



Proclus' Theory of Evil: An Ethical Perspective

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Abstract

While the metaphysical aspects of Proclus' theory of evil have recently been studied by a number of scholars, its ethical implications have largely been neglected. In my paper I am analysing the moral consequences that Proclus' concept of evil has, at the same time using the ethical perspective to throw more light on Proclus' ontology. Most importantly, I argue that the difference between bodily and psychic evil is much more substantial than it might seem from *On the Existence of Evils* alone. Though both kinds of evil are characterized by their 'parasitical existence' (*parhypos-tasis*), evil in bodies is unavoidable, resulting from a wide network of cosmic corporeal interactions that no partial being can ever have control of. Psychic evil, on the other hand, is a product of human choice and is independent of external circumstances, depending wholly on the soul's ability to keep its proper vertical hierarchy. In this regard it is evil in a much more serious sense of the word, being actively caused (though unintentionally) rather than just passively suffered. In the last section of my paper I throw further light on this more dangerous kind of evil, showing it as resulting from an essential bi-dimensionality of human beings.

Keywords

Proclus, evil, ethics, Neoplatonism

In recent years, Proclus' theory of evil has attracted a great deal of attention. Owing to the excellent translation of *On the Existence of Evils* by Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel (2003), as well as a number of articles that preceded its publication,¹ Proclus' analysis of evil is now well known and

¹ C. Steel (1999); J. Opsomer and C. Steel (1999); cf. J. Phillips (2007).

understood. Nevertheless, so far all scholarly discussions have only been concerned with evil as a metaphysical problem. In this they have followed Proclus' own treatment in *On the Existence of Evils*, for in this treatise his interests are purely metaphysical: his task is to explain how evil fits into the scheme of things, how its existence squares with the omnipotence and all-pervading presence of the Good, how it comes about and what its ontological status is. All of these questions are undoubtedly important, and I do not mean to belittle them. At the same time, however, we are entitled to ask about the precise *ethical* implications that Proclus' theory may have. Can it help us at all in judging the moral quality of human actions?

In *On the Existence of Evils* the moral dimension is only treated incidentally. Fortunately, we have other works that show more interest in practical ethics (such as the two remaining *opuscula* on providence, or some chapters of the *Republic Commentary*), and I will use these as a starting point in my attempt to reconstruct some elementary features of Proclus' moral conception of evil. I do not mean to imply, of course, that Proclus would have a special ethical theory of evil distinct from the metaphysical one. Neoplatonic philosophy is a holistic system of thought in which each part mirrors the whole, and even all ethics is necessarily ontological at its core. Ontologically, therefore, there is one theory of evil only—but it very much depends on the context which of its aspects the philosopher decides to accentuate.² It is thus my aim to show not only that Proclus' theory of evil does after all have interesting moral implications, but at the same time that these in turn may throw interesting light on his metaphysics; for when discussing evil in ethical contexts, he brings out some interesting features of his basic theory that in the more metaphysically minded passages tend to pass unnoticed.

Proclus' Basic Theory of Evil: A Short Summary

Before we start to investigate the ethical perspective, let me briefly summarize the basic ontological conception as presented in detail in *On the*

² In other words, I am interested in the various *aims* for which the one basic ontological theory of evil can be used. This is why I speak of an ethical 'perspective', not an ethical 'theory'. Terminologically, I will use the word 'metaphysical' to characterize the *perspective* that differs from the ethical one, but will prefer the term 'ontological' to describe the basic *theory* common to both the ethical and the metaphysical perspective.

Existence of Evils and as reiterated in a number of other treatises. In Proclus' view, no single component of reality can be evil in itself. All that exists is good in its essence and strives to achieve goodness in its activity too. Indeed, it is precisely by imitating the good that all things are preserved in existence. It follows that evil is something that can only happen inadvertently. Every being or thing has a natural aim and a perfection it strives for. To become evil means to fail to reach this perfection, to deviate from one's nature.³ Evil thus has no positive existence of itself. It is a failure having no reality of its own, being but an incidental perversion of something good. To capture this particular mode of existence, Proclus uses the term *parhypostasis*, 'parasitical existence'—i.e. an existence that has no proper antecedent cause, but arises accidentally in consequence of an unfortunate interaction of a number of partial causes, each of them having the best intentions only.⁴

The reason for the occasional failures of our activities is the existence of various components of which we consist, 'each being drawn by its own desires':⁵

On the whole we may say that the body has a share in evil because there are various components in it, and when these lose their mutual symmetry, each wishing to rule, disease appears as their parasite. And similarly, the soul shares in evil because in her too there are different kinds of life contrary somehow to one another, and when these start to fight, each pursuing its own interests, evil creeps in as a result of their strife.⁶

While no single component of reality is evil, it is in the *relation* between various components that evil may appear. A typical example is the soul with its different parts. In themselves, all the parts are good and useful, but they only reach their proper perfection when they co-operate in the right

³) Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 25.

⁴) Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 49-50. Cf. J. Opsomer and C. Steel (1999) 249-250.

⁵) Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 50.49 (all the translations of *De mal. subs.* are by Opsomer & Steel).

⁶) Proclus, *In Remp.* I 38.9-15: πάντως γὰρ εἰ σώμα ἐστὶν κακοῦ μετέχον, ἔστιν ἐν τούτῳ διάφορα ἄττα, ὧν ἀσυμμέτρως ἐχόντων πρὸς ἄλληλα παρυφίσταται νόσος, ἐκάστου κρατεῖν ἐθέλοντος. καὶ εἰ ψυχὴ, διάφορα ζωῆς εἶδη καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ καὶ ἐναντία πάς ἐστιν, ὧν μαχομένων ἐκ τῶν ἐτέρων τοῖς ἐτέροις ἐνδύεται τι κακόν, ἐκατέρου τὸ ἑαυτοῦ πράττοντος.

hierarchy, i.e. with reason controlling the irrational parts. Evil arises when the hierarchy is reversed, reason being overpowered by the lower parts.

It is noteworthy that for Proclus it is essentially the *vertical hierarchy* that matters. The failure to attain one's appropriate goal 'is due to the weakness of the agent, since the agent has received a nature of such a kind that a part of it is better, a part worse'.⁷ It is precisely this vertical tension between the higher and lower part of each thing that gives rise to evil. There are, in fact, only three kinds of evil, corresponding to three types of corrupted vertical relations:

Let us repeat once again: there are three things in which evil exists, namely, the particular soul, the image of the soul [i.e. the irrational soul], and the body of individual beings. Now for the soul that is above [i.e. the rational soul], the good consists in being according to intellect—because intellect is prior to it. For the irrational soul it consists in being according to reason—because for each thing being good comes from the thing immediately superior to it. And for the body again it is being in accordance with nature, because nature is the principle of motion and rest for it. If this is the case, it is necessary that evil for the first is being contrary to intellect, as being subcontrary to what is according to intellect; for the second it is being contrary to reason, as in its case being good means being according to reason; and for the third it is being contrary to nature. These three species of evil inhere in the three natures that are liable to weaken because of the decline into partial being.⁸

In none of these cases is evil brought about by any of the components involved. It is neither the body, nor the irrational soul, nor reason that gives rise to troubles, but always their twisted vertical symmetry. Proclus sums up his conception succinctly in the *Timaeus Commentary*:

In a word we may say that evil is not to be found in the intellectual realm, for all intellectual genera are free of evil. Nor is it to be found in universal souls or in universal bodies, for all that is universal is free of evil, being eternal and always in accordance with nature. It remains that it is to be located in partial souls or partial bodies. But in this case it cannot lie in their essence, for all essences come from the gods. Nor does it lie in their powers, for these are in accordance with nature. It remains that it has to exist in their activities. But it

⁷) Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 50.37-38.

⁸) Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 55.5-15.

cannot exist in rational activities, for these all strive for the good, nor in irrational ones, for these too work in accordance with nature. Accordingly, it needs to be found in their mutual asymmetry. And in bodies evil can exist neither in form, for form wants to control matter, not in matter itself, for it longs to be ordered. It follows then that it is to be found in the lack of symmetry between form and matter.⁹

This vertical description does not imply that there are no horizontal asymmetries involved in the production of evil. The lack of a vertical symmetry often goes hand in hand with a horizontal disturbance—e.g. in bodily diseases, in which parts of the organism stop cooperating. Nevertheless, each such disease necessarily has a vertical dimension too, for it means that the form of the living being is ‘overcome by what is inferior’.¹⁰ We shall return to the relation of vertical and horizontal asymmetries later on.

