

*Matter in Plotinus's Normative Ontology**

CHRISTIAN SCHÄFER

ABSTRACT

To most interpreters, the case seems to be clear: Plotinus identifies matter and evil, as he bluntly states in *Enn.* I.8[51] that 'last matter' is 'evil', and even 'evil itself'. In this paper, I challenge this view: how and why should Plotinus have thought of matter, the sense-making ἔσχατον of his derivational ontology from the One and Good, evil? A rational reconstruction of Plotinus's tenets should neither accept the paradox that evil comes from Good, nor shirk the arduous task of interpreting Plotinus's texts on evil as a fitting part of his philosophy on the whole. Therefore, I suggest a reading of evil in Plotinus as the outcome of an incongruent interaction of matter and soul, maintaining simultaneously that neither soul nor matter are to be considered as bad or evil. When Plotinus calls matter evil, he does so metonymically denoting matter's totally passive potentiality as perceived by the toiling soul trying to act upon it as a form-bringer. As so often, Plotinus is speaking *quoad nos* here rather than referring to 'matter *per se*' (for Plotinus, somewhat of an oxymoron) which, as mere potentiality (and nothing else) is not nor can be evil. In short: matter is no more evil than the melancholy evening sky is melancholy – not in itself (for it isn't), but as to its impression on us who contemplate it. As I buttress this view, it will also become clear that matter cannot tritely be considered to be the αὐτὸ κακόν as a *prima facie*-reading of *Enn.* I.8[51] might powerfully suggest, but that the αὐτὸ κακόν,

Accepted March 2003

* A less elaborate and much shorter German version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the German Society for Ancient Philosophy (GanPh) at Bonn University in May 2002. It was the scope of this Bonn talk to sum up and to defend before a specialised group of predominantly German-speaking scholars one of the main tenets I put forward in my recently published 'Habilitation' *Unde Malum* (Würzburg 2002), namely a proposed solution to the vexing and long contested problem of matter and evil in Plotinus (and before that, in an earlier essay version focussing on the problem of evil's threats to monism in *Das Dilemma der Neuplatonischen Theodizee: Versuch einer Lösung*, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82 (2000), pp. 1-35). Both before and (especially) after the GanPh meeting, I was asked to make my argument known to a larger non German-speaking public in English by a number of scholars (among them, Denis O'Brien, to whose publications on Plotinus my interpretation is much indebted). As I return to the issue of matter and evil in the *Enneads* for the third time, I seize the opportunity to expand and to systemise my argument in some aspects, to rewrite several admittedly ambiguous passages and to include two or three additional points which I mainly owe to the interesting discussion at the Bonn meeting. I also want to thank Jake Mackey of Princeton University's Classics Department for correcting this paper and for his valuable comments and suggestions.

far from being a principle of its own, has to be interpreted within the dynamics of Plotinus's philosophical thinking as a unique, though numerous applicable flaw-pattern for all the single κακά (hence the Platonic αὐτό). To conclude, I shall offer a short outlook on the consistency of this interpretation with Plotinus's teaching on the soul and with the further Neoplatonic development of the doctrine of evil.

H.: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost
in shape of a camel?

P.: By th' mass and 'tis – like a camel indeed.

H.: Methinks it is like a weasel.

P.: It is backed like a weasel.

H.: Or like a whale.

P.: Very like a whale.

Hamlet III 2

It is the scope of this paper to reassess, and to answer, if possible, one scandalous and much fought over question of Plotinus studies: is matter in the *Enneads* to be identified with 'evil'? I shall come back to Plotinus's concept (if not 'definition') of matter shortly. For starters, it is above all the meaning of 'evil' that must be determined: for there is no modern European language equivalent, to my knowledge, of the Greek word κακόν. Whatever is conceived of as bad, evil, wicked, base, vile, calamitous, foul, or negative in any way, can be expressed by this word, as the dictionaries show. Whenever I employ in the following the English 'evil' as a conventional umbrella term of the philosophical idiom¹ in order to translate the broad-sensed Greek κακόν, one thing should be clear: in the Neoplatonic context I am going to treat, κακός or 'evil' is meant to denote whatever is not in order with the world in single aspects or as a whole, or, more 'Platonically' speaking: κακός is whatever can be adduced as responsible for the fact that the world falls short in so many aspects of the perfection one would expect it to have considering its single and utterly good ontological origin.

¹ It is my understanding that the English 'evil', not unlike the German 'böse', has a more intensive meaning as compared to 'bad', 'negative', and similar terms. What F.-P. Hager states for the German 'böse' should therefore hold for the English equivalent 'evil' as well: namely that by its use „die religiöse und metaphysische Tiefendimension besser angesprochen zu sein scheint, welche dem Begriffe des κακόν gerade in der Erörterung durch griechische Metaphysiker zukommt“ (F.-P. Hager, *Gott und das Böse im antiken Platonismus* (Würzburg 1987), p. 10).

1. *The problem and its sources*

In contrast to so many other urgent philosophical questions, the Neoplatonists were not able to securely mark out a coherent doctrine of evil in Plato. The ‘material’ they were faced with was one of scattered *ad hoc* utterances difficult to combine. To name just the most prominent examples:

- In *Resp* 611c, the σώματος κοινωνία is held to be the first of evils for man (which could be swiftly combined with other passages like *Phaedo* 67d); in other dialogues as well, Plato seems to suggest that the σωματοειδές is the residuum of evils in other dialogues as well.
- In the *Theaetetus* (176a), the κακόν is insinuated to be the ‘necessary’ corollary of what is good in the constitution of bodily things.
- On the other hand, in *Parmenides* 130b-d, the possibility of an idea or of an ontological ‘type’ (in the sense of an absolute εἶδος) of what is bad or evil, of an absolute evil, seems to be rejected considering the τιμή and the πρεσβεία of ideas: there are no ideas of ἀτιμότητα and φαυλότατα.
- From *Resp* 353 et passim, we gather the *argumentum e gradibus*: ‘bad’ or ‘evil’, κακόν, would be equivalent, according to this conception, to the fact of a thing’s falling short of the standards established by its ontological pattern. ‘Bad’ is such a thing as does not meet the expectation of realising its form, its εἶδος, to its best, μάλιστα τέλειον.
- Finally, in *Laws* 896/7, Plato seems to toy with the (at least) hypothesis of a κακή ψυχή opposing the ἀρίστη ψυχή in the creation of the world – a motif (perhaps all too) easily transferable to the image of the soul-chariot in the *Phaedrus* (247b).

All of which is obviously meant to work under the unquestioned principle that the Divine is not to be held guilty of evil(s), since it is entirely good and, as such, τῶν κακῶν ἀνάιτιον (*Resp* 379b).

Thus, to Plotinus, who claims to give a coherent account and a unified view of Plato’s philosophy (*Enn.* V.1[10].8,10-14), the problem of evil presented itself in the following manner: evil is a deficit in the earthly realisation of normative standards, the deficit being due to the corporeal constitution of things and/or to a certain fault of the soul. Roughly speaking, a Neoplatonic answer, on these premises, would face two possibilities: [1] to blame evil on a fault of the soul (being the form-giver of the bodily cosmos, the communicator of normative standards onto earth), or [2] to link up evil with the material condition of things, and ultimately with matter itself.

In the face of the difficulty of reconciling these alternatives, interpreters of Plotinus have always been tempted to opt for one of the two possibilities, developing their theories at the expense of the other one. Most scholars² share a view according to which Plotinus, in his old age, dismissed his earlier theory of the soul-flaw, and by the time he wrote *Enn.* I.8[51] had totally adopted the explanation of evil as matter. The problem with this thesis is this: if matter is identified with evil (and even evil 'itself'), that either "brings us back to the paradox that Good makes evil"³ (which contradicts the Platonic dogma of the ἀγαθὸν κακῶν ἀναίτιον), or it will lead us to admit the subreptive assumption of a dualism of principles – stemming from Middle-Platonism or elsewhere – in Plotinus's thought. The latter, however, contradicts the fundamental monistic key-note and creed of his philosophy as a whole, as well as the explicit anti-dualist statements to be found – not only! – in *Enn.* II.9[33].

In contrast, a relatively small (but obviously growing) number of interpreters has tried to blame evil in the *Enneads* on a metaphysical fault or flaw, on the 'fall' or 'debasement' of a world-forming spiritual entity – which, in Plotinus's philosophical 'system' (and in accordance with the motifs in Plato's *Laws* and *Phaedrus*), would have to be the 'soul'. But how could that be, if Plotinus excludes every kind of evil from the realm of the intelligible the soul inhabits (explicitly in *Enn.* I.8[51].2,25ff and ch. 4-5)?

In addition, a conflict of congruency seems to arise when one takes seriously Plotinus's position that the visible universe as a whole and the soul as pertaining to the realm of the intelligible are to be considered as good (*Enn.* IV.8[6].2,1-55), but that the necessary coming together of soul and matter must be thought of as the beginning of evils due to a 'sin' (ἁμαρτία) of the soul (5,6).

But, as I shall try to show in what follows, there is a way to combine and reconcile both of these possibilities by proving them to be complementary in a consistent theory of evil as Plotinus conceived it.

² Cf. Dominic J. O'Meara, *Das Böse bei Plotin*, in: B. Mojsisch/T. Kobusch (eds.): *Platon in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte*, pp. 33-47; Jan Opsomer, *Proclus vs Plotinus on Matter (De mal. Subs. 30-7)*, *Phronesis* 46 (2001), pp. 154-188.

³ Dominic J. O'Meara, *Plotinus* (Oxford 1993), p. 86.

