

An Evaluation of Plotinian Theodicy

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Abstract

Gottfried Leibniz is a household name whenever Theodicy is the subject of philosophical or theological analysis. He searched for a way to reconcile the existence of both good and evil in the world, an idea he referred to as Theodicy. Theodicy, according to Leibniz, attempted to defend the existence of God, who was assumed to be good, despite the existence of evil in the world. Theodicy operated on the ideas that: God is good, all-knowing, and all-powerful; the universe was made by God; there is evil in the world for unknown reasons. The question that perennially is to be answered is: Why does God permit senseless suffering? If God is good and all-powerful, why does evil exist? The problem of evil perennially vexes theology, but many theologians have abandoned the project of theodicy, or the theological explanation of evil, as either fruitless or hopeless. Academic studies on theodicy, moreover, typically succumb to theological deficiency and abstraction, often devoid of any concrete connection to Christian life and practice. This paper reinvigorates this stalled debate in philosophy and theology through a detailed reassessment of the problem of evil and the task of theodicy through a careful analysis of the Plotinian Theodicy. Of all the ancient philosophers, Plotinus stood out with his philosophy of Neo-Platonism and theodicy. Plotinus argued that God is good personified, who remains untouched, undiminished, and unmoved. Evil, according to him, is a non-being and total absence or privation of good. This position is evaluated with the lenses of Philosophy and Theology.

Keywords: Theodicy, Theology, Philosophy, Plotinian, Good and Evil.

1.0 Introduction

The epistemic question posed by evil is whether the world contains undesirable states of affairs that provide the basis for an argument that makes it unreasonable to believe in the existence of God. Over the years, particularly around the first three centuries of the Christian era, many philosophical arguments border the minds of philosophers with various ideologies and

discussions. One of these philosophers is Plotinus. Who is Plotinus? What philosophical arguments did he present? How was he influenced? And what contribution did his philosophical arguments made to knowledge, particularly to the Christian faith? These and a few other issues are raised in this paper. The goal is to evaluate the theodicy of Plotinus in the light of other discussions on theodicy philosophically.

2.0 The Biography of Plotinus

Historians of Philosophy seem not to know many details about the life of Plotinus. While Holoduek affirmed that Plotinus was born in 203 CE and lived from 203 – 270 CE (2013, p.13), Lilla in his biography of Plotinus pointed that Plotinus was born ca. 204 – 270 during the 13 year of the reign of Septimius Severus, namely 204 – 205 on the basis of the information provided by the doctor Eustochius according to which Plotinus was 66 years old at his death, which occurred in the second year of the reign of Claudius II (Lilla 2013, p.230). These dates appear speculative, for none of the philosophers even know where or when Plotinus was actually born. It was Karl Jaspers who states that “the reports that he was born in Lycopolis, Egypt, did not make its appearance until long after his death” (Jaspers 1966, p.38). Both Armstrong and Jaspers according to Holoduek (2013, p.6), suggest that Plotinus may have been born in Rome due to his name and also his inaccuracies in speaking and writing in Greek. Holoduek also, believed that there are other reports that have Plotinus born in India. This dispute about where and when he was born gives one the impression that historians of philosophy do not have or know much about the life of Plotinus.

One of the first facts that are certain about Plotinus is that he studied under Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, Egypt. Armstrong states that “in the 28th year of his life, Plotinus went to Alexandria to study philosophy; he found no teacher there to satisfy him till, at the end of 232 or the beginning of 233, someone took him to Ammonius” (Armstrong 1967, p.196) who was for him a revelation and remained with him for eleven years. Lilla argued that at the beginning of 243 AD, Ammonius died shortly and Plotinus' desire of knowing more about the Persian religion prompted him to join the emperor Gordian III's military expedition against Persia (Lilla 2013, p.231). Following the failure of the campaign and the death of the emperor, Plotinus went to Antioch and reached Rome, where he settled definitely and began his teaching activity. For 10 years, he was following the examples of Ammonius and restricted himself to oral teachings until the first year reign of Gallienus when he began to write certain treatise. Although Holoduek held that he did not make revisions, his student Porphyry became the editor and compiler of his work which eventually became known as the 'Plotinus' Enneads' (Holoduek 2013, p.6).

Holoduek further affirmed that Plotinus was said to be a profound teacher throughout his life even with the lack of desire to write down his thoughts. He quoted Jasper as saying, “many times distinguished men and women on the point of death brought him their children to educate and entrusted him with their fortunes to administer” (Holoduek 2013, p.6).