The Ethical Perspective: Injustice of the Soul as the Only True Evil

In *On the Existence of Evils* evil in souls and in bodies is treated as essentially similar. True, psychic evil is deemed worse, for while bodily evil sooner or later destroys its subject, the soul is indestructible, becoming simply worse and worse as a result of its depravity. This shows that malice in souls is more troublesome than corporeal evil: ‘For corporeal evil when it intensifies leads to non-existence, whereas evil of the soul leads to an evil existence.’¹¹ Nevertheless, there seems to be no principal difference between psychic and bodily evil, the gravity of the former being just a matter of

⁹ Proclus, *In Tim.* I 380.24-381.6: συλλήβδην οὖν εἶπωμεν, ὅτι τὸ κακὸν οὔτε ἐν τοῖς νοεροῖς ἐστίν· ἅπαν γὰρ ἀκάκωτον τὸ νοερὸν γένος· οὔτε ἐν ψυχῆς ὀλικαῖς ἢ τοῖς ὅλοις σώμασιν· ἅπαντα γὰρ τὰ ὅλα ἀκάκωτα ὡς καὶ ἀίδια καὶ αἰεὶ κατὰ φύσιν. λείπεται οὖν ἐν ψυχῆς αὐτὸ εἶναι μερικῆς ἢ σώμασι μερικοῦς, ἀλλὰ καὶ τούτων οὔτε ἐν ταῖς οὐσίαις· πᾶσαι γὰρ αὐτῶν αἰ οὐσίαι θεόθεν· οὔτε ἐν ταῖς δυνάμεσιν· κατὰ φύσιν γὰρ αὐται. λείπεται ἄρα ἐν ταῖς ἐνεργείαις, καὶ ἐν μὲν ψυχῆς οὔτε ἐν ταῖς λογικαῖς· πᾶσαι γὰρ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ὀρέγονται· οὔτε ἐν ταῖς ἀλόγοις· καὶ γὰρ αὐταὶ κατὰ φύσιν ἐνεργοῦσιν· ἀλλ’ ἐν τῇ πρὸς ἀλλήλας αὐτῶν ἀσυμμετρίᾳ. ἐν δὲ σώμασιν οὔτε ἐν τῷ εἶδει· κρατεῖν γὰρ ἐθέλει τῆς ὕλης· οὔτε ἐν ταύτῃ· ἐφίεται γὰρ τοῦ κοσμεῖσθαι· ἀλλ’ ἐν τῇ ἀσυμμετρίᾳ τοῦ εἶδους πρὸς τὴν ὕλην.

¹⁰ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 28.10. For the disease of bodies cf. *De mal. subs.* 56.15-17, 60.21-32.

¹¹ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 39.41-42. Cf. *In Remp.* II 89.25-90.1.

degree. Ontologically, this is understandable, for it is undoubtedly true that the *parhypostasis* principle works equally well for souls and bodies. In both cases, evil is accidental, having no antecedent cause and resulting from an asymmetry between various causes.

The situation changes once we start to think about evil from an ethical perspective. Is committing a crime really comparable to getting sick or disabled? Our suspicion in this matter is confirmed by an interesting passage in the *Republic Commentary*. In the sixth essay Proclus is trying to defend Homer against the charges raised by Plato in the *Republic*. One of them concerns the fact that in many cases Homer's gods seem to be responsible for evil. In his response, Proclus draws a sharp distinction between two types of evil. One is represented by the 4th book of the *Iliad*, in which Athena provokes the Trojan archer Pandarus to break the peace treaty and shoot Menelaus. The goddess makes Pandarus commit an unjust act, thus being seemingly guilty of what 'all men would acknowledge to be evil'¹² (though Proclus actually manages to clear her of the suspicion, putting all the blame on the head of Pandarus and the Trojans). The other type of evil is more interesting for us. It is present in the classic image of two jars standing on Zeus' threshold, 'one full of the evil gifts that he gives, the other full of the good ones' (*Il.* 24.528). Proclus relates the two jars to the basic principles of Limit and the Unlimited that stretch from the top of things to the very bottom, dividing each level of reality into two complementary sets. Once we understand the jars in this way, it becomes obvious that 'evil' is meant here in a loose sense of the word only:

Now, since all things are of necessity divided in the manner just mentioned, the ancients had a habit of designating those that belong to the better portion simply as 'good', while those of the contrary portion as 'evil'. However, they are surely not using the word 'evil' here in the same sense as when we all agree to call 'evil' the unjust and intemperate state of the soul. No, by 'evil' they mean the impediments of our activities, and all that stands in the way of our natural disposition, disturbing the easiness with which the soul takes care of human affairs. It is these things that they admit to be 'evil'—which is a different concept of evil from the one we apply to the soul. In this sense they were even wont to count as 'evil' sickness, powerlessness, and life lacking in basic necessities.¹³

¹²⁾ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 101.3-4.

¹³⁾ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 97.5-17: τούτων δὴ οὖν κατὰ τὸν εἰρημένον τρόπον ἐξ ἀνάγκης

Metaphysically speaking, 'all that stands in the way of our natural disposition' (i.e. all corporeal evil consisting in external 'horizontal' events pressing upon us and blocking our activities) is no doubt just as evil as depravity of the soul. Nevertheless, in the ethical context of educating young people (which is a perspective that Proclus pays great attention to in this essay) it is better to use a more neutral word, reserving the category of 'evil' for the injustice of the soul. The same holds for various external misfortunes that may befall us, such as poverty, sickness or exile:

In what sense these things are 'evil' has already been said: only in so far as they make the present life more difficult to live and make our souls desperate. Genuine philosophers, of course, should not really call such things 'evil', but to those who have taken the path of practical life they will seem to be impediments of an excellent life.¹⁴

For those who are meant to realize their life project on the worldly level, poverty and exile seem 'evil'. From the philosophical point of view, however, poverty is no worse than richness. In the harmonious system of the universe there need to be both the rich and the poor, and the gods will make sure that the appropriate parts are played by those who are well disposed for them.¹⁵ Morally, what counts is not the possessions we have but the way we use them. 'Are riches not defiled by injustice, health by debauchery, and worldly power by the meanness of the soul, and is not poverty embellished by magnanimity, sickness by endurance, and powerlessness by generosity?'¹⁶

διηρημένων τὰ μὲν ὡς τῆς ἀμείνωνος ὄντα μερίδος αὐτόθεν ἀγαθὰ τοῖς παλαιοῖς ἔθος προσαγορεύειν, τὰ δὲ ὡς τῆς ἐναντίας κακὰ προσονομάζουσιν· καὶ οὐχ οὕτω τὸ κακὸν ἐνταῦθα δῆπου λέγουσιν, ὡς τὴν ἄδικον καὶ ἀκόλαστον τῆς ψυχῆς ἕξιν κακὸν ὁμολογοῦμεν ὑπάρχειν· ἀλλ' ὡς τὰ ἐμπόδια τῶν ἐνεργειῶν καὶ τὰ ἐπιπροσθῶντα ταῖς κατὰ φύσιν ἡμῶν διαθέσεσιν καὶ τὰ διακόπτοντα τῆς ψυχῆς τὴν μετὰ ῥαστώνης ἀποτελουμένην τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πρόνοιαν κακὰ συγχωροῦσιν εἶναι καὶ λέγεσθαι τρόπον ἕτερον τῶν αὐτῆς τῆς ψυχῆς λεγομένων κακῶν, οὕτως ἄρα καὶ τὴν νόσον καὶ τὴν ἀδυναμίαν καὶ τὴν ἄπορον τῶν ἀναγκαίων ζῶην ἐν τοῖς κακοῖς εἰώθασι καταλέγειν.

¹⁴ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 100.8-12.

¹⁵ Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* III 2, 11; III 2, 17.

¹⁶ Proclus, *De dec. dub.* 35.13-16.

Ontological Background of the Ethical Distinction

At first sight, the sharp distinction between psychic and bodily evil postulated in the *Republic Commentary* seems at variance with Proclus' more neutral discussion of evil in *On the Existence of Evils*. Yet the two treatments need not exclude each other. Rather, they result from a difference in perspective. There is no doubt that metaphysically speaking psychic and bodily evil are similar indeed, for the *parhypostasis* principle works for both of them. Nevertheless, in ethical contexts we must distinguish between them clearly, since both are to be evaluated in an entirely different way. Accordingly, in such contexts Proclus does not hesitate to deny the name of 'evil' to precisely the same bodily phenomena that he repeatedly calls evil in dozens of other, more metaphysical passages.¹⁷

The interesting question is whether the ethical distinction between the seeming evil of bodies and the true evil of souls can also be grounded ontologically. In other words, is there an essential ontological difference between psychic and corporeal evil that might entitle Proclus to treat both as basically distinct in his ethical discussions? Unfortunately, Proclus never deals with this problem himself. I believe, however, that if we follow his ontological reflections and bring them to their implicit conclusions, there is a way to harmonize the two perspectives and to provide an ontological foundation for the ethical distinction between psychic and bodily evil.

