

THE DESCENT OF THE SOUL

Almost everyone who discusses the *Enneads* remarks at some stage that the theory of the production of the material world by Soul involves Plotinus in very great difficulties. On the one hand he believes with Plato's *Phaedo* that the soul is a prisoner in the body and that the material world is an inferior version of the intelligible; on the other he holds with Plato's *Timaeus* that the material world is a product of God and the best possible world of its kind, that it is the work of Providence and that it is full of the glory of its maker. When thinking of the return of the soul to its source, our commentator will continue, Plotinus thinks of a flight from the world and of souls living in the world as fallen and being punished for their fall by bodily life; when opposing the extreme dualism of the Gnostics, for whom the creator of the material universe is evil and his productions monstrous, Plotinus takes the contrary position and is almost Franciscan in his praises of the excellence of the cosmos and his talk of the importance of the soul as its maker and organizer. The two positions may be incompatible, the result of conflicting pressures which Plotinus was never able to resolve. Nevertheless even if it is true that he did not achieve a complete harmony of outlook, there appears to be a greater consistency in the *Enneads* than is generally admitted. In considering this degree of consistency, we shall touch briefly on such problems as the relation of matter and evil and the nature of the human soul, problems whose further clarification will be beneficial for the student of the philosophy of Plotinus in its widest aspects.

One of the crucial questions in Plotinus' dispute with the Gnostics is over the moral nature of the World Soul or some similar power. In *Ennead* 2.9.10 Plotinus refers to the Gnostic view—it would seem to be Valentinian—that the World Soul

and a certain Wisdom or Sophia 'declined' and entered the material world. He goes on to show the contradictions in the Gnostic account of what the material world is and how it came to exist, but this can be left aside for the time being. Our present aim is to make it clear that, for the adversaries of Plotinus, the World Soul is capable of a moral lapse and its products are the direct result of that moral lapse. Hence the material world is self-evidently evil. Plotinus' view of the World Soul, however, is quite different. The World Soul, as we shall see, is different in many respects from particular souls, and in no respect more clearly than in this, namely that it is particular souls which, in Inge's words, are travellers in the spiritual world, capable of ascent to the realms of pure Form or of the basest servitude to their material inferiors. The World Soul, on the other hand, is an hypostasis of true Being; it does not enter the world of sense and change, but produces and creates that world from above. Let us therefore look at those passages of the *Enneads* where this is explained.

Some of the Gnostics had claimed that the World Soul made the world 'after the failure of its wings' (πτερορρησασαν, 2.9.4.1), as the language of the *Phaedrus* puts it. Plotinus' reply is that the World Soul could not suffer such a thing, and therefore by implication that Plato must have been thinking in terms of the soul of the individual. If the World Soul is fallen (σφαλεῖσσαν), Plotinus challenges, tell us the cause of the fall! If it has been fallen from eternity, then its essential nature must be a fallen nature—which is impossible. If it fell at some particular time, why did it not do so earlier? The truth of the matter, in Plotinus' view, is that the construction of the world by the World Soul is not a decline (νεῦσις), but rather the opposite (μὴ νεῦσις). For if it is a decline, then the soul has forgotten its origin, and if it has forgotten its origin, it could not create, for we know that creation is the reflection of contemplation. The creative soul should be supposed to be *inclining* to its superiors rather than *declining* towards formlessness and evil.¹ Since creation is the result of such upward inclinations,

another of the Gnostics' favourite themes is ruled out. It is ridiculous, says Plotinus, to imagine that the World Soul performs its creative acts in order to gain glory.² That is a merely anthropomorphic interpretation of the divine activity.

