

The Platonic Tradition on 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? Where and how does evil arise? These questions have nagged at human beings throughout history and answers have been offered in mythological and philosophic terms: the Platonic tradition often calls the First Cause "the Good" and so the question of the origin and nature of evil is particularly demanding of attention to the philosophers of the tradition.

The whole of reality is seen, by Platonists, as the unfolding of the Good in ordered stages, with the initial phases bound tightly to the character of the First Principle: there are, then, things which are profoundly rooted in the Good, and which are unchanging and immensely powerful. Everything in the realm of eternity is perfectly good, and does not undergo movement from the better to the worse or from the worse to the better. But at some point in the "unpacking" of the highest principles, change and movement become intrinsic to the nature of things – the world of "becoming" is a world of time in which things necessarily undergo some kind of change. It is here that Plato sees what we call evil arising, and he has Socrates saying in the *Theaetetus* (176a), "But it is impossible that evils should be done away with, Theodorus, for there must always be something opposed to the good; and they cannot have their place among the gods, but must inevitably hover about mortal nature and this earth."

The creation of the Cosmos is described in the *Timaeus* (30a), and the main speaker says about this movement from eternal reality to temporal reality, "Let us now state the Cause why He that constructed it [the Creative God, the Demiurgus] constructed Becoming and the All. He was good, and in him that is good no envy arises ever concerning anything; and being devoid of envy He desired that all should be, so far as possible, like Himself. This principle, then, we shall be wholly right in accepting from men of wisdom as being above all the supreme originating principle of Becoming and the Cosmos. For the God desired that, so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil . . ."

That the Good provides for all things is the key to understanding why the Platonist philosophers cannot conceive that evil can have an existence of its own – that such existence as it has is really a parasitic existence which borrows being from anything which possesses good. Plotinus, in his treatise on Evil (Ennead I, 8) begins by defining the Good, insofar as that is possible:

1

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 dependant 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 . . .

Proclus on Evil

Proclus, the fifth century AD head of the Athenian Platonic academy, explores these questions concerning evil in several of his works: in our extract he is examining it from the point of view of its place in an universe of all-pervading providence. Here he claims that what we call evil appears in two forms – in the natural world as that which is

contrary to nature, and in the moral order as that which is contrary to reason. In *Ten Doubts concerning Providence* (sections 27-29), he says:

2

Admitting, therefore, that evil exists, let us look in what manner it exists, without disturbing the kingdom of providence. And because evil is twofold, one type existing in bodies contrary to nature, another in souls contrary to reason, and neither exists in all bodies nor in the universal souls, let us first consider how, in agreement with providence, what is contrary to nature can exist and in what kinds of body.

What is contrary to nature is only found in corruptible bodies: that is obvious, since what cannot be in a state contrary to nature is everlasting, if indeed to be contrary to nature is a path to non-being. But everything that perishes has a place among beings for the very reason given by Timaeus, that the universe should not be incomplete and that primary beings should not be the last of all: for everlasting beings come first and are cognate to the [intellectual, eternal and demiurgic] cause. If, then, evil exists in order that the corruptible exist, and the latter exists in order that there be not only that which is perpetual, and this again in order that the universe be complete and perfect, and this again because of the providence for the world, then it has been shown in the clearest possible way that evil exists because of providence, so that providence may be perfect in producing a perfect world. Therefore, for this evil too, the good is the end, since it is because of the good that this [evil] too is incorporated in beings so as to contribute to the whole. For all corruption is because of the generation of another thing, and all that is against nature exists in order that something in accordance with nature may come about, and not the other way around.

Hence, that which exists for the sake of the good is not evil in all respects nor is it unmixed with the good, but it is evil for a certain thing, namely for that which is corrupted, and good for another thing, namely for that which comes to be because of the corruption of the former. Hence, [this evil] is also good for the universe. Indeed, it is good for the universe by being the cause of corruption [for one thing] and the cause of generation for another. For there must be generation as well as corruption, and the universe needs both of them in order for it to be 'the All', as it is so often called. Although that which corrupts does so according to nature, that which is affected is affected contrary to nature. But perhaps even the latter is affected according to nature. For as it is one of a pair of contraries, it is according to nature to be affected by its contrary. Thus, it has become already clear to us that, because of the excellent providence within the universe, the contrary to nature received an entry into being, and that it is not simply contrary to nature, *but rather in accordance with nature than contrary to nature.*

In other words "evil" is a necessary part of the world of change, where a parts are subservient to the whole: what is seems evil to the part which is passing out of existence, is a good to the part that is coming into existence as a result – and the also from the point of view of the whole, which requires its temporal parts to form an ordered sequence: a perpetual kaleidoscope reflecting the living animal which the Demiurge looked towards to act as a paradigm for the manifested universe. But what of the evil that arises from the activity of rational beings? Proclus turns to this next and rests his argument on the common Platonic view that the human being is essentially a rational soul (the "divine part"), but one that forms a relationship to the body of natural impulses (the "mortal part") which necessarily accompany physical embodiment. He suggests that is in this very relationship that evil can arise (sections 30-31):

Passing on to the consideration of what is contrary to reason and is evil in souls let us consider how this too exists in accordance with providence.

