

Chapter 4:

The debate over matter and the problem of evil

1. So what is matter?

The hypothesis of divine causes which explain the structure of the cosmos – god and (especially) the so-called ‘forms’ – are what defines Platonism, in the popular mind as well as their own self-understanding; but what we have seen in Ch. 3 is that this hypothesis relies on understanding that the cosmos cannot be explained by matter alone. To think otherwise is to misunderstand the nature of matter. But this means that Platonists needed to spend at least as much time on giving a rigorous account of matter as they did on explaining the work of the forms and god. A proper understanding of matter, in fact, is required in advance to establish what it is that these divine causes need to deliver. So while the topic of matter is by no means the easiest place to begin an account of a Platonist system, and the reader may well find that they will benefit from returning to the material in this chapter in the light of the chapters that follow, nevertheless it belongs at the beginning if the rest is to be properly motivated.

That the difficulties in accounting for matter are real, and not just a challenge to our own exegetical abilities, is demonstrated by the arguments that the topic engendered within Platonism. In broad terms, there are three main approaches.

1.1. Model 1: Something and nothing. Eudorus, Moderatus and others

The simplest and most radical answer to the question of what matter is, is that matter is *nothing at all*; at least, nothing primary, nothing in its own right. Remember how Platonists came to distinguish ‘body’ from ‘matter’: a body is matter *with some particular qualities*. Conversely, matter must be whatever is left when those qualities have been stripped away. But what is something that has no colour, shape, texture, flavour, smell . . .? One answer is that it is really nothing at all. Or to be precise: that it is nothing at all *in its own right*. (It follows, of course, for people who hold this view, that matter is not a ‘principle’: cf. Ch. 3, esp. Note 4d(iv).) On this view, the first principles (god and the forms, or whatever stands in their place) are characterised by creative activity which results in ever-increasing complexity – and ‘matter’ appears as a kind of ‘emergent’ property of this complexity.

Consider for example **B**, which reports the views of Moderatus. Moderatus is someone strongly influenced by the Pythagorean view that cosmic reality is to be explained by two antithetical causes: the ‘One’ (the cause of all determination, unity and being), and the ‘Indefinite Dyad’ (which exercises a causal pull on reality in the other direction, towards potentially unlimited division and proliferation). But unlike many Pythagoreans, Moderatus did not think that these two principles were the *ultimate* causes: they in turn depend on a *true* unity, a prior ‘One’ which has no antithetical counterpart. (Moderatus, then, is a ‘monist’ in metaphysics; that is, he maintains a one-principle theory: cf. again Ch. 3 Note 4d(iv).)

The first principle does not bring the One-and-Dyad into being as a pair on equal terms: rather, what it does is to causes the (second) One to exist. It is the fact that we now have a second ‘One’ that entails the potential for an ever increasing proliferation of being – *against which*, indeed, its own integrity and unity is understood. That potential is the Dyad, which Moderatus associates with the unlimited and formless ‘quantity’ of Plato’s ‘receptacle’ – the locus of creation in the *Timaeus* which Platonists typically identified as raw ‘matter’. Of course, infinity of this sort can only ever be potential: but as the limiting case of what happens to being as it proliferates and the complexity of what exists increases, the Dyad nevertheless helps to explain something about the entities – the bodies – which result. Bodies exist between the actual One and this notional Dyad, and both are needed for us to explain its characteristics. (No body is a singularity; but nor is any body an unconstrained or unqualified infinity.)

This view might usefully be considered as a way of approaching an even older testimony within the tradition, one which is also indebted to Pythagoreanism, that of Eudorus in **30**. Eudorus also holds the view that the first principle, the cause of all that exists, is a ‘One’ which gives rise to another ‘One’ and its opposite – by which he too evidently has in mind the Pythagoreans’ ‘indefinite Dyad’, which interacts with the unifying effects of the One to create the plural (but limited) complexities of the world. Although Eudorus’ Dyad sounds more like something with more concrete existence than in Moderatus (where it is described only as the negation of the second One), it may be that he actually has something rather similar in mind. Eudorus’ Dyad, in other words, is probably not to be thought of as an entity in its own right, but a description of the increasing process of complexification which is the result of the first act of multiplication on the part of the One – the ‘shadow’ it begins to cast on what exists (**B**[231.4-5])

1.2. Model 2: Pure receptivity? E.g. Dercyllides, Alcinous, Maximus

The suggestion in **30** that the Dyad is on an equal footing with the (second) One shows us the way to an obvious objection to a theory like this: how can the original ‘One’, something characterised as a cause of being and unity, end up as the cause of plurality and at least the

intimation of non-existence? Or, as Numenius puts it even more starkly in **Q**, how can this One ‘regress into a dyad’? Moderatus cannot escape the worry if he says that the Dyad is only the notional antithesis of the second One: the objection to him will be that, as soon as the first One has created a second unity, it becomes itself a mere *half* of all that there now is, so that the supposed cause of unity has made *itself* into a contributing member of plurality. This sort of concern might explain why Platonists at this period more often assume that matter has its own independent reality – so that it is, in the terms of the last chapter, a ‘principle’. **D** expresses the point in the same Pythagorean language as Moderatus and Eudorus: the One and Dyad are primitive, and between them explain everything else that there is. But now the opposite worry arises: if matter is something in its own right, yet depends for its qualities and determination on god and the forms (as we shall see in the following chapters), what is it left to be?

The answer most commonly suggested by Platonists is that the *passivity* or *receptivity* which Plato ascribes to the receptacle in the *Timaeus* is the distinguishing property of matter. This seems to give it some character of its own, but *without* giving it the kind of determination that it will receive from the forms. Indeed, this ‘passivity’ describes the property of *being receptive of form*: **E, M**. One advantage of putting things in these terms is that it acts in some measure as a counter-weight to the ‘top-down’ metaphors usually employed by Platonists to describe the imposition of form on matter (for example, the metaphor of stamping or ‘imprinting’: **P**[373A]; cf. **5F** and **5G**; **6Dd**). These capture the fact that the forms and god are indeed the ‘active’ causes of the shape that matter ends up having; but we should not think that they are ‘active’ in the sense that they themselves move or change in ‘reaching out’ to matter, or force creation upon it. The idea of ‘receptiveness’ reminds us that creation also relies on matter being open to the effects of the forms’ eternal activity.

