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## Ethics and Metaphysics in Plotinus

Plotinus' ethics has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The debate revolves around the status of practical ethics. One view is that Plotinus is much more interested in the metaphysical principles of reality than in man and the empirical world. If he has an ethics at all, it is the otherworldly, self-centered and elitist ethics of the late antique sage that does not have much to offer to ordinary people. Other scholars accord ethics, including other-regarding virtues, a more extensive role in Plotinus; they argue that social engagement has firm doctrinal basis in his metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I shall try to elucidate Plotinus' ethics from a different angle. Given that both camps accept that the crucial question concerns the relation of ethics to metaphysics, I deem that issue worthy of closer scrutiny. There is only one short passage in the corpus where Plotinus explicitly discusses the relationship between the two disciplines. For this reason, I shall first examine the characteristics of Plotinus' ethical thought using a particular example, the analysis of human freedom in the treatise *On the Freedom and the Will of the One* (VI 8). Then, at the end of my paper, I turn to the treatment of ethics in the treatise *On Dialectic* (I 3. 6). I shall argue for the following claims.

1. Plotinus sets out his ethical teaching primarily in terms of metaphysics rather than directly, by means of analysis of ethical conduct.
2. He is committed to the ideal of a contemplative life. Nonetheless, his metaphysics provides reasons for the philosopher to engage in practical action as necessity arises, and to act for the sake of other persons.
3. There is such a thing as a Plotinian ethics but, given his notion of philosophical explanation and his concept of reason, it is not an *autonomous* discipline.
4. He has a largely coherent view of human action which explains how theoretical knowledge can be turned into action.

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<sup>2</sup> For the first view see Wildberg (2002), Chiaradonna (2009), and Dillon (1996), the paper which started the debate. For the second interpretation see Smith (1999) and (2005), Schniewind (2003), Song (2009). O'Meara (2003) develops a comprehensive account of Neoplatonic ethics and political philosophy along these lines. Others seek to find a middle way, Remes (2006) and Stern-Gillet (2009). Beierwaltes (2002) emphasizes that the contemplative ascent, which is at the heart of Plotinus' philosophy, implies ethical self-transformation, and he grants that it does not necessarily exclude moderate involvement in practical affairs.

# 1 The criterion of autonomy and the activities of human soul

In VI 8, Plotinus explores whether the notion of ‘being in one’s power’ (τὸ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς) can be applied to the gods, and, above all, to God, the first principle. The notion in question evidently belongs to the sphere of human life.<sup>3</sup> Plotinus wonders whether and, if so, how it can be transferred to the divine principles.<sup>4</sup> He first examines human autonomy (chs. 1–6),<sup>5</sup> then he turns to the applicability of the notion to God, the One or the Good (chs. 7–21). The first part, which is preparatory to the theological inquiry, can be regarded as an *ethical* treatise.

The question is couched in terms of ‘being in one’s power’ (ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς), but ‘freedom’ (τὸ ἐλευθέρων) is used synonymously with the former term in the treatise.<sup>6</sup> In Hellenistic and Imperial times, ‘being in one’s power’ standardly refers to the autonomy requisite for moral responsibility which became a central issue in the debates about Stoic determinism. The Stoics discuss ἐλευθερία in the context of normative ethics, more precisely, in the delineation of the ideal of the wise person.<sup>7</sup> In Epictetus’ ethics, freedom is a central value, the ideal state to be achieved through philosophy. He works out a method of spiritual exercises designed to transform one’s attitudes and value judgements in such a way as to completely detach oneself from what is external and to achieve internal freedom.<sup>8</sup> In VI 8, Plotinus seems to have this kind of ideal freedom in mind rather than the minimal autonomy required for responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

He advances the following account of the (common) notion of ‘being in one’s power’:

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<sup>3</sup> VI 8. 1. 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> VI 8. 1. 18–21.

<sup>5</sup> VI 8. 1. 13–15 (tr. Armstrong): ‘But 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 (ἐφ’ ἡμῖν).’

<sup>6</sup> For instance, VI 8. 4. 6; 4. 10–11; 4. 35; 5. 33; 6. 6; 6. 26–27.

<sup>7</sup> Diogenes Laertius, VII 121. Cf. *ibid.* VII 33; Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 5; Philo, *Quod omnis probus* 21ff. The ideal of freedom seems to have Socratic roots (Xenophon, *Mem.* IV. 5), and it is present in the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions (see next section).

<sup>8</sup> See especially *Diss.* IV. 1. Cf. Dio Chrysostomus, *Or.* 80.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Eliasson (2008) 206. For the broader context of Plotinus’ analysis of human and divine autonomy in Imperial philosophy see O’Meara (1992), Lavaud (2007) 176–179 and Frede (2011) 125–130.

I myself think that, when we are pushed around among opposing chances and compulsions and strong assaults of passions possessing our soul, we acknowledge all these things as our masters and are enslaved to them and carried wherever they take us, and so are in doubt whether we are not nothing and nothing is in our power, on the assumption that whatever we might do when not enslaved to chances or compulsions or strong passions, because we wished it (βουληθέντες) and with nothing opposing our volition, this would be in our power. But if this is so, our notion of ‘being in our power’ (ἡ ἔννοια τοῦ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν) would be ‘what is enslaved to our volition (βούλησει) and would come to pass (or not) to the extent to which we wished it’ (VI 8. 1. 22–33, tr. Armstrong, modified).

The fundamental oppositions in terms of which autonomy is defined are the contrast between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’, and that between oneself and other things.<sup>10</sup> Not only chance circumstances and compulsions but also passions of the soul count as ‘external’, presumably on the grounds that they make the rational self depend on other things, while the ‘internal’ side is represented by rational volition (βούλησις). Later in the treatise it emerges that ‘volition’ does not necessarily presuppose a two-sided decision-making faculty: freedom does not require that the agent be able to do or not to do something.<sup>11</sup> Positively, volition can be understood in terms of a conscious and knowledge-based desire for the good of the subject and, ultimately, for the transcendent Good. It is sufficient for autonomy that the agent pursues his own good rather than the good of another on the basis of knowledge of that good.<sup>12</sup> The normative notion of rational autonomy outlined in the preliminary definition—that is, freedom from error, passion and external influences—underlies both the account of human autonomy and the theological part of the treatise.