Well, in this case too, the meeting of contraries of some sort - I mean of the immortal soul and the mortal - creates room for that which is contrary to reason. For whenever that which is mortal prevails over that which is divine in us, vice arises in us. For instance, when anger or desire prevails, for themselves the affections by which they are affected are natural, that is, [it is natural] for anger to be in anger, for desire to be desiring (for the very affection that is natural for each of them is that by which it is indeed affected). But for the divine part [to be affected in that way] is contrary to nature, because the divine part is essentially foreign to mortal passions, even if these are natural for the beings that have been allotted an irrational nature. Since, however, the divine part in us is reason, this [evil] received as name 'contrary to reason', instead of being called 'contrary to nature'. Likewise when reason wins, the good is established in the souls and the name for this good is 'according to reason' instead of 'according to nature'. Both parts, however, are because of their desire for what is natural [to them] eager to act accordingly: the one to live in a passionate way, the other to live transcending passions; the one rationally, the other irrationally. In the mixture of both, however, and in their relation with one another, evil acquires existence, yet not a principal existence, not even here, but what is rightly called a parasitical existence (*parhypostasis*). It is to everyone clear, then, that what is called 'contrary to reason' (and not 'contrary to the irrational') is not only evil, but is also [in a sense] not evil. Indeed, it is evil for that being for which it is contrary to reason [i.e. the rational part]; but is not evil for that for which it is according to nature [i.e. the irrational part]. That is clear. For where there is no reason, for instance in irrational animals, nothing of these things is evil. Moreover, the fact that it is according to nature for a passion to be passionate does not make it contrary to nature for it to be ruled by reason. For the latter state is even more in accordance with nature than what belongs to it from its proper nature. For when of two opposites one is better, the other worse, the latter is subject to its own passion when acting according to its natural ability, but is transformed to what is superior to its nature, when it becomes subservient to the better. For reason too, when acting as reason, frustrates that which in us is better than reason.¹ Yet in so doing it merely activates the kind of activity that naturally belongs to it. If, however, the [better part] prevails, reason will obtain to a greater degree what is good for it. For every being has both a good at its own level, and a greater good that comes from what is better than itself, as the intellect has the capacity to act divinely, and the soul to act intellectually, and the body to have self-motion. This then is also true of the irrational when it remains as such, is angry and desires, it is moved according to nature - and the more so as each of them [anger and desire] remains itself (for everything, indeed natural existence also increases natural activity). But when the irrational converses with the divine [i.e. rational] part in us and gets in its way in order to exercise its own activities, although it has the ability to participate in the greater good which comes from the [divine part], it remains deprived of this good as long as it wants to be moved with its own motions, and this offers the evil that is called 'against reason' an entry into partial souls.²

¹ i.e. the highest powers of intellect – in common terms pure intuition.

² Partial souls – that is to say souls of individual rational beings which are concerned with particular lives.

If what we say is true, people who believe that these facts are not in accordance with providence must either blame the divine soul for its descent into the realm of generation or the mortal soul for its existence in body. But if these people grant that both happen in accordance with providence, they must absolutely refer also the origin of what is contrary to reason to a good worthy of providence which pervades the world. Clearly it is good that the divine soul descends to the last part of the universe, in order that also in this way the 'All is complete' and is not only full of rational immortal animals and, besides those, of irrational mortal animals, but also of living beings intermediate between these, beings that are both rational and mortal.³

The body of natural impulses (the "mortal part") – which is identified in Platonism as the irrational soul – acts as an intermediary between the rational soul and the physical body: it provides the natural appetites with a certain power, without which the body would not survive and be able to act as a vehicle for the rational soul. Embodiment is accomplished by the soul establishing a ruling relationship with the irrational soul – sometimes Platonic writers speak of the rational "riding" on the irrational – because it is the irrational soul which provides forceful desires and appetites, as well as defensive resistance to destructive influences through anger; in summary, the irrational soul is useful because it is at least partly passive to the external world – it possesses a passivity which would undermine the rationality of the soul itself. The fact that it is the difficult relationship between the rational and irrational which allows moral evil to intrude into the Cosmos should not detract from the rightness of the arrangement:

4

For if it [the rational soul] were not active about all these things, or rather if it were not affected by them, it would soon have a serious destructive effect on the body, and its descent would have been in vain, as the [bodies] receiving it would not have benefited from it but would suffer destruction. For it is not possible to know the things which may corrupt [the body] from outside without sense-perception that knows the particulars. Nor can it yearn for drinks and food without desire, nor manage the mortal without memory of what can harm or benefit it. In so far as it was better for the soul not to undergo itself the affections, but to let something other [i.e. the irrational soul] undergo them, even if the soul is occasionally troubled by this other thing, and this only sometimes, not always, to that extent it was a greater good for the soul to endure the irrational [soul] than to turn itself into something irrational by undergoing the passions of the irrational [soul]. If, therefore, it was necessary that the immortal soul should descend to this place and that the mortal soul too should come to exist for the sake of it, and that both facts are according to providence, contrariety to reason should also be referred to the same decree of providence. And just as in the case of the bodies what is contrary to nature is for the sake of what is according to nature, thus too in the case of the souls what is contrary to reason is for the sake of what is according to reason. For the activity contrary to reason exists so that reason in us may act according to reason.

³ That the manifested Cosmos is full of life and intelligence is through the agency of soul, according to the *Timaeus*, for, Plato says there (30b), "of the things naturally visible there was nothing, the whole of which, if void of intelligence, could ever become more beautiful than the whole of that which is endued with intellect: and at the same time he [the Demiurge] discovered, that it was impossible for intellect to accede to any being, without the intervention of soul."