1. Introduction

Ethics is a constituent part of most philosophical systems. Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Aquinas, Spinoza and Kant all have an ethical theory, which is organically linked to the other parts of their system. Is Plotinus’ philosophy, undeniably systematic though it is, an exception to this general rule? The fact that learned students of Neoplatonism have raised the question is evidence enough that the question does arise. That is perplexing enough. More perplexing even is the fact that these same scholars should have come to two diametrically opposed answers despite being in broad agreement on the meaning of the relevant passages in the corpus. It would seem therefore that it is not so much the meaning of these passages as their interpretation in the broader doctrinal context of the *Enneads* that is the object of scholarly disagreement.

The controversies arising from this disparity of views have recently intensified to such an extent that it would be true to say that the nature of Plotinus’ ethics is currently one of the most earnestly debated issues in the field. Since no particular viewpoint has so far appeared to be gaining the upper hand, it is perhaps not surprising that the controversy shows no sign of dying down. The present essay is an attempt to advance the debate by identifying the assumptions on the nature of ethics that have given rise to it and to take a fresh look at a range of passages in the *Enneads* with a view to formulating an answer less narrowly beholden to the assumptions in question.
2. The problem

At one time - not so long ago - scholars who considered the question tended for the most part to disparage whatever ethical reflections they conceded were to be found in the *Enneads*. Some went as far as denying that Plotinus had an ethics at all. To document in detail the many critical, if not downright derogatory, accounts of the nature of Plotinus’ ethical reflections would far exceed the space of this volume and a brief summary of the criticisms that have been directed at Plotinus’ ethics will therefore have here to suffice.

They fall into three broad categories. The first and most frequently alleged ground of criticism is that Plotinus consistently downplayed what we moderns take to be the very core of the moral life, namely concern for the needs and entitlements of others. In 1921 René Arnou, for instance, rebuked Plotinus for advocating ‘a certain form of *egoism* masquerading as disinterestedness’¹ and, in 1996, John Dillon issued a similar complaint:

... [the] single-minded pursuit of union with God which is Plotinus’s only approved form of ethical activity does not really leave much room for that concerned interaction with our fellow men which constitutes the traditional arena of ethics. Plotinus’ ethics, Dillon concluded, in being ‘addressed to the late antique sage’, offers little ‘practical guidance to the common man.’²

A second ground of criticism levelled at Plotinus’ ethical reflections is that they are essentially ‘negative’. Such negativity, in Paul Plass’ opinion, ‘... comes to the surface most clearly at two points: Plotinus’ devaluation of conventional virtue and the nature of his own metaphysical ethical principles.’³ For Richard Bodéüs the negativity is most apparent in Plotinus’ conception of the process of purification which he would have the incarnate soul undertake prior to beginning her ascent to the Intelligible. Since the purifying soul is a soul that frees herself, so far as possible, from the influence of the body, it follows that the Plotinian moral life, in Bodéüs’ estimation, consists in making oneself insensitive to the

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¹ Arnou (1921: 44, my translation and italics).
² Dillon (1996: 323 and 318). See also Dillon (2007: 132-33). Flamand, in his introduction to his translation and commentary of the tractate *On Virtues* (Brisson-Pradeau 2002-2010: 419) expresses the same view. ‘Plotinus’ ethics’, he writes, ‘is somewhat disconcerting for the modern reader ... neither on the theoretical nor even on the practical level does the tractate present an ethics oriented to the relation of self to others.’ (my tr.).
³ Plass (1982: 244).
suffering of the body, one’s own and, even more, that of others’. It is to become ‘a person, so to speak, entirely different’ from the compound of body and soul that most human beings take themselves to be.

Third and last comes the complaint, as put forward by Rist in his seminal 1967 study, *Plotinus. The Road to Reality*, that Plotinus’ thought on ethical matters is ‘somewhat contradictory’:

The theory of the self-sufficiency of the sage should preclude him from all communal interests except that of teaching, while the theory of the union of the self with the One and the submerging of our own lives and activities in the life and activity of the One should lead to an outgoing attitude of the personality in the form of creativeness at all levels. ... Theoretically such care should distract the soul; but again theoretically it would enable the soul to perform its functions to the full.

In spelling out what he described as the ‘somewhat contradictory’ aspects of Plotinus’ ethical reflections, Rist paved the way for attempts by later scholars to argue that Plotinus, far from neglecting the domain of ethics, as we moderns conceive it, had included teaching in the activities of the sage and had countenanced the view that union with Intellect and the One should result in ‘an outgoing of the personality in the form of creativeness at all levels’.

All in all, therefore, for one reason or another, the received interpretation at the end of last century tended to be that Plotinus’ ethics was one-sided or otherwise unsatisfactory. Matters, however, were soon to change; received interpretations invite dissent, and this particular received interpretation proved no exception. Latterly, a number of scholars have argued that Plotinus’ ethics, far from being as one-sided and other-worldly as had previously been supposed, does include norms of other-regarding conduct and, consequently, that ethics and political philosophy do form an integral part of it. In the defence of this thesis, they have adopted a variety of strategies and approaches.

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4 Bodéüs (1983: 259, my tr.). Intriguingly, Bodéüs grounds his argument in a reading of the very tractate (I 4 [46]), in which Schniewind (2003), as will be seen below, professes to find ethical norms of an ‘other-regarding’ nature.

5 Ibid., 257.

6 P. 167. See also Baltzly (2004), who argues that, after Plotinus, Proclus did much ‘to put human beings in general and ethics in particular back into the world’ (303) and that the ideal of god-likeness, as he conceived it, ‘takes on a much more human form than it does in Plotinus.’ (319).
A common line of defence consists in turning to the detail of Porphyry’s eulogistic account of his master’s life to back the view that concern for the needs of others is an integral aspect of his ethics. Thus, most notably, Andrew Smith has professed to find in the *Vita Plotini* (9, 5-22), no less than in various passages in the *Enneads*, enough evidence to substantiate his claim that Plotinus offers ‘a practical ethical code’ or ‘a meaningful theory of practical ethics’.⁷

Most attempts to find other-regarding norms in Plotinus’ philosophy, however, have been carried out through the detailed exegesis of his own writings. In his reconstruction of Neoplatonic political thinking, from Plotinus to Al-Farabi, Dominic O’Meara has identified in the *Enneads* a small number of passages which, in his view, do contain a political philosophy *in ovo*. The principle of emanation and reversion, as well as the broad concept of contemplation worked out in the tractate *On Nature and Contemplation and the One* (III 8[30 4. 31-46]) do, in his estimation, provide a theoretical background against which Plotinus can, and does, justify the life of action. More specifically, political engagement can proceed from, and be an image of, mystical union in so far as ‘union with the One *must* involve sharing in its metaphysical fecundity, its nature as the self-giving and self-communicating Good’. As the Good is metaphysically fecund and nourishes the lower levels of reality, so the Neoplatonic philosopher, after communing with the Good, may, very properly, O’Meara claims, ‘descend to political matters as a consequence and expression of the union reached with the One’.⁸ Moral expertise and legislative activity, so O’Meara assures us, although they are not the highest manifestations of contemplation, are nonetheless worthy derivative exercises of it.

Alexandrine Schniewind, for her part, pursued a suggestion mooted by Rist in 1967 that the ethical function of the Plotinian sage (*ho spoudaios*) is, for the most part, to teach. As described in the tractate *On Well-Being* (I 4 [46]),⁹ the *spoudaios* identifies himself with his higher self, holds onto the One or Good as his goal and succeeds, in so far as a human being can, in mastering the weaknesses attendant upon his soul’s temporary association with the

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⁸ O’Meara (2003: 76): the Plotinian passage in question, which is discussed further in section 5 below, is VI 9 [9] 7.16-28.

body. Far from being entirely disengaged from ordinary human concerns, the sage, in Schniewind’s phraseology, also ‘teaches’, ‘inspires’, and is ‘a model for’, others. To motivate ‘ordinary human beings’ (*epieikēs anthrōpoi*) to rise above the ‘common life of body and soul’ (16.9), he carefully tailors his pedagogical methods and inspirational guidance to the level and capacities of his audience. In this particular tractate, so Schniewind argues, we get a glimpse of Plotinus’ own pedagogical practice: chapters one to four are addressed to the large and philosophically untutored audience who attended the meetings of the school, chapters five to eleven to the inner circle of disciples, and chapters twelve to sixteen to the closest few who, like Porphyry himself,\(^\text{10}\) were entrusted with the master’s writings and could therefore rightly be described as his assistants.\(^\text{11}\)

In her circumspect attempt to identify an ethics of concern in the *Enneads*, Pauliina Remes focuses on the noetic life rather than the final *unio mystica* to back her claim that an ethical theory, albeit one of a highly abstract nature, is built into the very fabric of the *Enneads*. The purified soul’s ascent to the Intelligible, in the course of which she divests herself from particularities of all kinds, enlarges the self and enables it to grasp ‘essences and the real nature of things’.\(^\text{12}\) Those who have successfully undertaken such a process of conversion, Remes argues, gain:

… a global standpoint that [is] directed to the perfection of the entire *kosmos*, not on the happiness of any one part of it. While social virtues are not constitutive of the good, the cosmological point of view renders the well-being of the world as a whole the *telos* of an individual life.’\(^\text{13}\)

Remes concludes that the ethical theory that she finds in the *Enneads*, far from being a variety of ethical egoism, is more aptly described as an ‘ethics of disinterested interest’.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^\text{10}\) One cannot but wonder whether the fact that Porphyry, by his own account, was in Sicily when Plotinus wrote I 4 [46] weakens Schniewind’s interpretive hypothesis.