In an intricate aporetic argument, Plotinus surveys the faculties of human soul, relying more or less on Aristotle’s psychological model. Desiderative activities—both irrational desires and rational desires aiming to satisfy natural bodily wants—are excluded from the sphere of autonomy mainly because they are externally determined. As for cognitive operations, φαντασία fails for similar reasons. Sense-perception and (rational) cognition are discarded on the grounds that they

**10** Oneself versus other things: VI 8. 4. 11–22 and 31–32; 6. 32–34. Internal versus external: VI 8. 4. 2–3; 4. 9–10; 4. 32–34; 6. 19–22 and 26–30; cf. 17. 25–27.

**11** VI 8. 4. 4–7 and 11–22; cf. 21. 1–7. This contrasts not only with the decidedly indeterminist Alexander of Aphrodisias (*De fato*, 181. 6 Bruns), but also with Aristotle (*NE* 1113 b 7–8). The phrase ‘comes to pass or not’ does not imply a two-sided decision-making faculty. Plotinus refers back to this part of the definition in the argument which aims to detach volition from practical action (VI 8. 5. 34–6. 3).

**12** VI 8. 3. 2–5; 4. 12–15; 7. 1–3.

are inert and do not grant control over what is being done.<sup>13</sup> Reason, however, can operate not only as the instrument to achieve the goals set by desire, but also as an active, ruling principle.<sup>14</sup> Plotinus tentatively suggests two ways in which the activity of reason thus understood may qualify as autonomous:

And 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 (VI 8. 2. 33–37, tr. Armstrong, modified).

These two forms of freedom—self-contained contemplative activity and the intrinsic desire of reason that is at work in virtuous action—are in fact included in the final theory. Plotinus concludes that the activity of intellect and the desires deriving from intellection are truly free.<sup>15</sup>

Plotinus uses the same criterion to demarcate the sphere of autonomy as Epictetus does. He considers what it is that depends on the agent himself, as opposed to things depending on other factors. However, the Platonic reinterpretation of this criterion leads to significant differences. First, Plotinus relies on a multipartite psychological model. Secondly, he grounds the possibility of exclusive control over some of our mental operations metaphysically, that is, with the immateriality of soul and of intellect.<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, while Epictetus focuses on the problem of preserving our autonomy in practical situations, in Plotinus the quest for freedom leads one away from the sphere of practical action, and it finds its goal in Platonically conceived contemplation.

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**13** VI 8. 2. 2–8: ἐπιθυμία, θυμός; 2. 8–25: λογισμὸς μετ’ ὀρέξεως; 2. 8 and 3. 8–17: φαντασία, αἴσθησις; 2. 25–30: γνῶσις. The discussion shows that human body is also discarded, cf. n. 16 below.

**14** VI 8. 2. 31: ποιεῖ ... καὶ κρατεῖ.

**15** VI 8. 3. 22–24: τὴν τοῦ νοῦ ἐνέργειαν ... καὶ τὰς ὀρέξεις τὰς ἐκ τοῦ νοεῖν ἐγειρομένας. Cf. 6. 4–6: ‘we shall assert that virtue and intellect have the mastery and that we should refer being in our power and freedom to them’.

**16** VI 8. 6. 26–27 (tr. Armstrong): ‘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.’ Immaterial entities enjoy self-determination on account of their causal properties: they are impassible and essentially active principles, cf. III 1. 8. 4ff.

## 2 Virtue in action and virtue as contemplative activity

How are we to understand the claim that the autonomy of practical action is ‘mixed’?<sup>17</sup> Which aspects qualify as autonomous, and what kind of limitations does Plotinus have in mind? Since Plotinus is concerned with normative freedom rather than moral responsibility, only *virtuous* action is a viable candidate for (partial) autonomy.<sup>18</sup> The question is to what extent virtuous actions are subject to the *exclusive* control of the agent himself. That is why the attainment of the goal (τεῦξις), which depends also on external circumstances, is ethically irrelevant. However, the agent is in charge of whether he acts in a noble way (καλῶς) and whether he does his best.<sup>19</sup> The second qualification is that the exercise of virtue is provoked or indeed compelled by the situation.<sup>20</sup>

... 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, and that there should be injustice that it might define what is just and set things in order, and poverty, that it might display its liberality, or to say quiet because everything was well, 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 (VI 8. 5. 13–20, tr. Armstrong).

The virtuous person is no activist. Rather, he is like a physician curing a disease.<sup>21</sup> He refrains from acting if possible, but under appropriate conditions—that is, if circumstances are adverse enough—he seeks to restore the natural order of things. Virtue is ‘necessitated’ to the extent to which it is the *external* circumstances that require its intervention. While external action is heteronomous in this sense, the ‘volition which precedes action’ is exempt from necessity and is in our power.<sup>22</sup> Thus, autonomy is confined to the internal, psychic side of action. According to a third qualification, a distinction is needed even within this realm: virtue as psychic disposition or state does not include the desires and passions to which it brings limits or from which it liberates the person.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> VI 8. 2. 36–37.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Plato, *Resp.* 617 e 3: ‘virtue is no man’s slave’, quoted at VI 8. 5. 30.

<sup>19</sup> VI 8. 5. 3–7. Cf. Epictetus, *Diss.* II. 5. 6–8.

<sup>20</sup> VI 8. 5. 12–13 and 20–21.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Stern-Gillet (2009) 340f. In principle, preventive actions (as distinct from curative ones) could also have a place here, but Plotinus’ examples suggest otherwise.

<sup>22</sup> VI 8. 5. 22–27.