After his 26 years stay in Rome and running his teaching school, in 268 CE, Emperor Gallienus, his protector, was killed, and Plotinus fell mortally ill from his long standing battle with leprosy (Holoduek 2013, p.8). When the persistent illness worsened, Plotinus retired to Campania near Manturnus under the care of his friend Zeto, where he died in 270 at the age of 66. His project of establishing a Platonopolis, the ideal city governed according to the model established by Plato in the *Laws*, was originally approved by the Emperor Gallienus, but then left by the wayside and never implemented (Jaspers 1966, p.38). Porphyry, Plotinus' student recorded Plotinus' writings in Greek. Less than a century later, Marius Victorinus translated the *Enneads* into Latin. This is the translation that Augustine had access to and most likely read. It was Augustine's reading of these texts that began a conversion process and would eventually bring him to Christianity (Holoduek 2013, p.9).

Although Plotinus during his lifetime attacked the Gnostics, he is silent about Christianity, which he must have known to some extent. But though he never became a Christian, he was a resolute witness to spiritual and moral ideals, not only in his writings but also in his own life, and it was the spiritual idealism of his philosophy that enabled him to exercise such an influence on the great Latin doctor, St. Augustine of Hippo (Copleston 2013, p.464).

3.0 Plotinus' Philosophy

Plotinus was greatly influenced by Ammonius Saccas who was his teacher. Gribomont argues that Plotinus through his teacher Ammonius was exposed to some of Philo's doctrine who was of Christian origin and who, like all educated Alexandrian Christians had certainly known Philo's writings (Gribomont 2013, p.890). This leads to the presentation of certain surpassing analogies between Philo and Plotinus. In the doctrine of double ethical phases *metriopatheia-apatheia* or that of the second hypostasis, Plotinus set out above all to be an exegete and systematizer of the philosophy of Plato: his principal intent is that of “explaining” and “ordering” into coherent system the doctrines which the Athenian philosopher left scattered across his dialogues, and doctrine frequently covered by veils which need to be lifted (Gribomont 2013, p.890).

While Ammonius Saccas was faithful to the thought of Aristotle and to the tendency dominant in Philo and in Middle Platonism, Plotinus showed himself decisively in favor of the second solution, which remained fundamental in all

subsequent 'orthodox' Neo-Platonism; at the apex of his construction was not the *nous*, but the 'One'. The adoption of the negative 'One' as the first principle, the clear formulation of the doctrine of its superiority over mind (*nous*) and over being, and its identification with good, have precedence in the history of Greek thought. This means that Plato's philosophy had a great influence on Plotinus.

Plotinus succeeded Sacca and systematized the teachings of the school by teaching that the true source of reality cannot be matter, but spirit, and not any spirit, but the One, the Absolute or infinite, as he called God (Borruso 2007, p.73). This One is neither Being nor Mind, but above both. Since One is also the Good, and good is by nature spreading, the One-Good necessarily and eternally *emanates* intellect (Grk *Nous*), and then ideas, the World-Soul, forces and finally matter, in decreasing succession. To attain happiness one has to go backwards from matter up to the contemplation of the One-Good (Borruso 2007, p.73).

Plotinus is closely associated with Neo-Platonism in his philosophy. In fact, he was said to be its creator and most illustrious exponent (Dillon 1992, p.380). Dillon believed that without taking anything away from the greatness and originality of his (Plotinus') thought, it should be remembered that Neo-Platonism had many centuries of preparation behind it. Some of the philosophers who set the pace for Neo-Platonism include: Aristotle and his commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias, who, following Plato established the ancient Academy: The Stoicism, Neo-Pythagoreanism, the Neo Academy of Antiochus of Ascalon, Middle Platonism and Philo of Alexandria. Then to Ammonius Saccas, the Alexandrian teacher of Plotinus (Dillon 1992, p.380).

Plotinus' Neo-Platonism is ultimately a form of philosophical mysticism. R.T. Wallis tells us that many people, who do not know the first thing about Neo-Platonism, know that Plotinus was a mystic and explains this term thus: "Mystic is here used not in the sense of 'irrationalist', 'occultist' or 'teacher of esoteric doctrine', but in its strict sense of one who believes himself to have experienced union with God or Ultimate Reality" (Wallis 1972, p.3). This points to the fact that Plotinus believed that God exists and that man could relate with God. Further still, in his biography of Plotinus, Porphyry informs his readers that Plotinus had achieved this union with the Ultimate Reality many times. This Ultimate Reality, he called "the *One*." Plotinus believed that the body was an impediment to this union, for he was able to achieve the union for only a few seconds and then he would be pulled backed to the body. In the union, the mind is released from all personal limitation and is in perfect unity with the *One*. Porphyry also tells through his writings that he himself only achieved this union once (Holoduek 2013, p.7).

