

A NEW TESTIMONIUM FOR NUMENIUS: PROCLUS ON THE ORIGIN OF EVIL*

ABSTRACT

*In the course of examining the origin of evil in the *De malorum subsistentia*, Proclus reproduces a position that considers the maleficent (world-)soul as cause of evil. The same entity is held to co-govern the material realm alongside the beneficent world-soul. While scholarship tends to associate the testimonium with Plutarch (and Atticus), this survey shows why Numenius of Apamea is a much more probable candidate. The discussion concludes with further proposals for a new edition of Numenius, including possible traces of Numenius in Iamblichus' *On Soul* and Porphyry's *On the Faculties of Soul*.*

Keywords: Numenius; evil soul; world-soul; Proclus; Plutarch; Platonism

In chapter 40 of the *De malorum subsistentia*, Proclus outlines three positions that advocate for a single (godly, psychic, or intelligible) principle as cause of evil. The first group juxtaposes an evil principle (a 'fount') to the good principle, the second position adduces a 'maleficent soul', and the third argues that 'forms of evil' exist in the demiurgic intellect similarly to other forms. The entire passage runs as follows (with the second position set in italics):

Some indeed say that there is a fount of evils, and from this fount is produced every evil of whatever kind; *others posit a maleficent soul as the principle of the nature of evil and say that the evils are generated from there.* Others again take a middle position and leave forms of evils in the intellectual nature, from which, they claim, evils have their procession just like all other things.

Philosophers come to those conclusions from different suppositions; some of them even make Plato the father of their doctrines. Those, indeed, who place the ideas of all things in the intellectual realm adduce what is said by Socrates in the *Theaetetus* as corroboration of their doctrine, namely that there are two kinds of 'paradigms, the one divine and the other godless'. *Others cite the Athenian Stranger, who introduces two kinds of soul, 'the one beneficent, the other the opposite of beneficent', and asserts that the universe is governed by the first of these alone, but the mortal realm by both.* (transl. Opsomer/Steel)¹

As Opsomer and Steel point out in their edition, the last conception was presumably held by Amelius, while the first doctrine seems to allude to some sort of Manichaean dualism featuring an antagonistic evil god.² The second position is the subject of

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¹ Procl. *De malorum subsistentia* 40.5–18, transl. J. Opsomer and C. Steel, *Proclus: On the Existence of Evils* (London and Ithaca, 2008). The following remarks and references profited greatly from their thorough commentary (cf. Opsomer and Steel [this note], 123–4 nn. 288–93). For the reconstruction of Proclus' text, see B. Strobel, *Proklos, 'Triá opuscula'* (Göttingen, 2014), 963.

² Cf. Ascl. in *Nic. Arithm.* 1.44 Tarán: Ἀμέλιος δέ, οὐκ οἶδα πόθεν ὀρηθεῖς, καὶ τῶν κακῶν οἴεται λόγους εἶναι παρὰ τῷ δημιουργῷ; see H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink, *Proclus Théologie Platonicienne* (Paris, 1968), 1.87 n. 2 (at 153).

this paper and involves seven relevant notions in total (some of which, in turn, imply more subtle premisses):

- (1) There is a unique cause of evil.
- (2) Two (kinds of?) psychic principles exist, one good and the other evil (or ‘maleficent’).
- (3) The latter causes ‘the nature of evil’ (τοῦ κακοῦ φύσεως).
- (4) All evils are generated (γεννᾶσθαι) from it.
- (5) The universe is solely governed by the beneficent (world-)soul.
- (6) The mortal realm is governed by both (world-)souls, the beneficent *and* the maleficent together.
- (7) Plato’s *Laws* is cited to corroborate (some of?) the previous tenets.³

Scholarship has considered Plutarch and Atticus as possible albeit problematic candidates.⁴ They come to mind first because Proclus elsewhere associates the notion of a maleficent soul with those who side with Atticus and Plutarch.⁵ Yet Plutarch is at best an unfit candidate. He does not posit a separate evil (world-)soul (2), all the less so one governing the lower realm (6).⁶ Proclus himself recounts in his commentary on the *Timaeus* that Plutarch’s pre-existing irrational soul does not survive the demiurgic activity as irrational.⁷ A recently discovered Syriac text of Porphyry suggests that Atticus—who is anyway often inextricable from Plutarch in later doxographies—shared Plutarch’s conception in this regard.⁸ For Plutarch, at least, the evil or maleficent soul

³ The reference is to Pl. *Leg.* 896e: ‘Do one or many [souls exist]? “Several”, I will answer for you. Anyway, let us assume no fewer than two—the beneficent [soul] and that capable of achieving the opposite.’ A bit further at 897d, the Athenian Stranger adds: ‘If, however, [the cosmos] moves in a mad and disorderly way, [then owing to] the bad [soul]’.

