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Freedom and *Praxis* in Plotinus's *Ennead* 6.8.1-6

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that Plotinus does not limit the sphere of free human agency simply to intellectual contemplation, but rather extends it all the way to human *praxis*. Plotinus's goal in the first six chapters of *Ennead* 6.8 is, accordingly, to demarcate the space of freedom *within* human practical actions. He ultimately concludes that our external actions are free whenever they actualize, in unhindered fashion, the moral principles derived from intellectual contemplation.

This raises the question of how the freedom of practical actions might relate to the freedom of intellectual contemplation. After considering two previously offered models – a model of *double activity*, and an Aristotelian model of *practical syllogism* – I offer a third alternative, namely a model of *moral attunement*, according to which our rational desires assume a kind of ‘care of the soul’ through active supervision. Practical life is thus imbued with freedom to the extent that the soul supervises its actions to conform to its will and choice of the good.

Keywords: Plotinus, Freedom, Soul, Action, Practical Ethics.

Porphyry said of Plotinus that “he was present at once to himself and to others” (Porph. *Plot.* 8.19; trans. Armstrong, 1966).¹ Turned in contemplation to his intellect, Plotinus was also turned to other people in everyday *praxis*. While committed to contemplation, Plotinus nonetheless justifies engagement in practical action as necessity arises. He offers, in fact, a coherent account of how theoretical knowledge can generate action. To elucidate this aspect of his thought, I will turn to the analysis of human freedom in the first six chapters of *On Free Will and the Will of the One* (6.8). It is my contention that the shift from *theoria* to *praxis* does not entail the elimination of free agency altogether, as some have suggested.² Rather than limiting the sphere of free human agency to intellectual contemplation, Plotinus extends it all the way to practical situations.

The challenge I face in this paper is to explain, then, how Plotinus assigns freedom *both* to inner intellectual contemplation *and* to outer, virtuous actions. This leads me to an extensive discussion of how the freedom of practical actions might relate to, or be derived from, the freedom proper to intellectual contemplation. Two models have been

¹ Scholars often cite chapters 8-9 of the *Vita Plotini* as indicating the simultaneity of action and contemplation in Plotinus’s life. Cf. Smith (1999, p. 228-330; 2005, p. 71) and Linguiti (2012, p. 187-188).

² Cf. Leroux (1996, p. 309), Dillon & Gerson (2004, p. 166, n. 29), and Lavaud (2007, p. 260, n. 69).

offered to explain the relation between these two terms in 6.8.1-6: (1) a model of *double activity*, according to which the internal activity causes the external activity automatically, provided that a suitable substrate is present (Emilsson, 2012); and (2) an Aristotelian model of *practical syllogism*, according to which our contemplative activity supplies the major premise of virtuous action (the choice of good and noble ends), while our cognitive faculties provide the minor premise concerning the relevant circumstances of action (Bene, 2013). Both models, however, reduce virtuous actions to an automatic production of contemplation, to a spontaneous reflex which is, in fact, a major target of Plotinus's critique in his treatise on freedom. I thus propose a *third* model to understand the relation between inner intellectual activity and outer practical actions: (3) a model of *moral attunement*, according to which our free rational desires seek to actualize – in empirical and embodied life – the intelligible principles of action derived from contemplation. By assuming a kind of 'care of the soul,' our rational desires actively supervise the soul to make it good.

The Context of 6.8

Plotinus begins 6.8 with the question of whether we can ascribe to God (the One) or to the other gods (the intermediary gods, including divine Intellect) such attributes as "what is in one's power" (*to eph'hemin*) or, more broadly, freedom (*eleutheria*, 1.1-11).³ But he immediately shifts his focus, saying that "we must postpone these questions for the present, and first enquire about ourselves, as we usually do, whether anything does happen to be in our power" (1.13-15).⁴ Plotinus thus begins with an *ethical* treatise on human freedom (chapters 1-6), before turning to a properly theological inquiry about the freedom of God, the One or the Good (chapters 7-21). By doing

³ Plotinus phrases this question in terms of "being in one's power", but "freedom" is used synonymously; cf. 6.8.4.6, 10-11, 35; 6.8.5.33; 6.8.6.6, 26-27.

⁴ All references to the *Enneads* come from Armstrong (1967; 1984a; 1984b; 1988). Henceforth, all citations of 6.8 will display only chapter and line numbers; citations of other treatises will include ennead, treatise, chapter and line numbers.

so, he can reveal the radical continuity or pervasiveness of freedom throughout distinct ontic levels – a pervasiveness that extends all the way to human *praxis*. To prove this last point is my goal in this paper.

We thus begin with Plotinus’s initial characterization of freedom:

Whatever we might do when not enslaved to chances or compulsions or strong passions, because we wished it and with nothing opposing our wishes, this would be in our power. But if this is so, our idea of what is in our power would be something enslaved to our will (*boulesei*) and would come to pass (or not) to the extent to which we wished it (1.27-33).

At issue here are the conditions under which we might have something in our power. Something is in our power if it satisfies two conditions: first, its coming to pass must not already be settled by the course of the world, independent of us; and second, its coming to pass must depend *on us*, that is, on our *willing* to do it (1.31-33; cf. Frede, 2011, p. 134). The first condition is needed because we may will to do something, but circumstances (“chances or compulsions or strong passions”) can prevent its getting done. This brings us to Plotinus’s second condition, for our willing must be radically distinct from those chances or compulsions that determine our actions *from the outside*. Plotinus is thus distinguishing between the internal and the external: chances, compulsions and strong passions make us “heteronomous”, i.e., obedient or enslaved (*douleuei*) to external things, whereas our internal volition (*boulesis*) makes us autonomous and self-dependent.