\(^\text{11}\) It may be that in formulating this hypothesis Schniewind is adapting Porphyry’s division (*V.P.* 7) of the listeners who attended the *sunousiai* in Plotinus’ school into three categories, namely those who led a money-making life (such as Serapion), those who engaged in politics (such as Rogatianus) and those who devoted themselves to philosophy, such as Amelius, Eustochius and Porphyry himself. For the historical context of such classifications, see Joly (1956) and Brisson *et al.* (1992: 11 and 226-36).


\(^\text{13}\) Remes (2008: 19).

\(^\text{14}\) In this brief review of attempts to find in Plotinus an ethic of concern for the world of sense, there is no space available to include more precisely targeted aspects of the *Enneads* such as IV 3 [27] 9 by ecologically-minded Plotinian scholars. In recent years Michael Wagner (2002) and Kevin Corrigan (2009), more specifically, have claimed that Neoplatonic concepts such as those of *synaptic logos* (III 3 [48] 4), *physis* as living contemplation (III 8 [30] 7), and life conceived as an organic force, can assist us in re-thinking the relationship between
3. Hidden (and not so hidden) assumptions

What can we learn from these diverging viewpoints? Quite a lot or disappointingly little, depending on how one looks at them. While the debate itself shows that both parties to the disagreement do, as often as not, share a number of basic assumptions about the nature and foundations of ethics in general, the assumptions in question stand in the way of getting a clear view of Plotinus’ ethics. The reason is that they reflect, for the most part, a miscellany of theories on the nature of ethics that had currency in the latter half of last century and proceed from the anti-foundationalist conviction that it is futile to search for the grounds, metaphysical or other, of moral value. Although some of these assumptions have since been called into question, modified or altogether discarded, they nonetheless appear to have retained a hold on the minds of specialists in ancient thought. Ploughing their own different, though neighbouring, furrow, they have been content to leave such assumptions, as well as the theories from which they proceed, largely unacknowledged and unexamined. It is my claim that those modern assumptions and theories hinder the interpretation of Plotinus’ own ethical reflections, which themselves proceed from very different assumptions. Accordingly, I shall take my first task to be that of identifying the modern assumptions that have been brought to the study of Plotinus’ ethics, with a view to showing why, and in what ways, they are likely to divert attention from what lies at its very core. This should clear the ground and enable me to consider afresh a number of relevant Plotinian passages.

According to the first assumption (hereafter the ‘basic’ assumption) the function of ethics is to lay down principles whose application is expected to promote the common good by counterbalancing the interests of all those likely to be affected by the decisions and actions that human beings commit themselves to in the course of their daily life. This basic assumption is itself rooted in the belief, whether consciously held or not, that self-partiality is a fundamental human trait which, as such, must be held in check if human beings are to show due concern for each other and for those other forms of life which share the planet with them.

humankind and nature, in the sense in which ecologists currently understand nature. See also Robinson and Westra (2002) as well as Corrigan’s contribution to the present volume.

15 Most 20th century forms of ethical anti-foundationalism derive from the so-called Hume’s guillotine (‘no ought from an is’, A Treatise of Human Nature, bk III, 1). Rist (1976) had already called attention to crucial differences between Plotinus’ ethical views and those of most post-Humean moral philosophers. Schniewind (2003), too, alludes to contemporary ethical anti-foundationalism, but her account of it misfires in so far as she writes that ‘l’on n’admet pas que l’être (to be) puisse être déduit du devoir-être (ought)’ (ibid: 17). It is, of course, the other way round: what Hume and his followers warn us against is the attempt to deduct norms (i.e. ‘what ought to be’) from facts (‘what is’).
So understood, moral principles are the rudder which prevents, or minimises, whatever conflicts of interests would otherwise arise. So understood, the specific task of ethics is to counteract the limitations of human sympathies and thus to alleviate ‘the human predicament’ by protecting the entitlements of all those with whom the moral agent has the kind of dealings likely to require guidance in that respect. As Kurt Baier famously put it: ‘The very raison d’être of a morality is to yield reasons which overrule the reasons of self-interest in those cases when everyone’s following self-interest would be harmful to everyone. Hence moral reasons are superior to all others.’

Far from coming alone, the basic assumption gives rise to a second assumption, namely that, pace Kant for example, there cannot be duties to oneself. Indeed, if the function of ethics is to counteract the limitations of human sympathies, it follows that the concept of obligation (or duty) is essentially other-directed. Even if those who are committed to the basic assumption do not take a contractual (or contractarian) view of moral obligation, they are, even so, likely to argue that the notion of obligation (or duty) to oneself is well nigh incoherent or hopelessly ill-conceived. It is incoherent in the sense that obligations and entitlements are correlative and that, in the case of putative obligations to self, there cannot, strictly speaking, be an entitlement corresponding to the obligation. It is ill-conceived in the sense that duties to oneself, if they are to have moral significance, need to be mediated through, or be derivative upon, duties to others. These objections owe their force, not only to the conception of morality as essentially other-directed, but also to the assumption that selfhood is broadly coextensive with moral agency. Outside the framework of these assumptions, they lose their compelling force. Since Plotinus’ concept of higher selfhood as normative significantly differs from the one that lies at the basis of the objections latterly levelled at self-regarding duties, particular care must be taken not to project the theoretical background to these objections onto the interpretation of the ethical views put forward in the Enneads.

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16 In the terminology of Warnock, G. (1971: 71).
18 As argued by, e.g., Singer (1959: 202) and Williams (1985: 181–82).
19 The example of promise-keeping best illustrates this point: when promiser and promisee are different persons, no conceptual difficulties need be encountered in either the making of a promise or the releasing of the promiser by the promisee; when, on the other hand, the promiser and the promisee are one and the same person, both the act of promising and that of releasing the promiser from his obligation appear to be conceptually confused. For a useful account of contemporary objections to the notion of self-regarding duty, see Denis (2001).
20 Examples of duties to self mediated through duties to others would include the duty, on the part of parents, to keep themselves healthy for the sake of their dependent children as well as the more generally conceived duty to cultivate one’s talents for the sake of the benefits they might bring to others.
The above two assumptions, in turn, are likely to give rise to a third one. Those who, being committed to the basic assumption, take the function of ethics to be the promotion of the common good are likely to extend to reflexive notions such as self-fulfilment, self-regard and self-love the kind of suspicion that they harbour on the subject of duties to oneself. Such moral attitudes, they are prone to argue, are at best of peripheral relevance to ethics and at worst a mere garb destined to give superficial respectability to a form of psychological egoism which sanctions the promotion of the agent’s self-interest at the expense of those with whom he has dealings.\(^{21}\) This third assumption is likely to account for the predilection, shared by many an apologist of Plotinus’ ethics, for citing Porphyry’s pious report in the *Vita Plotini* of the devoted care with which his master looked after orphaned children.\(^{22}\)

All three assumptions, especially when they remain below the level of critical awareness, cloud the examination of Plotinus’ ethics by generating questions to which the text of the *Enneads* can provide no clear or incontrovertible answers. The reason is that the assumptions in question are foreign to the thinking of a philosopher whose overriding aim - not to say his sole aim - was to convince his disciples of the truth of the metaphysical system he developed in the *Enneads*. There is no need in the present context to rehearse in detail the central tenets of his metaphysics, all of which are as familiar to those who criticise Plotinus’ ethics as to those who defend it: the One as cause of all things and universal object of desire, the distinction between internal and external activity, the formation of Intellect, the stages in the descent of Soul, the generation of matter, the double selfhood of human beings and the complementarity of the processes of emanation and reversion.\(^{23}\)

There are, however, aspects of Plotinus’ metaphysics which bear more directly than others on the ethically charged reflections contained in the *Enneads*. These reflections, like other aspects of Plotinus’ philosophy, cannot be fully understood in isolation from their doctrinal context. While it is commonly assumed that Kant’s *Groundwork to the Metaphysic of Morals*, for instance, can profitably be studied by those who are largely untutored in the complexities of the first *Critique*, Plotinus’ ethical reflections are almost unintelligible unless placed within the metaphysical background that alone can give them significance. This is all the more so that, although questions of ethics frequently intrude in Plotinus’ thinking on a

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\(^{21}\) See, e.g., Arnou in footnote 1 above.

\(^{22}\) See, e.g., Smith in footnote 8 above.

\(^{23}\) Each of these aspects of Plotinus’ metaphysics generates complex exegetical and philosophical problems which are discussed in other chapters of this volume.
host of other matters, they are only occasionally dealt with as such, as in tractates I 2 [19] and I 4 [28]. If, therefore, we are to take the full measure of Plotinus’ ethical teachings and avoid projecting upon them the assumptions described above, all of which stem from the view that the main function of ethics is to give us reasons to counter our innate self-partiality, we must first turn to those elements of Plotinus’ metaphysics that render otiose the formulation of narrowly conceived other-regarding norms.

4. Metaphysics and Morality

Plotinus’ description of the emanation and return of the Soul is the anchor point of his ethics. Since this is the most puzzling, if not the most paradoxical, part of his system, the first task that confronts the would-be student of Plotinus’ ethics is to understand how he accounts for the emergence of moral norms in a metaphysical process that he consistently characterises as timeless and necessary. And, as if this was not paradox enough, he makes compliance with the moral norms in question part of the purificatory process that enables individual human souls to return to their ontological priors. The lack of symmetry between Plotinus’ account of the descent of Soul and that of her return is perplexing. Why, the reader may ask at this point, is the ascending soul a soul who ascends of her own initiative while the descending soul is a soul who complies with ‘a law’ inscribed in her nature? In this section I shall consider the two paradoxes raised by Plotinus’ presentation of the soul as a reality whose descent is necessary, but whose return, on the part of one of her manifestations, is a matter of moral understanding and agency.