Plotinus' extended treatment of Gnostic theories on the descent of the World Soul in chapters 10 and 11 of this same tract enables us to pursue his own ideas further. It is clear from 2.9.10.23 ff. that the Gnostics talked both of the coming down (κατελθεῖν or νεῦσαι) of the soul, and of its 'illuminating' the darkness (ἐλλάμψαι μόνον τῷ σκότῳ). Yet if it did not come down (μὴ κατηλθεν), asks Plotinus in 2.9.11.1, but illuminated the darkness, how can it be said to have declined in any sinful sense? The fact that it sheds light cannot be called such a declension. Only by leaving its own world and descending to the level of what is illuminated could the soul be said to have declined. Such movement, which would presumably involve taking on a body and entering into the world of space (ἡ δὲ ἦλθε τοπικῶς), is not a *necessary* complement to 'illumination'. The position of Plotinus, as opposed to that of the Gnostics, is that the World Soul remains above and illuminates matter without having physical contact with it.

It should be noticed that we have not yet determined what is illuminated, but have only seen that the World Soul does not descend to the lower level. Yet the language at the end of 2.9.10 should indicate the direction of Plotinus' thought on this further issue. Here there is a clear allusion to Gnostic dualism. For when the Gnostics talk of illumination, we must understand that the darkness which is illuminated is viewed as some kind of material substrate. Yet although this was probably the view of Plato and although Numenius a few years earlier had taken a dualistic position on this issue, Plotinus finds it vague and appears to despise it. They talk of matter, he says, or of materiality (ύλότης) or of whatever else they want to call it. Yet if Plotinus does not accept an independent material substrate, how does he understand the illumination?

Before we turn to these difficulties, let us finally settle the question of the World Soul. The opinion that it does not descend, that its illumination is not a moral decline, is not merely introduced as polemic against the Gnostics. In 3.9.3-5 we read that the World Soul is always above, in 4.8.4 that it is only after abandoning the World Soul in the Intelligible World that particular souls fall into evil here on earth, in 4.8.7.27 ff. that 'the so-called Soul of the All has never taken part in lower activity, but unaffected by evils and in a state of contemplation oversees what is below it and simultaneously stays fixed in what is above'. Finally it takes only a passage of the next section (4.8.8.13 ff.) to summarize the situation. Although every soul, including the World Soul, is concerned both with the Intelligible World and with the governing of matter, yet the manner of operation of the World Soul is distinguished by its purity. As MacKenna-Page renders it: 'The Soul of the All, as an entirety, governs the universe through that part of it which leans to the body side, but since it does not exercise a will based on calculation as we do, but proceeds by purely intellectual act as in the execution of an artistic conception—its ministrance is that of a labourless overpowering (ὑπερέχουσα ἀπόνως).' We may leave the matter there. So far as the World Soul is concerned, there is no descent. Both the production and the guidance of the material world are the fulfilling of a function, but one to which not the slightest stain attaches. We can therefore now compare this situation with that of the individual soul.

There is a difference between the activities of the World Soul and of individual souls which is immediately obvious. The World Soul governs a body, the material universe, which will be maintained for ever in fundamentally the same state (4.8.2.15), for in Plotinus' view the four elements will never pass away, nor will the various species of living creatures that inhabit the earth's surface. The individual body, however, is a temporary and fragile lodgement for a soul which may from time to time pass through a whole string of such bodies with-

out necessarily forming an intimate connection with any of them. This different status of the body of the world and of individual bodies helps to indicate the different effects they will have on their governing souls. The individual soul governs what is short-lived and therefore partial; the World Soul governs something that will endure in some sense in its completeness and perfection.

These differences are made clearer when we consider some of the language Plotinus uses to describe the actions of the World Soul and individual souls in their creative aspects. The Gnostics, we recall, had tried to show the World Soul as guilty in its creative activities. Plotinus rejects this, as we saw, in many forms, and, as we must now notice, in a peculiar and significant form at 2.9.11.21-2. The World Soul does not create, we read, out of a spirit of vainglory and audacity (ἀλαζονείαν καὶ τόλμαν). The second of these words is peculiarly significant because it is precisely this quality of audacity which may be the ruin of the *individual* soul. What has caused the souls to forget their father? asks Plotinus, at the opening of 5.1.1. For these souls, is the reply, the beginning of evil is their audacity (τόλμα) . . . and their desire to be self-centred (τὸ βουληθῆναι δέξει τῶν εἶναι).³ Here then is the most striking difference between the World Soul and the individual souls. Somehow or other the individual souls may be, and are, sinful.