2. Matter, soul, and the *diffusio boni*

A short glimpse of both candidates – soul and matter – will be necessary: in his typical top-down-arrangement of reality generated through the ontological ‘flux’ coming from the one and ineffable Origin, there is one repeated pattern that Plotinus offers as an explanation (or sometimes rather as a description) of how one ontological level is derived from the other (that is, of what is frequently labelled ‘emanation’). According to this explanation, a superior reality of higher ontological intensity generates a *hypokeimenon*, an at first completely amorphous ontological substrate meant to serve as an undetermined outlet for the further extension of being coming from ‘above’. It is only by a ‘posterior’⁴ taking shape of its own identity (in a participation in forms) that the emanate becomes another, ontologically lower-ranging, but nevertheless well defined degree of being, a grade of reality resembling its superordinate generating reality on a lesser level. The amorphous *hypokeimenon* is what Plotinus calls matter, ὕλη. In this sense, the soul(-level), too, when first brought forth by the *Nous*, is to be considered as such an amorphous substrate and as an undefined potentiality, as ‘matter’ in regard (or as compared) to the already ontologically defined generating reality, as ὕλη πρὸς νοῦν, as Plotinus says in an astounding passage of *Enn.* III.9[13].11,3/V.3. Soul becomes a reality of its own and in itself only when exercising its proper activity in imitation of and self-identifying (so to speak) distinction from the *Nous*.

Now the *hypokeimenon* brought forth by the soul-level in preparation of soul’s own onto-generative activity (in imitation of the *Nous*), is the sort of matter one could compare *in a way* to Aristotle’s prime matter. This – as Plotinus insists – ‘inferior matter’ is what we *ex post* identify as the (‘in itself’) structureless ‘fabric’, which underlies material-matter as we know it of the bodily universe. And it is only this soul-dependant inferior matter which will play a role in the following considerations concerning evil.⁵

⁴ For the sake of brevity, I describe simultaneous or non-temporal logical dependencies in terms of chronology (in the same way, I describe non-spatial entities in terms of ‘above’ and ‘inferior’ etc.). In ‘reality’, time is brought forth only at the last stage of the procession, i.e. in the formation of the visible cosmos, as Plotinus reminds us every now and then: cf. *Enn.* III.7[45].12,22; 13,23ff; *Enn.* II.4[12].5,25f. Note Salustios’s words (*De dis et mundo* IV 9): “Now these things never happened, but always are. And mind sees all things at once, but reason (or speech) expresses some first and others after.”

⁵ This is a significant point: it is not the bare and dull fact or circumstance of being

What is important is this: in Plotinus, soul and matter are to be defined as standing in a complementary relationship to one another within the dynamics of the diffusion of good and being: namely matter as the *hypokeimenon* of soul's self-identifying activity.

Soul, therefore, definitely does right and acts well and according to Good (which it ultimately stems from and will have to revert to) when in imitation and prolongation of what *Nous* does, it enables the *diffusio boni* by bringing forth a *hypokeimenon* meant to serve as a necessary substrate for a subsequent level of reality. For

the intelligible (τὸ νοητόν)⁶ could not be the last [sc. level of being], for it had to have a double activity, one in itself [ἐν ἑαυτῷ, i.e. the self-identifying activity] and one directed to something else [εἰς ἄλλο, i.e. the passing on of being to another]. There had, then, to be something after it, for only that which is the most powerless of all things (τῶν πάντων ἀδυνατώτατων) has nothing below it.⁷

The dialectics of a double activity, ἐνέργεια, towards itself and towards the next lower level is a recurring thought in Plotinus:⁸ every new ontological 'product' has to 'gather itself' at first, so as to constitute its own identity out of the ontological *fluxus* which brought it forth as an undifferentiated potentiality, as ὕλη. It is only then that it can turn to its own ontologically generative activity (the different levels a water-fountain successively fills are a handy and often used illustration of this double aspect of 'emanation' and of how to understand it: only when the upper basin nearest to the water-source is completely filled up with water, will it overflow

matter, i.e. of subsisting as a structureless *hypokeimenon*, that raises the question of matter and evil. The *hypokeimenon* of the ontogenetic activity of *Nous* is a structureless substrate too, but it remains aloof from all evil (cf. *Enn.* V.9[5].3,22ff; *Enn.* II.4[12].3,4; *Enn.* III.9[13].5,2; *Enn.* II.5[25].3,14). Something else, some additional problem, must be adduced if the 'inferior matter', the *hypokeimenon* of the soul's activity, is going to be said to have anything to do with evil(s).

⁶ The νοητόν is not confined, of course, to the *Nous*, but denotes all levels of reality which are not corporeal, including soul as the last degree of the intelligible thus conceived. In fact, the whole of chapter 8 of *Enn.* II.9[33], from which this quote is taken, is dedicated to the soul.

⁷ *Enn.* II.9[33].8,21ff. Throughout this article, translations from the *Enneads* and from Porphyry's *Vita Plotini* are (with slight modifications) those of Armstrong. Explanations and insertions in square brackets are mine.

⁸ Cf., among others, *Enn.* II.5[25].1,30f; III.4[15].1,6ff; IV.8[6].4,1ff (all of which deal with the concept of 'matter'). For some good explanations of this feature of Plotinus's philosophy see Jens Halfwassen, *Aufstieg zum Einen* (Stuttgart 1992), pp. 130-135; Hans Buchner, *Plotins Möglichkeitslehre* (München 1970), p. 72; and John M. Rist, *Plotinus, The Road to Reality* (Cambridge 1967), p. 123.

to thus fill up the one beneath, and so on). For in its self-identification, every reality recognises its origin, and in attaining awareness of its first Origin, it recognises itself as a lesser image of this Origin, of Its utter One-ness (in the act of turning to itself, in the ἐνέργεια ἐν ἑαυτῷ) as well as of Its perfect undiminished radiation of being (in turning its activity onto another, in its ἐνέργεια εἰς ἄλλο).⁹ In *Enn.* II.4[12].5,32ff, too, Plotinus explicitly lingers over the question of how everything produced by the undifferentiated flow of being obtains its proper definition by reverting towards the O/one it (ultimately) comes from (ὅταν πρὸς αὐτὸ ἐπιστραφῆ). This is how every ontological level produces an ontologically lesser ‘alter ego’, an ἄλλο of itself (cf. *Enn.* V.2[11].1,9f: αὐτοῦ πεποίηκεν ἄλλο κτλ.).¹⁰

3. What evil is made of

As long as this – roughly sketched – process develops without any impediment, everything will be in order. And it is: for this is exactly what Plotinus states of the realm of the intelligible. In the level of reality subsequent to the last degree of intelligible life, that is, to what ontologically follows the soul, however, this process seems to have been seriously interfered with in some way. It is by that ‘interference’ or ‘damage’ that what is negative comes into our bodily universe. And it is by that circumstance that the ‘whence’ of evil(s) is to be sought and can be found.

What I would like to show now is that this cacogenic damage has to do with the *hypokeimenon* of soul’s activity, namely matter – and at the same time that matter cannot be simply identified with evil ‘itself’ merely for that reason. Strictly speaking, matter is just the last possible degree of the derivation sequence from the One. As the passage from *Enn.* II.9[33] quoted above shows, soul’s activity produces something which lacks any proper ἐνέργεια or ‘actuality’ and which therefore lacks any ability to identify itself ontologically by ‘reversion’ or by steadying itself as an

⁹ In his *La matière chez Plotin*, Phronesis 44 (1999), pp. 45-71, Denis O’Brien has examined this process of self-identification and reversion by interpreting several of the most cogent passages of Plotinus’s works, such as *Enn.* V.1[10].7,4-6 (on p. 48f) and *Enn.* V.2[11].1,7-11 (on p. 51ff). For a handy summary of this article, one sentence taken from the English abstract will do good service: “The One or Intellect produces an undifferentiated other, which becomes Intellect or soul by itself turning towards and looking towards the prior principle, with no possibility of the One’s ‘turning towards’ or ‘seeing’ itself”.

¹⁰ In this interpretation I follow Denis O’Brien, *La matière chez Plotin*, p. 69.

entity in its own right vis-à-vis the ontological flux. As soul¹¹ transmits the stream of being, it does not produce an ἄλλο, an ontological reflection or 'alter ego' of itself, but an ontological opponent or contrary (so to speak), a negation of its energetic self, namely the τῶν πάντων ἀδυνατώτατων, which is matter. Matter, considered in this way, is not an ἄλλο of the producing soul, but rather a ἕτερον.

Interpreted according to the purport of the Platonic *Sophistes*, Plotinus considers this ontological ἕτερον to be ultimately μὴ ὄν,¹² a last derivative not to be conceived of as 'something' anymore, but merely as an ontological 'chasm'. Necessarily, this last, 'meontic' degree signifies the total ebbing away or stoppage of the energetic process of successive self-defining levels of being, and the necessary end of that process: hence the statement in *Enn.* II.9[33].8,21ff that only and finally that 'which is the most powerless of all things has nothing below it' – this might be an allusion to the necessity-formula of *Theaetetus* 176a as well as a reminder of Plotinus's constant rapprochement (if not identification) of ἐνέργεια and οὐσία. So the expiration of all actuality in the ἕτερον-level opposite the intelligible *hypostaseis* signifies the end of the derivation process. This is what matter is, and this is what it should be considered as: the (though ontologically slippery, rather 'meontic') final product of a dynamic process it concludes, it depends on, and in turn affects.