Soul, as we know, is a hypostasised logical ‘moment’ or ‘stage’ in a necessary process of emanation which begins with the perfect unity and goodness of the One and ends with the non-being and abjectness of matter. More internally complex than her priors, Soul descends in stages. The World Soul, issuing forth from Intellect, generates, in turn, individual human souls and nature in its various manifestations. As the emanative process runs out of power, lifeless matter is produced. Though necessary, the descent of individual souls into body, which is a sine qua non condition of the fulfilment of their mission in the world of sense, is compatible with their ascent to the higher realities from which they proceed and in which

24 As Plotinus puts the point in IV 3 [27] 13. 30-32. The issue is pellucidly analyzed in Leroux (1996), to whom I am here indebted.
their highest element remains. But if descent is a stage in a metaphysical process which brooks no exception, ascent is a moral ideal, which, as such, may prove to be beyond the reach of souls too weak to resist the demands that corporeality makes upon them. To come within reach of this moral ideal, so Plotinus teaches, embodied human souls must be attentive to the imprints of the higher realities that they bear within themselves. The moral life, therefore, as he conceives it, is a life consistently inspired by the knowledge that our soul, while being herself, is also an image (indalma) of higher realities and that she will find her perfect (teleia) and true (alēthinē) life is in the intelligible realm.25 Let us now look at some of the philosophical difficulties encountered on the way to this conclusion.

As an intermediary between the two higher hypostases and the world below, Soul, in Plotinus’ famous phrase, is an ‘amphibious reality,’ a reality with a twofold nature and role.26 Although an emanant of Nous, Soul never altogether leaves her prior; although the World Soul and human souls do descend, they leave something of themselves in the Intelligible Principle.27 By her very nature, therefore, as Plotinus often reminds us, Soul belongs to the higher world. On the other hand, as a separate hypostasis, whose function is to generate and govern the sensory universe, it is also part of Soul’s nature and ontological mission to attend to the world that she has generated. For an incarnate soul, this means, inter alia, ministering to the needs and wants of the particular body to which she is joined. While it is appropriate that incarnate souls should do so, the caring role is not without risks since the body, immersed as it is in the material world, proves to be, more often than not, a distracting presence for the soul by repeatedly presenting her with occasions for forgetting her higher nature. As Plotinus conceives it, self-forgetfulness takes the form of moral lapses. The introduction of morality, which itself presupposes some degree of freedom, raises the paradoxes mentioned above. If, as we shall see, Plotinus shares our modern assumption that freedom from certain constraints - external or internal - is a condition of voluntary action,28 the question arises as to how he can ascribe moral responsibility to human souls for doing what is in accord with their amphibious nature and metaphysical mission?

26 IV 8 [6] 4.32; the phrase was made famous by Inge (1928: vol. 1, 257) to whom it is often ascribed.
28 So much is clear from the discussion of human freedom in VI 8 [39] 1.33-34: ‘... everything is a voluntary act (hekousion) which we do without being forced to and with knowledge [of what we are doing], and in our power which we are also competent to do.’
Plotinus’ choice of words is partly responsible for the paradoxes. His heavy reliance on images and metaphors imparts a degree of conceptual fuzziness to terms that philosophers such as Aristotle had taken care to define or circumscribe. Partly as a result, Plotinus’ key terminology is not infrequently at odds with later philosophical usage. His concepts of voluntariness and necessity are cases in point, being both equivocal and bearers of connotations foreign to later thinkers. While these thinkers, for the most part, take the concepts of voluntariness and necessity to be antithetical, Plotinus refused the antithesis and claimed that the descent of the soul was both necessary and voluntary. Was he inconsistent in doing so? Since the paradox entailed by the use of contradictory terms to describe one and the same metaphysical process would affect the consistency of the Plotinian system as a whole, the matter fully deserves the careful consideration that it has received over the last few decades. The vast and highly polemical literature that has grown around the issue has led to a better understanding of Plotinus’ idiosyncratic concept of necessity.\(^{29}\) As a key feature in a system that purports to account for the derivation of the many from unity, Plotinian necessity would be classified by modern philosophers of logic as a metaphysical necessity with a de re modality, true of all possible worlds. So much is in accord with Plotinus’ own comparison of necessity to a ‘law’ (nomos) inscribed within the soul, a law ‘which does not derive from outside the strength for its accomplishment, but is given to be in those who are subject to it, and they bear it about with them’ (IV 3 [27] 13).\(^{30}\) Working its way from within the nature of what is subject to it, Plotinian necessity, as applied to the descent of soul, precludes deliberation and choice as well as the operation of external causes.

Necessity, so understood, is compatible with voluntariness (to hekousion) if ‘voluntariness’ is taken to denote the spontaneous and unreflective yielding to a natural impulse, yearning or in-built tendency. Necessity is not compatible with voluntariness if voluntariness is taken to refer to actions properly so-called, that is ‘doings’ or ‘undertakings’ resulting from deliberation and choice and carried out in the absence of external constraints

\(^{29}\) The secondary literature on the issue, most of which also considers the problem of accounting for the origin of matter in Plotinus’ monistic system, is too vast to be listed here. For a particularly lucid account of the issue, see Rist (1961 and 1965) and O’Brien (1971 and 1977); for dissenting views, see Schwyzer (1973), Corrigan (1986), Narbonne (1992 and the present volume) and Phillips (2009); for a critique of the dissenting views, see O’Brien (1996, 2011, 2012 and forthcoming 2013), and Lavaud (in his commentary of tractate IV 8 [6] for Brisson-Pradeau 2002-2010: 264). I am here indebted to both Rist and O’Brien who seem to me to have had the better of the controversy. Because the issue is not directly germane to my present concern, I shall not here test for consistency the various statements in which Plotinus describes the manner in which Soul descends. For a detailed analysis of the passages in question, see O’Brien (1977 and 1993).

\(^{30}\) For the same point, couched in almost identical terms, see also IV 8 [6] 5.
or in spite of them. The examples of voluntary behaviour that Plotinus gives in IV 3 [27] 13 show that he understands the concept in the first of the above two senses since he compares the descent of soul into body to the sprouting of beard and horns, the passionate desire for sexual union or indeed the unreasoning impulse to perform noble deeds. Aware of the conceptual tension involved in describing the same ‘event’ or ‘process’ as both necessary and voluntary, Plotinus repeatedly emphasizes the impulsive character of the soul’s descent. In the early tractate On the Souls’ descent into Bodies (IV 8 [6] 5), defending Plato against a charge of inconsistency which he suspected might be levelled also at himself, Plotinus writes: ‘there is ... no contradiction (ou diaphônei) between the sowing to birth and the descent for the perfection of the All.’ (ll. 1-2) Later, in the tractate On Difficulties about the Soul I (IV 3 [27] 13.17-18), he specified: ‘the souls go neither willingly nor because they are sent, nor is the voluntary element in their going like deliberate choice (hekousion).’

Descent, however, is also decline and Plotinus, always a Platonist, held that ‘whatever goes to the worse does so unwillingly (cf. to akousion).’ He ascribed the souls’ descent to a flaw (hamartia) in their nature. In that context, hamartia, one of the densest words in the Greek philosophical vocabulary, does carry negative moral connotations, which may be taken to refer to the souls’ tolma (audacity) or ‘wish to belong to themselves’ (cf. to boulēthēnai de heautōn einai), a tolma that causes them to be ignorant of their true nature and to turn away from the higher world of their origin. Such hamartia, Plotinus took care to specify, can refer to two things, namely the cause (aitia) of their descent or the wrongdoings (kaka drasai) of which the individual soul is guilty during her sojourn here below. While the soul’s hamartia is unavoidable and therefore exempt from blame, the wrongdoings committed by incarnate souls are avoidable and blameworthy. To describe them, as will presently be seen, Plotinus relies on the language of morality.

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31 For Plotinus’ concept of action, see note 30 supra as well as Remes’ contribution to the present volume.
32 Except when otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Enneads are in Armstrong’s translation, with occasional modifications, flagged as such.
33 I here follow the reading of the manuscripts, not the emendation proposed by Theiler (1962) and adopted by O’Brien (1977: 408-410).
35 Ibid., 17-18. The translation of hamartia into modern vernaculars raises well-known difficulties. I here adopt McKenna’s rendering (‘flaw’), in preference to Armstrong’s (‘sin’) and Fleet’s (‘error’) on the ground that it best conveys Plotinus’ view that the fact that soul’s nature and destiny are in the higher world does not preclude the presence of an imperfection in her nature.
37 See also I 1 [53] 9, passim.
This is the point at which Plotinus’ concept of ‘freedom’ becomes central to the discussion. What makes the incarnate human soul, after her necessary descent in the material world, capable of resisting the promptings of corporeality and of turning upwards to Intellect? The answer lies in Plotinus’ conception of the role of the logizomenon (the discursive faculty) in human souls.38 In his reinterpretation of Plato’s tripartite division of the human soul,39 Plotinus assigned to the logizomenon or middle part (to meson) of the soul the role of ‘managing’ (dioikousa, II 9 [33] 2.14) the body and, more generally, to steer a rational course through the vicissitudes of embodied life. Mostly turned outwards, this element processes the data of sense perception, and, when keeping to its median function, uses inferential reasoning to understand the world of sense and guide our way in it. The logizomenon of Plotinus’ description is a characteristically human capacity, which is ‘in the middle between two powers, a worse and a better, the worse that of sense-perception, the better that of Intellect.’ 40 But, if the natural role of the logizomenon is to mediate between the highest and the lowest part of the human soul, it is not unalterably fixed. Indeed, by being attentive to the intimations of the higher realities that it bears within itself, the logizomenon is capable, albeit intermittently, of lifting itself up to the highest part of the soul. So doing, it gains in power as well as in beauty (cf. kallioi kai dunatōtera, 2.16) and becomes better able to illuminate ‘what comes after it.’ Conversely, by conceding too much to the physical nature, it is prone to let itself be dragged down to the lowest part of the soul. The authority that it has by rights is then compromised and its power weakened. The action-guiding role of the logizomenon, as well as its capacity to go either to the better or to the worse, make it the site of human freedom.

