

The Relationship of the Kantian and Proclan Conceptions of Evil

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According to many contemporary commentators, there has been a marked movement in philosophy away from a theocentric conception of evil, which attempts to explain evil in light of the great paradox of “*si Deus est, unde malum? Si non est, unde bonum?*”¹, towards an anthropocentric conception of evil, which attempts to explain evil in light of man as a free and willing being. Furthermore, for these commentators, it is the work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), especially his short essay ‘On the Radical Evil in Human Nature’ found in his late treatise, *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, which “holds a privileged position in this passage from theodicy to anthropodicy.”² With his proposal of a ‘radical evil’ within human nature, Kant is certainly breaking from a number of his philosophical predecessors, especially those closest to him by virtue of both time and influence. It remains to be seen, however, whether Kant is truly making a *complete* break from the history of philosophy and establishing a new conception of evil that lies wholly outside the scope of all his predecessors. Although many contemporary thinkers hold this to be so,³ there may be reason to doubt this claim.

In the *De malorum subsistentia* of Proclus (412?–485), the eminent fifth-century Neoplatonist and head of the Platonic Academy, we also find a highly developed conception of evil, which may be seen as the culmination of nearly a millennium of Platonic thought on the subject. This Proclan conception of evil, as developed in the *De malorum subsistentia*, exerted a prolonged influence in both the East and in the Latin West. It was adopted almost immediately by Proclus’ fellow Neoplatonists, such as the great Aristotelian

1. Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E.M. Huggard (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), I, §20.

2. Jacob Rogozinski, “It makes us Wrong: Kant and Radical Evil,” *Radical Evil*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1996), 31.

3. Including essentially all the contributors to the above mentioned volume as well as other influential contemporary thinkers such as Susan Neiman in her recent book *Evil in modern thought: an alternative history of philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

commentator Simplicius (490–560),⁴ and secured a central place within the Christian tradition thanks to a summarization by the Pseudo-Dionysius in his *De divinis nominibus*⁵ and that treatise's subsequent influence. Indeed, although the original work of Proclus concerning evil was unavailable to the Latin West until the middle of the thirteenth century,⁶ the essence of the Proclan conception of evil became of such import to the Christian tradition that, as Alain de Libera writes:

A la question de savoir s'il y a eu une pensée spécifiquement médiévale du mal, nous pouvons répondre à présent en distinguant deux sens: si spécifique signifie *caractéristique* il faut dire que la caractéristique du Moyen Age a été de prolonger, sans le savoir, les intuitions fondamentales du néoplatonisme proclien.⁷

It is thanks to this prolonged influence over the history of thought, stretching from the ancient world to the late middle ages, that the Proclan doctrine of evil has as substantial a claim as any other at being the principal representative of pre-Kantian thought concerning evil.

In what follows, we will attempt to probe the true depth of Kant's supposed break from the 'theocentric' Proclan tradition of philosophy with his doctrine of a 'radical evil.' This will be done by ascertaining whether Proclus' teaching on evil offers an adequate explanation of Kant's radical evil or whether Kant's thought is something wholly new. If the former is found to be true and Proclan and Kantian conceptions of evil are not as distant as commonly assumed, then two further questions will briefly be raised, namely, whether these two doctrines of evil are both superior to the various rival doctrines which they attempt to supersede and whether they are adequate in themselves.

KANT'S BREAK WITH HIS PREDECESSORS

The tradition of thought from which Kant emerges and against which he writes his 'On the Radical Evil in Human Nature' is one dominated by the thought of Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and his follower Christian Wolff (1679–1754). Kant was indeed a student and ardent admirer of Leibniz for

4. Simplicius uses a nearly identical formulation to that of Proclus, stating that evil has a "derivative existence, derived from the good as a falling away and deprivation of it (ἀλλὰ παραφύσταται τῷ ἀγαθῷ)." Simplicius, *Commentary on Epictetus' Enchiridion*, 74, 9.

5. Cf. *De divinis nominibus*, 4,18–34. As Alain de Libera writes: "Avant que Guillaume de Moerbeke ne le traduisit, cela faisait pourtant non pas plusieurs années, mais bien plusieurs siècles que ses idées avaient pénétré la pensée chrétienne, latine et grecque: les ND du Pseudo-Denys ont été le principal vecteur de la diffusion en occident du platonisme proclien." De Libera, "Le mal dans la philosophie médiéval," *Studia Philosophica* 52 (1993): 101.

6. "Le mal dans la philosophie médiéval," 101.

7. *Ibid.*, 101–02.

some time and in his essays prior to 1763, as Olivier Reboul writes, “Kant se tient résolument dans la ligne de Leibniz et de Wolff” and his work at this time “ne fait que prolonger leur pensée.”⁸ Leibniz and Wolff, in turn, drew their own ideas concerning evil from a long tradition of reflection on the nature of evil, stretching far back into the ancient world, and from it derived three essential propositions concerning evil. The first of these is that evil is necessary for the universe. This time-honoured idea, which can be traced back to Plato⁹ and holds a central place within the history of philosophy at least until Hegel,¹⁰ was taken up by Leibniz in his famous doctrine of ‘the best of all possible worlds.’ In this formulation Leibniz argues that God, in his perfection, could only create a world that was as close to perfection as is possible. Therefore, all the evils that we (along with *Candide*) experience in the world are simply necessary additions for the perfection and completion of creation.¹¹ The second proposition held by Leibniz and Wolff is that the cause of evil may not be attributed to matter, as they suppose the ancients to have done,¹² and must instead be sought “in the ideal nature of the creature”¹³. These first two propositions lead to the third and final one, the Leibnizian solution to the problem of evil, which is that “*metaphysical evil* consists of simple imperfection”¹⁴ and therefore all evil is nothing more than a mere privation of goodness in a creature’s ‘ideal nature.’