A convenient bridge between the two viewpoints might be provided by a passage of the *Timaeus Commentary* (I 375.6-381.21), in which Proclus gives yet another summary of his theory. The basic approach is metaphysical again, but Proclus provides a classification of evils that is slightly different from the one he presents in *On the Existence of Evils*. He explains that evil only concerns the lower kinds of partial beings, which can basically be divided into two classes. (1) The first one is of those that are 'moved by others' (*heterokinêta*), being transposed by them as required and depending on their providence. For these things evil is necessary as a result of the unavoidable cycle of generation and corruption by which the material

¹⁷ The two perspectives are presented side by side in the *Alcibiades Commentary* 332-334, where death and wounds are at first (332.22-23) denied to be evils, as they do not touch our substance, which consists in the soul (= the ethical perspective). Later on in the same passage (333.8), however, Proclus admits death to be 'an evil of the body', though not one of the human being as such (= the metaphysical perspective).

world is sustained.¹⁸ (2) The second class is of those that are ‘moved by themselves’ (*autokínēta*), having the choice (*hairesis*) to become good or bad. Such beings are able to cause evil, and bear responsibility for it, though not even their evil activity is entirely devoid of goodness: it is evil as being done ‘by themselves to themselves’ (*ap’ autôn eis autous*—377.23), but it is good in that a just retribution follows automatically, benefiting the soul of the evil-doer.¹⁹ Indeed, the same is true even if a wrong decision is not really followed by an evil action:

For all choice either elevates the soul, or draws it downward. And inasmuch as the [wrong] choice comes from the soul, it is evil; but inasmuch as it transfers the choosing person²⁰ to his or her proper position in the cosmos, it is just and good. For the choice brings punishment to the one who has chosen, becoming an instrument of justice in this person, causing the soul to fall from its good. For as a beneficent choice becomes its own reward, so a depraved choice becomes its own punishment. For such is the way of powers that move by themselves.²¹

Clearly, the distinction between evil suffered by things ‘moved by others’ and by those ‘moved by themselves’ corresponds to what in *On the Existence of Evils* Proclus called evil in bodies and evil in souls. Moreover, it is important to remember that for Proclus self-motion is not an empirical category, but a metaphysical one. As we learn from the *Elements of Theology* (props. 14-20), self-motion implies self-reversion, and therefore self-constitution as well (cf. props. 42-43). In other words, it is just the rational soul that is self-moved—and in the context of our passage the human soul only, for no other rational souls are capable of rising up and falling down in consequence of their choices (prop. 184). Empirically, the animals may

¹⁸) Proclus, *In Tim.* I 376.25-377.7.

¹⁹) Proclus, *In Tim.* I 377.7-29.

²⁰) Literally ‘the choosing entity’, but as the only ‘choosing entities’ are humans, I am opting for a ‘humanized’ translation to make the argument more intelligible.

²¹) Proclus, *In Tim.* I 378.12-21 (the translation is partly inspired by that of T. Taylor): *πάσα γὰρ αἵρεσις ἢ ἀνάγει τὴν ψυχὴν ἢ καθέλκει· εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀπὸ ψυχῆς ἢ αἵρεσις, κακόν, εἰ δὲ εἰς τὴν οἰκείαν τάξιν μεθίστησι τὸ ἐλόμενον, κατὰ δίκην ἐστὶ καὶ ἀγαθόν· αὕτη γὰρ ἢ αἵρεσις ἐπάγει τῷ ἐλομένῳ τὴν δίκην, μᾶλλον δὲ ἢ ἐν αὐτῷ γίνεται δίκη, τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀποστήσασα τὴν ψυχὴν· ὡς γὰρ ἢ ἀγαθοειδὴς αἵρεσις ἑαυτῆς γίνεταί καρπός, οὕτως ἢ μοχθηρὰ ἑαυτῆς ποινή· τοῦτο γὰρ οὖν ἴδιόν ἐστι τῶν αὐτοκινήτων δυνάμεων.*

seem to move by themselves too, but metaphysically they do not, for they only have the irrational soul which is essentially tied to the body, sharing its dependent status.²²

The *Timaeus Commentary* thus helps to show that after all there is a more substantial difference between the moral evil committed by human souls and the evil in bodies. While *On the Existence of Evils* emphasized the similarity of bodily and psychic evil, both being caused by a vertical asymmetry between two layers of reality, we now see that psychic depravity is evil in a more serious sense, being not just a passive by-product of the cycle for generation and corruption, but something *actively caused* by the choosing soul. It is in fact only the self-moved choosing soul that Proclus explicitly calls 'an evil-producing cause' (*kakopoion aition*), devoting a special paragraph to justifying its existence:

If, however, someone should wonder why the choosing soul has been brought into existence in the first place, being an evil-producing cause (though just a partial one, and not one of the wholes), we can reply that the procession of beings is continuous, no vacuum being left among them. . . . And how will the continuity of beings be preserved, if there should exist wholes moved by themselves, as well as partial natures moved by others, but we would do away with the intermediate natures, i.e. those that are moved by themselves, but at the same time partial? . . . It is necessary, therefore, that there should be this kind of life also, being a mean term in the order of being, and the bond of things which have as it were an arrangement contrary to each other. Nevertheless, evil is not on this account natural for the soul, for she is essentially the mistress of her choice.²³

²² In question 7 of *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence* Proclus considers the possibility of animals also having a 'trace of self-moved life' in themselves, being thus capable of moral choices (43.17; cf. ch. 44). In the end, however, he seems to rule out this alternative, though he is rather evasive on the issue and his actual standpoint is not quite obvious. In any case, he normally treats animal souls as essentially distinct from the souls of humans—cf. e.g. *De mal. subs.* 25, and in greater detail J. Opsomer (2006) 138-140.

²³ Proclus, *In Tim.* I 378.22-379.9 (the translation is partly inspired by that of T. Taylor): εἰ δὲ θαυμάζουσί τινες, δι' ἣν αἰτίαν παρήκται τὴν ἀρχήν, κακοποιὸν αἴτιον <ὄν>, καὶ εἰ μὴδὲν εἶη τοῦτο τῶν ὅλων, ἀλλὰ μερικόν, ῥητέον πρὸς αὐτούς, ὅτι τῶν ὄντων ἡ πρόδος συνεχῆς ἐστὶ καὶ οὐδὲν ἐν τοῖς οὖσι ἀπολέλειπται κενόν. . . . πῶς δὲ ἡ συνέχεια σωθήσεται τῶν ὄντων, εἰ τὰ μὲν ὅλα προϋπάρχει καὶ αὐτοκίνητα τὰ τε μερικὰ καὶ ἑτεροκίνητα, τὰ δὲ μετὰ τούτων ἐκποδὼν ποιήσαιμεν αὐτοκίνητα μὲν ὄντα, μερικὰ δὲ ὄμοι; . . . ἀναγκαῖον ἄρα καὶ ταύτην εἶναι τὴν ζωὴν, μέσην ἐν τοῖς οὖσι καὶ σύνδεσμον

Apparently, while the existence of evil at the level of partial natures moved by others needs no complicated justification, it is the choosing soul that really might cause difficulties, for it is only with her that evil can originate actively. Why on earth has the demiurge allowed such independent active souls to exist? Do they not present a dangerous and uncontrollable element within the hierarchy of reality? They do indeed, but one that is indispensable for the completeness of reality. To account for its necessity, Proclus has recourse to the classic late Neoplatonic law of the mean term, showing that soulless bodies simply could not exist without there being choosing human beings as well.

Moral Evil as Essentially Vertical

The *Timaeus Commentary* points out one important ontological difference between bodily and psychic evil. I suggest that we take it up and try to pursue it still further. As we remember, for Proclus all evil arises as a result of a *vertical asymmetry* between various levels of reality. In case of bodies, this means a clash between matter and form. Taking the simple example of a tree, its evil consists in a failure to develop its natural form properly—e.g. in its inability to grow normally and bear fruit as a result of drought or sickness. What is the reason for this failure? Clearly, it is not a result of the tree's inner weakness or insufficient effort, but rather of some wider cosmic context in which the tree is set.²⁴ The tree becomes impotent 'on account of the power of the contraries surrounding it on all sides, for many are the forces that are external and hostile to mortal nature.'²⁵ Its failure is the outcome of a conflict between the tree's body and other bodies surrounding it, each trying to realize its natural form. In the fight between a cherry tree, the greenflies eating it, and the ladybird devouring them, all the members of

τῶν οἶον ἀπ' ἐναντίας ἀλλήλοις τεταγμένων, καὶ οὐ διὰ τοῦτο κατὰ φύσιν αὐτῆι τὸ κακόν, ἐπειδὴ κατ' οὐσίαν ἐστὶ κυρία τῶν αἰρέσεων.

²⁴ In *De dec. dub.* 45.1-3 Proclus explicitly contrasts plants with the beings 'moved by themselves' and gives them as an obvious example of a 'mortal form of life that is placed in a mortal body, having only that body and nothing of its own, but belonging to that in which it is placed' (τὸ τῆς ζωῆς εἶδος... θνητόν, ἐν θνητῷ σώματι κείμενον, ὡς... τὸ σῶμα καὶ οὐδὲν ἑαυτοῦ ἔχον, ἀλλ' ἐκείνου ὄν ἐν ᾧ ἔστι). It follows that plants bear no responsibility for their failures, being but victims of their bodily surroundings.

²⁵ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 27.27-29.

this food chain behave quite naturally, and if any one of them wins over the other, it is neither's fault. The destruction of one body is necessary for the existence of another, the whole process being good and beneficent for the totality of the cosmos.²⁶ If a body fails to reach its proper aim, it is not evil for it in the strong, evaluative sense, but merely in the sense of being a necessary by-product of the imperfection of all bodily reality. Matter is a receptacle that in principle cannot hold all the bodies at once, and if it is to give an impartial chance to them all, there must exist the endless cycle of generation and corruption, old forms constantly giving way to new ones.

