

Toward a Plotinian Solution to the Problem of Evil

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Introduction

The first- and second-order problems of evil

The problem of evil is usually formulated in the context of theological or philosophical-theological discourse. It is characterized as the problem of explaining why and how an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God could permit the manifest evils of the world. Theological or philosophical-theological formulations thus do not address the problem of evil *simpliciter*; rather, they frame a *second-order* problem arising from the assumption of a theistic framework of thought, either with the intent of explaining that problem within a theistic framework (theodicy), or in order to challenge the soundness of that theistic framework.¹ Theological or philosophical-theological formulations of the problem of evil are logically derivative formulations of an antecedent and more general problem, namely that which arises from considering evil *simpliciter*. Experience impresses upon us early, often, and remorselessly the suffering and pain with which creaturely existence, including our own, is unendingly afflicted.²

¹ This is the general manner in which the problem of evil has been conceptualized at least since Leibniz, although in Leibniz's *Theodicy* the so-called atheistic problem of evil, whereby the problem of evil is taken as an argument establishing atheism, is not yet prominent.

² The use of the term "creaturely" is not insignificant. First, it is inappropriate to use the term "human" in its place, for the suffering and pain of animals must strike us with as much force as our own suffering and pain. Second, a more general term, such as "material existence," should not be

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This *prior fact* of overwhelming suffering frames the *first-order* problem of evil, which may be expressed with a simple question: *why* is creaturely existence so painful?³ The question is urgent, for in the first instance we find no self-evident reason why creaturely life should be so painful, so beset by that which we unhesitatingly call evil. The attempt to answer the first-order problem of evil is therefore not the exclusive concern of theology or philosophical theology, for it is clearly not a theological question in the first instance.⁴ The first-order problem of evil is the problem of *suffering*, and it reveals that the primary signification of evil is suffering.⁵ As such, the

substituted. Rocks, though quite material, presumably suffer nothing, for they have neither sensations nor thoughts. Among Neoplatonists, Porphyry at least would agree with this assessment, as is clear from *De Abstinencia*. Earlier Platonists prefigure Porphyry's arguments. Plutarch condemns the "torture" to which animals were subjected in contemporary husbandry (*Moralia* 996f–997a). More generally, Porphyry's view may be the logical culmination of a persistent and considered trend in ancient philosophy that stresses a fundamental, albeit carefully circumscribed, kinship between humans and other animals (e.g., Corrigan, "Ecology and Neoplatonism"). Such theorizing is apparent in the earliest Greek philosophy. Thus, fragment 110 of Empedocles observes: "all things possess thought and a portion of intelligence." Pythagorean beliefs in this matter are well attested to (e.g. Huffman). Indeed, a striking expression of kinship between humans and other animals is attributed to Pythagoras in fragment 7 of Xenophanes: "Once [Pythagoras] passed by as a puppy was being beaten, the story goes, and in pity said these words: 'Stop, don't beat him, since it is the soul of a man, a friend of mine, which I recognized when I heard it crying.'" The force of this passage is not diminished by the argument that Xenophanes' intention was to ridicule Pythagoras (Huffman 70). For translations of the cited fragments of Empedocles and Xenophanes, see Curd and Waterfield.

³ N.b., this question does not inquire to what *purpose*, in the teleological sense, such suffering occurs. Rather, the issue is determination of the *cause* of this suffering.

⁴ One could elide the distinction between the first and second-order problems of evil via the following argument. Without assuming the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity, there would be no immediate and self-evident reason *not* to encounter the fact of overwhelming suffering. Therefore, the problem of evil is problematic only in the context of a prior commitment to the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity. Thus, the distinction drawn here between a first and a second-order problem of evil is untenable. This argument is specious. It is true that upon non-theistic reflection, there is no reason *not* to encounter the fact of overwhelming suffering. This, however, is already a rudimentary *answer* to the question that is logically antecedent to it, viz. *why* do we encounter the fact of overwhelming suffering? Moreover, the argument appears to rely upon the implicit assumption that, without belief in the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity, we would not perceive and identify suffering and pain as evil. The falsity of such a claim is rivaled only by its absurdity. The experience of creaturely suffering and pain is well nigh overwhelming and immediate, and certainly the unhappiness that suffering and pain cause does not require belief in a God for its identification as such.

⁵ It might be objected that the first-order problem of evil should therefore be referred to as the problem of suffering. However, there is no compelling reason for this nomenclatural revision. We unhesitatingly find suffering to be evil, and it is creaturely suffering which is primarily and in the first instance that which constitutes our experience of evil. It therefore seems appropriate to refer to this as the first-order problem of evil.

problem falls within the jurisdiction of philosophy proper.⁶ Consequently, the present study shall hereafter be concerned with philosophical evaluation of the first-order problem of evil.⁷

The goal of the present study: A Plotinian solution to the problem of evil

Drawing upon the *Enneads* of Plotinus, the present study attempts to explicate a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil that will also be a viable option within contemporary philosophy.⁸ At the heart of a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil is the equation of sensible matter with primary evil, or evil itself⁹ (I.8). If the basic premises of the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system are accepted, even if they are emended or generalized, this solution will be viable. However, when viewed in the broader context of his logico-metaphysical system, a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil is potentially inconsistent. Plotinus associates the One with the Good, and everything in the cosmos is logico-metaphysically or ontologically contingent upon the One. If sensible matter is evil, then apparently evil is contingent upon the Good. A solution to this inconsistency is discussed, and it is concluded that this problem is not insuperable. If the proposed solution is accepted, then this inconsistency is neutralized and there is a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil that is a viable option within contemporary philosophy.

