>1</sup>

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According to Treatise 51 [I 8], which is devoted to the problem of the existence and origin of evils, sensible matter is not only evil-in-itself and the first evil (14, 51); it is not only a principle of evil—opposed as one whole to another whole (τὸ ὅλον τῷ ὅλῳ, 6, 43–44), that is, to the principle of good (ἀρχαὶ γὰρ ἀμφῶ, ἡ μὲν κακῶν, ἡ δὲ ἀγαθῶν, 6, 33–34)—but it is also presented as the universal source of all evils, including the weakness of the soul. As Plotinus repeats several times throughout this late treatise, the soul that is in the sensible world is “not evil on account of itself (οὐ κακὸν παρ’ αὐτῆς)” (11, 17; compare 5, 26–28). This refusal to impute the responsibility for evil to the soul was already declared in chapter 4 (20–25) and in chapter 5 (5–6), which ended on this thought:

If this is true, then we must not be assumed to be the principle of evil as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us, and those that take hold on men do not do so with their good will, but there is an ‘escape from the evils in the soul’ for those who are capable of it, though not all men are (5, 26–30).<sup>2</sup>

These preliminary remarks are not yet sufficient for Plotinus who, as we know, returns again to the subject of the soul’s weakness in chapter 14, where it constitutes the principal object of discussion. Twice in this chapter (in lines 21–22 and 44–45), the soul’s weakness is directly associated with the fall of the soul. In the first instance, Plotinus insists that the soul’s weakness concerns only souls that are fallen: “weakness must be in the souls which have fallen (ἐν ταῖς πεσούσαις εἶναι τὴν ἀσθένειαν)” (14, 21–22). He indicates that for these souls, which are neither pure nor purified, weakness consists in an *addition*, an “alien presence” (ἄλλοτρίου παρουσία); it is therefore something which comes to it from outside, and not a lack, which would come from within the soul itself (14, 23–24).

1. Daniel Wilband translated part of this article from the French and edited all of it.

2. Quotations from Plotinus are based on Armstrong’s translation (Plotinus, *Enneads*, vols. I–VII, with an English translation by A.H. Armstrong. Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1966]), with occasional modifications to fit the sense.

The exact nature of this connection between the soul's *fall* and the soul's *weakness*, however, is not yet clear in this initial development. Is the one the cause of the other, or are they both caused by something else? To grasp the answer to this question we must focus upon the argument's second development. Bearing in mind that there are souls which remain separate from matter, but that the powers of the soul are multiple, and that there is a beginning as well as intermediate and final terms of the soul, matter will come into play at the soul's periphery, *from underneath and as from outside it*, but trying to pass into the interior and to corrupt that to which it has been joined:

But there are many powers of soul, and it has a beginning, a middle and an end; and matter is there, and begs it and, we may say, bothers it and wants to come right inside. "All the place is holy," and there is nothing which is without a share of soul. So matter spreads itself out under soul and is illumined, and cannot grasp the source from which its light comes: that source cannot endure matter though it is there, because its evil makes it unable to see. Matter darkens the illumination, the light from that source, by mixture with itself, and weakens it by itself offering it the opportunity of generation and the reason for coming to matter; for it would not have come to what was not present. *This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak*, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders them from coming by occupying the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition, and making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft—until soul manages to escape back to its higher state. So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. (14, 34–51)

The fall of the soul is therefore precisely *to come toward matter and to become weak*, while this 'coming' and this 'weakening' are provoked by matter itself which, both by its occupation of places and by its attempts to seize the soul, hinders the free operation of the soul's powers. Without matter, the soul—even if diminished—would not have fallen and would not have been weakened, simply because it would not have had *that toward which to go or to proceed*. In accord with what Plotinus has already stated in this chapter, evil comes entirely *from outside*, at once because of the presence of matter and the disturbances induced by it. This analysis is in agreement with his suggestion, established earlier in the treatise, that *deficiency* or *defect* (ἔλλειμμα, ἔλλειψις) is not yet equivalent to evil. In effect, by contrast to the pure soul which remains turned toward Intellect, the soul which proceeds outside of itself is certainly less complete or less perfect (4, 28ff.) and, one could say, because of its relative deficiency it is susceptible to vice or corruptible—that is to say, able to receive evil secondarily into itself—although it is not by itself the cause of evil. In short, "evil is not in any sort of deficiency, but in absolute deficiency" (5, 5–6). Already at this point, the active and determinative role of matter is fully revealed. It is matter alone which "is so evil that it infects with its own evil that which is not in it but only directs its gaze to

it”; moreover, matter “makes everything which comes into contact with it in any way to be like itself” (4, 21–22 and 24–25).<sup>3</sup> The soul that does not remain above, and is not perfect but deficient, furnishes only a favourable ground for the implantation of evil, and it is this soul that “receives evil” (4, 8–9). Consequently, Plotinus insists, even if we are deficient, we are not the principle of evils, which antecedently reside in matter. Moreover, evils do not come from the gods (6, 2). The entire world that is from above—which includes our souls—is thus exonerated from responsibility with regard to evil. Evil is oriented *from the bottom up*, not *from the top down*; it is essentially *ascending* and not *descending*.

