

The Platonic tradition looks at evil

What is evil? Does it exist, or is it merely an experience? Does it arise from a principle, and if so, what kind of principle could it be? Can something or somebody be "pure evil"? What happens if we claim that evil does not exist?

These and similar questions have been asked by human beings throughout history – and at particular times with an urgency born from the press of circumstances. What does the Platonic tradition have to say about such matters? Plato has Socrates say (in the *Theaetetus*), "But it is impossible, Theodorus, that evils should be destroyed; (for it is necessary that there should be always something contrary to good) nor yet can they be established in the Gods; but they necessarily revolve about a mortal nature, and this place of our abode." Since for Plato the Gods represent the great principles of the universe, it seems that he denies that there is a principle of evil – but that whatever he means by "evils" they are located here in the world of our daily experience. Two important thinkers of the tradition explore this at length: Plotinus (3rd century AD) wrote a treatise *On the Nature and Origin of Evil* (Ennead I, 8) and Proclus (5th century AD) wrote an extensive essay *On the Subsistence of Evil*. Below are extracts from each writer.

Plotinus – Ennead I, 8

Whoever inquires from whence evils originate, and whether they happen about things themselves in general, or about some particular kind of things, will begin his inquiry in a proper manner, if he first establishes what evil is, and defines its nature; for thus it will appear, from whence evil arises, where it is situated, to what it belongs, and if it has any real existence in the nature of things.

But here a doubt arises, by which of our internal powers we may be best able to perceive the nature of evil; since our knowledge of everything is produced by a certain similitude between the object and its percipient. Thus, because intellect and soul are forms, they possess a knowledge of forms, which at the same time they naturally desire. But how can anyone imagine a form of evil, since it is conceived as the total absence of good? But if because opposites are known by one and the same kind of knowledge, and evil is opposite to good, on this account we obtain a knowledge of good and evil, it is necessary that whoever understands evil should discern good; since things better come before the worse, and forms are better than that which is deprived of form.

Again, therefore, a question worthy of solution presents itself, in what manner good is contrary to evil? Perhaps it may be said, because good is first in the order of things, but evil the last; or certainly good is as form and evil as privation: but the solution of this must be deferred to the latter part of our disquisition.

For the present, then, let us define the nature of good, as far as the present disputation requires. Good, then, is that sublime principle from which all things depend, or which all things desire, deriving from this their origin, and being perfectly indigent of its presence to the continuance of their subsistence: but good itself is in want of nothing, but is perfectly sufficient to itself, independent of desire; it is the measure and bound of all

things, from itself producing intellect, essence, soul, life, and intellectual energy; all which are beautiful . . .

[Here Plotinus talks about eternal intellect as the immediate progeny of the Good, and soul as its second offspring, so to speak: both, in their own way, are deeply rooted in goodness.]

If such then is the condition of these true beings [intellect and soul], and of that which is more exalted than being [the Gods], certainly evil cannot be found in beings, and much less in that which is superior to being, for all these are good. It remains, therefore, that if evil anywhere subsists, it must be found among non-entities, must be itself a certain species of nonentity, and be solely found about such things as are mingled with non-entity, or are, in some respect, conversant with it. By non-entity in this place, I do not mean *nothing*, but that alone which is different from being; nor yet a non-entity of such a kind of motion and rest, which are said to subsist about being; but I understand that kind of non-entity which is no more than the mere image of being, or something even more remote than this from reality; and this is no other than our visible universe, and the sense-experiences which accompanies this; or it is something posterior to these . . .

It is lawful to conceive of a nature of this kind, as something destitute of measure with respect to measure, as infinite with reference to bound, and as something formless with respect to a forming power: besides this, it is always indeterminate, always in want with relation to sufficiency, never perfectly reposing, on every side enduring all things, insatiable, and extreme poverty and want.

* * * * *

What Plotinus is driving at here is a view of a kind of empty matter – completely unformed matter with only one characteristic – pure receptivity. He will suggest that only things which are mixed with this can, one way or another, be evil. Proclus writing two centuries later goes back and asks us what exactly we mean when we call something evil: he makes a distinction between corruption initiated by the soul, and the corruption of natural bodies.

Proclus – On the Subsistence of Evil

But if the vices of the soul must be confessed to be of the nature of evil, it will be shown that evil effects something among beings; and the effective power of evil is likewise evident from this, that it is corruptive of everything. For that evil is this, is demonstrated by Socrates in the *Republic*,¹ who very properly says, that the good of everything is that which is preservative of everything, on which account all things desire good; for existence and salvation to all things are thence derived; just as non-existence and corruption are on account of the nature of evil.

¹ cf. *Republic* 608d f; and Com. Rep. 355 ff.

Is it necessary, therefore, that nothing should be corruptive of anything? But thus the progress of generation would be stopped. For things of a corruptive nature not existing, neither is it possible that there should be corruption; and corruption not existing, neither will there be generation, because all generation is effected through the corruption of another thing.² Generation likewise not existing, the whole world will at the same time be imperfect; for it will not contain in itself the mortal genera of animals. It is, however, requisite that it should, in order (says Timaeus³) that it may be sufficiently perfect. If, therefore, it is requisite, [as Plato says in the *Timaeus*,] that the world should be a blessed God, it is also requisite that its similitude to all-perfect animal⁴ should be perfectly preserved. And if this is necessary, it is requisite that mortal genera should give completion to the universe; but if this, then there must be generation and corruption; and if this also be admitted, different things must be generative and corruptive of different things. For generation and corruption are not from the same things to all things. But the natures which are allotted generation being corruptive, are so from an innate power, and this is their evil. For the evil of that which is generated, is a corruptive principle, primarily and essentially inherent in it. For, indeed, one thing is corruptive of the soul, but another of the body.

That also which is corrupted is different from that which corrupts; and there is not the same mode of corruption; but in one thing it is essential, and in another vital; *and in this thing essentially leading to corruption*; but in that vitally, in consequence of the life of it flying from being to non-entity. The same reasoning, therefore, will preserve for us the whole world perfect, and will give a place to evil among beings. Hence, not only will evil exist on account of good, *but it will also be good for it to exist*. This, therefore, which is most paradoxical, will again become more known.

* * * * *

Thus we end with a paradox – at least as far as what one might call "natural evil" is concerned: the universe is better for the presence of decay and death, which allows it to move through differing phases, displaying the hidden beauties of its eternal paradigm in a temporal sequence.

But what of evils which arise from rational, free-willed beings such as ourselves, when we make "evil" choices? Is it possible that even these contribute to the fullest expression of the good? Or would a world in which there is no possibility of making bad choices be a better one than the one in which we find ourselves?

These are questions which differing traditions continually ponder – and to which we must find our own answers, if we are to understand our place in the universe.

One final question we might like to consider: if the Platonic tradition is correct in calling the First Principle (that is to say it is the universal cause of all things) "the Good" – how is it possible for evil to arise?

² That is to say, in material world things can only be generated and grow if other things are being corrupted and releasing material to allow that growth.

³ *i.e.* the *Timaeus* of Plato [30a f.; and Com. Tim. 90a ff. TTS vol. XV].

⁴ The paradigm of the universe is called by Plato, in the *Timaeus* [31a-b], *all-perfect animal*.