In other words, while corporeal evil strictly speaking results from a vertical conflict between the body and its form, in actuality it is rather the *horizontal* relation of that body to other bodies that appears to be crucial. This is very much different from what we see in case of souls. These too are exposed to a pressure of external circumstances, but unlike plants they have the power to resist them. Proclus discusses this in detail in question six of *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence*. Commenting on the injustice that seems to rule in the world, the good ones being poor and oppressed, while the bad ones flourish and prosper, he explains it as a sophisticated educational scheme devised by divine providence. By confronting good people with misery and distress, the gods teach them to be independent of external circumstances, looking down on worldly gifts and seeing virtue of the soul as the only true good:

The lack of seemingly good things contributes to the striving of worthy men for virtue, for it provokes them to despise these things, training them by means of external circumstances. It makes them used to thinking slightly of bodies, leading them away from the excitements of the phenomenal world. At the same time, it reveals to others in a more efficient way the magnitude of virtue and its true essence. Stripping it from the things that are deemed good by ordinary people, it provides opportunity for those capable of seeing to behold true beauty in itself—a noble beauty which transcends all that is admired by the majority. For we do not admire the pilot's art when the sea and the air are calm, but in tempest and storm. Nor do we praise virtue when human affairs run smoothly, but when it remains unshaken amidst the blows of fortune.²⁷

²⁶) Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 5; *De dec. dub.* 28; *In Tim.* I 379.11-21.

²⁷) Proclus, *De dec. dub.* 34.1-11.

Proclus' position here is very similar to that of Epictetus. In agreement with him, he treats external circumstances as morally indifferent. Worldly pressures can damage our body, but they can never force us to become evil—for it is always our choice that gives moral quality to life. Quantitatively, most aspects of our life are not determined by us. We are a part of the cosmic whole, being greatly dependent on it. Yet, while the power of our choice might appear slight, it is actually of crucial importance, being the source of moral value, having the power to make things good or evil:

And for these reasons, in regard to events, we praise some people and blame others, as if they were masters of these events through their choice. And however we may qualify the events that take place, we do not say that the universe has this [moral] character, but the person who acts. This is because the [moral] quality in what happens did not come from the world, but from the life of the acting person. He is co-ordinated with the universe because of the universe and he is in turn of such and such quality because he is a part. . . . And it is because of its choice that we say that it [i.e. the faculty that depends on us] makes failures and acts rightly, since even if the result is good, but the agent acts on the basis of an evil choice, we say that the action is bad. For, what is good in what is done is due to a [favourable] external factor, but what is bad is due to the choice of the agent.²⁸

The reason for this absolute moral power of human choice is easy to see. For Proclus, moral evil is produced by an asymmetry between the lower and the higher levels of one's soul. This is why external (horizontal) pressure of the world can never make us evil: it only concerns our body and the irrational parts of the soul contained in it, but it cannot influence the *vertical* relation between these irrational parts and the reason that is meant to

²⁸) Proclus, *De providentia* 35.8-13, 36.8-11 (all the translations of *De providentia* are by Steel): καὶ διὰ ταῦτα ἄρα καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς γινόμενοις τοὺς μὲν ἐπαινοῦμεν, τοὺς δὲ ψέγομεν, ὡσανεὶ κυρίους καὶ αὐτοὺς διὰ τὴν αἴρεσιν γενομένους· καὶ ὅποια ἄττα ἂν εἴη τὰ γινόμενα, τοιοῦτον οὐ τὸν κόσμον φαμέν, ἀλλὰ τὸν δράσαντα· τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτοῖς ποιὸν οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου ἦν, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ πράξαντος ζωῆς· συντέτακται δὲ πρὸς τὸ πᾶν <διὰ τὸ πᾶν>, καὶ ἔστιν ἄλλιν τοιόνδε διὰ τὸ μέρος. . . . καὶ διὰ τὴν προαίρεσιν φαμέν αὐτὸ [sc. τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν] καὶ ἁμαρτάνειν καὶ κατορθοῦν, ἐπεὶ, κἂν τὸ πραχθὲν ἀγαθὸν εἴη, τὸ δὲ πρᾶττον ἐκ προαιρέσεως ἐνεργῆ μοχθηρᾶς, κακίζομεν τὴν πρᾶξιν· τὸ μὲν γὰρ χρηστὸν ἐν τῷ γενομένῳ δι' ἄλλο, τὸ δὲ μοχθηρὸν διὰ τὸ προελόμενον.

be their master. If we manage to keep the proper vertical hierarchy within ourselves, we will remain good despite whatever befalls us.

This essential verticality of psychic evil can thus be seen as another feature that makes it ontologically different from evil in bodies. Bodily evil is only vertical in its result (i.e. in the disproportion between matter and form), but it really happens due to horizontal circumstances. It is only in souls that the vertical nature of evil becomes decisive.²⁹ Proclus expresses this clearly in ch. 48 of *On the Existence of Evils*. After repeating once again that evil arises either in souls or in forms in matter, he points out the difference between the two cases:

For the former [i.e. the souls] throw themselves into evil, whereas the latter [i.e. the forms in matter], being adverse to each other, create room for the coming to be of the unnatural, since that which is according to nature for one thing is unnatural for another.³⁰

Whereas the souls ‘throw themselves into evil’ in a vertical movement downwards, bearing responsibility for it, bodies are rather passively thrown into evil, their forms being subject to unavoidable horizontal clashes with other forms. The passage makes it clear that bodily evil is morally neutral, ‘since that which is according to nature for one thing is unnatural for another’.³¹ The soul, on the other hand, as Proclus explains in the rest of the chapter, becomes evil of its own choice by averting its gaze from itself as well as beings superior to itself and looking down ‘at things external to and inferior to itself’.³²

²⁹ This interpretation is confirmed by the *In Remp.* I 38.9-15 passage quoted above, which claims that both in bodies and souls evil arises because of the loss of symmetry between their various components. Obviously, in bodies these components must be *horizontal*, corresponding to various humours and organs that bodies are composed of, all on the same ontological level. In souls, on the other hand, the parts are *vertical*, being arranged in a clear hierarchy. In *De mal. subs.* 56 Proclus distinguishes between two kinds of psychic evil, but both are clearly vertical: *foulness* is ‘ignorance and privation of intellect’, *disease* is ‘discord inside the soul [i.e. between its lower and upper parts] and deficiency in the life according to reason’.

³⁰ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 48.2-5: <τὰ μὲν γὰρ> αὐτὰς ἄγει εἰς τὸ κακόν, τὰ δὲ ἀλλήλοις μαχόμενα δίδωσι τῷ παρὰ φύσιν χώρῳ εἰς τὴν γένεσιν. τὸ γὰρ ἄλλω κατὰ φύσιν, ἄλλω παρὰ φύσιν.

³¹ For a justification of evil in bodies from the perspective of universal nature cf. Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 60.

³² Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 48.12-13.

Human Choice as Essentially Vertical

The emphasis that I have placed on the verticality of moral evil might seem surprising to some readers, for we are not used ourselves to consider moral decisions in this one-dimensional manner. It could be objected, for instance, that in theory there might also arise a horizontal conflict within human soul, namely if two of its partial *logoi* came into conflict, the soul then being torn apart by its own clashing tendencies that would all stand on the same horizontal level.³³ A typical example would be one of those situations well known to contemporary ethics in which the choice we need to make is not between good and evil (i.e., in Proclus' terminology, between following our higher causes or falling down from them), but between two different principles the value of which seems equal.

Yet, obvious as such a possibility might seem to us moderns, I do not think it would ever cross Proclus' mind. Indeed, when it comes to discussing human choice (*prohairesis*) in *On Providence* 57-60, Proclus defines it as an essentially *vertical* faculty, enabling the soul to move upwards or downwards:

To sum up, choice is a rational appetitive faculty that strives for some good, either true or apparent, and leads the soul towards both. Through this faculty the soul ascends and descends, does wrong and does right. Considering the activity of this faculty authors have called its ambivalent inclination 'the cross-roads' in us. . . . Due to this faculty we differ both from divine and from mortal beings, since neither of them is subject to this ambivalent inclination: divine beings, because of their excellence, are established only among true goods, and mortal beings, because of their deficiency, only among apparent goods.³⁴

³³) Obviously, this is only conceivable in case of individual souls—'for all that is universal is free of evil' (Proclus, *In Tim.* I 380.26-27). Cf. *De mal. subs.* 27. For the elegant anti-thetical harmony between various antagonistic *logoi* within the Logos of the universe see Plotinus, *Enn.* III 2, 16.