Note that to say that matter *is* something in its own right – and, as an irreducible cause, now, that it is a ‘principle’ – is not to say that matter can *actually exist* on its own, without having some particular determination from the forms. Indeed, the property that matter has under this view – passivity / receptivity – defines it in relation to the forces that act on it. One might usefully think of this view of matter as a sort of cousin to the Stoics’ view of matter, what they term the ‘passive principle’ (cf. Ch. 3), or to the ‘prime matter’ of the Aristotelian tradition (e.g. *GC* 2.1; Gannagé 2005: 56-82 for the perspective of a contemporary Aristotelian). In all three cases, matter is understood as a substrate of perhaps infinite potentiality which only *actually* exists as informed by some active cause.

1.3. Model 3: Raw mobility. E.g. Plutarch, Atticus, Numenius

The characterisation of matter in terms of pure receptivity benefits, no doubt, from the support it can garner from its relationship with the broader traditions of thought about matter in the abstract I have mentioned (Stoic and Aristotelian); but in the context of Platonism, it is not without its own conceptual difficulties. One worry, for example, that Platonists might have with it – more than Stoics at least – is that even this characterisation of matter (as receptive) might seem too ‘thin’ to answer everything we need matter to explain. For example, movement is a feature of the perceptible cosmos; but god and the forms are not in motion; if matter is not either, then where does this movement come from? In other words: how is movement generated in a system whose principles are all essentially *unmoving*? The Stoics do not face this problem, because their ‘active principle’ *is*, essentially, dynamic. (The Stoics see a close, if not essential, connection between causal efficacy and movement which Platonists deny.)

One might think that it could be possible for matter to *explain* movement without in any sense *being in motion*. The idea of proliferation in Eudorus and Moderatus might be a good starting-point for thinking about this: movement might be implicated in (or even reducible to) the same process of proliferation by which the One gives rise successively to points, lines, surfaces and solids. Like corporeality itself, movement could be a sort of emergent property.

The trouble is that movement does not have the same sort of relationship to geometrical proliferation as extension and body. *Time* might do – at least if one thinks of time as a dimension, a further level of proliferation. But we do not know of any Platonist who thinks of time as a dimension: on the contrary, time is generally supposed to presuppose movement (for example, Platonists identify time with the movement of the heavenly bodies, or define it as the measure of that movement (see further Ch. 7). But even if a Platonist were to think of time as a dimension, its existence would give the *condition*, not the *cause* of movement. It is recognised for example that something can be *extended through time* without in any sense being in movement (cf. Plutarch, *On the E* 390C). From this point of view, it starts to look tempting to think that movement is somehow one of the inherent properties of matter – and this is the view adopted by a third group of Platonists.

If we say that movement is inherent to matter, we do not have to mean that matter in its ‘pure’ state has the *very same kind of* movement that things in the perceivable world have. Indeed, it would be very surprising if it did, since movement like that involves determinate geometrical bodies moving along determinate geometrical vectors (at least in the paradigm case of movement, namely locomotion). So we should assume that, on this theory, matter has some radical quality which, when matter is duly brought under the control of forms, will manifest in

the world as the kind of movement with which we are familiar: pre-orderly movement, as it were; or something which we can appropriately call ‘chaotic’ motion (**K, L; 7K, 7L**).

Finally, note that, since Plato defines the *soul* in terms of self-movement (e.g. *Phdr.* 245c; *Lg.* 896a), and since the movement that matter has intrinsically on this view evidently is self-movement, it is a significant (if surprising) corollary of the view for Platonists who adopt it that the principle of movement in matter is ‘soul’ in the truest, radical sense. This is a point that will be picked up in Ch. 7, Section 5.2.

2. The problem of evil

Whatever its drawbacks, the ‘dynamic’ view of matter has another advantage for those who hold it, which is that it provides a ready explanation for the ‘problem of evil’ – the challenge which the evident existence of disorder and imperfection presents to our belief that the cosmos is shaped by benign forces of order. There is an important moral dimension to this question, of course, which is how it is that we end up with moral agents who seem bent on promoting disharmony and unhappiness; but this is only a special case of a more general problem.

Although there is enough order and stability in the cosmos to license the view that it is sustained by providential forces, nevertheless, *things often go wrong*. That this is not a purely subjective judgement seems clear from the fact that much of what is wrong is *counter-natural*, precisely an interruption of the teleological state of affairs for the individual. Healthy grass gets eaten by gazelles, which are sometimes cut down in their turn by ravening lions; lions may succumb to disease. How can the cause of any of these things lie with principles that are not in themselves somehow deficient? What stops the world from being the kind of place where every organism lives a complete and unimpeded existence according to its nature?

We shall see in the discussion of god and forms in following chapters that Platonists are committed to a form of teleology which would make it contradictory to suppose that the ‘active’ causal principles, those that determine the shape taken by matter, suffered any degree of imperfection themselves. It is impossible, for example, and in fact contradictory to suppose that god or the forms could somehow ‘intend’ it to be the case that lions sickened and grass got eaten. So Platonists were left to suggest that the explanation for these things must lie with the *intransigence of matter*. There is, they said, something about matter, such that it is simply not possible to achieve in it the level of perfection proper to god and the forms.

The way in which the first two models of matter considered in this chapter are committed to putting this is to say that ‘evil’ emerges at the point where the activity of the transcendent principles is *limited* by material constraints – at the maximal proliferation of being for the monists (such as Eudorus and Moderatus); or in the constraints on what matter is capable

of co-actualising (that is, bringing about together in the same cosmic order) in the ‘passive’ model of someone like Apuleius or Alcinous. ‘Evil’ is part of what makes it a ‘shadow’ that is cast over being by matter in **B**[231.4-5]: a certain resistance which sets limits to the good which god and the forms can cause.

