Dual selfhood and self-perfection in Plotinus’ 'Enneads'.

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Abstract: Plotinus’ theory of dual selfhood has ethical norms built into it, all of which derive from the ontological superiority of the higher (or undescended) soul in us over the body-soul compound. The moral life, as it is presented in the *Enneads*, is a life of self-perfection, devoted to the care of the higher self. Such a conception of morality is prone to strike modern readers as either ‘egoistic’ or unduly austere. If there is no doubt that Plotinus’ ethics is exceptionally austere, it will be argued below that it is not ‘egoistic’. To that effect, the following questions will be addressed: Are the virtues, civic as well as purificatory, mere means to Plotinus’ metaphysically-conceived ethical goal? To what extent must the lower self abnegate itself so as to enable the higher self to ascend to Intellect and beyond? And if self-perfection lies at the centre of the Plotinian moral life, is there any conceptual room left in it for other-regarding norms of conduct? A close reading of selected passages from Plotinus’ tractate (I.2[19] On Virtues and tractate VI.8[39] On Free Will and the Will of the One will, it is claimed, bring elements of answer to these questions.

I

Plotinus’ theory of dual selfhood is one of the best-known aspects of his philosophy. Each of us, he taught, is both a compound of body and soul and a discarnate member of the hypostasis Intellect. As he wrote in a famous passage:

… ‘we’ are used in two senses, either including the beast or referring to that which even in our present life transcends it. The beast is the body which has been given life. But the true man (*ho d’alēthēs anthrōpos*) is different, clear of these affections; he has the virtues which belong to the sphere of intellect and have their seat actually in the separate soul, separate and separable even while it is still here below. (I.1[53].10. 5-10)

Or, as he put the point more pithily in a slightly earlier tractate:

… every man is double, one of him is the sort of compound being and one of him is himself (*ho de autos*). (II.3.[52]. 9. 30-31)
As can be seen, Plotinus resorts to heavily value-loaded terminology to distinguish between the two ‘selves’ or ‘us’ (ἡμείς). The lower self is the empirical self, a compound of soul and body, and, as such, an entity extended in space and time (IV.4.13). In the first of the two extracts above, Plotinus pointedly refers to the bodily part of the compound as a θέριον (a beast), a word which in classical and post-classical usage refers to wild animals, such as lions, which are mostly hostile to humans. To the extent that the metaphor suggests that the body might constitute a threat to ‘the true man’ in us, it aptly conveys Plotinus’ view that the body stands to be an obstacle to our higher self. But if the body is an obstacle, it need not be an insurmountable obstacle. Although ‘we’ are bound to ‘our’ body for the duration of our incarnate existence, the whole of our being is not inevitably determined by the needs and wants of the body. We do have a degree of freedom. What such degree of freedom consists in and how it can be safeguarded and exercised will be briefly considered below.

The seat of our freedom is the higher self. Plotinus closely associates the higher self with what he calls the ‘undescended soul’, namely the ‘part’ of our soul that has not descended from Intellect and, as a result, has remained unaffected by incarnation. Like all other members of the Intelligible Principle, the undescended soul reflects, and is reflected by, the whole of that hypostasis. Through the undescended soul, therefore, we are able, under certain conditions which will be investigated below, to behold Intellect, as well as the cause and origin of Intellect, the One. The higher self, being closely related to the undescended soul and therefore ‘other’ than the body, is immune to the constraints of space and time, and impervious to corruption of any kind. As such, it is choristos (separate, VI.4[22].14), even while we are still in the body. This means that the higher self can be active on its own, without the support of the body, and that it will, in a manner that Plotinus never makes entirely clear, survive the death of the body. In the wording of the second of the two extracts above, this self is truly what each of us is (cf. ho de autos, II.3.[52].9.31).