Methodological Issues

One should analyze philosophical theories primarily in the context of their objective logical content and not in the context of their author's interpretations of that content (Popper). Such analysis reveals the range of implications entailed by philosophical theories. Also, one should engage philosophical theories primarily for the pursuit of truth, rather than for

⁶ The most eloquent and philosophically rigorous treatment of the first-order problem of evil is arguably to be found in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, which has informed the present study. Hereafter, book, chapter/section, and page numbers are used to cite passages from *The World as Will and Representation*, following the standard format in the secondary literature (e.g., Magee).

⁷ The first-order problem of evil shall hereafter be referred to simply as the problem of evil.

⁸ The translation of A. H. Armstrong, hereafter cited by *Ennead* number, treatise number, and section number, is used throughout the present study.

⁹ N.b., in II.4 Plotinus distinguishes between intelligible matter and sensible matter (Rist). It is only sensible matter that is relevant to the present study.

merely historical or exegetical reasons.¹⁰ This study is therefore concerned with the explication of a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil that will also be a viable option within contemporary philosophy. Although informed by Plotinian ideas, this study will modify or discard them where necessary, in accordance with the task at hand. This paper is not a study in the history of ideas, nor is it exegetical. It has a philosophical agenda for which Plotinus is being used (although hopefully not exploited).

Overemphasizing mystical or religious elements therein hampers critical philosophical interaction with the *Enneads*. Unfortunately, much of the secondary literature insists that Plotinus is a mystic or a spiritualist.¹¹ Plotinus' philosophy is in fact rigorously logical, and one may engage in a formal logico-metaphysical analysis thereof.¹² Plotinus is clearly a philosopher in the sense of Plato or Aristotle, and his work should be subjected to rigorous philosophical analysis.¹³ Whatever their veracity, claims about Plotinian mysticism or spiritualism are not relevant to the philosophical

¹⁰ These views are not original; nevertheless, work on past philosophers is often strictly historical or exegetical, with no thought that the work of such philosophers might contain viable theories. Deploring the neglect of F. H. Bradley's works in contemporary philosophy, Manser and Stock aptly stated that "There is always a danger that the reconsideration of a dead philosopher will become a mere piece of intellectual history, an attempt to show that, in the context, his ideas were reasonable or to be expected. Such an attitude...is another way of burying a philosopher. To place any figure in a museum of philosophy is not to honour him. The way to show respect for a dead philosopher is to make use of him for one's own concerns, even if those concerns seem to point in a direction of which he would not have approved" (2-3). The present study concurs with this approach. In the study of ancient philosophers, similar methodological remarks are found in Barnes. This approach is most eloquently expressed by Nietzsche in aphorism 201 of *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, the first supplement to *Human, All Too Human*: "The philosopher believes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the building; posterity discovers it in the bricks with which he built and which are then often used again for better building; in the fact, that is to say, that that building can be destroyed and *nonetheless* possess value as material."

¹¹ A few examples will suffice. Throughout the Armstrong translation of the *Enneads*, reference is repeatedly made to the mysticism of Plotinus, and the introduction to the 1964 translation by O'Brien opens with William James: "Mystical classics have neither birthday nor native land." It is not only translators of Plotinus who insist upon the philosopher's deep mysticism. John Dillon freely labels Plotinus a mystic, albeit a "rational mystic" (surely a contradiction in terms!) (e.g., Dillon, "Plotinus at Work on Platonism"). Alternatively, the word "spiritual" may be used, but that seems equally meaningless (e.g., Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to the Enneads*).

¹² E.g., Martin, "On logical structure and the Plotinic cosmos."

¹³ This has been stressed in some of the more philosophical secondary literature (e.g., Harris, Blumenthal, Lloyd, Gerson). Blumenthal puts the matter tidily: "What is important is that most of the Neoplatonic writings we have are clearly philosophical rather than religious or otherwise concerned with the supernatural. I shall therefore take it for granted that we are talking about philosophy, and not any of the things with which Neoplatonism has sometimes been associated, and which may undoubtedly be found in some of its products" (2).

study of Plotinus.¹⁴ Consequently, the Plotinian solution to the problem of evil developed here is logico-metaphysical. It will not speculate on any mystical, spiritual, or theological dimensions of that solution.¹⁵ Nor will it engage in speculation about alleged psychological motivations for Plotinus' treatment of the problem of evil.¹⁶

There is a further reason for this logico-metaphysical approach. Ethical problems are derivative within philosophy. They arise only in the context of metaphysical systems, and they can be addressed satisfactorily only by reference to such systems. Paraphrasing the judgment of Kant, metaphysics are necessary for coherent ethical thought. Plotinus likely would have agreed with this evaluation. So, Plotinus' treatment of the problem of evil would be derived from logical and metaphysical analyses.¹⁷ He does not engage in free-floating speculation, and neither will the present study.