But Numenius has an objection to this. The idea of a limit to the good that there is can certainly help to explain why there are things that are *not good* about the world; but it is a fallacy to elide what is *not good* (the contradictory of good) with what is *evil* (its contrary) (cf. **O**). So, for example, god and the forms (at least let us assume) cannot explain the way in which leaves form heaps in a forest – these being mere by-products of the processes required to realise and perfect trees, but lacking in themselves any purpose or goodness. But the problem of evil is not about the *limits* of aesthetic organisation. The problem of evil – especially as we feel it in the human world – involves the idea of an incursion, an offence *against* the good. It is the death of a child, the decision to kill or abuse. It is not that such things have no hold on our admiration; they demand our disapproval and disgust.

The theory of inherently ‘dynamic’ matter, shared in its outlines by Numenius and, among others, Atticus and Plutarch, is meant to address this problem: *matter is evil to start with*. To be precise about this, because there is some difference of expression here, matter is evil in virtue of its movement. Numenius, then, consistently talks about matter itself *as evil*; but Plutarch, when he wants to be precise (but cf. Note 4a below), is clear that it is the *evil soul* that matter has inherently which is evil. (This will allow him later on to say that, if the soul can be as it were ‘tamed’ – cf. **8T**[B] – then it is possible to say without contradiction that a material entity can be good: for even though it is made out of matter, it was not the matter that was evil, but its movement.)

As ever, it is important not to lose sight of the level of abstraction at which we are talking here. Just as chaotic movement explains but is not the same as the movement of the perceivable world, so the ‘evil’ inherent in matter explains, but is not quite the same as the evil of our experience. It is not, for example, anything so well-formed as an ‘intention’ to harm. Rather, it is a force – of *chaos* – which actively opposes perfection in the world made out of it.

3. The ‘suitability’ of matter for form

By now, the theory that matter is *nothing at all* may seem to have rather little going for it; but there is at least one problem which arises for the other two models which does not so obviously arise for it. If matter is in any sense independent of god the forms, and especially if it is opposed in some way to them (whether merely resistant or actually inimical), one might wonder how the two sides of the equation from which our world emerges ever came together in the first place.

They seem to occupy as it were parallel universes. (When people talk about Platonism as a ‘two-world’ philosophy, they are normally contrasting the world of our senses with that of the intelligible forms and god; one might suppose, a fortiori, that an even wider gulf separates pre-cosmic *matter* from forms and god.) This is not a peripheral issue: it is crucial for understanding how matter is conceived, and is crucial groundwork for understanding the causality of god and the forms, the subjects of the next chapters. It is also very important background for one of the most prominent debates within post-Hellenistic Platonism: whether the world had a beginning in time (Ch. 7).

The key concept here is the Platonists’ language of ‘receptivity’ which, perhaps surprisingly, is by no means the prerogative of the ‘passive’ model of matter (Model 2). In particular, we have good evidence for Atticus’ talking in this context of matter being ‘ready’ or ‘suitable’ (*epitēdeios*) for the activity of the forms on it, although Atticus champions the ‘dynamic’ view of matter (Model 3); and Plutarch (who does so as well) even talks about matter *loving* or ‘striving’ for the forms: **N**, **P**[372F]. One way of understanding the broad spread of this language across adherents of very different conceptions of matter might be to appreciate that there is one crucial thing that they all have in common. All of them, I suggest, take ‘matter’ to be an analytical concept, in the sense that matter is *never* – not on any one of the theories considered above – understood to be the kind of thing that is capable of existing on its own. Note that this is different from the question of whether it *is* anything *in its own right* (it is not on Model 1; it is on Models 2 and 3). But whether it is or not, it cannot actually exist independently of its possession of form. (It can scarcely even be conceived without form, as Plato had said: e.g. **B**[231.14]; cf. **3E**[192].) I take it that when Platonists variously talk about matter being ‘suitable’ for the activity of forms, or even striving for it, this is just what they mean: that matter in actual fact always has some form.

From one point of view, this ought not to be controversial. We have seen that Platonists’ thinking about the issue relates, sometimes closely, to reflection on ‘prime matter’ in the Aristotelian tradition, and the ‘passive principle’ of the Stoics, neither of which can exist on its own. If it seems as if there is something else going on in Platonism, there are I think two main reasons for this – both of them red herrings. The first is the debate internal to Platonism over whether the universe had a beginning in time. It can sometimes seem as if the possibility that the cosmos *did* have a beginning must imply a belief in the substantial independence of matter. After all (the thought goes), if matter does not exist on its own, it could never have existed in an unordered state *before* the universe was formed. And indeed Proclus (perhaps following Porphyry) exploits this thought in his polemical report of Plutarch and Atticus in **L** (compare **7M**). However, it turns out that no-one at all ever thought that matter existed ‘before’

the universe was formed. The question of whether the universe had a beginning in effect comes down to the question *whether time itself had a beginning* – as we shall see in Ch. 7. *No-one*, as it turns out, takes a stand in this debate which implies that matter ever does, or ever could, exist on its own.

But there is another reason why it can seem as if at least some Platonists believed in a material principle that is more than analytically distinct from body, and that is the very fact that its nature is thematised and debated within the movement in a way and to an extent that is not quite paralleled in the Peripatetic and Stoic traditions. But this is possible because there is an asymmetry in Platonist ontology that does not exist in Aristotle or Stoicism. For while Aristotle thinks that immanent forms, the forces which shape his world, depend on matter for their existence as much as matter depends on form, and the Stoics think that the active principle depends on the passive principle as much as the passive depends on the active, Platonists think that the ideal realm which brings determination to matter does not rely for its existence on matter in any sense at all. In fact god and forms in Platonism are *entirely self-sufficient*, and ultimately need to be understood in their own terms, distinct from matter. But this encourages us to think more about the unique contribution of matter to cosmological explanation, and may even tempt us to think that a fully independent characterisation could be made of it in step with the fully independent characterisation that can be made of god and the forms.

To put this another way: since Platonists are distinguished from other schools of thought *more* because they think that forms are independent than because (as I claim) they think that matter is dependent, the real question facing them is how to justify that, the essential self-sufficiency of the ideal – something which we shall address in Chh. 5 and 6. The essential *dependency* of matter is not the novelty in the Platonist position.