As such, our higher self is inalienable; however much we yield to the promptings of the body, we can never irremediably sink to the level of ‘the beast’, at least not in the course of the life of the particular compound which constitutes our lower self. Admittedly, we can, and often do, neglect our higher self. We do so whenever we choose the more immediately gratifying life of the compound over the cultivation of the intelligible element in us. To caution us against a life lived mainly at the level of the compound, Plotinus, as will be seen
below, not infrequently adopts a hortatory tone, presenting the higher self as an ideal to which ‘we’ must never cease to aspire. How, if at all, he could defend his concept of the ‘we’ (hēmeis) as an agency capable of freely choosing between identifying itself (mostly) with the lower or (mostly) with the higher self is not a question that can be addressed in the present context. How exactly he deals with some of the conflicts and paradoxes involved in presenting the higher self at one and the same time as a constituent part of our being and as an ideal is a question to which we shall turn in due course.

II

From the way that Plotinus presents the bifurcation between the two selves, it is clear that he has built ethical norms into it. Although the body is not inherently bad or ugly - Plotinus is no Gnostic - the lower self, of which it is a part, nevertheless constitutes for ‘us’ a permanent and very real danger of alienation, a danger to which we must take care not to succumb, or not to succumb more than strictly necessary. In this moral endeavour we stand to be helped by the virtues, which it behoves us therefore to cultivate. Plotinus’ virtues are the traditional Greek virtues of wisdom, self-control (or moderation), courage and justice. But if Plotinus’ list is the standard one, his conception of the virtues differs in a number of ways from that of Plato and Aristotle. More specifically, Plotinus articulates the distinction, which is but embryonic in Plato,\(^3\) between two levels of virtue, a lower level of civic (politikai) virtues and a higher level of purificatory virtues (cf. katharseis). Furthermore, as we shall see, Plotinus differs from Plato in explicitly ascribing instrumental, as opposed to intrinsic, value to the state of psychic harmony consequent upon the practice of the virtues. As for Aristotle, although Plotinus is indebted to his description of individual virtues, he differs from him, as he does from Plato, in presenting the virtuous state, be it at the lower or higher level, as a stage to an end higher than itself, rather than as an end that is desirable in and for itself. Indeed, while, for Plotinus, the lower virtues are there to discipline the body-soul compound and prepare it for the practice of the higher virtues, the higher virtues themselves, in turn, serve the goal of fostering in the virtuous agent a steady aspiration to the higher realities as well as the ability to identify himself with his higher self. Ultimately, therefore, Plotinus’ virtues are so many stepping stones to a state of being which Plotinus identifies with the Platonic ideal of ‘likeness to god’ (I.2 [19].1).\(^4\) The more advanced a person is on the road to likeness to god the less he will need to have his resolve strengthened and his vision sharpened by the virtues. There is no call for virtue in the life of the divine.
The manner in which Plotinus articulated his distinction between the two orders of virtue strongly suggests that his ethics is but an offshoot of his metaphysics, and the moral life, in his view, but a preparation for union with Intellect and, possibly, the One. To see whether, or to what extent, this is so, let us consider in some more detail the role that he assigned to the civic and the purificatory virtues in the life that he presented as the best for a human being to lead.

The ‘civic’ (political) virtues are the virtues of the compound of soul and body, or lower self, and their sphere of application is defined by what Plotinus called the unlimitedness and unmeasuredness of incarnate life (I.2 [19]. 1):

The civic virtues... do genuinely set us in order and make us better by giving limit and measure to our desires, and putting measure into all our experience; and they abolish false opinions, by what is altogether better and by the fact of limitation, and by the exclusion of the unmeasured and indefinite in accord with their measuredness; and they are themselves limited and clearly defined. (I.2 [19].2)

As characterized in these lines, the civic virtues ‘make us better’ by exercising the mostly negative function of limiting, lessening and excluding. So doing, Plotinus argues, they tone and strengthen the soul in us, both intellectually and practically. Intellectually, the civic virtues free us from false opinions by correcting our vision of the world around us and making us attentive to the evidence of the higher realities that it presents.\(^5\) Practically, they prepare us to undertake the process of dissociation from the life of the compound, a process that should ultimately enable us to become our higher self. They fulfil their practical function by introducing order in, and between, our various desires, and thereby enabling us to withstand, so far as is possible, the pressure of bodily needs and wants.\(^6\)