<sup>23</sup> VI 8. 5. 27–34; 6. 22–26. In the treatise *On Virtues* the moderation of passions is a function

The conclusion is that the autonomous aspect of virtuous action can be located in volition (βούλησις). This inner core of virtuous action, of which the agent is fully in control, is described in intellectualistic terms: ‘also 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’.<sup>24</sup> This account cuts across the Aristotelian distinction between theory and practice. In Plotinus’ view, it is contemplative, noetic activity—νόησις, θεωρία—that is at the heart of virtuous practical actions. The contemplative activity in question is probably directed to some specific aspect of the intelligible world rather than to the second hypostasis in its entirety.<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between internal activity and external actions recalls the metaphysical model of double activity which is designed to explain causality.<sup>26</sup> It is an important part of this theory that the internal activity constituting the substance of the cause brings about the external activity automatically, without any special effort, intention or attention on the agent’s part, provided that a suitable substrate is present. We may wonder if the internal contemplative activity which constitutes virtue produces practical actions in this way. On the one hand, the term ‘internal activity’ strongly suggest this. Further, elsewhere Plotinus argues that the world–soul and the astral souls exert their external ordering activity effortlessly and without deliberative calculation, while they remain engaged in contemplation of higher realities. The relationship of cosmic soul to the bodies they take care of provides the ideal model for embodied human soul.<sup>27</sup> Ποίησις and πράξις can equally be an accompaniment (παρακολούθημα) of contemplation in the case of human agents, too, as long as their external performance is guided by an intelligible object of contemplation.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the virtu-

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of ‘civic virtue’ (I 2. 2. 13–26), while ‘purificatory virtue’ entirely detaches the soul from the body and bodily desires (5. 2ff.). Plotinus’ initial question at VI 8. 5. 27f. reminds us of the former, but in the discussion—to judge from the maximalist expectations set for virtue (VI 8. 6. 14–18)—he seems to have in mind mainly the latter. Likewise, virtue is introduced as a disposition or state of the soul (ἔξις, διάθεσις, 6. 27–28, 35), but finally it is classified as ἐνέργεια (6. 21–22). For lower virtue as disposition and higher virtue as activity see VI 3. 16. 27–31; VI 2. 18. 15–16.

<sup>24</sup> VI 8. 6. 19–22, tr. Armstrong.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. I 2. 7. 3–6; V 8. 10. 11–16.

<sup>26</sup> Emilsson (2012) 355–357 suggests that the distinction between external and internal action in Plato’s *Republic* (443 c–d), which underlies VI 8. 6. 19–22, is interpreted by Plotinus in the light of his doctrine of double activity (or, perhaps, it is among the inspirations of that doctrine).

<sup>27</sup> IV 4. 8; IV 8. 2; II 9. 18. 30–35. See Smith (1999) 233–235.

<sup>28</sup> III 8. 4. 39–44. Cf. Smith (1999) 233; O’Meara (2003) 133. Wilberding (2008) 375–378 suggests that only ποίησις can qualify as an accompaniment of contemplation, while πράξις is always its weakening. However, Plotinus does not distinguish here between πράξις and ποίησις (cf.

ous person reacts to external stimuli<sup>29</sup> which implies that he or she takes notice of them. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that the virtuous person acts without paying attention to the circumstances or without availing herself of sense-perception and discursive reason. But if she does make use of these faculties, it is not clear in what sense the model of double activity applies to her action. I shall come back to this difficulty in the final section of my paper.

For the time being, let me put Plotinus' view on the partial autonomy of virtuous action into its proper historical context. In an early, Platonically-minded, work Aristotle contrasted the social virtues on the one hand and the theoretical cognition of reality on the other. The social virtues that inform the practical life of man while in body qualify as 'necessary', whereas the life of theoretical cognition, which we will enjoy on the Isles of the Blessed and which is called free life already in earthly existence, is 'the only thing we want'.<sup>30</sup> This idea can be connected with Plato's comparison of the liberty of the philosopher with the servitude of the person engaged in public life.<sup>31</sup> The contrast between the liberty of contemplation and the qualified autonomy of practical action that requires the use of the body is wide-spread among the Platonists (and other philosophers) of the Imperial Period.<sup>32</sup> We can see now that Plotinus' claim that the primary form of autonomy consists in noetic understanding rather than practical action<sup>33</sup> reformulates a traditional doctrine. However, his account of virtuous action goes beyond the conventional statements of the primacy of contemplation in that it isolates a contemplative core within *practical* virtue itself. In his view, contemplation and action are not independent alternatives; rather, virtuous action can be understood in terms of external manifestation of contemplation.

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the usage at III 8. 3. 3–6); for action deriving from perfect contemplation see III 8. 6. 37–40. Cf. V 3. 7. 29–34.

**29** VI 8. 5. 12–13; 6. 10–11.

**30** *Protr.* Fr. 12. Ross = Augustinus, *De trinit.* XIV 9. 12 and Iamblichus, *Protr.* IX 52. 16–54. 5 Pistelli.

**31** *Theaet.* 172 c–176 c. For the freedom of disembodied philosophical souls cf. *Phaedo* 66 c–e, 114 b–c.

**32** Alcinous, *Didasc.* 2. 2–3. For other sources see Baltes/Dörrie (2002), Baustein 174. 1 with commentary.

**33** VI 8. 6. 3–10 and 32–43; cf. IV 4. 44.

### 3 Divine Intellect as model of human freedom

Plotinus develops his analysis of the freedom of purely contemplative activity at the end of the treatment of human autonomy.

But the contemplative, that is the primary, Intellect is what is in its own power in this way, that its work in no way depends on another, but it is all turned to itself and its work is itself and it rests in the Good, being without need and fulfilled, and, one might say, living according to its volition; but its volition is its thinking, but was called volition, because it was to its mind (*κατὰ νοῦν*); for what is called volition imitates what is in Intellect (VI 8. 6. 34–38, tr. Armstrong, modified).

This account concerns divine Intellect rather than its human counterpart.<sup>34</sup> Universal Intellect is relevant to Plotinus' argument for two reasons. Plotinus asked whether the notion of autonomy can be applied to the 'gods' and the 'primary things' (VI 8. 1. 1–11); the second hypostasis, Intellect, that is being discussed here certainly falls within this category. What is more important for my purposes here is that the self-contained activity of Intellect is introduced as the paradigm of human autonomy (as can be seen from occurrence of the notion of 'imitation' at the end of the quote).