Kant, although a long-time follower of Leibniz, broke with him early on, and the sources from which he drew, over his final proposition concerning evil. Kant found that he could no longer hold to the third proposition, that evil is a privation, upon his discovery that negations exist. This idea was completely contrary to the thought of Leibniz, to whom Kant ascribes the opinion “that negations are the things which are uniquely contrary to real-

8. Olivier Reboul, *Kant et le problème du mal* (Montréal: Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1971), 43.

9. Socrates, in his discussion with Theodorus, says that “it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed- for there must always be something opposed to the good; nor is it possible that it should have its seat in heaven. But it must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about this earth.” Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M.J. Levett in *Plato: the Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 176a5–8.

10. For evidence of the necessity of evil in Hegel’s thought, cf. Richard Bernstein, *Radical evil: a philosophical interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 46–76.

11. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, I, §21: “as this vast region of verities contains all possibilities it is necessary that there be an infinitude of possible worlds, that evil enter into several of them, and that even the best of all contain a measure of it.”

12. *Ibid.*, I, §20. “The ancients attributed the cause of evil to *matter*, which they believed uncreated and independent of God.”

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, I, §21.

ity.”¹⁵ This idea, which Kant originally derived from physics and mathematics,¹⁶ was applied by him to his metaphysical and psychological speculations, allowing him to write that:

Displeasure is accordingly not simply a lack of pleasure. It is a positive ground which, wholly or partly, cancels the pleasure which arises from another ground. For this reason, I call it a *negative pleasure*.¹⁷

This idea that the negation of something, such as pleasure, has real being, was a monumental discovery for Kant and was applied to the whole of his thought, especially his conception of evil. According to this new conception, evil, for Kant, is not simply “the not-good”¹⁸ as Leibniz would have it (i.e. the privation of being or the lack of something), but is in fact a positive force (“a positive evil”¹⁹) within the individual which exists just as substantially as the good and poses a real opposition to the good.²⁰

In spite of his disagreement with Leibniz’s solution to the problem of evil, Kant was still receptive to much of Leibniz’s thought, including his proposition that evil cannot be caused directly by man’s immersion in the material world and his inability to suppress his sensuous desires. For Kant the ground of evil cannot be placed in man’s sensuous nature and his natural desires “for not only are these not directly related to evil ... [but] we must not even be considered responsible for their existence (we cannot be, for since they are implanted in us, we are not their authors).”²¹ Because sensuous desires are simply an object of the will, something towards which the will may be inclined, they cannot be the source of evil. The source of evil for Kant, as we will see below, cannot be an object outside of the will but must be within the will itself.

15. Immanuel Kant, *Critique de la Raison Pure*, trans. Tremesaygues and Pacaud (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1965), 239. Cited in *Kant et le problème du mal*, 49.

16. *Kant et le problème du mal*, 49.

17. Kant, *Attempt to introduce the concept of negative magnitudes into philosophy in Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, trans. David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 220.

18. Kant, *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, trans. Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1960), 18, note.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Kant more fully illustrates this idea with the examples of the pleasure and pain in the following note: “As regards pleasure and pain there is a similar middle term, whereby pleasure = a, pain = -a, and the state in which neither is to be found, indifference, = 0. In us ... the law is a motivating force, = a; hence the absence of agreement of the will with this law (= 0) is possible only as a consequence of a real and contrary determination of the will, i.e., of an opposition to the law; = -a, i.e., of an evil will.” *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 30.

These three propositions concerning evil, two of which Kant embraced and the last he rejected, were, however, not unique to Leibniz. The proof of this is that thirteen hundred years earlier, Proclus responded to them in a manner identical to that of Kant. Proclus holds, along with Kant, “that evil ... must be different from privation.”²² This is because, for Proclus, a total privation, rather than indicating that something is totally evil, “implies that the evil nature has disappeared.”²³ He also states that evil is “contrary to the good and discordant with it” while privation “neither opposes ... nor is disposed to do anything.”²⁴ Aside from indicating his dismissal of evil as privation, this statement also demonstrates that Proclus too holds the idea that evil *is* something, a positive force of its own.²⁵ Although Proclus is careful to state that evil “is ineffectual and impotent on its own”²⁶ and only has a parasitic existence on the good, he is also clear that evil is neither an object of the will²⁷ nor simply a negation or a non-being.²⁸

Proclus also sides with Kant and Leibniz in their rejection of the idea that the ultimate source of evil is to be found simply in our sensuous desires. Proclus challenges those who would hold matter and the soul’s immersion in it as the source of evil with a long and subtle argument culminating in his own position that matter and the sensible world are “necessary to generation.”²⁹ Evil on the other hand, rather than coming from the soul’s immersion in the material world, “existed already before bodies and matter.”³⁰

Not only do Proclus and Kant unanimously reject these two possible grounds of evil, but they also jointly reject a third, which proposes that evil exists because man has a purely evil will. For Kant, the idea of a freely acting being that is not bound to the moral laws appropriate to such a being is “tantamount to conceiving of a cause operating without any laws whatsoever” and “this is a self-contradiction.”³¹ The very idea of freedom requires the existence of a moral law, just as a cause in the physical world requires physical laws by which it can act, and therefore the idea of purely evil, free being is impossible.³² For Proclus as well, this sort of being necessarily cannot ex-

22. Proclus, *De malorum subsistentia*, trans. Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 38, 11.

23. *Ibid.*, 38, 14.