The soul that has set itself in order by the practice of lower virtues is a soul that has taken the first step towards escaping from what Plotinus calls ‘the evils down here’ (I.2[19] 1). It is a soul that is ready to cultivate the higher, purificatory, virtues (cf. katharseis), which enable it to act (mostly) alone rather than (mostly) under the impulsion of the body. The purificatory virtues channel the soul’s aspirations to the higher realities. To the extent permitted by embodiment, they enable the virtuous person to engage in the process of
dissociating himself from the compound and of identifying with his higher self. So doing, they contribute to bringing about in him a ‘likeness to the divine’.

From ‘the evils down here’ to ‘likeness to the divine’, the progression is steep and the ideal exceptionally austere and unworldly. Just how austere and unworldly is a life lived according to the purificatory virtues is evident from the following lines:

Since the soul is evil when it is thoroughly mixed with the body and shares its experiences and has all the same opinions, it will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone – this is intelligence and wisdom (noein te kai phronein) – and does not share the body’s experience – this is self-control - and is not afraid of departing from the body – this is courage – and is ruled by reason and intellect, without opposition – and this is justice. (I.2 [19].3)

While the practice of the civic virtues enables us to deal with the frailties of the incarnate condition, the cultivation of the purificatory virtues, as this passage shows, makes possible detachment from the body. Yet, as Plotinus keenly stresses, detachment from the body, for all its considerable merit, is not for the virtuous soul the ultimate achievement. The process of purification is less perfect than the achieved state. In the achieved state of fellowship with the divine, the purified soul actively beholds the vision for which the purificatory process of ‘stripping away everything alien’ (aphairesis allotriou pantos, I.2[19].4.6) had prepared her. While the practice of the purificatory virtues is the toilsome preparation for the vision, the vision itself is the end point of the soul’s conversion and purification. It is the point at which the soul is returned to the higher realities of its origins and beholds the Forms in Intellect, of which it had so far only had impressions (tupoi I.2 [19].3-4).

Admittedly, the relationship between purification and vision is no simple,chronologically determined, means-end relationship. To undertake the toilsome process of self-purification, a soul needs to have some notion of its own nature and destiny as well as of the nature of the end to which it will toil. It needs to be able to anticipate, in however confused a manner, the rewards of the vision in which the purificatory process will culminate. To some extent, therefore, any soul that engages in the process of purification must already have turned itself to the higher realities that it stands to behold at the end of
the process. Plotinus expresses the delicate relationship between conversion, purification and vision in the following lines:

... it [the soul] must attain to this fellowship after being purified; and it will do so by a conversion. Does it then turn itself after purification? Rather, after the purification it is already turned. Is this, then, its virtue? It is rather that which results for it from the conversion. And what is this? A sight and the impression of what is seen, implanted and working in it, like the relationship between sight and its object. But did it not have the realities which it sees? ... It did not have the realities themselves but impressions (tupous) of them; so it must bring the impressions in accord with the true realities of which they are impressions.

(chapter 4)

If the exercise of the purificatory virtues thus presupposes on the part of the virtuous person some conception of the end, it none the less constitutes but a stage in the realisation of the soul’s return to its origins and true nature. Even in its highest form, therefore, the virtuous state is valuable only for what it contributes to bringing about.

It can at this point be concluded that Plotinus’ virtues, both civic and purificatory, are stages towards a state of being higher than themselves. While the civic virtues, which specifically involve the body, are steps towards the higher, purificatory virtues, the purificatory virtues themselves, which are the virtues of the soul ‘acting alone’, enable it to prepare itself for reaching the divine. So much, but no more, can the purificatory virtues do. The state of ‘god-likeness’, which Plotinus sees as the apex of the moral life, lies beyond even them. But if both kinds of virtues can, to that extent, be described as instrumental, their value as instruments greatly differs. Once the civic virtues have fulfilled their function of bringing the virtuous person to the point of being able to cultivate the higher virtues, their task is complete. Their role, so to speak, had been to make themselves redundant. In the ordinary course of the incarnate life of a god-like soul, they need never intervene again. The purificatory virtues, on the other hand, which are intimately linked with the contemplative life, will continue to sustain the god-like soul for as long as it remains ‘here below’. As Plotinus writes at the conclusion of the tractate:

