

Freedom and the Good: A Study of Plotinus' *Ennead* VI.8 [39]

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Plotinus' *Ennead* VI.8 [39] with a view to reevaluating what scholars have frequently considered to be the problematic implications of his metaphysical thought, and, in particular, Plotinus' supposed irrationalism. Our investigation shows that Plotinus is careful to develop an account of freedom that is distinct from acting arbitrarily, without thereby being necessitated or compelled – a development that is already clear in his reflections on human action. Plotinus' account culminates in his novel reinterpretation of the first principle, the Good, as the will of itself. Because this is simultaneously the cause of all things and the end to which they seek to return, Plotinus here locates the ground of our own freedom as well as the goal of our ethical striving.

List of Abbreviations Used

- EN* Aristotle. *Ethica Nicomachea*. Edited by I. Bywater. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
- SVF* Arnim, Johannes von, ed. *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. Vol. 2. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1964.
- VP* *Vita Plotini*, in *Plotini Opera*. Vol. 1. Edited by Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964-1982).

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Experience and Reason

Plotinus' account of the First Principle, uniting Plato's account of the 'Good beyond being' of the *Republic* with the One-non-being of the *Parmenides*, has long been regarded as revolutionary in relation to both the metaphysical and ethical thinking of the philosophical tradition before him. While scholars have largely lauded this innovation in the domain of metaphysics, the implications that it has for an account of the human good have not infrequently aroused suspicion and even drawn condemnation. In undertaking an investigation of Plotinus' account of liberty in *Ennead* VI.8 [39], it is necessary to situate this account in light of some of the major scholarly debates of the past century.

As Jean-Marc Narbonne has shown, Plotinus' particular reading of Plato emerged out of and, to a certain degree, in competition with a rival school of Platonic interpretation that derived its theology from the *Timaeus* rather than the *Parmenides*, and conceived of the first principle as the divine thinking.¹ Although this debate was largely silent and implicit, evidenced by the fact that Plotinus never devoted a single treatise to justifying or defending his particular interpretation of Plato against this rival school, Plotinus' arguments for positing the One as the first principle permeate his corpus. In essence, for Plotinus, thinking always implies (at least) a duality between the thinker and the thought, which is derivative of a higher, more unified principle: "if Intellect itself is what thinks and what is thought, it will be double and not single and so not the One."² As

¹ Cf. Narbonne, "La naissance du néoplatonisme," in *Hénologie, Ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin - Proclus - Heidegger)*, L'âne d'or, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), 21-70.

² VI.9 [9] 2, 36-37: εἰ μὲν αὐτὸς τὸ νοοῦν καὶ τὸ νοούμενον, διπλοῦς ἔσται καὶ οὐχ ἀπλοῦς οὐδὲ τὸ ἓν. I have generally followed the translations of A.H. Armstrong in Plotinus, *Enneads*, 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966-1988), although I have not infrequently taken recourse to modify

a consequence of denying the attribute of Intellection to the One, however, Plotinus also necessarily places it beyond the grasp of our own Intellection: “our awareness of the One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge.”³ While Plotinus still undeniably allots to intellection a crucial mediating or preparatory role, the attainment of the Good requires that one goes beyond these: “he who wishes to contemplate what is beyond the intelligible will contemplate it when he has let all the intelligible go; he will learn that it is by means of the intelligible, but what it is like by letting the intelligible go.”⁴

Drawing on passages like these, Émile Bréhier, an influential pioneer of Plotinian studies in the 20th century, argued that Plotinus’ doctrines of the higher principles had fundamentally two aspects: a rational one which provided the basis for our knowledge of the world, and experiential one in which “toutes les relations morales et intellectuelles qui font une pensée et une personne se perdent.”⁵ For Bréhier, the rational aspect stemmed from the tradition of Greek philosophy, whereas the experiential was derived from an oriental mystical tradition that in Bréhier’s judgement, “n’est que l’abus du rationalisme grec, et sa termination.”⁶ The difference between these two aspect is apparent in Plotinus’ elevation of the One beyond the duality of thinker and thought, although he finds it the same distinction within Plotinus’ doctrine of Intellect as well.⁷ Bréhier thus harboured a deeply ambivalent attitude towards Plotinus, seeing

them, silently, for consistency, clarity, and accuracy. All Greek text of Plotinus comes from the *Plotini Opera*, 3 vols., edited by Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzler, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964-1982).

³ VI.9 [9] 4, 1-3: μηδὲ κατ’ ἐπιστήμην ἢ σύνεσις ἐκείνου μηδὲ κατὰ νοήσιν, ὡσπερ τὰ ἄλλα νοητά, ἀλλὰ κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα.

⁴ V.5 [32] 6, 19-21: ὁ θεάσασθαι θέλων τὸ ἐπέκεινα τοῦ νοητοῦ τὸ νοητὸν πᾶν ἀφείς θεάσεται, ὅτι μὲν ἔστι διὰ τούτου μαθῶν, οἷον δ’ ἐστὶ τοῦτο ἀφείς.

⁵ Bréhier, *La Philosophie de Plotin*, (Paris: Boivin & Cie., 1928), 135

⁶ *ibid.* 108.

⁷ Bréhier finds that Plotinus’ account of self-knowledge also includes a mystical identification of the self with the universal, cf. *ibid.* 109.

him as at once a great representative of the Greek rationalist tradition, while at the same time inaugurating its downfall. This ambivalence about Plotinus was not new with Bréhier but stems back to commentators in the 19th century. Hegel, for example, characterizes Plotinus' thought as "an intellectualism or a higher idealism," while at the same time judging that "the Alexandrian school cannot altogether be absolved from the charge of superstition."⁸ The fear among Bréhier and others is that by positing the human good beyond reason, reason then becomes something that may be circumvented, for example, in ritual practice as later Neoplatonists were wrongfully maligned for doing.

Although after Bréhier the idea of a necessary oriental influence on Plotinus fell out of favour,⁹ the notion that Plotinus' time represented the decline of reason was still widely held, even among those who sought to see Plotinus as exempt from this decline. In E.R. Dodds' famous judgement, Plotinus was not the "subverter of the tradition of Greek rationalism, but its last constructive exponent in an anti-rational age."¹⁰ Dodds' rationalist interpretation of Plotinus depended above all upon intellectualizing Plotinus' account of the One: "The *term* τὸ ἕν was given in the [Greek] tradition; the *concept* can be reached, and most often *is* reached, through a purely philosophical argument [...] What the experience of unification seems to do is to give the assurance that the outcome of this regressive dialectic is no hollow abstraction [...] It is, as it

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, translated by E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, (New York: The Humanities Press, 1955), 410, 412.

⁹ This view was definitively put to rest by E.R. Dodds in his "The Parmenides of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic 'One,'" *The Classical Quarterly* 22, no. 3/4 (1928): 129-142. For more recent considerations on this subject, as well as reflections on the history of the scholarship on it, cf. Wayne Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History*, [published in a single volume with Narbonne, *Levinas and the Greek Heritage*], Studies in Philosophical Theology, (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: Peeters, 2006); *idem* "Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59, no. 2 (Juin 2003): 193-224; *idem* "Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy," *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 161-190; *idem* "Re-evaluating E.R. Dodds' Platonism," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 103 (2007): 499-541.

¹⁰ E.R. Dodds, "The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One," 142.

were, the experimental verification of the abstract proposition that the One is the Good.”¹¹ While there remains for Dodds a difference between the *concept* and the *experience* of the One, they are not longer opposed as they were for Bréhier: the experience of the One confirms the concept of it. In Dodds’ view, the irrational is not found in the heights of Neoplatonism, but in its the depths – above all in ritual practice – and it is to this which Dodds credits the downfall of Greek rationalism.¹² While Plotinus’ work may be viewed as free from the clutches of irrationalism, his more theurgically inclined successors did not fare so well.

Following Dodds, the intellectual, anti-theurgical interpretation of Plotinus would become influential in the 20th century, especially in the English speaking world, although it was not universal.¹³ Armstrong, for example, suggested that the irrational elements in Plotinus’ thought, though undeniably present, may be accredited to his unscrupulous manner of writing and lack of editing.¹⁴ More recently Gerson has put forward an intellectualist interpretation of Plotinus, claiming that “much of what Plotinus has to say about the One is inspired by Plato and based on arguments which have a lot more to do with scientific realism than they do with mysticism.”¹⁵ Gerson’s interpretation involves relegating Plotinus’ mysticism to the domain of

¹¹ E.R. Dodds, “Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 50, no. 1-2 (1960): 6-7.

¹² Cf. E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951): 283-314.

¹³ Cf. John Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 213-230. More recently scholars in the English world attempts have criticized this approach more systematically. Cf. Robert Berchman, “Rationality and Ritual in Plotinus and Porphyry,” *Incognita* 2, no. 2 (1991): 184-216; John Bussanich, “Plotinian Mysticism in Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (1997): 339-365; and *infra* n. 9 & n. 28.

¹⁴ A.H. Armstrong, “Elements in the Thought of Plotinus at Variance with Classical Intellectualism,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 13. Armstrong’s claim is no doubt to some degree based upon Porphyry’s anecdote that Plotinus never revised any of his writings due to his poor eyesight. *VP* 8, 1-17.

¹⁵ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus, Arguments of the Philosophers*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 218.

‘personal experience,’¹⁶ and arguing, despite numerous passages to the contrary, that the ultimate Good for Plotinus is to be found in a permanent state of contemplation.¹⁷

While this intellectual Plotinus was largely influential in the English speaking world, in the French world commentators were more attentive and sympathetic to Plotinus’ ethical thought. The basis for this may be found, somewhat ironically, in Bréhier who recognized the central place of subjectivity in Plotinus’ thought. For Bréhier, Plotinus’ thought represents a particular form of idealism that, rather than substituting thoughts or ideas for real objects, makes the relation between subjects and objects fundamental, so that “ce que Plotin place sous les choses, ce dont il fait la réalité véritable, ce sont des sujets actifs, des activités spirituelles.”¹⁸ For Bréhier, this is a precarious position, which potentially forms a basis for irrationalism by elevating a subjective intuition above objective rational forms and relations. At the same time, Bréhier believed that Plotinus succeeded in reining in this tendency, and in harmonizing mystical intuition with Greek rationalism:

les formes du réel ne peuvent être considérées comme des réalités inertes existant indépendamment des actes spirituels qui les ont posées; si elles sont vraiment susceptibles d’une déduction rationnelle, il faut que leur substance consiste dans ces actes spirituels eux-mêmes. La réalité spirituelle unique découverte par le mystique, l’acte qui est le fond de toute réalité, sans être aucune réalité déterminée, devient donc solidaire du rationalisme compris en ce sens.¹⁹

Subsequent readers of Plotinus were more inclined to this aspect of Bréhier’s interpretation in seeing mysticism, experience, and subjectivity as constitutive, rather than destructive, of rationality. Thus, for Jean-Trouillard, Plotinus’ whole philosophy was epitomized in his doctrine of purification, which liberates the human from its limited perspective to an ever deeper

¹⁶ *ibid.* 218-219

¹⁷ *ibid.* 220.

¹⁸ Bréhier, *La Philosophie de Plotin*, 182.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 186.

reflection on itself and the whole: “Le plotinisme est donc une doctrine et une méthode des métamorphoses du moi. L’univers n’est pas autre chose que l’aspect objectif des différentes formes mentales. La vie noétique n’est pas dans le monde ni le monde en elle; ils sont identiques.”²⁰ Crucially, this interrelation of the self and the world does not result in an abyss in which “toute différence est absorbée, où a cessé complètement toute distinction du sujet et de l’objet,”²¹ as Bréhier believed was the danger in Plotinus, but rather integrates the mystical, experiential, and rational sides of Plotinus’ thought into stages or moments within one spiritual life.

The most influential exponent of this view in the 20th century was Pierre Hadot. What in Plotinus fascinated Hadot was that, where Plato had articulated varying degrees of reality – for example, in the images of the Sun, the Line, and the Cave – these were transformed by Plotinus into “des niveaux de la vie intérieure, des niveaux de moi.”²² For Hadot, the philosophy of Plotinus does not consist ultimately in abstract reasoning, but in providing a programme for the ethical cultivation of the self: “Pour Plotin, la connaissance est toujours expérience, plus encore métamorphose intérieure. Il ne s’agit pas de savoir rationnellement qu’il y a deux niveaux dans la réalité divine [sc. l’Intellect et l’Un] mais il faut s’élever intérieurement jusqu’à ces niveaux et les éprouver en soi, en deux tons différents de la vie spirituelle.”²³ For Hadot, the central problem in Plotinus’ philosophy, therefore, is that of virtue, or how we may habituate, purify, and perfect ourselves in order to experience and to live with the higher levels of ourselves (including the contemplative) rather than the lower.²⁴ Like Bréhier and Dodds, Hadot essentially

²⁰ Jean Trouillard, *La purification plotinienne*, (Paris: Hermann, 2008), 208

²¹ Bréhier, *La Philosophie de Plotin*, 107.

²² Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 31.

²³ *ibid.* 74.

²⁴ *ibid.* 112-113.

maintains a distinction between philosophical reasoning and experience,²⁵ but only because reasoning is one level of experience, which is more fundamental. In this, Hadot follows Plotinus' own emphasis on the limited and provisional nature of philosophic discourse: "For teaching goes as far as the road and the travelling, but the vision is the task of someone who has already resolved to see."²⁶ Rather than presenting Plotinus as a rationalist doctrinaire, the Alexandrian is, in Hadot's view, "un professeur et un directeur de conscience qui ne cherche pas à exposer sa vision de l'univers, mais à former des disciples, grâce à des exercices spirituels."²⁷ While in recent years Hadot has come under criticism for overlooking ritual elements of Plotinus' thought, and thus operating, intentionally or not, within the paradigm of a 'rationalist' Plotinus,²⁸ the harmony he discovers between ethics and reason in the spiritual life has been a hallmark of Plotinian studies in the latter part of the 20th century.

1.2 Freedom and Rationality

These shifting views on Plotinus' rationalism and mysticism have important consequences for the understanding of liberty in his thought, and they have a close analogue in the consideration of his notion of 'will.' In his Sather lectures of 1974, published eight years later, Albrecht Dihle distinguished two different notions of will in the classical world: the one

²⁵ Plotinus, *Traité 9*, introduction, translation, commentary, and notes by Pierre Hadot, *Les Écrits de Plotin*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1994), 29: "Il ne faut absolument pas confondre la théologie négative, qui est une méthode rationnelle, et l'expérience mystique qui précisément est une expérience."

²⁶ VI.9 [9] 4, 15-16: μέχρι γὰρ τῆς ὁδοῦ καὶ τῆς πορείας ἡ διδασκαλία, ἡ δὲ θεὰ αὐτοῦ ἔργον ἤδη τοῦ ἰδεῖν βεβουλημένου.

²⁷ Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard*, 15.

²⁸ Cf. Zeke Mazur, "Unio Magica Part I: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus' Mysticism," *Dionysius XXI* (2003): 23-52; *idem* "Unio Magica Part II: Plotinus, Theurgy and the Question of Ritual," *Dionysius XXII* (2004): 29-56, esp. 44 n. 53; Hankey, "Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas," 193-223; James Bryson, "Evaluating Pierre Hadot's Criticism of Plotinian Mysticism," in *Perspectives sur le néoplatonisme*, edited by Martin Achard, Wayne Hankey, and Jean-Marc Narbonne, (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009), 253-266.

‘voluntaristic,’ and the other ‘intellectualistic.’ The voluntaristic notion denotes a will that is not in any way bound or necessitated by anything, including the strictures of reason.²⁹ The intellectualistic view, as its name suggests, denotes a will which is bound within the limits of reason: that the will wills “what the intellect recognizes as good.”³⁰ In Dilhe’s view the voluntaristic conception belongs characteristically to the Judeo-Christian tradition, whereas the intellectualistic is rooted especially in the tradition of Greek philosophy and its Latin readers,³¹ although he recognizes that there are many figures who break with this schema, such as Philo Judaeus. Of particular note for our purposes is that for Dilhe the positing of the Good beyond being and knowing, such as one finds especially among the Neoplatonists, introduces the possibility of an arbitrary and capricious God.³² While Plotinus is fundamentally opposed to this view, he nonetheless recognizes it as a possible consequence which he must hedge off by categorically refusing that the One wills anything other than itself.³³

Subsequent scholars have called into question Dilhe’s account on many grounds. Most notably, Michael Frede’s own Sather lectures, delivered in 1997-98 and published posthumously, sought to rectify Dilhe’s overly narrow focus on tracing the roots of the modern notion of will, which is neither univocal nor indisputable, to the exclusion of other conceptions contained in the

²⁹ Cf. Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 10-11.

³⁰ Christoph Horn, “The Concept of Will in Plotinus,” in *Reading Ancient Texts: Aristotle and Neoplatonism*, edited by Suzanne Stern-Gillet and Kevin Corrigan, (Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2007): 154.

³¹ This opposition between the Greek tradition and the Judeo-Christian was commonplace in Biblical scholarship, although it has been shown to be deeply problematic. Cf. Robert D. Crouse, “The Hellenization of Christianity: A Historiographical Study,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 8 (1962): 22-33; Hankey, “*Memoria, Intellectus, Voluntas*: the Augustinian Centre of Robert Crouse’s Scholarly Work,” *Dionysius* 30 (2012): 41-76.