From Plotinus’ description of the logizomenon, it is to be inferred that there can be no freedom for it, or indeed any part of the soul, to go against her nature or indeed to pursue the worse course. Holding, like the Platonic Socrates, that that no one would, knowingly and voluntarily, ‘choose’ the worse course,41 Plotinus wrote: ‘the real drive of desire of our soul is towards that which is better. When that is present within it, it is fulfilled and at rest.’ (I 4

38 Also called to dianoētikon or dianoia. For a study of the diverse appellations of the middle part of the soul, see Blumenhal (1971: 100-105), to whom I am here indebted.
39 For a clear expression of Plotinus’ reinterpretation of Plato on this point, see II 9 [33] 2 and V 3 [49] 3.
41 In Horn’s (2007: 169) apt summary of Plotinus’ theory of the will, ‘The will is not free because of its power to decide arbitrarily, but because of its possession of the faculty to act according to reason. It is not a two-way power but a faculty to adopt the good.’
Human souls whose life here below is in accord with their higher nature, enjoy as great a power of self-determination (to eph’ hēmin or to autexousion) as is compatible with their embodied condition. By contrast, souls whose desires lead them away from the good find themselves progressively enslaved to physical nature and alienated from their true self. Since erring souls are, to a large extent, the agents of their own enslavement, Plotinus blames them for it, as well as for the ‘wrong actions’ (kaka drasai) that their enslavement leads them to perform. Going beyond blame, he turns to philosophical instruction in order to remind them that they belong by nature to the higher world. Should they, however, ignore such instruction or fail to act according to their higher nature, he warns them that punishment for self-forgetfulness is likely to take the form of re-incarnation in a lower form of life. The very fact that he made use of such strategies shows that he took them to have exercised a degree of self-determination in their wrongful choice of life.

Let us now take stock and evaluate the consequences for Plotinus’ ethics of the two tenets of his philosophy discussed above, namely his conception of the soul as an amphibious reality and his definition of the human will as a capacity for self-determination. The first tenet has it that while the mission of the soul is to minister to the world of sense, her own destiny is in the higher world. The second tenet has it that in actively ministering to the world of sense, the human soul is constrained both by external contingencies and her inner impulses and passions. As a result, her freedom of choice is doubly limited. By contrast, the soul who has purified herself from the passions and taken her distances from earthly commitments is as free as an embodied reality can be.

The tension in Plotinus’ ethics, it will now be argued, mirrors the paradoxes in his metaphysics of the soul. There are two strands in the moral advice that he gives to the human soul, the one favouring a modicum of engagement in the world below, the other favouring return to, and contemplation of, the higher realities from which she is emanated. While teaching that it is good for the soul to follow her natural inclination and manage the external world, Plotinus, as will now be seen, is far more often prone to stress that the soul’s natural

43 VI 8 [39] 2-4.
44 Such as is provided throughout V 1 [10].
tendency to look after her product is to be held in check if her care for the bodily nature is not to jeopardise her own integrity as a member of the higher world. While occasionally reassuring the soul that no harm need come to her through caring for her inferior, he more often presents the body as an encumbrance which, in admittedly extreme circumstances, may even have to be jeopardised for the sake of preserving the integrity of the soul.\textsuperscript{46} As a preliminary step to considering Plotinus’ theory of the virtues, let us now turn to two passages in which he assesses differently the risks that embodiment presents for the soul.

Chapter 17 of tractate IV 3 [27] (\textit{On Difficulties about the soul}) is representative of Plotinus’ pessimistic account of the consequences for the soul of too close an engagement with the body.\textsuperscript{47} The passage is a vivid description of the progressive dimming of the light given out by descending souls as they approach the earth. At the start of the descent, in the heavenly regions which border directly on the lowest reaches of the Intelligible realm, the radiance is strong, but, as the souls continue their descent, a descent that Plotinus here describes as not being ‘to their advantage’,\textsuperscript{48} the light they emit gets dimmer. As a consequence, ‘the things which are illuminated need more care’ and the souls become ever more closely engaged with their product. Having each become associated with a body, they have almost reached the end of their descent. Although possibly unaware of what threatens them from then on, incarnate souls tend to behave like frantic seamen in charge of steering a vessel through a storm. As Plotinus writes:

\begin{quote}
... just as the steersmen of ships in a storm concentrate more and more on the care of their ships and are unaware that they are \textit{forgetting themselves}, that they are in danger of being \textit{dragged down} with the wreck of the ships, these souls incline downwards more with what is theirs. Then they are held \textit{fettered} with bonds of magic, held fast by their care (\textit{kēdemonia}) for the bodily nature. (ll. 22-28)
\end{quote}

In this sombre and not entirely helpful metaphor, in which the vessel stands for the pilot’s body, the impending shipwreck is being considered from two contrasting points of view, that of the pilot, who may also stand for the reader of the passage, and that of Plotinus, who tells

\textsuperscript{46} VI 8 [39] 6; for a detailed analysis of the passage, see Stern-Gillet (2013).
\textsuperscript{47} Since the theme is a recurrent one, other passages could have been selected, in particular I 7 [54] 3.19-22, in which Plotinus gives us his last and, one presumes, most carefully thought out advice on the issue: ‘... life in a body is an evil in itself, but the soul comes into good by its virtue, by not living the life of the compound but separating itself even now.’
\textsuperscript{48} In MacKenna’s felicitous translation, the souls are ‘not themselves the better for the depth to which they have penetrated’.
the story. While the pilot is exclusively preoccupied with the safeguard of the vessel (or the survival of his body), Plotinus’ sole concern is for the pilot’s soul. While the pilot takes the vessel to be what needs to be saved from the storm, Plotinus holds that the pilot has misidentified the object he is to care for and that, when he puts his all in an attempt to save it, he acts in ignorance of his true nature.

At this point the metaphor becomes a little confusing: when Plotinus writes that the pilot is in danger ‘of being dragged down with the wrecks of the ship’ (ll. 24-25), he does not mean that the pilot and the ship are one and the same thing, but that the pilot, having mistakenly made common cause with the ship, is now at risk of sinking with it. Fettered as if by bonds of magic, he has lost the inner freedom to resist the promptings of fear and his behaviour is now entirely dictated by the movements of the waves. Instead of caring for what he should care for, namely his soul or higher self, he devotes all his efforts to the safeguard of the physical object with which he is currently associated (ship or body). In the process, he lets himself be immersed in matter. Bodily death, Plotinus claims in this passage, is not the worst misfortune that can befall the steersman - or indeed the reader of the passage.

From the pessimistic account of soul’s engagement with body given in this passage a clear ethical conclusion follows: the best life for an incarnate soul to lead is one in which the utmost care is given to that which most deserves it, namely the higher element in the compound. Were the steersman of Plotinus’ metaphor to become actively aware of the divine nature of his soul, he would endeavour to separate her, ‘as far as possible, from his lower nature’; instead of being wholly absorbed by his care for the vessel (or body), he would reach out to the divine in himself and direct his sight to Intellect.

While it must be emphasized that such bleak warnings against too close an engagement with the body preponderate in the Enneads, it should, even so, be recognised that a more optimistic note is occasionally sounded. One such occasion occurs in the tractate On the descent of souls into bodies (IV.8 [6]), where Plotinus denies that harm invariably comes to the soul through her association with body:

... it is not evil in every way for soul to give body the ability to flourish and to exist, because not every kind of provident care (pronoia) for the inferior deprives the being exercising it of its ability to remain in the highest. (2. 24-26)

Although the tone is guarded and the point negatively put, the chapters that follow provide groundings for a more positive outlook. In chapter five, having turned his attention from hypostatic Soul to incarnate human souls, Plotinus outlines the beneficial aspects of their descent and embodiment:

... when it is eternally necessary by the law of nature that it [the soul] should do and experience these things [the soul’s experience in the outer world] and, descending from that which is above it, it meets the need of something else in its encounter with it, if anyone said that a god sent it down he would not be out of accord with the truth or with himself. (5. 10-14)

To substantiate the point, which he clearly regards as important, Plotinus proceeds to make three distinct claims: (1) the soul’s descent brings order and beauty (cf. kosmēsei) to the world below (ll. 26-27); (2) the soul herself need not be harmed by her descent and the knowledge of evil acquired in the process (ll. 27-29); (3) the soul may even benefit from gaining some experience of evil (7.8-17). Let us briefly take these claims in turn.

According to the first claim, as developed in chapters five to seven of the tractate, the beneficial action of soul on the world below would appear to be of a mostly aesthetic nature. So much is suggested by Plotinus’ choice of words; to the soul, we read, is to be credited the wondrous variety (cf. tēs poikilias) of fine things (ta glaphura) in the world of sense as well the greatest perceptible beauty in it (to en aisthētōi kalliston). The very existence of such beauty, he explains, is a direct result of soul’s descent, a descent which makes it possible for her to unfold powers that would otherwise have remained hidden and unknown, and to give everything in the physical universe a share in the nature of the good. One might have expected Plotinus at this point to mention that the beneficial action of soul in the outer world includes practical activities prompted by concern for the welfare of fellow embodied souls. But he does not do so, and we must take is as highly significant that there should be no mention of ‘other-related’ norms and activities in the one tractate he devoted to outlining the beneficial aspects of the descent of soul into body.