Along the same lines, Plotinus metaphorically (οἶον) speaks of matter as 'begging', 'bothering' or (as Plotinus's choice of words might suggest) 'instigating' soul for the communication of form and for the transformation of its (sc. matter's) unfitness into reality: and when Plotinus explicitly speaks of how matter by this constant begging and bothering and as

¹¹ A differentiation in terminology is necessary at this point: Plotinus marks a clear difference between the ψυχή τῶν πάντων and the individual soul, insisting at the same time that the universal Soul remains entirely unaffected with evil(s) (*Enn.* I.8[51].15,23ff; *Enn.* IV.8[6].2,1-55) since both transmit being, but on different levels and in slightly different ways. In the following, whenever I refer to '(the) soul', the individually acting spiritual entity is meant, except where Soul is put in upper case (in such occasions as would allow of speaking of Soul and soul likewise – as is the case of producing matter as its ἕτερον – I will simply concentrate on what individual soul does, as the rest of the argument will rely on soul's activity). For the nonetheless intimate relation of soul(s) to Soul – a relation not always easy to disentangle – I remind the reader of *Enn.* IV.8[6].3,19-22.

¹² Cf., among others, the passage at *Enn.* I.8[51].3,7ff: μὴ ὄν δὲ οὐτι τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν ἄλλ' ἕτερον μόνον τοῦ ὄντος κτλ. As such, matter is "like an image of being or something still more non-existent" (ibid.).

“matter’s indefiniteness distresses it” (cf. *Enn.* II.4[12].10,34) becomes soul’s evil (*Enn.* I.8[51].14,35ff), then it should be clear that this statement should, or rather must be read and can only be understood clearly within the complementary context of soul’s activity in the diffusion of being. As a matter of fact, the perspective Plotinus adopts is plain enough: he speaks exclusively from the soul’s point of view on matter, telling how soul feels bothered by amorphous matter’s simultaneous greed and incapacity for being.

It is a distinctive feature of this construction that matter displays an unexpected tendency towards good (which is form-giving) in its powerless ‘will’ for realisation and for transformation into being, and in its ‘yearning for substance’ (*Enn.* III.6[26].7,13: ὑποστάσεως ἔφεσις): matter wants to, yet cannot, imitate the higher *hypostaseis*’ self-defining reversal. Matter thus strangely partakes (if only in its own awkward way, namely *ex negativo*) in the principle of the *bonum diffusivum sui* all Neoplatonic derivation rests upon. One should stop to think about the far-reaching implications and the serious consequences this Plotinian doctrine has: the very matter denounced as ‘evil’ and ‘evil itself’, by its ‘nature’ has an inward connection with and a laudable tendency towards Good and a (admittedly passive) role in the transmission of being, in the *diffusio boni*. How is this to be understood, and what has all this, as the quoted passages of the *Enneads* suggest, to do with evil(s) coming into the world?¹³

Plotinus gives a hint in ch. 28 of *Enn.* VI.7[38]. – Actually, Plotinus’s argument is quite revealing; what makes it look like a mere ‘hint’ is the at first sight awkward example he embellishes his thoughts with. What Plotinus says here is, I am convinced, the following: what makes us talk of evil as equivalent to matter is the fact that amorphous matter, in its powerlessness, begs and bothers soul for the communication of form. But at the same time, matter is not able in any way to receive and to hold and contain form. Rather, and this is where the flowery language might startle the reader, forms “come upon matter like a good dream (ὡςπερ ὄνειρατος ἀγαθοῦ)” that seems to bring some order into it.¹⁴

¹³ I am sure, at any rate, that those interpreters are wrong who (like Venanz Schubert, *Pronoia und Logos* (Salzburg/München 1968), p. 83, just to name one example) believe that by saying this, Plotinus wilfully places a last paradox at the very bottom of the problem of evil. There is no such paradox, or at least there is a solution to the question that is not paradoxical, as I argue below.

¹⁴ The entire quote *Enn.* VI.7[38].28,7ff runs like this: ἀλλὰ τὸ κακὸν πῶς ἔφειν ἔξει τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ; ἢ οὐδὲ τὴν ὕλην ἐν ἐφέσει ἐτιθέμεθα, ἀλλ’ ὑπόθεσιν ἐποιεῖτο ὁ

What could this obscure image of the unreal pseudo-formation of matter as if by the approach of a 'good dream' possibly mean? Plotinus once more seems to be "abounding more in ideas than in words" (νοήμασι πλεονάζων ἢ λέξεσι): a general stylistic feature of his, as Porphyry (*Vita Plotini* 14,2) tells us. I attempt to render the main idea clearer by explaining the illustrative image of the dream by still another illustrative image, which I believe to be not only clarifying to a certain extent, but also serviceable for illustrating the further development of the argument where necessary. It was Leonardo da Vinci who said that to be an artist, it should suffice to copy with a pencil whatever shapes or contours one gathers from drifting clouds or from the cracks or uneven surfaces of a wall: faces, animal shapes, landscapes, in short: an entire universe of countless forms and figures.

Now in reality, neither the fissures of a wall nor cumulus clouds or their shadow-play actually *have* the shape of human faces or animal bodies etc.: rather, it is the observer's mind which, let leisurely loose for daydreaming, begins to shape the unstructured objects according to those structures it knows from the real world and is concerned or accustomed to deal with in real life. It is basically the psychological foundation of the Rorschach method. It is an act of shaping from the observer's side that does not reach the object which, nonetheless, gave the occasion (or the substrate) for the shape-giving daydream. When Plotinus speaks of form coming upon matter like a 'good dream', seemingly bringing structure to the 'downright structureless', he is speaking, I would suggest, of a similar situation. And he explicitly says so in another passage (*Enn.* III.6[26].7,32f): forms seem to act upon matter, but do not achieve anything with it, "as if someone in a way projected shapes in the void (ἐν τῷ [. . .] κενῷ μορφὰς εἰσπέμπτοι)". In the same line, *Enn.* III.6[26].7,21ff reminds us:

whatever announcement it [matter] makes, therefore, is a lie, and if it appears great, it is small, if more, it is less; its apparent being is not real, but a sort of

λόγος αἴσθησιν δούς, εἴπερ οἶόν τε ἦν δοῦναι ὕλην τηροῦσιν· ἀλλὰ τοῦ εἶδους ἐπελθόντος, ὡσπερ ὀνειράτος ἀγαθοῦ, ἐν καλλίονι τάξει γεγόνεσθαι. The strange fact that evil arises from something which is not active, but nonetheless 'begs' (noxious) action, is illustrated for example, I should like to think, in the *Odyssey* when Homer declares that "iron of itself draws a man to it" (XIX 13). Which means: wherever weapons (which 'iron' metonymically stands for) are, men will engage in bloodshed sooner or later. As in Plotinus's account of matter, one may ask: what exactly is iron's 'evil' here, iron's negative αἰτία? It is the mere fact of 'being there' or 'being at hand', and of serving in some way as a passive stimulus for some certain (and in this case deplorable) action of an active principle.

fleeting frivolity (οἶον παίγιον φεῦγον); hence the things which seem to come to be in it are frivolities, nothing but phantoms in a phantom, like something in a mirror which really exists in one place but is reflected in another, etc.

Soul indulges in the idle dream of transferring forms onto amorphous matter, taking them from the intelligible realm and ‘more real reality’ soul pertains to and basically stays in forever.¹⁵ Yet this process of shaping the amorphous remains entirely on the soul’s side and does not reach matter nor have an effect on it, just as our daydreams, which remain solely in our minds, do not objectively bring clouds into shape.¹⁶ This awkward situation made Plotinus observe that due to the formlessness of matter, objects appear to be where they in reality are not (*Enn.* III.6[26].7,4-44)¹⁷ – because in reality the forms remain within the soul. Plotinus presents us here with a strange hylemorphic negation of hylemorphism – but a fitting piece of his philosophy entirely in accord with his fundamental ideas and basic conceptions, let alone his eagerness to interpret Plato flawlessly. And of a piece with Plotinus’s theory of evil, too, as I want to outline in the following. Because matter’s complete incapability of form-reception and inaccessibility for structure, as well as soul’s complementary drifting away in daydreams when making this inert matter the object of its natural tendency of the ‘transmission’ of forms¹⁸ will show the way to a better solution of the matter-evil problem.

¹⁵ Of course, and this should perhaps have been said earlier, clouds are not completely structureless (as Plotinian matter is). So it is understandable that we dream forms into them when seeing their diffuse quasi-shape. – But what does soul see in the totally amorphous *hypokeimenon* of matter? Itself, as in a mirror, Plotinus replies (*Enn.* IV.3[27].12). Soul ultimately dreams itself into matter, thus disavowing its contact with reality (which is spiritual). This, however, is a problem on the soul’s side, to which I shall come back in the last paragraph of the summary to this paper.

¹⁶ In the passage from *Hamlet* quoted at the beginning of this article, Polonius’s consent to see any animal the prince proposes in the shape of a wandering cloud is mere fawning toadyism. But the transitory nature of shapes seen in a cloud is a handy parallel of the transitory character of the bodily universe’s objects and shapes. In contrast to the intelligible’s, which always stay the same.

¹⁷ Cf. the motif of ‘awakening’ in Plotinus, who uses it to describe the re-entry from such daydreams to the ‘real reality’ of the intelligible. As A.H. Armstrong has put it in his chapter on Plotinus in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge 1967), p. 227: “Plotinus often describes this turning and concentration of attention upwards as ‘waking’: and waking ourselves up from our dream-like obsession with the needs and desires of our lower self in the world of the senses is for him a difficult process requiring vigorous intellectual and moral self-discipline”.

¹⁸ Cf. O’Brien, *La matière chez Plotin*, p. 45: “Since matter is lifeless, it cannot

4. *Evil arising*

So far, matter's relation to soul (and vice versa) has been discussed. At least two things should be clear by now.