Plotinus is differentiating his notion of freedom from Aristotle’s notion of the voluntary (*hekousion*) as what we do when knowing full well what we are doing and not being forced to do it.⁵ To make sense of this, imagine that you have already had four cups of coffee in a day, but the smell of freshly grounded coffee suddenly hits your nose. This fosters an appetite in you, which makes you brew another cup for yourself and drink it. For Aristotle, this is fully voluntary, since nothing forces you to drink the coffee, and you know perfectly well

⁵ Cf. Frede (2011, p. 134-135).

what you are doing. But when Plotinus requires that a free action be due to a *willing*, he requires that such an action be motivated not by any kind of desire but by a desire of *reason*. We are not free when moved by appetite (*epithymia*) or spirit (*thymos*); both of these do not depend on us entirely, since they originate in impressions triggered by external factors. Freedom comes, therefore, from a particular *kind* of desire, a rational desire which has *noetic* foundations, i.e., which comes from our identification with Intellect itself. We must explore this in greater detail: how is human freedom founded on Intellect?

The Noetic Foundations of Human Freedom

Intellect, Plotinus tells us, is ours and yet not ours (5.3.3.26-29). It is both our mind and the divine power that makes us think. Our self, in other words, is laid out in tiers, and coincides at its upper levels with the rational principles governing the intelligible universe itself. In setting out his anthropology, then, Plotinus insists on the separation and struggle which result from the division of the various layers of the soul: we are free only insofar as we accomplish – however momentarily – an identification with Intellect (5.3.3.34). But what is this identification and how can it bring about freedom?

Plotinus argues for an identification with Intellect after surveying the various faculties of the human soul in search of what is “in our power”. He considers a few candidates: it cannot be impulse or desire because then the insane, children and animals would have something in their power – but they in fact have no mastery over their “casually occurring imaginations” (*phantasiai*: 2.8-9).⁶ Nor is it simply desire accompanied by calculation (*logismos*), for what if calculation goes wrong somewhere? In that case, the result of our action would not be in our power: it would not happen because we *willed* it to happen. So perhaps what is done from *correct* calculation together with *correct* desire is in our power. But then we could ask “whether the calculation

⁶ In 4.3.31, Plotinus had posited two *phantasiai*, one belonging to the higher and one to the lower soul. But in the current treatise, he seems to consider only a lower kind of *phantasia*, determined by the desires of the soul-body compound (3.7-18).

set the desire in motion or the desire the calculation” (2.11-12). If calculation operates only as an instrument to achieve the goals set by desire, it is being led rather than taking the lead (2.18-19). Reason (*logos*), however, can operate not only as an instrument of desire, but also as an active, ruling principle (2.31-32: *poiei ... kai kratei*).⁷ Here we find the kind of principle in us with which we must identify in order to be free. Plotinus tentatively suggests two activities of reason that may qualify as “being in our power”:

If reason itself makes another desire, we must understand how; but if it puts a stop to the desire and stands still and this is where what is in our power is, this will not be in action, but will stand still in Intellect; since everything in the sphere of action, even if reason is dominant, is mixed and cannot have being in our power in a pure state (2.33-37).

Plotinus lists here two possible activities of reason: (1) making a desire, and (2) putting a stop to desire and standing still in Intellect. These correspond, respectively, to the *rational desires* at work in virtuous actions (described as “reason itself making another desire”), and to the *contemplative activity* that “puts a stop to desire and stands still in Intellect”. Plotinus’s task is to determine whether to assign freedom to such activities. He at first wonders whether only the second activity qualifies as free (“if reason puts a stop to desire [...] and this is where what is in our power is”). However, he corrects himself in the next chapter and assigns freedom to our rational desires as well:

The desires roused by thinking are not involuntary, and [...] the gods who live in this way [as many as live by desire in accord with Intellect] have self-determination (3.24-26).

I read “desires roused by thinking” as referring to a new mode of desiring (“reason makes *another* desire”): no longer lower forms of *epithymia* and *thymos* like eating, drinking and getting angry, but a

⁷ As noted by Bene (2013, p. 144) and Emilsson (2017, p. 359).

rationally *willed* desire. Bene (2013, p. 157-158) has suggested that this “other desire” roused by thinking refers to the rational desire for good and noble ends pursued in virtuous *practical* actions. So even though practical actions are not fully free (they “cannot have being in our power in a pure state”), the rational desire which lies “before the action” (5.24-25) is indeed free. Plotinus isolates a sphere of noetic understanding and desire within practical virtue itself. For him, the freedom of any virtuous action resides not in its concrete results or material circumstances – which are externally determined – but in the rational desire for good ends, of which the agent is fully in control. Plotinus thus delineates the sphere of free human activity *in between* putting a stop to desire and making a *new kind* of desire.

Plotinus, therefore, ascribes freedom *both* to the contemplative activity of Intellect *and* to the desires deriving from intellection. He makes this clear in the following passage from chapter 3:

We trace back what is in our power to the noblest principle, the activity of Intellect [i.e., *contemplative activity*], and shall grant that the premises of action derived from this are truly free, and that the desires roused by thinking [i.e., *rational desires*] are not involuntary, and we shall say that the gods who live in this way [including divine Intellect] have self-determination (3.22-26).

Passages like this make it clear that we are dealing with two levels of free human activity, one which is primary (“the activity of Intellect”) and the other secondary (“derived” and “roused” by such activity). This means that the rational desires behind our virtuous actions constitute a real aspect of free human agency operative in practical ethics. We must beware, then, of a widespread interpretation according to which Plotinus attributes “what is in our power” strictly to the contemplative repose of Intellect itself. Leroux (1996, p. 309), for instance, claims that “freedom resides outside of action,” and that “the freedom to engage in *praxis*, the freedom to choose and to act, is destined to be displaced by a purely spiritual, free determination”. Dillon & Gerson (2004, p. 166, n. 29) also claim that Plotinus grants freedom only to “acts of will that do not result in action”. But this is

not so. The above quotation from 6.8 clearly lists two forms of free human activity: one which involves contemplative detachment, and another which delineates the sphere of freedom *within* practical actions. Human freedom thus resides *both* in our inner intellectual activity (detached from action) *and* in the rational desires derived from such activity but operative even in practical situations.