This insistence is troubling and it seems to us to be an innovation. Evidently, the idea that matter is evil, and even evil-in-itself, involves nothing original.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the idea that there is an evil that adds itself to the soul from outside is not only an old one but is also apparently consistent throughout Plotinus’ writings.<sup>5</sup> Yet, that the soul’s weakness and fall are themselves set off by the efficacy of matter *alone*, this idea is not introduced in its full clarity until Treatise 51 and it contradicts his earlier, wholly explicit pronouncements, which grant the soul at least a portion of the responsibility for evil according to the model inherited from the *Phaedrus* (246a–248c). Above all, one might consider Treatise 6 [IV 8], where the harms which the soul suffers from the body are viewed as a *consequence* of ‘losing its wings’ and not as its cause:

Now when a soul does this for a long time, flying from the All and standing apart in distinctness, and does not look toward the intelligible, it has become a part and is isolated and weak [...] Here the ‘moulting’, as it is called, happens to it, and the being in the fetters of the body. (4, 12–23)

In Treatise 5 [V 9], 2, 19–20, Plotinus indicates the existence of an ugly soul, in contrast to the beautiful soul which is reflected. In Treatise 10 [V 1] he tells us calmly: “the beginning of evil for them [*i.e.*, souls] was audacity and coming to birth and the first otherness and the wishing to belong to themselves” (1, 3–5).

3. Compare 51 (I 8), 8, 18–20: “For matter masters what is imaged in it, and corrupts and destroys it by applying its own nature which is contrary to form.” Clearly, matter is here not only the *necessary* cause but the *sufficient* cause of evil. For a criticism of the opposite thesis, as it is defended by D. O’Brien (in our view unsupported by the more explicit statements of Plotinus), see J.-M. Narbonne, “Plotinus and the Gnostics on the Generation of Matter (33 [II 9], 12 and 51 [I 8], 14),” *Dionysius* XXIV (2006): 45–64.

4. Cf. 12 [II 4], 16, 16; 26 [III 6], 11, 28–29; 41–43; 38 [VI 7], 28, 12; 47 [III 2], 15, 9.

5. 1 [I 6], 5, 31–34; 2 [IV 7], 10, 11–12: “ὡς προσῆται τὰ κακὰ τῆ ψυχῆ καὶ ἄλλοθεν”; 33 [II 9], 17, 3; 51 [I 8], 5, 17; 8, 20; 14, 24; 52 [II 3], 8, 14–15; 53 [I 1], 12.

How, then, can we explain this sudden shift? Is Plotinus inconsistent in his understanding of evil, changing his position haphazardly in successive treatises,<sup>6</sup> or has his understanding simply evolved on this point of fundamental doctrine, for reasons that remain to be discovered? And, in the latter case, just how far back can we reasonably locate this change of perspective?

Some key elements of the argument in Treatise 51 can set us on the course toward a solution. We summarize them as follows: (a) evil does not come from us but it resides, anterior to souls, in matter; (b) moreover, evil does not come from the gods, whether visible (i.e., the stars) or invisible; (c) to be incomplete or less perfect does not amount to incarnating evil, since “evil is not in any sort of deficiency, but in absolute deficiency” (51, 5, 5–6). Now, these theses stand in contrast, point by point, to the theses Plotinus attributes to the Gnostics in Treatise 33.

Firstly, the principle according to which evil arises does not consist in a partial lack, but a radical one. This claim finds its exact opposite in a statement of Plotinus concerning the Gnostics: they “consider evil as nothing other than a falling short in wisdom, and a lesser good, continually diminishing (τό τε κακὸν μὴ νομίζειν [the Gnostics] ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ ἐνδεέστερον εἰς φρόνησιν καὶ ἔλλατον ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἄει πρὸς τὸ μικρότερον)” (33 [II 9], 13, 27–29). The consequences of this Gnostic suggestion would be disastrous for Plotinus, as he immediately explains: “it is as if one were to say that nature (τῆν φύσιν) was evil because it is not perception, and that the principle of perception was evil because it is not reason” (*ibid.*, 30–33). To consider the weakening as an evil is *ipso facto* to place the responsibility for evil on the very principles from which the descent was produced, and thus to contaminate the whole of reality. Points (a) and (b) above respond to this problem concerning evil both among the gods and in our own souls, which are themselves also of a divine nature. The descent, when it takes place, must thus be viewed as something other than an evil. On the basis of this consideration, we have the careful distinction which Plotinus will henceforth employ: “a thing which is only slightly deficient in good is not evil, for it can still be perfect on the level of its own nature” (51 [I 8], 5, 6–8).