When we consider the consequences of this for Plotinus' account of the material world, a paradox will confront us at once. In some sense both the World Soul and individual souls are responsible for the creation and maintenance of the world, yet their moral relationship to it is different. We saw in the case of the World Soul that a simple illumination (ἔλλαμψις) of whatever is below carries no stain of guilt, but that such guilt is incurred if bodily or spatial contact with these inferior products takes place. If we wish to examine how such contact occurs, we must consider further how matter and its products are actually produced, and the relation of the individual souls to them.

We must return once more to the treatise against the Gnostics, this time to 2.9.12.39ff. Here Plotinus considers—and implicitly rejects—two Gnostic alternatives. One view is that when the World Soul descended it saw the pre-existent darkness and lightened it. This view, which makes matter, materiality, or whatever the Gnostics called it, a kind of darkness unconnected with the emanation scheme from the One, is impossible for Plotinus. If the darkness is pre-existent, he adds, meaning if it is an independent reality (like the 'space' of the *Timaeus*), then where did it come from? It could not, he assumes, be uncaused. Then there is the other Gnostic alternative. What if the darkness were created by the 'decline' of the soul itself? If that is the case, then it is the nature of the soul itself to act immorally ('decline' in the Gnostic sense) and guilt is present in the realm of true Being—a conclusion which Plotinus goes on to speak of as reckless folly and which by implication he has rejected earlier in this very chapter. In line 32, for example, there is an examination of the concept of illumination (ἔλλαμψις). This must be either natural or unnatural. If it is natural, it must be eternal (and there is no need of an independent material substrate); if it is unnatural, then the realms not only of becoming but also of Being and Form are evil.

Nevertheless the notion of illumination is appropriate. There is illumination from the World Soul and it is eternal and natural. That being so, matter cannot be isolated as any kind of pre-existent darkness, for there is no pre-existence either temporally or ontologically. Matter cannot pass away, we read in 2.9.3.16, for if it could why did it come into existence? If it is isolated, and apart from the process of illumination from the World Soul and ultimately from the One, then the effects of the World Soul are spatially limited—which is impossible. Therefore the other alternative mentioned in this chapter must be the true one: matter is an 'implication' of the emanation process (παρακολουθεῖν). It is wholly negative, and thus not identical with the Gnostic 'darkness' whether

pre-existent or otherwise, though it could not for other reasons be pre-existent. It is simply what is 'there' when nothing is there, when the emanation process finally runs out. It may be compared with a mirror (3.6.13.49), but only in so far as other things appear in it, not in such a way as to make it a material object.

The same doctrine and the same word for the 'implication' of matter (ἠκολούθησεν) are to be found in a very difficult section of the early *Ennead* 4.8.⁴ In view of the disputes on the meaning of this section, it will be necessary to quote the Greek in full. Plotinus writes as follows:

Εἴτ' οὖν ἦν αἰεὶ ἡ τῆς ὕλης φύσις, οὐχ οἷόν τε ἦν αὐτὴν μὴ μετασχεῖν οὖσαν τοῦ πᾶσι τὸ ἀγαθὸν καθόσον δύναται ἕκαστον χορηγοῦντος· εἴτ' ἠκολούθησεν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἡ γένεσις αὐτῆς τοῖς πρὸ αὐτῆς αἰτίοις, οὐδ' ὡς ἔδει χωρὶς εἶναι, ἀδυναμίᾳ πρὶν εἰς αὐτὴν ἐλθεῖν στάντος τοῦ καὶ τὸ εἶναι οἷον ἐν χάριτι δόντος.