This double-sidedness of human freedom is by no means a preliminary hypothesis which Plotinus initially considers but eventually rejects. On the contrary, he confirms this thesis towards the end of his investigation of human freedom in chapter 6:

In practical actions self-determination and being in our power is not referred to practice and outward activity but to the inner activity of virtue itself, that is, its thought and contemplation [...] So it is still clearer that the immaterial is the free, and it is to this that being in our power is to be referred and the will which has the mastery and is independent, even if something directs it by necessity to what is outside. All therefore that comes from this will and is done according to it is in our power, when it is acting externally and when it is by itself” (6.19-30, my italics).

Plotinus specifies here that, when it comes to *practical actions*, we should refer what is in our power, *both external and internal*, to our inner will. This surely means that the immaterial is primary, i.e., that actions are free only if they manifest externally the *inner activity of virtue* (i.e., its thought and contemplation). But this does not mean that we thereby implode *praxis* into *theoria* and deny all freedom to our practical actions. Rather, Plotinus states *only* that actions “cannot have being in our power in a pure state” (2.35-37), but *not* that they have no “being in our power” whatsoever. Whatever freedom exists in practical actions belongs to the rational desires which are derived from “thought and contemplation”. In other words, Plotinus argues not for a displacement of the outer by the inner, not for a substitution of *praxis* by *theoria*, but rather for a continuum of activity, where our inner intellectual contemplation outflows into outer actions that give (imperfect) expression to it. Free human activity thus resides both in inner intellectual contemplation and, simultaneously but derivatively,

in the rational desires operative in outer virtuous actions. These rational desires will be the subject of our next sections. Our goal is to understand how the freedom of practical actions might relate to, or be derived from, the freedom proper to intellectual contemplation.

Freedom in Action and in Contemplative Activity

I have argued that, for Plotinus, freedom applies not only to inner intellectual activity but also to virtuous practical actions. This raises the crucial question of how freedom might relate to both layers of human agency, i.e., both to *energeia* as the inner intelligible *activity*, and to *praxis* as the outer practical *action*. Plotinus tackles this issue when he asks whether “self-determination (*to autexousion*) and being in one’s power” is “only in Intellect when it thinks, that is, in pure intellect”, or “also in soul when it is active according to intellect and engaged in practical action according to virtue” (5.1-3). His initial line of response is to note that at least the *outcome* of the action (*he teuxis*) is not up to us (5.5). What he has in mind is presumably cases where something interferes with the action and prevents its intended outcome – such as a blow of wind swaying an arrow off its course.

Someone might reply, however, that even if the outcome of our actions is not up to us, freedom may still hold with respect to *how* we act, i.e., whether we act well (*kalos*) or not. So even if a blow of wind may interfere with the archer’s hitting the target, we may still attribute freedom to everything associated with the archer’s skill and execution of the shot. Against this, Plotinus points out that even the execution of virtuous actions depends on external circumstances which are generally not up to us. For instance, a war calls for a certain courage that would otherwise not have been actualized:

How is the activity then in our power when if war did not break out it would not be possible to carry out this activity? But it is also the same with the other actions done according to virtue, since virtue is always being compelled to do this or that to cope with what turns up. For certainly if someone gave virtue itself the

choice whether it would like in order to be active that there should be wars, that it might be brave... it would choose to rest from its practical activities because nothing needed its curative action, as if a physician, for instance Hippocrates, were to wish that nobody needed his skill. If then when it is active in practical affairs virtue is compelled to be helpful, how can things be purely and simply in its power? (5.7-23).

The question here is to what extent virtuous actions fall under the *exclusive* control of the agent. That is why the outcome of the action cannot qualify as being “in our power”. But that is *also* why, as we now see, the very *exercise* of virtue, which is provoked or compelled by external circumstances, cannot count as free. The virtuous person is like a physician who would prefer that nobody needed her curative powers. Plotinus is putting a strong emphasis on choice: “If someone gave virtue itself the *choice* [...] it would *choose* to rest from its practical activities”. The virtuous person would refrain from acting if possible, but under adverse circumstances she would be “compelled to be helpful”. So not only is it the case that the virtuous person *depends* on external situations for her exercise of virtue, but also that she seems *compelled* to specific actions when such situations arise. Virtuous actions appear “necessitated” to the extent that external circumstances *require* intervention.

But this cannot be the full story. Plotinus does not think that virtue enslaves us. He notes that virtue is “a kind of other intellect” (5.34-35), and intellect is not forced by external circumstances or passions. So, while the exercise of virtue may be compelled, “the will and the reason which are *before the action* are not compelled” (5.23-25, my italics). Here, freedom appears confined to the internal, noetic side of virtuous action (i.e., “the will and the reason”). Plotinus thus provisionally concludes that the free aspect of virtuous action resides in “the will and the reason”. His description of virtue appears strongly intellectualistic at this point: “If then virtue is a kind of other intellect, a state which in a way intellectualizes the soul, being in our power does not belong to the realm of action but in intellect at rest from actions” (5.34-37). Freedom would seem to belong not to practical actions, but to intellectual contemplation “at rest from actions”.

This characterization has led Lavaud, for instance, to claim that Plotinus completely dissociates freedom from the realm of practical actions: “Plotinus for his part accomplishes a radical interiorization of freedom: it pertains purely and simply to the intelligible realm [...] and it must be dissociated from all relation to action” (Lavaud, 2007, p. 260, n. 69; my translation).⁸ But I find this conclusion premature: Plotinus has not yet adopted his final position. As Corrigan & Turner (2017, p. 196-197) indicate, Plotinus is working out his arguments dialectically, looking at a problem from different viewpoints before adopting his final position. It is thus a *problem* for him that if we place will and reason before action, and consider action as something “compelled”, then freedom will lie outside of action. Plotinus’s final position will appear only in the subsequent chapter (ch. 6); for now, he is interested in stressing a *problem*: while our actions cannot be purely free given external determinations, if we cut our freedom completely away from action, it will not be *our* freedom—the freedom of embodied *agents*.