The same distinction emerges as Plotinus examines the Gnostic theory of the illumination of obscurity, which he criticized in the immediately preceding chapter. This is what we read there:

6. This was the opinion already expressed long ago by E. Schröder, *Plotins Abhandlung Πόθεν τὰ κακά (Enn. I 8)* (Rostock, 1916) 178 n5: “Nur darauf sei hingewiesen, daß nie ein unbildhaftes, klares Resultat erreicht wird, und daß Plotin in diesem Punkt nicht ganz davon freizusprechen ist, daß er, allerdings von einem argen Dilemma hin- und hergezerrt, seinen Mantel nach dem Winde hängt: Fordert der Zusammenhang eine Art Schuld der Seele, so neigt die Wage mehr nach jener Seite; wir hören von einem Willen zum Schlechten bei der Seele und dergl. Ist der Zusammenhang entgegengesetzter Art, so sinkt die andere Schale, und wir erfahren von zersetzenden Einflüssen der bösen Materie und Ähnlichem.”

For their “illumination of the darkness,” if it is investigated, will make them admit the true causes of the universe. For why was it necessary for the soul to illuminate, unless the necessity was universal? It was either according to soul’s nature or against it. But if it was according to its nature, it must always be so. If, on the other hand, it was against its nature, then there will be a place for what is against nature in the higher world, *and evil will exist before this universe*, and the universe will not be responsible for evil, but the higher world will be the cause of evil for this world, and evil will not come from the world here to the soul, *but from the soul to the world here*. And the course of the argument will lead to the attribution of responsibility for the universe to the first principles: and if the universe, then also the matter, from which the universe on this hypothesis would have emerged. For the soul which declined saw, they say (φάσιν, line 41), and illuminated the darkness already in existence. Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say (φήσουσιν, line 42) that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere for it to decline to, and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline, *but the soul’s own nature*. *But this is the same as attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities; so the responsibility goes back to the first principles.* (33 [II 9], 12, 30–44)

If the production of realities was itself *rebellious to nature* (παρὰ φύσιν) and, rather than the explanatory model for evil being that of an *ascent*, it were instead a *descent*, then evil would move not from the world in the direction of the soul, but from the soul to this world, which for Plotinus is inadmissible. This is why, on the one hand, the degradation involved in emanation cannot be considered an evil, even if, on the other hand, it is understood that the most degraded stage of reality will be that which, by definition, presents itself as the most sensitive to the action of evil. In order not to fall into his adversaries’ difficulties, Plotinus was thus required to minimize—indeed, to eradicate entirely from his language—any references to a psychical source or foundation of evil.

Thus, our hypothesis is that the argument against the Gnostics forced Plotinus, in the treatises posterior to Treatise 33, henceforth to insist upon the material genealogy of evil, which was always considered to be important in the earlier treatises but was never *decisive* or *exclusive*. It is now a question of a decisive shift relative to his earlier doctrine.

For another witness, one can also take the important Treatise 52 [II 3], *On whether the stars act*. Here Plotinus not only returns several times to the *extrinsic* character of evil (8, 15; 9, 20–21; 12, 9–11; 16, 27–29; 17, 18), but he confronts us once more with this fundamental alternative, whether evil is an effect of matter, or whether it is already inscribed within the λόγοι given to the soul. The latter is a fundamentally intolerable hypothesis: “But if this is so, then we shall be asserting that the reasons [λόγους] are the causes of evil, though in the arts and their principles there is no error and nothing contrary to the art (παρὰ τὴν τέχνην) or any corruption of the work of art” (16, 38–41). How, under these conditions, are we to explain the emergence of evil? Plotinus responds in this way:

The λόγος compels the better things to exist and shapes them; the things which are not so [i.e., *good*], are present *potentially* in the λόγοι, but *actually* in what comes to be; there is no need then any more for soul to make or to stir up the λόγοι as *matter is already, by the disturbance which comes from the primordial λόγοι,*<sup>7</sup> *making the things which come from it, the worse ones;* though it is none the less overruled towards the production of the better. So there is one universe composed of all the things that have come to be, differently in each of these two ways, and that exist differently again in the λόγοι. (16, 46–54)

One of the chief interests of this passage is to show that, without the intervention of matter, the inferior and imperfect λόγοι of the soul would remain simply what they are—things worse *in potency* and not *in act*. Only matter can act such that what is potentially evil becomes effectively and actively evil. The line of distinction here is comparable to that which Treatise 51 had already drawn. The soul is a multiple potency possessing a beginning, a middle, and an end. At its term, where it is naturally inferior and less complete, the soul is a more favourable ground for vice, which it possesses, so to speak, in potency, but in a virtual way that only matter can actualize and that, without the action of matter, is not yet truly a weakness or an evil but simply the result of the progressive descent. In Treatise 51 [I 8] 14, 45–46, as we have seen, Plotinus explained that the soul, at a certain time, does not have all its powers ready for action, being hindered by the matter which occupies its space. Thus, the cause of the soul's weakness is this incapacity of the soul, on account of matter, to continue to activate its potency. Correspondingly, here in Treatise 52 [II 3], something in the soul is potentially evil insofar as it is subject to the disturbing activity of matter.