First: although Plotinus speaks of matter as inert, structureless, powerless, and obnoxiously incapable, etc., this does not render matter *ipso facto* evil.¹⁹ The ἀδυνατώτατων τῶν πάντων is a necessary, as to 'place' and 'function' in its own way fitting (though admittedly unfit), and appropriate constituent of reality as a whole. It has its proper place and sense *within* this derivation process and to consider it outside of this process is impossible and methodologically doubtful. Matter *qua* passive potentiality is nothing in itself but all-dependent on others. 'Matter itself' is an oxymoron, to a certain extent, for Plotinus, and always to be referred to as if written in quotation marks, and this should duly arouse suspicions whenever a trite identification of matter and 'evil itself' is proposed.

Second: matter does not *always* (and therefore all talk of '*per se*' or 'by its nature' etc. is rendered obsolete) instigate soul to perform an inadequate waste of form-transmission on its amorphous *hypokeimenon*. From case to case, soul profitably and agreeably 'dreams' forms into matter, and the most prominent example of this achievement is the universe as a whole, which like a living, perfect and beautiful work of art is an accomplished and joyful projection of forms by the world-Soul, the *artifex mundi*, into matter (which is why Plato praises the cosmos as a 'blessed God': *Enn.* IV.8[6].1-2; *Enn.* V.8[31].8,21; *Enn.* II.9[33].4,27; 8,19ff). Plotinus reminds us of all that in the elaborate passage on Soul's activity in building the corporeal realm in *Enn.* IV.8[6].2,1-55. But individual souls can contact matter without any harm done as well. They *on principle* are strong enough to perform their activity in matter without doing wrong and without evil coming to pass: cf. *Enn.* I.8[51].425-28; *Enn.* IV.7[2].13,9; *Enn.* III.2[47].4,10. Finally, the 'visible gods', i.e. the plan-

turn towards its source. Soul therefore has to be herself directly responsible both for the production of matter and for the covering of matter with form".

¹⁹ It is true that, as I said in the beginning, the Greek κακόν has the meaning of 'base' or 'incapable' etc., too. But that would never justify the identification of the 'base' and 'unfit' with 'evil itself'. Moreover, it is important to avoid the mistake of calling a thing 'bad' just because there are others that are better. Augustine has a good observation of this, as he asks in *Ad Simplicianum* I 2,8: *Quo enim merito sol factus est sol, aut quid offendit luna ut tanta illo inferior, vel quid promeruit ut sideribus ceteris tanto clarior crearetur? Sed haec omnia bona creata sunt quaeque in genere suo.*

ets, are corporeal, hence material (ύλης παρούσης), but are free of all evil (τὸ κακὸν μὴ παρεῖναι): *Enn.* I.8[51].5,31-35. So it is not by the mere presence of matter that a presence of evil can be diagnosed, which makes it difficult to believe that matter in Plotinus can be *salva veritate* commuted with evil. – In consequence, even ‘lower’ matter is not *ipso facto* the carrier or bearer of evil, let alone evil itself, and therefore not *per se* the cause for whatever is not in order with the world.²⁰ And neither is the form-bringing S/soul-principle, of course. And neither matter nor soul is to be considered as evil *in actu*, since both do definitely serve the *diffusio boni*.

Yet, evils come into the world exactly when both, soul and matter, get in contact in the constitution of the bodily cosmos. It is, of course, the formative principle of individual reality – and not the world-Soul – whose activity upon matter is the problem here. Plotinus has given the question of the (individual) soul’s ‘fall’ a great deal of thought. He speaks of soul’s ‘lapse’ and ‘mistake’ (or should we venture to translate ‘sin’: ἀμαρτία?) and ‘forgetfulness’ etc. But at the same time, he wants to maintain that there is no evil in the realm of the intelligible. It takes another entire *opusculum* to explain this only *prima facie* inconsistency in Plotinus in detail.²¹ Yet, what has been said about matter so far, should help for an understanding of what happens here in respect to the origin of evil(s): in its (anthropomorphically speaking:) ‘deplorable’ condition of complete powerlessness and formlessness, matter by merely being there (not by acting on its own initiative)²² incites soul to act upon it, to ‘make something out of it’, to follow its natural ἐνέργεια εἰς ἄλλο. Matter ‘does’ nothing

²⁰ All the same, in distinguishing the ‘two matters’, ‘lower’ and ‘upper’, Plotinus solves a problem Plato left unanswered: whether matter has a good disposition for receiving form (as in *Timaeus* 56c), or a negative inertness (as *Politicus* 273bc might suggest, among other passages). Plotinus can answer this traditional dilemma: on principle, matter (‘lower’ and ‘upper’) is a mere *hypokeimenon* and therefore by ‘essence’ disposed to receive form, as the *Timaeus* has it. Yet ‘lower’ matter displays an utter inability to be formed and by its total passiveness is liable to overstrain its form-giving principle, soul.

²¹ This is not a paradox, either. It just seems to be one to the modern reader. I have tried to disentangle Plotinus’s doctrine of the ‘fallen soul’ and its ἀμαρτία in a previous article: *Tragische Schuld im Theatrum Mundi Plotini*, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 40 (1998), pp. 33-56, and again in *Unde Malum*, pp. 69-104.

²² Matter is an αἰτία simply ‘by its presence’, Plotinus says in a fabulous passage on soul’s relation to matter which ends like this: “soul would not have come to it [matter, that is] unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth” (*Enn.* I.8[51].14,54f).

here, it is just what it was always meant to be: the *hypokeimenon* of soul's naturally defining activity.

In a sense, soul's experience of and relation to matter is comparable to our everyday experience of and relation the future. Our perception of the future is that of a mere potentiality, a vast outlet for our prospective acting, and nothing in itself; it is just what 'we make of it', but then again, as soon as we take action 'making the future', the future is no more, it ceases to be the future and as soon as it is realised, it becomes 'something' which is not the future anymore. All the same, the future 'bothers us' and 'begs' for action, for being moulded and forged. The future, one could say, is a 'meontic' pure openness of possibilities and as soon as this openness is closed down to one possibility, reality comes to be. Still, the future is not as ontologically slippery a concept as structureless matter in Plotinus, as should be clear from what has been said so far about matter's status. This is where the comparison lets us down.

In its utter incapacity for epistrophic self-identification matter needs to be ontologically replenished, 'reverted towards Good', by another (as Plotinus insists, for instance, in *Enn.* II.5[25].1,30f). This other is, of course, soul as standing next to it in the sequence of the *πρόδος* of being. So what happens is this: matter's 'insatiate poverty' (*Enn.* I.8[51].3,13ff; *Enn.* II.4[12].16,20 etc.), which puts it so to speak *ἔξω τῶν ὄντων* (*Enn.* II.4[12].10,35) as long as forms do not come to it, does in fact 'bother' soul and lets soul assume the task matter cannot accomplish: to form and to confer being to the structureless *hypokeimenon*. A futile task, as the reader knows by now. *Therefore* it is (rather: it can be from case to case) a mistake for the soul to turn its attention to matter, though a highly laudable mistake, since soul is devoted to the *diffusio boni*. Accordingly, Plotinus can maintain his dogma of the utter goodness of the intelligible realm and at the same time explain how and why it is that soul's activity in the bodily sphere can have evil(s) as a consequence: it is because soul's entirely well motivated intentions of form-giving despair vis-à-vis matter's completely amorphous inability to be formed, to be 'mastered by form' (*Enn.* I.8[51].5,24). This passive resistance to the communication of form and the frustration of soul's *ἐνέργεια εἰς ἄλλο* it brings with it, make it clear why matter is called 'evil' in the *Enneads*. But it should be equally clear now that when Plotinus calls matter evil, this can only be meant *within* a dynamic process it stands in, depending on and (passively) acting on others. Finally, it should be clear that evils belong to the ontic world, to the (according to *Enn.* VI.7[38].28) 'oneiric' realm of the strangely unsummed encounter of soul and matter; what lies beneath them as 'the'

evil, however, does not necessarily have to be a fixed, or at least determinable, ontological ‘item’ (to choose a term as vague as possible), as soul and matter are, but rather has to be identified with an ontological state of affairs, with a metaphysical dynamics of correct or incorrect encounters and couplings of such ontological ‘items’ or ‘factors’, etc.

Lloyd P. Gerson was right, therefore, when he spoke up against the facile identification of matter and evil to be found in most interpreters of Plotinus: he straightens out the scholarly discussion by pointing out that the κακόν is not simply to be considered matter (sans phrase), but, and this makes a big difference, “matter *viewed in relation to* form and Good”.²³ It is indeed the ever insatiable dependence of matter on form and Good which is the *metaphysical* πρῶτον κακόν, since ‘form’/‘shape’ means being, and, in turn, shapelessness is matter’s ‘φύσις’ or ‘οὐσία’, as it were.²⁴

Matter’s neediness and simultaneous incapacity for receiving form, its ‘relational οὐσία’, is the centre of Plotinus’s doctrine of evil.²⁵ The receiving of being καθ’ ὅσον δύναται (cf. *Enn.* II.9[33].3,1ff), which constituted the different ontological intensities and well-defined degrees of being so far, is lead *ad absurdum* in matter’s unlimited receptiveness which has no measure καθ’ ὅσον anymore.

Earlier I compared matter’s status to the status of the future as always mere potentiality. There is another comparison to everyday experience of

²³ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (London 1994), p. 192 (my italics). This is exactly what Plotinus says in *Enn.* I.8[51].9,16-18 (matter as opposed to form), and 9,26f (matter as τὸ ἀντὶ [i.e. to νοῦς] ἐναντίον).