Let us have a closer look at this relationship. Plotinus emphasizes with respect to Intellect that 1) its operation is self-directed and it does not depend on anything else; 2) in this kind of operation it possesses the Good on its own level, that is, it has attained its goal, hence it is 'fulfilled' and 'lives according to its volition'; 3) its volition is intellection. Plotinus compares the mode of operation of Intellect and the volition (*βούλησις*) in the human soul that, in context, can be understood as comprising both purely theoretical activities and the kind of contemplation that may find its expression in virtuous action.<sup>35</sup> Plotinus stated that (1) volition remains or at least wants to remain by itself (*ἐφ' αὐτῆς*), and it is capable of preserving its independence in the face of external challenges;<sup>36</sup> (2) volition in the soul is ultimately directed to the Good: it wants it, and it attains it

**34** The phrase *πρῶτος νοῦς* regularly refers to universal Intellect rather than human reason (I 6. 9. 34; III 8. 8. 19; V 3. 5. 27 and 39; V 5. 1. 34; VI 7. 29. 27). Moreover, while Plotinus uses the *ἐπί* + dative construction in the plural first person in connection with human autonomy (VI 8. 2. 34–35; 3. 21; 6. 5–6), the phrase occurs here in the third person (*ἐφ' αὐτῶ*, 6. 32; cf. 6. 44; 13. 11).

**35** At VI 8. 6. 29–31 the first part of the sentence seems to refer to the volition that constitutes virtue, while the second part (*ὁ αὐτὴ βούλεται ...*) can be interpreted in terms of the contemplative activities of the soul.

**36** VI 8. 6. 6–14 and 27–30.



again and again (τυγχάνειν);<sup>37</sup> (3) human volition, too, can be described in terms of intellectual cognition.<sup>38</sup>

The slogan ‘lives as he wishes to’ is the traditional description of the ethical ideal of freedom.<sup>39</sup> Plotinus transfers this description to Intellect, and thus he creates continuity between autonomous human volition and the activity of divine Intellect. On the other hand, the nature of human freedom can only be fully understood if we trace it back to its intelligible principle, if we grasp it as an image of the sovereignty of Intellect.<sup>40</sup>

However, human freedom is related to Intellect even more intimately than the image–model relationship suggests. Human intellect and universal Intellect are not two numerically distinct things. Plotinus postulates that human intellect is part of the organic unity of Intellect, and it is in some sense identical with the other parts and with the whole.<sup>41</sup> As a consequence, man is capable of having immediate experience of the transcendent modes of freedom enjoyed by Intellect and by the One.<sup>42</sup> Human contemplative activity, insofar as it attains its goal, is not merely an image of the activity of Intellect but coincides with it.<sup>43</sup>

The nature of human freedom is explained in metaphysical—rather than in genuinely ethical—terms. The most important part of the answer to the question concerning human autonomy is provided by the metaphysical doctrine of Intellect.

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**37** VI 8. 6. 38–39 and 41–42; 7. 5.

**38** Cf. VI 8. 5. 22–24 and 6. 27–28 with 5. 34–35; 6. 21–22.

**39** Epictetus, *Diss.* IV 1. 1; cf. IV 1. 128; II 1. 23–2. The description of freedom in these terms is traditional Stoic doctrine, see Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 34; *De officiis* I 69ff.; Persius, *Sat.* V; Philo, *Quod omnis probus* 59f., cf. 97; Dio Chrysostomus, *Or.* 14.17.

**40** The text of VI 8. 6. 34–38, as printed in Henry/Schwyzler (1982) and translated by Armstrong, incorporates an emendation by Igal (ἢ γὰρ instead of καὶ γὰρ at 6. 37), but the aspect I am emphasizing here—the paradigmatic role of the activity of Intellect for human volition—does not depend on this conjecture.

**41** V 3. 3. 21–29; IV 3. 5. 6–19; VI 2. 20; cf. *Enn.*V 9. 6. 3–5.

**42** VI 8. 15. 14–22. I take it that the βούλησις discussed in the first chapters belongs to the psychic level, while the ‘nature’ that is in contact with Intellect and the One (15. 14) is on the level of the second hypostasis. In successful contemplative acts the soul manages to adapt the images in itself to the originals in Intellect, and thus it partakes in non-discursive, noetic understanding, cf. V 3. 4. 1–15; 6. 25–28.

**43** A further question, which I cannot pursue here, is whether the analogy Plotinus draws between the ethical self-constitution of man and the self-causation of the Good (VI 8. 13. 12–47) implies a different understanding of autonomy. This possibility is explored by Remes (forthcoming).

## 4 The intertwinement of metaphysics and ethics

In the *Timaeus*, Plato posits an intelligible paradigm in order to explain certain properties of the physical world. In Plotinus, this mode of explanation is extensively applied to the interrelations of entities that are ordered by the principle of metaphysical priority. The image may provide a starting-point for the inquirer in the cognitive process that leads to the intellectual grasp of the original,<sup>44</sup> but the latter enjoys explanatory priority. The image can be known only if it is identified as an image of its model, whereas the model cannot be explained in terms of its images. The methodology based on the notions of original and image is a variety of Plotinus' 'vertical' explanations. In his view, the phenomena of the empirical world can be understood if we trace them back to their intelligible principles.

Ethical values are explained in the same way. In VI 8, it emerges that autonomous human volition, which is at the root of contemplative life and may also be operative in practical action, is an image of the self-contained activity of Intellect, and, perhaps, it partially coincides with it. This kind of justification of ethical doctrines can be detected in other contexts, too. Virtue,<sup>45</sup> happiness<sup>46</sup> and self-knowledge<sup>47</sup> are likewise traced back to their models in Intellect.

This methodology has important consequences both for Plotinus' ethics and his metaphysics. We have seen that the inquiry into human freedom in VI 8 is conducted on a very abstract level. Plotinus barely takes into consideration practical situations. All we can gather concerning ethical conduct is that the virtuous person acts only if circumstances render it absolutely necessary, and that he is prepared to sacrifice his own life, his children and his fatherland if the end he has in view so dictates.<sup>48</sup> Instead of an analysis of ethical life, we get a metaphysical account of human nature interspersed with references to Intellect that is portrayed as the model of human autonomy. I believe, however, that Plotinus' ethical

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<sup>44</sup> III 7. 1. 20–24.