We have the same teaching again in Treatise 53 [I 1], 12, where, employing the comparison with the sea-god Glaucus whose initial form is not recognisable because of the defects that have been added to it,<sup>8</sup> Plotinus concludes that the cause of error does not reside in that which *illuminates* but in that which is *illuminated*: “And how is this inclination not a sin? If the inclination is an illumination directed to what is below, it is not a sin; *what is illuminated is responsible* (ἀλλ’ αἴτιον τὸ ἐλλαμπόμενον), *for if it did not exist the soul would have nowhere to illuminate*” (12, 24–27). The parallel

7. Here we read τῶν ἐκ τῶν in accordance with the teaching of w Q (thus already Creuzer and Bréhier) insofar as it seems to us absolutely necessary to link the notion of disturbance (τῶ σεισιμῶ) to the material element (the related expression τοῦ σώματος appears in 26 [III 6], 4, 25). The idea of a disturbance *provoked by the primordial reasons* would have made about as much sense as the idea of a *light produced by material darkness!* The term ὁ σεισιμὸς, like its cognate verb, is linked several times by Plato to the act of the receptacle or to the wet-nurse of becoming in *Timaeus* 52e–53a. In fact, the opposing act of matter in this process is clearly shown in the rest of the phrase: ἤδη τῆς ὕλης... καὶ τὰ παρ’ αὐτῆς ποιούσης τὰ χεῖρω (lines 50–52).

8. Plato, *Republic* X, 611d7–612a5.

here with Treatise 51 [I 8], 14, 53–54 is clear: “Soul would not have come to matter unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming.” In effect, in both cases it is always a question of avoiding the Gnostic danger, which consists in “attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities” (33 [II 9], 12, 44).

Was Plotinus of a different opinion in Treatise 47 [III 2], 5, 25–26, when he suggested that evil must be considered a lack of good: “In general, we must define evil as a falling short of good (ὄλως δὲ τὸ κακὸν ἔλλειψιν ἀγαθοῦ θετέου),” a formula which apparently takes the opposite view to the teaching of chapter 5 in Treatise 51? We do not think so. In fact, Plotinus is here employing a commonly accepted phrase, and hence we have the ὄλως with which the sentence begins. But, the true opinion of Plotinus immediately becomes clear, as he continues by declaring:

And there must be a falling short of good here below, because the good is something else [*i.e.* matter]. This something else, then, in which the good is, since it is other than good, produces the falling short (ποιεῖ τὴν ἔλλειψιν); for it is not good. (5, 26–39).

Thus, here again the cause of evil is lying beneath, matter being not only evil but that which produces lack in other things.

As we all know, Platonic exegesis has always been tugged about between two dominating orientations. Some interpreters want defect and evil to have a sensible origin in the receptacle or in corporeal reality (this is the teaching of *Phaedo* 65a ff, *Theaetetus* 176a, *Timaeus* 52d4–53b5, *Statesman* 273b4–c2, and *Republic* X, 611d7–612a5); the second view traces evil back to the presence of an evil world-soul (*Laws* 896e5–6), and conceives the descent of souls into the sensible as the result of a fault associated with them (*Phaedrus* 246c; 248c). In all cases, whether the fault falls to matter and the body, or to an initial weakness of the soul, the sensible world is constantly made the object of a certain contempt. Plotinus himself affirms that Plato “everywhere speaks with contempt of the whole world of sense and disapproves of the soul’s fellowship with the body” (6 [IV 8], 1, 28–30). But, from this essentially negative statement—*i.e.*, that the sensible world is the place of evil and, in any case, something inferior to intelligible realities—two different attitudes can arise. One attitude is a rather negative one which, according to Plotinus, Plato develops in the *Phaedrus*; the other attitude, more positive though equally Platonic, is found in the *Timaeus*, where the soul is there to save what can be saved and to make the sensible world the best possible replica of intelligible perfection. From this perspective, as Plotinus concludes, “it is not evil in every way for soul to give body the ability to flourish and to exist, because not every kind of provident care for the inferior deprives the being exercising it of its ability to remain in the highest” (2, 24–26).

It is precisely this double vision, which is at once pessimistic and optimistic, and which also forms an integral part of the rich Platonic heritage, that Plotinus is no longer at leisure to maintain in his reaction to the Gnostics' disdain of the world.<sup>9</sup> In Plotinus' reading, the Gnostic attitude is characterised by a systematic depreciation of the sensible:

The man who censures the nature of the universe does not know what he is doing, and how far this rash criticism of his goes. This is so because the Gnostics do not know that there is an order of firsts, seconds and thirds in regular succession, and so on to the last, and that the things that are worse than the first should not be reviled; one should rather calmly and gently accept the nature of all things, and hurry oneself to the first, ceasing to concern oneself with the melodrama of the terrors, as they think, in the cosmic spheres [...]. (33 [II 9], 13, 1–8)

We find here one of the principal leitmotifs of his anti-Gnostic writings: "Again, despising the universe and the gods in it and the other noble things is certainly not becoming good" (*ibid.*, 16, 1–2); "For the beauties here exist because of the first beauties. If, then, these here do not exist, neither do those; so these are beautiful in their order after those" (17, 25–26).