²⁴ This is what Plotinus says when defining the phenomenon of matter-evil in its ‘essence’ as a strictly relational term and therefore speaks of evil being “unmeasuredness *in relation to* (πρός) measure, and unboundedness *in relation to* limit, and formlessness *in relation to* formative principle, and perpetual neediness *in relation to* what is self-sufficient; always undefined, nowhere stable, subject to every sort of influence, insatiate, complete poverty: and all this is not accidental to it but in a sort of way its essence (‘οὐσία’)” (*Enn.* I.8[51].3,13-18).

²⁵ W.R. Inge was right, therefore, to identify matter’s indefinable ‘φύσις’ (which Plotinus mentions in *Enn.* I.8[51].6 *et passim*) as “resistance to form” (*The Philosophy of Plotinus*, New York 1968, p. 134); John M. Rist, *Plotinus on Matter and Evil*, *Phronesis* 6 (1961), pp. 154-166, is equally right in understanding the ἄπειρος ὕλη (*Enn.* I.8[51].10,1f) and the ἐρμία of matter as the “non-cooperation of something completely inert” as to the communication of form (p. 156). On the κακοῦ φύσις (*Enn.* I.8[51].1,4) and the problems of defining evil as an οὐσία (which it strictly isn’t): *Enn.* I.8[51].3,22f; its status of being “as if (ὡς) an οὐσία” is alluded to in *Enn.* I.8[51].3,17.

potentiality I should like to adduce in order to show how potentiality can be conceived of by us as noxious or even 'evil'. It is Plato himself who warns his readers that money as mere possibility can work disastrously on humans. What he thinks of is, of course, the devastating effect money (as compared to valuable 'things') can have on a man's *πλεονεξία*, precisely because money is not an 'object': there are two constituents, one wanting everything, the other allowing the acquisition of everything by in itself being nothing, and this will go haywire. That matter is mere potentiality without being something (at least, of any worth) 'in itself' might be even more patent to us, whose money is no longer made of precious metals, than to Plato's contemporaries. Yet, normative assessment comes in here more drastically: paper (or virtual) currency, being close to nothing by itself, is mere possibility, and its 'meontic' status diminishes in the measure that it is spent, or 'realised', turned into objects, etc. Yet, we know perfectly well what those people mean who say that money has a negative influence on people, and that money is 'dangerous', noxious, and finally might be 'bad' *because* it is just open potentiality.

This is why matter is to be considered a privation, corruption, obstruction, and disturbance of soul's – on principle – positive and laudable activity.²⁶ This also explains the concept of evil as *στέρησις* by matter to be found in *Enn.* I.8[51].11,1ff, among other *loci*: soul's activity is rendered futile and diminished by matter's passive inertness, and it is as absurd and futile as any of our attempts to shape cumulus clouds 'in reality' by thinking forms into them would be. This *evil-qua-στέρησις* definition, too, exemplifies how evil by its 'essence' depends on the coming together of two constituents, since 'στέρησις' has no reasonable significance in itself and obtains its sense only when we include a defining relational 'of what' in its definition.²⁷ Matter's *στέρησις* or *ἄρσις* to soul's natural activity, its

²⁶ Once more O'Brien seems to have hit the nail on the head when he says: "Soul will forever cover with form the formlessness and the disfigurement of the object whose appearance is a consequence of her own movement away from the higher principles 'towards herself' (cf. *Enn.* III.9[13].3,7-16). Not that the movement was itself evil. The soul becomes evil, not in the making of matter, but only as a possible consequence of her activity in covering with form the object to which she has given birth" (*Plotinus on Matter and Evil*, in: L.P. Gerson (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge 1996), p. 190).

²⁷ That *στέρησις* is meant to be an *ἄρσις*, a 'nullification' or a 'frustration', can easily be deduced from *Enn.* II.4[12].13,23ff (*ἄρσις γὰρ ἢ στέρησις*, etc.). As to how a 'passive *στέρησις*' can be conceived of, see, for example, Hubert Benz, *Materie und Wahrnehmung in der Philosophie Plotins* (Würzburg 1990), p. 127.

reduction of soul's formative task to Sisyphean toil, results objectively in 'natural evils', the sufferings soul experiences when ordering the bodily universe, i.e. pains, sicknesses, hunger, deformities, as well as ugliness and other imperfections and troublesome hindrances and shortcomings of all kinds, in short, the *κακά* we suffer (cf. *Enn.* IV.8[6].2,44ff; *Enn.* V.9[5].10,4ff; *Enn.* I.8[51].5,23ff; *et passim*). The 'subjective' consequences are to be found in soul's further involvement in a mere mirror-reality of imperfect form-dreams, an entanglement which paralyses and hardens it, which dilutes its attention and turns it away from what it should do (which is to revert towards Good and to live in the sphere of the intelligible and the true forms)²⁸ and perverts or darkens its perception of what is real and right. This is what Plotinus understands by 'moral evil(s)', that is sin, wickedness, and everything else which, as Plotinus fears, will drag us deeper into the morass of 'natural evils': *Enn.* I.8[51].15,13-23; 5,20-26; etc.²⁹

It is as if soul spontaneously and without further reflection rushed into a life-threatening situation with the commendable intention of helping a drowning child crying for assistance, and as if this unselfish (or should we say: self-forgetful?) deed almost led to both of them drowning, soul not having been strong enough to keep both of them afloat. Nobody will rightly reproach either of them for this: neither the drowning non-swimmer's cry for help nor the would-be rescuer's attempt to render aid can be called evil. Evil as a consequence of the two of them coming together in the difficult rescue has, if not positive, at least no negative, 'evil' or 'bad' premises.³⁰

²⁸ In Plotinus's eyes the reversion of the upper emanate is at the same time the reversion of the lower emanate it penetrates with being. The two energies he speaks of in *Enn.* II.9[33].8,29ff thus complement each other in the reversion of all towards the highest Being. There are frequent allusions to this idea that the higher reality contains the lower one(s) and lifts it (them) up in its own upward movement throughout the *Enneads*: *Enn.* IV.3[27].9,34ff; VI.9[9].3,3ff; VI.4[22].1,7; V.5[32].9,30.

²⁹ By this explanation of how the metaphysical *κακόν* is the pattern of 'natural' and moral *κακά*, I of course allude to the common classification of evils as established by Leibniz (*Essais de théodicée* I §21). But still, one must beware: the modern classification never can do justice to the ample concept of 'evil' in Neoplatonic philosophy, and perhaps any good Neoplatonist would have rejected it. In this line, just to mention one difficulty out of many, the term 'natural evil' is to be understood as a *façon de parler*: evil is *never* natural to Plotinus, but strictly *contra naturam*.

³⁰ I would never dare to construe such an imaginative example, if it were not for Plotinus himself hinting at it over and over again: cf., for instance, *Enn.* VI.9[9].8,16ff; IV.3[27].17,21ff; I.8[51].13,17f. The motif of the 'bottomless' waters of the utterly

It is in an almost 'tragic' shift of circumstance that the interpreter learns why, when speaking of the unending dynamics of ontological generation and reversion, Plotinus calls matter evil: curiously, he does so for the same reasons that would definitely forbid him to call matter 'as such' (if that wasn't an oxymoron) and in an impossible vision as disconnected from the πρόδος, 'evil (itself)'. As we contemplate matter for philosophical investigation's sake as if it were conceivable as something (with)in itself (which it isn't, since it never emerged as 'in itself' from the flux of being), we seem indirectly to grasp a negative notion of it as not being, as mere passive δύναμις, as ontologically void of reality etc., in short: as the very pre-ontic substratum all matter is without *ipso facto* being evil. Matter 'is not' in the sense that it is not yet, but 'as such' awaits being, which is not being evil, leave alone evil in a sense so intensive as to speak of it as 'evil itself' and all evils' evil: ἄποιος δὲ οὐσα πῶς κακή, Plotinus is right to ask.³¹ The answer he has to this question is revealing, since it shows a) that evil is not to be considered as an entity, but as privation, i.e. in relational terms; and that b) evil is therefore not a ὑπόστασις in

different goes back to Plato (*Politicus* 273de). 'Drowning' is also the leitmotiv of the frequent allusions Plotinus makes to the Narcissusmyth, comparing soul to the man who wanted to get hold of his own image on the water, not considering it was only a reflection, and drowning in the attempt – a myth whose illustrations can nicely be brought into agreement and matched with what I said before about the dreaming of forms onto matter: cf. *Enn.* I.6[1].8,6-15. Once more, I should like to draw the reader's attention to a quote from O'Brien, *Plotinus on matter and evil*, p. 190: "The soul's excessive absorption in caring for the things of this world has the tragic consequence that the soul herself becomes evil, because of the nature of the object that she cares for. The soul becomes evil when she does so, because the object of her care is 'evil itself'". Note that from this point of view, O'Brien couldn't help, just as I can't, putting the term 'evil-itself' in gnomic commas.