24. *Ibid.*, 38, 26–7.

25. *Ibid.*, 8–10.

26. *Ibid.*, 54, 1.

27. *Ibid.*, 54, 2: “it is also involuntary and, as Plato says, unwilling.”

28. *Ibid.*, 9.

29. *Ibid.*, 36, 22.

30. *Ibid.*, 33, 2.

31. *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, 30.

32. The idea that Kant would not allow for the existence of a purely evil being is a source of some dispute amongst Kantian scholars, with scholars such as John Silber who laments in his

ist. He entertains the possibility that the source of evil could be found in a maleficent soul, only to completely reject it on the grounds that such a soul must have been created evil, thereby implicating the gods in the creation of evil.³³ The soul, having been created by the gods and belonging originally to the upper realm must have a good substance. Only its powers and activities can be corrupted by evil, for if a soul's substance were capable of being corrupted, it would no longer be immortal and thus not a soul.

TWO DOCTRINES OF EVIL

Having examined some of the ideas held by the pre-Kantian tradition and what Kant accepted and rejected from this tradition, we are now able to examine Kant's own teachings concerning evil. He opens his consideration of the subject strikingly, stating "that 'the world lieth in evil' is a complaint as old as history, even as old as the older art of poetic fiction; indeed, just as old as the oldest among all fictions, the religion of the priests."³⁴ Although, as he goes on to remark, many philosophers and pedagogues of his day have come to hold the opinion that "the world steadfastly forges ahead ... from bad to better,"³⁵ he is utterly unconvinced by their reasoning. For Kant, the prevalence of moral evil cannot have been lessened with the passage of time as "the history of all times attests far too powerfully against it."³⁶ In essence, Kant begins his treatment of evil with an attempt to prove that, in spite of much wishful thinking to the contrary, moral evil exists.

The existence of this evil can be easily demonstrated through the experiential proofs of the opposition of man's will to the moral law (*sittliches Gesetz*).³⁷ In other words, we constantly experience men behaving in an evil manner, contrary to those *a priori* laws of morality privy to them as rational beings. These experiential proofs, however, do not teach us the grounds of the will's opposition to the moral law. For that we must look elsewhere. As we have seen above, Kant rejects the idea that a freely willing being could exist without a moral law or be in complete rebellion against it. The law in fact irresistibly forces itself upon all freely willing beings by virtue of their

paper 'Kant at Auschwitz' that "Kant's ethics is inadequate to the understanding of Auschwitz because Kant denies the possibility of a deliberate rejection of the moral law." Richard Bernstein, however, corrects such judgements by pointing out that although Kant will not allow for a being to exist without the moral law, his concept of *Willkür* allows a being to consistently choose to act contrary to the moral law. Whether Kant would agree with Bernstein's interpretation is another matter entirely. Cf. *Radical evil: a philosophical interrogation*, 36–42.

33. *De malorum subsistentia*, 45.

34. *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, 15.

35. *Ibid.*, 16.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 31.

moral disposition.³⁸ Indeed, because of this constant presence of the moral law, if no other incentive were being offered, man would certainly adopt the moral law alone as the determining ground of his will and would therefore become a perfectly good being.³⁹ This, however, as experience shows us, is never the case, for there is always another incentive offered to man for the construction of what Kant calls the ‘maxim’⁴⁰ determining his will: his sensuous nature. Neither of these two can influence man alone, so he must adopt both in the construction of his maxim. The difference therefore, between a good man and an evil man is not which of these two incentives he adopts into his maxim (the content of his maxim), but “which of these two incentives he makes the condition of the other”⁴¹ (the form of his maxim). Thus, a man is evil when he subordinates the incentive of the moral law to his sensuous nature and makes it the condition of the former and a man is good when he does the opposite (i.e. makes the moral law the condition of his sensuous nature).

Anyone who experiences the conflict between these two incentives will realize that they cannot remain equal to one another and that one must be subordinated to the other. This person will also realize that the natural and ethical ordering of these inclinations is to subordinate the sensuous nature to the moral law. If, however, there exists a “propensity (*Hang*)” in human nature to invert this natural and ethical ordering of inclinations, then “there is in man a natural propensity towards evil.”⁴² Kant holds that just such a propensity exists. Because this propensity exists prior to the moral law and the sensuous nature of man, it can be sought nowhere else but in the will itself.⁴³ This evil must therefore be a “*radical evil (radikal Böse)*” because in its inversion of the ethical ordering of incentives “it corrupts the ground of all maxims.”⁴⁴ This evil also can neither be extirpated nor can we know its origin because it lies within the will itself.⁴⁵ We can, however, find ways in which to overcome it. Therefore, we may say that for Kant, the ground of evil is found in man’s propensity to will the rejection of himself as a freely willing being (for he wills to subordinate the moral law to his sensuous nature, even

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. The maxim which governs our will, according to Kant, “contains the practical rule which reason determines in accordance with the conditions of the subject (often their ignorance or inclinations) and is thus the principle according to which the subject does act.” Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 30.