³² Dilhe, *The Theory of Will*, 11: “If the Absolute is not determined or necessitated by anything else, if it transcends both being and reason, it must equally be free to interfere with reality at any given level at any given time, simply because of its will or pleasure and regardless of the preestablished, rational order of being.”

³³ Cf. VI.8 [39] 21, 1 ff.

tradition.³⁴ Frede also thoroughly undermines Dihle's opposition between the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions by tracing Augustine's supposedly novel and paradigmatically Christian notion of the will to Epictetus,³⁵ and finds the supposedly Judeo-Christian notion of "the world's dependence on God's will" in Plotinus.³⁶ At the same time, against an overly 'voluntaristic' conception of the will, Frede acknowledges that Plotinus' One is far from being able to "make absolute and unconditioned choices which have no further explanation," but is rather free in the sense that it does not act either by chance or necessity.³⁷

Taking a further step away from Dilhe, Christoph Horn has argued that Plotinus' notion of the will is fundamentally intellectualistic. In order to uphold the view that "there is no room for arbitrariness or irrationality in Plotinus' picture of the divine world,"³⁸ Horn has to deny that Plotinus' One has a will except in an equivocal, non-literal sense. On Horn's account, while all things have a desire for the Good, the Good itself, being perfect, has no desire for anything. Or, as Plotinus says, the One is "good not for itself, but for others, if anything is able to participate in it."³⁹

What is radical and surprising in *Ennead* VI.8 [39], however, is the way in which Plotinus undoes this account and makes the self-willing of the Good the very basis of our desire for it: "But it is necessary for the choice and willing of itself to be included in the existence of the Good, or else it would hardly be possible for anything else to find it satisfactory."⁴⁰ This

³⁴ Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011): 5-6.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 156-159.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 150.

³⁷ *ibid.* 152.

³⁸ Christoph Horn, "The Concept of Will in Plotinus," 167.

³⁹ VI.9 [9] 6, 41-42: αὐτὸ οὐχ ἑαυτῷ, τοῖς δὲ ἄλλοις ἀγαθόν, εἴ τι αὐτοῦ δύναται μεταλαμβάνειν.

⁴⁰ VI.8 [39] 13, 43-45: ἐν δὲ τῇ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ὑποστάσει ἀνάγκη τὴν αἴρεσιν καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ θέλησιν ἐμπεριειλημμένην εἶναι ἢ σχολῆ γ' ἂν ἄλλω ὑπάρχοι ἑαυτῷ εἶναι.

account of the Good thus escapes the pitfalls of voluntarism by not being an arbitrary will but determinatively a self-will, but it also avoids the limitations of intellectualism which would reduce the Good to rationality. While scholars of the 20th century have found in Plotinus rationalism and irrationalism, both generally and in his understanding of the will, his account of freedom in *Ennead* VI.8 [39] offers us a particularly good vantage point to reconsider these characterizations.

Plotinus' treatment of freedom, as we shall see, is fundamentally structured around the question of the individual's desire for, and attainment of the Good. Indeed, in the end, the highest form of freedom is a complete liberation from external determinations, which can only be found in the nature of the Good, insofar as it is prior to all determinations and the source of them. Plotinus' account of freedom depends upon rigorously maintaining the transcendence of the One *vis-à-vis* intellect, since this very transcendence is reinterpreted as pure freedom. As a corollary to this, if the human individual is to be free, it can only be so in virtue of an original coincidence of itself with the Good that is attained by purifying itself of everything extrinsic and accidental, even its own humanity. In this way, the freedom of the One is found to be not other than our original selves. Hence, we may come to agree with Bréhier, Hadot, and Trouillard about the central role of subjectivity in Plotinus' thought. Finally, amidst these various tensions, Plotinus shows himself to be very careful to forbid that the total freedom from external constraints descend into irrationality or caprice, and he takes pains along the way to safeguard reason against these threats.

To commence this study, we shall in the following chapter examine how this account of self-will of the Good, understood as the freedom of the first principle, begins to emerge from Plotinus' examination of human action.

Chapter Two: Freedom, Responsibility, and the Place of the Human

2.1 Human Action in Plotinus and its Hellenistic Background

In the philosophical tradition leading up to Plotinus, the examination of freedom was, by and large, contained within the boundaries of the inquiry into human action. Although by raising the question of divine freedom Plotinus may appear to break with this tradition, his account of divine freedom depends upon and develops out of an examination of human action. This dependence is signalled at the beginning of the treatise, which Plotinus opens by asking, “Is it possible to enquire even about the gods whether there is anything in their power?”⁴¹ Although Plotinus’ theological concern is immediately evident, he quickly concedes that this is not an adequate point of departure: “we must postpone these questions for the present, and first enquire about ourselves, as we usually do, whether anything does happen to be in our power.”⁴² The reason Plotinus gives for this deferral is that the notion of ‘being in one’s power’ is far from self-evident:

First we must ask what something ‘being in our power’ ought to mean; that is, what is the idea of this kind of thing in our minds; for in this way it might come to be known whether it is suitable to transfer it to the gods, and still more, to God, or whether it should not be

⁴¹ VI.8 [39] 1, 1-2: ἄρ' ἔστι καὶ ἐπὶ θεῶν εἴ τί ἐστιν ἐπὶ αὐτοῖς. The Greek phrase ἐπὶ + *dativus personae* is notoriously equivocal and difficult to translate into English, despite being one of the key terms in Greek discussions of freedom. English translators have variously opted for ‘what is up to oneself,’ ‘what is in one’s power,’ ‘what depends upon oneself,’ and even in some contexts ‘what one is responsible for.’ I have not attempted to provide a single rendering of the Greek phrase, which is especially difficult because Greek writers use it both transitively (having something in one’s power) and intransitively (having ‘being in one’s power’ as an attribute or quality). When in doubt, the reader is encouraged to consult the Greek which I have provided. For a study of Plotinus’ use of this term, and a comparison of it to previous thinkers, cf. Erik Eliasson, *The Notion of That Which Depends on Us in Plotinus and its Background*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008).

⁴² *ibid.* 13-16: ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ἐν τῷ παρόντι ἀναβλητέον, πρότερον δε' ἐφ' ἡμῶν αὐτῶν, ἐφ' ὧν καὶ ζητεῖν ἔθος, εἴ τι ἐφ' ἡμῖν ὄν τυγχάνει

transferred. If it should be transferred, we should enquire how ‘being in their power’ is to be applied to other gods and to the first beings.⁴³

Thus, only by clarifying the nature of human freedom can we consider whether something akin to it is to be found in the gods.

Plotinus speaks of this as an issue of transference, transposition, or, to use a modern cognate as Lavaud does, a question of metaphor (μεταφέρειν).⁴⁴ While language used to describe the freedom of the gods is certainly borrowed from the domain of praxis, this is not to say that Plotinus’ account of divine freedom is merely metaphorical, a sort of phantom of human action. Indeed, Plotinus’ actual method is more subtle than what this single clue may lead us to think. On the one hand, to employ the terminology of human freedom in describing the higher principles is, as Plotinus says, to drag them down to our level.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Plotinus elsewhere in the treatise describes his method as one of tracing human freedom back through its principles.⁴⁶ There is thus both a descending and an ascending movement that underlies the relation of the human liberty to the divine, and our manner of speaking about it. From the perspective of the first movement, Plotinus will be critical of using the language of human freedom in reference to the gods, but, from the perspective of the second movement, he is justified in using this same language insofar as the gods are the source of this freedom. The task of Plotinus’ examination human freedom will thus be to expose its limitations, and refine our

⁴³ *ibid.* 16-21. πρῶτον ζητητέον τί ποτε δεῖ τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν εἶναι τι λέγειν· τοῦτο δ’ ἐστὶ τίς ἔννοια τοῦ τοιούτου· οὕτω γὰρ ἂν πῶς γνωσθεῖη, εἰ καὶ ἐπὶ θεοὺς καὶ ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐπὶ θεὸν ἀρμόζει μεταφέρειν ἢ οὐ μετενεκτέον· ἢ μετενεκτέον μὲν, ζητητέον δέ, πῶς τὸ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς τοῖς τε ἄλλοις καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν πρώτων.

⁴⁴ Plotinus, *Traité 39 (VI, 8)* translation, introduction and notes by Laurent Lavaud, in *Traité 38-41*, translations under the direction of Luc Brisson and Jean-François Pradeau, (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 175.

⁴⁵ Cf. VI.8 [39] 7, 10-11.

⁴⁶ VI.8 [39] 3, 1-4.

understanding of it, in order to develop a way of speaking and thinking about the freedom of the gods.

This effort will occupy Plotinus for the first six chapters of the treatise, right up until he states the famous objection against him in the seventh chapter, and turns to consider the freedom of the One almost exclusively. As it is this latter discussion of divine freedom which has earned the treatise renown, the first seven chapters have received comparatively little attention from scholars. It is this first section, however, which serves as a propaedeutic to Plotinus' theological speculations, and introduces many of its central themes. Furthermore, an overly zealous focus on the latter part of the treatise risks treating its major themes as if they appeared out of thin air, instead of as an organic development from Plotinus' reflection on human action in the first part of the treatise. Lastly, a careful reading of the of first six chapters allows us to situate Plotinus' treatise among the many reflections on freedom, providence, fate, and justice that appeared in the Hellenistic world, and to see how their themes may be implicitly taken up in the treatise's second part.⁴⁷ Let us begin with this last point.

2.2 Freedom and Responsibility among the Stoics and Epicureans

The concern for human freedom is indissociable from our desire for happiness, from a concern for justice, and from the question of the righteousness of the gods. To deny human freedom and responsibility would be to render us no more than the products of blind chance, to

⁴⁷ Leroux argues against situating Plotinus in this context: "la volonté et la liberté de l'Un ne sont pas posées par Plotin dans le contexte d'une justification de l'ordre du monde, mais dans la seule perspective d'une justification absolue de l'acte originaire de l'Un," in Plotinus, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un*, introduction, Greek text, translation, and commentary by Georges Leroux, *Histoire des doctrines de l'antiquité classique*, (Paris: J. Vrin, 1990), 33.

imprison us within the lot that fortune has given us, and thereby to abolish any basis for justice, either human or divine. Plotinus states the problem elegantly in his treatise *On Providence*: “Providence ought not to exist in such a way as to make us nothing. If everything was providence and nothing but providence, then providence would not exist; for what would it have to provide for?”⁴⁸ Establishing a legitimate space for human action was a popular topic in the philosophical discussions of Hellenistic period. Plotinus presents his own position as a solution to the problems he finds in the Stoics and Epicureans, each of which he finds eliminating human agency in different ways. In order to better grasp Plotinus’ own position, it is therefore useful to examine briefly the teachings of these two schools.

The Stoics present Fate as governing and presiding over all things. Playing on a etymological connection between ‘εἰμαρμένη’ (Fate) and ‘εἰρμός’ (string), the Stoics say that Fate is “a string of causes.”⁴⁹ The basis for this doctrine is simply the thesis that “nothing that happens is uncaused, but according to prior causes.”⁵⁰ When one considers these two theses absolutely, one comes to the conclusion of Chrysippus that “it is impossible for any of the parts, even the smallest one, to turn out differently than according to the common nature and its reason.”⁵¹ Two major problems arise from this view: in the first place, Chrysippus’ position would seem to make Fate and the divine *Logos* responsible for evil as well as good, and second, as a consequence, this would appear to absolve humans of any moral responsibility. In response to these problems, the Stoics attempted to develop a basis for granting some degree of freedom to humans without compromising the rule of Fate. In particular, the Stoics developed the notion

⁴⁸ III.2 [47] 9, 1-3: οὐ γὰρ δι’ οὗτω τὴν πρόνοιαν εἶναι δεῖ, ὥστε μηδὲν ἡμᾶς εἶναι. πάντα δὲ οὐσης προνοίας καὶ μόνης αὐτῆς οὐδ’ ἂν εἴη· τίνας γὰρ ἂν ἔτι εἴη;

⁴⁹ SVF 2.917, 920: εἰρμὸν αἰτιῶν. All translations from SVF are my own.

⁵⁰ SVF 2.912: τὸ μηδὲν ἀνατίως γίνεσθαι, ἀλλὰ κατὰ προηγουμένας αἰτίας.

⁵¹ SVF 2.937: οὐθὲν γὰρ ἔστιν ἄλλως τῶν κατὰ μέρος γενεσθαι οὐδὲ τοῦλάχιστον, ἢ κατὰ τὴν κοινὴν φύσιν καὶ κατὰ τὸν ἐκείνης λόγον.

of events being ‘co-fated,’ which is to say that particular events are dependent upon particular preconditions including, it seems to be implied, our own volition. Chrysippus is accredited with developing this notion particularly in response to the ‘lazy argument’ (ἀργὸς λόγος). The classic example of this is that if someone falls ill and is fated for them to get better, then there is no need for them to visit a doctor, since they will get better in either case.⁵² But the counter argument of Chrysippus would be that visiting the doctor may be fated as a condition of one’s return to good health, and so it is incumbent upon us to do so. Thus, while the rule of fate remains intact, we are still morally obliged to do certain things on Chrysippus’ account.

The Epicureans, although vigorously rejecting the rule of Fate,⁵³ nonetheless ascribed all change to the natural motions of the atoms.⁵⁴ While not imposing an external determination on our actions, as some saw the Stoic account doing, the Epicurean account would still seem to reduce human action to natural mechanisms, thereby forfeiting any control we may have over events, and the basis for human responsibility. To resolve this problem, the Epicureans introduced the notion of the ‘swerve’ where an atom would change its course without being pushed by anything outside it.⁵⁵ What this position essentially accomplishes is to introduce contingency and indeterminacy in a physical system, in order to secure our capability for acting

⁵² Cf. Cicero, *De Fato*, in *Cicero*, vol. 4, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), 28-30.

⁵³ See Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoecus* in *Diogenis Laertii Vitae Philosophorum*, Vol II., edited by H.S. Long, Oxford Classical Texts, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 10.133-135. I have generally followed the translation found in *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, 2nd ed., translated by Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

⁵⁴ Cf. Cicero, *De Finibus bonorum et malorum*, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, MA: 1967), I.18-20.

⁵⁵ Cf. Cicero, *De Fato*, 22-23; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, edited by Cyril Bailey, Oxford Classical Texts, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), II.251-271. Cicero attributes the swerve as a solution to this problem in particular – *hanc Epicurus rationem induxit ob eam rem quod veritus est ne, si semper atomus gravitate ferretur naturali ac necessaria, nihil liberum nobis esset, cum ita moveretur animus ut atomorum motu cogeretur*. Yet, perhaps even more importantly, it was used to resolve problems within Epicurean physics. Cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, II.225-250.

without being driven on by other forces.⁵⁶ For the Stoics, such indeterminacy would undermine the rule of Fate and the order of the cosmos, but the Epicurean gods are decidedly not providential, since to interfere with the workings of the cosmos would be a threat to their perfect tranquility.⁵⁷

Plotinus takes issue with both the Stoic and Epicurean accounts of freedom and, in the case of the Stoics, of providence. In regard to the Epicureans, although they allow for the contingency requisite for human choice, since this contingency is random, it appears no less a threat to human freedom than an external compulsion:

we must leave no room for vain ‘swerves’ or the sudden movement of bodies which happens without any preceding causation, or a senseless impulse of the soul when nothing has moved it do anything which it did not do before. Because of this very absence of motive a greater compulsion would hold the soul, that of not belonging to itself but being carried about by movements of this kind which would be unwilled and causeless.⁵⁸

Thus, on Plotinus’ account, the Epicurean swerves in no way allow for the soul’s self-direction and instead simply make it subject it to randomness and chance. The contingency and indeterminacy of the Epicurean swerve, rather than providing an opportunity for human freedom, in fact abolishes the possibility for purposive action. What is needed, according to Plotinus, is that the soul ‘belong to itself,’ or more literally, ‘exist from itself’ (τὸ αὐτῆς εἶναι). This is to say that the soul, if it is to be free, ought to be capable of originating its own actions and of directing

⁵⁶ In this I follow the reading of Frede and Hunter, cf. *infra* 58. The more common account of the swerve, which would equate the motion of willing with the swerve, succumbs rather easily to the Plotinian criticism given below.

⁵⁷ Cf. Diogenes Laertius, 10.76-77.

