CHAPTER TWO

EVIL AS PRIVATION

2.1 [DMS c. 2, p. 174.23–32] ...But if, as we say, the Good is above being and the source of being, since all things, in whatever way they exist and are generated, seek the Good by nature, how is evil in any sense to be one of the things that exist, if it is excluded from such striving? It is hardly enough, then, to say that evil exists because there must be something that is entirely a sub-contrary to the Good; for how can what is entirely sub-contrary seek at all its contrary nature? But it is impossible that there be any existing thing that does not seek the Good. For all things are created and exist because of that desire and are preserved through it. Hence, if evil is sub-contrary to the Good, evil is not to be included among existing things.

2.2 [DMS c. 3, p. 176.1–11] Why should we say more? If the One and what we call the nature of the Good is beyond being, then evil is beyond not-being—I mean not-being in the absolute sense, for the Good is better than being in the absolute sense. One of two things is true. (Not-being is either absolutely-not-being or what is beyond being. But it is impossible that evil is beyond super-essential not-being, which is the good.) [Opsomer and Steel emendation] If not-being is absolutely not-being, then to a much greater extent is evil not-being, since it is even weaker than absolute not-being, as the account has it; for evil is more distant from good than not-being. This is the meaning of those who prefer not-being to evil-being. Yet what is further from good is more non-existent than what is nearer to it; so absolute not-being itself has a greater degree of being than what is called evil: evil is not, then, to a much greater degree than absolute not-being...

2.3 [DMS c. 5, pp. 178.1 – 180.29] And not for this reason only, but also because evil is the corrupting principle of each thing. This is the evil that Socrates revealed in Republic when he made the appropriate
comment that, because the good of each thing is what preserves it, for this reason all things have a desire for the Good. Since for all things existence and self-preservation come from it, while on the other hand not-being and corruption are due to the nature of evil. It is necessary, then, either that evil exists or that nothing should be corruptive of anything else; but in the latter case “generation will break down and cease” [Phaedrus 245e1]. For if there are no corruptive entities, corruption is impossible; but if there is no corruption, then there is no generation, since all generation takes place through the corruption of another thing. And if there is no generation, then the whole world at the same time will be imperfect. “For it will not possess in itself the mortal kinds of animals; but it should possess them if it is going to be sufficiently perfect,” says Timaeus [Timaeus 41b7–c2]. If, then, the world is to be a “blessed god,” it should perfectly preserve its likeness to the wholly perfect animal; if this is the case, then the mortal kinds should also complete the All; if this is the case, then there should be both generation and corruption; but if this is the case, then there should be certain things that are either corruptive or generative of certain other things. For neither generation nor corruption occurs to all things through the same causes. And if there are corruptive principles which, because inherent in those things which take part in genesis, destroy their power, then evil must also exist… So the same reasoning will preserve the entire world for us as perfect and will place evil among existing things. Thus not only will evil exist because of the Good, but also it will be good by the very fact of its existence…

2.4 [DMS c. 6, p. 182,29–35] So Socrates, in Theaetetus, emphatically affirms that evils do not perish and that their existence is neither superfluous nor, so to speak, by chance. For it is a necessary and good thing. And he says that evil is “necessary,” and therefore evil is a good. And if evil is a good, then it exists, in his own terms, not only in the sense that it was so generated as not to perish and is thus included among existing things, but also in the sense that its principle is in accordance with what is good, that is, its passage into being.

2.5 [DMS c. 7, pp. 184,28 – 186,42] But this privation, incapable of existing in and of itself nor completely absolved from that nature of which it is the privation, becoming in a certain sense empowered by that nature, because of its implication with it is situated in the order of those things that are opposite to the Good. For other privations are