When examining the reception of Platonism in late Antiquity, we can recognize three characteristic periods in the interpretation of the relation between the existence of evil and the generation of sensible matter. With regard to Middle Platonism—with authors such as Plutarch of Chaeronea, Atticus, Numenius, Cronius, Celsus and Harpocration—it is matter (more specifically matter through an evil Soul, according to Plutarch, and through bodies, according to Harpocration) which constitutes evil, but this matter is not itself generated, and therefore does not come from an anterior principle. Conversely, all of Plotinus’ Neoplatonist successors do not consider matter to be an original reality, but rather one that stems from an anterior principle. However, this matter is no longer identified with evil. Plotinus alone (or nearly alone) would constitute an intermediary figure, since he would profess, on the one hand, the intrinsically evil character of matter, and would claim, on the other—although not always explicitly—that this matter is generated.

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2 See however the case of Moderatus, who, if we are to believe in the complex testimony of Porphyry’s Περὶ ὕλης, as reported by Simplicius (In Phys., pp. 230, 34–231, 24 = fr. 236 F. Smith [a good account of the issues regarding this text is found in H. Dörrie–M. Baltes, Der Platonismus in der Antike, Band 4, Baustein 122, Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1996, p. 176 ff. and 477 ff.]), would have also taught both things at the same time, as well as the case of the Chaldean Oracles (fr. 34 and 88 Des Places; comp. Psellus, Hypotyp. 27, p. 75, 34 Kroll). Porphyry’s own position, very close to that of Plotinus, will be examined later.
Of this audacious standpoint, Proclus wrote a famous refutation which occupies chapters 30 to 37 of his *De malorum subsistentia* (On the Existence of Evils), where Plotinus’ doctrine is pushed to its last limit. According to Proclus, if matter is indeed evil, either we are faced with a fundamental dualism bringing two original antithetical principles together, or evil has proceeded from the Good and the responsibility for evil falls back on the Good itself. The first option is judged by Proclus to contravene the very axioms of Neoplatonism, given that multiplicity always presupposes the prior existence of a unity: Plotinus himself refuses to follow this option.\(^4\) The second option, however, which is supported by Plotinus, seems just as impracticable to Proclus, who offers several objections to it, most notably (in chapters 31 to 33): [1] that since the cause is, by definition, superior to its effect, the generating principle of evil would be even worse than the evil of which it is the principle; from this, there would follow an inversion of its own qualities (it would be good and evil at the same time), and a corresponding inversion in its effect. [2] If it is necessary for the universe’s construction, matter cannot be an absolute evil. [3] If matter is truly impassible, it should not be able to oppose itself to anything. [4] Matter cannot be the cause of the soul’s fall, because the soul’s weakness intervenes before matter does. [5] Moreover, if matter was the cause of the soul’s fall, how could one explain the difference in attitudes among the souls? [6] And what action could be imposed on others by a matter that is incapable of acting in principle and is itself without quality? [7] Finally, if the soul’s appetite for the sensible is the cause of its fall, it is not matter, but rather the appetite that is evil; if it is matter, then the soul no longer has either autonomy or any choice left to exercise—an untenable conclusion.

According to Proclus, God cannot produce evil anymore than heat can produce cold. In fact, neither unmixed nor original evil exists, but evil actually reveals itself as a simple negative correspondent of each level of good, it is a “subcontrary to some good, though not to all the good” (*De mal. subs.*, op. cit. [note 3], §9, 18, 19; §54, 23, 29), and as long as it does not have a principal cause, but rather several causes. It has only a “counter-existence”, or a “parasitic” existence (παρυπόστασις),\(^5\) since it

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5. For this term, which is very difficult to translate, see A.Ph. Segonds, *In Alc.*, I, p. 191, n. 98, Paris, Belles Lettres (Budé), 1985.