⁵⁸ III.1 [3] 1, 16-23: οὔτε παρεγκλίσεισι κεναῖς χώραν διδόντα οὔτε κινήσει σωμάτων τῆ ἐξαιφνης, ἢ οὐδενὸς προηγησαμένου ὑπέστη, οὔτε φυγῆς ὀρμῆ ἐμπλήκτῳ μηδενὸς κινήσαντος αὐτὴν εἰς τό τι πρῶξαι ὧν πρότερον οὐκ ἐποίει. ἢ αὐτῷ γε τούτῳ μείζων ἂν τις ἔχοι αὐτὴν ἀνάγκη τὸ μὴ αὐτῆς εἶναι, φέρεσθαι δὲ τὰς τοιαύτας φορὰς ἀβουλήτους τε καὶ ἀναιτίους οὔσας. Although Plotinus’ criticism has been regarded as a strong one, more nuanced and sympathetic readings of the Epicurean swerve have nonetheless been offered by scholars. Cf. Michael Frede, *Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 12-14; and more recently Hugh Hunter, “Lucretius on Swerves and Freedom,” *Dionysius* XXXII (2014): 71-81.

itself by its will, as opposed to the ‘unwilled and causeless’ (ἀβουλήτους τε καὶ ἀναιτίους) movements of chance. Plotinus will often invoke this ‘existing from itself’ in his discussions of freedom, where it functions as a sort of watchword for real liberty.⁵⁹

Plotinus also accuses the Stoics of abolishing the basis for human action, but, in their case, by absorbing it into the universal:

And must we, as the consequent causes are brought into action from that one source, call their continuous interweaving ‘Fate’ [...]? But, first of all, this excess of necessity and of fate so understood itself does away with destiny and the chain of causes and their interweaving. For just as with our own parts, when they are moved by our ruling principle, the statement that they are moved according to fate is unreasonable – for there is not one thing which imparts the movement and another which receives it and takes its impulse from it, but the ruling principle itself is what immediately moves the leg – in the same way if in the All the All is one thing acting and being acted upon, and one thing does not come from another according to causes which always lead back to something else, it is certainly not true that everything happens according to causes but that everything will be one. So, on this assumption we are not ourselves nor is there any act which is our own.⁶⁰

By unifying the chain of causes into a single principle, Plotinus argues, the Stoics collapse the diversity of the All into an undifferentiated unity. But without any particularity, without any difference between us and the all, we are simply a link in the chain of Fate, or rather we are simply identical to Fate. This is what Plotinus suggests by comparing Fate to the give-and-take movement of a body: it is necessary that there be an impulse which moves the leg while being

⁵⁹ One of the objections against Plotinus’ One stated in the middle of the treatise on freedom is that it “is what it is not from itself,” VI.8 [39] 7, 13-14: οὐσα τοῦτο ὃ ἐστὶν οὐ παρ’ αὐτῆς. For other examples, cf. III.2 [47] 10, 15-16.

⁶⁰ III.1 [3] 4, 3-22: φερομένων δὲ ἐκεῖθεν τῶν αἰτίων ἀκολούθων ἀνάγκη τὴν τούτων ἐφεξῆς συνέχειαν καὶ συμπλοκὴν εἰμαρμένην [...]; ἀλλὰ πρῶτον μὲν τοῦτο τὸ σφοδρὸν τῆς ἀνάγκης καὶ τῆς τοιαύτης εἰμαρμένης αὐτὸ τοῦτο τὴν εἰμαρμένην καὶ τῶν αἰτίων τὸν εἰρμόν καὶ τὴν συμπλοκὴν ἀναιρεῖ· ὡς γὰρ ἐν τοῖς ἡμετέροις μέρεσι κατὰ τὸ ἡγεμονοῦν κινουμένοις ἄλογον τὸ καθ’ εἰμαρμένην λέγειν κινεῖσθαι – οὐ γὰρ ἄλλο μὲν τὸ ἐνδεδοκὸς τὴν κίνησιν, ἄλλο δὲ τὸ παραδεξάμενον καὶ παρ’ αὐτοῦ τῆ ὀρμῆ κεκρημένον, ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνό ἐστι πρῶτον τὸ κινήσαν τὸ σκέλος – τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον εἰ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ παντός ἐν ἔσται τὸ πᾶν ποιοῦν καὶ πάσχον καὶ οὐκ ἄλλο παρ’ ἄλλου κατ’ αἰτίας τὴν ἀναγωγὴν αἰεὶ ἐφ’ ἕτερον ἐχούσας, οὐ δὴ ἀληθὲς κατ’ αἰτίας τὰ πάντα γίνεσθαι, ἀλλ’ ἐν ἔσται τὰ πάντα. ὥστε οὔτε ἡμεῖς ἡμεῖς οὔτε τι ἡμέτερον ἔργον. Although Armstrong suggests in his note *ad loc.* that Plotinus is here attacking a Platonist (perhaps Calcidius or Numenius), on the basis of his mention of ‘one soul’ a few lines above, I follow the reading of Marguerite Chappuis in seeing Plotinus’ opponent here as the Stoics. Cf. Plotinus, *Traité 3*, introduction, translation, commentary, and notes by Marguerite Chappuis, *Les Écrits de Plotin*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2006), 90-92.

different from it, just as there must be a difference between Fate and what it governs. But as the Stoics do not acknowledge this difference, neither can there be a difference between the cause and what is caused, so that everything is simply one.

Although Plotinus is critical of the Stoics on these grounds, he fundamentally wishes to adhere to their principle against the Epicureans that nothing is causeless.⁶¹ But, against the Stoics, Plotinus identifies providence with the intellectual order of the world, which governs the cosmos by being its paradigm, but without being implicated in its particularity. On the one hand, Plotinus affirms that Fate “has an absolute and universal necessity, and when all the causes are included it is impossible for each individual thing not to happen.”⁶² Yet, on the other hand, he grants that the human individual is a free or self-determining principle (αὐτεξούσιος ἀρχή) which forms a part of this fabric of causation.⁶³ What underlies this liberty, however, is the fact that the order of the All is not something external to us. Thus, having asked what cause could be the source of our impulses and motions as well as the order of the world, Plotinus says that it must be the soul itself: “Soul, surely, is another principle which we must introduce among beings – not only the Soul of the All but also the individual soul along with it as a principle of no small importance; with this we must weave all things together, which does not come, like other things, from seeds but is the origin of its own activity.”⁶⁴ Plotinus here draws upon the Platonic account of the soul found in the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, where Plato finds the soul to be self-moving, making it both immortal and the original source for movement of bodies, which cannot move

⁶¹ Cf. III.1 [3] 8, 1-2.

⁶² III.1 [3] 3, 8-10: ἔχει μὲν οὖν τὴν πάντως πάντων ἀνάγκην, καὶ πάντων εἰλημμένων τῶν αἰτίων οὐκ ἔστιν ἕκαστον μὴ οὐ γίνεσθαι.

⁶³ III. 2 [47] 10, 19.

⁶⁴ *ibid.* 8, 4-8: ψυχὴν δὲ δεῖ ἀρχὴν οὔσαν ἄλλην ἐπεισφέροντας εἰς τὰ ὄντα, οὐ μόνον τὴν τοῦ παντός, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν ἑκάστου μετὰ ταύτης, ὡς ἀρχῆς οὐ μικρᾶς οὔσης, πλέκειν τὰ πάντα, οὐ γινομένης καὶ αὐτῆς, ὥσπερ τὰ ἄλλα, ἐκ σπερμάτων, ἀλλὰ πρωτουργοῦ αἰτίας οὔσης.

themselves and thus are inherently passive.⁶⁵ Plotinus continues from this to say that by liberating itself from the body and communing with itself, the soul becomes free: “Now when the soul is without body it is in absolute control of itself and free, and outside of cosmic causation; but when it is brought into body it is no longer in all ways in control as it forms part of an order with other things.”⁶⁶ While Plotinus resists collapsing all things into one, as he accuses the Stoics of doing, by upholding the distinction between Fate and the individual, at the same time the individual may come to unite itself with its principle and thereby find its freedom and happiness. Plotinus says that one who does this “lives by the law of providence”⁶⁷ by possessing a rational understanding of its operation.

Despite his polemical differences with the Stoics and Epicureans, Plotinus is here in line with one of their fundamental themes, namely the ideal of happiness as living in accord with nature. Thus, although to both the Stoics and the Epicureans it is a deterministic physics which appears threatening to human liberty, freedom in the truest sense in fact consists in adhering to nature. One of the principle maxims of the Epicureans was: “If you do not, on every occasion, refer each of your actions to the goal of nature, but instead turn prematurely to some other [criterion] in avoiding or pursuing [things], your actions will not be consistent with your reasoning.”⁶⁸ It is our misunderstanding of nature which makes it appear so cruel to us, and Epicurus himself was particularly concerned with dispelling mythological explanations of

⁶⁵ Plotinus’ use of *πρωτουργός*, its only use in all of the *Enneads*, echoes Plato’s definition of the soul in Book X of the *Laws* 897a. Cf. also *Phaedrus* 245c-246a. For a fuller account of the soul’s animating and ordering of the cosmos in Plotinus cf. V.1 [10] 2, 1 ff.

⁶⁶ III.1 [3] 8, 9-10: ἄνευ μὲν οὖν σώματος οὐσα κυριωτάτη τε αὐτῆς καὶ ἐλευθέρα καὶ κοσμικῆς αἰτίας ἔξω· ἐνεχθεῖσα δὲ εἰς σῶμα οὐκέτι πάντα κυρία, ὡς ἂν μεθ’ ἑτέρων ταχθεῖσα.

⁶⁷ III.2 [47] 9, 6-7: νόμῳ προνοίας ζῶντα. For an excellent discussion of the relation between reason, virtue, and the cosmic order, cf. Elizabeth Ruth Curry, *Neither the Morning nor the Evening Star is so Fair: Virtue and the Soul of the world in Plotinus*, Treatise 19 (I, 2) and Treatise 20 (I, 3), (Master’s thesis: Dalhousie University, 2013), esp. Chapter 5, “Purified Virtue in *Treatises 19* (I, 2) and *20* (I, 3).”

⁶⁸ Diogenes Laertius, 10.148.

meteorological phenomena which lead us to believe that the gods are fickle and irascible.⁶⁹ What we ultimately desire is freedom from disturbance (*ἀταραξία*) which can only be achieved through knowledge that liberates us from unnecessary concerns: “Among natural desires, those which do not lead to a feeling of pain if not fulfilled and about which there is an intense effort, these are produced by a groundless opinion and they fail to be dissolved not because of their own nature but because of the groundless opinions of mankind.”⁷⁰ Similarly the Stoic Epictetus makes our happiness depend upon remaining conscious of what we are and are not capable of changing, and upon not being disturbed about changing things outside of our control:

Remember that if you think the things which are by nature slavish to be free, and the things which are in the power of others to be your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will blame both gods and men: but if you think only that which is your own to be your own, and if you think that what is another's, as it really is, belongs to another, you will never blame anyone, you will do nothing involuntarily, no one will harm you, you will have no enemy, for you will not suffer any harm.⁷¹

Although the Stoics, Epicureans, and Plotinus all disagreed about the basis of human freedom, they held in common the view that by maintaining a proper understanding of oneself in relation to nature, one would be able to achieve true happiness and freedom.

2.2 Aristotle and Plotinus on Voluntary Action

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 10.76-78, 142-143.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 10.149.

⁷¹ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, edited by Gerard J. Boter, Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubeneriana, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), I: μέμνησο οὖν ὅτι ἐὰν τὰ φύσει δοῦλα ἐλεύθερα οἰηθῆς καὶ τὰ ἀλλότρια ἴδια, ἐμποδισθήσῃ, πενθήσῃς, ταραχθήσῃ, μεμνη καὶ θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπου· ἐὰν δὲ τὸ σὸν εἶναι, τὸ δὲ ἀλλότριον ὥσπερ ἐστὶν ἀλλότριον, οὐδεὶς σε ἀναγκάσει οὐδέποτε, οὐδεὶς σε κωλύσει, οὐ μεμνη οὐδένα, οὐκ ἐγκαλέσεις τινί, ἄκων πράξεις οὐδὲ ἔν, οὐδεὶς σε βλάπτει, ἐχθρὸν οὐχ ἔξεις, οὐδὲ γὰρ βλαβερόν τι πείσῃ. The English translation comes from Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, translated by George Long, (Dover Thrift Editions, 2004).

Plotinus' most immediate interlocutor in the first part of *Ennead* VI.8, however, is Aristotle, and the foundation for Plotinus' account of practical freedom is to be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It therefore is worthwhile to consider Aristotle's position in some detail in order to grasp Plotinus' own. At the beginning of Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle announces that he will undertake a treatment of the voluntary and involuntary since, he says, "virtue is concerned with passions and actions and it is only voluntary actions for which praise and blame are given; those that are involuntary are condoned, and sometimes even pitied."⁷² Our ethical life, virtues, and vices thus fall within the purview of voluntary actions. In delineating the character of voluntariness, Aristotle is not treating an isolated matter of philosophical curiosity, but rather analyzing the ground of our practical selves. This is apparent from the larger trajectory of Aristotle's argument. Beginning with the more basic phenomenon of voluntariness, Aristotle proceeds through an analysis of desiring, wishing, and deliberating which collectively form the structure of a rational choice (προαίρεσις). But, rational choice, in the end, is nothing other than the human: "choice is either thought related to desire or desire related to thought; and such a principle is the human."⁷³ Since Plotinus draws primarily upon Aristotle's account of voluntariness, it is outside of our scope to trace all of the steps in this argument and to develop an account of Aristotle's anthropology. Nor can we address in any great detail the conclusion of Aristotle's work where he argues that the greatest life is not the human life but the divine, which is at once beyond the human and yet achievable "in virtue of something within him that is divine."⁷⁴ For the moment, it suffices to note that for Aristotle the question of what we are is

⁷² *EN*, III.1 1109b31: τῆς ἀρετῆς δὲ περὶ πάθη τε καὶ πράξεις οὐσης, καὶ ἐπὶ μὲν τοῖς ἐκούσιος ἐπαίνων καὶ ψόγων γινομένων, ἐπὶ δὲ τοῖς ἀκούσιος συγγνύμης, ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ ἐλέου. I have generally followed the English translation found in Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926).

⁷³ *EN* VI.2 1139b4-5: ἢ ὀρεκτιδὸς νοῦς ἢ προαίρεσις ἢ ὄρεξις διανοητική, καὶ ἡ τοιαύτη ἀρχὴ ἄνθρωπος.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* X.7 1177b28: ἢ θεῖόν τι ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπάρχει.

intimately bound to the nature of our freedom, and that, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, Plotinus' argument will have a similar trajectory.

Aristotle begins his account of the voluntary with our most primitive capacity to act or be acted upon. The most basic example of involuntariness is to be moved from without, such as when someone “is carried by stress of weather, or by people who have him in their power.”⁷⁵ In our natural and political environment, we may be subject to forces which cause us to move and act against our will in various ways. Aristotle classifies these as actions done under compulsion. Characteristically, compulsory acts have their principle outside of us (ἡ ἀρχὴ ἔξωθεν), so that “the one acting or being acted upon contributes nothing.”⁷⁶ But while examples such as these are rather clear-cut, there is another class of actions which Aristotle calls the ‘mixed’ (μικταί). These include extreme situations where one must do something undesirable for the sake of a greater good, such as when the crew of a ship jettisons their cargo in a storm in order to save their own lives.⁷⁷ Although having the appearance of compulsion, Aristotle says that these are actually closer to voluntary actions because they are not simply imposed from without, but “at the actual time when they are done they are chosen.”⁷⁸ Aristotle says, though, that we might say that these actions are “involuntary apart from circumstances – for no one would choose to do any such action in and for itself.”⁷⁹

It is then characteristic of voluntary actions that they have their principle within us (ἐν αὐτῷ ἡ ἀρχή)⁸⁰ - but this alone is not sufficient. Our movements and actions are directed by our

⁷⁵ *ibid.* III.1 1110a1-4: πνεῦμα κομίσει ποι ἢ ἄνθρωποι κύριοι ὄντες. Cf. Plotinus, VI.8 [39] 1, 22-30.

⁷⁶ *ibid.* III.1 1110a1-3: βίαιον δὲ οὗ ἡ ἀρχὴ ἔξωθεν, τοιαῦτα οὖσα ἐν ἧ μηδὲν συμβάλλεται ὁ πράττων ἢ ὁ πάσχων.

⁷⁷ *ibid.* III.1 1110a8-11.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* III.1 1110a12-13: αἰρεταὶ γὰρ εἰσι τότε ὅτε πράττονται.

⁷⁹ *ibid.* III.1 1110a18-19: ἐκούσια δὴ τὰ τοιαῦτα, ἀπλῶς δ' ἴσως ἀκούσια· οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἂν ἔλοιτο καθ' αὐτὸ τῶν τοιούτων οὐδὲν.

⁸⁰ *ibid.* III.1 1110a17-18

desires, and, as we can gather from Aristotle's remarks about mixed actions, what is desired in a voluntary action ought to be intrinsically desirable, not just in certain exigent circumstances. Even with this granted, it is still possible to act involuntarily, such as when we are oblivious to what we are doing, and end up acting contrary to our intentions. Aristotle says that these are actions done through ignorance. For example,

a man may be ignorant of what he is doing, as for instance when people say 'it slipped out while they were speaking,' or 'they were not aware that the matter was a secret,' as Aeschylus said of the Mysteries; or that 'they let it off when they only meant to show how it worked,' as the prisoner pleaded in the catapult case. Again, a person might mistake his son for an enemy as Merope does; or mistake a sharp spear or one with a button on it, or a heavy stone for a pumice-stone; or one might kill a man by giving him medicine with the intention of saving his life; or in loose wrestling hit him a blow when meaning only to grip his hand.⁸¹

Similar to the cases of compulsion, the people in these examples act contrary to their desire. The cause of this is not, as in the case of compulsion, some external force exerted upon the agent, but rather some sort of mistake or misconception about their circumstances, which causes the action to turn out differently than intended. Ignorance of this sort, Aristotle says, concerns particulars (καθ' ἕκαστα) and the circumstances of one's action (ἐν οἷς καὶ περὶ ἃ ἡ πράξις).⁸²

Aristotle further distinguishes another type of ignorance, namely ignorance about the universal (ἡ καθόλου), which concerns one's own interests (τὰ συμφέροντα) and what one ought to do (ἃ δεῖ πράττειν).⁸³ Actions done through ignorance of this kind are not involuntary because the wicked deed is actually chosen and done willingly. As a consequence of this, we are responsible for our vice as much as for our virtues.⁸⁴ Although involuntary actions are excusable

⁸¹ *ibid.* III.1 1111a8-15.