Bréhier's view of this is as follows:⁵ 'Either matter has always existed... or else its creation is a necessary consequence of antecedent causes. In the first case, it is a term distinct from the realities which proceed progressively from the One, and it may set itself against these realities. In the second case, it is the last term in the procession of the realities, that is to say, the sterile stage in which the productive force which has proceeded from the One at last dies out.' This view, which is presumably akin to that held by Puech,⁶ neglects the whole significance of the words οὐδ' ὡς ἔδει χωρὶς. This phrase must imply that it is the second alternative account of matter which might seem to suggest that matter is separate (χωρὶς) from the One. What Plotinus is saying is that even if matter comes into existence as a necessary consequence of the causes πρὸ αὐτῆς—we will consider these words in a moment—even then it is not separate. This must mean that the first alternative ('if matter has always existed') can be the more easily understood to involve an ultimate connection of the emanation process with the production of matter. That being so, Bréhier's interpretation cannot be correct. The antithesis must be not

between matter as independent of the process of emanation and matter as the last stage of that process, but of a different kind. The antithesis must be, as I have suggested elsewhere,⁷ between an eternal matter and a matter created in time. It is true that this latter possibility is not Plotinus' view, and indeed that it is a view which he rarely even considers; yet it is certainly not a view with which any third-century thinker would have been unfamiliar. The words πρὸ αὐτῆς therefore must have a temporal reference, for the sense of the whole passage forbids any other. Plotinus' second alternative is therefore that even if matter is a temporal creation, not even so is it apart from the One, for how could the One not be equal to any achievement? The fact that this is not his own view makes the words 'not even so' (οὐδ' ὡς) doubly appropriate.⁸ Under no circumstances can matter be a darkness independent of the One, as Gnostics held. Nevertheless we should notice that Plotinus uses the word ἠκολούθησεν here of the alternative which is not his own. It is clearly a term he found peculiarly appropriate to the results of the emanation process when that process is viewed dynamically.

Matter therefore is to be accounted for as the last product in the stream of products deriving ultimately from the One. It is in some sense an outflowing which has come from the Soul of the All; yet since it is purely negative we must consider the question of how the material world comes to be variegated and multiform. The fact is of course that it is an image of the Intelligible World in general *and* of the intelligible Forms in particular. The particular Forms are represented by their *logoi* in the world of matter, and in some cases at least these *logoi* must be seen as souls. We must therefore consider the function of the individual soul in the creative process.

The harmony of the Intelligible World is such that each Form implies the World of Forms and the World of Forms implies each individual Form. Nor are the characteristics of the individuals fundamentally different from the characteristics of the whole. At the level of soul, however, as we have

already seen, the element of multiplicity has increased and the great effect of this increase is that although the World Soul will always remain pure, individual souls in their lower aspects are capable of a 'fall' comparable to that posited by Christian theology.

This is perhaps best explained in *Ennead* 1.1.12. Here the correct sense of the word *νεῦσις*, which we have seen used to refer both to upward and to downward movement in the treatise against the Gnostics, is explained more fully. The question before Plotinus is clear. When the soul produces its image in non-being by the customary process of emanation, must not this kind of 'decline' (*νεῦσις*) be a sin (*ἄμαρτία*)? Plotinus' answer is that if the 'decline' (*νεῦσις*) is an illumination of non-being and nothing more, then there is no sin. The sin occurs when a soul does more than illuminate, when it actually follows its own image and becomes enslaved by it. How, we may ask, could such a thing happen? And above all, is such a thing necessary for the process of creation?