<sup>45</sup> The ideas of the virtues are in Intellect (V 8. 10. 11–16; VI 2. 18. 15–16; VI 6. 16. 16–18). At I 2. 7. 3–6, the noetic archetypes of the cardinal virtues are identified with various aspects of the self-directed cognitive act of Intellect.

<sup>46</sup> I 4. 4; cf. I 5. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Plotinus draws a parallel between the self-knowledge of Intellect and human ethical self-knowledge (VI 7. 41. 17–22). Self-knowledge is connected with the knowledge of God both on the level of soul and that of Intellect (V 3. 4. 20–24; 6. 3–4; 7. 7–8). In the former case, self-knowledge has a spiritual-ethical dimension, cf. V 1. 1. 1–22. The origin of this motif is Plato's analysis of ethical self-knowledge, see *Alc. I* 133 c.

<sup>48</sup> VI 8. 5. 7–20; 6. 14–18.

thought is not confined to texts which explicitly address questions of human good and of social relations, but much of it is implicitly contained in metaphysical doctrines. When he comes to speak about the perfect, self-sufficient, eternal life of Intellect, he clarifies, at the same time, what the essence of human freedom, virtue and happiness consists in. Ethics is, as it were, telescoped into metaphysics.

Let me explain. The metaphysical model of reality is pregnant with normative implications. 1) The metaphysically prior grades of reality enjoy priority in value as well. The ontological and causal order represents an axiological order. Thus, the metaphysical framework determines the direction of life praxis and it sets the goal for man. The human good consists in a life lived on the level of Intellect which is ultimately directed to the Good, the only absolute reference point in the system. 2) The analysis of human nature is also relevant to ethical praxis. The distinction between the lower, bodily self and the higher, intellectual self implies the injunction to direct our awareness to the latter and to allow ourselves to be guided by this aspect of our nature. 3) Plotinus seems to work out his metaphysical doctrines with ethical considerations in view.

The last point can be illustrated with the passage discussed in the previous section. Plotinus' Intellect is not exclusively an epistemological construct. Plotinus' theory contains notions—such as 'turning toward oneself',<sup>49</sup> 'desire for the good'<sup>50</sup> and 'care of oneself'<sup>51</sup>—which traditionally serve to describe the psychological and moral life of man. These notions are put into an ontological and epistemological context, and they are reinterpreted in terms of the Aristotelian doctrine of self-thinking Intellect. The inward turn of Intellect is its cognitive orientation, desire is the indefiniteness of the subject before it receives content, Intellect's work on itself is its self-directed cognitive activity. At the same time, the theory of Intellect retains an ethical potential. Intellect sets the standard not only for perfect cognition; its self-sufficient, cognitively rich life that is centered around the Good can also be understood as the ethical ideal of contemplative life elevated to the level of divine perfection.<sup>52</sup> The enthusiastic, rhetorical descriptions of Intellect exhort the reader to imitate the divine paradigm.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Intel-

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49 Epictetus uses this notion in the context of ethical self-examination and self-perfection, *Diss.* I 4. 18f.; III 16. 15; *Ench.* 41. 1; *Diss.* III 22. 38f.; III 23. 16; *Ench.* 10. 1; *Diss.* IV 4. 7. Cf. III 12. 5.

50 Plato, *Charm.* 167 e; *Gorg.* 468 b–d, *Meno* 77 e–78 a; Aristotle, *DA* 432b5–7, 433 a 23ff., *NE* 1111 b 19ff., 1113 a 15ff.

51 *Alcib.* I 132 b–c.

52 Aristotle also connects human and divine theoretical life, *NE* 1177 a 13–17; 1177 b 26–1178 a 2; *Metaph.* 1072 b 14–24.

53 See, for instance, VI 8. 15; V 8. 3–4.

lect fulfills the role of explanatory principle in relation to the ethical life of man. It is the second feature of the theory that is exploited at VI 8. 6. 32ff. where Plotinus finds the model of human autonomy in the self-thinking act of Intellect.<sup>54</sup>

## 5 Consequences for other-regarding attitudes

If the intertwinement of ethics with metaphysics is sufficiently taken into account, the contested points concerning the status of practical ethics appear in a new light. I focus on the problem of self-centeredness. If the world of ethical praxis remains in the background, it is not, as though Plotinus' philosophy entailed fleeing from the world, egocentrism and neglect of fellow men. Rather, he seems to suppose that the nature of human community can be best explained in terms of its principles in the intelligible realm.

Interpersonal relations and other-regarding attitudes are accounted for in the context of metaphysical doctrines concerning the soul and the unity of the intelligible world rather than directly, by means of an ethical analysis of the human world. Embodiment implies that the soul turns away from the organic unity of the intelligible realm and it becomes isolated from it. The fact that its attention is focused on the needs, pains and pleasures, fears and desires of a particular body prevents it from contemplation of the higher realm.<sup>55</sup> Man is merely a part of the sensible world and is subject to the causal nexus of nature, as far as his lower, bodily nature is concerned.<sup>56</sup> The embodied human soul, however, potentially contains the whole of the intelligible realm.<sup>57</sup> The ascent to the intelligible world involves actually becoming a 'whole', reintegration into the living unity of the intelligible world to which the higher self has always belonged. In this unity, the higher self retains some kind of individuality but, at the same time, it is not separated from other entities—among them other selves—by which the intelligible world is populated; it can even be regarded as identical with them and with the whole.<sup>58</sup> In the light of these doctrines, the inward turn, ascent and contemplation

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**54** The notions that figure here in the account of the 'primary, theoretical Intellect', are used elsewhere in descriptions of the ethical ideal of the contemplative wise person. Concern with the self as opposed to external things: IV 4. 44. 1–4; I 4. 4. 18–19. Inward turn: I 4. 11. 7–8 and 16–17. Living according to one's volition: I 4. 5. 8–9; cf. I 4. 6. 13ff.