... when he [the virtuous person] reaches higher principles and different measures he will act according to these. For instance, he will not make self-control consist in that former observance of measure and limit, but will altogether
dissociate himself, as far as possible, from his lower nature and will not live the life of the
good man which civic virtue requires. He will leave that behind, and choose
another, the life of the gods: for it is to them, not to good men, that we are to be
made like ... likeness to the gods is likeness to the model, a being of a different
kind to ourselves'. (I.2[19].7)

By this, Plotinus does not mean that once the soul has become god-like, it will cease to have
the civic virtues and cultivate only the purificatory virtues. Far from it since, like most
Greek philosophers before him, Plotinus does believe in the unity of the virtues.\footnote{8 What
he does mean in the above lines, as will presently be seen, is that it is only in extreme
circumstances, such as brought about by war, that the god-like soul will have any occasion
to practice the civic virtues.

This proviso notwithstanding, it can be concluded that in the philosophy of the
Enneads ethics is a maidservant to metaphysics. If the Plotinian virtuous agent must seek to
be a good man, it is mainly so that he can, in turn, raise himself to the state of god-likeness,
thereby becoming like those whose perfection precludes the need for virtue.

III

The manner in which Plotinus theorizes the hierarchy between two orders of virtue strongly
suggests that his belief in the perfectibility of human beings is the cement that ties his ethics
to his metaphysics.\footnote{9 As shown above, the purificatory virtues are essentially virtues of self-
perfection. So much does the ideal of self-perfection dominate Plotinus’ discussion of the
virtues in I.2 [19] that beneficence and its attendant norms and duties are almost completely
overshadowed as a result. Furthermore, to the extent that the main function of the civic
virtues is to prepare us for the practice of the purificatory virtues, it can be said that they,
too, are, to a not inconsiderable extent, virtues of self-perfection. In Plotinus’ ethics,
therefore, every single virtue, whether civic or purificatory, is, directly or indirectly,
foocussed on the care of the (higher) self of the virtuous person rather than on the care of the
self (higher or lower) of others. No explicitly ‘other-directed’ norms feature in the account
of virtue provided in tractate I.2[19] and no mention is made of the commitments and
obligations that moral agents might have either to their philoi or to the state of which they
are members. Even in his definition of higher justice, where one would most expect to find
them, Plotinus makes no reference to the claims of others upon the virtuous agent:
True, absolute justice is the disposition of a unity to itself (oikeiopragia), a unity in which there are no different parts. So the higher justice in the soul is its activity towards Intellect.’ (I.2 [19]. 6)

From the evidence of these lines it should come as no surprise, therefore, to find no decisive support either in this tractate or in others for the view that Plotinus was interested in extending his concept of justice in the individual soul to the city as a whole.  

Plotinus’ highly metaphysical interpretation of the hierarchy between civic and purificatory virtues as well as the central role that he assigns to the process of ‘stripping away everything that is alien’ (I.2 [19].4. 6) in the practice of the purificatory virtues warrant the further conclusion that the Plotinian virtues are to be exercised, mainly though not exclusively, in the privacy of one’s own life. Indeed, under the heading of ‘alien’, we can surmise that he would have included most, if not all, aspects of our earthly existence: material possessions, no doubt, but also habits, interests of various kinds, attachments to persons and places, most of what makes the incarnate life what it is, which means most of the properties that make us the singular persons that we are. The Plotinian ascent to the higher self, in other words, presupposes distancing oneself from ordinary psychic and social life.