The matter is raised in the sharpest form at 4.8.5.16. The descent of the soul involves a twofold sin: the motives for the descent involve sin; and sin is committed by the soul once it has descended. Both these sins are punished, the one by the descent itself, the other by the transmigration of the soul from body to body until it has completed its expiation.⁹ It is natural that once the soul is down at the material level it will act unworthily. Our problem is in the first of the two sins, the sin involved with the motive for the descent itself. We have seen in the case of the World Soul that the act of creation by illumination is free from taint. The point must be, therefore, that in the case of the individual soul this act is committed from motives which are at the least not wholly pure. We must therefore examine all the reasons which govern this descent.

Line 26 of this very section (4.8.5) provides us with an answer. Three reasons are given why the soul descends. It comes down through a voluntary pressure (*ῥοπή ἀντεξουσίῳ*) and through the nature of its own power, both creative and

administrative, in the material world. Clearly if there is a sin involved in this descent it will be connected with the 'voluntary pressure' and Plotinus, we should recall, has taken the word *ῥοπή* from the *Phaedrus*, where Plato speaks in the myth of the charioteer of the evil horse weighing the chariot down.¹⁰ This 'pressure' then is associated in Plotinus' mind with a kind of *nostalgie de la boue*. We must look for further instances of its use—and of the use of *ἀντεξουσίος* also.

The two words occur together again at 3.2.4.37, where we find *ῥέπω* used in a neutral sense in the sentence: Living things that have voluntary (*ἀντεξουσίον*) motion may incline (*ῥέπτοι*) now to the better, now to the worse. And this of course is the case with the soul, which may either turn itself to the World Soul and the Intelligible World beyond or down to its own products and the material sphere. More useful in our present enquiry are 4.3.17.25, where we hear of souls being pulled down like the captain who goes down with his ship, and 5.1.1.5—a passage we have looked at already—where after learning that among the causes of evil for the soul are its own audacity and self-centredness, we hear that it is in trouble through rejoicing in its own freedom (*τῷ δὴ ἀντεξουσίῳ . . . ἡσθεῖσαι*).

The individual soul therefore need not content itself with illumination as does the World Soul; it has the choice of good or evil before it and is responsible for its own decisions. It is inevitable that it will 'decline' towards the material world for the sake of creation, and there is nothing wrong in that. The crucial point is in its attitude towards its own 'decline'. The test for the soul is whether it falls in love with itself and its products and forgets its source, for it has the power to take this course if it wishes. We can see therefore why at 4.3.13.17 ff. Plotinus says that the souls descend neither through compulsion nor from free-will in the sense of rational choice. Their act, he continues, is a kind of natural leap, such as men make towards marriage, or in a few cases towards the performance of noble deeds. We say of such people that their actions come

naturally, and Plotinus cannot strictly call such naturalness either freedom or compulsion. As he puts it again at 4.8.5.3ff., necessity includes the voluntary, for the descent is neither wholly voluntary nor wholly involuntary. No soul voluntarily descends to its inferiors, if we understand 'voluntary' in the Socratic sense, yet there does appear to be some fault in submitting with too good a grace to however natural and inevitable a tendency if that tendency may lead to sin. We must suppose therefore that the degree of sin involved is determined by the nature of the individual soul itself. The pure soul can act in its descent as does the World Soul, and no harm is done. Most souls, however, will be overwhelmed by their own handiwork and accept the necessity of descent so gladly as to forget the moral duty to return. How Plotinus describes this particular aberrancy we must now consider.

Plotinus relies heavily upon two texts from the *Phaedrus* in his description of the production and care of the material world. In 246B he finds that soul concerns itself with what is soulless, and in 247A that there is no place for envy or jealousy in what is divine. Hence the soul by its nature must overflow and produce and guide the material world. At this stage the production of the material world would appear to be parallel to the production of *Noûs* by the One and Soul itself by *Noûs*. And in the case of the World Soul this parallel seems to hold. Yet in the case of the particular souls it does not, for paradoxically enough there appears to be some kind of self-centredness involved in the creative power of the particular soul of which the World Soul has no share—a self-centredness which must have to do with the individual soul's power to choose between good and evil and which must explain why the individual souls fall and the World Soul does not. We might expect to find the fact that the individual soul is sent down by the World Soul explained as an overflowing of the individual, but what Plotinus actually says is very different. In 5.2.1.19ff. we read that when individual souls look back to the World Soul from which they have come they gain their