Wallis also states that Plotinus' conception of mystical union with the Ultimate Reality differs from that of other mystics. He argues that other mystics hold that it is through some religious practice or pure faith that one achieves union with the Ultimate Reality whereas Plotinus held that "the soul's purification is accomplished primarily through philosophy" (Wallis 1972, p.3). Philosophical speculation, for Plotinus, was the means to the end, which he held to be the union with an Ultimate Reality that transcends worldly concerns. Plotinus often neglected mundane earthly affairs, including taking care of his own body, because as have been noted, he believed that the body was an impediment to the union that he desired so greatly (Holoduek 2013, p.8). This assertion reveals that philosophy plays a vital role in relating with God, which he called the 'One.'

According to Copleston, Plotinus sees God as absolutely transcendent: He is the 'One', beyond all thought and all being, ineffable and incomprehensible (Copleston 2013, p.464). He argued that Plotinus believed that neither essence nor being nor life can be predicated of the One, not of course that it is less than any of these things but because it is more. The One according to him cannot be identical with the sum of individual things, for it is these individual things which require a Source or Principle, and this Principle must be distinct from them and logically prior to them (Copleston 2013, p.464). The 'One' of Plotinus is not, therefore, the One of Permenides, a monistic principle, but is the 'One', whose transcendence was emphasized by Neo-Pythagoreanism and middle Platonism.

This does not mean, however, that the One is nothing or non-existence; rather it means that the One transcends all being of which we have experienced. The concept of the being is drawn from the objects and consequently transcends also the concept that is found on those objects (Copleston 2013, p.464). By this, he meant that God, though beyond all beings can still be related with and experienced. So, God is real to Plotinus.

Another notable point in the philosophy of Plotinus is that while unwilling to ascribe any positive attribute to the One, Plotinus affirmed that Goodness may be attributed to the One, provided it is not attributed as an inhering quality. He argued that God is accordingly the Good rather than 'goodness.' Consequently, God is 'Good' personified and not just having the attribute to be good.

Another thought of Plotinus is the ultimate Principle. On this view of God, the ultimate Principle, Copleston queried, 'how can Plotinus account for the multiplicity of finite things? He argued that God cannot limit Himself to finite things, as though they were part of Him; nor can He create the world by a free act of His will, and creation is an activity and we are not justified in ascribing activity to God and so impairing His unchangeability (Copleston 2013, p.466).

He held that Plotinus had to recourse to the metaphor of emanation. But though he (Plotinus) made use of metaphorical terms, he bluntly rejects the notion that God becomes in any way less through the process of emanation. For Plotinus, God remains untouched, undiminished, unmoved. It can therefore be said that Plotinus' use of metaphorical terms in his doctrine of God does not in any way limit God. Although his description of the process of emanation is pantheistic or monistic in character, he fully rejects pantheistic self-canalization of the Deity in individual creatures, a self-description of God. In other words, he tries to steer a middle course between theistic creation on one hand and a fully pantheistic theory on the other hand. Just as Copleston maintained, that we well think that (since an ultimate dualism does not enter into the question) no such compromise is possible; but that is no reason for calling Plotinus a pantheist without due qualification (Copleston 2013, p.467).

4.0 Plotinian Theodicy

On the problem of the origin and nature of evil, Plotinus in his eight tractate of the first Ennead, gave two answers. On the one hand, evil consists in the total absence, privation and wants of good; it is not to be found in beings – which they are products of the good, participate in it – and it is a form of nonbeing.

On the other hand, its essence – supposing that one may talk of an 'essence' of evil – should be identified with matter. In souls, evil consists above all in the lack of measure, a salient characteristic of matter. The two solutions are for Plotinus perfectly compatible with each other, in that they are derived from his theory about matter: evil, the total absence of good and nonbeing, is identical with matter insofar as this lasts, which itself in no way participates in being, is completely lacking in it, and is a nonbeing (Gribomont 2013, p.893). Evil therefore to Plotinus is a non-being and the total absence or privation of good.

In addition to Plotinus's fusion of Platonic and Aristotelian cosmological themes, he also asserts the Orphic and Neo-Pythagorean view of matter as the principle of evil. At its lowest grade, as devoid of quality, as unilluminated privation, it is evil itself (not, however, having evil as an inhering quality any more than the Good has goodness as an inhering quality), and so stands over against the Good as its radical antithesis (Copleston 2013, p.469).

Plotinus opposed the Gnostic contempt for the world as the work of Demiurge and the World-Soul; it is an eternal and unified creature, bound together in a harmony of parts, governed by Divine providence. He expressly says that we must not allow that the universe is an evil creation, in spite of all vexatious things that are in it (Copleston 2013, p.469). It is the image of the intelligible, but it is too much demanded that it should be the precise counterpart of the intelligible. What cosmos, he asks, could be better than the one we know, with

the exception of the intelligible cosmos? The material world is the exteriorization of the intelligible, and the sensible and the intelligible are bound together forever, the former reproducing the latter according to the measure of its capacity. This universal harmony and cosmic unity form the rational basis for prophecy and for the magical influencing of the superman's powers.