IV

The heavy emphasis laid on self-perfection and the care of the higher self in Plotinus’ conception of the higher virtuous life is prone to raise ethical problems in the mind of modern readers. Can the demands of self-perfection, these readers may wonder first, be combined with the reality of our commitments to others, commitments into which we were born or which we have subsequently voluntarily entered into? If Plotinus’ view, as inferred from his argument in tractate I.2[19], is that self-perfection must take precedence over other considerations, is his ethics to be labelled ‘egoistic’ as a result? Secondly, the same readers may inquire, how far does Plotinus think that the lower self, once it has acquired the civic virtues, must go in promoting the interest of its higher twin? What amount of self-sacrifice on its part is suggested in the advice to discard ‘everything alien’? Could the lower self have to go as far as consenting to its own demise when circumstances are so extreme as not to permit the survival of both selves? To these questions, I now turn, after making two general points.
Let it be noted, to begin with, that the first of the two conflicts mentioned above, far from being peculiar to the *Enneads*, arises in other ancient systems of ethics. In envisaging in the *Republic* that philosophers would have to be compelled (*anagkasteoi*, VII 539 E 3) to return to the Cave, and in having Adeimantus protest that the philosophers’ engagement in practical affairs might not bring them personal happiness (IV 419 A 1-3), Plato recognised the possibility of conflicts between the pursuit of the theoretic life and the demands of civic life. Ultimately, as we know, he had Socrates resolve the issue by claiming that the discharge of their public duties would constitute for philosophers a source of great happiness (*ibid.*, 420 B 4-5). As it has come down to us, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, too, leaves acute the problem of the nature of the best and most fulfilling life for a human being to lead, whether it be the ‘practical’ life of politics, as books I to IX would have it, or the theoretic life of contemplation, as it is claimed in chapters 7 and 8 of book X. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle did not explicitly seek to resolve the conflict that is opened up in his ethics. The reason, for all we know, may be that book X was composed at a different time, or for a different context, from the other nine books. But, whatever the reason, the conflict is glaring and the consistency of Aristotle’s ethics requires that it be addressed. In the *Enneads*, however, matters stand otherwise. Unlike Plato, Plotinus does not recognize explicitly that the demands of action might be thought to conflict with those of contemplation. Unlike the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that of the *Enneads* is free of conflicting pronouncements on the nature of the best life for a human being to lead.

As for the worry that Plotinus’s ethics might have to be labelled ‘egoistic’ as a result of the emphasis laid in it on the self-perfection of the agent, it is a modern worry. ‘Egoistic’ tend to carry negative connotations in modern parlance, if not always in modern systems of ethics. Modern commentators, therefore, who either deplore the ‘egoistic’ nature of Plotinus’ ethics\(^{12}\) or, on the contrary, profess to find in it norms of other-regarding conduct\(^{13}\) do so on the strength of a modern concept. Is the concept useful in the discussion of Plotinus’ ethics? Is it even applicable to it?\(^{14}\)

As theorized in modern thought, ‘egoism’ designates either a psychological or an ethical thesis. Psychological egoism is a theory about human motivation which centres on the *descriptive* claim that human beings have a natural tendency to further their own self-
interest before attending to the interest of others. Ethical egoism is a normative theory according to which human beings ought only to act from self-interest. What makes the theory ethical is the justification that accompanies its central claim, namely that ‘it is for the best if everyone ... pursues his or her own interest’\textsuperscript{15}, or, more precisely, that the common good is the end product of the pursuit, by each one of us, of our own interest.\textsuperscript{16} Since self-interest as well as the common good can be conceived in more than one way, ethical egoism presents a number of variants.\textsuperscript{17}

There is no sign in the \textit{Enneads} that Plotinus ever subscribed to psychological egoism. As for ethical egoism, the issue is not, \textit{prima facie}, clear-cut. As we saw, Plotinus’ paragon of virtue, having become dissociated from his empirical self and assimilated to his higher self, has set himself up amongst the intelligible realities. As far as his incarnate condition permits, he has left the body and its concerns behind, and is leading the best possible human life. In so far as Plotinus’ ethics is focussed on the promotion of the higher self, therefore, it can be said to be ‘self-centred’\textsuperscript{18} by definition.