⁴ M. Erler, *Proklos Diadochos. Über die Existenz des Bösen* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1978), 145 n. 2 notes that it ‘most of all alludes to’ (*meint hier wohl vor allem*) Plutarch and Atticus. The same observation was made by Opsomer/Steel (n. 1), 124 n. 289 who, however, questioned whether Proclus depicts their position accurately; cf. Opsomer/Steel (n. 1), 124 n. 293.

⁵ Cf. Procl. *In Ti.* 1.381.26–382.12. Concerning the phrase οἱ μὲν οὖν περὶ Πλούταρχον τὸν Χααρωνέα καὶ Ἀττικόν, see also D.T. Runia and M. Share, *Proclus. Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus* (Cambridge, 2008), 2.249 n. 224.

⁶ This is the *communis opinio* among Plutarch scholars: cf. J. Opsomer, ‘Neoplatonist criticisms of Plutarch’, in A. Pérez Jiménez and F.C. Casadesús Bordoy (edd.), *Estudios sobre Plutarco. Misticismo y religiones místicas en la obra de Plutarco. Actas del VII Simposio Español sobre Plutarco* (Madrid and Málaga, 2001), 187–99, at 191–7. The theological scheme set out in *De Is. et Os.* 369B–D, however, allows for ‘two opposite principles and two antithetic powers’ (δυσὲν ἐναντίων ἀρχῶν καὶ δυσὲν ἀντιπάλων δυνάμεων, 369C) that govern the material realm together; see J. Dillon, ‘Plutarch and god: theodicy and cosmogony in the thought of Plutarch’, in D. Frede and A. Laks (edd.), *Traditions of Theology* (Leiden, 2002), 223–37, at 229–34.

⁷ Procl. *In Ti.* 1.382.8–13 Diehl (= Atticus, fr. 23 des Places): ‘Once the production of the cosmos at the hands of the Demiurge has supervened, matter changes [its nature] for the formation of the cosmos, and maleficent soul, having participated Intellect, is rendered rational and produces ordered movement’ (transl. Runia/Share [n. 5], 250). Iamblichus confirms this; cf. Iamblich. *Περὶ ψυχῆς* fr. 23 Dillon, *apud* Stob. *Flor.* 1.49.37.80–2 Wachsmuth (= Numenius, fr. 43; Atticus, fr. 10); see also Iamblich. *Περὶ ψυχῆς* fr. 28 Dillon.

⁸ In Porphyry’s citation, Atticus indeed refers to the ‘irrational soul’, without, however, quoting Plato (cf. Porph. *On Principles and Matter* 76). In Porph. *On Principles and Matter* 84, Porphyry remarks: ‘Now, Atticus, who follows Plutarch, also states that the nature of Soul is ungenerated, unordered, and unformed, and that it appeared by itself from eternity and came together with Matter. And because it exists naturally with Matter, is set in order, and imitates the First Forms and Ideas which are in God, also Matter is set in order by God’ (transl. Y. Arzhanov, *Porphyry, ‘On Principles and Matter’. A Syriac Version of a Lost Greek Text with an English Translation, Introduction, and Glossaries* [Berlin, 2021], 119).

merely represents the irrational aspect of soul as an integral part thereof; that is to say, it is not a distinct entity opposed to a counter-principle in the way in which Proclus supposes it in the testimonium discussed here.⁹ Beyond that, Plutarch considers (the irrational) soul as such to be the cause of evil, not the world-soul (as the latter already has received order and harmony from the demiurge) (3).¹⁰ In short, it chiefly speaks for Plutarch that he indeed quotes Plato's *Laws* to corroborate the notion of an evil soul—a figure of thought he admittedly makes extensive use of.¹¹ None the less, this is at most thin evidence given the apparent contradictions to other aspects of Plutarch's cosmology.

If Proclus really had Plutarch in mind, he gave a heavily flawed rendering of his position, perhaps for didactic purposes. It is also possible—and some would uphold: the most likely case—that Proclus had limited access to Plutarch's writings or that he adduced his position from doxographic accounts (in all likelihood, from Porphyry). This would, however, not explain why Proclus transmits two contradicting accounts of Plutarch. Either his knowledge of Plutarch in the *in Timaeum* differs heavily from that in this work or Proclus must have given, for the sake of the argument or illustration, a sketchy abbreviation of a position he actually knew better. Be that as it may, any attempt to save the attribution to Plutarch (or Atticus) is rather unrewarding in the face of a much more probable candidate: Numenius of Apamea (whom later Platonists sometimes mention alongside Plutarch and Atticus).¹²

NUMENIUS

Caution is in order: Numenius' psychology is attested fragmentarily—which would have been less obstructive if the Christian and Neoplatonic lines of transmission were not so difficult to reconcile. Nevertheless, the textual evidence suffices to plausibly relate the testimonium to him.