**55** For the isolation of the soul see IV 7. 13. 11–12; IV 8. 4. 10–21; V 1. 1. 1–22; VI 4. 16. 21–26.

**56** II 3. 9. 27–30.

**57** I 2. 2. 3–5; II 3. 7. 11 and 22–23; III 4. 3. 21–27.

**58** VI 5. 7. esp. 7–9 (tr. Armstrong): 'For, since the others, and not only ourselves, are those [the

cannot simply mean secession from the human community. Quite the opposite, it is precisely in this way that we regain true community with our fellow men.<sup>59</sup>

The doctrine of the community of human souls or intellects in the unity of the intelligible realm provides motivation to appreciate other persons in earthly life. Other persons share with us the same intellectual nature, and they enjoy the same kind of community with God that we ourselves do.<sup>60</sup> The wise person looks at the world from a detached, holistic perspective,<sup>61</sup> without paying heed to the needs of the particular body his soul cares for. Plotinus depreciates our *natural* attachment to our relatives,<sup>62</sup> but he does not do so in the name of a selfish ideal. He is ‘not unfriendly’ or ‘unsympathetic’, but ‘the best of friends’; he keeps his distance from the earthly fates of others no more than he does from his own.<sup>63</sup> He values other persons (and himself) as citizens of the community of the intelligible realm rather than in their capacity as bodily, empirical beings.

Ordinary people who do not look beyond the world of action act in order to create external expressions of the cognitive contents dimly present in their souls which they can see more clearly in this form.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, the wise person’s action does not serve the purpose of epistemic clarification because he is already capable of contemplating the intelligible objects within himself with sufficient clarity. His action is independent from any self-regarding interest. He displays ‘what comes from himself’ (τὸ παρ’ αὐτοῦ), which, I take it, includes his actions, to another person (πρὸς ἄλλον ἀποφαίνει).<sup>65</sup> In this sense, he acts for the sake of others. The awareness of the community of the souls I have discussed in the previous paragraphs may provide him with reasons to do so.

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intelligible things], we are all (pantes) those. So then, being together with all things [persons?], we are those: so then, we are all and one.’ For the unity of the intelligible world and for relation between the parts and the whole see IV 8. 3. 6–21; V 8. 4. 5–9 and 22–27; VI 4. 14. 1–22. See also IV 3. 18. 18–24 for the intimate community of disembodied souls.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Bussanich (1990) 172–180.

<sup>60</sup> I 6. 5. 9–17; II 9. 9. 26–29; 9. 43–51; 9. 74–79; 16. 5–9.

<sup>61</sup> Remes (2006) 17ff. calls attention to this aspect.

<sup>62</sup> I 4. 7. 32–47; 8. 12–30; IV 4. 44. 6–9; VI 8. 6. 15–18.

<sup>63</sup> I 4. 15. 21–25.

<sup>64</sup> III 8. 6. 1–9; cf. 4. 31–36.

<sup>65</sup> III 8. 6. 37–40; cf. 4. 41–44. Schniewind (2003) 182–184 interprets the external performance of the wise person described at 8. 37f. primarily in terms of his educational role.

## 6 Practical reason and the division of philosophy

What has been said thus far suggests that ethics is almost dissolved in metaphysics. However, weighty arguments can be adduced to the opposite effect. In the treatise *On Dialectic* Plotinus says that philosophy includes, along with dialectic (metaphysics), ethics and physics as well, which means that he expressly acknowledges the existence of ethics as a discipline.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, one might argue on the basis of the distinction between theoretical and practical reason made at least in two passages<sup>67</sup> that ethics qualifies as an autonomous discipline in a deeper sense, too, since it is rooted in the natural structure of reason. Let us have a look at Plotinus' conception of practical rationality with a focus on φρόνησις.

It is useful at this point to recall the basic traits of Aristotle's notion of φρόνησις, practical wisdom. He divides reason into a scientific and a calculative part.<sup>68</sup> The former is concerned with necessary, universal truths; its highest excellence is theoretical wisdom (σοφία) which includes insight into the principles and demonstrative knowledge of derivative theorems (νοῦς, ἐπιστήμη).<sup>69</sup> Calculative reason is related to contingent particular things; its characteristic mode of operation is deliberation (βούλευσις). Φρόνησις is one of the virtues of calculative reason (it is distinguished from productive expertises). Practical wisdom is related to the agent himself, it has to cope with particular situations, and it uses its deliberative powers to achieve the noble ends set by ethical virtue.<sup>70</sup>

Plotinus distinguishes between φρόνησις and σοφία in the following way:

And, in the same way, philosophy theorizes about the morals drawing on intelligible reality, but adds the virtuous dispositions and the exercises which produce them. The rational dispositions receive their principles from There, and they possess them as their own already; for in fact they are with matter for the most part. And the other virtues apply reasoning (λογισμούς) to the experiences and actions proper to them, but φρόνησις is a kind of superior reasoning (ἐπιλογισμός) and is concerned with what is more universal, and with questions of mutual implication, and <it controls> whether to refrain from action, now or later, or whether an entirely different course would be better. Dialectic and σοφία provide everything for φρόνησις to use, in an even more universal and immaterial form (I 3. 6. 5–12, my translation, based on Armstrong's).

<sup>66</sup> I 3. 6. 1–7.

<sup>67</sup> I 3. 6. 10–14; V 3. 6. 35–44.

<sup>68</sup> NE 1139 a 5–15.

<sup>69</sup> NE 1139 b 19–35; 1140 b 31–1141 a 19.

<sup>70</sup> NE 1140 a 24–b 30; 1141 a 28–b 23.

Φρόνησις is interpreted here in terms of practical intelligence and is distinguished from theoretical wisdom. The former is concerned, to judge from the operations ascribed to it, with particular practical situations, and it is characterized as a kind of reasoning (ἐπιλογισμός). The subordination of practical wisdom to theoretical wisdom is not alien to Aristotle either. It seems, then, that Plotinus has a notion of practical wisdom which largely corresponds to Aristotle's.