Thus, in Plotinus' opinion, it is the optimistic message of the *Timaeus*, which praises the role of the soul *vis-à-vis* the world, that the Gnostics neglect in their cosmogony:

And yet, even if it occurred to them to hate the nature of body because they have heard Plato often reproaching the body for the kind of hindrances it puts in the way of the soul—and he said that all bodily nature was inferior—they should have stripped off this bodily nature in their thought and seen what remained, an intelligible sphere embracing the form imposed upon the universe, souls in their order which without bodies give magnitude and advance to dimension according to the intelligible pattern, so that what has come into being may become equal, to the extent of its power (εἰς δύναμιν), by its magnitude to the partlessness of its archetype:<sup>10</sup> for greatness in the intelligible world is in power, here below in bulk. (33 [II 9], 17, 1–10)

One cannot condemn the sensible world without incriminating that from which it arises, and this is the message that Plotinus emphasises against his adversaries. The innocence of the divinities cannot be dismissed; this is the first, absolutely unbreakable law. One cannot search within the divine for the explanation of evil down here. The first consequence, therefore, is that the hypothesis of a weakness proper to the soul—of an evil or perversion endog-

9. On this double tendency in all Greco-Roman religious thought and its distant Platonic source, see the arguments of A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. II: "Le Dieu cosmique," x–xiii; 92–94; vol. III, "Les doctrines de l'âme," 63–96.

10. The Greek text here is difficult and has provided occasion for numerous conjectures. For our part, we accept the text of Kirchhoff followed by Bréhier, Theiler and Armstrong.



enous to it—must be entirely put aside, and this implies the abandonment of one of the Platonic sources for the appearance of evil, associated with the *Phaedrus* and certain passages in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Plotinus, then, is not *inconsistent* on the question of the origin of evil. Rather, his thought has evolved. More precisely, in order to mark his distance from Gnosticism, he has been forced to modify substantially the soul's role in his theodicy.

But there is also a second consequence, concerning which we have henceforth been hesitant. If the divinities cannot be held to be responsible for evil, whose origin is *material* (and by that we mean *exclusively material*), these divinities can no longer be held responsible for the very existence of matter, which is the origin of this evil, and most especially Soul, which bears the responsibility to create or, at best, to organise the cosmos. While Plotinus sharply criticises the Gnostics because they make material obscurity to be born out of the inclination of the soul, how would he himself dare to defend a similar doctrine?<sup>11</sup>

#### SENSIBLE MATTER, BY-PRODUCT OF THE EMANATIVE PROCESS

Indeed, upon close examination one finds that sensible matter is for Plotinus not a creation of the Soul, but a *by-product* of the alterity-infinity coming from the One, something that has *by itself escaped, gone out or fallen*, or has been *expelled* from the Infinity above (cf. 12 [II 4], 15; 25 [II 5], 4–5; 26 [III 6], 7, 7–11; 13, 21–27; 34 [VI 6], 1–3; 44 [VI 3], 7; 51 [I 8], 15, 24ff.),<sup>12</sup> reducing accordingly the responsibility or implication of the above principles in the process.

As an example of this type of emergence—totally different from the *generation* or *production* operated by a soul of something, diversely described as *place* or some appropriate *outline, illumination* or *trace* of herself, but never called matter (ὕλη)—we can quote the crucial text of 25 [II 5], 5, 13–22 where Plotinus explains:

It [Matter] was not anything actually from the beginning, since it stood apart from all realities, and it did not become anything; it has not been able to take even a touch of colour from the things that wanted to plunge into it, but remaining directed to something else it exists potentially to what comes next; *when the realities of the intelligible world had already come to an end it appeared* (φανεῖσα) and was caught by the things that came into

11. It is significant to observe that Plotinus never speaks of “ὕλη” in the several passages where he describes the final generative or productive activity of soul. On this question, cf. “Plotinus and the Gnostics on the Generation of Matter (33 [II 9], 12 and 51 [I 8], 14)”: 54ff, and J.-M. Narbonne, “La controverse à propos de génération de la matière chez Plotin. L'énigme résolue?” *Quaestio* 7 (2007).

12. This other type of origin of sensible matter is commented on at length in our “La controverse à propos de la génération de la matière sensible chez Plotin. L'énigme résolue?” Cf. *supra* n.11.

being *after it* [which means of course the sensible copies] and took its place as the last after these too. So, being caught by both [*i.e.*, the sensible copies and the intelligible realities], it could belong actually to neither class of realities; it is only left for it to be potentially a sort of weak and dim phantasm unable to receive a shape.