Does that make it ‘egoistic’? Not really, or so I would argue. The self that lies at the centre of Plotinus’ ethics differs in a number of crucial ways from the self whose interest is promoted by ethical egoism. The self of ethical egoism corresponds to Plotinus’ lower self. It is an empirical, embodied, self, a self whose needs and wants are determined by appetite, desire and passion, as well as by reason. It is essentially a social self which depends upon others for survival and fulfilment, and which must share competitive goods of all kinds with others. Accordingly, its virtues are of a kind that cannot be exercised outside a community. They are thus truly civic, unlike the virtues that go under that description in Plotinus’ terminology.

The self that Plotinus urges us to cultivate is of an entirely different order. It is a self that has mostly transcended the compound and its associated opinions and affects, the latter of which include emotions such as envy, jealousy, pity (I.1[53].10.14), as well as love of particular persons rather of ‘all that is akin’ (II.9[33].16.8-9). It is a self that is unconcerned and unperturbed by the contingencies and tribulations of earthly existence. As Plotinus rhetorically asks in the tractate on Well-Being: ‘What human circumstance is so great that a man will not think little of it who has climbed higher than all this and depends on nothing
It is a self that does not engage in calculation of losses and gains or seeks to balance short-term against long-term self-interest. What it aspires to cannot be an object of competition. Not only can it be active on its own, but its access to the higher realities largely depends on its ascending to them in solitude. Its specific virtues, therefore, are mostly practised outside a social context. ‘Self-centred’ though Plotinus’ ethics be, the self that constitutes its focus is therefore not the self with which ethical egoists concern themselves.

If the higher self proves too ethereal an entity to be identified with the self of ethical egoism, the question arises none the less as to how a person possessing the higher virtues would deal with the two conflicts mentioned above, namely the conflict between his own interest and that of others and the conflict between his commitment to the higher self and the necessity to attend to (some of) the needs of the compound. Far from ignoring these issues, Plotinus deals with them, albeit briefly, in tractate VI.8 [39], on Free Will and the Will of the One, in the context of a discussion of free will. Plotinus’ main purpose in the tractate is to establish whether or not the One, which cannot be other than it is, can nevertheless be said to be free. To hone his concepts for this important investigation, Plotinus devotes the first six chapters of the tractate to an enquiry into the nature and extent of human freedom. Briefly summarized, his position is as follows. Besides being subject to chance, humans are prone to be enslaved by their passions as well as by external circumstances. Yet they can free themselves from both kinds of bondage. Neither chance nor passion nor external circumstances have any unshakeable power to constrain the sage. For the sage, in conquering his lower, empirical, self by the practice of the civic virtues, \textit{ipso facto} makes himself immune to most external factors which, until then, had held him in their power. So doing, he assimilates himself to his higher self. Plotinian freedom, therefore, which is internally related to the good, is mostly restricted to the life of contemplation.

Is it likely, however, that the sage, for all his autonomy and serenity, will forever remain unaffected by circumstance? Is he likely to be able altogether to avoid becoming involved in practical affairs? And, if he cannot avoid it, we shall want to ask to what extent he will remain free when so engaged? Plotinus seems to have anticipated the question. In chapter 5 of the tractate he addresses the issue of possible conflicts between the demands of contemplation and those of action, between what we must do for the sake of our higher self
and what we must do for the sake of those around us. He recognizes that there are circumstances, such as war, injustice and poverty, in which the sage will have to intervene in practical affairs, even though such intervention will compromise his freedom. Indeed, since the attainment (teuxis) of any action intended to have an impact on the world outside ultimately depends on factors outside the agent’s control, the outcome of any action cannot ever be wholly within the agent’s control. For this reason, the sage’s involvement in the world outside will be reluctant, and remain curative, rather than being preventive. If virtue itself were asked, Plotinus adds, it would always prefer not to be called upon to intervene in practical affairs:

… 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 stay 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[39].5.13-20)

From these lines, we may infer that the sage’s disengagement from practical affairs need not be total. Although he will not be on the look out for opportunities to relieve the acute distress of others, he will nevertheless not shirk the burden of doing so whenever he is uniquely placed to help out. But, even then, he will take care that his interventions in the affairs of others remain curative only and hope that they will not have to be so frequent as to compromise the freedom of his soul or undermine his ability to ascend to the intelligible order. Rather than a monster of indifference, it seems, the Plotinian sage is a paradigm of rational aloofness.