³⁴) Proclus, *De providentia* 59.1-9: *Est ergo, ut summarium dicatur, electio potentia rationalis appetitiva bonorum verorumque et apparentium, ducens ad ambo animam, propter quam ascendit et descendit et peccat et dirigit. Huius potentie operationem videntes, biviam in nobis vocaverunt ad ambo ipsius inclinationem. . . . et secundum hanc potentiam et a divinis differimus et a mortalibus: utraque enim sunt insusceptiva eius que ad ambo inclinationis, hec quidem in bonis veris solummodo locata propter excellentiam, hec autem in apparentibus propter defectum.*

For Proclus, *prohairesis* is always a vertical choice between good and evil, never a horizontal decision between two equivalent alternatives.³⁵ In fact, it is precisely its essential moral ambivalence that distinguishes choice from will (*boulêsis*), the latter being always directed to the good, the former choosing between good and evil.³⁶

It is true that Proclus never rules out horizontal decisions explicitly, and it might be argued that I am making too much of his understandable emphasis on vertical choices. Nonetheless, I believe the emphasis is not accidental. It follows from a long tradition of ancient discussions on freedom and determinism, which deserves a short excursus. Without being able to go into details, we may note that Stoic analyses of causality made all subsequent defences of human freedom to choose immensely difficult.³⁷ After Chrysippus it was no longer possible for a serious philosopher to argue simply that we are free to choose from different alternatives; it became necessary to demonstrate what exactly this power of choice is based on and in what sense the choice is liberated from the all-encompassing causal network of the universe. How complicated this was can be seen from the entirely unsuccessful Peripatetic attempts at providing an answer to Stoic determinism. In his treatise *On Fate* Alexander of Aphrodisias postulates human choice as an independent cause stepping into the cosmic causal network without being determined by it,³⁸ but he never manages to provide an adequate causal background for this unique human power. The Stoics would agree, of course, that we are causes of our own actions, but would add that even our decisions have to be caused by something (such as by our upbringing and character)—otherwise we would introduce arbitrary motions without a cause. To challenge this view, Alexander would have to offer a radical re-description of causality, setting our choice into a

³⁵ See the *In Tim.* I 378.12-21 passage quoted above ('all choice either elevates the soul, or draws it downward'). Cf. Proclus, *De providentia* 57.3-6: 'The ancients always take the expression "what depends on us" as referring to the power of choice, making us masters of choosing and avoiding either some good or its opposite.'

³⁶ Proclus, *De providentia* 57.6-9. Cf. 57.9-10: 'Therefore, choice characterizes the soul, since choice is equally open to both [i.e. the good and the evil], and it is appropriate to the intermediate nature which is moved towards both.'

³⁷ For an authoritative review of Stoic arguments cf. Frede (2003), and in greater detail Bobzien (1998).

³⁸ See in particular Alexander, *De fato* XV, 185.15-28 Bruns. Cf. already Aristotle, *Ethica Nic.* 1112b31-1113a7.

causal context of some sort without embracing the causally closed—and therefore deterministic—system of the Stoics. Yet, this is precisely what he never does, avoiding thus the true heart of the matter.³⁹

The Peripatetics were ill-disposed for a substantial reply to the Stoics. They worked with the pre-Stoic system of Aristotle which showed no propensity for holistic analyses of causality, classifying reality in an entirely different manner. When faced with the Stoic vision of an all-encompassing causal network of the universe, they found no conceptual tools for a thoroughgoing reaction.⁴⁰ The Neoplatonists were in a much better position, for they had a sense for holistic analyses, understanding well what the Stoics meant. They fully acknowledged the existence of a universal causal nexus, but were able to escape its rigidity by postulating another ontological level above the cosmos that is independent of it, being a causal system in its own right.

A good example of the Neoplatonist solution is Plotinus. In his early treatise *On Fate* (*Enn.* III 1) he starts by fully conceding the weight of the Stoic position: when analysing fate and its relation to human decisions, we have to keep to a strictly causal account, admitting no uncaused motions (ch. 1). The problem is that most accounts sticking to this principle end up being deterministic, seeing all the motions as parts of one single causal nexus allowing for no exceptions. As a result, man becomes a passive puppet, depending fully on other factors and having nothing in his power

³⁹) Cf. the critical remarks of Robert Sharples (1983) 147 concerning Alexander's failure to provide an alternative approach to causation.

⁴⁰) Cf. Frede (2003) 182-184 for the contrast between Aristotelian 'localism' versus Stoic 'globalism'. A good example of Peripatetic helplessness is Ps.-Alexander's *Mantissa*, which tries to bypass determinism by insisting that there is some 'motion without a cause' (*anaitios kinesis*) after all, due to the fact 'that there is non-being in the things that are' (170.11, tr. by Sharples). If all things happened according to their nature, they would be fully determined. Nevertheless, due to our weakness we often fail to develop our natural tendencies, making decisions that are unnatural—and in this sense non-deterministic. The corollary to this position is striking: our power to chose is causally grounded in the 'weakness and slackness of mortal nature' (171.19-20, tr. by Sharples). Our decisions are undetermined simply because they often get out of our hand. As Sharples (1975) has shown, Ps.-Alexander's solution is hardly adequate, for it does not analyse why exactly the failures come about. The Stoics would have no problem to describe most of such unexpected events as a result of a deterministic clash of different causes. It is only from the partial perspective of one particular nature that we may speak of an unforeseen failure. Once we look at the situation with the entire causal network of the universe in mind, the event will seem as fully determined.

(ch. 7). The solution is simple: as another principle and source of motion we need to introduce soul, which is independent of cosmic causality, being ‘a cause which initiates activity’.⁴¹ At first sight, this might seem to copy the position of Alexander described above. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the two thinkers. While Alexander did regard the soul as an independent cause, he was unable to explain what its causal power leaned upon. Plotinus, on the other hand, has an answer ready at hand: the causal power of soul comes from the intelligible world in which the soul is rooted. Events in our world result from the interaction of two distinct causal orders: cosmic causality on the one hand and the intelligible causality of soul on the other. The ensuing causal mixture is non-deterministic, its precise shape depending on the extent in which our souls yield to cosmic causality, becoming its slaves, or resist it, retaining their own freedom and self-control (ch. 8-10).

It is important to realize that although the intelligible order is seen by Plotinus as a source of the soul’s freedom, this does not mean that it would be loose and undetermined. On the contrary, it is fully deterministic, being always in the best state possible. For Plotinus, freedom does not imply the ability to choose arbitrarily between alternatives, but rather the power to direct one’s activity unflinchingly towards the Good.⁴² Freedom is not characterized by capriciousness but by a lack of compulsion: our action is free if it voluntarily strives towards the Good, but involuntary if it only strives towards some apparent good, being deluded by things in our world which only imitate the Good as such.⁴³ The chief criterion of freedom is correct knowledge of the good. Freedom and choice are thus entirely unrelated⁴⁴—indeed, they rule each other out, ‘for to be capable of the opposites belongs

⁴¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* III 1, 8.8: *prôtourgou aitiâs ousês*. All the translations of Plotinus are those of A. H. Armstrong.

⁴² Plotinus, *Enn.* VI 8, 7.1-3: ‘The soul, then, becomes free when it presses on without hindrance to the Good by means of Intellect, and what it does though this is in its power’ (γίνεται οὖν ψυχὴ μὲν ἐλευθέρη διὰ νοῦ πρὸς τὸ ἀγαθὸν σπεύδουσα ἀνεμποδίστως, καὶ ὁ διὰ τοῦτο ποιεῖ, ἐφ’ αὐτῆ).

⁴³ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI 8, 4.12-15: ‘How could something borne towards the Good be under compulsion since its desire for the Good will be voluntary if it knows that it is good and goes to it as good?’ The background of this argument is the classic Socratic principle ‘no man does wrong voluntarily’ (οὐδένα ἀνθρώπων ἐκόντα ἐξαμαρτάνειν—*Protagoras* 345e1).

⁴⁴ The same applies to the Stoics; cf. Bobzien (1998) 341.

to incapacity to remain with the best'.⁴⁵ At the back of such thinking stands the Neoplatonic concept of creation, which sees the Good as producing the lower levels of reality not out of choice but by a process of spontaneous and unplanned emanation resulting from its fullness and perfection.⁴⁶ The ability to decide and chose only emerges at a low stage of creation as a consequence of the imperfection and fallibility of human soul.

It is against this background that Proclus' vertical concept of choice is to be read. The Neoplatonic picture of reality provides no space for any horizontal choices, for both the horizontal planes we live on—that of the corporeal world and that of rationality—are in themselves deterministic. The physical world is the realm of fate, described by Proclus in terms very close to those of the Stoics: fate is cosmic Nature binding all corporeal things in sympathy and connecting their interactions in one co-ordinated nexus.⁴⁷ The soul which only follows its lower impulses becomes enslaved by fate, having no freedom whatsoever. It is only when the soul looks up and is guided by reason and intellect that it starts to have 'a share in the state of freedom insofar as it has a share of virtue'.⁴⁸ Yet, as we have seen already, the freedom that the Neoplatonists long for is itself a form of slavery, being distinguished from enslavement to fate only in its voluntariness.⁴⁹ As a result, the soul can only choose between two types of slavery:

it will either take on the necessity of inferior things or put forward the freedom of the superior, and it will be subservient, either ruled from above or from bellow, and, while a slave, will either reign together with its masters or be a slave together with those who are only slaves.⁵⁰

Since both the order of fate and that of the higher realities is determined, it is only their interaction that allows for unexpected outcomes—for we never know beforehand whether each particular soul manages to follow

⁴⁵ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI 8, 21.5-7: καὶ γὰρ τὸ τὰ ἀντικείμενα δύνασθαι ἄδυναμίαις ἐστὶ τοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἀρίστου μένειν. As Plotinus stresses, the Good could not make itself other than it is, for by changing in the slightest fashion it would become worse than it is now (VI 8, 21).

⁴⁶ Cf. e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* VI 8, 17.

⁴⁷ Proclus, *De Providentia* 10-12.

⁴⁸ Proclus, *De Providentia* 24.4.

⁴⁹ Proclus speaks of 'willing slavery' (*ethelodouleia*) in this case (*De Providentia* 24.10-11).