41. *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, 31.

42. *Ibid.*, 32.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, 38.

though the willing of the moral law is the grounds by which he maintains his freedom) for the sake of himself as a sensuous creature.

Proclus' account of evil begins at much the same place as that of Kant. For Proclus, evil must necessarily exist (although its existence is merely a parasitic one) and we find in man distinct empirical proof of this in the difference between virtue and vice.⁴⁶ Although, as we have seen above, Proclus disagrees with those such as Leibniz who hold that evil is simply non-being or a privation of the good, he partakes in the Platonic idea that evil only occurs when something rejects its natural position within the ontological hierarchy. With respect to particular, human souls, this would mean embracing what is below them: the sensible and material world.⁴⁷ Therefore, Proclus teaches that the origin of evil for particular souls "is the continuous commingling and cohabitation with what is inferior to us."⁴⁸ These souls, according to Proclus, are in fact the first beings in the hierarchy of existence that are capable of rejecting their own natural position within it.⁴⁹ The reason for this is that these souls are by nature in possession of self-motion and free will.⁵⁰

The question to which this description of the soul naturally leads, however, is why would a soul, which is by nature immaterial and belongs to the upper realms, ever choose to forsake this position and descend into generation and the material world, in which it can succumb to evil? The answer to this daunting question is that there is for some souls "a weakness (*debilitas*)"⁵¹ which makes them incapable of permanently imitating their "presiding gods,"⁵² therefore causing them to "precipitate downwards."⁵³ This 'weakness' exists prior to the soul's descent into matter⁵⁴ and is in no way caused by matter or the temptations of the material world, for that would rob the soul of one of the principles of its nature: the free will by which it may choose its mode of existence.⁵⁵ This pre-existent weakness, which causes some souls to descend into the sensible world and into evil, can be found nowhere else but in the soul's own free will.

46. *De malorum subsistentia*, 4.

47. This is because, for Proclus, "every soul is an incorporeal substance" and "is indestructible and imperishable." Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, trans. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), props. 186 and 187 respectively.

48. *De malorum subsistentia*, 24, 33.

49. *Ibid.*, 20, 7–8.

50. *Ibid.*, 33, 25. For other qualities ascribed to the soul by Proclus, cf. *The Elements of Theology*, prop. 186–97.

51. *Ibid.*, 24, 1.

52. *Ibid.*, 23, 19.

53. *Ibid.*, 24, 2.

54. *Ibid.*, 33, 2.

55. *Ibid.*, 33, 25.

After examining these two descriptions of evil in humans, it is not the differences which first strike us but the many obvious similarities. Both Kant and Proclus agree that evil exists necessarily and occurs when the soul chooses something inferior to itself as the object of its will. This, for the human soul, is to subordinate its true immaterial nature and its link to those things in the intelligible realm (for Proclus the Forms and for Kant the moral law) to the senses and the material world which they represent. The ground of evil within the human is therefore, for both Kant and Proclus, found in a pre-existent 'propensity' or 'weakness' in the soul's natural free will which causes the soul to choose the sensible world over the intelligible, making it the condition of the latter in the maxim governing its will and the goal of its existence. The heart of this joint doctrine and the central premise upon which Proclus and Kant agree is that the soul is both responsible for the evil which it commits (for it is a freely willing agent and can choose to overcome its own weakness⁵⁶) yet it is not itself the direct source of evil (this would make it a malicious soul, a possibility that we have seen both reject).

Due to the necessary brevity of this exposition, the Kantian-Proclan conception of evil may seem somewhat confused and contradictory. We are ostensibly presented by them with a system in which both authors reject the possibility of evil emerging directly from the sensible world while simultaneously maintaining that the soul's choice of the sensible world over the intelligible causes it to succumb to evil. Maintaining these two claims, however, is not as paradoxical a position as it may initially seem. Both authors hold that the sensible world cannot alone be the source of evil, because that would mean that man, by his very embodiment, is immersed in evil and has therefore lost his freewill. This also does not explain why, if the soul has free will, it would ever choose to immerse itself in what is lower than itself. It is true that the choice of the sensible world over the soul's own intelligible nature is the *cause* of evil in man, but the *source* or *ground* of this bad choice (and therefore the *source* or *ground* of evil for man) must lie outside the sensible world and in the will itself. It is this subtle distinction between evil's cause and its source which underlies their doctrine of evil and which alone can preserve man's free will in the face of evil.

THE PROBLEM OF MATERIAL EVIL

It appears that the Kantian and Proclan conceptions of evil are much closer than previously assumed and both authors may indeed be seen as subscribing to a single conception of evil that defines itself in opposition to three other prominent conceptions. These are that evil is simply a privation, that it is

56. *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, 32. *De malorum subsistentia*, 24.

caused by the soul's immersion in the sensible world and that it is caused by a purely evil will within the soul. These three solutions, however inadequate Kant and Proclus find them, are certainly not without their proponents. The second possibility in particular, which Leibniz takes as characteristic of all ancient thought, in fact finds support in the work of one of the most eminent thinkers of the ancient world. This is none other than Plotinus (204–270), the founder of Neoplatonism, who states famously that “the cause, at once, of the weakness of the soul and of all evil is matter.”⁵⁷ Plotinus is so subtle a proponent of the idea of matter and the sensible world as the source of evil that not only is Proclus forced to confront his doctrines in his own treatment of evil, but indeed anyone who dismisses the idea of material evil must inevitably confront the Plotinian formulation (though Kant, unfortunately, does not do so directly). It would be useful then to examine this conflict between these two Neoplatonists in order to see whether both Kant and Proclus, with their consonant explanations of evil, are correct in dismissing the idea of the sensible world as the source of evil, or whether they are themselves mistaken in looking beyond it in search of another source.