Explication of a Plotinian Solution to the Problem of Evil

The basis of a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil is the equation of sensible matter with primary evil, or evil itself (I.8.3–4, I.8.8, I.8.13). It is therefore necessary first to explicate a Plotinian conception of sensible matter. Once this has been done, the equation of sensible matter with evil can be further developed.

Explication of a Plotinian conception of sensible matter

At the beginning of II.4.16, Plotinus identifies sensible matter as “the part of otherness which is opposed to the things which in the full and

¹⁴ Cf. Gerson (xvi–xvii). Of course, such claims might be relevant for a more historical or a strictly exegetical study of the philosophy of Plotinus. However, as noted, the present study is neither historical nor exegetical.

¹⁵ This is not to deny that such a solution might be of interest from a mystical, spiritual, or theological viewpoint. The present study is simply not concerned with mysticism, spirituality, or religion, as this is a *philosophical* study. The exploration of the mystical, spiritual, or religious Plotinus can be left to mystics, spiritualists, and theologians.

¹⁶ O'Brien unfortunately dabbles in such dubious psychohistory at the end of an otherwise excellent analysis of Plotinus' treatment of the problem of evil. Such psychohistorical speculation is not unique to O'Brien, however; it is traditional in much of the secondary and historical literature (e.g., Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy*).

¹⁷ Porphyry's division of the *Enneads* is thus unfortunate. Cordoning off a set of texts in *Ennead I* as the ethical discourses of Plotinus makes it seem as if ethics are the basis of the Plotinian system. Even if Plotinus would have agreed with Porphyry, ethics are logically derivative within the system.

proper sense exist, that is to say rational formative principles [Forms]... Though it is non-existent, it has a certain sort of existence in this way, and is the same thing as privation, if privation is opposition to the things that exist in rational form.” Similarly, in I.8.3, Plotinus discusses that which is a “form of non-existence,” which he associates with non-being. By non-being, Plotinus clarifies, he “does not mean absolute non-being but only something other than being; not non-being in the same way as the movement and rest which affect being, but like an image of being or something still more non-existent.” This characterization, Plotinus continues, applies to the sensible world and to sensible matter. To clarify these characterizations of sensible matter, Plotinus’ thought must be analyzed in the context of Plato’s *Sophist* and *Timaeus*.¹⁸

1. *Contributions from Sophist*.—In *Sophist*, an Eleatic stranger addresses the Parmenidean assertion that the conception of what is not is an absurdity. The stranger grants to Parmenides that it is impossible to conceive of that which truly does not exist in any signification of the term.¹⁹ However, the stranger’s aim is to establish the necessity of non-being in a more circumscribed sense (O’Brien 172–3). The sense in which non-being is necessary is that in which non-being makes possible the existence of sensible objects. Unlike true beings, i.e., intelligibles such as Forms, sensible objects must (in addition to participating in being) also participate in some form of “otherness.” Participation in non-being makes possible the distinction between truly existent intelligible entities and sensible objects. The stranger concludes that there must be non-being in the sense of “that part of the form of otherness which is opposed to the being of each thing.”²⁰ It will prove significant for the explication of a Plotinian conception of sensible matter that non-being, as defined by the Eleatic stranger, is already associated with sensible objects in *Sophist*.

2. *Contributions from Timaeus*.—Here, what is of concern is the nature of the receptacle.²¹ The receptacle is compared with various things, including a wet-nurse of becoming (49a6), a lump of gold (50a4–b5), a mother and father from whose union offspring are produced (50d2–4, 51a4–5), a plastic

¹⁸ As stressed by O’Brien (172–4), upon which the following exposition draws. O’Brien’s analysis is prefigured by Fuller, which unfortunately came to attention too late to be incorporated within the present study.

¹⁹ Cf. 237b7–8. In his discussion, O’Brien translates the Greek as “what is not in any way at all” (172). This and only this type of non-being is what the stranger grants the impossibility of.

²⁰ The quotation is the translation provided by O’Brien (173) for lines 258d7–e3. The stranger also provides another definition of non-being, but, as O’Brien notes, Plotinus does not use it.

²¹ The “receptacle of all becoming” is introduced starting at 49a1.