We know, however, from our earlier glimpse at chapter 6, that Plotinus does not starkly divide free internal volition and compelled outer action. Rather, he proposes a continuum of activity, in which our practical actions are derived from our inner activity. Recall that he concludes his argument by claiming that “all that comes from this will [from our inner will] and is done according to it is in our power, *when it is acting externally and when it is by itself*” (6.29-30, my italics). Plotinus is thinking here of a key passage in Plato’s thought where the union of the inner and the outer dimensions of life is given classical expression.⁹ In *R.* 4 443d-444a, Socrates says about true justice that it consists in doing one’s own

not as regards one’s own external action (*peri ten exo praxin*), but as regards the internal one (*peri ten entos*),

⁸ “Plotin pour sa part accomplit une intériorisation radicale de la liberté : elle relève purement et simplement de l’intelligible [...] et doit être dissociée de tout rapport avec l’action”.

⁹ Emilsson (2007, p. 65-66; 2012) and Corrigan & Turner (2017, p. 202-209) have also corroborated this connection between *Enn.* 6.8.6.19-30 and *R.* 443d-444a.

since it truly concerns oneself and what belongs to oneself... From having been many things, he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious. Only then does he act (*prattein*). And when he does anything (*prattei*), whether acquiring wealth, taking care of his body, engaging in politics, or in private contracts—in all of these, he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it (R. 4 443d-444a; trans. Grube & Reeve, 1997, modified by reference to Emilsson, 2007, p. 65).

We have here a Platonic view of how the agent's inner harmony is the precondition of any just action. Actions are just insofar as they refer back to this harmony, since the inner and the outer have become unified in an agent that "from many has become one". Plato is, of course, not discussing freedom in this passage from the *Republic*; but Plotinus may have interpreted the expression "concerns oneself and belongs to oneself" to mean "what is in our power", as he understands the latter. Plotinus thus adopts Plato's position but changes inner and outer *action* (*praxis*) to the Aristotelian notion of inner and outer *activity* (*energeia*). By doing so, he can explain the relation between inner volition and outer action in terms of a two-fold activity, where the external activity (virtuous actions) is an expression of the internal activity (internal volition), so that both internal and external aspects constitute a single activity seen from two different viewpoints (cf. Arist. *Ph.* 8 255a33-b5; 3 202a13-21). We must ask, then, if this model of double-activity can be coherently applied to the present discussion, and whether it can explain how the freedom proper to "the will and the reason" may nonetheless extend all the way to practical actions, which would no longer be compelled but free.

The Double-Activity Model

Chapter 5 had left Plotinus with a problem: only the volitional side of virtuous action ("the will and the reason") is free, whereas the exercise of virtue is compelled by external circumstances. Such a strict division between free inner volition and compelled outer action leaves us with a worry about causal interaction. On the one hand, if

the will is indeed free, how can it be “compelled” to act under certain conditions, i.e., if adverse circumstances arise? The will no longer seems free once it is compelled to act. But on the other hand, if the will is not *at all* compelled to act outwardly in the world and does not cause the action in any way, then the action will not trace back to us as embodied *agents*. What is the solution?

To solve this problem, Emilsson (2012, p. 355-357) has appealed to Plotinus's doctrine of double activity.¹⁰ This theory states that the *internal* activity (our will) brings about the *external* activity (virtuous action) automatically, without any special effort or intention on the agent's part, provided that a suitable substrate (adverse circumstance) is present. Our will would thus indicate an *internal* activity, of which the virtuous action would be the *external* expression. The key point here is that the cause, the internal activity, would not be changed in the slightest by acting. Plotinus typically expresses this by saying that the cause abides (*menei*), or that it does not leave itself (*apoleipein*), or even that it is in no way diminished (*elattousthai*) by causing its effects.¹¹ Cause and effect would thus comprise a single activity seen from two different perspectives, like fire and heat. Fire “makes” heat, which becomes conceptually distinct from it, but fire and heat are not cut off from each other; rather, they constitute a single *energeia* seen from different viewpoints (inner and outer). This means that the cause (fire) is in no way reduced or affected by having the effect that it has (heat), since the effect expresses what is intrinsic to the cause itself.

If we apply this framework to the problem at hand, we may relate inner volition to outer action without eliminating the freedom of our inner will. Our free will would in no way be diminished by generating virtuous actions when faced with adverse situations. Moreover, if the external action is an *expression* of the inner will, then the goodness of the production must be embodied in the product itself, which

¹⁰ For a fuller account of double activity in Plotinus, cf. Rutten (1956, p. 100-106), Lloyd (1990, p. 98-106) and, most comprehensively, Emilsson (2007, p. 22-68). Here I am also relying on Bene's (2013, p. 146) description of Emilsson's position.

¹¹ Cf. 5.4.2.21-37 (*menei*); 5.1.2.9; 6.4.2.15; 6.4.8.28; 6.4.11.5-6 (*apoleipein*); and 6.9.5.37 (*elattousthai*). For an analysis of these terms, cf. Emilsson (2007, p. 28).

means that the external action must also reflect the freedom of the activity that generated it. We may thus have solved the worry about causal interaction, all the while doing justice to Plotinus's conclusion in 6.8.6.29-30 that freedom extends all the way to practical actions ("all that comes from this will and is done according to it is free, *both when it is acting externally and when it is by itself*").

Applying the double-activity model to human practical acting is by no means an *ad hoc* solution to the problem at hand. Rather, it has a firm basis in Plotinus's general theory of practical ethics (cf. Smith, 1999, p. 233-235). In 3.8.4.30 f., for instance, Plotinus speaks of the productiveness of contemplation in nature and then draws a parallel with human beings. Human beings, he says, when they are weak with regards to contemplation, tend toward action (*praxis*) as a substitute for contemplation. So, when we find it difficult to view an intelligible object, we gaze outwardly to what we produce. Plotinus generalizes:

Everywhere we shall find that making and action are either a weakening or consequence of contemplation; a weakening, if the doer or maker had nothing in view beyond the thing done, a consequence if he had another object of contemplation better than what he made (3.8.4.40-43).