Calcidius reports in his commentary on the *Timaeus* that Numenius praised Plato for having postulated the existence of two world-souls, one benevolent and the other malicious.¹³ Numenius analogously extended such a dichotomy to human psychology: every human receives a rational, good soul from the demiurge and an irrational, malicious soul from the material cosmos. Porphyry firmly assures that Numenius indeed had two numerically distinct souls in mind (and not merely 'parts of a single soul', μέρη ψυχῆς μιᾶς).¹⁴

⁹ Cf. Opsomer (n. 6), 192.

¹⁰ Cf. Opsomer (n. 6), 192. On Plutarch's theory of evil, see also F. Jourdan, 'Woher kommt das Übel?: Platonische Psychogonie bei Plutarch', *Ploutarchos* 11 (2014), 87–122.

¹¹ Cf. Plut. *De an. proc.* 6–7 (= *Mor.* 1014D–E); see also *Mor.* 1015B; *De virt. mor.* 441C–442C; *De Is. et Os.* 370D–F.

¹² Cf. Iambl. *Περὶ ψυχῆς* fr. 23 Dillon, *apud* Stob. *Flor.* 1.49.37.80–2 Wachsmuth (= Numenius, fr. 43 des Places).

¹³ Numenius, fr. 52.64–7 (*apud* Calcidius, *In Timaeum* 297): *Platonemque idem Numenius laudat, quod duas mundi animas autemet, unam beneficentissimam, malignam alteram.*

¹⁴ Porph. *Περὶ τῶν τῆς ψυχῆς δυνάμεων* fr. 253 Smith, *apud* Stob. *Flor.* 1.49.25a.19 Wachsmuth (= Numenius, fr. 44). We likely find yet another Numenian testimonium in Porphyry's reference to 'those who say we have two souls' in *De abst.* 1.40 as suggested by E.R. Dodds, 'Numenius and Ammonius', *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique* 5 (Vandœuvre, 1960), 7 n. 1. More generally, Porphyry's account of the *κακοεργοὶ δάμνοες* may in one way or another be indebted to Numenius, not least because Porphyry is trying to overcome and refute conceptions that are reminiscent of him. The suggestion that Porphyry heavily draws from Numenius in this work (e.g.

Iamblichus, too, seems to affirm this reading.¹⁵ Maleficent soul subsists in the body owing to its material nature, whereas the beneficent soul, being of supramundane origin, joins the body as an addition (or descends to the body through the planets; cf. Numenius, fr. 12.14–16). Calcidius further recounts in the same passage that Numenius' malicious world-soul is to be identified with matter and that matter, in turn, is the origin of evil. Calcidius' testimonium gives the impression that Numenius stressed the latter part repeatedly, attributing it to both Pythagoras and Plato. This is resemblance enough to relate the testimonium to Numenius above all.

Aside from this glaring doctrinal affinity, it moreover matches Numenius' *modus operandi* of adducing Platonic passages to 'seal' (σημηνόμενον) his own, previously laid out doctrines with Plato's words.¹⁶ Calcidius confirms that Numenius indeed worked out his psychology in reference to Plato. Philoponus likewise suggests that Numenius appealed to Plato's exact wording to establish another (equally controversial) aspect of his psychology, namely the immortality of the irrational soul.¹⁷

NUMENIUS IN IAMBlichUS' *DE ANIMA*

A weak yet noteworthy parallel to these aspects of Numenius' psychology is found in Iamblichus' report that according to Numenius evil enters the soul externally through matter.¹⁸ Consistent with Calcidius, Iamblichus further remarks at another instance that according to 'the former' (ἐκεῖνοι, referring to Numenius and some other Platonist[s]) the soul 'dissolves' (ἀναλύσει) into a 'union without individuation' (ἀδιορίστῳ συναφῇ)—two valuable bits of information that all existing editions of Numenius fail to include.¹⁹

Moreover, it seems reasonable to link this notion with what Iamblichus recounts as the position of 'many of the Platonists and Pythagoreans' at another instance, namely the notion that soul (confers) a *harmonia* 'which is interwoven with the cosmos and

the so-called τῶν Πλατωνικῶν τινες of 2.36.22) was first expressed by F. Thedinga, 'Die Paraenese in des Porphyrios Schrift *Περὶ ἀποχῆς ἐμψύχων*', *RhM* 76 (1927), 54–101, at 97–101.