fulfilment, but that when they proceed to another motion they produce images of themselves which are the powers of sensation in the animal world and growth in the world of plants. It would seem that the production is not a spontaneous overflowing which occurs as a result of the soul's looking back to its source, but a contrary and sinful, yet deliberate move away. It seems that, though the soul will only be fulfilled by a return whence it has come, it is too weak to concentrate itself upon that return and as a result of this weakness turns away from its source and creates the world of matter. Such a situation would not of course mean that the material world is evil, but rather that the soul is weak, not that this is not the best of all possible worlds and an image of the divine, but that so far as the individual soul, though not the World Soul, is concerned, it would have been better if it had never existed.

The same critical picture of the creative activities of the individual soul can be found in *Ennead* 3.9.3. Here we find that the 'partial' soul, as Plotinus here names the individual, is illuminated (*φωτίζεται*) by moving back towards its ontological priors, for by doing so it will re-enter the world of reality, but when it does the opposite and is drawn towards its inferiors it approaches the non-existent. At this stage its activity is described as follows: 'It does this when it is carried towards itself, for when its will is set on itself (*πρὸς αὐτὴν γὰρ βουλομένη*) it produces the image of itself which comes after itself, and this is non-being.' We should recall immediately 5.1.1, where it was 'the will to belong to themselves' that helped to bring evil to the souls and made them forget their father. Now this very self-will is seen to be part of the creative process itself, so far as the individual soul is concerned. We can see why Plotinus speaks of the descent in the passage we examined above as a twofold sin.

So far this tract has only described a part of the process of the construction of the material world, and that process has involved the soul in guilt. It goes on to describe the second stage. Stage one has involved the production of an image of

the soul, which Plotinus calls non-being and which is plainly to be thought of as matter. The next stage is a second descent to that matter or image and the introduction of form to it. We should notice the difference here between matter in the Intelligible World and physical matter. Intelligible matter once produced has the power to turn back to its source to receive its form from that source;¹¹ the prime matter of the physical universe has no power whatever; it is dead, and can only acquire the semblance of form by a further completed act of the soul. 3.9.3 goes on to explain this second act: 'By a kind of inferior orientation it shapes the image and approaches it rejoicing (ἡσθεῖσα).' We should probably be suspicious of this rejoicing. From 5.1.1 we are aware that when the soul rejoiced in its freedom of choice, this rejoicing led to trouble. It is a dangerous pleasure that the soul enjoys. Its true pleasure can only be found in a return to its source.

The creative activities of the individual soul therefore are fraught with sin. Instead of creating by mere reflection, as does the World Soul, the individual has acted out of an incipient revolt against its priors and an urge of irrepressible selfishness. Now let us see how it behaves in the other of its proper functions, namely the administration of what it has produced. Here too we shall find its performance inadequate. The theme is the same in a number of passages, but 4.3.12 will perhaps prove the most fruitful starting-point. The souls of men, says Plotinus, have, as it were, seen their images in the mirror of Dionysus¹² and as a result have rushed down from their homes above to the inferior realm. This is a picture with which we are already familiar, but Plotinus goes on to explain (line 6) that the depth of the descent is increased by the fact that the souls are compelled to care for the matter to which they have come. Now we recall that the powers of the soul were properly to be deployed not only in the production of the material universe, but in its administration. Yet we are now to understand that this administration, this concern for the soulless, as the *Phaedrus* puts it, brings additional dangers in its