Just how aloof the sage has it in him to be emerges from chapter 6 of the same tractate, in which Plotinus moves from considering how the sage will react in extreme circumstances affecting others to how he will react when he himself stands to be affected. Unfortunately, the syntax of the passage is confusing, and the reading that is grammatically the more likely, if not the only one possible, turns out to be the one that is also the more counter-intuitive to modern readers. In my translation the passage reads as follows:20

… for she [virtue] will not attend to practical affairs, such as saving someone in danger (ton kinduneuonta), but, if she should see fit, she will forsake this one
(touton), and enjoin the forsaking of life, as well as of riches and children, and even of the fatherland. For virtue keeps the fine as its goal, but not the existence of what is subject to her. So that both self-determination in the realm of actions and what is in one’s own power do not refer to the acting itself nor to external activity, but to the activity of what is within and to the thought and contemplation of virtue itself (i.e. the contemplation that virtue itself engages in). But one must say of this virtue that she is a kind of intellect, not counting the passions in with her, the passions that are enslaved and brought into measure by reason, for these, as he [Plato] says, seem to be in close relationship with the body since it is by habits and training that they are put right. (VI.8[39].6.14-26)

The main difficulty of the passage is the identity of ‘the man in danger’ (ton kinduneuonta, l. 15), to whom it is clear that the demonstrative ‘this one’ (touton, l. 16) refers. Who is the man in danger? Is he the virtuous agent himself or someone else? Furthermore, what exactly does Plotinus mean when he makes virtue enjoin the forsaking of children and country? In my reading, which is also that of Bréhier and of the most recent French translation of the tractate, the man in danger is the agent himself or, more precisely, the body with which the soul of the agent is conjoined at the time. By referring to the body as ton kinduneuonta, Plotinus uses style, rather subtly, to point to the otherness of what is in danger: the body, the empirical self, which is other than the real self of the agent. If the circumstances warrant it, virtue will enjoin (keleuein) the agent to forsake this body (touton), which is an essential part of his empirical self.

From virtue’s command, so interpreted, the rest of the sentence follows naturally. The object to be forsaken (cf. proiemenên and proiesthai, l. 16), namely life (cf. to dzen, l. 16), refers to the life of the agent himself: forsaking his own body, he must forsake his bodily life itself. Letting go of his bodily life, he must, in turn, let go of his material possessions as well as, more grievously, his relationship with his children. From a philosophical point of view, this reading is in line with Plotinus’ teaching that the death of the body is a lesser evil for the sage than the subordination of his soul to the survival instinct of his body. As the passage makes plain, the principal aim of virtue, in Plotinus’ viewpoint, is to secure ‘the fine’ (to kalon) for herself (ll. 17-18) and not, as one might expect, the good of ‘what is subject to her’ (l. 18). Indeed, ‘what is subject to her’ is external and, as such, not within her control, hence
outside her remit. Of all that is outside virtue’s control - riches, the fatherland, children, bodily life itself - the Plotinian sage must let go. And he must do so in the name of moral norms higher than those embodied in the social virtues.

The passage taken from chapter 6 of *Ennead* VI.8, therefore, in its context, yields a clear picture of the Plotinian sage. His virtue is of the higher, purificatory, order. This virtue has intellectualised his soul, oriented him to the good, freed him from the passions and ensured that the premises of his actions are truly within his control. If he obeys the commands (*keleuein*) of virtue, he does so freely, even when they require of him what would be for most human beings the ultimate self-sacrifice. In the interest of the *kalon*, which is also that of his higher self, he forsakes most, if not all, of what would otherwise be considered to make the incarnate life bearable.