After having determined that evil makes its first appearance in souls, Proclus turns in the *De malorum subsistentia* to discover how it is that evil occurs here first. Having dismissed nature on the whole as being the source of evil,⁵⁸ Proclus turns to matter. He first gives a brief summary of why it is tempting to posit matter as the source of evil, due to that fact that it is the last generated thing and that it shares the qualities of “unmeasuredness, absolute unlimitedness, imperfection and indeterminacy”⁵⁹ with evil. Immediately after this, however, Proclus sets up a logical trap with which to ensnare those who hold this idea of material evil. This logical trap is based upon the necessity for both Proclus and Plotinus of upholding certain Platonic tenets concerning the One (which subsequently become enshrined in the later tradition and hold true for Kant and many of his successors). These are that the One is unique and without a contrary and something which is only good, such as it, cannot create evil directly. Therefore, according to Proclus, if someone is to take matter as the source of evil, either he must posit matter as an entity independent of the One and therefore in opposition to it or he must accept that matter comes from the One and therefore either the One will be the cause of evil or evil will in fact be good.⁶⁰ After setting up this snare, Proclus goes on to show how it is foolish to take matter as the source

57. Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1.8[51].14.49: “ἕλη τόνων καὶ ἀσθενείας ψυχῆ αἰτία καὶ κακίας αἰτία.” All translations of Plotinus are those of Armstrong.

58. *De malorum subsistentia*, 27–29.

59. *Ibid.*, 30.11–12.

60. *Ibid.*, 31.6–7.

of evil because it is necessary for the universe,⁶¹ it desires measure,⁶² it is the mother of generation⁶³ and according to Plato, it is produced by the One.⁶⁴ Upon stating these reasons for not taking matter as the source of evil, Proclus furnishes us with his own opinion on matter, namely, that it “is neither good nor evil” but instead “it is a necessity (ἀναγκαῖον).”⁶⁵ Proclus admits that from the perspective of matter as the final generation, it may be called evil, so it is not inconceivable that some people hold the idea of a material evil. From the perspective of it being generated by the One, however, matter must be called good and viewed simply in itself, matter is nothing more than necessary for the creation of the universe.⁶⁶

At first glance, Proclus’ argument against material evil seems to be a very sound one, but the question we must now pose is whether it is adequate to the sophisticated argument employed by Plotinus in support of the same principle. So sophisticated in fact is Plotinus’ argument that it has proven extremely difficult to find one interpretation which satisfies all of his commentators. Due to this discord, a few of the most prominent interpretations will be examined to see whether any of them afford Plotinus an escape from Proclus’ snare.

The first interpretation that should be examined is that of the eminent H.-R. Schwyzer. According to Schwyzer’s interpretation, Plotinus sees matter as ungenerated (ἀγέννητος).⁶⁷ This interpretation, although freeing Plotinus from the second part of Proclus’ trap, causes him to succumb instantly to the first. For matter to be ungenerated, it would have to be a principle on the same level as the only other ungenerated thing, the One. Plotinus would therefore be violating a central Platonic tenet by establishing a dualism.

Though this first interpretation does not free Plotinus from Proclus’ criticism, the second major interpretation, proposed by D. O’Brien⁶⁸ and supported by such scholars as D. O’Meara⁶⁹ and J. Opsomer,⁷⁰ seems to offer Plotinus a means of escape. According to this interpretation, matter is produced by an image of the higher soul known as the partial soul. The

61. *Ibid.*, 32.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, 35.

65. *Ibid.*, 36.

66. *Ibid.*, 37.

67. H.-R. Schwyzer, “Zu Plotins Deutung der sogenannten platonischen Materie,” *Zetesis* (1973): 266–80. 276: “von der hiesigen ὕλη aber sagt er, sie sei ἀνώλεθρος (2.5[25].5,34) was ἀγέννητος einschliesst.”

68. Cf. D. O’Brien, *Plotinus on the Origin of Matter* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1991).

69. Cf. D. O’Meara, *Plotin. Traité 51, I.8.* in *Les Écrits de Plotin* (Paris: 1999).

70. Cf. J. Opsomer, “Proclus vs. Plotinus on Matter,” *Phronesis* XLVI, No. 2 (2001).

partial soul generates an image of itself, which comes to be the non-being known as matter. This interpretation is supported by referring to *Ennead* 3.9[13].3.7–11, where O'Brien summarizes Plotinus' argument as "a 'partial' soul generates 'what is indefinite' and 'what is not'"⁷¹ and *Ennead* 3.4[15].1 where he says "that soul which is an image of the higher soul generates 'absolute indefiniteness'."⁷² This matter generated by the partial soul is the principle of evil. In order for the soul to succumb to this principle of evil, however, and thereby become evil itself, "two conditions must be fulfilled: a certain weakness must be present in the soul, and the soul needs to be in contact with matter and undergo the latter's negative influence."⁷³ The essential part of this explanation is that neither matter nor the soul's own weakness is alone responsible for evil in the soul. It is only through a combination of the two that soul may succumb to evil.