Claims two and three are focused on the soul and the effect that her sojourn in the physical world may have upon her. Plotinus argues, not only that it is possible for the soul to remain unharmed by the knowledge of evil acquired through her descent, but also that she may actually be benefited by it. Although surprising at first, the two claims are consonant
with the optimistic tone of the tractate as a whole. They also constitute the first expression of a point of doctrine on which Plotinus would never vary afterwards, namely that the soul in us cannot be permanently harmed by too close an engagement with the material world.

The steps of the argument are as follows. Having first drawn attention to the soul’s beneficial action on the world below, Plotinus repeats the familiar point that her care for it must go only so far and no further, on pain of jeopardising her well-being. He then draws a distinction which turns out to be crucial for the understanding of the rest of the tractate, the distinction between wise and weak souls. Wise souls are those who, while joined to a body, yet succeed in maintaining themselves in universal soul and share in the royal command that she exercises over the world below (4.5-9). Theirs is the right course; they descend, but do not fall. Weak souls, by contrast, sink deep into the body to which they are joined, fret over it, allow themselves to be caught in its fetters and come to act by sense rather than intellect. They are the fallen souls; having become ignorant of their true nature, they have isolated themselves from universal soul.

Fallen souls, however, need not remain fallen since, in Plotinus’ view, evil is powerless fundamentally to impair the soul. Although he regards moral evil, namely ‘the evil that men do,’ as a serious risk for human souls, he consistently stresses that, however deeply engulfed in the material world a soul has allowed herself to become, she cannot altogether lose the ‘transcendent something (hyperechon ti)’ that she holds within. In appropriate conditions, therefore, and given the right motivation, such a soul can, through the cultivation of her transcendent element, loosen the fetters - mostly self-made - that bind her to the world below. This point of doctrine constitutes the background against which the puzzling claims proffered in chapters five and seven of the tractate are to be understood.

In these chapters, Plotinus reassures the human soul that, although she must be wary of the ever present risk of moral evil, the risk could never be fatal; while some rare souls are able to withstand it altogether, others emerge stronger from a brief experience of it. It is at that point that Plotinus puts forward the claim that, by escaping quickly enough from the

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50 In, e.g., IV 8 [6] 5 and I 8 [51] 5, Plotinus uses various expressions to denote metaphysical (or cosmological) evil, which he distinguishes from moral evil. While the first kind has to do with the (necessary) descent of soul and the generation of matter, the second kind comprises the (avoidable) wrongdoings (kaka drasai, IV 8 [6] 5. 18), for which embodied souls can be held responsible. To render as closely as possible Plotinus’ expression tēn kakan hēn anthropōi echousin (I 8 [51] 5.31-32), I borrow Shakespeare’s expression ‘the evil that men do’ (Julius Caesar, Act III, sc. 2).

quagmire below, some human souls can remain altogether unharmed by acquiring the knowledge of evil:

... if it [the soul] escapes quickly enough it has come to no harm (*ouden beblaptai*) by acquiring a knowledge of evil (*gnōsin kakou*) and coming to know (*gnousa*) the nature of wickedness (*physin kakias*).’ (5. 27-29, tr. Armstrong modified)\(^{52}\)

These lines raise several large questions: How could a self-professed Platonist conceive of evil as an object of knowledge? Furthermore, assuming that the evil in question is moral, as opposed to metaphysical, how would a soul acquire such knowledge without her vision being clouded as a result? Lastly, on the assumption that the exceptional soul mentioned in the passage is the ‘perfect soul’ described in a later tractate (I 8 [51] 4. 25-28), a soul who ‘neither sees nor approaches anything undefined and unmeasured and evil’, the question arises as to how a human being could reach adulthood while remaining altogether untouched by evil.\(^{53}\) However, since these questions are only tangentially related to the problem at issue, the claim made in the above-quoted lines will have to remain unravelled in the present context.

In chapter seven, Plotinus returns to the issue and, this time, the message is less paradoxical. He now seeks to assuage any annoyance that the soul may feel for associating too eagerly with the world of sense. He tells her that, since her metaphysical role is to straddle the divide between the divine and the sensible realms, she should not be ‘vexed with herself’ (*ouk aganaktēteon autēn heautē*), 7.4) for giving to the perceptible world ‘something ... of what she has in herself and taking back (*antilambanein*) something from it in return’ (7.8-9, tr. Armstrong, modified). He reassures the weaker soul that even though it would be to her true advantage to be turned to the intelligible world, there are, even so, benefits to be drawn from tarrying in the world of sense. From her association with the body, he writes, she might derive, not indeed a ‘knowledge of evil’, but an ‘experience of evil’:

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\(^{52}\) See also ‘there is an escape from the evils in the soul for those who are capable of it, though not all men are.’ (I 8 [51] 5.29-30).

\(^{53}\) Plotinus’ claim in the tractate *On Dialectic* (I 3 [20] 1.9 and 3.8) that the philosopher, as conceived by Plato, ‘goes the upward way by nature’ and is ‘by nature virtuous’ is equally puzzling in view of the long process of education to which Plato would subject the future guardians of the ideal state. However, the allusion, whether justifiable or not, is too undeveloped to shed light on Plotinus’ claim in the above lines.
If it [the soul] does not use only its safe part in governing the universe, but with great eagerness plunges into the interior and does not stay with the whole; especially as it is possible for it to emerge again having acquired the whole story of what it saw and experienced here (entautha) and learnt what it is like to be There (ekei), and by the comparison ... learning, in a way more clearly, the better things. For the experience of evil (tou kakou peira) is a clearer knowledge (gnōsis enargestera) of the Good for those whose power is too weak to know evil with clear intellectual certainty (cf. epistēmēi) before experiencing it. (7.9-17)

For weaker yet suitably disposed souls, Plotinus here optimistically avers, some experience of the deficiencies of evil can make the Good shine out all the more by comparison. This presupposes that the weaker souls in question have not become entirely alienated from the divine world of their origins, but have retained, through their ‘transcendent element’, what Plotinus calls ‘an intelligent desire’ (cf. orexei noerai, 4.1) to return to the higher realities. If, as seems likely, such is Plotinus’ meaning, the question now arises as to how ‘intelligent desire’ should be re-kindled or fostered in those souls?

Ethics comes to occupy centre stage against the background of the distinction between, on the one hand, exceptional souls who are able to know evil with clear intellectual certainty without experiencing it and, on the other hand, weaker-minded souls who need to experience evil to gain a clearer knowledge of the Good. To the tractates that Plotinus devoted to questions of ethics, as the subject had been understood since Aristotle, we now turn.

5. The virtues

Plotinus’s reinterpretation of the distinction between demotic and purificatory virtues that he had found in Plato is far more significant than is commonly realised.54

Not all ways of practising the virtues, so Plato had claimed in the Phaedo (68c-69a), are equally valid. When the virtues are inculcated ‘by habit and training’ (82b2) and practised out of a prudential desire to lead as trouble-free or pleasurable an earthly existence

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54 To take but one example: in the otherwise excellent commentary of I 2 [19] by J.-M. Flamand (Brisson-Pradeau: 2003) there is no discussion of doctrinal divergences on this particular point between Plato and Plotinus.
as possible, they are appropriately called ‘simple-minded’ (euēthē, 65e5) or ‘demotic and political’ (dēmotikē kai politikē, 82a12-b1) and dismissed as mere appearances of virtue. When, by contrast, they are a result of ‘philosophy and understanding’ (philosophias te kai nou, 82b3), and are practised out of deference to the immortal element in us and the desire to keep it as immune as possible from bodily contamination (ibid., 67c6-7), they are appropriately classified as modes of ‘purification’ (katharsis, 67c5). In the Republic, the austere implications of the distinction first drawn in the Phaedo were to be toned down, if only to take account of the lengthy process of selection and formation of the future guardians, a process which would require that the civic virtues be inculcated in the souls of all young citizens, regardless of their future status in the ideal republic. But, even in the context of the Republic, the aspersions that Plato had earlier cast on the civic manner of practising the virtues would not disappear entirely. While he assigned the civic virtues to the guards and the producers, in conformity with their class and calling, he expected that those selected for the guardianship of the city would progress from the civic to the purificatory virtues and, in the process, become as god-like as a human being can be.55

In the tractate On Virtues (I 2 [19]) Plotinus proceeded to rehabilitate the civic virtues. Against the master who had denied that they could make us godlike (3.9-10), he argued that ‘it is unreasonable (alogon) to suppose that we are not made godlike in any way by the civic virtues, but that likeness comes from the greater ones’ (1.23-26). The specific contribution of the civic virtues to the life of the embodied soul, he continued, is:

... genuinely [to] set us in order and make us better by giving limit and measure to our desires, and generally by putting measure into the passions; 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. And so far as they are a measure which forms the matter of the soul, they are made like the measure There (ekei) and have a trace (ichnos) of the Best There. (2.14-20, tr. Armstrong, modified)

So reinterpreted, the civic virtues exert their regulatory influence at the point at which the soul interacts with the material world. This they do in two ways, which are not mutually

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55 As shown by David Sedley (1999), to whom I am here indebted, the ideal of being made god-like maintains a presence in the Republic (518d-e and 613a-b) and later dialogues.
exclusive. They restrain or curb affections originating in the bodily part of the compound and lessening, therefore, the hold that these affections have on the soul, make it easier for her to resist their demands and maintain her independence. They also abolish false opinions and uncriticised mental images and thereby moderate or altogether extinguish the affections that arise out of them.56

How do the civic virtues achieve this? The emphasis that Plotinus places on measure and limitation in the above-quoted lines strongly suggests that he regards the civic virtues as ethical manifestations of the operation in us of the logizomenon, whose function, as seen above, is to mediate between the higher and the lower part of the soul. By bringing reasoned thought and order to our lives, the logizomenon ensures that each element in the soul plays its allotted part, with reason exercising its rule over passion and appetite and thereby training the irrational part (to alogon) into habits of easy compliance. So doing, the logizomenon enables the embodied soul to evaluate rationally, and react fittingly to, the adventitious and ever-changing circumstances in which she finds herself in the world of sense.57 An embodied soul in whom the logizomenon functions as it should is a soul who possesses the civic virtues of courage, moderation, practical wisdom and justice, understood as so many dispositions (diatheseis) to ensure the harmonious interaction between the plurality of her parts. Lastly, by taming the passions and replacing prejudiced opinion by reasoned judgment, the civic virtues enlarge the domain of what is in our power (to eph’ hēmin).

