

The Platonic tradition looks at evil

Part 1

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. Since the human soul experiences this order of change (albeit alongside an inner experience of a connection to the immutable things of the eternal order), the questions concerning evil given above have more than a merely theoretical dimension.

Plato

Plato's approach to the issues surrounding evil is, as is so often the case, scattered through several dialogues - making our attempt to understand his position somewhat difficult. In the long run, of course, this works to our advantage because it forces us to resolve the apparently conflicting responses to the existence and power of evil ourselves. The statements we find about evil in his dialogues must always be taken within the context of each dialogue. In general, since most of his Socratic dialogues are primarily about our cultivation of virtue in one form or another, the issue of evil is largely addressed to that stemming from our own lack of wisdom and failure of choice. As a consequence most modern writers tend to limit their analysis of Plato's position on evil to this area at the expense of the wider frame of his metaphysics and cosmology.

In the *Timaeus*, however, Plato has some important things to say which start from this very foundation. In the act of creation of the manifested universe by the Demiurge (who is looking to a universal paradigm in eternity) we have an affirmation that this Creator is good, and that he wants all things in his creation to be good and nothing evil, as far as that is possible:

Let us declare then on what account the composing artificer constituted generation and the universe. The artificer, indeed, was good; but in that which is good envy never subsists about anything which has being. Hence, as he was entirely void of envy, he was willing to produce all things as much as possible similar to himself. If, therefore, any one receives this most principal cause of generation and the world from wise and prudent men, he will receive him in a manner the most perfect and

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true. For, as the Divinity was willing that all things should be good, and that as much as possible nothing should be evil; hence, receiving everything visible, and which was not in a state of rest, but moving with confusion and disorder, he reduced it from this wild inordination into order, considering that such a conduct was by far the best. For it neither ever was lawful, nor is, for the best of causes to produce any other than the most beautiful of effects.

We can see then that, firstly, the act of creation is not one that arises out of nothing – there is already something which is “moving with confusion and disorder” and needs the Demiurge to introduce order and arrangement in order that his creation would be “the best” and “most beautiful”; secondly, that in his unenvying will was that “all should be good, and that as much as possible nothing [in his creation] should be evil”.

In the course of the speech of Timaeus, we find that the Demiurge is not the first cause of all, but only the immediate cause of the manifested universe: there must be, before his action, a paradigm (intelligible, but not primarily intellectual) and a First Cause – the Good (which the *Republic* says at 509b is beyond essence and being, and, by implication, itself without form). We will also find that Plato’s conception of creation requires there to be a receptacle – *chora* – which provides the place in which the ordered universe can be received: this, too, is necessarily without form. All the effects from causes which are considered as prior to the Demiurge (in causal order, not in time of course) must be taken as established, providing an underlying nature upon which he must work with his ordering power of intellect. Timaeus expresses it thus (Tim. 47e):

And thus far, a few particulars excepted, have we shown the fabrications of intellect. But it is likewise requisite to give a place in our discourse to the productions of necessity. For, the generation of the world being mingled, it was produced from the composition of intellect and necessity. But intellect ruling over necessity persuaded it to lead the most part of generated natures to that which is best; and hence necessity being vanquished by wise persuasion, from these two as principles the world arose.

The Demiurge, we are told (Tim 37d) brings the manifested universe along with time (which is “an eternal image flowing according to number, of eternity abiding in one”): the existence of time allows movement and change – so that things in time can move from a better condition to a worse and from the worse to the better. And from non-existence to existence and vice-versa. Further, it allows the possibility of choice – for eternal things are just what they are and all their activity is fully present, whereas temporal things must unfold their potential in some kind of sequence so that sometimes they bring to the fore one form and sometimes another. This brings us to the nature of soul which, according to the *Phaedrus* (245d) is “the fountain and principle of motion.”

The fact that we experience evil in the material world in which all motion can be traced back to soul leads to this passage in the *Laws* (896c onwards):

GUEST. But do we recollect, that it was acknowledged by us above, that if soul should appear to be more ancient than body, the things pertaining to soul would also be more ancient than those pertaining to body

CLIN. Entirely so.

GUEST. Disposition, therefore, manners, volitions, reasonings, true opinions, attention, and memory, must have been generated prior to the length, breadth, depth, and strength of bodies, on account of the priority of soul to body.