³¹ *Enn.* I.8[51].10,1f. When I say that evil cannot be defined as an 'as such' or 'in itself', I share the same view of those who believe it to be prime evil *sans phrase*. Cf. the remark made by O'Meara, *Das Böse bei Plotin*, p. 37: "Wir erkennen das Gute, indem wir den determinierten vielfältigen Ausdruck des Guten im intelligiblen Sein erfassen. So könnte auch das absolute Böse erkennbar werden, indem wir Gestaltungen des Bösen im körperlichen Sein begreifen können", and, on the following page: "Auch kann ein Begriff [...] des absoluten Bösen entwickelt werden, indem man die Eigenschaften des Guten verneint". – Note that O'Meara correctly recognises that just as Good is only good insofar as it does good, evil is admitted to be evil only insofar as it does evil. As 'Good' is beyond all good and therefore in itself not good but more-than-good and more-than-being (as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), matter is not in itself evil, but less-than-evil since it is ἔξω τῶν ὄντων, below the realm of all manifestation of evil(s).

itself, but merely co-exists ἐν ἄλλῳ. Believe your eyes: Plotinus is saying exactly what Proclus says when allegedly criticising Plotinus and when in fact criticising the doctrine of matter's identification with evil. Plotinus's wording comes as close to a *παρυπόστασις*-definition of evil as it possibly can without using the term itself:

For it is not called (λέγεται) evil because it has, but rather because it has not quality; so that perhaps it would not be evil if it was a form (εἶδος) instead of a nature opposed to form. But the nature opposed to form is privation; but privation is always in something else and has no existence by itself (δὲ ἀεὶ ἐν ἄλλῳ καὶ ἐπ' αὐτῆς οὐχ ὑπόστασις).³²

As we attempt to define matter 'in itself', we must at the same time admit that we cannot. At least not if we take Plotinus's philosophy seriously. Speaking of matter as if it were something καθ' αὐτό is dubious in the Plotinian context, and if Plotinus himself does so, he has something else specifically in mind, as I shall presently show (cf. below, step [5] in the summary). Matter as mere potentiality is all-dependent on realisation 'from above', is ontologically all-'awaiting' and nothing else. Matter can only be adequately grasped (if ever) when seen within the dynamics of the ontological process whithin which it makes sense as the final constituent. And the same is true for Plotinus's doctrine of 'matter as evil': the 'other', which matter awaits being from, is soul, and it is as a constituent of the by nature interrelated πρόοδος and return that matter can become a lethal trap for its formative principle whose action it passively provoked by just being at hand as a totally indeterminate substratum for soul's natural ἐνέργεια εἰς ἄλλο. An ἐνέργεια, on the other hand, which was not meant to be wasted on an absurd losing of the soul's self to the mere 'mirror' of matter, but to be the energy of reversion towards the higher truths and real forms.³³

³² *Enn.* I.8[51].10,13-11,4. As to why I hold the λέγεται to indicate a 'so-to-speak', cf. infra point 5. on Proclus and Plotinus, the concluding paragraph of this article.

³³ This passage illustrating the dynamic coherence of the whole of Plotinus's ontology shows that I should clarify what I said in footnote 31: for whilst the One (or the Good) can to a certain extent be treated as a hypostasis 'in itself', 'isolating' it, as it were, *argumenti causa* from the context of the realities 'after' it – since all those depend on it whereas it does not in any way depend on them – everything following the One and Good in the πρόοδος of being can only be grasped as inserted in the dynamics of the progressive diffusion, and in relation to the preceding realities, which in the most intensive case is true for matter as being totally 'in relation to other(s)' and nothing 'in itself'.

5. Sola sub nocte per umbras

There is one key-note to Plotinus's treatises that should not be underestimated: it is not in vain that recent scholarly works increasingly insist on the predominance of the dynamics in Plotinus, on calling his philosophy one of experience rather than a rigid 'system',³⁴ on speaking of ontological 'derivation' (i.e. *quoad nos*) rather than 'objectively' of 'emanation'.³⁵ Recent interpretation shows a strong tendency to more frequently recognise the human subject as the centre of attention in Plotinus's treatises, and to consider the grand world-picture the *Enneads* draw as a reflection of the intellect-gifted subject's inner self.

As a consequence, Plotinus's language is – almost paraenetically – moulded to fit the soul's point of view within the 'system' (what other viewpoint should a human thinker adopt?), and to express adequately this emphasis on the inner experience, on the objectively subjective.³⁶ This 'agent-relative' point of view and form of expression (as opposed to an 'agent-neutral' one which, I insist, seems to be quite dubious if attributed to Plotinus) explains Plotinus's calling matter evil: as I tried to show, there is no such thing as a 'matter itself' that is to be identified with 'evil'. When Plotinus speaks of evil matter and matter as evil, he does so by adopting or even cleaving to soul's point of view in performing its activity on matter, a point of view that does not permit the conclusion that matter as evil means matter *is* evil, but that soul perceives matter *qua* evil, and *not before* coming upon it. In a way, this resembles the Greek concept of the ἀληθές, which implies or presupposes an object 'capable' of being grasped (of being ἀ-ληθής) as corresponding to the subject capable of grasping it. Plotinus might have something like this in mind in referring

³⁴ To mention only one example of one of the major exponents of that shift in interpreting Plotinus: Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*, Chicago/London 1993 (in the same line, the book review of Werner Beierwaltes in *Gnomon* 72 (2000), pp. 202-207, is highly interesting).

³⁵ Dominic O'Meara, throughout his *Plotinus*, makes a strong point in favour of adopting a perspective *ex parte rerum recipientium* (as Thomas Aquinas put it), and correctly so. Consequently, he advocates the use of the term 'derivation' (which describes the procession from a perspective *quoad nos*) in place of the traditional 'emanation'.

³⁶ Two or three examples taken from *Enn.* I.8[51] may stand for all others: 7,12-14; 14,38-455; in the latter passage in particular, matter is called 'evil' because (τοίνυν, ἄρα . . .) it causes soul's evils. The conclusion of the *Ennead* (15,13-29) is entirely 'subjective' in its ways of treating the problem and speaks from soul's point of view.

to the truth of being and the problem of meontic evil in *Enn.* I.8[51].6,44-47, as well as in calling (as he frequently does) matter an ‘ontological lie’: cf. the passage *Enn.* II.6[26].7,21ff quoted above.

Matter *qua* evil or – in this ‘actual’ way of speaking – ‘evil matter’ is, I want to suggest, to be taken as a methodical *enallagé* of thoughts (which perhaps is a better word for it than ‘pathetic fallacy’): just as in the *allagé adiectivi* we make use of without much ado and with great adequacy for what we want to say, when we speak of the ‘melancholy evening sky’. The evening sky is not melancholy, nor is it in any way capable of being so. What we express here in a most natural turn of speech is the ‘*quoad nos*’ of the evening sky, the (e)motion it evokes within us who are capable of melancholy, but which at the same time comes from within us, and not from the contemplation of the evening sky – though we would most probably not be affected by melancholy if it had not been for the evening sky which just happened to be there and which met our eye and attention. What makes the evening sky melancholy is what it stands for in soft or crying colours: the end of the day, the termination of labours accomplished or not, things awaiting us tomorrow, etc.³⁷

As I have tried to point out, there are good reasons for not trusting a trite and all too heedless ‘wrongly objective’ identification of matter ‘*per se*’ and evil ‘in itself’ in Plotinus. The severe contradictions, paradoxes, and inconsistencies arising within the philosophy of Plotinus itself if such an all too simplistic identification – which renders matter the *salva veritate* substitute of evil – is admitted, are due not only to the astonishing readiness of interpreters to let an ‘early Plotinus’ plainly contradict a ‘late Plotinus’, or a self-confessed monist a latent dualist, etc. They are also an effect of not perceiving that Plotinus’s thoroughly dynamic and ‘actual’ view on philosophy renders his language a less doctrinal and more experience-centred one than many ‘scholastic’ interpretations can grasp. I take

³⁷ Let me be clear on this: I do not say that Plotinus’s speaking of matter as evil is just a *façon de parler* like our referring to the evening sky as melancholy, which is a variety of metonymical talk and therefore to be considered a (mere) rhetorical device – telling as it may be. However, the *allagé adiectivi* can serve as an analogy for the *enallagé* of thoughts or of viewpoints within a philosophical ‘system’ we encounter here and that I want to stress; more importantly, it can illustrate the shift from an ‘agent-neutral’ point of view and language all too readily presumed for the interpretation of the Plotinian treatises to an ‘agent-relative’ point of view and form of expression in Plotinus’s account of evil and render it plausible (I apologise by the way for usurping the ‘agent-terminology which has its own distinct place and meaning in the contemporary moral and social philosophy where it originated).

his – otherwise conceptually helpless – remarks on, or rather, as I feel free to say now: ‘theory’ of evil to be a good example of this.³⁸

I am quite aware of the fact that my interpretation seems to contradict some Plotinian utterances to be found (especially) in ch. 13 of *Enn.* I.8[51]. This is where Plotinus says that evil and evil’s effects should not be separated from one another so as to possibly call one of them evil and the other one not: *Enn.* I.8[51].13,2ff. At the same time, Plotinus insists that by κακία he does not merely signify a simple ἐμπόδιον τῆ ψυχῆ, an impediment to the soul, but that the κακία presupposes an αὐτὸ κακόν which is its cause (13,4ff; cf. 14.50: κακίας αἰτία). I shall briefly try at least to outline how my interpretation absorbs and integrates these – *prima facie* considered – ‘threats’ to its main tenets.

First, my interpretation explicitly avoids what Plotinus holds to be an interpretive mistake of his account of evil. For in the agent-relative interpretation presented on the preceding pages, no division of being and effect is proposed at all. On the contrary, ‘passive’ or ‘negative’ effect and ‘potential’ or ‘meontic’ being are taken to be necessarily *the same* in the special case of evil. And this must have been Plotinus’s view as well, I think, and very probably the reason for this warning: for mark that Plotinus *does* otherwise identify matter and its privative effects downright, and insists on matter being a depriving impediment to the soul’s activity (ταῦτόν, he calls them in *Enn.* II.4[12].16,3; and the κακόν is presented as the *matter of fact* of privation in *Enn.* I.8[51].1,19: [τὸ κακὸν δὲ] ὡς στέρησις, just to mention two examples).