Notes and Further Reading

1. Matter and evil. The greater part of the literature discussing Platonist theories of matter concentrates on what I am calling Model 3, the theory that matter is essentially bound up with a cause of movement and evil. (Vimercati 2007, on Alcinoüs, is an exception; and for theories of matter as created, see further below.) The influence of Gnosticism (a family of views involving the position that there is a force of evil operative in the cosmos) has been seen in Platonists who hold this view, especially Numenius and the Chaldaean Oracles: see H.-C. Puech 1934; des Places 1973c; Wallis 1992b. Most scholars, however, emphasise the need to distinguish dualism at the level of the principles from the consequences for the world that results: *dualism* at this ‘deep’ level may help to explain the basic tension that all Platonists see between the divine and the perceptible realms (Kübel 1973: Part I; O’Meara 1975: Ch. 1), but it need not translate into the fully ‘Gnostic’ belief that there is a force of evil at work in the cosmos as it is presently constituted. See Dörrie 1957a; 1960: 212; Baltes 1985b (esp. 204 on Numenius); Bianchi 1986

and 1987 (an expanded, English version); Majercik 1989: 18 (for the Chaldaean Oracles); Armstrong 1992; Perkins 1992; Alt 1993 (Ch. 4 for an unusual perspective on Alcinoüs as a dualist); Jourdan 2015 (esp. 169) (on Numenius). Plutarch, who argues at length for a dualism of principles (even invoking Zoroastrianism in support of his position at *Isis and Osiris* 369E-370C), has been the object of special interest on this score: see Dillon 1977a: 202-6, 1986c: 119-20; 2002a; Dörrie 1981a; Chlup 2000; Opsomer 2007a. Other dualists include Atticus (**K**, **L**) and Numenius (**Q**, **R**; cf. **8X**) (cf. A. Smith 2013 for a possible disagreement between Numenius and Harpocration on matter as a cause of evil); cf. Galen, *Compendium of the Timaeus* 4.5-10 (p. 43) with Festugière 1952: 114-16. Cf. also perhaps Antoninus, **8Y**, with Ch. 8 Note 8a. (Reydams-Schils *forthcoming* sees a hint of dualism in **F**.) The view that there exists a principle of evil is often justified by reference to Plato, *Lg.* 10, 896e ff.: e.g. **K**; **8T**[D] (but cf. Waszink 1966: 68, insisting that Plato entertains the idea only as a hypothesis). For another aspect of the problem of evil, cf. Ch. 10 Note 3e, on daimons.

2. Matter ‘in love’. The idea of matter’s ‘yearning’ for order and, conversely, the ‘erotic’ draw of the first principle, builds on a long tradition, going back at least to Empedocles (in whose ‘Strife’ and ‘Love’ Plutarch saw an antecedent to his own dualism: *Isis and Osiris* 370E = 31 B18), and taking in Aristotle’s famous metaphor for the relationship of the spheres to the first unmoved mover (*Metaph.* 1072b3-4). Other possible sources include Plutarch, *Face in the Moon* 944E; Alcinoüs, *Didaskalikos* 14.3 (p. 169.35-41); the anonymous commentary on the *Parmenides* 2.29-30; cf. the Chaldaean Oracles, **20J**. See further Schoppe 1994: 268; Frazier 2008.

3. Matter’s ‘receptivity’ to forms. For the ‘receptivity’ of matter, or its being ‘suitable’ (*epitēdeios*, *euergos*) to receive form, cf. also **9Dd**. The idea is sometimes explained within the terms of the craftsman analogy as a disposition engendered in matter by something external to it (for example by soul) – a sort of prior act of creation, one manifest in the ‘traces’ of elements (earth, fire, water, air) with which the creator god works (*Ti.* 53b). Cf. Deuse 1983: 236-44; Noble 2013: 277 n. 45. (And cf. Aristotle, *Ph.* 2.2, 194a33-4 for the idea that crafts make their matter – or make it ‘suitable’, *euergon*; *Pol.* 7.4, 1325b40-1326a5 for *epitēdeios*.) I take ‘suitability’ to be a characteristic of matter itself: perhaps, for example, its very propensity to generate ‘traces’ of the elements in the course of its chaotic movement – traces which give the forms their traction and spark the process of creation proper. See on this the rich discussion of Rescigno 1997 (including, for evidence of Plutarch’s views, *Abandoned Oracles* 430C-E and *Table-Talk* 636C-D; cf. also the title of his lost book *How does Matter Participate in Forms? That it Produces the Primary Bodies = Lamprias* 68). Rescigno however does not suppose, as I do, that matter is only ever *analytically* distinct from bodies. Cf. the later account of Proclus, as described at Philoponus, *On the Eternity of the World* 11. Proclus’ view is that the only thing that ever *prevents* matter from taking on a given form is the presence in it already of an incompatible form; to make a statue of Aphrodite, for example, one only has to clear competing forms from the stone, and it will spontaneously receive the form of Aphrodite. (But if I am right to suggest that this view shares so much in common with that of Atticus and others – especially the idea of ‘suitability’, and the thought that matter is only analytically distinct from bodies – how is it that Proclus can approve the *attack* on Atticus for holding a theory of ‘suitability’ in **M**? The answer is that he does not, exactly: the point of the argument is to claim that Atticus cannot consistently maintain that matter is merely analytically distinct from body if he also believes that the world had a beginning in time – the suggestion being that such a belief entails the view that matter pre-existed its formation into bodies. Atticus would no doubt deny this in fact: on temporal creation, see above in the commentary, and further Ch. 7.)