“stuff,” for want of a better term (50c2–6, e7–51a1), and so on. Plato asserts that the receptacle lacks proper characteristics of its own (50d5–51a3). Given the avalanche of analogies, the receptacle can be interpreted as a “neutral” something-or-other, possessing only formal entitative properties.²² The receptacle is that “in” which imitations of the Forms, however construed, manifest, and it is that which makes possible the flux of those things that manifest “within” it (49e7–50a1). It is in fact identified as the “space” which makes possible the becoming of all that which does become (52a8–b1). It is not the flux of those things that become, but rather it is that which serves as a horizon for becoming. Those things which do manifest “within” it, the imitations of Forms, would appear to be identifiable as bodies, for the receptacle is said to receive bodies into and out of itself (50b6). A legitimate reading is that such bodies are simply sensible objects. If so, the receptacle must be a horizon for the flux of sensible objects, i.e., it must constitute the sensible world as such, for the sensible world as such just is the system of sensible objects and their relations.²³ Its formal entitative properties must, therefore, be those which make possible and which ontologically ground the existence and nature of the sensible world. The only formal entitative properties that could serve this function, and which therefore must define the receptacle if it is to be understood as a horizon for becoming, are spatiality and temporality considered as formal logico-metaphysical or ontological principles constitutive of the sensible world.²⁴ The receptacle is spatiotemporality so understood, operating as the *principium individuationis* that grounds the existence and plurality of the sensible world.²⁵

²² I.e., those properties that make it what it is as opposed to some other thing.

²³ In *The Analysis of Matter*, Russell expresses a somewhat similar view of the sensible world, albeit developed in a very different philosophical context. Moreover, there is some similarity between this view of the physical world, as only a system of sense data or sensibles and their interrelations, and the conception of empirical reality elucidated by Carnap (*Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, and “Empiricism, semantics, and ontology”). Fundamentally, description of the empirical world is held in these views to be relational and strictly empirical, with no metaphysical commitments. Chalmers elaborates on this view: “physical theory only characterizes its basic entities *relationally*, in terms of their causal and other relations to other entities. Basic particles, for instance, are largely characterized in terms of their propensity to interact with other particles. . . . The picture of the physical world that this yields is that of a giant causal flux, but the picture tells us nothing about what all this causation *relates*” (153).

²⁴ Textual support is provided by the following passages: 49e7–8, 50c4–5, 52a4–6, 52b3–5.

²⁵ It is conceded that this interpretation of the receptacle will not garner unanimous consent. Nevertheless, it is a legitimate interpretation and, therefore, should not be dismissed. For a review of the various interpretative options, see the commentary to Zeyl’s translation of *Timaeus* (liv–lxiv). The term “*principium individuationis*” is Scholastic in origin, but it is here understood largely as

3. *Plotinian sensible matter*.—With these contributions from *Sophist* and *Timaeus*, a Plotinian conception of sensible matter can be explicated more fully. We start with the contributions from *Sophist*. The stranger’s definition in *Sophist* of non-being as otherness is an elliptical transcendental argument for the existence of the sensible world with its plurality and flux. The existence of non-being as otherness is a matter of logico-metaphysical necessity, for the sensible world exists, and it is only the existence of non-being as otherness which can explain why that is so. The form of otherness of which this type of non-being consists is inextricably tied to sensibility, for it makes possible the existence of sensible objects. Turning to *Timaeus*, we are provided with formal spatiotemporality operating as the *principium individuationis*, i.e., the receptacle. It is the horizon for becoming, spatiotemporally individuating Forms as sensible objects (Form imitations or images). A Plotinian conception of sensible matter can be explicated by combining these concepts. Thus, on the present interpretation, Plotinian sensible matter is the form of otherness from *Sophist*, and that form of otherness is understood as formal spatiotemporality, the *principium individuationis*, following the interpretation of the receptacle from *Timaeus*. Succinctly, Plotinian sensible matter just is the *principium individuationis*.

This explication is textually defensible. In the context of *Sophist*, the characterization of sensible matter from II.4.16 is less mysterious (O’Brien 174). Plotinus here associates sensible matter with the otherness that *Sophist* identifies as necessary for the existence of sensible objects. For Plotinus, this otherness is “opposed” to truly existent things, i.e., Forms and the One, for it is that which distinguishes sensible objects *from* Forms and

by Schopenhauer, who introduces it in *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I, Book II, §23, 112–19. Schopenhauer’s explication of the *principium individuationis* is an emendation of Kant’s doctrine of the transcendental ideality of space and time, as established in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thus, there are differences between Schopenhauer’s conception of the *principium individuationis* and the Platonic conception here developed. The most notable of these is that Schopenhauer, following Kant, understands space and time more as epistemological principles constitutive of subjective experience than as logico-metaphysical or ontological principles constitutive of the sensible world as such, which description does not necessarily entail that they are epistemological principles to be associated with the subject or subjects. However, for both Kant and for Schopenhauer, the fundamental conclusion of the analysis of space and time is that neither applies to the thing-in-itself; rather they are constitutive only of the sensible world. This is congruent with the theory of the receptacle as interpreted here. In Schopenhauer, similarities to Platonism are still more evident, for, aside from Kant, the principal philosophical influences upon Schopenhauer were Plato and the Platonic tradition, including Plotinus and his successors. It is therefore unsurprising that Schopenhauer’s explication of the *principium individuationis* is redolent of Platonist themes. Thus, Schopenhauer writes in §23 “it is only by means of time and space that something which is one and the same according to its nature and the concept appears as different, as a plurality of coexistent and successive things. Consequently, time and space are the *principium individuationis*,” and that the *principium individuationis* is indeed the “possibility of plurality,” that which functions as the horizon in which the phenomenal, which is to say the sensible, exists.