⁸² *ibid.* III.1 1111a1.

⁸³ *ibid.* III.1 1111b28-32..

⁸⁴ *ibid.* III.5 1113b6 ff.

and arouse our sympathy, “this error,” ignorance of the universal, “is the cause of injustice and vice in general.”⁸⁵ This account of vice may be seen as development of the Socratic dictum that “no one goes willingly toward the bad.”⁸⁶ The reason that people commit wicked deeds, in Aristotle’s view, is their ignorance of what is good, so that there is a disjunction between what appears to them as good, and what is actually good.⁸⁷ At the same time Aristotle exculpates those who do know and will the good, but, on account of some error, fail to act accordingly.

After following Aristotle’s argument rather closely up until this point, Plotinus here intervenes. He collapses Aristotle’s distinction between ignorance of the particular and of the universal, and concludes against Aristotle that both of these are incompatible with voluntary action and having something in one’s power. He brings out this point in an allusion to the story of Oedipus. First, he confirms Aristotle’s intuition about circumstantial ignorance: “if one was competent to kill, it would not be a voluntary act when one did so if one did not know that this man was one’s father,” but, he continues, neither it is voluntary if one is ignorant of the universal, that is, if one does not know that one should not kill one’s relatives: “For why is the action involuntary if one does not know that it is a relation, but not involuntary if one does not know that one ought not to do it?”⁸⁸ Plotinus is not concerned, as Aristotle was, with determining responsibility for virtue and vice – for this account certainly undoes the Aristotlean basis for finding fault with vicious individuals. Plotinus’ purpose is rather to refuse any degree of power or sovereignty to vice. On the contrary, vice, as Plotinus says elsewhere, is the “weakness of the

⁸⁵ *ibid.* III.1 1110b13-15: καὶ διὰ τὴν τοιαύτην ἁμαρτίαν ἄδικοι καὶ ὅλως κακοὶ γίνονται.

⁸⁶ *Protagoras* 358d. It seems to me that Aristotle is not refuting or contradicting this Socratic position, *pace* Gerson, *Plotinus*, 275-76 n. 84

⁸⁷ Cf. *EN* III.4 1113a15 ff.

⁸⁸ VI.8 [39] 1, 36-42: εἰ κύριος ἦν τοῦ ἀποκτεῖναι, ἦν ἂν οὐχ ἀκούσιον αὐτῷ πεπραχότι, εἰ τὸν πατέρα ἠγνόει τοῦτον εἶναι [...]. διὰ τί γάρ, εἰ μὲν ἀγνοεῖ, ὅτι φίλος, ἀκούσιον, εἰ δὲ ἀγνοεῖ ὅτι μὴ δεῖ οὐκ ἀκούσιον;

soul,⁸⁹ and like everything weak it constantly yields to external pressure and exercises no control. For Plotinus, then, voluntariness presumes that one's ends and desires are aligned with what is actually good: "For the involuntary is a leading away from the good and towards the compulsory, if something is carried to that which is not good for it."⁹⁰ To be ignorant of the good and to be unable to seek the Good earnestly in the light of knowledge renders one incapable of satisfying one's own desire, and hence actually incapable of acting voluntarily.

The relation between desire and knowledge, however, requires clarification. Plotinus asks: if voluntary actions require good ends, how are these determined? He immediately rules out the possibility that they come from any sort of impulse or desire, since this would grant some degree of liberty to children, animals, madmen, and others of this kind.⁹¹ He concludes rather that our ends ought to be derived from "correct calculation along with correct desire."⁹² But this leads to a dilemma: it seems that calculation is always spurred on by desire, but desire seems to have its principle outside of us in the thing desired. It then appears that we are enslaved to our desires and led around by them, so that we are not in control when acting in accordance with them: "how in general can we have mastery where we are led? For that which is in need and necessarily desires to be filled does not have mastery over that to which it is simply being led."⁹³ To resolve this dilemma, Plotinus has to reinterpret the role of reason and desire, and through this he moves from the freedom of practical action toward Intellection.

⁸⁹ I.8 [51] 14, 1: ἀσθένειαν ψυχῆς.

⁹⁰ VI.8 [39] 4, 15-17: τὸ γὰρ ἀκούσιον ἀπαγωγή ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ πρὸς τὸ ἠναγκασμένον, εἰ πρὸς τοῦτο φέροιτο, ὃ μὴ ἀγαθὸν αὐτῷ.

⁹¹ *ibid.* 2, 2-8. Cf. Eliasson, *The Notion of That Which Depends on Us in Plotinus and its Background*, 192-195.

⁹² *ibid.* 2, 10: τῷ ὀρθῷ λογισμῷ καὶ τῇ ὀρθῇ ὀρέξει.

⁹³ *ibid.* 2, 19-21: πῶς δ' ὅλως κύριοι, οὗ ἀγόμεθα· τὸ γὰρ ἐνδεὲς ἐξ ἀνάγκης πληρώσεως ὀρεγόμενον οὐκ ἔστι κύριον τοῦ ἐφ' ὃ παντελῶς ἄγεται. See also VI.8 [39], 4, 1-4.

To begin with the first of these, Plotinus argues that calculative reason (λογισμός) must give way to knowledge (γνώσις or λόγος). He comes to this conclusion in trying to find what could be a ‘master’ (κύριος) of desire. Calculative reason cannot accomplish this since its function is to serve desire. Plotinus then considers a series of possibilities in quick succession before arriving at his conclusion (for convenience I have broken up the separate points in this rather elliptical passage):

But if it is because the living being and the soul knows what it does, if it knows by sense perception, what help is that to things being in their power? For sense perception does not give mastery of the work since it only sees.

But if by knowledge, [that is] if it is by knowledge of what is being done, here too it only knows, but something else leads to action.

But if reason or knowledge acts against the desire and gets the better of it, we must enquire into what this is to be referred, and in general where it takes place.

And if reason makes another desire, we must understand how.

But if reason or knowledge puts a stop to the desire and stands still and this is where what is in our power is, this will not be in action, but will stand still in Intellect, since everything in the sphere of action, even if reason is dominant, is mixed and cannot have being in our power in a pure state.⁹⁴

Plotinus’ argument leaves a number of loose ends that are not pursued further in the treatise. Yet, each of these undeveloped possibilities drives toward the conclusion (which is still formulated only as a hypothetical) that it is the role of reason to oppose a servile desire, and that freedom does not reside in action but in contemplation. This impossibility of voluntariness and freedom in practical action is certainly an attack on Aristotle, who argued that it is a mistake to say that

⁹⁴ *ibid.* 2, 25-37: εἰ δ' ὅτι γινώσκει τὸ ζῶον καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ ὃ ποιεῖ, εἰ μὲν αἰσθήσει, τίς ἢ προσθήκη πρὸς τὸ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς εἶναι; οὐ γὰρ ἡ αἰσθησις πεποίηκε τοῦ ἔργου κύριον ἰδοῦσα μόνον. εἰ δὲ γνώσει, εἰ μὲν γνώσει τοῦ ποιουμένου, καὶ ἐνταῦθα οἶδε μόνον, ἄλλο δὲ ἐπὶ τὴν ἄγει· εἰ δὲ καὶ παρὰ τὴν ὄρεξιν ὁ λόγος ποιεῖ ἢ ἡ γνώσις καὶ κρατεῖ, εἰς τί ἀναφέρει ζητητέον, καὶ ὅπως ποῦ τοῦτο συμβαίνει. καὶ εἰ μὲν αὐτὸν ἄλλην ὄρεξιν ποιεῖ, πῶς ληπτέον· εἰ δὲ τὴν ὄρεξιν παύσας ἔσται καὶ ἐνταῦθα τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν, οὐκ ἐν πράξει τοῦτο ἔσται, ἀλλ' ἐν νῶ στήσεται τοῦτο· ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἐν πράξει πᾶν, κἂν κρατῇ ὁ λόγος, μικτὸν καὶ οὐ καθαρὸν δύναται τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἔχειν.

actions done for the sake of pleasant or noble things are compulsory, “since everyone does everything for the sake of these.”⁹⁵ Although Aristotle is willing to grant a greater freedom to practical action as Plotinus, the direction of Plotinus’ argument is quite Aristotlean. According to Aristotle, what brings us happiness in practical action is not some external good, but rather, as he suggests provocatively at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the contemplation: “Happiness therefore is co-extensive in its range with contemplation: the more that things contemplate, the more that they are happy, not as an accidental concomitant of contemplation but as inherent in it, since contemplation is valuable in itself.”⁹⁶ Plotinus takes this position to an extreme in order to say that contemplation is no more than an inferior and externalized form of contemplation: “Men, too, 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, but still long to see it, they are carried into action so as to see what they cannot see with their intellect.”⁹⁷

This teaching of Plotinus’ came under harsh criticism by Henri Bergson who identified it as one of the critical philosophical errors of the ancient world:

Elle [sc. l’erreur] consista à s’inspirer de cette croyance, si naturelle à l’esprit humain, qu’une variation ne peut qu’exprimer et développer des invariabilités. D’où résultait que l’Action était une Contemplation affaiblie, la durée une image trompeuse et mobile de l’éternité immobile, l’Ame une chute de l’Idée. Toute cette philosophie qui commence à Platon pour aboutir à Plotin est le développement d’un principe que nous formulerions ainsi: « Il y a plus dans l’immuable que dans le mouvant, et l’on passe du stable à

⁹⁵ EN III.1, 1110b11: τούτων γὰρ χάριν πάντες πάντα πράττουσιν

⁹⁶ *ibid.* X.8 1178b28-32: ἐφ’ ὅσον δὴ διανείνει ἡ θεωρία, καὶ ἡ εὐδαιμονία, καὶ οἷς μᾶλλον ὑπάρχει τὸ θεωρεῖν, καὶ εὐδαιμονεῖν, οὐ κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν θεωρίαν· αὕτη γὰρ καθ’ αὐτὴν τιμία.

⁹⁷ III.8 [30] 4, 31-36: ἐπεὶ καὶ ἄνθρωποι, ὅταν ἀσθενήσωσιν εἰς τὸ θεωρεῖν, σκιὰν θεωρίας καὶ λόγου τῆβ πράξιν ποιοῦνται. ὅτι γὰρ μὴ ἰκανὸν αὐτοῖς τὸ τῆς θεωρίας ὑπ’ ἀσθενείας ψύχῃς, λαβεῖν οὐ δυνάμενοι τὸ θέαμα ἰκανῶς καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οὐ πληροῦμενοι, ἐφιέμενοι δὲ αὐτὸ ἰδεῖν, εἰς πράξιν φέρονται, ἵνα ἴδωσιν, ὃ μὴ νῶ ἐδύνατο.

l'instable par une simple diminution. » Or, c'est le contraire qui est la vérité.⁹⁸

Bergson's account, however, operates within an opposition between contemplation and action that Plotinus aims to dissolve.⁹⁹ To state that for Plotinus action is a weakened contemplation, although by no means false, is nonetheless one-sided. For, we could say, on the contrary, that contemplation is perfected action: that is to say, action not constrained by time, or place, or external circumstances, and so actually free.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, as his criticism of Platonism suggests, for Bergson the intellectual world is but an abstraction of the moving world, which it effaces.¹⁰¹ For Plotinus, however, the intellectual world is not a dead abstraction, but what is abundantly active, alive, and creative. In Intellect,

all things are filled full of life, and, we may say, boiling with life. They all flow, in a way, from a single spring, not like one particular breath or one warmth, but as if there was one quality which held and kept intact all the qualities in itself, of sweetness along with fragrance, and was at once the quality of wine and the characters of all tastes, the sights of colours and all the awareness of touch, and all that hearing hears, all tunes and every rhythm.¹⁰²

As we can see, what justifies Plotinus' speaking in this way is that all movement and vivacity of this world is not lost in contemplation, but found there more concentrated and more pure.

The function of contemplation for Plotinus then is the liberation of the soul from external disturbances. This he finds to be the ground for virtuous action. In the first place, Plotinus sees

⁹⁸ Henri Bergson, "Introduction à la métaphysique," in *La pensée et le mouvant*, 5^{ème} édition, (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1934), 245.

⁹⁹ For an excellent discussion of Bergson's interpretation and criticisms of Plotinus, cf. Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France*, 106-110.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Politeia*, edited by W.D. Ross, Oxford Classical Texts, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), VII.3 1325b16-21.

¹⁰¹ See Bergson, "Introduction (Première partie)," in *La pensée et le mouvant*, 15.

¹⁰² VI.7 [38] 12, 22-30: πάντων ζωῆς πεπληρωμένων και οἶον ζεόντων ἔστι δ' αὐτῶν ἡ οἶον ροὴ ἐκ μιᾶς πηγῆς, οὐχ οἶον ἐνός τινος πνεύματος ἢ θερμότητος μιᾶς, ἀλλὰ οἶον εἴ τις ἦνμι ποιότης μία πάσας ἐν αὐτῇ ἔχουσα και σφύζουσα τὰς ποιότητας, γλυκύτητος μετὰ εὐωδίας, και ὁμοῦ οἰνώδης ποιότητος και χυλῶν ἀπάντων δυνάμεις και χρωμάτων ὅψεις και ὅσα ἀφαί γινώσκουσιν· ἔστωσαν δὲ και ὅσα ἀκοαὶ ἀκούουσι, πάντα μέλη και ρυθμὸς πᾶς.

even within virtue a moment of dependency, manifest as the reaction to external circumstances.

In a rhetorical *tour de force*, Plotinus shows that the true end of virtue is to overcome this relation to what is other than it, and even to extinguish itself, so to speak, in the process:

For certainly if someone gave virtue itself the choice whether it would like (in order to be active) that there should be wars, that it might be brave, and that there should be injustice that might define what is just and set things in order, and poverty, that it might display its liberality, or to quiet because everything was well, it would choose to rest from its practical activities because nothing needed its curative action, as if a physician, for instance Hippocrates, were to wish that nobody needed his skill.¹⁰³

Thus, virtue assumes a primarily curative role: it is what allows the soul not to be overpowered by the world around it. Thus, virtue “constructs freedom and being in our own power and does not allow us to be any more slaves of what we were enslaved to before.”¹⁰⁴ The source of vice and of discontent is the body and, to borrow a phrase from Trouillard, ‘the regime of externality’ it imposes on the soul. Plotinus shows with remarkable concision that each of the cardinal virtues may be understood as liberating the soul from the concerns of bodily life and coming in touch with intellect: “Since the soul is evil when it is thoroughly mixed with the body and is affected with it, it will be good when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone - this is intelligence and wisdom - and is not affected with it - this is self-control - and is not afraid of departing from the body - this is courage - and is ruled by reason and intellect without opposition - this is justice.”¹⁰⁵ It is in this sense that our actions are externalized contemplations: the model of the virtues that is exhibited in action is already to be found in the nature of Intellect. But

¹⁰³ VI.8 [39] 5, 13-20: καὶ γὰρ εἴ τις αἴρεσιν αὐτῇ δοίη τῇ ἀρετῇ, πότερα βούλεται, ἵν' ἔχοι ἐνεργεῖν, εἶναι πολέμους, ἵνα ἀνδρίζοιτο, καὶ εἶναι ἀδικίαν, ἵνα τὰ δίκαια ὀρίζη καὶ κατακοσμή, καὶ πενίαν, ἵνα τὸ ἐλευθέριον ἐνδεικνύοιτο, ἢ πάντων εὖ ἐχόντων ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν, ἔλοιτο ἂν τὴν ἡσυχίαν τῶν πράξεων οὐδενὸς θεραπείας δεομένου τῆς παρ' αὐτῆς, ὡσπερ ἂν εἴ τις ἰατρός, οἷον Ἰπποκράτης, μηδένα δεῖσθαι τῆς παρ' αὐτοῦ τέχνης.

¹⁰⁴ VI.8 [39] 5, 32-34: κατασκευάζει τὸ ἐλεύθερον καὶ τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἑτι δούλους εἶναι, ὧν πρότερον ἦμεν.