However, if the civic virtues play a valuable role in the life of the embodied soul, it is nonetheless only a propaedeutic one. If they set her on the road to god-likeness by sustaining, or re-activating, the ‘transcendent something’ (hyperechon ti)58 that lies within herself, they only take her part of the way. If they ‘build up’59 her freedom, they cannot ensure her independence from the external factors in the outer world which, by definition, lie outside her control.60 To that extent, the civic virtues cannot but be a preliminary stage in a process of purification that must go further and deeper, if it is to succeed in dissociating, so far as possible, the soul from the body to which she is temporarily joined and in making her capable of fulfilling her destiny in the higher world. Their function, beyond guiding the

56 For a description of this particular action of the civic virtues on the soul in us, see III 6 [26] 4-5.
57 As described in I 3 [20] 6, 8-10 and VI 8 [39] 5.13-19.
58 See note 52 supra.
59 To render kataskeuazein in VI 8 [39] 5.32
60 ‘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 [39] 2.35-37).
embodied soul in her dealings with the lower world, is to alert her to the traces of the higher realities that she bears within herself and, in so doing, to awaken her to her true nature, and foster her desire to return to her priors.

Does this mean, therefore, that the function of the civic virtues, ideally, is to make themselves redundant by giving way to the purificatory virtues which alone can guide the soul to the true object of her aspiration? The polemics recorded in section I above stem, for the most part, from the different interpretations that scholars have put on the few passages in which Plotinus considers the question. We shall turn to these passages shortly.

To progress beyond the civic virtues, the embodied soul must ‘draw together to itself in a sort of place of its own away from the body’ (5.4-5). Loosening the ties that bind her to the world below, she must withdraw from the ‘perceptible sounds’ that emanate from it and, by ‘turning her power of apprehension inwards’, make it accessible to ‘the voices from on high.’ Striving to make herself immune to the pull of pleasure and pain, the soul must do all she can to lessen the impact that passion, emotion and irrational desire would otherwise have upon her as a whole. Rather than simply taming, or training, the irrational part, the higher part of the soul must seek to purify it, so as to make it as ‘like’ herself as possible, and thereby avoid making the incarnate soul into a ‘spirit who is double.’

Once completed, the process of integration of the inferior into the superior will ensure, not only that the embodied soul avoids ‘culpable error’ (hamartia), but also, more importantly, that she becomes ‘god-like’ (6.1-3). The virtues of such a soul, rather than fostering harmony between the plurality of her parts, are best described as the kind of dispositions that a unity has to itself:

... the higher justice in the soul is its activity towards intellect, its self-control is its inward turning to intellect, its courage is its freedom from affections, according to the likeness of that to which it looks which is free from affections by nature: this freedom from affections in the soul comes from virtue, to prevent her sharing in the affections of her inferior companion. (6.23-27)

In setting the soul free from both bodily affections and the tyranny of ever changing and often unpredictable external circumstances, the purificatory virtues give their possessors as great a power of self-determination (to autexousion) as a human being can hope to enjoy.

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62 5.21-31; see also 6.5-11.
As can be seen, Plotinus did not regard the civic and the purificatory virtues as different in kind, as Plato had done in the *Phaedo*, but as constituting stages - or degrees - in a process of purification whose ultimate aim is to render the soul in us capable of achieving the kind of mystical union described in IV 8 [6] 1. Plotinus’ conception of virtue as constituting a scale explains why, outside the tractate *On Virtues*, he rarely specifies whether it is the civic or the purificatory virtues that he is referring to.

If the two sets of virtues constitute a scale of moral and spiritual progression leading the embodied soul to her optimal state of being, must it be concluded that the possession of the purificatory virtues render otiose the practice of the civic ones? Plotinus’ answer to this crucial question, as recorded in the tractate *On Virtues*, is less clear than might be wished. On the one hand, he tells us that it is a matter of necessity (*ex anagkēs*, 7.11) that whoever possesses the higher virtues possesses the lower ones ‘potentially’ (*dunamei*, ibid.), although perhaps not ‘in act’ (*energeiai*, l.13). On the other hand, he keenly stresses that a man who has reached the higher level will not choose to return to the life he has left behind, preferring instead to follow the ‘higher principles and different measures’ that Intellect gives to those who have rendered themselves capable of receiving them.\(^{63}\) Such a man, he writes:

... will altogether (*holōs*) separate himself, as far as possible, from his bodily nature and will altogether (*holōs*) dissociate himself from the life of the good man (*ton anthropou bion ton tou agathou*), which civic virtue recommends. He will leave that life 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. (7.23-28, tr. Armstrong, modified)

This is a key passage for the understanding of Plotinus’ conception of the role of virtue in the best life (cf. *zōēn ten aristēn*, IV 8 [6] 1.4) for a human being to lead. While he recognises that the separation of the soul from the body can only be ‘so far as possible’, the doctrine of the inviolability of the soul *qua* soul enables him to argue that the ideal of god-likeness can be achieved while the soul is in the body and, therefore, that *eudaimonia* can be reached without the direct participation of the body.\(^{64}\) When engaged in the contemplation of the higher realities, the possessor of the purificatory virtues, Plotinus here tells us, leaves behind the ‘life of the good man’; being at one with his higher self, he shares ‘the life of the gods’.

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\(^{64}\) ‘It is absurd to maintain that well-being (*eudaimonia*) extends as far as the living body, since well-being is the good life, which is concerned with soul and is an activity of soul, and not of all of it.’ (I 4 [46] 14.4-7).
Engaging in the highest activity of which human beings are capable, such a man has become, not only as self-determining, but also as *eudaimōn*, as an embodied being can be.

According to the moral norms implied in the above-quoted lines, those who are capable of leading the ‘life of the gods’ will rightly choose it in preference to the ‘life of the good man’. Once more, therefore, the question arises as to whether the Plotinian good life is a life aimed at the higher realities and unperturbed by active participation in the lives of other human beings at either the personal or the civic level. In the hope of bringing further elements of answer to the question, I now turn to two passages in which Plotinus arguably adopts a less uncompromising position than in the texts so far discussed.

The first and, by far, the most significant passage occurs in the context of a discussion of human freedom in the tractate *On Free Will and the Will of the One* (VI 8 [39]). In chapter five of that tractate Plotinus argues that no virtuous action undertaken in response to adventitious circumstances in the outer world can be free in the full sense of the term since neither the occasion for performing it nor its final outcome are within the agent’s control. So much, he proceeds to claim, accounts for virtue’s reluctance to be compelled (*anagkazomenēs*) ‘to cope with what turns up’ (*pros to prospipton ... ergazesthai*, 5.13) in the outer world:

… 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 (*oudenos therapeias deomenou*), as if a physician, for instance Hippocrates, were to wish that nobody needed his skill… (VI 8 [39] 5.13-20)

This quasi prosopopaeic passage, in which Plotinus takes it upon himself to speak in virtue’s name, shows that he does allot her a role, albeit a modest one, in dealing with a range of conditions in the outer world such as war, injustice and poverty. Intruding into the life of the virtuous agent, such circumstances compel him to actualise the civic virtues that had laid dormant in him since he attained the purificatory ones.⁶⁵ Although it is right that the virtuous agent should do so, the reactive nature of his intervention inevitably reduces the extent of

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⁶⁵ [12] [19] 7 11-13, as discussed earlier in the present section.
‘what is in his power’. 66 Just as a physician prescribes a course of treatment (therapeia) to deal with an illness or an accident, virtue does not shy away from doing what it can to alleviate, or to rectify, such desperate states of affairs in the world below. 67 Plotinus’ use of the metaphor of therapy, as well as his comparison of virtue to a somewhat reluctant physician, are highly significant. Although the virtuous agent, like the responsible physician, will not refuse to intervene whenever he perceives that there is a need to be met, he will not, even so, seek to do any more than undertake curative action. 68 Indeed, from the examples given above, it seems clear that Plotinus did not envisage that virtue would, or should, seek to prevent - as opposed to curing - the future occurrence of external calamities by devising or implementing economic and political strategies to forestall their occurrence. 69 Although modern readers may find this a curious omission on Plotinus’ part, his position is fully consonant with his metaphysics. 70 The conception of virtue as ‘a kind of other intellect (nous) ... which intellectualises the soul’ (5. 34-36) commits him to the view that the life of action, however worthy, cannot but be second best to the life of contemplation; while the former keeps the soul anchored in the world below, the latter lifts her above the contingencies of embodied existence and enables her to share in the god-like activity of Intellect. However, as the above-quoted lines show, this did not prevent Plotinus from conceding that contemplation might, on occasion, have to be interrupted or postponed in order to enable virtue to deal with calamitous events and circumstances in the outer world.

