Order from disorder—that is what the author John Phillips (JP) promises, and that is what he delivers. This book, the fifth in the series of *Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism and the Platonic tradition*, has a double aim. It is both a clear analysis of Proclus’ doctrine of evil, and a retracing of that doctrine to its roots. The author discusses Proclus’ Platonic sources and the doctrines he criticizes, primarily those of Plotinus, but also of dualists like Plutarch, and Numenius.

The monograph consists of an introduction, six chapters divided over three parts, and a conclusion. In the introductory chapter, which gives an overview of the relevant Platonic passages and of the Stoic and Aristotelian reactions to those passages, the main issues of the book present themselves: the source(s) of evil, its existence, evil and divine providence, the disorderly motion (*Timaeus* and *Statesman*), matter, the World Soul, and human free will.¹

Each of the six chapters consists of translations of key passages from Proclus’ works plus an analysis. The passages, taken especially from *De Malorum Subsistenta* (*DMS*) and *In Timaeum commentaria* (*In Tim.*), and all in the author’s own translations, take up about a quarter of the book. This is somewhat surprising, since a beautiful English translation of the *DMS* was published as recently as 2003 by Opsomer and Steel.² Nonetheless it is pleasant to have all the major Proclan passages on evil—including passages from the *In Remp.*, for which no recent English translation exists—together in one book, in translations that are accurate and read well.

The first part of the book contains a general discussion of Proclus’ doctrine of evil. Chapter 1 sketches an outline of his doctrine and the main issues he is dealing with. Proclus wants at any cost to defend a monistic position against theological dualism, and therefore adopts the notion of evil as privation. There is no ultimate evil principle, next to and opposite the Good as the ultimate cause of everything. Instead, evil has no real cause, but is the absence of Good.

Chapter 2 is a more detailed treatment of Proclus’ definition of evil as privation, and of how it reconciles divine providence (*Timaeus*) with the necessary existence of evil (*Theaetetus*). Unlike Aristotle, Proclus distinguishes two types of privation,

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¹) The author announces that he will concentrate on 5 topics (p. 6), but I am not sure which they are.
²) Note that the bibliographical data JP gives for this translation are incorrect: its year of publication is given as 1999. Translations of the *In Tim.* are currently appearing with CUP.
namely the absence of a certain state and the presence of the opposite or contrary of a state—and evil is the latter. In a detailed analysis of Plotinus’ arguments for the identification of evil with matter (esp. *Enn.* I.8), and Proclus’ reactions to them, JP shows why for the latter evil cannot be the absolute opposite to the Good, yet is at the same time more than mere absence of it.

In the second and third parts of the book, the author discusses this notion of evil as privation in more detail with regard to body and soul respectively. The second part “Evil as privation: the body” consists of two chapters, chapter 3 on evil as disorderly motion and chapter 4 on irrational nature. The third chapter explains how Proclus tries to solve the problem of the pre-cosmic disorderly motion (*Timaeus* and *Statesman*), by making a conceptual differentiation between corporeal and ordering generation. This differentiation enables him to counter dualistic explanations of the disorderly motion by Numenius and others, and to refute the Plotinian ascription of causal power to matter.

In the fourth chapter JP further elaborates one of the notions that plays a part in corporeal generation, namely that of corporeal nature. It seems, however, that in this chapter JP merges two notions of nature into one: nature properly speaking—i.e. an immanent causal principle of motion, separate from soul,\(^3\) and 'the corporeal nature', where 'nature' simply means 'being', or 'essence'.\(^4\) To give but one reason why the merger is not likely: nature properly speaking is, according to Proclus, the subject of the entire *Timaeus* (cf. *In Tim.* I 2.7–8). Corporeal nature, on the other hand, is what is responsible for the disorderly motion of the corporeal. A merger of the two would therefore reduce the *Timaeus* to a dialogue about the disorderly motion.

The third and shorter part, entitled “Evil as privation: the soul”, consists of a discussion of some remaining topics relating to the World Soul and the individual human soul. Chapter 5 describes Proclus’ rejection of the evil World Soul of Plutarch and others, and the sixth and final chapter treats of evil as a weakness in the human soul. JP shows very clearly how Proclus—as opposed to Plotinus—explains the descent of the soul as a rational choice, and hence the evil in the soul as residing in the rational part of the soul as well.

The book would have benefited from a separate discussion of what is probably the most important notion in Proclus’ doctrine of evil, namely that of *parhupostasis*, which is something like ‘parasitic existence’.\(^5\) As a *parhupostasis*, evil is more than an (accidental) property while being, at the same time, less than an entity with a real cause and end. Since, as JP himself notes, Proclus is not very clear on

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\(^3\) On this topic, see also my dissertation, available on request.

\(^4\) This shows clearly on p. 202.

\(^5\) Also the related Platonic notion of *hupenantion* (sub-contrary) remains unclear.
this crucial topic (p. 89), a separate discussion would have been much needed.\textsuperscript{6} JP (pp. 266-7) criticizes Proclus for being unsuccessful, in the end, in reconciling the existence of evil with divine providence. I would say, however, that the beauty of Proclus’ doctrine lies in the fact that, by stripping down evil to a \textit{parhupostasis} which is ultimately good, he reduced the urgency for such a reconciliation.

Before concluding, let me nitpick a little. On the whole, the book is written in a very clear analytic style. A downside of that style is that at times it gets repetitive. This goes also for the translated passages. Some passages occur in different chapters. This is fine, as a passage may be relevant in a number of contexts, but a reference to other occurrences would have improved the accessibility of the book.\textsuperscript{7}

Brill publishes beautiful books, but they are very expensive. For a book of over €100, this one really contains too many typos and sloppy formulations.\textsuperscript{8} And as noted above, there is one important mistake in the bibliography: the translation of Opsomer & Steel was published in 2003, not 1999. Finally, I do not understand why the publisher opted for transliteration of Greek terms.

To conclude: the author delivers on his promise and creates order in the disorder of a long discussion among Ancient Platonists on the nature of evil. Some notions remain unclear, but I still recommend this book to scholars of Platonism. Its clear style and wealth of information make it a valuable contribution to the rapidly growing industry of Platonic studies.

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References


\textsuperscript{6} JP comes closest to explaining the two terms on pp. 70-1, but the metaphysical ramifications of the notions remain unclear. See also Opsomer and Steel (2003: 26-7).

\textsuperscript{7} E.g. text 1.3 overlaps with 2.9, 1.11 with 2.15, 1.17 with 2.17 and 2.18 etc.

\textsuperscript{8} Examples: n. 1 refers to Opsomer and Steel 1999, but there are two 1999 publications, p. 4: “an analysis Proclus’”, p4 n.: “Thesauros”, p. 8: “arose out their exegeses”, p. 44, n. 8 suggests that Plato contends that evil is a \textit{parhupostasis}, and drew this notion from Iamblichus (!); p. 45 n.: excresence, p. 52 “Here, as elsewhere, Plato stresses…” reference unclear, p. 134: Philopon, p. 187: Alexander Aphrodisias, p. 239: double ‘\textit{is}’, p. 255: “it exists in the asymmetry of souls to each other” (should be something like “asymmetry of the parts of soul and of the soul to body”, cf. 257). General: the use of quotation marks is not consistent (see e.g. p. 69, ‘\textit{s}’, “\textit{s}”).