¹⁰⁵ I.2 [19] 3, 11-19: ἢ ἐπειδὴ κακὴ μὲν ἐστὶν ἡ ψυχὴ συμπεφυρμένη τῷ σώματι καὶ ὁμοπαθῆς γινομένη αὐτῷ καὶ πάντα συνδοξάσουσα, εἴη ἂν ἀγαθὴ καὶ ἀρετὴν ἔχουσα, εἰ μήτε συνοξάζοι, ἀλλὰ μόνη ἐνεργοῖ - ὅπερ ἐστὶ νοεῖν τε καὶ φρονεῖν - μήτε ὁμοπαθῆς εἴη - ὅπερ ἐστὶ σωφρονεῖν - μήτε φοβοῖτο ἀφισταμένη τοῦ σώματος - ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἀνδρίζεσθαι - ἡγοῖτο δὲ λόγος καὶ νοῦς, τὰ δὲ μὴ ἀντιτείνουσι - δικαιοσύνη δ' ἂν εἴη τοῦτο. Cf. *Phaedo* 69a-c.

because Intellect is the model for our actions, the culmination of praxis is to return from a relation to the external world to this state of intellectual tranquility. Aristotle approaches contemplation in a similar manner at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where none of the practical virtues are found to be adequate to the gods, since these imply a relation to what is other than and below them, so that no activity remains for them except the self-related one of contemplation.¹⁰⁶ Because, for Plotinus, virtue straddles the practical and the contemplative, it mediates the passage from the one to the other in both directions, so to speak. Contemplation is at once the source of virtue and that to which virtue tends: “If then virtue is a kind of other intellect, a state which in a way intellectualises the soul, again, being in our power does not belong to the realm of action but in intellect at rest from actions.”¹⁰⁷

In this chapter, we have examined Plotinus’ account of human action and freedom, first in his providential writings in relation to the Stoics and Epicureans, and then in *Ennead* VI.8 [39] in his engagement with Aristotle. On both accounts we’ve found that the object sought in practical activity is found ultimately in reason and contemplation, which, unlike practical activity, is not subject to external demands, but to some degree self-sufficient. This paves the way for Plotinus to develop a consideration of freedom absent of contingency which will be crucial to his argument regarding the freedom of the One. This we shall consider in the following chapter.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *NE* X 1178b8 ff.

¹⁰⁷ VI.8 [39] 5, 34-37.

Chapter Three: The Freedom of the One

3.1: The Origins of the Problematic of *Ennead VI.8* [39]

We found in Chapter 1 that, for Plotinus and his contemporaries, the freedom of praxis has as its end acting according to nature, or more precisely according to the divine and rational principles that structure nature. Indeed, Plotinus goes even further in this by making the goal of virtue to turn away from praxis and toward contemplation of the divine intellectual principles. Prior to *Ennead VI.8* [39], however, it appears that no one (at least in the philosophical tradition) attempted to examine whether and in what sense the gods might be said to be free. Indeed, insofar as freedom was associated solely with the realm of things that could be otherwise, it was imperative to dissociate the gods from it. Consider the definitive philosophical argument for the immutability of the gods that Plato gives in his discussion of poetry in the *Republic*. In essence, he says: given that the gods are the best in every way, if they were to change it must be for the worse. Consequently, they have no desire to change, and are indeed unable to change if they are to remain gods.¹⁰⁸

This immutability was not meant *prima facie* as a rejection of liberty, nor was the necessity that belongs to the gods viewed as problematic. As Armstrong puts it, “Perhaps it is fair to say that for [Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics] it is inconceivable that the divine should be other than it is or do other than it does, but this does not mean that it is bound or compelled by any sort of necessity. The Stoic God, so far from being compelled by necessity, is the very

¹⁰⁸ *Republic* 381b-c

substance of necessity or fate. He is anything but a blind compulsion.”¹⁰⁹ Certainly, although certain differences between them abide, the same could largely be said of the God of Plato or Aristotle. Indeed, after concluding that the first motion, the circular revolution of the heavens, is in fact moved by an unmoved mover, and that “this exists from necessity, and, as necessary, it is good, and it is a principle in this way,”¹¹⁰ Aristotle takes care to distinguish this necessity from compulsion: “For the necessary is said in such ways: that which is by compulsion, because it is contrary to impulse, and that without which there would not be good, and that which cannot be otherwise but is simply necessary.”¹¹¹ Indeed, the necessity of the first becomes an essential doctrine of ancient and medieval philosophy and theology, even for some of those thinkers, like St. Thomas Aquinas, who have been represented as adhering to a doctrine of free creation against a necessary emanation.¹¹² Whereas, according to Hankey, Aquinas overcame this antinomy “by placing the opposed modalities in different places in his system,”¹¹³ Plotinus’ approach in *Ennead* VI.8 [39] is rather to comprehend the the single act of the One as at once free and necessary.

This occurs particularly in response to an objection that he appears to summarize or paraphrase in the seventh chapter of the treatise: “some rash argument starting from a different way of thinking says that since the nature of the Good happens to be as it is, and since it does not have mastery of what it is, and is what it is not from itself, it would not have freedom, or being in

¹⁰⁹ A.H. Armstrong, “Two Views of Freedom: A Christian Objection in Plotinus *Enneads* VI.8 [39] 7, 11-15?” in *Studia Patristica XVIII*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982): 399.

¹¹⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, edited by W. Jaeger, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), XII 1072b10-11: ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἄρα ἐστὶν ὄν· καὶ ἡ ἀνάγκη καλῶς, καὶ οὕτως ἀρχή. My translation.

¹¹¹ *ibid.* 1072b11-13: τὸ γὰρ ἀναγκαῖον τοσαυταχῶς, τὸ μὲν βίαι ὅτι παρὰ τὴν ὀρμήν, τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἄνευ τὸ εὔ, τὸ δὲ μὴ ἐνδεχόμενον ἄλλως ἀλλ’ ἀπλῶς. My translation.

¹¹² Cf. Wayne Hankey, “*Ab uno simplici non est nisi unum*: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas’ Doctrine of Creation,” in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev’d Dr Robert D. Crouse*, edited by Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten, and Walter Hannam, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007): 309-335.

¹¹³ *ibid.* 314.

its power, since it does or does not do what it is necessitated to do or not to do.”¹¹⁴ The refutation of this ‘rash argument’ has rightly been considered the treatise’s *raison d’être*, and Plotinus will occupy himself with this task for the remainder of the work. Because he does not, however, clearly state who poses this argument, aside from that fact that it comes either from another school or from a different mode of thinking (‘ἐτέρωθεν’ could indicate either of these), it is unclear what conception Plotinus actually seeks to oppose in the treatise. Since the question of divine liberty emerges in the context of this polemical debate, the hope of scholars has been that by knowing the philosophical assumptions and motivations of Plotinus’ unnamed interlocutor, one might be in a better position to understand and evaluate his response. What, then, is the origin of this ‘rash argument’? Of the various theses proposed, some have argued that the objector was a Christian,¹¹⁵ a Gnostic,¹¹⁶ an Epicurean,¹¹⁷ a Peripatetic (perhaps even a disciple Alexander of Aphrodisias),¹¹⁸ or else simply a position invented in one of Plotinus’ own thought experiments.¹¹⁹ Unfortunately, although debate about this question has gone on for over a century, no scholarly consensus has yet emerged, and until recently not much light has been shed upon Plotinus’ argument as a result of it.

¹¹⁴ VI.8 [39] 7, 11-15: εἰ μὴ τις τολμηρὸς λόγος ἐτέρωθεν σταλαίς λέγοι, ὥς τυχοῦσα οὕτως ἔχειν, ὥς ἔχει, καὶ οὐκ οὔσα κυρία τοῦ ὅ ἐστιν, οὔσα τοῦτο ὅ ἐστιν οὐ παρ’ αὐτῆς οὔτε τὸ ἐλεύθερον ἂν ἔχοι οὔτε τὸ ἐπ’ αὐτῇ ποιοῦσα ἢ μὴ ποιοῦσα, ὃ ἠνάγκασται ποιεῖν ἢ μὴ ποιεῖν. I follow the reading of Lavaud and Leroux against Armstrong in taking ποιοῦσα ἢ μὴ ποιοῦσα as participles expressing cause that function independently of τὸ ἐπ’ αὐτῇ. Armstrong’s translation goes: “its doing or not doing what it is necessitated to do or not to do is not in its power.”

¹¹⁵ A.H. Armstrong, “Two Views of Freedom,” 397-406.

¹¹⁶ Plotinus, *Ennéades*, vol. VI pt. 2, translated and edited by Émile Bréhier (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938), 119-122. Narbonne, “New Reflections on God as *Causa Sui*,” in *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 129-141.

¹¹⁷ Plotinus, *Ennéades de Plotin*, vol. III, translated and edited by M.-N. Bouillet, (Paris: Hachette, 1861), 506 n. 30, who also there suggests Strato the Peripatetic and “des autres philosophes qui rapportaient tout au hasard.”

¹¹⁸ Lavaud, *Traité 39*, 176-79 and 266-67 n. 105; Dominic O’Meara, “The Freedom of the One,” *Phronesis* 37 (1992): 343-49.

¹¹⁹ Leroux, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l’Un*, 107-108. Leroux’s examination of this problem (*ibid.* 104-123), although now somewhat dated, still remains the most thorough.

A recent publication by Jean-Marc Narbonne has, however, advanced this discussion a great deal. What distinguishes Narbonne's argument from most others is his knowledge not only of philological evidence, but, more importantly, his unequalled attention to philosophical argument. Most attempts to identify Plotinus' objector have relied primarily upon the former of these, that is, upon possible allusions made in the 'rash argument' to other texts. This method, however, has consistently proved inadequate, insofar as Plotinus' brief statement of objection, although resonating with a variety of texts and positions, does not clearly align with any of them. Thus, Narbonne's method is rather to consider carefully *what* philosophical position is held by the various proposed sources, and *whether* they would be capable of coherently posing the 'rash argument' that Plotinus states.

This is most evident in the case of Alexander of Aphrodisias, who also happens to be regarded on philological grounds as one of the more likely candidates for Plotinus' opponent. O'Meara and Lavaud¹²⁰ have suggested that the phrase the Good 'would not have neither freedom, nor being in its power,' refers to a passage from Alexander's *De Fato*: "In the case of the gods being such as they are will not be in their power [...] because being like this is present in their nature, and none of the things present in this way is in one's power."¹²¹ Because Plotinus' account of divine liberty runs directly contrary to this account, it is argued that someone in Alexander's school may have been the exponent of the 'rash argument.' Yet, Alexander upholds this position because 'what is in one's power' belongs properly to humans, as it contains the possibility for contrary courses of action, and he finds that this is completely unbecoming of the gods: "[...] unless someone wants simply to say that what is brought about by something in

¹²⁰ See note 7 above.

¹²¹ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate*, text, translation and commentary by R.W. Sharples, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, 1983), 204.12-15: ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν θεῶν οὐκ εἴη ἂν τὸ εἶναι τοιούτοις [...] ὅτι γὰρ ἐστὶν αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ φύσει τὸ τοιοῦτον, οὐδὲν δὲ τῶν οὕτως ὑπαρχόντων ἐπ' αὐτῶν.

accordance with its own nature depends upon it, introducing another meaning of ‘what depends upon us’ besides that which is accepted and [in accordance with] our conception [of it], which we say is on account of our having the power for opposite courses of action.”¹²² As Narbonne points out, although Alexander and the ‘rash argument’ both deny that the gods have something ‘in their power,’ this is a view that Alexander *advocates*, but the objector *criticizes*. Narbonne thus concludes that “the potential disciples of Alexander could not criticize the Plotinian One for producing in a necessary manner and in accord with the good, since it is the position which they themselves defended.”¹²³ While we can agree with Lavaud that, unlike Alexander, Plotinus wants to develop a conception of liberty beyond the confines of choosing between contraries,¹²⁴ this philosophical difference emerges as a result of the ‘rash argument’ and cannot be the basis for it.

Those who would consider Plotinus’ objector to be an Epicurean encounter a similar hermeneutical difficulty. This identification has been based primarily upon Plotinus’ engagement with the problem that the One ‘happens to be’ (τυγχάνειν), that it occurs by chance (τύχη), that it is accidental (αὐτόματος/συνέβη).¹²⁵ But while these locutions may have a vaguely Epicurean air, it is important to recognize, similar to the case of the Peripatetics, that these are accusations brought against Plotinus, and that he is attempting to refute them. Even supposing that Plotinus did hold that the One ‘happened to be,’ this would not be something that an Epicurean would find especially problematic or worthy of criticism. Considering the affinity of chance and happenstance to the Epicurean notion of the ‘swerve,’ it would not make sense for an Epicurean

¹²² *ibid.* 211.30-212.1: εἰ μὴ βούλοιτό τις ἀπλῶς τὸ ὑπὸ τινος κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν γινόμενον φύσιν ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνῳ λέγειν ἄλλο τι σημαίνονμενον τοῦ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν εἰσαγωγῆς παρὰ τὸ πεπιστευμένον τε καὶ προειλημμένον, ὃ φαμεν εἶναι διὰ τὸ ἔχειν ἡμᾶς ἐξουσίαν τῶν ἐν τοῖς πραττομένοις ἀντικειμένων.

¹²³ Narbonne, “New Reflections on God as *Causa Sui*,” 138.

¹²⁴ Lavaud, *Traité* 39, 177-178.

¹²⁵ Cf. Narbonne, “New Reflections on God as *Causa Sui*,” 135, n. 18.

to claim that, because the One happens to be, it therefore lacks freedom. As Narbonne observes, “Plotinus is not criticized for refusing to settle on an explanation according to chance – that which an Epicurean would claim –, but for not having immediately rejected the threat of chance to a principle which through it might be rendered insufficiently powerful, free and self-directed.”¹²⁶ Further, the Epicurean notion of freedom as an uncaused ‘swerve’ would likely make them subject to the same criticism made against Plotinus.¹²⁷

As we have suggested, the standard that Narbonne sets for this problem is to go beyond mere textual similarities between any given text and Plotinus’ own, in order to consider whether the philosophical suppositions of a given text provide a basis for the critique raised against Plotinus. Thus, drawing upon a wealth of texts, some of which have only become widely available in last quarter of the 20th century,¹²⁸ Narbonne shows that the Gnostic doctrine of the freedom and self-creation of the first principle could be opposed to Plotinus’ conception in the same way that ‘rash argument’ is. For example, in the *Tripartite Tractate* we read, “He has his power, which is his will. Now, however, it is in silence that he keeps himself, who is the great one, who is the cause of bringing the Totalities into their eternal being. He is himself since in the proper sense he begets himself as ineffable one, since he is self-begotten, since he conceives of himself, and since he knows himself as he is.”¹²⁹ It is possible then that the Gnostics, with their emphasis on the primacy of the will of the first principle, might ridicule Plotinus for having a God that acts simply out of necessity. Further, the self-identity of the first principle, its identity

¹²⁶ *ibid.* 136.

¹²⁷ Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie, et Ereignis*, 165-166.

¹²⁸ The first complete translation of the texts from Coptic into a modern language was *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, translated by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Christianity and Antiquity, under the direction of James M. Robinson, (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

¹²⁹ *The Tripartite Tractate*, translated by Malcolm L. Peel, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, I 5, 55 (p. 58). My emphasis. For other examples, cf. Narbonne “New Reflections on God as *Causa Sui*,” 130-131.

with its will, and its self-creation are all motifs that we find in *Ennead* VI.8 [39],¹³⁰ and these might signal a deliberate effort on Plotinus' part to defend the liberty of the First by incorporating the Gnostic terms for it.

Even beyond the bounds of *Ennead* VI.8 [39], Narbonne notes that the issue of creation was already a subject of dispute between Plotinus and the Gnostics. In the so-called *Grossschrift* - a single expansive work directed against the Gnostics, but split into four treatises by Porphyry and scattered throughout the *Enneads* - Plotinus appears to affirm the necessity of the eternal production of the sensible world against the Gnostic belief in its temporal creation and dissolution:

But each thing of necessity must give of its own to something else as well, or the Good will not be the Good, or Intellect Intellect, or the soul this that it is, unless with the primal living some secondary life lives as long as the primal exists. Of necessity, then, all things must exist for ever in ordered dependence upon each other: those other than the First have come into being in the sense that they are derived from other, higher, principles. Things that are said to have come into being did not just come into being, but always will be in the process of becoming: nor will anything be dissolved except those things which have something to be dissolved into. If anyone says that it will be dissolved into matter, why should he not also say that matter will be dissolved? But if he is going to say that, what necessity was there, we shall reply, for it to come into being? But if they are going to assert that it was necessary for it to come into being as a consequence of higher principles, the necessity is there *now* as well.¹³¹

Although Plotinus does not explicitly state the doctrine that he is opposing, the force of his argument is to affirm the eternal, ordered dependence of each thing on each other, particularly against a temporal dissolution of the world. According to Plotinus, to make this world depend upon higher principles, as the Gnostics do, requires that one also affirm the eternal fecundity of

¹³⁰ For a few examples, cf. VI.8 [39] 13, *passim*; 14, 41-42; 15, 8-10; 16, 21-24 & 38-39; 21, 32-33.

¹³¹ II.9 [33] 3, 7-18: ἀλλ' ἀνάγκη ἕκαστον τὸ αὐτοῦ δίδοναι καὶ ἄλλω, ἢ τὸ ἀγαθὸν οὐκ ἀγαθὸν ἔσται, ἢ ὁ νοῦς οὐ νοῦς, ἢ ψυχὴ μὴ τοῦτο, εἰ μὴ τι μετὰ τοῦ πρώτως ζῆν ζωὴ καὶ δευτέρως ἕως ἔστι τὸ πρώτως. ἀνάγκη τοίνυν ἐφεξῆς εἶναι πάντα ἀλλήλοις καὶ αἰεὶ, γενητὰ δὲ τὰ ἕτερα τῶ παρ' ἄλλων εἶναι. οὐ τοίνυν ἐγένετο καὶ γενήσεται, ὅσα γενητὰ λέγεται· οὐδὲ φθαρήσεται, ἀλλ' ἢ ὅσα ἔχει εἰς ἅ· ὃ δὲ μὴ ἔχει εἰς ὃ, οὐδὲ φθαρήσεται. εἰ δὲ τις εἰς ὕλην λέγοι, διὰ τί οὐ καὶ τὴν ὕλην; εἰ δὲ καὶ τὴν φήσει, τίς ἦν ἀνάγκη, φήσομεν, καὶ νῦν ἀνάγκη. See also *ibid.* 7, 1-2.

these principles, and not restrict their creative act to one particular time. Against the Gnostics' explanation of the creation of the sensible world on account of a fault in its creator (σφάλμα), Plotinus points out that since the creator is eternal, his fault cannot be a single event but also an eternal reality.¹³² In opposition to the Gnostics, Plotinus thus wants to eliminate categorically any sort of change or process that would occur among higher principles, and he does so by forcefully asserting their unchanging necessity.