4. Plutarch on matter. (a) *The coherence of his position* has been challenged in several ways: in particular, he is accused of changing his view from the *Isis and Osiris* (where matter has an

impulse to the good), through the *Abandoned Oracles* (where it is evil: esp. 414D; cf. *Platonic Questions* 1003A), to the *Procreation of the Soul* (where it is indifferent, but moved by a ‘soul’ which is evil). See Thévanaz 1938: 108-11 (explaining it by ‘eclecticism’); Deuse 1983, ch. II; Ferrari 1995, ch. 4; 1996; Rescigno 1997: 66-7. (Waszink 1966: 42-3 finds a similar equivocation in the evidence for Numenius.) It could be the requirements of context that explain these differences, however. In *Procreation of the Soul*, the character of the moving principle (the origin of soul) is very precisely under examination, and Plutarch carefully distinguishes it from matter, which is something ‘indifferent’. (We should not put too much weight on the fact that the soul is here identified as a ‘principle’ distinct from matter: cf. Ch. 3 Notes 4b and d(i).) In *Abandoned Oracles* and elsewhere where the distinction is not immediately relevant, Plutarch can talk more loosely as if it is matter (which is after all inalienably associated with soul, as what is, in the first place, moved by it) is itself evil. The orientation of matter towards the good in *Isis and Osiris* can be explained by my observation above that matter is only ever analytically distinct from bodies: since, ex hypothesi, the forms are present in this case, the movement that matter has is, necessarily, framed by them (there is no other movement to be had). (NB one needs to beware here of a misconception of the nature of matter’s evil. It is not ever, in the dualism of any Platonist, that matter actively wishes to oppose the good. Rather, as we have seen, the evil associated with matter lies in its resistance to being mastered by the forms. So one can say that matter ‘strives for the good’ insofar as it flows in the channels set by the forms, but the very fact of its flowing makes it resistant to perfect assimilation to the forms, and it is that in which its evil consists. There may be a paradox of sorts here, but not a contradiction.) The distinction between matter and body may be played out in dramatic form in Plutarch’s treatment of ‘chthonic’ deities: Van der Stockt 2005 shows that he tends to reimagine them not as opposed to the Olympians, but as *intermediaries* between chaos and the celestial realm. **(b) On Isis and Osiris:** cf. **P.** *(i) As a source for Plutarch’s metaphysics.* The *Isis and Osiris* (described by Ferrari 1995: 98 as virtually a treatise on matter), deserves a note of its own. **(α) The myth**, as Plutarch reports it is as follows: Isis, Osiris, and Trypho were the triplet children of deities identified with the Greek gods Rhea and Hermes. The Elder Horus was the son of Isis and Osiris, conceived while they were themselves still in the womb. Osiris went on to become king of Egypt, and remained in love with Isis. Trypho plotted against Osiris, eventually dismembering him. Isis collected his limbs together and gave them burial. Osiris appeared to Horus from beyond the grave and trained him for battle. Horus, keen to avenge his father, fought and captured Trypho; but at the insistence of Isis he was allowed his life and freedom. **(β) The interpretation.** Plutarch considers three preliminary explanations of the myth: as an account of the activity of daimons; as a theory of the workings of nature; and as a description of astronomical phenomena. Finally, he gives his own exposition of the myth as an account of metaphysics in **P.** The details of this are controversial – and not helped by the fact that, as we know (cf. Ch.1, Section 2.4) such myths are subject to the kinds of distortion that preclude straightforward one-to-one philosophical decipherment. My own view is the following. Isis represents matter, which possesses an ineliminable tendency towards evil and dissolution represented by Typho. The Good, first principle and supreme god is Osiris. The ‘limbs of Osiris’ are the forms, which constitute the divine soul (as opposed to the divine intellect as such) (cf. Ch. 6, Section 3.3.1 below), and are embraced by matter. Considered collectively as the paradigm for the cosmos, the forms are known as the Elder Horus (who is identified with the Greek god Apollo); the product of their union with Isis is Horus, the cosmos. An obvious difficulty with this is that Isis (matter) loves Osiris – that is, *inclines to the good / to receive the forms*. My answer is that this is a way of saying that matter is given *no choice but* to work for the good – as explained above, on ‘receptivity’ (cf. also discussion in Plese 2008 for Aristotle’s influence on this ‘double’ characterisation of matter). **(γ) Alternative construals.** More radical attempts to explain how Isis can have an impulse to the good include Heinze 1892: 30-7, Krämer 1964: 92-101 and Petrucci 2016b and 2016d, variously identifying her with the *world soul*. (Taking her alongside Osiris as creator, Heinze and Krämer thus find in the myth

confirmation of their view that Plutarch adheres to a metaphysical scheme like that of Xenocrates.) Baltes 2000 also associates her with soul, but this time a good, *non-rational*, soul which exists in composition with matter (and is opposed to the immaterial evil soul that is represented by Typho). Other discussions of the myth (in broader agreement with this view) include Jones 1916: 25, 94-6; Griffiths 1970: 502-5; Deuse 1983, chh. 2-3; Ferrari 1995, ch. 4; cf. 1996d: 120-1 (Isis as matter with pre-cosmic ‘traces’ – cf. *Ti.* 53a-b – of the elements); 1999b: 127-8 (the soul and body of Osiris correspond to the two upper levels of Plato’s ‘Line’: i.e., forms and their ‘immanent’ counterparts, the mathematical); Brenk 1999; Karamanolis 2006: 102. *(ii) Further discussion of On Isis and Osiris (the work).* The *Isis and Osiris* is an enormously rich and important work for literary, cultural, and religious studies as well as philosophy: see e.g. Griffiths 1970 (an edition with translation and commentary); Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 174-224 (on the world as an ‘image’ in the work); Hani 1976 and Brenk 2002 (for the historical context for Plutarch’s interest in Isiac religion); Brenk 1999 and Richter 2001 (respectively for and against seeing Plutarch’s exegesis as an act of cultural appropriation); Petrucci 2016b (for the structure and coherence of the ‘Platonic’ section). *(iii) Elements of the myth elsewhere.* Plutarch alludes to another story concerning Horus at *Procreation of the Soul* 1026C: cf. Hani 1963. And Isis plays an important role for Apuleius: for example, she is the *dea ex machina* of his *Metamorphoses*. See variously Bohm 1973, Méthy 1996 and Donini 2002; cf. Walsh 1981 (arguing that his interest in her is one of the debts Apuleius owes to Plutarch).