⁵⁰ Proclus, *De Providentia* 25.5-8.

reason or whether it loses its control, yielding to irrational pressures. Under these circumstances our choice can only be conceptualized as a vertical faculty. It resembles a mercury column in a thermometer that can only rise up or sink down, having no possibility of digressing horizontally.⁵¹ As I shall suggest below, choice actually consists in the ability to keep up the right vertical tension between the various levels of our soul, the choosing of evil being equal to *slackening* and succumbing to our lower nature.⁵²

Why Does Moral Evil Happen?

We have seen that although from the pure metaphysical perspective (as pursued in *On the Existence of Evils*) bodily and psychic evil are similar in principle, both having a 'parasitic existence', once we take moral implications into account, important differences between the two kinds of evil start to appear. While bodily evil seems unavoidable, evil in souls is a result of choice, and thus can be avoided. Bodily evil results from a wide network of cosmic corporeal interactions that no partial being can ever have control of. Psychic evil is independent of external circumstances and depends wholly on the soul's ability to keep its proper vertical hierarchy. In this regard it is evil in a much more serious sense of the word, being actively caused (though unintentionally) rather than just passively suffered.

For Proclus, moral evil is a human phenomenon, for humans are the only beings that have an unstable vertical hierarchy built into their souls. Human soul acts as a bridge between the psychic level proper (i.e. the rational soul) and the bodily world, the irrational parts of the soul being

⁵¹) The conflicts of two equally reasonable principles that we know well from our everyday lives would thus presumably be explained by Proclus as being due to the limitations of our human knowledge. From a universal point of view one of the alternatives would have to appear as definitely better.

⁵²) In this sense, the Neoplatonists make use of the same idea that we have found in Ps.-Alexander's *Mantissa*, attributing the indeterminacy of the cosmos to our weakness and fallibility (the similarity to some of Proclus' ideas has been considered by Opsomer and Steel [1999] 253-255, but the authors only followed the metaphysical aspects, paying no attention to their ethical implications.). Nevertheless, the Neoplatonists reverse the perspective, making excellent sense of what in the *Mantissa* looked rather absurd. They agree that it is due to our fallibility that we are able to chose, but instead of presenting this weakness of ours as a guarantee of what is in our power, they see it as our main problem, urging us to overcome our infirmity and regarding it as a source of evil.

inserted as an indispensable mean term between the two extremes.⁵³ There are other classes of soul doing the same thing, such as those of daimons and heroes, but these have the fortunate ability of always keeping their rank.⁵⁴ It is only the souls of humans that are able to rise up and sink down, moving vertically between the higher world and the bodily level. Their true task is to be active ‘according to both kinds of life’,⁵⁵ bringing the lower mode of being in harmony with the higher one. Unfortunately, souls tend to forget about their higher origin, paying attention to the corporeal world only. As a result, their vertical hierarchy gets turned upside down, reason becoming a slave to irrational impulses.

The question is, of course, why this should happen. One possible answer has been suggested by the *Timaeus Commentary* already: the existence of choosing agents capable of making mistakes is indispensable for the completeness of reality. They are a necessary mean term between the beings moved by themselves who have no need of choosing due to their perfection, always acting in the best way possible, and the beings moved by others that are incapable of choice due to their imperfection, being wholly dependent on external circumstances. It is apparently for this reason that Proclus claims in *On the Existence of Evils* 33 that human souls show a propensity to weakness even before they have come into touch with matter. In this he sharply opposes Plotinus, who in *Enn.* I 8, 14 attributes the weakness of souls to their contact with matter.⁵⁶ In Proclus’ view blaming matter is an all too easy solution which does not explain why some souls are indeed strongly drawn towards matter, while others manage to resist it:

⁵³ Cf. e.g. Proclus, *In Remp.* I 38.15-22.

⁵⁴ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 16-20. The reason why daimons never fall is that they possess an intelligence of their own (*ET* 181-183), and are thus continually upheld by its benign power. Humans only have a secondary irradiation of intelligence (*In Crat.* 64; *In Alc.* 247. 1-5), which they are unable to participate in enduringly (*ET* 63-64), being ‘subject to change from intelligence to unintelligence’ (*ET* 184.1-2). It is precisely this ‘falling away from participation’ (*In Alc.* 118.3) that causes the vertical hierarchy within us to be unstable, making evil possible (*De mal. subs.* 20-21; *In Alc.* 118.15-119.1).

⁵⁵ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 23.18: *secundum ambas vite species.*

⁵⁶ See particularly *Enn.* I 8, 14.49-51: ‘So matter is the cause of the soul’s weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil.’ Cf. Opsomer (2001) 157-160, 168-170 for Plotinus’ position and Proclus’ reaction.

If... souls are drawn by matter—that is, if we attribute the cause of their generation to the attraction matter exercises upon souls, as something that draws them—where is their self-motion and ability to choose? Or how can one explain why among the souls that are generated in matter, some gaze at intellect and the good, whereas others gaze at generation and matter, if matter draws all of them alike to itself, troubling them and doing violence to them even when they are in the upper regions?⁵⁷

The ultimate metaphysical reason for the soul's fall is thus its power of choice. The soul has this power of itself, regardless of whether it turns towards matter or not. There simply had to exist souls capable of falling down—otherwise the procession of reality would be discontinuous.

Yet, convincing as such an argument may be from the perspective of Proclus' metaphysical system, from the moral point of view it is more than insufficient. In relation to the whole of reality the possibility of wrong choices may well be necessary, but from the perspective of an individual it is surely not. The power of choice is a precondition for the emergence of evil, but in itself it is but a neutral possibility which in no way explains why souls do in fact choose erroneously so often.⁵⁸ Even if there must be some souls capable of wrong choices, they can hardly use this fact as an excuse for actually making them. We must continue to ask, therefore, why it happens that a particular individual has a tendency to choose wrongly and how exactly it comes about that our reason loses its proper station so often.

Here Proclus' answer is more evasive, for he refuses to assign any single cause to evil. The irrational drives are not to be blamed, for they are only exercising their natural function.⁵⁹ If they lead the rational soul astray, it is its fault, not theirs. Indeed, since they are not self-constituted, they are

⁵⁷ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 33.22-28. In fact, as D. O'Brien (1971) has persuasively argued, Plotinus takes it for granted that if the soul is to succumb matter's temptation, there needs to be a certain weakness in it too (p. 141): 'In this way, the soul's weakness will be a sufficient condition of sin, although it is not causally sufficient.' Proclus disregards this subtle distinction.

⁵⁸ As Proclus puts it in *De mal. subs.* 46.19-21, the soul has wrong choices as an 'inclination' (*rhopê*—cf. Plato, *Phaedr.* 247b) only, but not as something that would follow necessarily from the soul's nature.

⁵⁹ Cf. Proclus, *In Remp.* I 38.15-22 on the necessity and usefulness of the irrational faculties.

incapable of correcting themselves, having all goodness 'as something from the outside', i.e. from the rational soul.⁶⁰ Accordingly, it is reason that bears responsibility for the irrational parts running wild. It is here that the faculty of choice is located, and we know already that it is of their own choice that rational souls become vicious, prior to any influence from the lower levels.⁶¹ In this sense the rational soul may be seen as an 'efficient cause' of evil, for it is through its agency that evil comes about. Nevertheless, it is not a cause in the strict sense of the term, not being a 'principal cause' (*aitiâ probêgoumenê*), i.e. a cause from which its effects would follow by necessity on account of its nature.⁶² It is inadvertently only, due to its ignorance, that reason makes mistakes.

In Proclus' answer to the problem of evil there hides a paradox. The origin of evil lies with the soul's choice, but this very faculty of choice seems to be something of no clear essence. For Proclus, choice is not a positive power but a weakness. Choice is the ability to lose one's station and fall down. Viewed from the perspective of the entire structure of reality, the emergence of such an ability at some stage in the process of emanation is indispensable and may be described as a positive feature of human soul. Yet, once we focus on the particular soul and ask what its choice consists in, we find that it amounts to the soul's capacity for making mistakes. What exactly this capacity, and where does it come from? Plotinus had a clear answer, locating the cause of weakness in matter as a principle of formlessness. Proclus refuses this solution. Nevertheless, even he has to admit that weakness has something to do with matter. Weakness is something that can only be understood relationally. To be weak for the soul means to bend down to something lower. Accordingly, while Proclus is careful to keep matter clear of all blame, he cannot but admit that the soul's weakness is related to matter after all:

What then is the origin of evil for us? It is the continuous communion and cohabitation with what is inferior to us. It is also oblivion and ignorance, which come about by looking at that which is dark and not intellectual.⁶³

⁶⁰ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 45.23-27 (cf. Steel's note *ad loc.*).

⁶¹ Cf. Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 46.1-7.

⁶² Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 50.23-23, 50.3, 49.7. Cf. Opsomer and Steel (1999) 249-252.

⁶³ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 24.33-35.