In this passage, Plotinus calls action a consequence or by-product (*parakolouthema*) of contemplation, thereby suggesting the notion of external activity. In the next chapter, 3.8.5, we find the language of double activity in a distinctive manner:

The first part of soul, then, that which is above and always filled and illuminated by the reality above, remains There; but another part [...] goes forth [...]. *But in going forth it lets its prior part remain unmoved where it left it [...]* [So action] is really the weaker form of contemplation, for that which is produced must always be of the same kind as its producer, but weaker through losing its virtue as it comes down [...]. It is soul that in contemplating makes what comes after it, that which contemplates *in this more external way* (3.8.5.10-28, my italics).

This passage indicates that Plotinus sees external action (*praxis*) as an external activity of contemplation, which turns action itself into a kind of contemplation. So contemplation (“the will and the reason”) cannot be entirely dissociated from external action (the exercise of virtue). Indeed, all contemplation is productive; and this must also be so with the individual soul. At the end of 4.3.4, for instance, Plotinus claims that the higher part of our soul, though transcendent, expresses care for the lower and embodied part like a gardener concerned about the maggoty part of a plant. The subsequent metaphors are even more revealing. Our higher soul is like a healthy person at the service of her neighbors, or like a sick person concerned with the care of her body (4.3.4.22-38). This recalls our earlier metaphor from 6.8.5, where Plotinus compares virtue to a physician who hopes that nobody needs her curative action, but who is ready to help if adverse circumstances arise (5.19-21). The point here is that our higher soul, which is free by virtue of its contemplative activity, nonetheless cares for and assists the lower soul in its practical affairs, but without having its contemplation impaired in any way by its external activity.

The double-activity model appears to solve our problems about causal interaction: not only does our inner will stay free (unchanged, undiminished) by causing outer actions, but those actions themselves display a degree of freedom to the extent that they reflect or embody the freedom of their cause, i.e., of the internal activity that generated them. But is that what Plotinus finally proposes by the end of 6.8.6?

I do not think so. The double-activity model is not without its problems when applied to the discussion of human practical acting. Two difficulties remain. First, this model seems to reduce virtuous action to an automatic production of contemplation, to a spontaneous reflex which is, in fact, a major target of Plotinus’s critique in 6.8. In the doctrine of double activity, the internal activity *necessarily* brings about the external activity, provided that a suitable substrate is present. This certainly coheres with Plotinus’s phrasing in chapter 5 that virtue “is compelled to be helpful” (5.22-23) and “is always being compelled to do this or that to cope with what turns up” (5.10). But recall that these words articulate a *problem*, not a solution. Our

inner volition no longer seems free if it necessarily generates external actions whenever the appropriate conditions are present. Just as fire has no control over its generation of heat, so too would the virtuous person have no control over her generation of virtuous actions. Plotinus, however, clearly dismisses this alternative in chapter 6:

[Virtue] will not follow the lead of the facts, for instance by saving the man who is in danger, but, if it thinks fit, it will sacrifice his life and property and children and even his fatherland, having in view its own excellence and not the existence of what is subject to it (6.14-18).

Plotinus tells us here that virtue “will not follow the lead of the facts”, meaning that it will not act by necessity whenever adverse circumstances arise. The decision to act virtuously in the world must remain under the control of the agent herself; otherwise, acting virtuously would not be “in our power”. The “necessity” of virtuous actions must therefore not connote heteronomy (i.e., a determination from outside the agent). Rather, the language of necessity must convey, I suggest, the notion of *moral duty*. The virtuous agent finds herself *morally* compelled to act virtuously when faced with adverse circumstances, but virtue still “keeps its independence by referring back to itself even here [when unfavorable situations arise]” (6.10-14). We must thus correct the double-activity model in such a way as to grant the internal activity *autonomy* over the generation of the external activity. I shall come back to this difficulty in the final section of my paper, where I propose an alternative model for explaining the freedom of practical actions in 6.8.1-6.

A second difficulty with the double-activity model has to do with intentionality. The internal activity – our inner volition or intellectual contemplation – does not seem to be directed to the external world or to engage in discursive thinking. Contemplation is turned toward itself rather than outward, and it exerts its productive activity without any deliberative calculation. This poses no problem for most contexts where the double-activity model applies (such as the generation of Intellect from the One, or the production of the sensible world from

Intellect); but it raises problems in the context of virtue and action. Plotinus, after all, states in 5.3.6 that while the theoretical intellect turns to itself and knows itself, the practical intellect (*nous praktikos*) turns outward and knows external objects rather than itself: “As the practical intellect looks to the outside and does not stay with itself, it could have a kind of knowledge of the things outside” (5.3.6.36-38). We also know from 1.3.6 that *phronesis* or practical wisdom requires knowledge of particular situations and is characterized by some form of deliberative reasoning. And lastly, in our own treatise, we see that the virtuous person reacts to external stimuli: she “copes with what turns up” (5.12-13) and “supervises the activities of her soul” (6.10-11). All of this implies that she takes notice of external situations. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to explain how a virtuous person acts without attending to circumstances through sense-perception and discursive thinking. But if she does employ these faculties, then it is not clear how the double-activity model serves to explain her actions.

We must determine, then, which place is assigned to knowledge of external circumstances and to deliberative reasoning in Plotinus's theory of action, and, in particular, in his account of virtuous action. This leads us to a second model for explaining the relation between internal volition and external action: the practical-syllogism model.

The Practical-Syllogism Model

To resolve this difficulty, Bene (2013, p. 156-159) has proposed that we interpret Plotinus's theory of human action in terms of the Aristotelian model of practical syllogism.¹² According to this model, the major premise of a practical syllogism identifies a good or a goal set by desire (e.g., coffee should always be drunk in the morning); the minor premise concerns the particular circumstances of action and derives from a cognitive faculty (e.g., *this* is grounded coffee; it is morning); and the conclusion results in action (e.g., *drink* coffee).

¹² Cf. *EN* 1146b35-1147a31; *de An.* 434a17-22; *MA* 701a7-25. Bene is not alone in advocating for the practical-syllogism model; it has been anticipated by Gerson (1994, p. 138-139, 242, n. 82), and corroborated by Hutchinson (2018, p. 166-175).

Actions would thus result not from a self-contained contemplative activity (as in the double-activity model), but from a syllogism whose minor premise necessarily attends to external circumstances.