Why did matter *appear*? Is this not a peculiar but at the same time very precise verb to use in the context? It *appeared*, quite simply, because in one way or another *it was already there*. If its appearance had been directly linked to, and dependent upon, the activity of Soul, Plotinus would simply be repeating the view held by some Gnostics,<sup>13</sup> and so contradicting himself since he refused the theory of the *production* of matter from a declining soul. The intelligible realities (being in themselves lights), when they arrived at matter (which is in itself dark), have necessarily illuminated it, simply because it was there; it was there because it had already *come, fallen*, or otherwise *escaped* from above. Moreover, the sequence of this *appearance* merits close attention. Firstly, there is a halt in the progression of the intelligible realities (T1); then, closely connected with this stop, there is the appearance of matter itself (T2); finally, there is a grasping of matter by the things that came into being after the appearance of matter (T3). This threefold ordered sequence is quite peculiar, in so far as it displays a reversal of the axiological order. Matter appears second, but is axiologically third after the copies, *i.e.*, the sensible objects.

Now, it is precisely both this *diverse* model of the *derivation* of matter and this reversal of order in Plotinus' system that is technically explained and carefully defended in Treatise 44 [VI 3], 7. In that Treatise, he describes a type of emergence which can be described as a *differentiated flow* of realities—as opposed to a *regular flow, spate-flow* or *cascade-flow*—wherein A generates B, and then B generates C, and for which every new step of production corresponds at the same time with a declension of being.<sup>14</sup>

Let us begin by noting a passage from 44 [VI 3], 7 (lines 1–9), where Plotinus writes:

But if anyone should say that the things here which are based on matter have their being from it we shall demand where matter gets being and the existent form. We have explained elsewhere that matter is not primary. But if one says that the other things could not come into existence except on the basis of matter, we shall agree as far as sense-objects are concerned. *But even if matter is prior to these, nothing prevents it from being posterior to many things and to all the things there in the intelligible* (πρὸ τούτων δὲ

13. “Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere to decline to [logical argument], and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline [refusal of the down-top model of evil], but the soul's nature [axiological argument]” (33 [II 9], 12, 41–43).

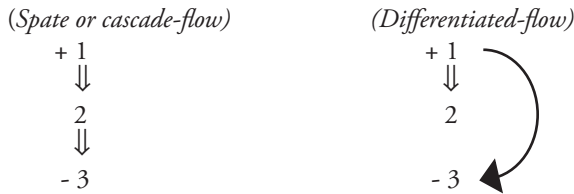
14. Cf. *e.g.* 33 [II 9], 3, 11–12.

οὐσαν ὕστερον πολλῶν εἶναι καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖ πάντων οὐδὲν κωλύει), since the being it has is dim and less than the things based upon it, in so far as they are rational principles and derive more from the existent, but matter is utterly irrational, *a shadow of rational form and a falling away from rational form* (σκιὰ λόγου καὶ ἔκπτωσις λόγου).

Apart from the mention here of the *fall* (ἔκπτωσις) of matter—which goes hand-in-hand with the *escape* concept just described—the main interest of this passage is to raise, once again, the issue of this inversion between the order of appearance and the order of being. Matter appears before the copies but is axiologically lower than them. This infraction upon the law of proportionality between the anterior and the posterior is revisited again later: “For when something which is more existent [*i.e.*, the Form] arrives about something which is less existent, the latter [*i.e.*, matter] would be first in order, but posterior in substance (τάξει μὲν πρώτων ἂν εἴη, οὐσίᾳ δὲ ὕστερον)” (7, 16–17). In short, in the order of the *occurrence* of being, we have the set 1→3→2; in the order of the *value* of being, we have the standard set 1→2→3.<sup>15</sup>

If, however, 3 comes before 2 but is nevertheless inferior to 2, perhaps this is because it appears differently from 2. That is exactly what Plotinus undertakes to clarify at the end of this chapter, as he explains how the flow of the unity may occur in different ways, and that it is possible for 3 to be inferior to 2, not because it comes from 2, but because it participates less of 1.

Here is the schema of those two fluxes and the corresponding text:

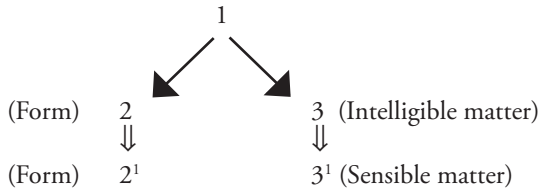


But one should not perhaps proceed like this. For each [of the three, matter, form and composite] is different as a whole, and the dimness is not something common, just as in the case of life there would be nothing in common between nutritive, perceptive and intelligent life. So here also being is different in matter and in form, *and both together come from one which flows in all sorts of different ways* (συνάμφω ἀφ’ ἐνὸς ἄλλως καὶ ἄλλως ρύεντος). For it is not only necessary for one to exist more and the other worse and less if the second comes from the first and the third from the second (οὐ γὰρ μόνον δεῖ, εἰ τὸ δεύτερον ἀπὸ τοῦ πρώτου, τὸ δὲ τρίτον ἀπὸ τοῦ δευτέρου, τὸ μὲν μᾶλλον, τὸ δὲ ἐφεξῆς χεῖρον καὶ ἕλαστον), but even if both come from the same, in that one has a larger share in fire, like a pot, and the other less, so as not to become a pot.