While it is clear that Plotinus was engaged in a dispute with the Gnostics over the nature of the creation, and it is quite possible that it is this dispute which is at play in *Ennead* VI.8 [39], it is impossible to establish this with certainty. Indeed, there are certain points of Narbonne's argument which are not altogether convincing. Most importantly, he dismisses too hastily the idea that the objection is a thought experiment, which he does solely on the basis of Plotinus' "palpable indignation" towards his opponent.¹³³ It is this position, however, which is perhaps amenable to Narbonne's own method insofar as it must concern itself directly with the philosophical position propounded against Plotinus. Leroux, for example, acknowledges the problem of Plotinus' apparent indignation, but still concludes that the rash argument cannot be traced to a Gnostic source.¹³⁴ As Leroux notes, Plotinus concentrates more on refuting the charge that the One 'happens to be' than that it is constrained by necessity.¹³⁵ Narbonne seems to overlook this point, but it would suggest Plotinus is concerned more with refuting an accidental occurrence of the One, and that his debate with the Gnostics is not what is primarily (or at least not solely) at issue. What leads Leroux to argue in a favour of a thought experiment is simply

¹³² *ibid.* 4, 1 ff.

¹³³ Narbonne, "New Reflections on God as *Causa Sui*," 134-135.

¹³⁴ Leroux, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un*, 117.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, 106

that, while he sees the ‘rash argument’ as anticipating some of the theological positions which emerge after Porphyry, he finds it to have no pre-Plotinian precedent.¹³⁶

While it is impossible to say for certain who Plotinus’ objector was, the interpretations of Leroux and Narbonne bring to the fore the two central issues that Plotinus will confront in the treatise: that of contingency and that of necessity. Since speculation about Plotinus’ sources will take us no further, we shall now examine how Plotinus develops and responds to these problems.

3.2 Contingency and Necessity *Redivivus*

Like Plotinus’ account of human freedom in his writings on fate and providence, the freedom of the One is threatened both by necessity - “it does or does not do what it is necessitated to do or not to do” - and by a certain contingency - “the nature of the Good happens to be as it is.”¹³⁷ Although the first seems to posit an external determination upon the One, and the second seems to deny it, both together serve to refuse to the One any degree of self-determination. The common problem behind these, which Plotinus’ objector exploits, is the difficulty, or rather impossibility, of characterizing the Good. In attempting to refute these troublesome assertions about the One, we effectively are impelled to ask: why is the Good the way that it is? But, as Plotinus says, the absolute priority of the First precludes us from answering these questions:

But what is That which did not come to existence? We must go away in silence and enquire no longer, aware in our minds that there is no way out. For why should one even enquire when one has nothing to go on to, since every enquiry goes to a principle and stands in it? And besides, every enquiry is about either what something is, or of what

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, 122.

¹³⁷ VI.8 [39] 7, 11-15.

kind it is, or why it is, or if it is. Now when we say that That 'is,' we say that it 'is' from the things that come after it. And the question 'why?' seeks another principle; but there is no principle of the universal principle.¹³⁸

We cannot thus explain the first principle, since, being first, there is nothing prior to it through which we could explain it; it is rather the inexplicable principle upon which all explanations depend. The objection against Plotinus addresses this problem: if we cannot explain the Good, it seems then that it just 'happens to be,' i.e. there is no reason or explanation for it whatsoever. At the same time, as Narbonne notes, we cannot simply state against this conception that the One is simply necessary to be: "Opposer purement et simplement la nécessité de l'Un à son état « hasardeux » laissait donc parfaitement intact le préjudice de sa *dépendance* ou de sa *sujétion*."¹³⁹ The understanding of liberty that Plotinus develops must therefore sail between the Scylla of necessity and subjection, and the Charybdis of contingency and mutability.

Plotinus finds, however, that the objection raised against him requires clarification: "But if someone takes 'happened to be' as applying to the Good, one must not stop at the word, but understand what the one who says it has in mind. What then does he have in mind?"¹⁴⁰ In his typical dialectical style of writing, Plotinus formulates a response on behalf of his objector: "This: it is because it [sc. the One] has this nature and power that it is principle; for if it had another, it would have been what it was, and if it was worse, it would have been active according

¹³⁸ *ibid.* 11, 1-9: ἀλλὰ τὸ μὴ ὑποστάν τοῦτο τί; ἢ σιωπησαντας δεῖ ἀπελθεῖν, καὶ ἐν ἀπόρω τῇ γνώμῃ θεμένους μηδὲν ἔτι ζητεῖν. τί γὰρ ἂν τις καὶ ζητήσειεν εἰς οὐδὲν ἔτι ἔχων προελθεῖν πάσης ζητήσεως εἰς ἀρχὴν ἰούσης καὶ ἐν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ ἰσταμένης; πρὸς δὲ τούτοις ζητήσιν ἅπασαν χρῆν νομίζειν ἢ τοῦ τί ἐστὶν εἶναι ἢ τοῦ οἶον ἢ τοῦ διὰ τί ἢ τοῦ εἶναι. τὸ μὲν οὖν εἶναι, ὡ λέγομεν ἐκεῖνο εἶναι, ἐκ τῶν μετ' αὐτό. τὸ δὲ διὰ τί ἀρχὴν ἄλλην ζητεῖ· ἀρχῆς δὲ τῆς πάσης οὐκ ἔστιν ἀρχή. I follow the reading of Lavaud and Leroux against Armstrong, and see first clause of the second last sentence as being about the One, signalled by ἐκεῖνο (itself referring to τοῦτο in ln. 1). For a note on Plotinus' penchant for using pronouns to designate the One in the treatise, cf. Leroux, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un*, 54.

¹³⁹ Narbonne, *La métaphysique de Plotin*, (Paris: J. Vrin, 1994), 35.

¹⁴⁰ VI.8 [39] 9, 1-3: ἀλλὰ πρὸς αὐτὸ εἴ τις λαμβάνοι τὸ 'συνέβη,' οὔτοι δεῖ πρὸς τὸ ὄνομα ἰστασθαι, ἀλλὰ ὅπως νοεῖ ὁ λέγων συνιέναι. τί οὖν νοεῖ;

to its own substance.”¹⁴¹ The ‘rash argument’ thus posits a sort of a radical indeterminacy at the heart of the One, in the sense that it could be (or perhaps could have been) anything, and there is no reason for why it is one way rather than another. If the One were to have a different nature or power, it would be something different, and, it is implied, there is nothing preventing it from being this way. Plotinus objects to this in the following way: “To this we must reply that it was not possible for it, since it is the principle of all, to happen to be, and certainly not to be worse, not even to be good but good in another way, a kind of lesser way.”¹⁴² In other words, because the Good is a principle, it must be in a certain way in order to be the cause of the things that come after it. The world exhibits a certain necessary structure which would be undermined if the Good were capable of being something else. Plotinus thus elicits the necessity of the One, although he avoids speaking of it as such, in order to combat the view of it as capable of being otherwise. That Plotinus here speaks of a certain impotency of the One ought not to trouble us. For, in a wonderful inversion, he says that the ability for change is in fact weakness and inability: “for to be capable of opposites belongs to incapacity to remain with the best.”¹⁴³ Plotinus is here drawing upon a deeply Platonic intuition. In essence, he has restated Plato’s argument for the changelessness of the gods in the *Republic* with which we opened this chapter.

Plotinus advances his criticism against the accidental occurrence of the good even farther, in order to say that by making the Good exist by chance, one loses any basis for rationality:

For if he attributes to chance the nature which takes away the ‘happened to be’ from others, wherever will existence which is not by chance come to be? But this principle takes away the ‘as it chanced’ from the others by giving them form and limit and shape, and one cannot attribute anything to chance in things which come to be rationally in this

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* 9, 3-6: τοῦτο, ὅτι ταύτην ἔχον τὴν φύσιν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν ἀρχή· καὶ γὰρ εἰ ἄλλην εἶχεν, ἦν ἂ τοῦτο, ὅπερ ἦν, καὶ εἰ χεῖρον, ἐνήργησεν ἂν κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ οὐσίαν. I follow Kirchoff’s deletion of ἀρχή in ln. 5.

¹⁴² *ibid.* 9, 6-8: πρὸς δὴ τὸ τοιοῦτον λεκτέον, ὅτι μὴ οἷον τε ἦν ἀρχὴν οὐσαν πάντων τὸ τυχόν εἶναι, μὴ ὅτι χεῖρον, ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ ἀγαθὸν μὲν, ἀγαθὸν δὲ ἄλλως, οἷον ἐνδεέστερον.

¹⁴³ *ibid.* 21, 5-7: καὶ γὰρ τὸ τὰ ἀντικείμενα δύνασθαι ἀδυναμίας ἐστὶ τοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἀρίστου μένειν.

way, but attribute their cause to reason; but chance is in what does not come to be as a result of what goes before and consistently, but is mere coincidence. But as for the principle of all reason and order and limit, how could one attribute the existence of this to chance?¹⁴⁴

Plotinus thus takes great care to distinguish what is below reason and falls short of it from what is above reason as its principle: the former of these he accords with chance, and the latter with the Good. His point is that order cannot emerge from disorder, nor reason from irrationality (‘wherever will existence which is not by chance come to be?’), which would be the consequence of making the Good occur by chance. Plotinus’ employment of the language of freedom of the One is thus designed in part to combat the notion of irrationality of the first principle implied in the language of chance or ‘happening,’ and he will come to emphasize this point again later in the treatise.¹⁴⁵

Plotinus is, however, no less wary of asserting the One as simply necessary. As he says, the Good “is not held fast by necessity, but is itself the necessity and law of others. Did necessity, then, bring itself into existence? No, that did not come into existence; the other things after it came to existence through it. How then could that which is before existence come to existence by either another’s agency or by its own?”¹⁴⁶ Plotinus thus restricts necessity to relation between the principle and the principled, while denying that the One itself is in some way compelled by necessity. It is necessary for other things, but this is a one-sided dependence that does not exercise any constraint upon the One in return. In order to safeguard against this

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.* 10, 4-12: εἰ γὰρ τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ἀφαιροῦσαν τὸ 'οὕτω συνέβη' ἀνατίθησι τύχη, ποῦ ποτε τὸ μὴ ἐκ τύχης εἶναι γένοιτο; ἀφαιρεῖ δὲ τὸ 'ὡς ἔτυχεν' αὕτη ἡ ἀρχὴ τῶν ἄλλων εἶδος καὶ πέρασ καὶ μορφήν διδοῦσα, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τοῖς οὕτω κατὰ λόγον γινομένοις τύχη ἀναθεῖναι, ἀλλ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο λόγῳ τὴν αἰτίαν, ἐν δὲ τοῖς μὴ προηγουμένως καὶ μὴ ἀκολούθως, ἀλλὰ συμπτώμασιν, ἡ τύχη. τὴν δὲ ἀρχὴν παντὸς λόγου τε καὶ τάξεως καὶ ὅρου πῶς ἂν τις τὴν τούτου ὑποστασιν ἀναθεῖη τύχη;

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.* 18, 42 ff.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.* 10, 34-38: οὐκ ἀνάγκη κατελιμμένον, ἀλλ' αὐτοῦ ἀνάγκης τῶν ἄλλων οὔσης καὶ νόμου. αὐτὴν οὖν ἡ ἀνάγκη ὑπέστησεν; ἢ οὐδὲ ὑπέστη τῶν ἄλλων ὑποστάντων τῶν μετ' αὐτὸ δι' αὐτό. τὸ οὖν πρὸ ὑποστάσεως πῶς ἂν ἢ ὑπ' ἄλλου ἢ ὑφ' αὐτοῦ ὑπέστη;

conception, Plotinus will assert the absolute singularity and self-productivity of the One to show that its determination is derived not from another, but from itself: “But the principle must be better than all the things which come after it; so it must be something defined. But I mean defined by uniqueness and not of necessity; for there was no necessity; for necessity is what comes after the principle, and even this does not exercise constraint in them; but this uniqueness comes from the principle itself.”¹⁴⁷

This point deserves emphasis because even the most astute interpreters have claimed that Plotinus’ account of the liberty of the One reveals itself in the end to be no more than necessity masquerading as freedom. Thus, in contrast to the Gnostic God who wills to create the world at a particular time, Narbonne says that “The ‘will’ of Plotinian One wills in fact nothing, it is simply the remodelled expression of its infinite potency asserting itself as absolute necessity and eternity.”¹⁴⁸ Leroux takes this position to be so incontrovertibly the case that for him a central *quaestio vexata* of the treatise is: “à quoi peut servir l’introduction de la volonté, si c’est pour devoir en contredire les présupposés par le concept de nécessité?”¹⁴⁹ Yet, as Plotinus argues, the language of necessity can only apply to the One in a sort of *post hoc* and relative manner, that is, in describing its relation to what comes after it. This is not an unfamiliar tactic in Plotinus’ discourses on the One. Insofar as all language about the One wrongly ascribes to it determination and finitude, so that Plotinus must say in the end the first principle is properly called neither the One nor the Good,¹⁵⁰ so too must one come to recognize eventually the inadequacy of the predicate of necessity and deny it. Trouillard thus argues that to make the One into a simple

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.* 9, 9-13: ἀλλὰ δεῖ κρείττονα εἶναι τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀπάντων τῶν μετ’ αὐτήν. ὥστε ὠρισμένον τι. λέγω δὲ ὠρισμένον, ὅτι μοναχῶς καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἀνάγκης· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἦν ἀνάγκη· ἐν γὰρ τοῖς ἐπομένοις τῇ ἀρχῇ ἡ ἀνάγκη καὶ οὐδὲ αὐτὴ ἔχουσα ἐν αὐτοῖς τὴν βίαν· τὸ δὲ μοναχὸν τοῦτο παρ’ αὐτοῦ.

¹⁴⁸ Narbonne, “New Reflections on God as *Causa Sui*,” 138. Cf. *idem.*, *La métaphysique de Plotin*, 34.

¹⁴⁹ Leroux, *Traité sur la volonté et la liberté de l’Un*, 42.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. V.5 [32] 6, 27 ff., and VI.9 [9] 6, 39-42 for the One and the Good respectively.

necessity is to insert it once again into the domain of the intelligible: “il n’y a dans l’origine, c’est-à-dire dans l’Un, ni normes, ni possibles, puisqu’il n’y a en lui aucun intelligible (ce qui supprime la question de savoir si la procession est nécessaire ou contingente: comment la procession des normes serait-elle nécessaire? Comment la procession des possibles serait-elle contingente?)”¹⁵¹ Because the One is the origin of both what is necessary and what it contingent, it must therefore retain an essential difference from each of these.

In emphasizing so strongly Plotinus’ strictures on speaking about the One, it may appear ironic that *Ennead* VI.8 [39] is frequently regarded as his greatest departure from the *via negativa*. Plotinus’ central strategy in developing his account of the liberty of the One is to express, in a variety of ways, a primordial self-reflexive activity. All of these expressions, as Plotinus confesses, are abominations which imply a duality that is utterly foreign to the One. Why then does Plotinus develop this manner of speaking? As he explains, this discourse is developed not in order to give a correct theological account, but for the sake of persuading the soul: “But if one must bring in these names of what we are looking for, let it be said again that it was not correct to use them, because one must not make it two even for the sake of forming an idea of it; but now we must depart a little from correct thinking in our discourse for the sake of persuasion.”¹⁵² This is not the only instance in Plotinus’ corpus where he indicates that he will indulge in a persuasive account over what is more true and correct.¹⁵³ Indeed, these two modes of discourse cannot ultimately be held apart insofar as no discourse about the One can ultimately reveal its essence. The purpose of theological discourse, as Plotinus makes strikingly clear in the

¹⁵¹ Jean Trouillard, “Rencontre du néoplatonisme,” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 22 (1972): 7. Cf. also Lavaud, *Traité* 38, 285 n. 192, whose interpretation of this point is in line with Trouillard’s.

¹⁵² VI.8 [39] 13, 1-5: ἀλλ’ εἰ καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ταῦτα ἐπάγειν δεῖ τοῦ ζητουμένου, πάλιν αὖ λεγέσθω, ὡς τὰ μὲν οὐκ ὀρθῶς εἴρηται, ὅτι οὐ ποιητέον οὐδ’ ὡς εἰς ἐπίνοιαν δύο, τὰ δὲ νῦν τῆς πειθοῦς χάριν καὶ τι παρανοητέον ἐν τοῖς λόγοις.