Perhaps one more observation in this context. Even in his attempt to give a close-to-ontological definition of matter’s ‘otherness’, namely in calling it the μὴ οὐσία as opposed to the true οὐσία of the first Principles, Plotinus cannot but make his point by referring – ἀναβαίνων and καταβαίνων – to their “furthest possible separation from each other”³⁹ within the procession of being, and by clearly stating that Good and evil are opposed to each other insofar as they are acting or act-inciting ἀρχαί and

³⁸ As John Dillon has put it in his introduction to MacKenna’s translation of the *Enneads*: “The entire system is assumed in each of the separate treatises, which more the form of special developments or demonstrations of significant points, not chapters in one work of consecutive exposition” (*Plotinus: The Enneads*. Ed. J. Dillon, translated by S. MacKenna, Harmondsworth 1991, p. xxx).

³⁹ Cf. *Enn.* I.8[51].6,58: πλείστον ἀλλήλων κειώρισται. And 6,41: ἐναντία τὰ πλείστον ἀλλήλων ἀφροστηκότα κτλ.

call forth opposite consequences (ἀρχαὶ γὰρ ἄμφω, ἡ μὲν κακῶν, ἡ δὲ ἀγαθῶν: *Enn.* I.8[51].6,34):⁴⁰

for (ἐπέπειρ) their contrariety *does not depend on* quality or any other category of being (γένος τῶν ὄντων), but on their furthest possible separation from each other, and on their being made up of opposites⁴¹ and on their contrary action (τὰ ἐναντία ποιεῖ): *Enn.* I.8[51].6,56-59 (my italics).

Second, what Plotinus wants to get at in *Enn.* I.8[51].13 is, and a more detailed scrutiny of the text should be able to prove it, that the different forms evil manifests itself in and which we perceive as evil(s) and might be all too willing to declare to be ultimate evil(s) – since immediacy is a mighty goddess, as a classicist friend of mine used to say –, are not evil itself, but evils *qua* varieties of the manifestations of the one πρῶτον κακόν. Plotinus simply states that the ‘multiform’ phenomena of evil(s) are not to be mistaken for their ‘uniform’ cause, and that their analysis and their understanding does not yet give an answer to what brought them forth. In short: that in order to understand evil at its root, one must go beyond the analysis of ‘physical’, ‘natural’, or ‘moral’ evil(s) and show what their underlying ‘metaphysical’ evil is whose mere manifestation(s) they are.⁴² Or think of the (πρῶτον) κακόν-κακά distinction as remotely analogous to the famous concept-conception distinction in John Rawls’s

⁴⁰ This corresponds to the opening remarks on the Good in the same treatise. Here too the Good is presented not as something ‘in itself’, but as the ἀρχή, as “that on which everything depends and to which all beings aspire; they have it as their principle and need it”, etc.: *Enn.* I.8[51]2,1-8, *et passim*. Note how evil is opposed to Good, then: as that which entirely depends on others, which aspires to being, is not an ontological principle at all, and is needy in every aspect. All these are strictly *relative* classifications.

⁴¹ I am almost sure that there is much more to the pun ἐξ ἀντιθέτων συνέστηκε than just the meaning ‘being made up of opposites’. I fail to come up with a better translation, but at least it should be clear that the expression cannot possibly refer to the ontological ‘constitution’ of Good and evil as ‘assembled’ or ‘put together’ by ‘elements’ of heterogeneous origin, or the like.

⁴² Plotinus compares this to virtuous life which does not give an idea of the good yet, but is its manifestation. Analogously, κακία is to be considered a manifestation of the κακόν: *Enn.* I.8[51].13,6f. But at the same time, he maintains that it is by entering the dynamics of the ontological scaling that virtue puts us on track for an understanding of the Good (cf. *ibid.*: ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἀναβαίνων κτλ.). And this is crucial: the phenomenon subjacent to all manifestations is correctly understood by the ‘agent-relative’ shift, solely ἀναβαίνων and καταβαίνων on the ontological scale, as the soul does by nature, since it is “like an amphibian”, pertaining to the intelligible world, but living, as it were, in the bodily realm, descending and ascending constantly: cf. *Enn.*

Theory of Justice:⁴³ at least in the way that Rawls's 'concept' (of justice, in his case) means (as the κακόν-concept in Plotinus does) a fundamental understanding (of the problem), whereas 'conceptions' (not unlike the Plotinian κακά) are singular implementations and applications of this understanding from case to case. It is wrong to rashly imply, however, that the κακόν, αὐτὸ κακόν or πρῶτον κακόν addressed here must be the ominous 'matter itself' construction. Rather, I should like to maintain, it is a unique (so to speak) and typically conditioning *pattern* (hence the αὐτό and the πρῶτον, which both are used 'Platonically' in order to express this factor of being a conditioning 'type') of a failed coming together of soul and matter which Plotinus refers to here. At the same time, he insists on the fact that when he calls this κακόν matter, he does so by referring to the *processual* contrariety becoming manifest between matter and good within the *aurea catena* of being, and by an understanding coming from the 'agent-relative' view on the eternal dynamics of the ontological κατάβασις and ἀνάβασις (*Enn.* I.8[51].13,12-16). In *Enn.* II.4[12], too, the account of matter as μὴ ὄν depends on the ontological procession and its qualifyability in 'ups' and 'downs': on matter's 'distance' from the First, its complete 'otherness' from being, etc. It should be evident by now why this is Plotinus's method in talking about evil and matter and what they have to do with each other: matter cannot be grasped as 'in itself' or 'as such'; but ἀναβαίνων and καταβαίνων, soul gets into contact with matter, experiencing it as pure potentiality and occasionally as evil.

6. A bold summary

A brief synopsis of what has been said on matter and evil in Plotinus can be given, I am confident, in some sort of short 'catechism' of seven little steps. With these seven steps, I hardly pretend to do more than to give an exegesis of what Plotinus summarises in *Enn.* I.8[51].14,38-55:

- [1] Matter, in Plotinus's view of the πρόοδος, is necessary and necessarily structureless, a void *hypokeimenon*, and strictly ἄποιος.
- [2] How can matter thus conceived (ἄποιος οὐδ᾽α) be evil?

IV.8.4,32. – It is thus that W.R. Inge called soul the "wanderer of the metaphysical world" (*The Philosophy of Plotinus*, p. 203).

⁴³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge/Mass. 1971. On the concept-conception distinction see section 9 of the book.

- [3] Plotinus's answer is: though completely passive, matter 'stimulates' the soul to act upon it,⁴⁴ but since matter is completely structureless, individual soul's Sisyphean action upon it, from case to case (and, in effect, in most cases), is painfully in vain, which is how evil(s) come into the universe, as shown. The κακόν at the root of the κακά is to be found in the inadequate or miscarried relation of soul's formative agency on inert matter, not in soul or matter 'per se'.
- [4] So why does Plotinus call matter evil at all?
- [5] He does so by expressing an *enallagé* of thoughts in agreement with his 'agent-relative' way of 'doing philosophy'. Metonymical expressions are an almost typical stylistic feature in Plotinus and denote the perspective of the philosophical 'agent' speaking. Cf. Plotinus's repeated references to forms ordering and shaping matter when 'in reality' (which he discloses in just one remote passage and cryptically enough, as he obviously cannot state it directly) he thinks that forms never *do* order matter, but that souls (as relative agents) 'dream forms towards matter', matter remaining without forms and forms remaining within the soul's realm just as our daydreams remain within our minds and do not shape clouds whatsoever.⁴⁵ As Plotinus explains in *Enn.* VI.7[38].28,7ff, the prior perspective, now rectified by allusion to how things really behave, was presented as if we made an unreal assumption (ὑπόθεσις) in order to shortcut the demonstration. I should claim that talking about matter as if it were something 'in itself' and about matter as evil are such 'agent-neutral' shorthand ways of talking as well. Plotinus states this, in fact, in *Enn.* I.8[51].5,11-13: "when we say it 'is', we are just using the same word for two different things, and the true way of speaking is to say it 'is not'". – οὐχ ὡς τοῖς ῥημασι λέγεται οὕτω καὶ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἔχειν, Plato's *Phaedo* (102b) reminds us about our references to relations.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ I agree with Christoph Horn, *Plotin über Sein, Zahl und Einheit* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1995), p. 172, that this is the sort of 'passive' ἀρχή Plotinus speaks of in *Enn.* I.8[51].6,31-44 when qualifying matter: he does so by referring to soul's view on matter and to the effect this viewing of matter has on the soul.

⁴⁵ Cf., as buttressing examples, Plotinus's repeated but unelaborated talk of how the soul 'falls' down or 'comes into bodies' etc. (all of which describes an experience of an agent) when 'in reality' he insists that it is not soul that is embodied, but that it is rather bodies that are 'enclosed' by the soul as a flue is by water (*Enn.* IV.3[27].9,34ff; a motif recurring in *Enn.* VI.9[9].3,3ff; VI.4[22].1,7; V.5[32].9,30).