Notice, however, that this model holds for both virtuous and non-virtuous agents. What divides these categories, for Plotinus, is that the latter consider external things as the *goal* of their actions. So, whereas the minor premise always concerns external situations, only in the latter case is the major premise *also* externally determined. Plotinus gives several examples of such major premises. In 4.4.44, he describes how actions motivated by familial affection and carnal desires are furnished by irrational desires directed to external objects:

The irrational also has an origin in the *premises* derived from the affection. For the care of children and concern for marriage have a manifest drawing power, and so do all the things which entice men since they give pleasure to their carnal desires (4.4.44.6-9, my italics).

This passage contains the term “premise” (*protasis*), which makes sense in this context only if it refers to the major premise of a practical syllogism. Plotinus is describing the kinds of premises which produce unwise decisions (i.e., “the premises derived from affection”, or any premise which is externally determined). The wise and virtuous person, by contrast, does not aim at external things. Rather, she possesses her own good within. As Plotinus says:

Contemplation alone remains incapable of enchantment because no one who is self-directed is subject to enchantment: for he is one, and that which he contemplates is himself, and his reason is not deluded, but he makes what he ought and makes his own life and work (4.4.44.1-5).

This kind of contemplation seems to describe the inner core of virtue according to 6.8.6. There, Plotinus says that the inner activity of virtue does not consist in “the passions which are enslaved and limited by reason”, but in the contemplative activity which “is all turned to itself and its work is itself” (6.24-25, 34-35). We may thus

inquire whether contemplation supplies the major premise of virtuous actions. Recall that Plotinus in fact uses syllogistic terminology when discussing virtuous actions: “[We] shall grant that the premises of action derived from this [from the activity of intellect] are truly free, and that the desires roused by thinking are not involuntary” (3.22-4). Bene (2013, p. 157-158) says that these “desires roused by thinking” refer to the rational desire for good and noble ends at work in virtuous actions, while the “premises” are the major premises of the practical syllogism that correspond to such desires. If that is so, contemplation plays a very specific role in ethical *praxis*: it supplies the ends or goals that the wise person pursues when engaged in practical actions.

However, even if contemplation supplies the major premise of a practical syllogism, the virtuous agent must still take into account the external circumstances that constitute the minor premise. This means that the universal values provided by non-discursive reason (i.e., by contemplation) are not enough: an agent also needs a discursive mode of thinking that assesses particular situations. Bene does not provide much textual evidence for this latter aspect, arguing that discursivity is required both by common sense and by the very model of practical syllogism. His main piece of evidence is from 6.8.1.39-44, where Plotinus insists, against Aristotle (in *EN* 1110b30-33), that voluntary actions require not only knowledge of particulars but *also* knowledge of general principles (cf. Bene, 2013, p. 158, n. 86). This implies, of course, that knowledge of particulars is needed as well. Therefore, an agent must assess particular situations in order to act voluntarily; and voluntariness constitutes an essential component of freedom in 6.8. Freedom thus includes voluntariness as one of its necessary (but not sufficient) conditions, which means that a free agent must necessarily consider external circumstances through discursive operations.

The practical-syllogism model appears to solve our worry about intentionality: the virtuous agent is now directed to the external world and considers particular situations. The problem, however, is that in several passages Plotinus seems to depreciate this fact, as if an agent could only turn towards the external world in cases of enchantment:

Everything which is directed to something else is enchanted by something else; for that to which it is directed enchants and draws it; but only that which is self-directed is free from enchantment. For this reason, all practical action is under enchantment, and the whole life of the practical man (4.4.43.18-20).

I contend that passages of this sort do not refute the practical-syllogism model. Statements like this appear problematic only if we disregard the greater context of Plotinus's arguments. So, if we look at the next chapter, 4.4.44, we see that "enchantment" holds only for the non-virtuous agent who does not have a higher goal in view beyond *vestiges* of nobility:

[If one] chooses practical activity because one is deluded by its *vestiges* of nobility, one has been enchanted in one's pursuit of the nobility in the lower world; for, in general, to be actively occupied with the *semblance* of truth and drawn toward it in any way is characteristic of someone who has been deluded by the forces which draw one to the lower world [...]. For to pursue what is not good *as if it were good*, drawn by the appearance of good by irrational impulses, belongs to one who is being ignorantly led where he does not want to go [cf. 4.22-24]¹³ (4.4.44.25-33, my italics).¹⁴

This passage attributes "enchantment" solely to the non-virtuous agent who is drawn toward external *images* of nobility. By contrast, the virtuous agent is free from enchantment, that is, she has released herself from external determinations and has become autonomous to the extent that her actions are guided by the contemplation of *true* nobility (not its vestiges or images). This means that, as long as her

¹³ "For it is for this reason that slavery is ill spoken of, not where one has no power to go to the bad, but where one has no power to go to one's own good *but is led away to the good of another*" (6.8.4.22-24, my italics).

¹⁴ Cf. 3.8.4.40-45: "Everywhere we shall find that making and action are either a *weakening* or a consequence of contemplation; *a weakening, if the doer or maker had nothing in view beyond the thing done*, a consequence if he had another prior object of contemplation better than what he made. For who, if he is able to contemplate what is truly real *will deliberately go after its image?*" (my italics).

major premises are derived from contemplation (cf. 3.22-26), her actions will not be “under enchantment”, aiming at external objects. Rather, her actions will exert an influence in the world “here below” while also maintaining their *telos* (their end or goal) in the intellectual contemplation of the good and the noble (*kalon*: 4.4.44.19-20, 25 f.; cf. 6.8.6.18). We have thus found a way, through the practical-syllogism model, to ensure that the agent turns to the external world with intentionality and discursivity while also preserving the primacy of contemplation. By doing so, we have explained how a virtuous action – the result of a practical syllogism – also functions as the by-product or external manifestation of contemplation as the *inner activity of virtue*. We have thereby combined the advantages of each of our previous frameworks while also criticizing their weaknesses.