5. Numenius on matter. Numenius’ influence on Plotinus’ theory of matter has sometimes been argued: see e.g. Martano 1960. Thedinga 1917 goes so far as to argue that *Ennead* 3.6.6-19, on matter, is an extract from Numenius’ lost work *On the Good*. But one can equally see the affinities with Moderatus: Plotinus even refers to matter a ‘shadow’ as Moderatus does in **4B**[231.4-5]: *Ennead* 3.6.18.28-9.

6. Philo’s views on matter are not quite clear. I take it that he believes matter to have been created by God: **C** is part of the evidence for this, since it seems to say that God created just the right amount of matter for the creation he had in mind. If this is right, then Philo holds a version of my Model 1 which differs from others, however, in suggesting that God had free choice over the character of matter. (Cf. also Note 7a below.) However, see also Winston 1975, arguing pre-existent matter in Philo (and something like my Model 2).

7. Generated matter. (a) Creatio ex nihilo. The view that God created matter *in the way that he wished it for the cosmos he was planning* (which is what is commonly understood by the phrase *creatio ex nihilo*) is sometimes taken to be a distinctively and essentially Judaeo-Christian view. But it took time to become ‘essential’ to Christianity: it is first clearly attested among Christians only in Theophilus (mid-second century): before him, Justin and Athenagoras, for example, both assume the pre-existence of matter: see Torchia 1993, and especially May 1994 (also Waszink 1955 for Hermogenes). And, although it is not the *same* as my Model 1 (according to which matter is in effect a recalcitrant by-product of creation), it is evidently in dialogue with that view. **(b) ‘Idealism’.** The notion of matter as, in general, an emergent property of (or, conversely, a sort of condition for) complexity as it is caused in the universe by the activity of non-material principles recurs in a more developed form later on as the view that material objects are constituted by the congregation of non-material forms. This is sometimes referred to as ‘idealism’ (see Sorabji 1983: 290-4 and Edwards 2002: 63); but, as Myles Burnyeat (1982) has pointed out, it should not be confused with the ‘idealism’ of someone like Berkeley, who did not only deny that matter was (to put it this way) a ‘principle’, but denied *that it existed at all*.

A. ATTICUS fr. 24 and PLUTARCH reported by Proclus, *On the Timaeus* i. 384.2-5

Concerning matter itself, one might ask whether it is created by no cause, as followers of Plutarch and Atticus say, or whether it is created and [if so] by what cause . . .

B. Moderatus reported by Porphyry via Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Physics* 230.34-231.24

This is the conception of matter that seems to have been held by the Pythagoreans first among the Greeks, and after them by Plato – as Moderatus too relates. He sets out the Pythagorean view that the first One is above being and all substance; he says that the second One, [231.1] the ‘truly being’ [cf. *Sph.* 240b] and ‘intelligible’, is the forms; and that the third, which relates to the soul, partakes in the One and the forms. Finally, after this comes perceptible nature – which does not partake in them [i.e. the One and the forms], although it acquires order by reflecting them. Matter in perceptibles is the shadow of non-being in what has quantity, first of all – but extends even further down than that. In *On Matter* book 2, Porphyry sets down the words of Moderatus when he writes this: ‘“The rationality associated with the One [*ho heniaios logos*] wished, as Plato says somewhere, to establish the generation of things from himself [cf. *Ti.* 29e-30a]: by removing himself he opened up room for universal quantity, removing from it his own essences and forms. [231.10] He called this quantity ‘formless’ [*Ti.* 50d, 51a] ‘undistinguished’ and ‘shapeless’ – but receptive of form, shape, distinction, every such quality. For the most part,” he says, “Plato seems to have preferred to give this quantity the names ‘all-receptive’ [*Ti.* 51a] and, saying that it was formless, also ‘indefinite’ [*Ti.* 52a] and ‘most baffling to the mind’s ability to grasp it [cf. *Ti.* 51b] and ‘scarcely graspable, by illegitimate reasoning’ [*Ti.* 52b], and everything of the sort.” This quantity, he says, and its form, which is conceived by privation of the rationality associated with the One, which embraces in itself all the principles of the things that are – these are the paradigms of corporeal matter, which he says both the Pythagoreans and Plato called “what has quantity”: not *what has quantity* in the sense of having some form, but due to privation, dissolution, [231.20] extension, fragmentation, as diversion away from being. By these designations, you can see that matter is evil, insofar as it is in retreat from the good. Yet it is also constrained by it, and cannot escape its limits: extension receives proportion from the form of size, and by this it is bounded; fragmentation is given form by numerical demarcation.’

C. Philo, *On Providence* fr. 1, quoted in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 7.21.1-2

[1] ‘Concerning the quantity of substance, if it really came into being, let the following be said. God aimed for a perfect sufficiency of matter for the generation of the cosmos: not too little, and not too much. The craftsmen who make particular things estimate what they need in materials whenever they create something, especially something precious; it would be absurd, then, if the inventor of numbers, measurements and their relative proportions failed to think about what would suffice. [2] I shall say without inhibition that no more or less substance was needed for the construction of the cosmos, or it would not have been perfect or complete in all its parts: it was accomplished by being created from the perfect amount of substance. The skill of identifying sufficient matter before beginning is the mark of great wisdom.’

D. DERCYLLIDES, reported by Simplicius, *On Aristotle’s Physics* 247.30-248.18 (that the person being quoted is also Dercyllides – quoting Hermodorus – is suggested by Simplicius’ care to note the reference to his book)

[247.30] Aristotle often mentioned that Plato called matter ‘the great and small’ [e.g. *Metaph.* 987b20], so you should know that Porphyry narrates that Dercyllides, in book 11 of *Plato’s Philosophy*, where he is talking about matter, transcribes the words of Hermodorus, Plato’s friend, from his work *On Plato*. From this, it is clear that Plato thought of matter in terms of the infinite and indefinite, showing how it comes from them, [248.1] which allow more and less, and to which the great and small belong. For he says: ‘Of the things that are, he says that some are *per se*, like man and horse, others relative to other things; of these, some are relative to an opposite, like good to bad, others relative to a thing; and of these, some are defined, some indefinite.’ And he adds: ‘And things [sc. that are relative] in the way that great is to small can all be more and less. (The increase in more and less goes on to infinity: thus broader and narrower should be understood to go on to infinity, and heavier and lighter, and everything spoken of this way.) But things [that are relative] like what is ‘equal’ and ‘remaining the same’ and ‘fitted together’ do not admit of [248.10] more or less – although their opposites do; for there is always something more unequal than any unequal thing, something changing more than anything changing, something more ill-fitting than anything ill-fitting. So these two pairs between them mean that the more and less encompasses everything – except the elemental