V

In Plotinus’ metaphysically-derived ethics, the best life for a human being to lead is a life of self-perfection, devoted to the care of the higher self. In the pursuit of this end, the sage will cultivate the civic and purificatory virtues, and lead a life of austerity, denying satisfaction to such appetites and desires as might compromise his soul’s ability to elevate itself to the higher realities. If necessary, he will sacrifice his bodily well-being and, in extreme circumstances, be prepared to forsake even life itself to the integrity of his higher self. What, in contrast, the sage is not prepared to do, is to sacrifice the life of others to the interest of his higher self. Indeed, while he will not readily engage in practical affairs, he will none the less not hesitate to do so when he finds himself uniquely able to avert disaster for others. This asymmetry, together with Plotinus’s highly ascetic conception of the life of higher selfhood, render the label ‘egoistic’ inapplicable to Plotinus’ ethics.22
Throughout this essay, I shall use ‘Intellect’ and ‘Intelligible Principle’ interchangeably to refer to the hypostasis emanated from the One.

Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from the *Enneads* will be in A.H. Armstrong’s translation.

See, e.g., *Republic* VI, 500 D.

See, e.g. *Theaetetus* 176 A-B. On the issue of Plato’s influence on Plotinus on this particular point, see Sedley (1999: 322-23).

As chapter V of the tractate makes plain, Plotinus is not so unworldly as to ignore, or even downplay, the difficulties that embodied souls inevitably face when in their attempt to dissociate themselves from the body.

For a particularly apt commentary on the chapter from which these lines are taken, see J.-M. Flamand, in *Plotin, Traité 7-21*, présentés, traduits et annotés, sous la direction de L. Brisson et J.-F. Pradeau, Paris: GF Flammarion, 2003, pp. 455-457.

The importance of the notion of self-perfection in Plotinus’ philosophy had already been noted by John Passmore (1970) in his study of the history of the concept of human perfectibility in Western philosophy.

Could Porphyry’s report in the *Vita Plotini* (12) that Plotinus had intended to revive the city of philosophers fallen into ruins in Campania, and to persuade it to live according to the laws of Plato be taken as evidence of Plotinus’ practical interest in political matters? Possibly. Yet no inference can be drawn from this anecdote on the nature of Plotinus’ political philosophy, if indeed he ever evolved one. Although there is no reason to doubt Porphyry’s veracity in the matter, the disciple’s mere word is no sufficient ground to ascribe to the master an interest in political matters that is not otherwise documented in his writings. In *Platonopolis* (2003), Dominic O’Meara argues that the *Enneads* do contain evidence of Plotinus’ theoretical interest in political matters. This claim is challenged in my ‘Plotinus and the Moral Point of View’, forthcoming.

This is also likely to be presupposed in Plotinus’ account of mystical union, in the course of which the contemplator withdraws from all that is outside himself in order to behold the intelligible realities within his soul (IV.8 [6].1). See also V.3[49].17.38: *aphele panta* (‘take away everything’).

See, e.g., Arnou who claims that Plotinus advocated ‘a certain form of egoism masquerading as disinterestedness’ and that the *Enneads* are notable for their ‘negation of solidarity and any form of responsibility.’ (1921: 44, my translation and italics).


Annas (1993: 225-26) convincingly argues that it is anachronistic to map the modern dichotomy between egoism and altruism to ancient systems of ethics.

Williams (1985: 13).

Frankena (1963: 16-23).

From Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* to M. Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* and A. Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness: a New Concept of Egoism Ethical*.

I borrow the phrase from John Dillon’s seminal article ‘An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage’, in Gerson (ed.) (1996).

See I.6[1].7.9, VI.9[9].11.51 and VI.7[38].34.7-8.

Constraints of space here rule out a detailed examination of the grammatical difficulties of the Greek passage. They are discussed in detail in my ‘Plotinus and the Moral Point of View’, forthcoming.

A distant ancestor of the present paper was read of the 2004 conference of the *American Philological Association* in 2003, and a not so distant ancestor was presented at the 2007 conference of the *Ancient Philosophy Society*, held at Boston College. In both cases, I much benefited from the discussion that ensued. Especial thanks are due to Gary Gurtler S.J., Denis O’Brien, Pauliina Remes, Svetla Slaveva-Griffin and Stephanie Semler for their willingness to engage with the issues discussed in the paper.

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