The merits of this interpretation of Plotinus are immediately obvious. It avoids Proclus' first snare by showing that matter is indeed generated and therefore cannot be placed as a rival to the ungenerated One. It also seems to dodge Proclus' second snare by making matter a product of the lowest part of the soul rather than directly of the One. Finally, it has the additional benefit of making a clear distinction between weakness and evil within the soul.⁷⁴

Although this interpretation seems to avoid Proclus' snares and offer us a cogent conception of material evil, if examined more closely, we can see that it may not fully satisfy Proclus' second argument. This argument, as we have seen above, holds that if someone takes matter to be evil and to be generated by the One, then the One will either be the cause of evil or all evil will be good. The idea of the psychic generation of material evil, although seemingly overcoming this, does not really remove matter from the massive causal chain which leads back to the One.⁷⁵ If matter is indeed the principle

71. *Plotinus on the Origin of Matter*, 17. The actual passage in Plotinus (3.9[13].3.7-11) reads "Φωτίζεται μὲν οὖν ἡ μερική πρὸς τὸ πρὸ αὐτῆς φερομένη—ὄντι γὰρ ἐντυγχάνει—εἰς δὲ τὸ μετ' αὐτὴν εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν. Τοῦτο δὲ ποιεῖ, ὅταν πρὸς αὐτὴν ... ποιεῖ εἰδωλον αὐτῆς, τὸ υἱ ὄν" which Armstrong translates as "The partial soul, then, is illuminated when it goes towards that which is before it-for then it meets reality-but when it goes towards what comes after it, it goes towards non-existence. But it does this, when it goes towards itself...it makes an image of itself, the non-existent."

72. *Ibid.* This interpretation is cobbled together by sifting through nearly a page of very complicated Greek, but the essence of it is that "the soul ... generates the sense perception which is its expressed form and the power of growth which extends also to plants ... Does this power of growth, then, produce nothing? It produces a thing altogether different from itself...that which is produced is not any more a form of soul-for it is not alive-but absolute indefiniteness (ἀοριστίαν εἶναι παντελή)." *Ennead* 3.4[15].1.1–12 (Armstrong's translation).

73. "Proclus vs. Plotinus on Matter," 158.

74. *Ibid.*, 159.

75. *Ibid.*, 178.

of evil and it is generated, its source must be evil as well, for it is a basic Platonic principle that the producer cannot produce that which it is not in an eminent way. This means that if matter is evil and is produced by the partial soul, the partial soul and in turn the higher soul and all beings in the causal chain preceding back to the One must be evil. It seems, therefore, that the psychic generation interpretation leaves Plotinus just as vulnerable to Proclus' trap as the ungenerated matter interpretation.

Another influential interpretation of the generation of matter in Plotinus is put forward by K. Corrigan. Corrigan holds that there are in fact multiple generations of various types of matter within the *Enneads*, but with regards to the sensible or lower matter that Plotinus clearly takes to be the source of evil, he holds that the *Enneads* seem to offer three types of generation. The first two types of generation are essentially psychic, where matter is produced by the both the "partial soul"⁷⁶ and the "pure soul."⁷⁷ Though these two possibilities of psychic generation do not aid Plotinus, Corrigan also proposes a third type of generation where matter "is generated as an implicit consequence of the first movement or otherness from the One."⁷⁸ Although Corrigan simply attempts to harmonize this third idea with the theory of the psychic generation of matter by the partial soul, which he takes to be *the* origin of matter in Plotinus,⁷⁹ something much like it is put forward by J.-M. Narbonne that may offer a second wind to Plotinus' idea of material evil.

According to Narbonne's interpretation, those who posit the psychic generation of matter are incorrect in saying that the soul has some form of pre-existent weakness which must be combined with matter to form evil, for its weakness clearly comes from matter.⁸⁰ For Narbonne, many commentators have had great difficulty in interpreting Plotinus' doctrine of material evil because they have overlooked a significant doctrinal evolution in Plotinus'

76. K. Corrigan, "Is there more than one Generation of Matter in the Enneads?," *Phronesis* XXXI (1986): 168.

77. *Ibid.*, 174.

78. *Ibid.*, 169. Corrigan is here referring to *Ennead* 2.4[12].5.

79. Corrigan affirms his support of the theory of the psychic generation of matter in his major work on the Plotinian conception of matter, where he writes that "lower matter, however, is clearly generated by the partial soul, that is the soul in plants." Corrigan, *Plotinus' Theory of Matter-Evil and the Question of Substance: Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander of Aphrodisias* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996), 258.

80. "The fall of the soul is therefore precisely *to come toward matter and to become weak*, while this coming and weakening are provoked by matter itself". J.-M. Narbonne, *A Doctrinal Evolution in Plotinus? The weakness of the soul and its relation to evil* (Université Laval: 2007), 2. For a full outline of Narbonne's interpretation and his treatment of the three rival interpretations, Cf. Narbonne, "La controverse à propos de la génération de la matière chez Plotin: l'énigme résolue?," *Yearbook of the history of metaphysics* 7 (2007): 123–63.

thought, stemming from his confrontation with the Gnostics. Plotinus' confrontation with the Gnostics forces him to substantially change his doctrine of matter and "insist upon a material genealogy of evil"⁸¹ precisely in order to avoid ideas such as a psychic generation of evil, which might lead to what he sees as a Gnostic-style dualism. According to Narbonne, Plotinus' matter is not generated by the soul, but is instead "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."⁸² In this interpretation, matter, prior to the generation of even the things within the intelligible realm, undergoes a primordial fall (ἐκπτώσις) or escapes from the One and therefore appears as ungenerated to all other later generated beings.