CLIN. Necessarily so.

GUEST. Is it not, therefore, after this necessary to acknowledge, that soul is the cause of things good and beautiful, evil and base, just and unjust, and of all contraries, since we establish it to be the cause of all things?

CLIN. Undoubtedly.

GUEST. Is it not also necessary to assert, that soul, which governs all things, and which resides in all things that are in any respect moved, governs likewise the heavens?

CLIN. Certainly.

GUEST. But does one soul, or many, govern them?

MEGIL. Many: for I will answer for you.

GUEST. We should not, therefore, establish less than two, one beneficent, and the other of a contrary nature.

CLIN. You speak with the utmost rectitude.

GUEST. Soul, therefore, by its motions, leads everything in heaven, earth, and the sea; and the names of these motions are - to will, to consider, take care of, consult, form true and false opinions, rejoicing, grieving, daring, fearing, hating, loving; together with all such primary motions as are allied to these, and which, receiving the secondary motions of bodies, lead all things to increase and decay, separation and concretion, and to things consequent to these, such as heat and cold, gravity and levity, the hard and the soft, the white and the black, the sour, sweet, and bitter; and, lastly to all things which, soul employing, when it perpetually receives a divine intellect, as being in this case a goddess, disciplines all things with rectitude and felicity; but when it is conjoined with folly, it produces everything contrary to these. Shall we admit that these things subsist in this manner, or shall we yet doubt whether they do not in a certain respect subsist differently?

CLIN. By no means

With regard to the matter of the “contrary soul”, Thomas Taylor footnotes in his translation of the passage, “Plato, by an evil soul, here means the nature or natural life suspended from the rational soul of the world, and which is the proximate *vis matrix* of bodies. As this life, without the governing influence of the rational soul of the world, would produce nothing but confusion and disorderly motions, it may be said, when considered as left to itself, to be evil.”

The idea that evil is only ever present in the world of motion is referenced in the *Theaetetus* (176b) when Socrates says:

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. On this account we ought to endeavour to fly from hence thither, with the utmost celerity. But this flight consists in becoming as much as possible similar to divinity. And this similitude is acquired by becoming just and holy, in conjunction with prudence.”

This said, the Platonic view of the cosmos is positive – it is contrasted favourably when compared to the state of the individual who is intemperate and living unjustly through ignorance. Thus Socrates says to Calicles (*Gorgias* 508a),

“The wise too, Calicles, say that communion, friendship, decorum, temperance, and justice, connectedly comprehend heaven and earth, Gods and men. And on this account, my friend, they call this universe *kosmos*, or *order*, and not *akosmia*, or *disorder*, and *akolasia*, or *intemperance*. However, you appear to me not to attend to these things, and this though you are wise. But you are ignorant that geometric equality is able to accomplish great things, both among Gods and men. On the contrary, you think that everyone should strive to possess more than others: for you neglect geometry.”

Nevertheless, Plato recognizes that things within the temporal order are subject to generation and decay – although the whole is always in the best possible condition, the parts within that whole are not. Socrates in the *Republic*, have laid out the ideal constitution of a state, says that even this will not abide forever in the best state:

"It is difficult for a state so constituted to be thrown into disorder, but since everything that comes into being decays, not even a constitution such as ours [as described in this dialogue] remains for the whole of time, but it will disintegrate. The disintegration happens like this: not only plants that grow in the ground, but also living creatures that roam the earth have times of fertility or infertility in both their soul and their body each time the revolution of their cycle is completed" (546a)

The majority of Plato’s dialogues centre around the human soul’s cultivation of virtue (and the avoidance of vice) – perhaps summarized towards the end of the *Republic* (618e) by Socrates in the following words:

And hence this of all things is most to be studied, in what manner every one of us, omitting other disciplines, shall become an inquirer and learner in this study, if, by any means, he be able to learn and find out who will make him expert and intelligent to discern a good life, and a bad; . . . and, having an eye to the nature of the soul, to comprehend both the worse and the better life, pronouncing that to be the worse which shall lead the soul to become more unjust, and that to be the better life which shall lead it to become more just, and to dismiss every other consideration.

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Plotinus

Plotinus wrote a treatise *On Evil* (*Ennead* I, viii) in which he firmly pins the origin of evil on matter because he considers evil as limitlessness and absolute deficiency. Here are some selected passages.