However, the main bulk of evidence tells against this interpretation. 1) In several passages, φρόνησις is not distinguished from theoretical wisdom; rather, it is itself a contemplative activity of soul that unfolds the contents of Intellect.<sup>71</sup> This probably also implies that it is not concerned with particulars. 2) Its mode of operation is not discursive. Strictly speaking, φρόνησις and deliberative reasoning are incompatible since the person engaged in deliberation only searches what the φρόνιμος already possesses.<sup>72</sup> 3) Φρόνησις exerts an ordering activity both on the cosmic level<sup>73</sup> and in human life. As a 'purificatory' virtue, it is the independent activity of soul that separates it from the body and brings it back to Intellect.<sup>74</sup> On the whole, φρόνησις can be understood in terms of intelligence that is contemplative and creative at the same time, and thus it mediates between the intelligible and the sensible realm. Plotinus' φρόνησις, at least in its standard use, is not practical intelligence as opposed to theoretical wisdom.

Moreover, non-Aristotelian features surface in I 3, too. First, φρόνησις is not limited to practical intelligence in this treatise either, but it has theoretical aspects as well.<sup>75</sup> Secondly, φρόνησις, even if it exerts its activity in particular situation, is not concerned with particulars as such; rather, its object is 'something more universal'. Presumably, it judges the particular situations in the light of universal values which it receives from the contemplation of intelligible reality. Thirdly, and most importantly, φρόνησις depends on theoretical wisdom for its content,

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**71** I 2. 6. 12–13: 'Σοφία and φρόνησις consists in the contemplation of that which Intellect contains'. Cf. I 2. 3. 21–31; 7. 6–7; I 3. 5. 5–8. Φρόνησις is not distinguished from productive rationality either. Cf. V 9. 11. 13–16; II 3. 18. 7–8.

**72** IV 4. 12. 3–13.

**73** I 2. 1. 16–19; II 9. 5. 1–8; IV 2. 2. 42–49; IV 4. 10–14. The external activity of φρόνησις, at least on the cosmic level, does not imply conscious attention and concern with the details. Cf. IV 4. 11. 23–28; IV 8. 2. 26–30; IV 4. 8.

**74** I 2. 3. 15; I 6. 6. 12–13; II 9. 15. 38–39; IV 7. 10. 7–19. Cf. Plato, *Theaet.* 176 a–b; *Phaedo* 69 a–c.

**75** At I 3. 5. 5–8, Plotinus develops a distinction between φρόνησις and σοφία that differs from the one in the quote above: the former is a disposition of the soul directed to Being, while the latter concerns the first principle beyond Being. I take it that by σοφία human reason seeks to comprehend the Good (without being able to grasp it in its simplicity), whereas φρόνησις is a contemplative activity directed to the second hypostasis.

as ‘σοφία provides to it everything for use’.<sup>76</sup> I conclude that for Plotinus σοφία and φρόνησις are not excellences of two kinds of reason that differ both in their objects and their respective mode of operation; rather, they are subsequent stages in a descending series that conveys the contents of Intellect to human beings.

The whole argument of the chapter aims to show that physics and ethics essentially depend on dialectic.<sup>77</sup> This sits well with the paramount importance of Intellect in the explanation of ethical values I have discussed above. Of course, Plotinus does not mean to abolish the ethical sphere any more than he does the physical world. The empirical world has a firm metaphysical status as a characteristic stage in the process of the unfolding of reality. Nevertheless, in the explanation of ethical values he avails himself of a strictly metaphysical method.

## 7 The practical syllogism in Plotinus’ theory of action

One may wonder precisely how the intelligible principles prompted by φρόνησις guide virtuous action. Plotinus’ remarks concerning the practical use of reason seem to point in opposite directions. 1) In VI 8. 5–6, the immaterial volition (βούλησις) and the internal activity, intellection or contemplation that constitutes virtue, which are alternative descriptions of the autonomous aspect of virtuous action, do not seem to be directed to the external world or to have a discursive mode of operation. Similarly, φρόνησις, in what I called its standard interpretation in the previous section, is directed to Intellect rather than outward, and it is capable of exerting its ordering activity without deliberative calculation. 2) On the other hand, Plotinus states that practical intellect (νοῦς πρακτικός), as distinct from theoretical intellect, turns outward and it knows external objects rather than itself.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, in I 3. 6, φρόνησις has to do with particular situations and is characterized by some kind of reasoning. It is not clear, then, which place is assigned to the knowledge of external circumstances and to deliberative reasoning in Plotinus’ theory of action, and, in particular, in his account of vir-

<sup>76</sup> I 3. 6. 12–14, cf. 5–6.

<sup>77</sup> I 3. 6. 2ff.

<sup>78</sup> V 3. 6. 36–39 (tr. Armstrong): ‘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, but if it was altogether practical, there would be no necessity in it of knowing itself’.



tuous action. This is the question I left open in the discussion of the applicability of the model of double activity to virtuous action.

The difficulty can be resolved, I submit, if we suppose that Plotinus conceives of human action in terms of the Aristotelian model of the practical syllogism.<sup>79</sup> Practical reason is directed outward to the extent to which the minor premise of a practical syllogism contains information concerning the relevant external circumstances of action. This holds for virtuous and ordinary agents alike. However, the latter consider some external thing as the *end* of their action, too. That is why in their case also the major premise is externally determined, as it is furnished by irrational desires which are directed to external objects. Actions motivated by familial affection, by carnal desires, by spirit, by fear and by the desire for self-preservation are analysed in these terms:<sup>80</sup> ‘the *premises* of passion are the principle [of action] and they belong to the irrational part’.<sup>81</sup> This statement contains the characteristic term ‘premise’ (προτάσις) which makes sense in this context only if it refers to the major premise of *practical* syllogism.<sup>82</sup>

The wise and virtuous person is distinguished by the fact that the end he has in view is not external. Rather, he possesses his own good within, since in the contemplative activity in which he is engaged the subject and the object of cognition coincide.<sup>83</sup> I take it that the contemplation which constitutes the inner core of virtue according to VI 8. 6 and φρόνησις in I 3. 5–6 belong to this type. This kind of contemplative activity may supply the major premise of action under certain circumstances. The syllogistic terminology is used by Plotinus in relation to virtuous action, too: ‘(we shall grant) that the premises [of action] derived from this [from the activity of intellect] (τὰς ἐντεῦθεν προτάσεις) are truly free, and that the desires roused by thinking are not involuntary’.<sup>84</sup> I take it that the ‘desires’ mentioned here can be connected with the volition directed to noble

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**79** NE 1146 b 35–1147 a 31; *De motu an.* 701 a 7–25. Aristotle uses this model to explain human action as well as animal behaviour. The major, more general, premise of practical syllogism formulates a rule or a goal set by a desire, while the minor premise, which concerns the particular circumstances of action, is provided by a cognitive faculty; the conclusion is action itself.