15. There is, of course, nothing hazardous in the fact that Plotinus reproaches precisely their ignorance of the order of realities: “This is so because the Gnostics do not know that there is an order of firsts, seconds and thirds in regular succession, and so on to the last” (*ibid.*, 13, 3–5).

But perhaps matter and form do not even come from the same: for they are different also in the intelligible world (τάχα δὲ οὐδ' ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἢ ὕλη καὶ τὸ εἶδος; διάφορα γὰρ καὶ ἐν ἐκείνοισι) (7, 26–35).

Here Plotinus suggests the most probable alternative possibility. As is often the case with the use of the word τάχα in the Plotinian corpus, in the last two lines of this passage Plotinus emphasizes that *perhaps* matter and form do not have the same origin; this possibility could be schematized in this alternative way:



This teaching is quite clear: either matter comes differently from the same origin, or it does not even come from the same origin, in that it comes from its correspondent in the intelligible world (*i.e.* intelligible matter). In both cases, we are close to a system of derivation of matter which we encounter in post-Plotinian Neoplatonism—in Proclus and others—and to what we find already anticipated in Moderatus or Eudorus. The crucial point is that, in both of these models (as opposed to the Gnostic model), the divinities are free of direct intervention and responsibility for this appearance. Not only do they not *generate* or *produce* matter as such, but they in fact capture it and fasten it up, so as to limit its harmful influence. The divinities are accountable for the limitation of matter's evil, and *not* for its evil.

One can immediately see the subtlety and efficiency of this doctrine, since with it Plotinus simultaneously attains four goals: 1) he avoids the pure dualism of positing two originative principles; 2) he avoids the weakening of the active opposition between Good and Evil, which is fundamental to his understanding of some evil acts and phenomena in the sensible world; 3) he avoids the direct implication of the Good in the irruption of Evil, which itself comes as a collateral damage in the contraband of the emanative process; 4) he preserves God's supremacy over his opponent—not a negligible achievement in the face of a problem widely thought to be irresolvable.

#### THE PROPER TASK AND ACCOMPLISHMENT OF TREATISE 51

Although the doctrine of Treatise 51 [I 8] is closely connected to that of Treatise 33 [II 9], it differs from it on a crucial point, while the two texts pursue entirely different purposes. Treatise 33—entitled *Against the Gnos-*

*tics*—had one main goal, which was to refute the Gnostics’ approach to various fields and topics. With respect to evil, its main task was to release the soul (and secondarily the other higher principles) of any causal responsibility for its existence. But the 33<sup>rd</sup> Treatise revealed nothing positive about how one should understand evil’s irruption in the cosmos; it did not explain the concrete mechanism by which the different evils (physical or moral) occur in the sensible world. Treatise 51 fills precisely this gap. It is there to establish a theory according to which matter could be considered the first evil and, at the same time, the cause of the weakness of the individual soul, which will thereafter be judged only as a secondary evil—a distinction nowhere to be found before 51. Treatise 33 denies the Gnostic theodicy, because if Soul had produced the darkened matter, the cause of its inclination in this direction would not be the obscurity already present, but Soul itself. Yet Treatise 33 does not expose Plotinus’ own theodicy, and it does not explain how we should relate the activity of souls to the activity of matter. In fact, by reading only Treatise 33, we would learn nearly nothing about the precise activity of matter in the sensible world. It is essentially—if not *only*—in Treatise 51 that we learn how the previous existence of matter is the sufficient cause of the soul’s fall, that this fall corresponds to its weakness, and that both would be absent without the active undertaking of matter. In this respect, Treatise 51 is probably closer to the very first Plotinian writing, Περὶ τοῦ καλοῦ, or eventually Treatise 26 [III 6], than to 33, which is silent regarding this delicate mechanism. The same is true regarding the double stratification of evil (primary/secondary), the double type of evil (physical/psychical)—a refinement typical of Treatise 51—and the recognition of a pair of principles opposed to one another. **This formula has hitherto justly puzzled commentators** (ἀρχαὶ γὰρ ἄμφω, ἡ μὲν κακῶν, ἡ δὲ ἀγαθῶν), even though the admission of two principles does not mean that they are equal in force and power—another refinement without which the exoneration of soul’s accountability regarding evil would remain wholly incomprehensible and fictitious.

All of this requires, as a precondition, the rejection of the Gnostic cosmogony, which amounts to a “melodrama of terrors” (33 [II 9], 13, 7), but none of this is fully elaborated or legitimised before Treatise 51. We have already seen that until Treatise 33 Plotinus was basically Platonic in his conception of evil, and we saw that a new orientation took place from Treatise 33 on. But it is only in Treatise 51 that Plotinus became truly ‘Plotinian.’ That is to say, only here did he express that for which he has since become recognised and famous, i.e., grounding all evil and perverse phenomena in a unique and universal cause: matter’s existence and behaviour. In this sense, only in Treatise 51 did Plotinus complete what he introduced negatively in 33. The Treatise Περὶ τοῦ τίνα καὶ πόθεν τὰ κακὰ must then be viewed

as complementary work to 33, and an indispensable one according to our evaluation. But, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Treatise belongs to the middle period of Plotinus' writing, and the 51<sup>st</sup> Treatise belongs to the last period, when the subjects chosen were no longer suggested to him in the occasions provided by his teaching activity (*VP* 5). Why did it take Plotinus so long to work out the detailed version of his position?