But each of our previous models has failed to address a pressing concern regarding the production or generation of virtuous actions. In both frameworks, such actions appear *necessitated*: so long as we formulate a major premise (e.g., coffee should always be drunk in the morning), we seemingly *cannot fail* to bring forth an action once the relevant minor premise comes in (e.g., *this* is grounded coffee; it is morning). Similarly, so long as the inner activity of virtue (our will) is operative, we apparently *cannot fail* to produce the external activity (virtuous action) if a right substrate (adverse circumstance) is present. Both models appear to have reduced virtuous actions to an automatic production or to a spontaneous reflex. It seems, in fact, that we have robbed the internal activity (our free will) of *efficient causality*: what triggers our action is the minor premise or adverse circumstance that *forces* our volition from inaction into action.

We must thus inquire whether these models do not subjugate our volition to external circumstances. After all, in both cases our inner volition would rather “rest from its practical activities”, but given the presence of a suitable substrate or of a minor premise, it finds itself “compelled to do this or that to cope with what turns up” (5.11-23). Practical actions thus no longer seem to reside “in our power”, since the determining factor for their occurrence apparently belongs to the minor premise or substrate, both of which lie outside the subject’s

control. However, if we find a way to rescue our actions from being necessitated by external factors, we might amend our previous models in such a way as to preserve their usefulness. Is that possible?

The problem intensifies once we realize that the language of necessity has strong textual support in Plotinus's discussion of practical action. In 4.4.44, for instance, we read that the virtuous agent is free from enchantment as long as she regards her actions as "necessary" rather than as desirable in and of themselves:

If one carries out the so-called noble activities as *necessary* ones, and grasps that what is really noble is something else [i.e., the intellectual contemplation of true nobility], one has not been enchanted – *for one knows the necessity*, and does not look to this world [i.e., does not have her *telos* in this world] (4.4.44.18-21, my italics).

This passage echoes our earlier discussion of 6.8.5, where Plotinus claims that virtuous actions are not only dependent on but even *compelled* by external circumstances. Acts of courage, Plotinus tells us, are necessitated insofar as the courageous person is compelled to act under the appropriate conditions, such as war (5.13-20). Both 4.4.44 and 6.8.5 seem to indicate that practical actions (however noble) are the children of necessity, whereas only our contemplation of true nobility remains free and autonomous.

I suggest, however, that Plotinus qualifies his use of the word "necessity" in 6.8. The so-called necessity of virtuous actions does not connote heteronomy (in the sense of external determination), but rather *moral duty*. The virtuous agent finds herself *morally* compelled to act virtuously when confronted with adverse circumstances. This is suggested by Plotinus's appeal to the language of command in chapter 6, which implies a moral determination, rather than a physical one: "[Our free will] has the mastery and is independent, even if something directs it (*epitaxeie*: commands or enjoins it) by necessity to what is outside" (6.28-29). Our free will, therefore, retains its independence even when unfavorable situations arise, which means that external circumstances do not *force* our will into action in a

deterministic way. Rather, such circumstances instantiate a rule or a goal set by rational desire, which then issues a moral exhortation or ethical command to act. This “call to action”, as it were, does not physically determine our will from the outside, but rather functions, we might say, as the inner voice of “moral conscience” enjoining the agent to act when faced with the relevant external facts.

In a crucial passage from chapter 6, Plotinus stresses precisely such a distinction between the soul's partial *freedom* from natural or physical determinations vis-à-vis the moral *necessity* of its actions:

Although the soul has not *willed* these things [these adverse circumstances] to happen, nevertheless even in these cases, the soul maintains its self-dependence by referring back to itself even here. *For it will not follow the lead of the circumstances*, for instance by saving the man who is in danger, but if it seems good to the soul, it will abandon this particular person and *command him [keleuousan]* to give up his life and property and children and even his country, having as its goal its own beauty but not the existence of what is subject to it (6.11-19, my italics; translation modified by reference to Corrigan & Turner, 2017, p. 90-91).

This central passage from chapter 6 – the conclusive chapter of Plotinus's argument about human *praxis* in 6.8 – challenges the thesis that our actions are necessitated by external circumstances. We read here that even if adverse circumstances arise (thereby leading to the formulation of a minor premise, or of a suitable substrate for action), the soul may still choose “not to follow their lead”. The soul always has its *telos* in “its own beauty” and in “its own good”, both of which come ultimately from the Good itself as the principle of all reality. Its actions, then, do not aim at “the existence of what is subject to it”, but at its own good. This leads us to interpret Plotinus's claim that the soul is “compelled to be helpful” (5.22-23) in cases of war as meaning that the soul is “morally compelled”, i.e., not compelled to generate any fixed or pre-determined action in the physical world, but – whatever action it undertakes “here below” – to always have its own good in mind. The decision to act virtuously in the world remains under the control of the agent, so that one's actions are still,

in an important sense, in one's power. To clarify this position about freedom and moral determination, I conclude by outlining an alternative model for understanding human *praxis* in 6.8.1-6.

The Moral-Attunement Model

We have seen that Plotinus finds it a *problem* that all human action – no matter how virtuous – appears necessitated by external circumstances. Whenever adverse situations arise, the virtuous person seems “compelled to be helpful” (5.22-23), in which case her actions would not reside in her power but would rather be externally determined by events that far exceed her control. The virtuous person would thus become a slave to circumstance. But Plotinus clearly rejects this alternative (cf. 6.11-19): his goal is to understand the way in which “being good is in our power and ‘virtue has no master’ [*Rep.* 10 617e3]” (5.30-31). To make sense of this, I have suggested that we read “compelled to be helpful” as meaning “*morally* compelled”, so that external events can only issue a *moral* determination, not a *physical* one (cf. 6.29: *epitaxeie*; 6.16: *keleuousan*). The efficient cause of action, then, still resides in the agent herself, who now has the moral *duty* (i.e., is morally “necessitated”) to act in such a way as to fulfill the inner voice of conscience. This means that the decision to act virtuously is still “up to the agent”, even though she has no choice but to feel morally compelled to act when war, infirmity, or other unfortunate situations arise, asking for her curative powers.