¹⁵³ Cf. VI.4 [22] 4; VI.5 [23] 11; VI.7 [38] 40; and V.3 [49] 6. For this point I am indebted to Adam Labecki, “The One and the Many: Part I: The One,” *Dionysius* XXIV (2006): 78.

treatise written immediately prior to *Ennead* VI.8 [39], is rather altogether preparatory and didactic:

The knowledge or touching of the Good is the greatest thing, and Plato says it is the 'greatest study,' not calling the looking at it 'study,' the learning about it beforehand. We are taught about it by comparisons and negations and knowledge of the things which come from it, but we are put on the way to it by purifications and virtues and adorning and by gaining footholds in the intelligible and settling ourselves firmly there and feasting on its contents.¹⁵⁴

In the next chapter we shall examine more closely what the purificatory role of this discourse is. For now, we shall simply remark that although Plotinus must express the liberty of the One in terms that are clearly inadequate, it is in service of refuting an even more problematic account which arises in reaction to his more customary account. The reason Plotinus nowhere else speaks in the sort of terms we find in this treatise must be traced to the extreme idiosyncrasy of the objection against him, which requires an equally idiosyncratic response. The task of the reader, here as elsewhere in the *Enneads*, is to look beyond shortcomings of individual expressions about the One in order to grasp what they are trying to indicate.

Plotinus' articulation of the freedom of the One, then, follows a generally similar pattern across the treatise. First, he posits the will or wish or desire of the One, then the identity of this with either its substance or activity, and then concludes from this identity that the One makes or wills itself to be. A few examples of this will suffice:

1. For if we were to grant activities to him, and ascribe his activities to what we might call his will - for he does not act without willing - and his activities are what we might call his

¹⁵⁴ VI.7 [38] 36, 3-10: ἔστι μὲν γὰρ ἢ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ εἴτε γνῶσις εἴτε ἐπαφή μέγιστον, καὶ μέγιστον φησι τοῦτ' εἶναι μάθημα, οὐ τὸ πρὸς αὐτὸ ἰδεῖν μάθημα λέγων, ἀλλὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ μαθεῖν τι πρότερον. διδάσκουσι μὲν οὖν ἀναλογίαι τε καὶ ἀφαιρέσεις καὶ γνώσεις τῶν ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναβασμοὶ τινες, πορεύουσι δὲ καθάρσεις πρὸς αὐτὸ καὶ ἀρεταὶ καὶ κοσμήσεις καὶ τοῦ νοητοῦ ἐπιβάσεις καὶ ἐπ' αὐτοῦ ἰδρύσεις καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖ ἐστιάσεις. See also the excellent commentary on this passage in Plotinus, *Traité* 38, introduction, translation, commentary and notes by Pierre Hadot, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 44-50.

substance, his will and his substance will be the same thing. But if this is so, as he wills so also he is.¹⁵⁵

2. For if his will comes from himself and is something like his own work, and this will is the same thing as his existence, then in this way he will have brought himself into existence, so that he is not what he happened to be but what he himself willed.¹⁵⁶
3. But he is, if we may say so, borne to his own interior, as it were well pleased with himself, the ‘pure radiance’ being himself this with which he is pleased; but this means that he gives himself existence.¹⁵⁷
4. And then, further, if he exists supremely because he so to speak holds to himself and so to speak looks to himself, he as it were makes himself and is not as he chanced to be but as he wills.¹⁵⁸

All of these examples serve to argue that the One, as Plotinus says near the conclusion, is “not at all before willing.”¹⁵⁹ What Plotinus wishes to avoid is to begin with a given determination of the One which could be seen as either accidental or necessitated. Bréhier states the general problem very elegantly: “dès que vous essayez de le déterminer [sc. l’Un] et de l’atteindre par la pensée vous en faites un être, et dès lors il n’est plus origine; et parce qu’il est un être on doit demander à nouveau quelle est son origine.”¹⁶⁰ In order to preserve the radical originality of the One, Plotinus begins with its will, and thereby posits a liberty which is prior to all determinations and the origin of them. If one were to ask then why the One is the way that it is, the response Plotinus furnishes is that it is ‘as it willed to be.’

In order to demonstrate that the will of the One is a self-will, rather than the will of something else or a random or arbitrary will, Plotinus takes recourse to the determination of the

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.* 13, 7-8: ἡ βούλησις αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡ οὐσία ταῦτόν ἐσται.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.* 13, 55-59: εἰ γὰρ ἡ βούλησις παρ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ οἷον ἔργον αὐτοῦ, αὕτη δὲ ταῦτόν τῇ ὑποστάσει αὐτοῦ, αὐτὸς ἂν οὕτως ὑποστήσας ἂν εἶη αὐτόν· ὥστε οὐχ ὅπερ ἔτυχεν ἔστιν, ἀλλ’ ὅπερ ἐβουλήθη αὐτός.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.* 16, 12-15: ὁ δ’ εἰς τὸ εἶσω οἷον φέρεται αὐτοῦ οἷον ἑαυτὸν ἀγαπήσας, αὐγὴν καθαρὰν, αὐτὸς ὦν τοῦτο, ὅπερ ἠγάπησε· τοῦτο δ’ ἐστὶν ὑποστήσας.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 16, 18-22: ἔτι τοίνυν, εἰ ἔστι μάλιστα, ὅτι πρὸς αὐτόν οἷον στηρίζει καὶ οἷον πρὸς αὐτόν βλέπειν, οἷον ποιοῖ ἂν αὐτόν, οὐχ ὡς ἔτυχεν ἄρα ἐστίν, ἀλλ’ ὡς αὐτὸς θέλει. For other examples cf. *ibid.*, 15, 2-10; 16, 27-30; 20, 4-11. 20, 23 ff.; 21, 11 ff.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.* 21, 15-16: οὐδὲ τὸ βουλήσεως ἄρα.

¹⁶⁰ Bréhier, “L’idée du néant et le problème de l’origine radicale dans le néoplatonisme grec,” in *Études de philosophie antique*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 248.

First as the Good: “For the nature of the Good is in reality the will of himself, a self not corrupted nor following his own nature, but choosing himself because there was nothing else at all that he might be drawn to.”¹⁶¹ Leroux has called this state “la nécessité de la perfection,”¹⁶² and Plotinus does speak of it normatively: “his willing is not irrational, or of the random, or just as it happened to occur to him, but as *it ought to be* since nothing there is random.”¹⁶³ But although Plotinus holds that the One cannot be otherwise, the language of necessity, as we have already argued, is somewhat misguided. For, the source of this normativity - the ‘ought’ of which Plotinus speaks - is the steadfast desire of the One for itself. It is the language of the Good, understood at the same time as liberty and power, that Plotinus will substitute in the place of necessity: “And if he is not master of his substance, but is who he is, as he did not bring himself into existence but manages with himself as he is, then he is what he is of necessity and could not be otherwise. Now he is not as he is because he cannot be otherwise, but *because being what he is is best*.”¹⁶⁴ Plotinus’ account of liberty is thus not so much a veiled necessity, as it is a reinterpretation and radically new expression of Plato’s account of the Good. At the same time, it is this fundamental satisfaction with itself, and the perfect love and enjoyment with itself, which makes the freedom of the One the paradigmatic ethical ideal, and it this which we shall examine more closely in the next chapter.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.* 13, 38-40: ἔστι γὰρ ὅτως ἡ ἀγαθοῦ φύσις θελησις αὐτοῦ οὐ δεδεκαμένου οὐδὲ τῆ ἑαυτοῦ φύσει ἐπιπομένου, ἀλλ’ ἑαυτὸν ἐλομένου, ὅτι μηδὲ ἦν ἄλλο, ἵνα πρὸς ἐκεῖνο ἐλθῆ. Cf. *ibid.* 9, 13 ff; Augustine, *Confessions*, 2 vols, text and translation by Pierre de Labriolle (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1961), VII.iv.6: *nullo enim prorsus modo uiolat corruptio deum nostrum, nulla uoluntate, nulla necessitate, nullo inprouiso casu, quoniam ipse est deus et quod sibi uult, bonum est, et ipse est idem bonum.*

¹⁶² Leroux, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l’Un*, 304.

¹⁶³ VI.8 [39] 18, 41-43: ἡ δὲ θέλησις οὐκ ἄλογος ἦν οὐδὲ τοῦ εἰκῆ οὐδ’ ὡς ἐπῆλθεν αὐτῷ, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἔδει, ὡς οὐδενὸς ὄντος ἐκεῖ εἰκῆ. My emphasis. This passage is the primary basis for Leroux’s interpretation of the One as necessity. Cf. Leroux, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l’Un*, 382-384.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.* 10, 23-26: καὶ εἰ μὴ οὐσίας δέ, ἀλλ’ ὦν ὅς ἐστιν, οὐχ ὑποστήσας ἑαυτὸν, χρώμενος δὲ ἑαυτῷ οἷός ἐστιν, ἐξανάγκης τοῦτο ἂν εἶη, ὅ ἐστι, καὶ οὐκ ἂν ἄλλως. ἢ οὐχ ὅτι οὐκ ἄλλως, οὕτως, ἀλλ’ ὅτι τὸ ἄριστον οὕτως.

In this chapter we have considered some of the possible sources for Plotinus' account of divine liberty, and although it is not possible to say for certain who Plotinus' interlocutor is, the central issues of the treatise can be derived from this investigation. We then examined how Plotinus seeks to develop his account of divine liberty in opposition both to the threat of necessity and contingency, which he does by developing an account of the One as a self-reflexive activity. The source of this reflexivity, however, is the desire of the Good for itself, which, as we shall see in the next chapter, is shared between us and it.

Chapter 4: Procession and Return

4.1 From the ‘Will of Itself’ to the ‘Will of the All’

...this is its beginning and end; its beginning because it comes from thence, and its end because its good is there. And when it comes to be there it becomes itself and what it was; for what it is here and among the things of this world is a falling away and an exile and a ‘shedding of wings.’¹⁶⁵

Although we have examined the liberty of the One largely in isolation from other topics it might inform, it is implicated within the whole structure of reality. By putting the liberty at the ground of reality, as the source of everything else, Plotinus realises that something of its character is necessarily passed down in the procession of all things. Thus, after an extended discussion of the relation of Intellect to the One, Plotinus comes to the following conclusion:

It [sc. Intellect] is not chance, but each and every part of it is rational principle and cause, but the One is cause of the cause. He is then in a greater degree something like the most causative and truest of the causes, possessing all together the intellectual causes which are going to be from him and generative of what is not as it chanced but as he himself willed.¹⁶⁶

Plotinus thus connects the One’s will of itself to its productive role, and in particular to its possessing subsequent causes in itself, in order to conclude that what comes from the One is also ‘as he himself willed.’ This notion has been regarded as thoroughly un-Plotinian and belonging more characteristically to subsequent Neoplatonists, and especially the Trinitarian theology of

¹⁶⁵ VI.9 [9] 9, 20-24: τοῦτο αὐτῆ ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος· ἀρχὴ μὲν, ὅτι ἐκεῖθεν, τέλος δέ, ὅτι τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἐκεῖ. καὶ ἐκεῖ γενομένη γίγνεται αὐτὴ καὶ ὅπερ ἦν· τὸ γὰρ ἐνταῦθα καὶ ἐν τούτοις ἔκπτωσις καὶ φυγὴ καὶ περὸρρύησις. Cf. *Phaedrus* 248c.

¹⁶⁶ VI.8 [39] 18, 37-41: οὐ τύχη, ἀλλὰ καθέκαστον αὐτοῦ λόγος καὶ αἰτία αἴτιον δὲ ἐκεῖνο τοῦ αἰτίου. μειζόνως ἄρα οἷον αἰτιώτατον καὶ ἀληθέστερον αἰτία, ὁμοῦ μάσας ἔχον τὰς μελλούσας ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἔσεσθαι νοεράς αἰτίας καὶ γεννητικὸν τοῦ οὐχ ὡς ἔτυχεν, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἠθέλησεν αὐτός. Cf. V.3 [49] 15, 27-33.

Christian Neoplatonists. According to Hadot, the Anonymous Commentator of the *Parmenides*¹⁶⁷ and Victorinus understood the creation of Intellect as exteriorisation and manifestation of what is hidden in the One, whereas Plotinus, in contrast, insists upon an incommensurable difference between the first two hypostases:

S'il y a en quelque sorte chez Plotin une autogénération de l'Intelligence, c'est simplement parce que l'Un reste immobile lorsque procède la seconde hypostase, mais ce n'est pas parce que celle-ci préexisterait sous une forme quelconque dans l'Un. De même si l'Un a une volonté, c'est uniquement une volonté d'être lui-même, ce n'est surtout pas une volonté d'être le Tout ou une volonté du Tout qui préexisterait dans l'Un.¹⁶⁸

Yet, it is clear from the passage above that Plotinus does acknowledge a sense in which Intellect pre-exists in the One, and that, when this is joined with the understanding of the One as the will of itself, the One does will the All. It may be that the tradition of Porphyry and Victorinus carried on this aspect of Plotinus' thought, whereas the Greek-speaking pagan Neoplatonists reacted specifically against it, as Narbonne has suggested.¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, there are grounds to trace some characteristics of this former tradition back to Plotinus. As *Ennead* VI.8 [39] tends more in this direction of this tradition than that of Iamblichus or Proclus, it is with this side of Plotinus' thought that we shall be more concerned.

¹⁶⁷ Hadot identified the commentator as Porphyry, although many other identifications have subsequently been proposed. Indeed, it can no longer be said for certain that the work is post-Plotinian. This topic has been recently reexamined in great depth in *Plato's Parmenides and its Heritage*, 2 vols., edited by John D. Turner and Kevin Corrigan, (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2010). For a few differing perspectives, cf. Alain Lenoùld, "Negative Theology and Radical Conceptual Purification in the Anonymous *Commentary* on Plato's *Parmenides*," in *ibid.* vol. 1, 257-274; Tuomas Rasimus, "Porphyry and the Gnostics: Reassessing Pierre Hadot's Thesis in Light of the Second- and Third-Century Sethian Treatises," in *ibid.* vol. 2., 81-110; Luc Brisson "Columns VII–VIII of the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides*: Vestiges of a Logical Interpretation," in *ibid.* vol. 2, 111-118; Kevin Corrigan, "Platonism and Gnosticism: The Anonymous *Commentary* on the *Parmenides*: Middle or Neoplatonic?" in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures, and Texts*, edited by J. Turner and R. Majercik (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 141–77; G. Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato's "Parmenides"*, (Bern: Paul Haut, 1999). Lenoùld and Brisson both argue for a post-Plotinian author; Bechtle and Corrigan for a pre-Plotinian one; and Rasimus argues that it was written by a Sethian Gnostic.

¹⁶⁸ Pierre Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus*, vol. 1, (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), 305. Cf. Leroux, *Traité sur la liberté et volonté de l'Un*, 220.

¹⁶⁹ Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis*, 165-180.

Hadot supports his interpretation on the well-known Plotinian dictum that the One gives what it does not have, and Lavaud is equally ready to cite it in order to dispel some of what he considers the more problematic passages of *Ennead* VI.8 [39].¹⁷⁰ There is reason to believe, however, that this is not Plotinus' final word on the matter. The absolute difference between the One and Intellect that this phrase implies, which is often invoked by Plotinus to affirm the simplicity of the One against Intellect, creates a potentially unbridgeable rupture between the first two hypostases. On one occasion, after coming to the conclusion that the One gives being, thought, and awareness without being any of them, Plotinus presents the following dilemma: "But how does he give them? By having them or by not having them? But how did he give what he does not have? But if he has them he is not simple; if he does not have them how does the multiplicity come from him?"¹⁷¹ Thus, to assert a complete difference between the One and what it gives raises the problem of how the simple can be the origin of the multiple. After developing the issue a little further, Plotinus restates the problem along with his solution: "But how is that One the principle of all things? Is it because as principle it keeps them in being, making each one of them exist? Yes, and because it brought them into existence. But how did it do so? By possessing them beforehand. But it has been said that in this way it will be a multiplicity. But it had them in such a way as not to be distinct: they are distinguished on the second level, in reason."¹⁷² Even outside of the context of *Ennead* VI.8 [39], therefore, Plotinus is led to affirm that the One does possess the things subsequent to it, albeit with the crucial provision that it possesses them without distinction. Thus, the origin of multiplicity is not simply its difference

¹⁷⁰ Cf. VI.7 [38] 15, 19-20; 17, 3 ff. Lavaud, *Traité* 39, 295-296, n. 240; 317 n. 346.