The Narbonnian interpretation of material escape in Plotinus offers new possibilities for the idea of material evil, but does it allow Plotinus to avoid the Proclan snare? Just as the theory of psychic generation, it certainly escapes Proclus' first trap by barring any possibility of matter as a second, ungenerated first principle. As for the second trap, which ensnared a psychically generated matter, Narbonne writes that the escapist interpretation "avoids the direct implication of the Good in the eruption of Evil, which itself comes as a collateral damage in the contraband of the emanative process."⁸³ Because matter escapes from the One, the One is not directly implicated in its generation. This satisfies the Proclan stipulation that the One cannot be the direct cause of evil and also preserves the Plotinian notion that matter is the direct cause of evil and of weakness in the soul.

With a viable doctrine of material evil at hand which avoids Proclus' logical snares, we may now reflect back on Proclus' own position on matter and see whether it is in itself superior to that put forward by Plotinus. Proclus argues that matter is necessary for the universe,⁸⁴ but holds this of evil as well,⁸⁵ therefore rendering this argument for material neutrality invalid. He argues that matter desires measure rather than opposes it, but Plotinus holds this as well and sees no conflict between this idea and that of material evil.⁸⁶ Proclus furthermore cites Plato as saying that matter is produced by the gods, but the escapist interpretation of material evil even satisfies this demand. Proclus finally argues that evil simply cannot have

81. *Ibid.*, 4.

82. *Ibid.*, 7.

83. *Ibid.*, 10.

84. *De malorum subsistentia*, 32.

85. *Ibid.*, 7.

86. Plotinus describes matter as in a state of "perpetual neediness in relation to what is self-sufficient (ἀει ἐνδεές πρὸς αὐτάρκες)" at *Ennead* 1.8[51].3.15. He also says that matter "begs (προσσιτῆι)" the soul and "bothers it and wants to come right inside" at 1.8[51].14. Cf. 'Proclus vs. Plotinus on Matter', 166, note 46.

its origin in matter, for “evil existed in the souls themselves prior to their descent into matter,”⁸⁷ an idea which Plotinus dismisses outright.⁸⁸ It is here that the Plotinian and Proclan-Kantian arguments divide. The former holds that only an exterior force could possibly corrupt the soul while the latter, as we have seen, holds that this weakness is inherent to the soul’s free will. Though the Proclan-Kantian position may attack Plotinian material evil as deterministic or implicating God directly in the creation of evil, upon close examination, it is unable to offer any substantial criticisms or uncover any logical flaws in Plotinus’ argument. Therefore, we are left with two seemingly viable explanations for the existence of evil.

AN ‘UNINTELLIGIBLE’ CONVERSION

Although the Kantian-Proclan doctrine of evil is unable to offer an explanation of the origin of evil superior to the Plotinian doctrine of material evil, we must now ask whether it still offers a complete and coherent argument in and of itself. Due to the constraints of space, undertaking a full such examination is out of the question. One possible incoherence within their argument, however, may be addressed. This incoherence revolves not around the explanation of the cause of evil for the soul but around the question of if and how the soul can escape this evil. Emil Fackenheim, in his essay “Kant and Radical Evil,” addresses this very question with regards to Kant. At the conclusion of his discussion of the essential differences he sees between Kant’s doctrine of radical evil and Christian original sin (which many have accused it of emulating), Fackenheim states that “whereas according to Christian doctrine, only God can redeem fallen man, Kant asserts, and must assert, that man can redeem himself.”⁸⁹ This necessary self-redemption, however, according to Fackenheim, poses a grave difficulty for Kant due precisely to his doctrine of radical evil. If, as Kant’s doctrine entails, every empirically evil action “presupposes a perversion of principles in man’s intelligible character,”⁹⁰ how then can any number of empirically good actions restore the original goodness of this character? It seems that Kant is caught in a dilemma due to his doctrine of radical evil, whereby he can explain mankind’s freedom for evil, but only at the price of denying its freedom for good. Can it be, as Fackenheim menacingly suggests, that Kant may only be able to either explain man’s freedom to do good or his freedom to do evil, but not both?⁹¹

87. *De malorum subsistentia*, 33, 3.

88. *Enn.* 1.8[51].14.

89. Emil Fackenheim, “Kant and Radical Evil,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 23 (1953): 352.

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*

This problem was of course foreseen by Kant himself, and as Fackenheim points out, he “denies this fateful dilemma”⁹² and holds that it is possible for a man to abandon the maxim to deviate from the moral law,⁹³ but only through a radical “self-conversion.”⁹⁴ How this conversion is possible, however, is in Fackenheim’s opinion “utterly unintelligible” for it is based “upon an ultimate act of decision for which there is no higher ground.”⁹⁵ Fackenheim judges rightly that for Kant the choice of acting according to the moral law is unexplainable, just as is the choice of acting in contradiction to it. This is because, as Kant writes, “the depths of the heart (the subjective first ground of his maxims) are inscrutable.”⁹⁶ The freewill that differentiates man from other beings and which allows him to choose between good and evil is ultimately unknowable. Although we may learn those things that influence our choices, such as propensities and weaknesses, we cannot determine the source of those choices, for as Richard Bernstein writes, “this would be in effect to deny that our will is radically free.”⁹⁷