train. The soul descends, as lines 38-9 of our present chapter tell us, to whatever aspect of the material world it itself resembles. If it is itself humane, it will therefore enter a human body; if it is bestial, it will enter the body of a beast.¹³ All evidently still depends on the nature of the soul itself and on its own power to choose its own fortune. Yet this choice will not only affect the type of material object the individual soul will create and administer, but also the extent of that administration. For this administration, though admirable in itself, as it is in the case of the World Soul, can be taken too far, and the soul, while devoting itself to its products, can conceal its lack of moral and philosophical direction in a specious concern for the material universe (4.8.2.26-30). This theme occurs on a number of occasions. We have looked at 4.3.17.21 ff. already. Here the soul is compared to the pilot who is so concerned for his ship that he is weighed down and sinks with her. Similarly the soul is so involved in its care for matter that it ceases to be its own master. It is as though it has fallen victim to magical powers which bind it fatally to the material world (πεδηθεῖσαι γοητείας δεσμοῖς, σχεθεῖσαι φύσεως κηδεμονίᾳ).

The same picture can be seen at 4.8.7.9-10. So long as the soul is restrained in the amount of administrative care it lavishes on its material products, all is well; but there will come a time when through excessive zeal it will go overboard (εἰς τὸ εἶσω δύοιτο). It will then sink to the level of its own image, for, as we read elsewhere (1.8.4.7), it is disastrous for the soul to be so involved with its material work that it becomes enslaved. 4.8.2.42 runs as follows: 'Commerce with the body is repudiated for only two reasons, as hindering the soul's intellectual act and as filling it with pleasure, desire, pain; but neither of these misfortunes can befall a soul which has never deeply penetrated into the body (εἰς τὸ εἶσω ἔδυστο τοῦ σώματος), is not a slave but a sovereign ruling over a body of such an order as to have no need and no shortcoming and therefore to give ground for neither desire nor fear' (trans. MacKenna-Page).

We have already looked at 4.8.7. This chapter contains two further points which should be considered here, one of a unique character in the *Enneads*, the other indicative of Plotinus' general position on the great problem which underlies the whole of the present discussion, namely the relation between the World Soul and individual souls. The first point is this: Plotinus remarks (4.8.7.11) that after the soul has fallen and involved itself too much in the material sphere, it is still able to recover itself and is able to turn its newly acquired knowledge to account since, by experiencing evil and its results, it can learn the better to appreciate goodness. This is a commonplace enough idea, and it harmonizes well with the traditional Greek note of learning by suffering, but what is curious for Plotinus is that the soul can acquire a *greater* knowledge of realities by this roundabout means. His more normal position appears in 4.8.5, where it is merely said that by acquiring knowledge of evil and by bringing its potentially creative powers into full operation, the soul will not suffer any permanent harm—so long as its descent into the material world is not of long duration. Of course the realization of the soul's powers *per se* could only be a good; it is the knowledge of evil which would bring the trouble, for the soul is all too ready to be seduced.

The second point we must clarify in 4.8.7 is of greater importance, namely that concerning the relation of the individual soul to the World Soul. We read in line 10 that when the soul makes its over-zealous dash into the material world, it ceases to be 'a whole soul with a whole soul' (μη μείναισα ὅλη μεθ' ὅλης). The point of this is explained in detail in 4.8.4, which is perhaps the most important chapter of the whole of the *Enneads* for our present problem. It will be valuable to describe the chapter in detail. Plotinus begins by saying that the individual souls have both the desire to return to the Intelligible World and a power directed to the world below. They are like the sun (and the higher hypostases of the Plotinian universe), in that they do not grudge their life-giving

powers to their inferiors. They are thus able to share the general administrative work of the universe with the World Soul (συνδιοικεῖν). They are seated around the World Soul like kings around the King of Kings and engage in administrative work without descending from their thrones. Yet then unaccountably comes the crucial stage. The souls seem to grow weary of their collective endeavour; they want to carve out kingdoms for themselves; they become self-centred, and since they are self-centred their collective nature is lost (ἐκ τοῦ ὅλου εἰς τὸ μέρος τε εἶναι καὶ ἑαυτῶν). The result is that fearful state in the Plotinian world, plurality and separation. Each soul retires (ἀναχωροῦσιν), looks after its own, is isolated (μονοῦται), weakened and bereft of the universal. Isolated with its own particular product, it becomes more and more closely involved with it (δύσσα πολὺ εἰς τὸ εἶσω, line 21). This is the real loss of its wings, the real fall; at this stage, against all its best interests, the soul is in chains, a prisoner shut up in a bodily cave.