**80** IV 4. 44. 6–16.

**81** IV 4. 44. 5–6, my translation. In Greek: ἀρχὴ καὶ τοῦ ἀλόγου αἰ τοῦ πάθους προτάσεις. My interpretation of this difficult phrase is based on the note of Henry/Schwyzler (1982) ad locum who construe both ἀρχὴ and τοῦ ἀλόγου as predicates.

**82** The Liddell/Scott/Jones dictionary lists among the meanings of προτάσις ‘stretching out, urge’. However, the only evidence adduced is the Plotinus passage I am discussing. In this case, therefore, I trust more Sleeman/Pollet (1980) s.v. προτάσις who are not familiar with this meaning and render the word with ‘proposition’, ‘premise’.

**83** IV 4. 44. 1–5 and 34–36.

**84** VI 8. 3. 22–24, tr. Armstrong.

ends that is operative in virtuous practical actions, while the ‘premises’ are the major premises of the practical syllogism that correspond to such desires. If that is so, Plotinus makes ethical praxis dependent on contemplation in a very specific sense. Contemplative activity does not only generally inform the external life of the wise person,<sup>85</sup> but it also furnishes the ends that he pursues when engaged in *particular* actions.

As for discursivity, it cannot be excluded from the mental processes of the virtuous person which lead to action. Even if the contemplative activity that supplies the major premise of the practical syllogism concerns universal values and is non-discursive in character, the agent must take into account the particular circumstances of action which provide the minor premise of the practical syllogism. There is not much evidence of the latter aspect in the texts,<sup>86</sup> but it is required not only by common sense but also by the model of practical syllogism which is, or so I would argue, clearly at work in Plotinus’ analysis of virtuous action. The discursive operation preparing virtuous action is presumably not aporetic. This is suggested by the fact that Plotinus uses the language of *command* rather than that of deliberation in this connection.<sup>87</sup>

In some passages, Plotinus seems to depreciate practical action as such. For instance, he says that practical action is ‘under enchantment’.<sup>88</sup> I believe, however, that a distinction needs to be made here. This statement holds strictly only for ordinary agents who do not have a higher end in view beyond the images of nobility brought about by action itself.<sup>89</sup> By contrast, the action of the wise person is ‘free from enchantment’, that is, it qualifies as autonomous, provided that he is guided by the contemplation of true nobility (as opposed to its images) and that

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**85** Cf. I 2. 5. 21–31. For the relationship between noetic contemplation and theoretical life see Linguisti (2012) 185–190.

**86** See, however, VI 8. 1. 39–44 where Plotinus insists against Aristotle (*NE* 1110 b 30–33) that voluntary action (ἐκούσιον) requires not only knowledge of the particular circumstances but also that of general principles. This implies that knowledge of particulars is needed as well. ‘Voluntary’ is a term for normative autonomy in VI 8.

**87** VI 8. 6. 16, 28: κελεύουσιν, ἐπιτάξειε.—The notion of ἐπιλογισμός at I 3. 6. 10 is perhaps introduced to set apart φρόνησις from ordinary calculative thought. One might guess that this kind of thinking involves seeing the particulars related to action in the light of intelligible principles. Cf. Schniewind (2008) 210f. The interpretation of φρόνησις in I 3. 6 is atypical insofar as it seems to be responsible not only for the general knowledge contained in the major premise of practical syllogism but also for the whole mental process leading to action.

**88** IV 4. 43. 18–24.

**89** IV 4. 44. 25–33; cf. III 8. 4. 41.

he regards action as ‘necessary’ rather than ‘good’.<sup>90</sup> The evaluation of practical action depends on its goal, on the metaphysical orientation expressed in it.

In the theory of double activity, the internal activity necessarily brings about the external activity if a suitable substrate is present. The ‘necessity’ of virtuous action does not only connote heteronomy; it also implies that the virtuous agent cannot fail to act if action is called for by the circumstances. Thus, the language of ‘necessity’ conveys the notion of moral duty as well. The necessary, ‘automatic’ character of the action of the virtuous person resembles the external activities in the theory of double activity. However, this does not mean that he does not use discursive reason; the analysis of virtuous action in terms of practical syllogism suggests the opposite.

Plotinus’ conception of ethics is deeply Platonic. He is reluctant to separate praxis from theoretical cognition and he considers metaphysical theory as directly relevant to the ethical life of man.<sup>91</sup> Plotinian φρόνησις cannot be understood in terms of practical intelligence as distinct from theoretical reason. Nonetheless, it has an ethical function as well which mainly consists in the mediation of the contents of Intellect to human soul. The way in which the principles conveyed to the soul by φρόνησις become operative in practical action can be elucidated in terms of the Aristotelian model of practical syllogism. Thus, Plotinus propounds a Platonic theory of action which accommodates elements of Aristotle’s theory. Later Neoplatonists go beyond him in this respect, but they seem to preserve his central insight, that is, the relevance of metaphysics to ethics.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> IV 4. 44. 18–21 and 25ff. Cf. VI 8. 6. 17–18.

<sup>91</sup> Plato argues that the knowledge of the Forms, especially that of the Good, is indispensable for political leadership (*Resp.* 484 b–d; 504 d–505 b). Aristotle objects that the universal Good, if there were such a thing, would be irrelevant to the human good that can be achieved by means of practical action (*NE* 1096 b 31–1097 a 13). In an early work, however, Aristotle sets out a Platonic position: θεωρητική φρόνησις, knowledge of ‘nature’ and of ‘the divine’ provides the philosopher with a model on which he can rely in ethical and political action (*Protr.* Fr. 13 Walzer/Ross = Iamblichus, *Protr.* 10).

<sup>92</sup> For the reception of φρόνησις and of practical syllogism in Iamblichus and in other later Neoplatonists see O’Meara (2003) 90 and 136–138.

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