¹⁵ Cf. Numenius, fr. 43 (abridged version of Iambl. *Περὶ ψυχῆς* 23, *apud* Stob. *Flor.* 1.49.37.76–99 Wachsmuth).

¹⁶ For why it is vital to Numenius' philosophy to attribute (or, as Numenius sees it, to trace back) his doctrines to Plato (and by extension to Pythagoras and other ancient sages), see K. Abdavi Azar, 'Ancient wisdom and Platonism' (Diss., KU Leuven, forthcoming). Numenius clarifies his methodology in fr. 1a.1–6 (*apud* Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 9.7.1.5–7 Mras) as follows: εἰς δὲ τοῦτο δεήσει εἰπόντα καὶ σημηνόμενον ταῖς μαρτυρίαις ταῖς Πλάτωνος ἀναχωρήσασθαι καὶ ζυνοδησασθαι τοῖς λόγοις τοῦ Πυθαγόρου, ἐπικαλέσασθαι δὲ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ εὐδοκμοῦντα ('On this it will be necessary, after stating [one's position] and sealing it with the testimonies of Plato, to go [further] back and bind it with the words of Pythagoras; [and then] to invoke the nations held in honour').

¹⁷ John Philoponus, *In de an.* 9.35–8 Hayduck (= Numenius, fr. 47): 'Of those who proclaim [the soul to be] separable, some have proclaimed all soul to be separable from the body: the rational, the irrational, and the vegetative—such as Numenius, led astray by certain aphorisms of Plato, who said in the *Phaedrus*: *all soul is immortal*'. Philoponus cites Pl. *Phdr.* 245c (which has a different syntax in the original: ψυχὴ πᾶσα ἀθάνατος instead of πᾶσα ψυχὴ ἀθάνατος). While Philoponus does not explicitly report that Numenius cited this very phrase, it is plausible that he did so. Otherwise, it would be superfluous for Philoponus to speculate about possible explanations as to what textual ground might have led Numenius to that position (which he meets with refusal anyway).

¹⁸ Cf. Iambl. *Περὶ ψυχῆς* fr. 23.10–19 Finamore/Dillon (= Numenius, fr. 43).

¹⁹ Cf. Iambl. *Περὶ ψυχῆς* fr. 50 and the unfortunately abridged fr. 42 of Numenius.

inseparable from the heaven'.²⁰ This 'immanentist' stance seems to sit well with the other depictions discussed so far. It also sheds light on the much-debated question as to why Proclus prefers to (somewhat polemically) label Numenius' third god 'creation' (ποίημα).²¹

FINAL REMARKS

One ought to keep in mind that testimonies of the kind discussed here inevitably entail an element of uncertainty. Any possible attribution, no matter to whom, is not without doubts; it is not even clear whether it can be attributed to anyone as a faithful testimonium in the first place. If, however, one wishes to count it as a testimonium proper that can be attributed to someone, this is the most justified conjecture given the textual evidence at hand. Since testimonies for Numenius—arguably the most significant single precursor to Plotinus—are scarce, every possible finding is worthwhile. Hopefully, this humble addition along with the further remarks will enrich scholarly debates on Numenius and make their way to future editions, at least among the *dubia*.²²

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²⁰ Cf. Iambli. Περὶ ψυχῆς fr. 5.7–9, *apud* Stob. *Flor.* 1.49.32.58–60: τὴν δὲ συνδιαπλεκομένην τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἀχώριστον τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πολλοὶ δὴ τινες τῶν Πλατωνικῶν καὶ Πυθαγορείων προκρίνουσιν, transl. J.F. Finamore and J.M. Dillon, *Iamblichus, De Anima: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden, 2002). Other figures who could be meant (as well?) are perhaps Cronius and Nicomachus of Gerasa.

²¹ Cf. Procl. *In Ti.* 1.303.27–304.7 (= Numenius, fr. 21).

²² A new edition should further consider re-establishing some of the testimonia identified by E.A. Leemans, *Studie over den wijsgeer Numenius van Apamea met uitgave der fragmenten* (Brussels, 1937) but omitted in the considerably more influential edition of É. des Places, *Numénius: Fragments* (Paris, 1973). There is no reason not to include at least Procl. *In Ti.* 1.304.22–305.6 (= Test. 18 L) and Porph. *Vita Plotini* 17 (= Test. 16 L). G. Boys-Stones, *Numenius, fragments; draft translation* (published online, 2014) sets a good example in this regard. Thankfully, he also includes more context for some testimonia, which can even prove crucial for understanding Numenius (cf. fr. 22). There is, however, still work to do, as the discussion of fr. 42 (= Test. 34 L) above illustrates.