One.¹ So something like this [i.e. the ‘more and less’ understood as matter] is said to be unfixed and shapeless and infinite and ‘not being’, in the sense that it is the negation of being. And no part of what it is to be a principle or a substance belongs to such a thing, but it is borne in confusion. For he shows that, just as the proper and preeminent cause is the agent, and is thus a principle, so matter is not a principle. This is why, for followers of Plato, whatever the principle is, it is said to be one.’

E. ALCINOUS, *Didaskalikos* 8.3 (p. 163.4-10)

Matter, which is completely receptive, ought, if it is going to receive the forms completely, to have its basis in a lack of any of their nature; it should be without quality and form for the reception of forms. Since this is what it is like, it is neither body nor incorporeal, but potential body – just as we take bronze to be a potential statue, because when it receives the form it will be a statue.

F. MAXIMUS, *Oration* 41.4d-g

[d] You see matter as it has been subjected to a maker who is good: insofar as it is ordered, that comes from his craft; but if the things in earth are unable to control themselves and experience some disturbance, please hold the craft to be blameless. None of the intentions of the craftsman is lacking in craft, as none of the intentions of a lawgiver is unjust – and divine intellect has a better aim than human craft. [e] In the case of the handiwork of craftsmen, there are some things which their craft effects as outcomes proper to its purpose; but there are others which come about as *consequences* of the creative process – things which are not the products of craft, but the effects of matter. Sparks come from the anvil, and heat-blasts from the furnace, and other effects from other matter – each the inevitable consequence of the work, not the preference of the craftsman. [f] Similarly, it does not matter how many effects which we call the intrusion of evil into human life come about on earth – the craft is to be held blameless in these cases. [g] Things of this kind are as it were the inevitable consequences in the case of the creation of the

¹ πλὴν τοῦ ἐνὸς στοιχείου (cf. **3M**[27-8]: ‘the one together with the indefinite dyad are to be considered as elements’). Szlezák 2010: 398 translates ‘except one part’ (‘außer dem einen Glied’), noting that Hermodorus gives us two types of pair (type 1: e.g. equal-unequal; type 2: e.g. great-small), but then understanding him to say that each of the four terms involved allows of more and less – *except one* (i.e. the first in the type-1 pair: here, ‘equal’). But Hermodorus is working towards a broader point about *matter*, and seems to be saying that *everything implicated in matter* as such admits of more and less. (Otherwise put: every instance of a quality in matter admits of more and less even if, as in the case of equal and the like, its formal paradigm does not.)

universe. What we call evils and disasters, things which we deprecate – these the craftsman calls the preservation of the universe. He is concerned with the whole; evil done to a part is necessary for the sake of the whole.

G. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 1.19.23 (reporting the views of Plato)

The nature of evil did not come about by the agency of god; nor does it exist in its own right. Rather, it comes about as the opposite of the good, and in consequence of it.

H. Aetius 1.9.4-5 ('On Matter')

[4] Aristotle [5] and Plato [say that] matter is body-like, formless, shapeless; unqualified as far as its own nature goes, but that it becomes receptive of forms as a nurse, a mould, a mother.

I. Aetius 1.19.1 ('On Place')

Plato [says that] it [place] is what takes on forms, and called it metaphorically 'material', as a kind of nurse or receiver.

J. PLUTARCH, *On Isis and Osiris* 374E

When we speak of matter, we must not be carried away by the opinions of some philosophers, and conceive of an inanimate body which lacks quality, and is of itself inert and inactive. The fact is that we call oil the 'matter' out of which perfume is made, and gold the matter of a statue, although these are not devoid of all quality.

K. ATTICUS fr. 23 / PLUTARCH cited at Proclus, *On the Timaeus* i. 381.26-382.12 (Proclus is here commenting on Plato's description of matter as 'moving without measure, without order' at *Ti.* 30a)

Followers of Plutarch of Chaeronea and Atticus persistently cite these words as showing that there was a temporal beginning to the genesis of the cosmos; and they say that unordered matter had prior existence, prior to creation, and that the maleficent soul which was responsible for its chaotic movement also had prior existence. For where does movement come from if not soul? And if the movement is unordered, then it comes from an unordered soul. For it is said in the

Laws that the good soul teaches upright and wise things, but the maleficent soul moves without order and governs what is ruled by it without measure [cf. 897b-c]. But when the creative activity of the creator is brought to bear, matter changes to take on the structure of the cosmos, and the [382.10] maleficent soul, partaking of intellect, is made wise and moves in an orderly way: for what leads the former to order is participation in form; the latter, the presence of intellect.

L. ATTICUS fr. 26 = Proclus, *On the Timaeus* i. 391.6-12

He [Porphyry] first attacks those followers of Atticus who champion a plurality of mutually conjoined principles – the creator and the forms – and also say that matter is moved by an ungenerated soul, an irrational and maleficent one, moved ‘without measure, without order’ [*Ti.* 30a]; and that matter exists before the perceptible chronologically, the irrational before reason, and disorder before order.

M. ATTICUS being criticised by Porphyry, as reported at Proclus, *On the Timaeus* i. 392.8-17

If one is ‘suited’ to being ordered, the other to bringing order, where does this ‘suitability’ come from? There must be something that joins both together and makes them commensurate – for these things are quite separate from one another and diametrically opposed: they certainly don’t render themselves suitable for coming together. Of course we could always say that this happens by chance, but we would have to close our ears to the Athenian Stranger when he says [*Lg.* 891c] that it is the source of unintelligent opinion to put the irrational in charge rather than reasoning, chance rather than intelligent skill.