1. 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 every thing is produced by a certain similitude between the object

and its percipient. Thus, because intellect and soul are certain species, or forms, they possess a knowledge of forms, which at the same time they naturally desire. But how can any one imagine a form of evil, since it is conceived as the total absence of good? But if because there is the same science of contraries, and evil is contrary to good, on this account we obtain a knowledge of good and evil, it is necessary that whoever understands evil should discern good . . .

2. 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; but intellect, which is the beautiful itself, reigns over all that is best in the intelligible world: an intellect not such as we possess, conversant with propositions, and perceiving what reason collects; inferring one thing from another, and beholding things through their consequences, as if void before its perception, although at the same time it subsisted as intellect. . .

Plotinus sees true being – intellect¹ and soul (in its essence) – as direct emanations of the Good itself, viewing in their inner recesses that First divinity and thus living “the life of the Gods.” (8, 1, 2.²⁵) He says, “And if the processions of divinity had stopped here, evil would never have had a being; but since there are things primarily good, there are also such as are secondarily good, and all things are in regular subordination about the king of the universe, who is the cause of everything good, and for whose sake all things subsist.”

3. If such then is the condition of these true beings, and of that which is more exalted than being, 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 any where 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 station, 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... It is lawful to conceive of a nature of this kind [evil], 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. Nor are properties of this kind accidental to such a nature, but appear to constitute its delusive essence. We may add farther, that in every portion of it which you behold, you will find these affections collected together; but other things which participate of this, and are assimilated to it, become evil, without being evil itself. All these evil properties are therefore inherent in a certain general receptacle, and are in no respect different

¹ Note that as a rule Plotinus includes the intelligible under the heading of intellect, making less of a distinction between the two than does Proclus.

from the receptacle itself: and as good itself is prior to that good which happens to others, so evil itself is different from participated evil.

Plotinus then considers the nature of things which rely upon matter – the stuff of the “receptacle itself” – either as a part of themselves, or at least as their field of activity: body, the non-rational soul, and rational soul (at least as it turns downward rather than upward).

5.⁵ Hence, whatever is deficient of good in a small degree is not yet evil, since it is capable, from its nature, of becoming perfect; but whatever is perfectly destitute of good, and such is matter, is evil in reality, possessing no portion of good: for, indeed, matter does not (properly speaking) possess being, by means of which it might be invested with good, but being is only equivocally affirmed of matter. Whatever therefore is defective is not good, but that which is universally defective is evil itself...

Gradually the treatise turns to the soul’s relation to evil. He makes the point (in relation to the *Theaetetus* (176b) quote on page 3:

6.¹¹ . . . to fly from hence is not to depart from earth, but this is to be accomplished only by the man who, while an inhabitant of earth, with respect to his corporeal part, lives in a just and holy manner, united with prudence: as if he had said we should fly from evil, which, with respect to man, is depravity, as well as the consequences resulting from depravity. But when Theodorus in this dialogue observes, that evils might be entirely extirpated, if he (Socrates) could only persuade men that his doctrine was true, Socrates denies the possibility of this, and asserts, that evils have a necessary subsistence, and that it is necessary that there should be something contrary to good. And here you will inquire how it is possible that human evil, that is, depravity, should be contrary to good? We reply, because it is contrary to virtue; but virtue is not good itself, but a certain good which enables us to overcome the evil of matter. But, you will again ask, how can any thing be contrary to good itself, for it is not to be ranked among qualities.

He also drives his position on the metaphysical place of evil and its necessity in the mortal place rounding off his reference to the *Theaetetus*:

7.¹⁷ But it is lawful to consider the necessity of evil in this manner; that since good cannot remain alone without communicating its beneficence, but must, from the perfect plenitude of its nature, be perpetually exuberant, it is necessary that, by a certain far-distant degression from good, evil should at length arise; or that, by a certain perpetual subjection and distance, it is necessary that something last in the order of things should take place, beyond which nothing farther can be produced, and that this should be evil itself: for since it is necessary there should be something after the first, it is also necessary there should be something last; and this is matter the mere shade and privation of good, which unavoidably occasions the necessity of evil.

Were we in particular pursuit of our relation to evil, and the ways in which we are to avoid it, we could move on the second half of the treatise. But in our next session we will look at how both Iamblichus and Proclus modify Plotinus’ stance on the issue.