To clarify this solution, I find it helpful (despite all anachronism) to turn to Kant's notion of moral duty in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. There, Kant tells us that “duty is the *necessity of an action* from respect for law” (Gregor, 2012, p. 13), and explains that the term ‘law’ refers to any practical principle of reason that is universally valid for all human beings (Gregor, 2012, p. 27). We are not straying too far from Kant if we identify this law, or this practical principle of reason, with the major premise of a practical syllogism, which concerns good and noble ends that are universally applicable, i.e., that are good for *all* human beings. But Kant not only claims that

duty comes from “respect for law” or for a general principle of action, but also that it makes an action *necessary*. Necessity (*Notwendigkeit*) refers here to what Kant calls practical “necessitation” (*Notigüng*) or constraint (*Zwang*) (Gregor, 2012, p. 24, 41). Kant is not dealing with *external* constraint – as by cages or chains – but rather with the inner rational *self-constraint* that one exerts over oneself from respect for correct principles. To act from duty, then, is to do something because you know that a universally valid moral principle demands it, and this gives you a good reason to decide to do it (cf. Wood, 2008, p. 25-26).

The advent of a minor premise or adverse circumstance, in short, does not necessitate an action through external coercion or physical force, but rather creates an “inner rational self-constraint” in all those who have “respect for correct principles” – i.e., for the good and the noble (*kalon*). It is still up to the embodied agent, however, whether to comply with this moral determination or to defy it, and how best to execute it externally or empirically. The more one complies with such a determination out of one’s own inner volition (out of “respect for law”), the more one achieves the freedom or autonomy proper to Intellect and, ultimately, to the Good itself. Plotinus says just as much when he claims that, if these two different strands – volition as the root of choice, and Intellect as the root of freedom – are consistent and attuned (6.4), then the virtuous soul will be free and independent:

Virtue and intellect have the mastery and [...] we should refer being in our power and freedom to them; and since these have no master, intellect is *independent* and virtue *wishes to be independent* by supervising the soul to make it good, and up to this point is free itself and makes the soul free (6.4-10, my italics).

Plotinus is here telling us that, while both virtue and Intellect are “without a master” (cf. *R.* 10 617e3), there is a different emphasis in each case: Intellect is self-dependent and free in a primary sense, while virtue wills or *chooses* to be self-dependent by assuming the responsibility to “make the soul good”. Plotinus appears to claim that virtue requires two conditions: it has to will the good and the noble (i.e., to have “respect for law”), as well as to assume a certain kind of

care for the soul in order to draw it up into the goodness of Intellect and, finally, into the Good itself. This “care of soul” recalls us to Plotinus’s examples in 4.3.4.22-38, where the higher part of our soul cares for the lower and embodied part like a gardener concerned about a maggoty plant. We thus “supervise the soul to make it good” by acting in such a way as to comply with our inner moral determinations – though it is up to us *whether* to act and how *best* to act in each given circumstance. Virtue is thus a question of decision: being good is in our power “if we will and choose it” (5.30-32).¹⁵

Plotinus, however, emphasizes that the freedom of our soul – in contrast to that of Intellect – will exist only “up to this point” (*mekhri toutou*: 6.9), i.e., it is an ambiguous freedom, often restricted by our power to stand over and supervise the whole soul to conform it to the Good. This means that the soul is not *yet* independent, but only *wishes* to be so. It seeks to actualize, in empirical and embodied life, its intelligible principles of action. And it may in fact achieve this in moments of complete adherence to – or of mystical union with – the Good: “Surely when we ascend to this [to the Good] and become this alone and let the rest go, what can we say of it except that we are *more than free* and *more than independent*?” (15.21-25, my italics). At first, the soul only *wishes* to be free, while Intellect *is* free and the Good is *more than free*. But in moments of mystical union, the soul can rise from an *imitation* of freedom, to freedom *proper*, and finally to the Good that lies *beyond* freedom and yet is its principle.

Practical life is thus imbued with freedom to the extent that the soul supervises its actions to conform to its will and choice of the good. This leads Plotinus to conclude that “all that comes from this will and is done *according to it* is in our power, both when it is acting externally and when it is by itself” (6.29-30, my italics). In other words, all *unimpeded* activity coming from our willing of the good is in our power – and this includes all virtuous actions that we will and

¹⁵ Cf. 5.5.12.33-35: “The Good is gentle and kindly and gracious, and present to anyone *whenever anyone wishes*” (my italics). Corrigan (2015, p. 147) reads this passage as saying that “the *free will* of the One is open to the *free wish* of anyone by virtue of that which wills or wishes in each subject”.

actualize *without hindrance*. “Without hindrance” characterizes, for Plotinus, human freedom in its fullest sense: “The soul becomes free, then, when it presses on without hindrance to the Good by means of Intellect [i.e. by actualizing its intelligible principles of action]” (7.1). Plotinus in fact calls freedom an unhindered (*anempodistos*) and unimpeded (*akolutos*) activity (8.12-13).¹⁶ Whenever we are acting externally in such a way as to actualize, in unhindered or unimpeded fashion, our intelligible principles of action, we are free. At this point, the freedom of intelligible activity pervades practical life.

Plotinus, in short, grants freedom to human *praxis*. He does so in cases where actions simultaneously (1) conform to the intelligible principles of action (thereby reflecting the free activity of Intellect), and (2) unfold unimpededly in empirical reality. In those cases, our external actions are *empirically* complying with an *intelligible* (and moral) determination out of our own, free inner volition. We are thus “living according to our will” while “imitating what is to our mind”, i.e., what is according to Intellect (*kata noūn*: 6.37). Our freedom manifests the freedom of Intellect, and, in cases like these, perhaps even we can touch upon something about which it is not possible anymore to speak or apprehend – this alone truly free (cf. 21.28-33).¹⁷

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¹⁶ Corrigan & Turner (2017, p. 208) emphasize Plotinus’s use of these terms; for the two terms together, see Epict. *Diss.* 2.19.32.4-33.1; and for *anempodistos* (unhindered) and cognate forms, see 1.5.4.3; 1.4.1.3; 1.8.4.3.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Kevin Corrigan (Emory University) for guiding me in the study of Plotinus and Neoplatonism, as well as for reading an earlier draft of this article.

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