N. PLUTARCH, *On Love* 770A-B

Is it not necessary that earth, mother of men, and the genesis of all animals and plants would be destroyed and completely extinguished if mighty love and [B] the desire for god were to leave matter, and matter were to stop yearning for the divine principle and moving in its pursuit?

O. PLUTARCH, *On the Procreation of the Soul* 1015B-C

We are caught in the difficulties of the Stoics if we introduce evil from nowhere uncaused and ungenerated: for of all that exists neither what is good nor what is without quality can

reasonably furnish the substance or origin of evil. But Plato did not have the same problem as these later philosophers. He did not overlook the third principle and power that is between matter and god, as they did, and so he did not need to put up with that most absurd line of argument that makes the nature of evil appear, somehow or other, spontaneously and incidentally. The Stoics do not concede to Epicurus that an atom can swerve even a tiny amount [C] because it involves him in introducing an uncaused motion from nowhere. But they say that the great evil and misery that exist, and the thousands of further disturbances and discomforts that can affect the body, do not have a cause among the principles, but come about incidentally.

P. PLUTARCH, *On Isis and Osiris* 372E-373C

Isis is what, in nature, is female and receptive to every act of generation – as what Plato calls a ‘nurse’ and ‘all-receptive’ [Ti. 49a, 51a], and what people at large have called many other things, because she changes under the influence of reason to take on every shape and form. She has an innate desire for that which is first and lord over all things, which is nothing other than the Good: she yearns for this and pursues it, fleeing and repelling the evil allotted to her. [372F] She is the place for both and the matter for both; but she always inclines towards the better of them, and makes herself available to it so that it can breed from her, and inseminate her with its emissions and likenesses. She rejoices in these and delights in being pregnant and swollen with these acts of generation: each is an image of substance in matter, a ‘*becoming*’ which imitates *being*. [373A] So it is not inappropriate that in their myths they make the soul of Osiris invisible and imperishable, and say that Typho many times dismembers and hides his body while Isis wanders in search of him to put him back together again. For being and the intelligible and the good are greater than destruction and change. The images of him that are impressed in the perceptible and corporeal, the formulae [*logoi*] and forms and likenesses that it takes on, as if impressions of seals in wax, do not abide for ever but are seized by disorder and chaos which have been driven down here out of the higher realm. This fights against Horus, to whom Isis gave birth, and who is a visual [373B] image of the intelligible cosmos. So it is said that he is charged with illegitimacy by Typho, not being unpolluted and pure like his father, who is reason untainted by contact with anything else and impassive; instead, he is adulterated with matter insofar as he is corporeal. But he prevails and wins, because Hermes, i.e. reason, testifies and shows that nature transformed under the influence of the intelligible gives us the cosmos. While the gods Isis and Osiris were still in the belly of Rhea, Apollo is said to have been born to them – which signifies the fact that, before this cosmos was brought to light and matter was completed by reason, [373C] it was shown to be wanting in itself when it brought forth a

defective first birth. That is why they also say that that god, whom they call the ‘elder Horus’ was born in darkness, a cripple – because he was not order, but a kind of image and representation of the order to come. But this Horus is himself well defined and whole. He has not annihilated Typho complete, but removed his efficacy and strength.

Q. Numenius fr. 52.2-24 = Calcidius, *On the Timaeus* 295

Numenius the Pythagorean refutes the Stoic theory of first principles with Pythagoras’ doctrine, with which, he says, Plato’s is in accord. He says that Pythagoras called god ‘monad’ [*singularitas*] and matter ‘dyad’ [*duitas*], and maintained that the indefinite dyad is not generated, but as something limited it is generated. In other words, the dyad has no origin or generation before it is adorned and acquires form and order; but it *is* generated as something adorned and embellished by god, the agent of order. Since its generation happens later, the unordered and ungenerated dyad should be thought coeval with god, who brought it to order. But [Numenius says that] some Pythagoreans did not understand the meaning of this claim correctly. They thought Pythagoras meant that the indefinite and unmeasured dyad itself sprang from the one monad, regressing from its monadic nature and changing into a dyad. Their understanding is incorrect in making the monad cease to be what it was, and to be what it was not, namely a dyad; in transforming god into matter, and the monad into an infinite and indefinite dyad. No-one even moderately educated would accept this view.

R. Numenius fr. 52.44-64 = Calcidius, *On the Timaeus* 297 (followed by **8X**)

So the Stoics agree that matter is unformed and without quality just as Pythagoras does, but Pythagoras thinks that this is also evil, while the Stoics think that it is neither good nor evil. Further down the road, however, when the Stoics encounter evils and are asked where evils come from, they accuse ‘aberration’ of implanting evils. But they do not go on to explain where this ‘aberration’ comes from when, according to them, there are two principles, namely god and matter, and god is good to highest degree and eminence, and matter, they suppose, neither good nor evil. Pythagoras is not afraid to defend the truth, even when what he says is surprising and tends to contradict common belief. For he says that, if providence exists, evil also must exist. In fact it exists because matter exists and matter is imbued with evil. And if the cosmos is made out of matter, this means that it must be made out of some existing thing that was by nature evil. This is why Numenius praises Heraclitus in his criticism of Homer, who expressed a wish for the destruction and extinction of life’s evils [cf. Homer, *Iliad* 18.107; Heraclitus 22 A22]:

Homer did not understand that what he was wishing for was the destruction of the cosmos, since matter, the source of evil, would be eradicated.

S. CELSUS, quotations from his *True Account* in Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.62, 65, 70

[62] ‘The number of evils in what exists did not and does not and will not diminish or increase: for the nature of the universe is one and the same, and the origin of evil is always the same.’

...

[65] ‘The origin of evils is not easy for a non-philosopher to know, but it is enough to tell the masses that evils do not come from god: they are associated with matter and reside among humans. The cycle of human existence is the same from beginning to end, and it is inevitable that the same things always did and do and will occur in line with its ordained revolutions.’

...

[70] ‘Even if something should strike you as evil, it is not thereby clear whether it is evil: you do not know what it is of benefit to you, or someone else, or the universe.’