In the system of Plotinus, the Orphic-Platonic-Pythagorean strain of 'otherworldliness' intellectual ascent, salvation through assimilation to and knowledge of God, reach their most complete and systemic expression (Copleston 2013, p.469). Plotinus' Neo-Platonism philosophy tends to pass into religion – at least it points beyond itself: speculation does not set itself up as the ultimate goal to be achieved.

5.0 Evaluation of the Plotinian Theodicy

Christian Theology will be the tool to evaluate the theodicy of Plotinus. Hence, theologically, the problem of evil is usually understood as a problem for classical theism. According to this theism, God is all knowing, all powerful, and all good. In the world however, we discover a great deal of naturally occurring pain and suffering (natural evil). We also find a great deal of moral evil: morally culpable actions (or refusal to act) which diminish both those who are morally bad and those around them.

The problem of evil is commonly seen as the problem of how the existence of God can be reconciled with pain, suffering and moral evil which we know to be the fact of life (Davis 1993, p.32). Presenting two arguments, Davis, wrote that firstly, non-theists argued that evil shows the existence of God as unlikely. Secondly, evil is a proof that there could not be God. The idea here is that theists cannot say both there is evil and that God exists, since they can hardly deny that there is evil.

Notable responses then include: the approach to deny the reality of evil and say that, in spite of appearances, evil is an illusion, an 'error' of mortal mind. This is the view of Christian scientists (Baker 1971, p.257). Another approach is a focus on the notion of evil as punishment. The idea here is that evil can be seen as punishment which is justly inflicted by God. There are elements of this in St. Augustine's argument, which is connected to his theory of the fall of Adam and Eve (Davis 1993, p.33). The next approach is the argument that the existence of evil is a necessary means to some good. Citing Swinburne, Davis wrote that natural evil provides, among other things, an opportunity for people to grow in knowledge and understanding. What Swinburne meant was that God gave human the freedom of knowing what is happening around and a responsibility to do something about it.

A related view is that of John Hick, who, echoing what he believes as the position of the church Father St. Irenaeus, argued that the existence of evil is necessary for the perfect development of human being. He held that evil in the light of God's desire is not to coerce people into accepting him. He suggests that people are sin-prone creatures, created as such by God, but able in a world containing evil, to rise to great heights because they are given the opportunity to become mature in the face of evil (Davis 1993, p.34).

The free-will defense is yet another approach. It tries to show that God's existence is compatible with moral evil. Davis states it as "much evil can be attributed to human agents. This evil need never have occurred, but if there is to be a world of free human agents, it must be possible for them to bring about moral evil. If they were thwarted in doing so, they would not be really free" (Davis 1993, p.35). So God had to create a world where moral evil is genuinely a possibility.

One of the logical statements on the problem of evil as described by Peterson et. al., citing Plantinga in his search for the third logical statement says: "God can create free creatures, but he cannot cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil as well." (Peterson et.al 2013, p.181). Hence, the source of moral evil is the exercise of human freedom in a wrong way.

Biblically, evil is a force that opposes God and His work of righteousness in the world (cf. Rom. 7:8 - 19). It is also used for any disturbance to the harmonious order of the universe, such as disease (cf. Ps. 41:8). But the Bible makes it plain that even these so-called "physical evils" are the result of a far more serious moral and spiritual evil that began with the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3). The ultimate source of evil in the world is Satan, also called "the devil" (cf. Luke 8:12) and "the wicked one" (cf. Matt. 13:19). Evil also comes from the hearts of men (cf. Mark 7:20-23). It does not come from God, "for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (cf. James 1:13). The Christian believer can be rest assured that Jesus will triumph at the end of time, when Satan will be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone and evil will be overcome (cf. Rev 20:10).

6.0 Conclusion

From this paper, it can be seen that Plotinus was greatly influenced by Plato's philosophy (not his teacher Ammonius Saccas), with which he developed the Neo-Platonism. The study also reveals that Plotinus though not a Christian affirmed the existence of God which he called the 'One'. Plotinus believed that

God exists and that man could relate with God. He also held that philosophical speculation was the means to the end, he therefore affirmed that philosophy plays a vital role in relating with God.

More also, he believed that the 'One' (God) transcends all being of which we have experienced or may experience. And that God's existence supersedes the experiences of man including the experiences of evil. Finally, on the problem of evil, Plotinus affirmed that God is 'Good' personified and not just being good. He (God) remains untouched, undiminished, unmoved. Plotinus argued that evil is a non-being and total absence or privation of good. And so defended the 'One' as not being responsible for evil because to him evil is a non-being. God is therefore not responsible for evil. Plotinian sensible matter can be understood as the *principium individuationis*. 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. 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 by 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. 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 amended 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 'philosophical theology'.

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