The answer to this question can, of course, only be tentative. We do know—as a fact revealed by Plotinus himself in 33 [II 9],<sup>10</sup>—that some people around him were attracted by the Gnostic doctrines and were willing to remain faithful to their extravagant theses, although Plotinus tried to rescue them from this deviancy that the philosopher himself could hardly explain. His 33<sup>rd</sup> Treatise was in fact devoted not to the Gnostics themselves, who were too dogmatic ever to change their mind anyway, but it was written as a safeguard to his own pupils who might become too sensitive to them (10, 1–15). Most probably, this is an understatement by Plotinus, minimizing the threat he was in fact encountering.<sup>16</sup> By reading Porphyry's report, we learn how demanding his opposition to them really was:

Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title "Against the Gnostics"; he left it to us to assess what he passed over. Amelius went to forty volumes in writing against the book of Zoroaster. . . . I, Porphyry, wrote a considerable number of refutations of the book of Zoroaster . . .  
(16, 9–15)

If we are to rely on Porphyry's account, the quarrel of Plotinus against the Gnostics had spanned many years, until the master finally engaged in an extensive essay directed against them. Moreover, he asked Amelius and Porphyry to take over the refutation, which they apparently did in a thorough manner. The whole school was thus engaged in this crucial debate. In comparison with the dispute of Porphyry himself with Amelius, concerning the status of the Ideas and whether they are inside or outside Intellect (*VP* 18), or the possible effect of Porphyry on the Plotinian criticism of the Aristotelian categories,<sup>17</sup> the Gnostic refutation appears as what it really is—the biggest challenge Plotinus had met throughout his entire academic career.

We can easily imagine that, in fact, the Gnostics were still very influential and even threatening—probably much more than the discrete indication

16. He mentions it again in 33 [II 9], 15, 1ff.: "But there is one point we must be particularly careful not to let escape us, and that is what these [Gnostic] arguments do the souls of those who hear them and are persuaded by them to despise the universe and the beings in it." Compare 33 [II 9], 9, 55ff.

17. Cf. H.-D. Saffrey, "Pourquoi Porphyre a-t-il édité Plotin? Une étude provisoire," in *Le néoplatonisme après Plotin* (Paris: Vrin, 2000) 4–26.

of Plotinus would allow us to think—and that, even after Treatise 33 had circulated widely, many doubts remained over the respective advantages or superiority of several doctrinal factors in the debate. The enterprise of refutation had to continue, and so Plotinus prompted Amelius and Porphyry to investigate further the details of their theory. We do not know how long they pursued this task, but it could easily have lasted until Porphyry finally departed to Sicily. Be that as it may, we know that Treatise 33 needed a complement—something that would indicate the true structure of the whole, and the precise place at which one should allow evil to enter into it. I suggest, therefore, that Plotinus returned again to the subject because he had to clarify his position and to demonstrate the soundness of his approach. He had to show that it was indeed possible to exonerate the principles, and especially Soul, for the evil in the sensible world, and this demonstration was needed not only due to the incompleteness of Treatise 33, but due to the ongoing dissatisfactions felt around him on that matter.

Our conclusion, then, is that as a result of his opposition to the Gnostics, who were increasingly influential in his own school, Plotinus was forced to minimize the role of Soul and to maximize the role of matter in the emergence of evil in the sensible world. We can conjecture that, if its importance is as colossal as we suspect, this same quarrel has had other effects on Plotinian doctrine: in the estimation, for example, of the value of the productive arts and of demiurgy in general, or even in the appreciation of the situation of the philosopher in our world. We know that the Plotinian system is not as monolithic as one would tend to think, and we know, for example, that the first treatises do not reveal in all clarity the doctrine of the “Super One” which will come to the foreground in Treatises 7 and 10.<sup>18</sup> Is it not reasonable, then, to think that such near opponents as the Gnostics could induce a curve in the otherwise unwavering orbit of Plotinus’ thinking, just as we notice that the mysterious adversaries of Treatise 39 [VI 8] have pressured him to develop, in relation to the One, a *causa sui* argument unheard of anywhere else in his entire corpus? One suspects that there must be other lines of doctrinal evolution influenced by Plotinus’ encounter and interaction with the Gnostics. Be that as it may, the demonstration of this will have to wait for another occasion.

18. Cf. P.A. Meijer, *Plotinus on the Good or the One (Enneads VI, 9). An Analytical Commentary* (Amsterdam, 1992) 27ff.