A second passage in which Plotinus arguably shows himself to be favourably disposed to the life of action in the outer world comes from the tractate On the Good or the One (VI 9 [9]). As mentioned in section 2 above, the passage has recently benefited from a detailed

66 For the unmistakable Stoic flavour of the lines, see Graeser (1972: 121-22), Eliasson (2008: ch. 6, passim) and Lavaud (Brisson-Pradeau 2007: 178 and 243 sqq).
67 Pace Annas (1999: 68), who claims that the possessor of the higher, purificatory, virtues ‘will not activate the lower virtues although he has them potentially.’
68 Just how detached the virtuous agent (ho spoudaios) is from outward circumstances comes out clearly in the tractate On Well-Being (I 4. [46] 11. 12-14): ‘He would like all men to prosper and no one to be subject to any sort of evil; but if this does not happen, he is all the same well off (eudaimon).’ See also I 5 [36] 10. passim, as commented on by Ciapalo, R (1987). As Gerson (1994: 202) well said: ‘In so far as this man [the man of higher virtue] is required to don the role of incarnate moral agent he will, so to speak, recreate an image of true virtue. But his dissociation from this life is such that he does not unqualifiedly desire to perform such acts, nor does he desire the occasion for their performance or even any particular outcome.’
69 The issue is dealt with at greater length in Stern-Gillet (2009). See also Bene (2013:145 sqq.).
70 After noting the Stoic flavour of these lines and relating them to VI 8 [39] 4. 9, Graser (1972: 122) aptly comments that ‘... the empirical world cannot, sub specie aeternitatis, be a concern of the real self, for the metaphysical self, to use this Kantian term, is not intrinsically related to πρότερον, i.e., to situations externally necessitated in which a decision has to be made. The soul, so it seems, would rather not act at all and not commit itself to any further state of alienation but would prefer to actualise its genuine state of being through contemplative acts.’
analysis on the part of Dominic O’Meara, who claims to have found in it evidence that Plotinus considered civic engagement to be a worthy by-product of communion with the highest reality.71 The passage has a strong prescriptive flavour unusual in the Enneads: having explained how the soul must prepare herself for mystical communion, Plotinus outlines the responsibility incumbent upon those who have achieved the vision they were aiming at:

...the soul must let go of all outward things and turn altogether to what is within, and not be inclined to any outward thing, but ignoring all things (...) and even ignoring itself, come to be in contemplation of that One, and having been in its company and had, so to put it, sufficient converse with it, come and announce, if it could, to another that transcendent union. *Perhaps* also it was because Minos attained this kind of union that he was said in the story to be “the familiar friend of Zeus”, and it was in remembering this that he laid down laws in its image (cf. *eidōla*), being filled full of lawgiving by the divine touch (*plēroumenos*). Or, because he considers that even the affairs of the city are unworthy of his attention, he therefore wants to remain above always; this is liable to happen to one who has seen much. (7. 16-28, tr. Armstrong, modified)72

Plotinus is here freely adapting Plato’s allusion in the opening lines of the *Laws* (I, 624 B) to the legendary Cretan king’s law-making activities.73 Conceivably, he is also alluding to his own mystical experience of ‘waking out of the body’, as he recounted it in a passage that Porphyry would later place at the opening of tractate IV 8 [6]. But, if he is, a crucial difference between the two passages is to be noted: while the notion of obligation is not

71 O’Meara (2003: 74-76).
72 ... pa/ntwn tw½n eÃcw a)feme/nhn deiÍ e)pistrafh=nai pro\j to\ eiãsw pa/nth, mh\ pro/j ti tw½n eÃcw kekli¿sqai, a)lla\ a)gnoh/santa ta\ pa/nta kaii pro\ tou= me\n tv= diaqe/sei, to/te de\ kaii toiÎj eiãdesin, a)gnoh/santa de\ kaii au(to\n e)n tv= qe/# e)kei¿nou gene/sqaí, ka)kei¿n% suggeno/mon kaii i, kanw½joiânon o(milh/santa hÁkein a)gge/llonta, eii\ du/naito, kaii aÁll% th=n e)keiÎ sunousi¿an: oiâan iáswj kaii <2Mi¿nws>2 poiou/menoj <2o)aristh<s>2 tou= <22Di<o<s>2 e)thmi¿sqh eiãnai, hÂj memnhmee/noj eiãwdla au)th=j tou\j no/mouj e)li¿qeí tv= tou= qei¿ou e)pafv= eii\j no/mwn plhrou/menoj qe/sin. áH kaii ta\ politika\ ou)k aÁcia au) tou= nomi¿sa a)ei e)e)qi¿me/nein aÁnw, oÃPer kaii t%½ polu\ i\do/nti ge/noito aÁn pa/qhma.

I adopt van Winden’s emendation of the manuscript reading, nomísaîa ei, into nomísaîas aei (1962:173).
73 Discussing the origin of the laws of Sparta and Crete the Athenian Stranger asks Megillus the Spartan and Cleinias the Athenian: ‘Do you then, like Homer, say that Minos used to go every ninth year to hold converse with his father Zeus, and that he was guided by his divine oracles in laying down the laws for your cities?’ (tr. Bury).
even mentioned in the autobiographical passage, it features centrally in the above-quoted lines, to which we now turn.

The first part of the passage, up to the mention of Minos in l. 23, is semantically straightforward. The first three infinitives governed by the impersonal verb dei (‘must’), which serve to describe the steps that a would-be visionary must take in order to achieve a ‘transcendent union’ (tēn ekei sunousian), all refer to points of doctrine well-rehearsed in the *Enneads*. The fourth infinitive, with its attendant proviso, states that the successful visionary has an obligation to ‘announce’ his transcendent vision to another. Aware that no obligation is binding unless it can actually be discharged, Plotinus takes care to note that only ‘if he can’ (ei dunaito) should the visionary tell others what he has seen. Plotinus does not specify the form that such announcement must take, and it is conceivable that it might consist merely in the kind of record he provided in IV 8 [6] 1 of his own mystical experience. That, of course, does not exclude the possibility that the announcement be of a more robust or practical nature, as suggested by the tentative introduction (cf. hoian isōs) of the example of Minos at this point. As result of ‘being filled by the divine touch’, Plotinus now speculates, Minos may have turned to law-making as a reflection (cf. eidōla) of his communion with the divine forms. Although the meaning of the passage is not in doubt, it remains unclear whether Plotinus is fully committed to the possibility illustrated by the example or whether he is simply making one of his frequent and dutiful allusions to Plato. The very vagueness of the allusion, which shows that in this case Plotinus had not bothered to check the Platonic text, suggests that the latter possibility is more likely.

As testified by successive attempts to emend the text, the passage becomes unclear with the last sentence, the difficulty being that of identifying the subject of *ethelei* in l. 27. Is it Minos or some other person? If, like recent translators, who mostly accept van Winden’s emendation,74 one takes Minos to be the subject of *ethelei*, a logical tangle ensues in so far as this last sentence in effect empties the *dei* of the binding force that Plotinus had given it in the first. Indeed, if Minos is the person who ‘... may think even civic matters unworthy of him’ (ē kai ta politika ouk axia autou nomisas), the two sentences, taken together, commit Plotinus to the absurd view that unwillingness to descend to the political arena constitutes a valid exemption clause to the duty, as earlier stated, of announcing one’s vision to others. If, on

the other hand, one takes the subject of *ethelei* to be some other person, who, unlike Minos, refuses to engage in the affairs of the city so as to spend all his time contemplating, the two sentences express a genuine disjunction. Plotinus’ position would then be that a successful visionary may choose either to come (*hēkein*) and announce his vision to others - as Minos perhaps did - or ‘to remain (*menein*) always above’ on the ground that civic activities are not worthy of his attention. Which is the better way of reading the text? While the first reading would seem to provide a smoother way of reading the lines, the second has the principle of charity on its side. Unfortunately, the issue is not hermeneutically neutral in so far as one’s choice of reading is likely to reflect the position one takes on the nature of Plotinus ethics.

Wisely disregarding the problem of ascertaining the contribution that the second sentence makes to the argument, O’Meara turns to a later tractate for substantiation of his thesis that Plotinus regards political engagement as a valid way of disseminating the knowledge gained through a unitive experience of the highest order:

Men ... when their power of contemplation weakens, make action a shadow of contemplation and reasoning. Because contemplation is not enough for them, since their souls are weak and they are not able to grasp the vision sufficiently, and therefore are not filled with it (*plēroumenoi*), but still long to see it, they are carried into action, so as to see what they cannot see with their intellect. When they make something, then, it is because they want to see their object themselves and also because they want others to be aware of it and contemplate it, when their project is realised in practice as well as possible. Everywhere we shall find that making (*poiēsin*) and action (*praxin*) are either a weakening (*astheneian*) or a consequence (*parakolouthēma*) of contemplation; a weakening, if the doer or maker had nothing in view beyond the thing done, a consequence if he had another prior object of contemplation better than what he made. For who, if he is able to contemplate what is truly real will deliberately go after its image (*eidōlon*)? (III 8 [30] 4.31-44)

Although O’Meara’s choice of text may initially surprise insofar as lines 31 to 35 and 43 to 44 are often quoted in support of the view that Plotinus dismissed the life of action as inferior
to the life of contemplation,\textsuperscript{75} lines 36 to 43 do, as he claims, make the point that action and production can be valid consequences of contemplation. Having drawn attention to the few parallels, verbal and non-verbal, between this passage and the one quoted previously, O’Meara proceeds to draw substantive inferences from the combination of the two. Plotinus’ claim that action and production can follow from contemplation, so O’Meara tells us, ‘corresponds to the example of Minos in \textit{Enn. VI 9}.’ Generalising the point, O’Meara then concludes: ‘Thus political action, as indeed all action, may arise as a result that accompanies the fulfilment of philosophical knowledge.’\textsuperscript{76}