Unsurprisingly, Proclus too holds that the fallen soul, in spite of the weakness that allowed it to fall, is also capable of turning from evil and becoming wholly good. A soul which makes this turn “changes course and moves upwards: ‘shedding the turbulent mob and its own accretions’ and leaving them where they are, it is led ‘to being itself and indeed the most splendid being’.”⁹⁸ Proclus, like Kant, holds that the soul must necessarily be able to overcome the weakness in its will and reorient itself towards the upper realms and the Good by “completely purifying the eye of the soul by which we contemplate true being.”⁹⁹ This purifying of the soul and preparation for conversion is demonstrated in many different ways within the Proclan system, from the simple art of conversation to the cathartic punishment of certain souls in the underworld by the heroes.¹⁰⁰ In spite of our knowledge of the preparatory methods for conversion, nevertheless, the ultimate source of this choice to turn towards the intelligible realm must remain for us a mystery. Proclus, like Kant, cannot suffer determinism in the least and

92. Ibid.

93. *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, 43. Cited at “Kant and Radical Evil,” 352: As Kant writes “A man [can] reverse..., by a single unchangeable decision, that highest ground of his maxims whereby he was an evil man (and thus put on the new man).”

94. “Kant and Radical Evil,” 352.

95. Ibid.

96. *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*, 46.

97. *Radical evil: a philosophical interrogation*, 45.

98. *De malorum subsistentia*, 24, 8. Within this passage Proclus makes reference to *Timaeus* 42c4–d2 and *Republic* 518c9.

99. Ibid., 24, 32.

100. Ibid., 19.

therefore demands that man be radically free.¹⁰¹ The source of this freedom, our 'choice' or 'what depends on us', is in Proclus' opinion "a rational appetitive faculty that strives for some good, either true or apparent, and leads the soul towards both."¹⁰² Proclus thus limits our knowledge of the faculty of choice to a knowledge of its objects. Any further knowledge would invite the spectre of determinism and therefore the nature of our free will must remain necessarily 'inscrutable.' Thus, the perceived weakness of the Proclan and Kantian explanations of evil, which owes itself to nothing other than their acknowledged inability to discuss the source of our free will, may in fact be viewed as a strength.

'THEODICY' VS. 'ATHROPODICY'?

Having examined the striking similarities between Kant's doctrine of radical evil and Proclus' teaching concerning evil, what are we to make of the above mentioned claim of many contemporary philosophers that Kant's thought marks a crucial turning point in the philosophical conception of evil from a theocentric conception to an anthropocentric one? As the history of philosophy is commonly constructed, there exists before Kant a long 'theodicy' which considers the question of evil from the point of view of reconciling evil's existence with the existence of a purely good Creator. This tradition as a whole is taken to be rejected by Kant, who supposedly rephrases Leibniz's famous question of "*si Deus est, unde malum?*" as "*si homo liber est, unde malum?*", making man's freedom rather than God's existence central to the question of evil and turning the question of evil from a 'theodicy' to an 'anthropodicy.'

It is certain that Kant is concerned with the problem generated by the simultaneous existence of evil and the necessity of man's free will. Nor is he alone in his concern. As we have seen, Proclus too is concerned about maintaining the soul's natural ability to choose how it will act, not even allowing for the possibility that the soul's fall into the material world is influenced by the allure of matter. He realizes, along with Kant, that the only way of preserving this choice in the face of evil's existence is to situate the ground of mankind's propensity towards evil in the will itself. Likewise, Kant is concerned with problem of evil's relationship to God, who is for him the both the basis of the moral law¹⁰³ and the cause of world.¹⁰⁴ Due to this, Kant too must find a way to exonerate God from the charge of

101. For evidence of Proclus' adamant opposition to determinism, cf. his *De providentia*, especially chapters 56–61.

102. Proclus, *De providentia*, trans. Carlos Steel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 59.

103. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 47.

directly creating evil, and therefore applies, much like Proclus, the idea of plural causation to evil. According to this idea, evil is not directly created by God but is only caused by the combination of the propensity to invert the ethical ordering of incentives and man's acquiescence to this propensity by wallowing in the sensible world.¹⁰⁵ If therefore Proclus and Kant share similar concerns and have markedly similar solutions to the problem of evil in humans, is it then correct to set up such a rigid dichotomy within the history of philosophy? Evidently such a dichotomy cannot be maintained, for we have seen that Proclus' conception of evil is wholly adequate to Kant's notion of a radical evil.

We have also seen, however, that in spite of the consonance of these two great thinkers concerning the origin of evil and their ability to withstand internal criticism, their doctrines cannot be judged as directly superior to all those which preceded them. The Kantian and Proclan considerations of evil now stand in need of renewed consideration in light of both each other and those rival doctrines, such as that of Plotinus, which they attempt to supersede. It is only through this type of consideration that we may come to a final assessment of their adequacy as a solution to the problem of evil. This type of assessment, however, has recently been denied to them owing to the false division of theocentric and anthropocentric conceptions of evil that would see Kant's thought as opposed to that of Proclus. Thus, it is perhaps necessary to finally discard this false division and to begin to consider contemporary questions of evil in light of a far broader tradition than simply that dating back to Kant.

105. Proclus does much the same and describes how evil is caused by a combination of the weakness of the soul and the soul's acceptance of this weakness and therefore its descent into the physical world and its prioritization of the sensible over its own intelligible nature.