the One. Moreover, if sensible matter *qua* otherness is something aside from being or beings, and is thus “opposed” to them, then it must lack the formal entitative properties possessed by being or beings. Sensible matter is otherness as such. Thus, II.4.16 refers to this otherness as privation—it lacks the properties or characteristics of being and beings. Sensible matter *qua* otherness possesses only those formal entitative properties that define its role within the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system.

The text of I.8 is also clearer in the context of *Sophist* and *Timaeus*. The characterization given in I.8.3 of what will be identified as sensible matter is that it is non-being, as in II.4.16. Plotinus insists that this non-being is not absolute non-being (drawing on the distinction made in *Sophist*), i.e., for Plotinus sensible matter exists in some sense. In I.8.9, Plotinus argues that primary evil (sensible matter) is identified via a process of abstraction. In this process of abstraction, one analytically separates the components of an object. In so doing, one arrives ultimately at the otherness that Plotinus associated with sensible matter in II.4.16.²⁶ Now, at the beginning of I.8.10, Plotinus argues that sensible matter is without quality because “it has in its own right none of the qualities which it is going to receive and which are going to be in it as their substrate.”²⁷ However, Plotinus has already established, both earlier in I.8 and in II.4, that matter nevertheless has a nature and that this nature is privation. As noted, privation can be understood as the form of otherness identified in *Sophist*, with which Plotinus associated sensible matter in II.4.16. The nature of that form of otherness is made clear in I.8.8, where Plotinus speaks of sensible matter *imaging* the Forms (just as the receptacle images them in *Timaeus*), thereby corrupting them. Plotinus has established that sensible matter lacks qualities, so those things which characterize sensible matter must be formal entitative properties alone. If sensible matter images the Forms, then these properties must be spatiality and temporality, considered as formal logico-metaphysical or ontological principles constitutive of the sensible world. Thus, as with the receptacle from *Timaeus*, Plotinian sensible matter can be understood as formal spatiotemporality, the *principium individuationis*.

If Plotinian sensible matter is understood in this sense, it is clearer why sensible matter is said to serve as a substrate for the qualities which properly reside in Forms (I.8.10) and why sensible matter is said to image the Forms (I.8.8). Moreover, on this explication, it is also clearer why sensible matter is said to corrupt the Forms it images. The Forms are corrupted

²⁶ Cf. Gerson (192, 198). The clearest expression of the idea that only such a process of abstraction apprehends sensible matter is midway through I.8.9 where Plotinus writes, “By absolutely taking away all form, we call that in which there is no form matter.”

²⁷ Compare this with the language used to describe the receptacle in *Timaeus*.

because sensible matter *spatiotemporally individuates* them. However, Forms are not properly subject to the *principium individuationis*: they are intelligibles, not sensibles, and their true nature is therefore not spatiotemporal. In addition, if this explication of Plotinian sensible matter is accepted, then the discussion in I.8.9 establishing that sensible matter is only understood through abstraction is also clarified. Abstracting away the Forms and that of which they are the locus reveals the formal properties of the otherness necessary for the existence of sensible objects. If sensible matter images the Forms, then those formal properties must be spatiality and temporality and sensible matter is revealed as the *principium individuationis*.²⁸

The equation of sensible matter with primary evil

If Plotinian sensible matter is understood as the *principium individuationis*, the basic elements of Plotinus' logico-metaphysical system alone will entail its equation with primary evil.²⁹ For both Plotinus and Plato, the fundamental logico-metaphysical or ontological division is between intelligible reality and sensible pseudo-reality. The true nature of the universe is disclosed only through contemplation of the intelligible. Disclosure of reality is therefore dependent upon unhindered noetic activity and the progressive association with such activity, at the expense of engagement with sensibles. Sensible matter, as the *principium individuationis*, imposes upon noetic activity an obscuring veil that at best hinders and at worst cripples contemplation of reality, i.e., contemplation of the intelligible. In spatiotemporally individuating the intelligible, which by its nature is not subject to the *principium individuationis*, sensible matter fragments and distorts the intelligible.³⁰ The distortion that results has catastrophic consequences. By interposing this veil of obscurity between noetic activity and the intelligible, the *principium individuationis* corrupts the noetic activity upon which disclosure of reality depends. Corrupted, noetic activity cannot primarily and in the first instance disclose reality; rather, it primarily and in the first instance discloses the sensible, thereby conflating it with reality.

²⁸ Hereafter, the terms "*principium individuationis*," "sensible matter," and "Plotinian sensible matter" will be used interchangeably.