O’Meara’s interpretation of these two passages, for all its ingenuity, calls for reservations. First, he plays down the tentative manner in which Plotinus presents Minos as a visionary who may (cf. \textit{hoian isōs}, l.23) have turned to law-making as a result of his converse with Zeus. Secondly, he ignores the fact that there is no mention whatsoever of civic activities in the context of the second passage he adduces as evidence for his thesis. Indeed the argument of tractate III 8 [30] as a whole is aimed at showing that although contemplation is the true goal of the soul, not all souls are capable of it and lesser souls, be it Nature or human beings, have to turn to action (\textit{praxis}) or production (\textit{poiēsis}) in order to maintain a precarious hold on what they have seen but dimly. Unlike fully-fledged contemplation, which constitutes its own end, weaker or unsteady forms of contemplation have to be sustained by activities which produce tangible results in the external world, results which stem from their producers’ desire to ‘see their object [i.e. that which they have made] themselves’ and to make others ‘be aware of it and contemplate it’ (III 8 [30] 4. 37-8) As suggested by the reference, earlier in the chapter, to the productive activity of Nature from whose weak contemplation issue ‘the lines which bound bodies,’ Plotinus is here more likely to be expressing an idea that will be developed more fully in the tractate \textit{On Intelligible Beauty} (V 8 [31] 1), which immediately follows in the chronological order. There, in seemingly open disagreement with Plato, Plotinus writes that ‘the arts (cf. \textit{tas technas}) do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives.’ (ll. 35-6) Yet, striking though the disagreement on this point appears to be between the two philosophers, Plotinus does not depart from the Platonic position as radically

\textsuperscript{75} See, for example, Armstrong’s \textit{ad loc.} comment: ‘... Plotinus is so deeply convinced of the inferiority of the material world that he has to represent the activity of soul in forming material things as an activity of the lowest form of soul and due to its weakness in contemplation; hence the comparison with the substitute activities of uncontemplative men.’

\textsuperscript{76} O’Meara (2003: 75, my italics).
as it might seem since he takes care to add that although art works may translate the artist’s vision of *logoi* in the soul, the status of the works as material objects makes them ontologically inferior to, and less beautiful than, the principles from which they derive. Even in the highly favourable cases of Minos’ laws or Pheidias’ Zeus, the vision translated in, or for, the external world is of lesser value than pure contemplation that sustains itself independently of external means. Taken within the context of whole of the *Enneads*, therefore, the two passages selected by O’Meara do not, it seems to me, constitute sufficient evidence that Plotinus believed that, other things being equal, political action could constitute as valid a ‘fulfilment of political knowledge’ as pure contemplation.

Could a more modest conclusion than O’Meara’s own be drawn? Could it be inferred from the passages discussed above that Plotinus does recognise that, in some admittedly rare circumstances, it is appropriate that action should take precedence over contemplation, and that the production of artifacts can be a way of expressing intelligibles contemplated from within the soul? It can, but only to a modest extent. The passage from VI 9 [9] 7 shows Plotinus to be willing to concede that in the event of war, famine or gross injustice in the world below, virtue would compromise her independence and undertake curative action. The passage from III 8 [30] 4 shows that he was not so doctrinaire as to refuse to envisage the possibility that civic engagement, which by definition is concerned with the needs and entitlements of others, might be a valuable way for a visionary of giving weaker souls a share in his vision of the higher reality. As for the passage from III 8 [30] 4, whose ethical significance is negligible, it simply makes the point that production can be directly related to contemplation, a point that Plotinus later clarifies by reference to the plastic arts. Although the first two passages do usefully correct the assumption that Plotinus’ ethics is uncompromisingly other-worldly, they should not be taken to ground a conclusion that the rest of the *Enneads* invalidate. The fact that, even in these passages, Plotinus takes care to emphasize that virtue’s engagement in the outer world would be hesitant or downright reluctant confirms that the other-worldly strand dominates his ethical reflections. Under normal circumstances, he held, those who are capable of discerning the light above will not be content to devote their time and energy to improving conditions in the darkness below.

Unlike Plato, therefore, Plotinus would not compel philosophers and visionaries to return to the Cave. From the available evidence it seems that he did not even seek to prepare
for public life those who attended the *sunousiai* he held in Rome for almost thirty years. Admittedly, as Porphyry reports in the *Vita Plotini*, he did at one time hope that a city of philosophers, Platonopolis, could be founded in the vicinity of Rome.\(^\text{77}\) But then Porphyry also tells us in an earlier chapter of the *Vita* that Plotinus tried to divert (*anastellein*) Zethus, a close friend of his and a valued member of the school, from embarking on the political career to which he was drawn.\(^\text{78}\)

To judge by the more reliable evidence of his own writings, Plotinus’ overriding aim was to give members of his audience a stake in the system of philosophy he was developing and to motivate them to lead their life according to the principles laid in it. This he sought to achieve by opening the *sunousiai* to all those who cared to attend them, irrespective of age, gender or depth of philosophical training, and by a method of instruction best described as interactive. His writings show him to have actively ‘philosophised’ in front of his audience, either in response to the questions or objections he encouraged them to raise or through his own engagement with the views of other philosophers. Such pedagogic style, with its distinct hortatory element, was well suited to promoting philosophy as a practice or, as a famous title goes, as ‘a way of life.’\(^\text{79}\) To members of his circle, he was a *maître à penser*, who relied on the considerable suasive power of his style to add seductiveness to the philosophical arguments by which he sought to induce them to turn their life around (*epistrephein*) into a direction opposite (*eis ta enantia*) to the one they had so far been heading towards.\(^\text{80}\) His choice of metaphors, almost invariably apt, drew them into the spirit of his philosophy. So much is testified by his use of the metaphor of stillness, to which we now, very briefly, turn.

Plotinus’ mostly commendatory use of *hēsuchia* and its cognates, not only to describe the higher levels of reality, but also to characterise the inner state which most becomes the human soul, tells us a great deal about his ethical thinking. To convey the value of stillness, he drew a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, what is still, tranquil, quiet, abiding, undisturbed or gathered into itself, and, on the other, what is moving, agitated, unquiet, busy,

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\(^\text{77}\) Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 12.

\(^\text{78}\) Ibid., 7. 17-21.

\(^\text{79}\) Hadot, P. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault.* As also noted by Goulet-Cazé (in Brisson *et al.* 1982: 234): ‘For them [Plotinus’ audience] philosophy was not in the main a body of knowledge to be learned or a mere object of study, but an opportunity to choose a way of life.’ (my tr.). On Plotinus’ style of teaching, see also Vassilopoulou (2003).

\(^\text{80}\) V I [10] 1.23.
clamouring or otherwise disturbed. The polarity between the two clusters of concepts is vividly conveyed in the following lines:

… the soul which comes from the divine was quiet (hēsuchos), standing in itself according to its character; but the body, in a tumult (thoruboumenon) because of its weakness, flying away itself and battered by the flows from outside, first itself cried out to the community of the living thing and imparted its disturbance (tarachēn) to the whole. It is like when in an assembly the elders of the people sit in quiet consideration (eph’ hēsuchō sunnoiaï), and the disorderly populace, demanding food and complaining of other sufferings, throws the whole assembly into an ugly tumult (eis thorubon aschēmona). (VI.4 [22]. 15)

The normative implications of these lines are unmistakable: the body must be brought to order if it is not to be for the soul an occasion of self-alienation by imparting its inherent weakness and instability to the compound. As seen above, the function of the virtues is to induce stillness in the embodied soul by bringing limit and measure to all the desires and passions that come to her through the body. Stillness, once achieved, enables the soul to gather unto herself, turn inwards and focus her attention on ‘the voices from on high’ which sound within her.81 In using this particular metaphor Plotinus was relying on the positive connotations that stillness as tranquillity had for his audience in order to reinforce a conclusion he had elsewhere reached by abstract argument, namely that the best life for a human being to lead is a life of attentiveness to, and contemplation of, the higher realities. Such a life, inevitably solitary for the most part,82 would mostly rule out active involvement in practical affairs.

6. Conclusion

I have argued above that the seemingly interminable nature of the debates generated by Plotinus’ ethics is a reflection, not only of the assumptions on the nature of ethics that many a modern scholar has brought to the issue, but also of the presence of two strands in Plotinus’ account of Soul’s engagement with the material world. Once it is realised that the assumptions in question are anachronistic projections onto a philosophy to which they are

81 Ibid., 1219-20
82 As already noted by Armstrong (1976:194).
profundely alien, Plotinus’ ethics can be seen for what it is, namely a guide to the soul in us, pointing the way she must go if she is to lead a ‘perfect and true life’. The need for such a guide stems from the temptable and therefore peccable character of the human soul, which Plotinus describes as poised between her mission in the world below and her destiny in the world above. Unsurprisingly, the ethical reflections that Plotinus drew from his conception of the soul as an amphibious reality show a degree of variation which, in turn, goes a long way toward explaining why the nature of his ethics should have given rise to the scholarly disagreements identified in section two above. At times, Plotinus assures the incarnate soul that it is appropriate for her to give the body to which she is joined the ability to flourish and, when necessary, to engage in the affairs of men. More often, however, as we saw, he presents the body as the soul’s alien garb and advises her to give it all it needs, but not all it wants. Only so will the soul in us, he claims, be able to preserve her integrity and return to the higher realities to which she belongs. In line with the moral norms that he had built into his concept of selfhood, Plotinus presented self-regard, understood as the disposition to honour the highest element in oneself, as the prime condition of virtue and the first step towards the ideal of god-likeness.  

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**Primary Literature**


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83 This long paper is, in more ways than one, the result of conversations and discussions held over the years with a number of scholars, including Luc Brisson, John Dillon, Peter Herisson-Kelly, Deepa Majumdar, Denis O’Brien, Pauliina Remes, Svetla Slaveva-Griffin and the late Steven Strange. John Dillon, Denis O’Brien and Christian Tornau have all made judicious comments on the penultimate draft, most of which I have gratefully taken into account. Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin have proved to be ideal editors, being flexible and patient, mindful of their contributors’ other commitments and problems while remaining utterly committed to the excellence of the volume. Let all of them be warmly thanked.


Secondary Literature


