

The Philosophy of Evil

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Some Philosophers

- Aristotle (384–322 BCE).
- Plotinus (205–270 CE).
- Iamblichus (c. 242–c. 325 CE).
- Proclus (412–485 CE), head of Plato’s Academy.
- Simplicius (6th c. CE).

Clarifying Our Terms

- Two broad types of evils:
 - Natural/Physical evils: from illness, to decay, to simple ugliness.
 - Moral evils: the results of choice.
- What is the problem?
 - Wide vs. narrow scope.
 - Theodicy vs. the more basic metaphysical problem.

Does Evil Exist? What is it?

- Two conflicting intuitions:
 1. Evils abound.
 2. There’s a basic/foundational goodness to the world.
 - Both intuitions can go too far.
- Key concept to address both: *archē* (Greek, plural *archai*) ‘source, origin, principle.’
- What would it mean to have *archai* for both good and evil?
 - Examples:
 - Manicheanism: two opposed powers, at war with each other.
 - Gnosticism (esp. the Valentinians).
 - Plotinus (though he tries to avoid it): matter itself as the source of evil.
 - Problems:
 - Aristotle: Opposites are species of a common genus.
 - The self-undermining “nature” of evil.
- What if evils are uncaused?
 - Requirements for a cause (in the strict, ancient sense):
 - A cause invariably produces its effect.
 - A cause always produces an effect that is, in some way, like itself.
 - When partial/incomplete goods get stronger, they become more like their source (*archē*).
 - What would happen to partial/incomplete evils as they get stronger?

Toward a Platonic Theory of Evil

- Evil is a failure of harmony between levels of reality.
 - For physical evils: disharmony between form and matter (because of the limits of matter).
 - For moral evils: disharmony between higher and lower parts of the soul (and their aspirations). Loading expectations onto matter, that matter can never possibly uphold.
- Consequences:
 - (A) good is a *hypostasis* – a **substance**, something that is produced, that exists.
 - (An) evil is a *parhypostasis* – a **by-product**, which only sort-of exists, parasitically.
 - Goodness as unity (harmony, symmetry, integration, etc.).
 - Evil as disunity (disharmony, disorder, disintegration, etc.).
- How does this help ...
 - To unify our examples?
 - With the Socratic maxim, “No one chooses evil insofar as it seems evil to him/her”?
 - With the wide vs. narrow uses of ‘evil’?
 - To distinguish what is necessary from what is choiceworthy?



Some Implications

- The goodness—and the necessity—of the physical world, and of material goods.
- Why is moral evil so much worse than natural evil?
- The need for self-knowledge.
- When is it appropriate, or useful, to adopt a cosmic perspective?

Responding to Evils

- Some cases:
 - Natural circumstances: a river that's prone to flood.
 - Addiction.
 - Human interactions and relationships (within a family, community, nation, ...).
 - Desires for power, control, authority, domination.
- Options:
 0. Push directly back; charge head-on at the evil. Not recommended!
 1. Step aside, let it spiral away.
 2. Look for the deeper (higher-level, subconscious, etc.) good; pursue it in a different way.
- Socrates again: “No one chooses evil qua evil.”
- To enact this strategy, it requires/entails two changes in ourselves:
 - Find—and focus on—the good, whether actual or apparent.
 - Develop a kind of compassion for the evildoer.
 - This is NOT about excusing, justifying, or encouraging their behavior.
 - It IS about understanding: seeing the person as ignorant, confused, or lost, but not intrinsically evil—and therefore, seeing the prospects for constructive change!



Suggested Readings

Questions about the nature of evil are tricky, so even some of the best discussions of this topic can often be heavy going. That said, here are some worthwhile places where you can follow up on, and extend, the conversation we've started together.

Among Plato's dialogues, these four are especially relevant:

- *Alcibiades* (sometimes called "First Alcibiades"): for the Platonic account of self-knowledge, and the way in which Alcibiades' desire to rule the world reflects a misguided pursuit of genuine goods, coupled with a failure of self-knowledge.
- *Gorgias*: on the good of the soul, and the way that apparent evils are often, for the wise person, genuine goods in disguise.
- *Phaedrus*: for the account of love, and the mythic narrative of the soul's dynamic tension between the intelligible and material realms.
- *Symposium*: as a supplement to the *Phaedrus*' account of love.

All of these are available in a wide variety of translations. The versions in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Hackett, 1997) are solid and reliable. Hackett also publishes a stand-alone paperback of the *Gorgias*, and a collection of the other three in *Plato on Love*, edited by C.D.C. Reeve.

Among the writings of Proclus, some of the high points are:

- *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*. Edited by L.G. Westerink and translated by William O'Neill. Prometheus Trust, 2011.
- *On the Existence of Evils*. Translated by Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2003].
- *Ten Problems Concerning Providence*. Translated by Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.
- *On Providence*. Translated by Carlos Steel. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2007].

Of these, the *Alcibiades Commentary* is comparatively more accessible; the other three short essays (known collectively as the *Tria Opuscula*) are quite challenging.

For some shorter treatments of Proclus' position, two sections from Simplicius' commentary on the *Handbook* of Epictetus are worthwhile. The relevant discussions of evil and providence come when Simplicius is explaining chapters 27 and 31 of the *Handbook*; the entire text is:

- Simplicius, *On Epictetus Handbook 27–53*, translated by Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2002].

Finally, here are two good resources from modern academics:

- Episode 90 of Peter Adamson's podcast, *The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*, offers a nice overview of Plotinus' account of evil. Given the limits of time, we touched very little on Plotinus in the workshop. Listen both for the similarities and for the major differences between him and the later Platonists.
- An article by Radek Chlup, "Proclus' Theory of Evil: An Ethical Perspective" (2009) gives one of the most readable summaries of Proclus' views on the topic. It was a great help to me as I reviewed the primary sources and prepared for the workshop.