In these words Proclus sounds surprisingly Plotinus-like. He does so because the situation he is describing is basically the same. Nevertheless, Proclus interprets it differently, seeing the problem not as springing from matter, but rather as being located in the interstices of reality. If the responsibility is on the part of soul, the actual origin of evil is somewhere *in-between* matter and soul.⁶⁴ The weakness that evil consists in does not correspond to any single agent in the order of things, arising rather as a result of an asymmetrical relation between several agents. 'Hence, the efficient causes of evils are not reasons and powers, but lack of power, weakness, and a discordant communion and mixture of dissimilar things.'⁶⁵ Proclus summarizes his theory as follows:

... evil, coming from the outside and being adventitious, consists in the non-attainment of that which is the appropriate goal of each thing. The non-attainment is due to the weakness of the agent, since the agent has received a nature of such a kind that a part of it is better, a part worse, each part being separate from the other. For where the One is, there at the same time is good. But evil is—and the One is not—present in a split nature. For incommensurability, disharmony and contrariety are in multitude; and from these weakness and indigence proceed.⁶⁶

In this way, Proclus makes a brave attempt at reconciling his strict monism with the obvious presence of evil in things. The One has produced all that exists, and every single thing must therefore be good. If evil is present in the universe as well, it is because of not being located in any of the existing things, being only found between them in their twisted relations. But a relation is something that in itself does not exist, and thus cannot be designated as an active cause of evil. We might well ask whether this solution is metaphysically plausible and whether Proclus is not really avoiding the

⁶⁴ In a way this is also true of Plotinus, as O'Brien (1971) has shown. Yet, though Plotinus does consider the soul's weakness an indispensable *condition* of evil, he sees matter as the *cause* of it. To use O'Brien's fitting analogy, while for Plotinus the soul only succumbs to the malicious talk of matter because of her own willingness to listen to it, in Proclus soul and matter originally approach each other with best intentions, and it is only when their conversation unexpectedly gets out of hand that they *both* start to talk maliciously.

⁶⁵ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 48.17-18: οὐτ' οὖν τὰ ποιητικὰ τῶν κακῶν λόγοι καὶ δυνάμεις, ἀλλ' ἀδυναμία καὶ ἀσθένεια καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων ἀσύμμετρος κοινωνία καὶ μίξις.

⁶⁶ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 50.35-41.

answer instead of providing it.⁶⁷ From a purely causal point of view he is, no doubt, but I believe that by being considered from the ethical perspective, his solution may actually be seen as quite convincing.

Moral Evil as Resulting from an Essential Bi-dimensionality of Human Beings

What precisely is it that makes human souls succumb to weakness so often? To answer this question, it will be useful to go back to some general principles of Platonic ethics. We may take as a classic starting point the *Phaedrus* myth, which Proclus relates to his conception of evil several times.⁶⁸ According to this myth, before their incarnation all souls spend their time above the heavens contemplating the Forms; after being born in earthly bodies they forget about those marvellous sights, but they can be reminded of them by being confronted with something in this world that resembles the Forms. In a memorable passage (255c-d) Plato gives a vivid picture of what was later described as 'projection' by the Neoplatonists, narrating that from every lover 'a flowing stream' of love pours in upon the beloved⁶⁹ and rebounding from him as from a smooth hard surface turns back and re-enters the eyes of the lover, so that the beloved becomes 'as it were a mirror' in which the lover 'unconsciously beholds himself' (255d6), the lover thus having the opportunity to recollect the Forms within himself through his beloved. Moreover, in the *Symposium* we are told that this is actually the case not just with human relationships but with all of our activities, for *erôs* is really a name for 'every kind of longing for the good' and one indulges in love even by becoming a businessman, or by practising gymnastic exercise or philosophy (205d). The conclusion is at hand that even these activities must involve some kind of projection, reminding us of the Forms whose traces we unconsciously bear in our souls.

In Neoplatonism, these mythic suggestions have been systematized and turned into a coherent doctrine, stating that whatever people do in their lives, they do it to project and act out their *logoi* and recollect the Forms in

⁶⁷ Cf. Opsomer and Steel (1999) 255-257.

⁶⁸ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 23-24; 33.3-12; 46.7-13; 50.41-49.

⁶⁹ In the passage the relation is actually reversed and it is the beloved who falls for the lover, the basic situation having already been described. But as this might lead to confusion, I will stick to the more natural relation in my summary.

this way. A classic statement of this theory is to be found in Plotinus III 8, 1-7, where all practical activity is said to take place 'for the sake of contemplation' (*heneka theôriâs*—III 8, 6.1), our external doings serving as a mirror in which the soul may catch a glimpse of the *logoi* she hides within herself.⁷⁰ In this way, the Neoplatonists are able to assign great importance to our worldly activities, while seeing them as something strictly relative and instrumental. Everyday activities are valuable in that they help us relate to the intelligible, serving as a useful prop for reintegrating the *logoi*. At the same time, however, this means that they have no value *in themselves*. Our worldly projects are good and useful as long as we are able to see them as pointing to something that transcends them. If we forget about their transcendent message and make their mundane aspect the sole aim of our activities, we fail to live 'according to both kinds of [our] life', disturbing their proper symmetry.⁷¹ Interestingly enough, this principle works regardless of the quality of our mundane doings. Even seemingly noble activities are bad if one just pursues them in themselves and fails to see them as referring to higher realities.⁷²

It is precisely this bi-dimensionality of human being that explains why our souls tend to lose their vertical hierarchy so easily.⁷³ We are essentially rooted in the higher world, bearing its glamorous invisible vision secretly

⁷⁰ Proclus takes the doctrine for granted in a number of passages, such as *De dec. dub.* 37, or *In Tim.* III 279.11-20. For its epistemological aspects cf. C. Steel (1997).

⁷¹ This is why for Proclus the biggest evil consists in 'not knowing oneself' (*In Alc.* 17.3-4: δείκνυσι τὸ μέγιστον ὑπάρχον τοῦτο τῶν κακῶν, τὸ ἀγνοεῖν ἑαυτούς), i.e. in the failure to recognize clearly the *logoi* that one's soul consists in.

⁷² Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV 4, 44.25-27: 'If one is content with the nobility in practical activities, and chooses activity because one is deluded by its vestiges of nobility (τοῖς ἔχνεσι τοῦ καλοῦ), one has been enchanted in one's pursuit of the nobility in the lower world.' This is a crucial aspect of Platonic ethics, for it enables one to separate the true value of one's actions from traditional moral conventions without lapsing into ethical relativism. It does not matter whether the things one does are conventionally considered good or bad; all that matters is whether they lead one to θεωρία. Even if someone spends his life helping the poor, this does not automatically make him a good man; if he is dazzled by the nobility of his action and fails to see it as an opportunity to re-integrate the *logoi* that this action reflects, it will have no value for him at all. 'Actions do not produce goodness of themselves, but it is men's dispositions which make actions excellent' (*Enn.* I 5, 10.12-13). For a similar idea in Plato see *Laches* 197a-b.

⁷³ Cf. Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 23.

inscribed in the depths of our souls. Even the lower, irrational impulses are deeply influenced by this primordial vision, and strive to catch some reflection of it in this corporeal world of ours. They always manage, to be sure, but being blind to the transcendent dimension, they are unable to distinguish between the relative perfection of the image and the true perfection of the original. Having a faint memory of the beauty of the higher realm, they try to achieve it in our world as well. This, of course, is an impossible task, for the material world simply cannot contain the ideal beauty of higher realities. As a result, people *pervert* the *logoi* they are trying to realize, investing them with more expectations than they can bear. They want to *possess everything*, just as each Form possesses all the others, and the result is covetousness and possessiveness; they want to achieve *unity* with all other things, and so indulge in sexual promiscuity or become a part of the mob; they want to *occupy the same place* as other people, just as the Forms do, and so commit murders.⁷⁴

Proclus provides a cogent illustration of this principle in the *Alcibiades Commentary*. Analysing Alcibiades' aspiration to become the greatest and the most honoured man ruling over both Europe and Asia, Proclus explains that it stems from his deep-seated longing for the divine. Unfortunately, Alcibiades mistakes the earthly image of greatness for its divine archetype, perverting his ambition and making it immoderate:

Well, in pursuing all that is held in honour, he is at any rate striving after the divine; for the divine is primarily held in honour . . . ; but unawareness of what is really held in honour makes him concern himself with what is apparent and unstable. It is therefore the task of knowledge to indicate what is true honour and in what grade of being the honourable is to be found.⁷⁵

Similarly, the desire to rule over all men is really the soul's yearning 'to join the gods in the regulation of the whole world; if knowledge prevails the

⁷⁴) Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* II 3, 11.5-10 for various examples of distortion that heavenly influences may suffer in our world: 'manly spirit, when the receiver does not take it in due measure, so as to become brave, produces violent temper or spiritlessness; and that which belongs to honour in love and is concerned with beauty produces desire of what only seems to be beautiful, and the efflux of intellect produces knavery; for knavery wants to be intellect, only it is unable to attain what it aims at.'

⁷⁵) Proclus, *In Alc.* 148.10-16 (tr. by O'Neill).

end of such a soul is salvation, but without it the end is ruin both for those who have these desires and for the rest of men.⁷⁶

The peculiar existential situation of mankind that tempts us to pervert our *logoi* becomes even more obvious when compared to that of irrational animals.⁷⁷ Ontologically, the crucial difference between beasts and humans is that the former live on one level only, namely that of the bodily world and the irrational soul immersed in it. As a result, their aspirations are adapted to the limits of corporeal reality, and they may indulge in them more or less freely. A lion may behave violently and devour our sheep, and yet it will not become unmeasured by behaving so, for in all its activities it follows a strictly defined pattern of behaviour that is natural for it, setting clear measures to whatever the animal may do.⁷⁸ It is only with humans that the same kind of behaviour becomes problematic, for our true nature is of a higher level: 'In the case of lions and leopards one would not consider rage to be something evil, but one would do so in the case of human beings, for whom reason is the best.'⁷⁹

On my interpretation, the point is not just that the same behaviour is good for the lion but bad for humans, but even more significantly, that by behaving like lions or leopards men actually become worse than them. That 'the vice of animals is less serious than that of people' was noted by

⁷⁶ Proclus, *In Alc.* 149.6-10 (tr. by O'Neill).