⁴⁶ As Christine Korsgaard says (*The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge 1996, p. 138): "To talk about values and meanings is not to talk about entities [. . .], but to

- [6] But can that be maintained in the face of the fact that Plotinus even calls matter the prime evil or the *αὐτὸ κακόν* etc.?
- [7] The above interpretation of *Enn.* I.8[51].13 can serve as a clue: there must be something underlying to the phenomenal forms of the *κακά*, and these should just be taken as different expressions of one subjacent pattern or common origin: just as different sorts of unvirtuous actions are not *κακία* in its all-encompassing form which we might call the *αὐτὴ κακία*; but they all definitely revert to it. Now what is the 'type' (negatively spoken) of all these different occurrences, what is the one *κακόν* at the very bottom of all the different *κακά*? Well, firstly: something which as a 'type' of multiple occurrences can be Platonically called a 'first evil' or *αὐτὸ κακόν*, and which can be seen as such a thing independently of all accidental determinations and singular circumstances, i.e., a metaphysical pattern. And secondly: it does not necessarily have to be something in the sense of some entity or principle⁴⁷ or – in the worst of cases – a 'substance', and I should like to argue: not even in the sense of a proto-substantial *hypokeimenon* such as matter might be conceived. The *κακόν* as presented by Plotinus can be a – paradigmatic, in a negative and passive way – state of affairs, a flaw, a misconnection, an 'event', etc. as well. And it is. It is such a flaw and combination defect in the sense explained in [3], and particular evils are its concrete multiple outcomes.⁴⁸ Compare it to (and forgive me the sorrowfully German thought to

talk in a shorthand way about relations we have with ourselves and one another. The normative demands of meaning and reason are not demands that are made on us by objects, but are demands that we make on ourselves and each other." In an analogous way, one might say about Plotinus's account of evil: to talk about evil is not to talk about an entity, but to talk in a shorthand way about relations within the Plotinian procession and between soul and matter. Evil as the *ἀρχὴ* of evils is not an object, but an outcome of such miscarried relations.

⁴⁷ Strictly speaking, this is utterly impossible considering Plato's doctrine that there can be no *ἰδέα* or *εἶδος* of bad things. And that 'evil itself', and therefore an entity (by 'self-predication') entirely evil, is impossible in Plotinus's eyes as well, is clearly stated for instance in *Enn.* I.8[51].15,23f: τὸ δὲ κακὸν οὐ μόνον ἐστὶ κακόν. And Plotinus adds why: διὰ δύναμιν ἀγαθοῦ καὶ φύσιν (15,24) – a perfect account of evil as depending on the ontological procession in the concluding lines of the treatise on evils and whence they come.

⁴⁸ This is perfectly consistent with Plotinus's observation that "if evil occurs accidentally in something else, it must be something itself (τι αὐτό) first, even if it is not a substance (μὴ οὐσία)" (*Enn.* I.8[51].3,22f. And, equally, with his statement in 3,35-40, where the *κακοῦ οὐσία* is seriously questioned, but a *πρῶτον κακόν* and a *καθ'*

follow) such obviously recurring events in the course of history that could make us believe in ‘circular history’, in history repeating itself: there is no ‘substance’ at the root of all this; just a pattern of all too human standard relationships (and their failure) that obviously won’t pass away.

These are only a few and fairly small steps, and they are easily reconcilable with Plotinus’s illustrative and elliptical idiom, as well as smoothly comprehensible within the philosophical *ductus* of the *Enneads*. In comparison, the gain is enormous.

For whoever wishes to submit a rational reconstruction of Plotinus’s philosophy must take his philosophical premises and intentions seriously. This sounds banal. But for Plotinus’s explanation of matter this implies that one is to follow his basic tenet of the first producing Principle’s complete and utter Goodness, Its sole causation, and Its omnipotence down to the detail. And this means that the interpreter has to apply this tenet all the way down to the *πρόοδος* from the One and even to the very last outpost of this procession, which is matter. To avoid paradoxes (such as Good producing evil) and inconsistencies (such as a tacit dualism of principles, one entirely active and good, one totally evil) in the interpretation of Plotinus, and to avoid, above all and even more calamitous, imputing such paradoxes and inconsistencies to Plotinus rather than to oneself, a consistent explication of matter and evil in the *Enneads* should run like this: the One produces whatever it produces completely and flawlessly. The generation of being stemming from it brings forth matter as the last possible offspring in the ontological procession. Matter, as the *hypokeimenon* of soul’s activity, has what no ‘emanate’ or *hypokeimenon* had so far, i.e., passively and *potentialiter* (never *in actu* or ‘as such’, neither of which ever applies to matter) the disposition to wake evil in the constellation and manner described above in its exasperating interaction with soul which experiences it as completely inert and in no way apt for formation. This is why matter, in an *enallagé* of thoughts which turns our attention from a view of matter ‘*per se*’ to Plotinus’ conception of the problem *quoad nos*, is called the *κακόν* in the *Enneads*. Matter thus and in a way as awkward as its own ‘meontic being’ completes the perfect order and scaling of the entire cosmos, or at least it does so as long as it remains pure passive *δύναμις* not in contact with soul. Only when soul comes upon it in a certain wrong way which does not *have to* be wrong but *can be* wrong, evils come into

αὐτὸ κακόν is conserved all the same. Finally, in 5,9-13, an *ὄντως κακόν* is denied and evil’s ‘being’ denounced as a shortcut expression of naming what is not a being.

the world: there was no need for them to come about. But, ὑπὲρ μόνον, it happened.⁴⁹

As it is easy to see, the problem in this paper was strictly narrowed down to the question of matter and evil; for that limited scope, what I said should suffice. However, it should have become clear that a second constituent is lacking for a thorough explanation of evil and its coming about. That second constituent is, of course, soul's role in the drama of evil, and an interpretation of what it means that the soul 'sins' and 'falls' etc. I have treated this problem(s) at length elsewhere⁵⁰ and I hope to have coupled my answer(s) to the question of 'evil' matter in such a way as to render the whole a compact and consistent exegesis of Plotinus's view on evil altogether. For now, I should just like to point out that the fact that my interpretation of matter in Plotinus's normative ontology cannot stand alone but needs a complementary view on the coherence of his philosophical system, makes a strong point in favour of its accuracy, and, if I may be so bold, of its 'Plotinian spirit'.

7. Some possible consequences

No doubt, this interpretation of matter's 'status' and 'normative assessment' in Plotinus's ontology takes getting used to.⁵¹ As a methodologically advisable *lectio difficilior* of Plotinus's own wording and as a correction

⁴⁹ Plotinus states this in *Enn.* I.8[51].7,16ff, a passage which also deserves attention insofar as it touches on the problem of Plato's 'necessity'-formula in *Theaetetus* 176a. Note again how 'evil' is inserted in the 'processual philosophy' and matter, again, is what is most distant from the Good (substitute 'First' for 'actuality', 'Last' for 'potentiality' in Armstrong's translation, and the case will become clearer). The *consequence* (καὶ αὐτὴ κτλ.) will be that matter (*qua* mere potentiality) will be necessary for the *πρόοδος* to come to an end, and this is where evil comes in as well, since evil, though not simply the same as matter, will not come about without matter. Though Plotinus does not say here, in what manner: "One can grasp the necessity of evil in this way too. Since not only the Good exists, there must be the last end to the process of going out past it [. . .]: and this last, after which nothing else can come into being, is evil. Now it is necessary that what comes after the First should exist, and therefore that the Last should exist; and this is matter, which possesses nothing at all of the Good. And in this way too evil is necessary". Evil here is clearly the outcome of a process. Again, it is not an instance *per se*, but the result of a miscarried relation at the lowest seam of reality.

⁵⁰ *Tragische Schuld im Theatrum Mundi Plotini*, and in *Unde Malum*, pp. 69-104 (cf. above footnote 21).

⁵¹ As a matter of fact, it will take much more than that to compel consent to this interpretation. There are some notoriously difficult passages in the *Enneads*, which

of ingrained views on Plotinus, it takes on the standard reading of – above all – *Enn.* I.8[51]. It is an attempt to interpret the problem according to the ‘spurious reasoning’ or indeed very ‘diverse kind of reasoning’ etc. Plotinus himself holds to be necessary here (cf. *Enn.* II.4[12].10,8; 10,10ff; and 12,32f – a reference to Plato’s *Timaeus* 52 b), taking seriously, at the same time, the metaphysical images and illustrative allusions and hints Plotinus to which Plotinus has recourse.

On the other hand, this interpretation would also allow recognition of Plotinus’s ‘doctrine’ of evil as the pattern underlying all (or at least most) subsequent Neoplatonic explanations of the *unde-malum* problem, including those of the Christian Neoplatonists who, like Augustine, Boethius, (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite, and even Anselm of Canterbury, could not consent to a thesis identifying matter with evil (since the ‘fall of the angels’ has nothing to do with matter), but propose a doctrine of the narcissistic *aversio a Deo* towards much lesser and ontologically poorer degrees of reality, however, ‘richer’ as to potentiality (that is the sinful error in normative estimation) by spiritual, or at least rational, creatures gifted with freedom.⁵²

Even more heretical, I would propose that my interpretation can – at least to a notable extent – reconcile Plotinus’s view of the problem with Proclus’s, whose treatise *De malorum subsistentia* is traditionally held to be in contention with the ‘Plotinian’ doctrine of evil identified with matter. I am quite sure that it is in contention with that doctrine, but not with Plotinus.

*Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät
Universität-München*

crave a more detailed analysis of the problem than I am able to give here. I am presently working on some of them in order to offer a thorough interpretation in another publication yet to appear. These are the already mentioned *Enn.* I.8[51].7 and 13, III.6[23].7, and VI.7[38].28. For now, I can only refer the reader once again to some pertinent remarks in my *Unde Malum*, pp. 112ff; 141-47; 156-167.

⁵² It is because they turned away from God and ‘upper’ reality and toward the vast unbounded, but never ‘real’, prospective of their own possibilities that (Pseudo-) Dionysius, in his treatise *On the Divine Names*, calls the devil’s and demons’ fall and form of existence *πρόσυλος*, ‘toward matter’: *DN* 725 A. Supposedly emulating (if not copying) Proclus, the alleged slasher of Plotinus’s ‘doctrine’ on evil, Dionysius as a Christian thinker expresses exactly the same view on matter and evil Plotinus proposes. For this statement in Dionysius, too, and for the last time now, I defer a necessary discussion of the problem to my *Unde Malum*, pp. 440-452.