The truth about the descent of the soul should now be apparent. There is nothing wrong with the material world *per se*; it is the best of all possible material worlds. It is mere blasphemous folly on the part of the Gnostics to revile the world and its maker, and to reject the kindly hand of Providence. The fault lies not in the creation of the world, but in the attitude of the individual soul.

Yet before concluding we must attempt to relate this question of the attitude of the soul to the more general problem of the relation of matter and evil. For a full discussion of this the reader may be referred elsewhere,¹⁴ but there are a few details which are relevant to our present problems. There are a number of passages where Plotinus refers to matter as the 'prime evil'. At 1.8.5.26 we read that as individuals we are not the source or beginning (ἀρχή) of evil. Evil is prior to us and existed before we took on our bodily forms. As 1.8.8.38 puts it, what is without measure is evil primarily, and this, we are to assume, is matter. Yet the true interpretation of such passages

is to be found at the end of 2.4.16. Since matter is sheer negativity, it is utterly destitute of sense, virtue, beauty, strength, shape, form and quality, and must be called the complete ugliness, the absolute evil. In other words, negativity has positively bad effects. Matter is no metaphysical evil, for it only exists as 'non-being', but its sheer lack of reality means that its effects will be bad. This is the sense in which it is the prime evil.

With this clear in our minds we can understand the proper significance of the very difficult chapter 1.8.14, which discusses the relation of the pure negativity which is matter to the soul's inherent weakness. The suggestion at the beginning of the chapter is that vice (*κακία*) may be a weakness of the soul. Now such weakness, says Plotinus (line 17), must exist either in souls separate from matter, or in souls enveloped in matter, or in both. But in fact, he argues, there will be no weakness in a soul which is wholly apart from matter, such, we may suppose, as is the World Soul. It inevitably follows that there will only be weakness where there is matter, and thus entry into matter is the fall of the soul and its weakness (l. 44). Hence we have to conclude that matter is the cause of weakness and of vice for the soul (l. 50).

Yet we recall that matter has no positive power except in so far as it is not good. While metaphysically nothing it can be morally damaging. And so we can summarize the problem. The cause of the fall of the soul, as we saw earlier, is its desire to be by itself, its selfishness, its being overwhelmed by gross pleasures under the pretext of caring for the body, its deliberate choice of a different manner of behaviour towards the material world from that of the World Soul, its origin. Yet it is the presence of matter itself, or we might say its non-presence, which induces this weakness. Or perhaps what Plotinus means is that the weakness itself is what matter really is and that we should define matter quite simply as a weakness of the soul.

Yet if we take this line, the inevitable questions which

Plotinus has not attempted to answer will come up: Why does matter affect the particular souls and not the World Soul? Why does the particular soul descend too low when it does not appear necessary for the construction of the world that it should do so? One might infer a reply to these questions, but Plotinus gives none. The reply would be on the lines that somehow the individual soul is prone to weakness, that its possession of the power of choice between good and evil means that inevitably it will sometimes choose evil. It is probably only the influence of Plato which prevented Plotinus answering in this way.¹⁵

To conclude, then, there is no evidence that Plotinus thinks that the creation and existence of the material world is evil *per se*. His doctrine of the relation of matter and evil is clear and consistent. Where he has failed to draw the conclusions of his own premisses is in his account of the potentialities for evil in the individual soul.