²⁹ The two arguments for the evil of sensible matter, which Plotinus produces by quibbling with Aristotle about contraries and privation, are therefore not necessary. This is fortunate, as both arguments are strained and neither is compelling. For the two arguments, see O'Brien (175–181).

³⁰ It could be said that sensible matter images the intelligible as a shattered mirror images all it reflects.

This is the fundamental reason Plotinian sensible matter is to be equated with primary evil, or evil itself. The corruption of noetic activity caused by the *principium individuationis* yields a systematic ontological illusion, whereby reality appears to be coextensive with the system of spatiotemporally individuated (sensible) objects and their relations, i.e., the sensible world as such. The upshot of this ontological illusion is the manifestation of life, including human life, as a phenomenon, subject to the *principium individuationis* and the structure of the sensible world that it yields. The phenomenal is a fractured image of the intelligible: a discordant network of sundered objects and relations. As such, life must invariably be afflicted with specific and multiform evils.³¹ Were it not for the *principium individuationis* and the resultant ontological illusion of spatiotemporal individuation, these evils *would not exist*.

This is a propensity view of the equation of the *principium individuationis* with primary evil. The *principium individuationis*, consequent to ontological illusion, causes an unending propensity toward the various specific evils and miseries that afflict the manifestation of life subject to the *principium individuationis* and the structure of the sensible world it yields. Thus, life, including human life, manifests as an unending propensity toward the various specific evils and miseries with which creatures are afflicted. The propensity view has the advantage of being entailed by the truth of the basic elements of the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system.³²

The distinction drawn at I.8.5 and again at I.8.14 between primary and secondary evils, or evil itself and species of evil, provides textual support for the propensity view. Plotinus writes that evil itself is not “this or

³¹ This is, fundamentally, the conclusion reached by Schopenhauer in both *The World as Will and Representation* and *On the Basis of Morality*. That such similar conclusions should be derived from Schopenhauer’s metaphysical analysis is striking, and it testifies to the possibility of hitherto underappreciated similarities between Plotinus and Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer had studied Plotinus, and Schopenhauer’s interpretation of Kant’s doctrine of the transcendental ideality of space and time is redolent of Platonist themes, as noted earlier. Indeed, in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer cites Plotinus while elaborating upon his own interpretation of the *principium individuationis* and matter (307–9; Vol. II, Ch. IV, 45; Ch. XXIV); Plotinus is later credited with correctly understanding the transcendental ideality of time, prefiguring Schopenhauer’s interpretation thereof (Vol. II, Ch. XLI, 484). For both Schopenhauer and for the Plotinian conception of sensible matter that has been explicated as part of the present study, matter is that which enables the phenomenal manifestation of the more primordial ground of reality (for Schopenhauer this is the Will, for Plotinus the intelligible). Moreover, on both interpretations, matter *distorts* that which it enables the manifestation of, concealing its true nature, with dire consequences. Certainly there are considerable differences in the general philosophical projects of each thinker, and in the fine details of their explications, but similarities should not be overlooked. Minimally, both philosophers share a commitment to what Cartwright, paraphrasing Schopenhauer’s *Manuscript Remains*, refers to as a “metaphysics and ethics in one” (252).

³² Gerson and O’Brien adumbrate elements of this propensity view.

that particular kind of evil, injustice for instance or any other vice,” rather it is that which “is not yet any of these particular evils; these are...species of evils” (I.8.5). Plotinus states that the evil of sensible matter is logically and metaphysically antecedent to the particular evils that befall us, and in fact it is the *cause* of these particular evils (I.8.14). These distinctions are difficult to understand unless seen in the context of the propensity view: the *principium individuationis*, sensible matter, is the cause of the propensity toward specific, secondary evils that afflict human life. Therefore, it is to be equated with primary evil, or evil itself.³³

The distinction drawn between vice and evil at I.8.13 also corroborates the propensity view. Vice is dissociation from uncorrupted noetic activity and the corresponding “turning away” from the intelligible toward the sensible. This dissociation is mediated by sense perception and the reliance upon sense perception that is consequent to the ontological illusion whereby reality and the sensible world are conflated, with all its consequences.³⁴ Vice, therefore, is contingent on the *principium individuationis*. Whereas the *principium individuationis* is the *cause* of the propensity toward the specific evils that afflict human life, vice is that propensity itself. As such, vice yields increased identification with evil and this is ultimately to say that vice reinforces the ontological illusion.³⁵

The necessity of sensible matter and evil

The existence of the *principium individuationis*, sensible matter, evil itself, is a hypothetical necessity.³⁶ Plotinus states in I.8.7 that sensible matter is necessary for the existence of the all, by which he means the

³³ Plotinus puts the distinction dramatically but clearly when he states in I.8.8: “Primary evil is the darkness, secondary evil the darkened.”

³⁴ This might be the meaning of the curious line from I.8.13 which reads “One will contemplate it [primary evil, i.e., sensible matter] with the contemplation that belongs to absolute evil [primary evil]...”

