ABSTRACT

The problem of evil, or the seeming contradiction involved in simultaneously holding the beliefs in the existence of an omnibenevolent Deity and the reality of evil present in the world he created, has been engaging the minds of philosophers and theologians for centuries. Many theists have tried to face this problem by defending the God’s cause, or by justifying the presence of badness in the world created and managed by a supremely good Being. These attempts are called theodicies. Coupled with and inseparable from the theodicean efforts are the investigations of the philosophers and the theologians aimed at isolating the original cause of all evil, so that the responsibility for it could be transferred from God to that entity or phenomenon. Exactly these are the issues with which I occupy myself in this dissertation, although from a specific viewpoint. More precisely, my research interests lies in the theodicy and the theory of evil as conceived and presented by Plato. This is in itself a contentious claim. Some critics will find the first more-or-less elaborate theodicy in the fragments of the Early Stoics, while others will credit Plotinus or St. Augustine with the introduction of the main theodician strategies, prevalent and popular even today. Many others will hold that Plato’s theory of evil, if he had one at all, was rather impromptu and inconsistent. Therefore, the aim of this work is to demonstrate that none of the above beliefs fully corresponds to the truth.

My dissertation consists of two parts. In Part One I focus on specific sections and passages of the Republic, the Timaeus and the Laws, in order to demonstrate that Plato was indeed seriously engaging with the problem of evil, and that he devised a much wider variety of theodicean strategies than it is usually thought. Among them are the Freedom of choice solution, the Principle of Plenitude, the Rival substance solution, the Aesthetic theme. In Part Two I explore passages from a group of Latter Middle and Late dialogues, namely the Theaetetus, the Timaeus, the Politicus and the Laws, from which most of Plato’s mature theory of evil may be extracted. There I argue for the so-called ‘material theory’ of the origin of evil, and try to demonstrate that Plato never wavered between a corporeal and psychic cause of evil.

Thus the two basic theses which I wish to put forward in this dissertation are: a) that Plato did his best to provide a relatively comprehensive theodicy; b) that despite appearances to the contrary, he had a consistent theory of evil, and that he identified the corporeal constituent of the universe as the cause of its existence. My hopes are that this dissertation will offer at least a small contribution to the investigation of Plato’s theory of evil, and especially to the question of Plato’s theodicy, which is, as I believe, one of the rare underdeveloped areas in the field of Platonic studies.