⁷⁷ Proclus discusses this in *De mal. subs.* 18 and 25.

⁷⁸ Indeed, the only way a lion might become evil would be by *not* being violent and devouring sheep (*De mal. subs.* 25.24-27): 'But if an animal becomes a fox instead of a lion, slackening its virile and haughty nature, or if it becomes cowardly instead of bellicose, or if another assumes any other type of life, abandoning the virtue that is naturally fitting to it, they give evidence that in these [beings], too, there is evil.' To what extent this is the animal's own fault (i.e. to what extent their evil can really be classified as 'vice', stemming from the animal's own choice) is unclear from Proclus' discussion in *De mal. subs.* 25-26. The possibility of animal vices is passionately defended by Porphyry in *De abstinentia* (cf. e.g. III 10.4, 13.2-3), who refuses to see a sharp boundary between animals and humans, taking the difference between the two as merely a matter of degree. In Proclus' own universe, however, the boundaries are fixed and impenetrable, animals standing on an entirely different level (cf. *Theol. Plat.* III 6, 23.16-24.17 for the hierarchy of different beings in our world, corresponding to the hierarchy of higher levels). That animals have no reason, and are therefore incapable of vice or virtue, was the standard position of the Stoics (cf. Galen, *De plac. Hipp. et Pl.* 5.6.37; Plutarch, *De soll. an.* 962a-b).

⁷⁹ *De mal. subs.* 18.22-23. Cf. *In Remp.* II 90.26-91.2.

Porphyry already,⁸⁰ though he did not provide an explanation of this fact. Proclus' own theory offers an answer. The behaviour of animals is regulated by a *logos* that is natural to them, consisting in a pattern of behaviour that may ideally be realized in this world. The realization may sometimes fail, the result being a behaviour that is weak and unnatural—such as that of a lion becoming cowardly. The situation of humans is more complicated due to their bi-dimensionality. They too have a *logos* to follow, but it lies on a higher ontological level. At their own level our irrational impulses have no *logos*, i.e. no inbuilt controlling mechanism to regulate them.⁸¹ It is the task of our reason to do that. Accordingly, while a lion's rage can only fall short of its natural limit, a man's rage easily transgresses all limits, turning ugly and unmeasured. Our impulses aspire to a higher perfection than the material world can bear, thus 'overstraining' it and making it deformed.⁸²

It is useful to compare the Neoplatonic position to that of the Stoics. For Chrysippus, vice consists in passion, which is defined as a *perversion* of *logos* due to its being coupled with *excessive impulse*.⁸³ Our impulses are excessive whenever they lack *reservation*, i.e. whenever we are not able to adapt our intentions to the inscrutable cosmic plans of Zeus, sticking to our own ideas of what is good for us. The passionate man takes the aims he strives for too seriously, mistaking them for something unreservedly good, choosing strongly what he should have chosen lightly, lacking the easiness

⁸⁰ Porphyry *De abstinentia* 3.10.4 (tr. by Clark): 'There are also vices and grudges in animals, even if they are not so overflowing as in humans, for the vice of animals is less serious than that of people.'

⁸¹ Strictly speaking this is not true, for as Proclus claims in *De mal. subs.* 7.42-43, 'there is no form of life so bad that the power of reason (*logos*) is completely extinguished. Some reason remains inside, expressing itself feebly.' However, the feeble *logos* that our irrational impulses have is not regulative, and thus cannot guarantee their proper behaviour.

⁸² Cf. Porphyry *De abstinentia* 3.19.3 (tr. by Clark): 'We see that many people live only by perception, having no intellect or *logos*, and that many surpass the most terrifying beasts in savagery and anger and aggression: they murder their children and kill their fathers, they are tyrants and agents of kings.'

⁸³ Cf. e.g. *SVF* III 459 or III 377: 'passion is an impulse that is excessive or that stretches beyond the measures given by reason' (πάθος δὲ πλεονάζουσα ὀρμή ἢ ὑπερτείνουσα τὰ κατὰ τὸν λόγον μέτρα). Chrysippus' conception was set in an entirely different framework of monistic psychology, of course, but the basic idea was meaningful across different schools, being already adopted and 'platonized' by Plutarch in *De virtute morali* 450c-451b, 444c.

and readiness to give up things.⁸⁴ His mistake, therefore, consists in overvaluing things, and thus deforming them by pushing all too hard. Proclus would agree,⁸⁵ but would probably claim that within their immanentist framework the Stoics are not quite able to explain *why* men should have this tendency to exceed measures and overestimate things. If all the world is divine, and matter and *logos* are but two aspects of the same thing, as the Stoics hold,⁸⁶ why should *logos* ever be perverted at all? The Platonic distinction between various levels of reality provides a convincing answer, postulating an essential *tension* between *logos* and matter. For Proclus, this tension is positive at heart: it is constituted by that continuous flow of energy which unites causes and effects in a perpetual cycle of *monê*, *prohodos* and *epistrophê*, combining similarity and difference in a balanced way. The task of human souls is to maintain this tension, making sure that the rational and the bodily level are kept similar *and* distinct at the same time. Evil originates whenever the tension is released, one of its poles giving way to the other.

To some of us it might seem counterintuitive that the ultimate cause of evil should be the soul's *weakness*. Do we not experience evil as something extremely forceful and intense—in fact, far more intense than the good? The seeming paradox vanishes as soon as we start regarding evil as stemming 'from a perversion of what is natural'.⁸⁷ Manifestations of evil are very strong, indeed—but all the strength that they possess is really borrowed from the good and perverted.⁸⁸ Evil arises when we desire the good but try to realize this desire in a way that violates our natural vertical hierarchy. The longing for the good is what makes the evil activity strong; but being perverted, it becomes deformed and convulsive. That is why evil may even appear as stronger than the good. Its power is unmeasured, and thus fierce and violent. Nevertheless, *violence* should not be confused with

⁸⁴ Cf. Inwood (1985) 118-125, 165-171 for this interpretation of 'excessive impulse'.

⁸⁵ Cf. *De mal. subs.* 27.31-34: 'Indeed, when the reason of nature does not prevail, ugliness is revealed as passion, and when the order is impotent, as lack of order. And reason is overcome by the inferior when it becomes irrational itself' (*et enim quod turpe, nature ratione non obtinente, passio est, et inordinatum, ordine impotente; obtinetur autem ratio a deteriori, ipsa irrationalis facta*).

⁸⁶ Cf. *SVF* II 310; 313. For a specifically Proclean criticism of Stoic immanentism see *In Tim.* I 413.27-414.7 (= *SVF* II 1042).

⁸⁷ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 18.14-15: *ex perversione eius quod secundum naturam*.

⁸⁸ Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 52.

power. Violence pretends to be strong, but is really a mark of weakness and of the inability to control oneself. True power consists in keeping the right form and symmetry. It has no need of vehemence, beaming with calmness and elegance. The good is invisible. It resembles bodily health, which we only become aware of once we fall sick, i.e. when our body starts to struggle with its own form. As long as the form is managed with ease, we hardly notice its existence. And yet it is precisely this inconspicuous easiness that is the sign of the greatest power.

It follows from this account that the weakness that gives rise to evil consists not so much in a complete lack of strength as in a loss of balance, leading to a perversion of power. The soul loses its tension when one of its poles becomes stronger than the other, disturbing the original symmetry. The emphasis on symmetry is typically Proclean and makes his theory of evil (which we might perhaps for this reason call ‘relational’) very much different from that of Plotinus. It is consonant with Proclus’ greater respect for civic virtues (i.e. virtues consisting in regulating the lower parts of soul) and for the worldly engagement of the philosopher.⁸⁹ The ideal life consists not in focusing fully on intellectual contemplation, leaving the body behind, but in keeping the two layers of ourselves in harmonious tension. There is perhaps no better way of concluding than quoting Proclus himself on this matter:

For the primary good is not contemplation, intellectual life, and knowledge, as someone has said somewhere.⁹⁰ No, it is life in accordance with the divine intellect which consists, on the one hand, in comprehending the intelligibles through its own intellect, and, on the other, in encompassing the sensibles with the powers of [the circle of] difference and in giving even to these sensibles a portion of the goods from above. For that which is perfectly good possesses plenitude, not by the mere preservation of itself, but because it also desires, by its gift to others and through the ungrudging abundance of its activity, to benefit all things and make them similar to itself.⁹¹

⁸⁹) Cf. Baltzly (2004).

⁹⁰) In his note Carlos Steel refers to Aristotle, *Eth. Eud.* 1214a32-33; but more generally Proclus might have Plotinus in mind as well, who in *Enn.* I 4 identifies well-being with intellectual contemplation regardless of the sufferings of one’s body.

⁹¹) Proclus, *De mal. subs.* 23.10-18.

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