³⁵ An interesting affirmation of the view that vice is to be identified with immersion in practical, day-to-day life and the natural world is found in IV.4.43-44. Here Plotinus speaks of the necessities and temptations of practical life and the enchantment and wizardry of nature leading us away from contemplation of the intelligible. In §23 of Iamblichus’ *De Anima* (Dillon and Gerson 220), we also find reference to this view: “While of those who...would attach evil to the soul from elements that have accrued to it from outside...Plotinus and Porphyry most of the time derive it from nature and the nonrational life.” Dillon and Gerson (220) also quote from Porphyry’s *De Abstemientia* the following, which echoes the view put forward by Plotinus in IV.4.43-44: “For in many people the motions and the needs of nonrational nature are the first stimulus to injustice.”

³⁶ This term and the following explication of it are taken from Gerson (197).

experiential universe, the sensible world. Here, Plotinus is making a condensed transcendental argument. Succinctly, if the experiential universe exists, then there must exist a principle or element that makes this possible, logico-metaphysically or ontologically. As the experiential universe *does* exist, such a principle or element *must* exist, and that principle or element is the *principium individuationis*, sensible matter. However, the necessary existence of the experiential universe or the sensible world is not derivable solely or even in the first instance from the brute fact that it presents itself to us. More fundamentally, it is derivable from the existence and nature of Intellect, the second hypostasis in the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system.³⁷ The experiential universe is a manifestation of the activity of the Forms with which Intellect is coextensive, and the activity of the Forms requires the existence of a formal principle that will logico-metaphysically or ontologically ground the manifestation of the Forms. This principle is, of course, the *principium individuationis*. The necessary existence of the *principium individuationis* is therefore entailed by the existence of Intellect. Following the same explanatory pattern, it can be seen that, since the fundamental hypostasis of the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system is the One, and the One is that which logico-metaphysically or ontologically grounds all else in the Plotinian cosmos, the necessary existence of the *principium individuationis* is entailed by the existence of the One.³⁸ The *principium individuationis*, and hence primary and secondary evil, therefore exist necessarily.

Summary

Following the explication that has been developed here, Plotinian sensible matter is to be understood as a form of non-being, the nature of which non-being is formal spatiotemporality. As such, Plotinian sensible matter just *is* the *principium individuationis*, which serves as the horizon for becoming by spatiotemporally individuating Forms as sensible objects. The *principium individuationis* imposes a veil of obscurity on noetic activity, impairing or crippling the disclosure of reality through contemplation of the intelligible. The *principium individuationis* thus causes an ontological illusion whereby the sensible world and the real are conflated. Consequent to this illusion, life—including human life—manifests as a phenomenon, subject to the *principium individuationis* and the structure of the sensible

³⁷ On Intellect and its nature see especially V.1-2, V.5, and V.8-9.

³⁸ On the One and its status as the fundamental principle in the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system, see especially V.1-2.

world it yields. This dissociation from the intelligible and association with the sensible in turn gives rise to the specific and multiform evils that afflict life. The *principium individuationis* is thus the cause of the propensity toward those evils, and hence is to be identified as primary evil, or evil itself. The *principium individuationis*, and hence primary and secondary evil, exist necessarily.

Evaluation

If a fundamental division between the intelligible and the sensible were accepted and developed along generally Plotinian lines, such that the sensible world was analyzed as logically and metaphysically contingent upon a transcendent intelligible realm, then a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil, such as that developed here, would be a viable option within contemporary philosophy. Whether or not such a logico-metaphysical framework could be accepted within contemporary philosophy, it can be objected that the Plotinian solution to the problem of evil explicated here is inconsistent. The *principium individuationis*, sensible matter, evil itself, exists necessarily. This necessity is ultimately grounded by the fundamental hypostasis of the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system, the One. Plotinus associates the One with the Good. There is an apparent contradiction: the Good has of necessity produced that which is evil itself and the cause of the propensity toward all specific evils.

This apparent inconsistency has long been discussed, and a variety of solutions have been proposed.³⁹ Considering this, and given the methodological parameters of the present study, the best option may be to cut this Gordian knot. If the association of the One with the Good were denied, the inconsistency threatening a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil would be eliminated. In general, the ascription of *any* moral predicates to those things that are truly existent, including the One, no matter in what sense such moral predicates are to be understood, is rejected. Plotinus insists upon the inappropriateness of predicating properties of the One, aside from its formal entitative property of unity.⁴⁰ The association of the One and the Good can be understood as an exercise in pseudo-predication (VI.9.6). In other words, the association of the One and the Good is an admittedly inappropriate attempt to explicate a relatively abstract logico-metaphysical point. *Qua* formal unity, the One is the only ontologically self-sufficient component within the Plotinian logico-metaphysical system,

³⁹ See O'Brien ("Plotinus on matter and evil") and Carroll ("Plotinus on the origin of matter").

