A DOCTRINAL EVOLUTION IN PLOTINUS?
THE WEAKNESS OF THE SOUL IN ITS RELATION TO EVIL

According to Treatise 51 (I 8), which is devoted to the problem of the existence and origin of evil, sensible matter is not only evil in itself, the primary evil (14, 51), and a principle of evil opposed as one whole to another whole (τὸ ὄλον τῷ ὄλῳ 6, 43–44) to the principle of good (ἀρχαὶ γὰρ ἄμφω, ἡ μὲν κακῶν, ἡ δὲ ἀγαθῶν, 6, 33–34), but also the universal source of all evils, including the weakness of the soul. As Plotinus repeats several times throughout this late treatise, the soul that is in the sensible world is “not evil on account of itself [οὐ κακῶν παρὰ αὐτῆς]” (11, 17; compare 5, 26–28). This refusal to impute the responsibility for evil to the soul is first stated in chapter 4 (20–25) and in chapter 5 (5–6), which ends with the following reflection:

If this is true, then we must not be assumed to be the principle of evil as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us, and those that take hold on men do not do so with their good will, but there is an “escape from the evils in the soul” for those who are capable of it, though not all men are.

(5, 26–30)

These preliminary remarks are not enough for Plotinus who, as we know, returns again to the subject of the soul’s weakness in chapter 14, where it constitutes the main topic of the discussion. Twice in this chapter (lines 21–22 and 44–45), the soul’s weakness is tied directly to the fall of the soul. In the first instance, Plotinus specifies that the soul’s weakness concerns only souls that have fallen: “weakness must be in the souls which have fallen (ἐν ταῖς πεσάς εἶναι τὴν ἀσένειαν)” (14, 21–22). He indicates that for these souls, which are not pure, weakness is caused by an addition, an “alien presence [ἄλλοτρον παράγωγον]”; it is therefore due to something which comes to it from outside, and not to a lack which would have its source in the soul itself (14, 23–24). However, is not yet clear in this initial development what might be the exact nature of this connection between the soul’s fall and the soul’s weakness. Is the one the cause of the other, or are they both caused by something else? In order to grasp the answer to this question, we must focus upon the argument’s second development. Bearing in mind that there are souls which remain
separate from matter, but that the powers of the soul are many, and that there is a beginning as well as an intermediate and a final term of the soul, matter will come into play at the soul’s periphery, so to speak, from underneath and as from outside of it, but trying, as it were, to pass into the interior and to corrupt that to which it is adjoined:

But there are many powers of soul, and it has a beginning, a middle and an end; and matter is there, and begs it and, we may say, bothers it and wants to come right inside. “All the place is holy,” and there is nothing which is without a share of soul. So matter spreads itself out under soul and is illumined, and cannot grasp the source from which its light comes: that source cannot endure matter though it is there, because its evil makes it unable to see. Matter darkens the illumination, the light from that source, by mixture with itself, and weakens it by itself offering it the opportunity of generation and the reason for coming to matter; for it would not have come to what was not present. This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders them from coming by occupying the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition, and making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft—until soul manages to escape back to its higher state. So matter is the cause of the soul’s weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. (14, 34–51)

The fall of the soul therefore consists precisely in this: to come toward matter and to become weak during this “coming”. This “weakening” is provoked by matter itself which, by both its occupation of place (τόπος) and its attempts to seize the soul, hinders the free operation of the soul’s powers. Without matter, the soul, even if diminished, would not have fallen and would not have been weakened, simply because it would have neither had a place to fall nor something which might cause its weakness. According to what Plotinus has already stated in this chapter, evil comes entirely from outside, through both the presence of matter and the disturbances caused by it. This analysis is in agreement with the postulate, established earlier in the treatise, according to which a deficiency or a lack (ἔλλειμα, ἔλλειψις) is not yet evil itself. In contrast with the pure soul, which remains turned toward Intellect, the soul which proceeds outside of itself is certainly less complete or less perfect (4, 28 ff.); it is, one might say, because of its relative deficiency, corruptibility or susceptibility to vice, that it is able to receive evil secondarily into itself, and yet not be evil in and of itself. In short, “evil is not in any sort of deficiency but in absolute deficiency” (5, 5–6). Already at this point, the active and determining role of matter is fully revealed. It is matter, and matter alone, which “is so evil that it infects with its own