⁴⁰ E.g., see VI.9.3 and VI.9.6.

and all else is contingent upon it. Highlighting logico-metaphysical or ontological contingency *relative* to the One can thus be taken as the true signification of asserting that the One is the Good (VI.9.6).⁴¹ If this interpretation is correct, then refusing to properly predicate any moral properties of the One is not only defensible in itself but also consistent with Plotinus' own view in the *Enneads*.⁴² The inconsistency objection to a Plotinian solution to the problem of evil therefore seems neutralized.

Conclusion

Plotinian sensible matter can be understood as the *principium individuationis*, which serves as the horizon for becoming by spatiotemporally individuating Forms as sensible objects. Spatiotemporal individuation imposes upon noetic activity an obscuring veil that cripples its ability to disclose reality through contemplation of the intelligible. This in turn causes and perpetuates a catastrophic ontological illusion whereby reality and the system of spatiotemporally individuated (sensible) objects and their relations, i.e., the sensible world as such, are conflated. Life, including human life, thus manifests as a phenomenon, fully and properly subject to the *principium individuationis*, defined by and inextricably entangled with the sensible world it yields. The resultant dissociation from the intelligible assures that human life must always be marred by specific and multiform evils.

⁴¹ See Gerson (18–19) and the succinct but useful treatment in O'Meara (56–57). A rather moving testament to this view is to be found in I.7, the last treatise Plotinus composed before his death.

⁴² The association of the One and the Good is also, in part, unpleasant and, for Plotinus, inescapable debris from *Timaeus*. In *Timaeus*, earlier associations of the intelligible and the Good (e.g., *Republic*) morph into the assumption that the universe is *fundamentally* beautiful and good, and that the ordering of it is maximally beneficent. Thus, we find at *Timaeus* 29a the following extraordinary assertion: "Of all things that have come to be, our world is the most beautiful, and of causes the Craftsman is most excellent." The centrality of this metaphysical optimism in *Timaeus* is clearly established in the commentary to Zeyl's translation. However, Plato provides little in the way of an argument for this naïve optimism. At *Theaetetus* 176a, Socrates more accurately describes the world: "The elimination of evil is impossible, Theodorus...it patrols this earthly realm." Whatever Plato's final view, the present study need not accept the optimism of *Timaeus* simply out of deference to Plato, as perhaps Plotinus felt obliged to. Moreover, Plotinus' commitment to the metaphysical optimism of *Timaeus* raises additional concerns about the consistency of his logico-metaphysical system. In spite of the implications of his own theories, Plotinus seems incapable of unequivocally admitting that the sensible world is evil and that it is defined by suffering. Thus, in some places, he presents a rather favorable view of the sensible world (e.g., III.2–3, IV.8.6). Nowhere is this pattern of equivocation and inconsistency more apparent than in the celebrated polemic against the Gnostics, II.9. While elements of his criticism have merit, Plotinus cannot wholly condemn the Gnostics for viewing the sensible world as unqualifiedly evil without threatening the consistency of his entire system. Fortunately, the Plotinian solution to the problem of evil explicated here is not committed to any form of metaphysical optimism. Therefore it is not encumbered by these equivocations and inconsistencies.

Thus, our lives are defined by pain, misery, and suffering. In the grip of ontological illusion, we disastrously seek relief in the unreality of the sensible world. Such relief is illusory, and the more we seek after it the farther we are led from disclosure of reality through contemplation of the intelligible. Worse yet, the impairment of noetic activity caused by the *principium individuationis* is irreversible. Hence, noetic activity can never fully disclose reality through contemplation of the intelligible. Contemplation of the intelligible can therefore serve only as a palliative to the evils that afflict us. Thus, simply in virtue of existing, the sensible world is damned. Life is suffering and the evils that everywhere afflict it are ineradicable. The ultimate implication of this Plotinian solution to the problem of evil is that life, including human life, is an unending tragedy.⁴³

Although unpleasant, this Plotinian solution to the problem of evil is consistent and comprehensive. If basic premises of Plotinus' logico-metaphysical system were accepted, even if emended or generalized, then the Plotinian solution to the problem of evil developed here would be a viable option for addressing the problem of evil within contemporary philosophy.⁴⁴

⁴³ The Plotinian solution to the problem of evil explicated here therefore concurs with Schopenhauer's characterization of life in *The World as Will and Representation*: "With its misfortunes, small, greater, and great, occurring hourly, daily, weekly, and yearly; with its deluded hopes and accidents bringing all calculations to nought, life bears so clearly the stamp of something which ought to disgust us, that it is difficult to conceive how anyone could fail to recognize this, and be persuaded that life is here to be thankfully enjoyed, and that man exists in order to be happy" (Vol. II, Ch. XLVI, 573-4). Plotinus, dying in Campania, might have seen merit in such a characterization when he wrote of the liberation that death brings (I.7).

⁴⁴ Jennifer Conboy, Jamie Feldman, Dr. Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, and David Trautman reviewed earlier drafts of this paper and their criticisms immeasurably improved the final product.

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