¹⁷¹ V.3 [49] 15, 1-3: ἀλλὰ πῶς παρασχών; ἢ τῷ ἔχειν <ἢ τῷ μὴ ἔχειν>. ἀλλ' ἂ μὴ ἔχει, πῶς παρέσχε; ἀλλ' εἰ μὲν ἔχων, οὐχ ἀπλοῦς· εἰ δὲ μὴ ἔχων πῶς ἐκ αὐτοῦ τὸ πλήθος;

¹⁷² *ibid.* 27-32: ὅπως δὲ ἐκεῖνο ἀρχὴ τῶν πάντων; ἄρα, ὅτι αὐτὰ σφίζει ἐν ἑκαστῶν αὐτῶν ποιήσασα εἶναι; ἢ καὶ ὅτι ὑπέστησεν αὐτά. πῶς δὴ; ἢ τῷ πρότερον ἔχειν αὐτά. ἀλλ' εἴρηται, ὅτι πλήθος οὕτως ἔσται. ἀλλ' ἄρα οὕτως εἶχεν ὡς μὴ διακεκριμένα· τὰ δ' ἐν τῷ δευτέρῳ διεκέκριτο τῷ λόγῳ.

from the One, or an abandonment of its unity, but an unfolding and distinguishing of what is indistinct in it.¹⁷³ This response will become so canonical in Neoplatonic thought that one finds it in such a figure as Eriugena, who, although having no access to its original source, employs it in a discussion of the relation of the divine names to their principle.¹⁷⁴

Plotinus, however, takes care to guard against confounding the undifferentiated unity of the all with the all itself. Thus, in contrast to that which actually is all things, the One is “the power of all things.”¹⁷⁵ Plotinus certainly does not mean by this ‘power’ (δύναμις) a potentiality in the weaker sense of what is not fully actualized or what itself becomes actualized in all things, but rather that which is the source of actuality.¹⁷⁶ Maintaining the difference between these two is crucial to preserving both the One and what comes after it: “For the origin is not divided up into the All, for if it were divided up it would destroy the All too; and the All could not any more come into being if the origin did not remain by itself, different from it.”¹⁷⁷ At the same time, Plotinus resists the notion that production of Intellect in any way adds to One, as if something new were produced which was not already implicit in its principle. To illustrate this in *Ennead* VI.8 [39], Plotinus employs one of his favourite metaphors, that of a circle. In his customary way, he compares the centre of the circle to the One, and the radii extending from it to Intellect. But, the full circle does not complete or perfect its centre; instead “what that centre is like is

¹⁷³ For a contrary account of the One’s production, cf. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie, et Ereignis*, 190-192.

¹⁷⁴ Eriugena, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae) Liber Tertius*, edited by I.P. Sheldon-Williams, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981), 624a: *Ipsae siquidem primae causae in se ipsis unum sunt et simplices nullique cognito ordine diffinitae aut a se inuicem segregatae. Hoc enim in effectibus suis patiuntur et sicut in monade omnis numerorum multiplicatio progreditur in infinitum, nullus tamen numerus ab alio numero discernitur.* Cf. Stephen Gersh, “L’*Ordo Naturalis* des causes primordiales. La transformation ériugénienne de la doctrine dionysienne des noms divins,” *Les Études philosophiques* 104, no. 1 (2013): 57-78.

¹⁷⁵ V.3 [49] 15, 32-33: δύναμις πάντων.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Narbonne, *La métaphysique de Plotin*, 30-34. Ham notes that this phrase is remarkably used not only of the One itself but also Intellect’s pre-noetic vision of the One at VI.7 [38] 17, 33. What I say below is indebted to his analysis of the One as ‘developed without being developed.’ Cf. Plotinus, *Traité 49*, introduction, translation, notes and commentary by Bertrand Ham, *Les Écrits de Plotin*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2000), 250-253.

¹⁷⁷ III.8 [30] 10, 17-19: οὐ γὰρ μερίζεται εἰς τὸ πᾶν ἢ ἀρχή· μερισθεῖσα γὰρ ἀπόλεσεν ἂν καὶ τὸ πᾶν, καὶ οὐδ’ ἂν ἔτι γένοιτο μὴ μενούσης τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐφ’ ἑαυτῆς ἐτέρας οὐσης.

revealed through the lines; it is as if it was spread out without having been spread out.”¹⁷⁸ In other words, the full development of the All is already present implicitly in the One, which the generation of the All reveals more than it achieves.

The assimilation of the One’s will of itself with its being the cause of all things is what provides the ground of providence: “we affirm that each and every thing in the All, and this All here itself, is as it would have been if the free choice of its maker had willed it, and its state is as if this maker proceeding regularly in his calculations with foresight had made it according to his providence.”¹⁷⁹ This recalls at once Plotinus’ discussion in the treatise written immediately prior to *Ennead* VI.8 [39], where he endeavours to give an account of creation and ordering of the world without attributing process or deliberation to Intellect. His solution is to say that at the level of Intellect things are one with their reasons and their causes, so that “if you open each individual form itself back upon itself, you find the reason why in it.”¹⁸⁰ It is only in the realm of temporal and spatial extension that things appear separately from their causes, and where one can raise the question of planning something ahead of time, but in the eternity of Intellect the future and the present coincide such that “if then the future is already present, it must necessarily be present as if it had been thought out beforehand with a view to what comes later.”¹⁸¹ The refinement that Plotinus puts on this doctrine in *Ennead* VI.8 [39] is that he traces the reasoning and planning of the cosmos back to the choosing and willing of its maker. Just as the sensible world exhibits an order that appears to be the result of planning, but in fact comes from timeless

¹⁷⁸ VI.8 [39] 18, 17-18: ἐμφαίνεται διὰ τῶν γραμμῶν, οἷόν ἐστιν ἐκεῖνο, οἷον ἐξελιχθὲν οὐκ ἐξεληλιγμένον.

¹⁷⁹ VI.8 [39] 17, 1-4: ἕκαστα τὰ ἐν τῷ παντὶ καὶ τότε τὸ πᾶν οὕτως ἔχειν, ὡς ἂν ἔσχεν, ὡς ἢ τοῦ ποιοῦντος προαίρεσις ἠθέλησε, καὶ οὕτως ἔχειν, ὡς ἂν προϊέμενος καὶ προῖδὼν ἐν λογισμοῖς κατὰ πρόνοιαν οὗτος εἰργάσατο. For an examination of Plotinus’ doctrine in the broader context of ancient and medieval reflections on providence, cf. Hankey, “Neoplatonic Surprises: The Doctrine of Providence of Plotinus and his Followers both Conscious and Unconscious,” *Dionysius* XXVII (2009): 117-126.

¹⁸⁰ VI.7 [38] 2, 18-19: εἰ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος ἕκαστον πρὸς αὐτὸ ἀναπτύττοις, εὐρήσεις ἐν αὐτῷ τὸ 'διὰ τί.'

¹⁸¹ VI.7 [38] 1, 51-52: εἰ οὖν ἤδη πάρεστι τὸ μέλλον, ἀνάγκη οὕτω παρεῖναι, ὡς προνενομημένον εἰς τὸ ὕστερον.

principles, so we might say that it appears the result of the willing and choosing of a creator, but the creator's will is nothing other than an affirmation of its own goodness and fecundity.

According to Bréhier, the central *quaestio vexata* of Plotinus' philosophy is: why is it necessary that there be something after the One?¹⁸² What we have come to see is that the One is essentially productive. It contains within itself the All that develops out of it. On one occasion Plotinus describes this as the fecundity of perfection: "all things when they come to perfection produce; the One is always perfect and therefore produces everlastingly."¹⁸³ What we see in *Ennead* VI.8 [39] is that Plotinus puts the self-willing of the One as the foundation for this fecund perfection. In its willing of itself, the One wills to create that which comes after it. In other words, the totality of the procession, while necessarily other than the One, is not ultimately opposed to it. It is therefore not out of place to say, *pace* Hadot, that the procession is the One's manifestation or exteriorization.

To speak of the procession without also examining the return would, however, be to tell only half of the story. We may agree with Trouillard that "l'essentiel de la procession est dans la conversion à multiples formes de l'être vers son origine. Là se trouve la synergie féconde de l'engendré et du générateur. La procession plotinienne est avant tout ascendante. C'est un accession non un retour qui annule un aller."¹⁸⁴ If the One contains the full development of that which comes after it, so also may we say that it is the source of the return to itself.

¹⁸² Bréhier, *La philosophie de Plotin*, 40.

¹⁸³ V.1 [10] 6, 38-39: πάντα δὲ ὅσα ἤδη τέλεια γεννᾷ· τὸ δὲ αἰεὶ τέλειον αἰεὶ καὶ αἰδίον γεννᾷ.

¹⁸⁴ Trouillard, *La procession plotinienne*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 5-6. Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, revised text with translation, introduction, and commentary by E.R. Dodds, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933), Prop. 31, 33, 146. Dodds comments on Prop. 33, "Procession and reversion together constitute a single movement, the diastole-systole which is the life of the universe."

4.2 From Procession to Reversion

In examining some of the features of the procession in Plotinus' thought, E.R. Dodds remarked that for Plotinus "causation is not an event: it is a relationship of timeless dependence by which the intelligible world is sustained in eternal being, the sensible world in a perpetual becoming comparable to the 'continuous creation' in which some astronomers now believe."¹⁸⁵ This is an idea that we have already encountered while considering the Gnostics, whose doctrine of a temporal creation Plotinus sought to oppose. The 'timeless dependence' of the lower upon the higher, however, not only describes a feature of the higher principles - that their creative act is eternal, undiminished, and entirely devoid of process - but also entails that these principles are in some sense ever present to that which is below them. As Plotinus says, "For we are not cut off from him [sc. the One] or separate, even if the nature of body has intruded and drawn us to itself, but we breathe and are preserved because that Good has not given its gifts and then gone away but is always bestowing them as long as it is what it is."¹⁸⁶ In other words, the eternal act of the Good is the reason first for our continual existence, but also gives us an unbroken link to it.

This perpetual connection of ourselves with our principle is what in *Ennead* VI.8 [39] offers the possibility of our freedom. For, the liberty of the One is at once the foundation for all things that are subsequent to it, and it is the end to which all things seek to return. Plotinus joins both of these aspects together in a single passage:

And as long as each individual did not have the Good, it wished something else, but in that it possesses the Good it wills itself, and neither is this kind of presence by chance nor is its substance outside its will, and it is by this Good that its substance is defined and by this that it belongs to itself. If then it is by this that each thing makes itself, it becomes, I

¹⁸⁵ E.R. Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus," 3.

¹⁸⁶ VI.9 [9] 9, 7-11: οὐ γὰρ ἀποτετμήμεθα οὐδὲ χωρὶς ἐσμεν, εἰ καὶ παρεμπεσοῦσα ἡ σώματος φύσις πρὸς αὐτὴν ἡμᾶς εἴλκυσεν, ἀλλ' ἐμπνέομεν καὶ σφωζόμεθα οὐ δόντος, εἴτ' ἀποστάντος ἐκείνου, ἀλλ' ἀεὶ χορηγοῦντος ἕως ἂν ἢ ὅπερ ἐστί.

suppose obvious that that Good is primarily the kind of thing it is by its own agency, by which the other things also are able to be by their own agency.¹⁸⁷

Plotinus thus connects our will of the Good with its will of itself, because in our attainment of the Good, we no longer will it as something other. But, in the second part of the quotation, Plotinus considers this from the other perspective, which is to say that, because we are united to the Good, all of the characteristics that belong to it also belong to us. Thus, in this formative moment, we too exist as we will, and we also make our own substance. Or, in other words, the self-willing and self-making of the Good is also the self-willing and self-making of us, because this is our source. Lavaud seems to misread this passage in seeing Plotinus' reasoning as analogical: "si les autres réalités tiennent du Bien la puissance de s'autoconstituer, *a fortiori* le Bien se produira-t-il lui-même," which implies that "il est légitime de remonter analogiquement de l'effet (l'autoproduction de chaque être) à la cause (l'autoproduction du Bien)."¹⁸⁸ Plotinus does not, however, speak of the self-production of each being as an event distinct from, and a result of the self-production of the Good. When he says that each thing defines its substance 'by the Good,' this is to say that it defines itself in virtue of its union with the Good, and not as a secondary power or faculty derived from the Good. Trouillard is right to say that "La volonté par laquelle nous posons la nécessité est identique à celle par laquelle le Bien nous pose et se pose lui-même."¹⁸⁹

It is necessary to distinguish this freedom rigorously from that which belongs to our everyday embodied life. As Plotinus notes, our existence is owed to causes outside of us, which

¹⁸⁷ VI.8 [39] 13, 20-27: καὶ ἕως μὲν τὸ ἀγαθὸν μὴ εἶχεν ἕσαστον, ἠθέλησεν ἄλλο, ἧ δὲ ἔσχευ, ἑαυτὸ τε θέλει ἤδη καὶ ἔστιν οὔτε κατὰ τύχην ἢ τοιαύτη παρουσία οὔτε ἔξω τῆς βουλήσεως αὐτοῦ ἢ οὐσία, καὶ τούτῳ καὶ ὀρίζεται καὶ ἑαυτῆς ἔστι τούτῳ. εἰ οὖν τούτῳ αὐτὸ τι ἕκαστον ἑαυτὸ ποιεῖ, δῆλον δῆπου γίνεται ἤδη, ὡς ἐκεῖνο ἂν εἴη ἑαυτῶ πρώτως, ᾧ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἑαυτοῖς ἔστιν εἶναι.

¹⁸⁸ Lavaud, *Traité* 39, 295-296, n. 240.

¹⁸⁹ Trouillard, *La purification plotinienne*, 118-119.

exclude us from the radical originality that we find in the One: “how in general can something be self-originated which comes from something else and whose origin is referred to something else and has come to be as it is from thence?”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, there is a great danger in believing ourselves to possess this freedom immediately. Plotinus attributes the evil of the soul precisely to such audacious desire for independence:

The beginning of evil for them was audacity and coming to birth and the first otherness and the wishing to belong to themselves. Since they were clearly delighted with their own self-determination, running the opposite course and getting as far away as possible, they were ignorant even that they themselves came from that world; just as children who are immediately torn from their parents and brought up far away do not know who they themselves or their parents are.¹⁹¹

Our desire for freedom risks leading us away from the Good as much as it leads us to it. Plotinus’ employment of the language of birth and parenthood, however, serves to undermine the legitimacy of the independence of the soul. That is to say, regardless of the extent to which the soul believes itself to be free and independent, it can never efface its ties to that from which it came, just as the biological connection to one’s parents is permanent despite whatever circumstances might separate one from them. The irony of the soul’s attempt to emancipate itself from its source is that rather than finding liberty, the soul becomes ever more debased, dependent, oblivious, and alienated:

Since they do not any more see their father or themselves, they despise themselves through ignorance of their birth and honour other things, admiring everything rather than themselves, and astonished and delighted by and dependent on these [earthly] things, they broke themselves loose as far as they could in contempt of that from which they turned

¹⁹⁰ VI.8 [39] 2, 21-23: πῶς δ' ὅλως αὐτό τι παρ' αὐτοῦ, ὃ παρ' ἄλλου καὶ ἀρχὴν εἰς ἄλλο ἔχει κάκαεῖθεν γεγένηται οἷόν ἐστι;

¹⁹¹ V.1 [10] 1, 3-11: ἀρχὴ μὲν οὖν αὐταῖς τοῦ κακοῦ ἢ τόλμα καὶ ἢ γένησις καὶ ἢ πρώτη ἑτερότης καὶ τὸ βουληθῆναι δὲ ἑαυτῶν εἶναι. τῷ δὲ αὐτεξουσίῳ ἐπειδήπερ ἐφάνησαν ἡσθεῖσαι, πολλῶ τῷ κινεῖσθαι παρ' αὐτῶν κεχηρμέναι, τὴν ἐναντίαν δραμοῦσαι καὶ πλείστην ἀπόστασιν πεποιημέναι, ἡγνόησαν καὶ ἑαυτὰς ἐκεῖθεν εἶναι. ὥσπερ παῖδες εὐθὺς ἀποσπασθέντες ἀπὸ πατέρων καὶ πολὺν χρόνον πόρρω τραφέντες ἀγνοοῦσι καὶ ἑαυτοὺς καὶ πατέρας. Although Plotinus here speaks of the fall of the soul as a sort of voluntary action worthy of reprobation, he also explains it elsewhere as a spontaneous and necessary movement. Cf. Jean Trouillard, *La purification plotinienne*, 19-25.

away; so that their honour for these things here and their contempt of that from which they turned away is the cause of their utter ignorance of God. For what pursues and admires something else admits at the same time its own inferiority.¹⁹²

The remedy for this fallen soul, Plotinus explains, is to reawaken it to its actual nature, and to make the soul recognize that what it seeks futilely outside itself is properly found within. After a rousing speech illustrating how the soul animates the entire corporeal realm, Plotinus concludes with an admonition, “but if the bodily is worth pursuing because it is ensouled, why does one let oneself go and pursue another? But by admiring the soul in another, you admire yourself.”¹⁹³ The way upwards, then, is to convert inwards and discover our real nature, and thereby we are put into contact with our source.¹⁹⁴

A useful comparison may be drawn here between the supposed independence of the audacious soul and Plotinus’ critique of practical action that we examined in Chapter One. Plotinus was critical of practical action to the extent that it pursued ends outside of itself, and hence remained implicitly enslaved to external circumstances. But this poses problem for our understanding of the Good. For, if the Good appears also as something external and foreign to us, then it would seem that our desire for it is not less free than for the goods of the body. Plotinus, however, takes care to distinguish these two types of desire when he comes to compare the activity of Intellect to praxis. Since Intellect, unlike practical activity, is not urged on by external circumstances, it is impossible to say of it that “it is active according to its nature as if

¹⁹² V.1 [10] 1, 11-19: οὐτ' οὖν ἔτι ἐκεῖνον οὔτε ἐαυτὰς ὀρῶσαι, ἀτιμάσασαι ἐαυτὰς ἀγνοίᾳ τοῦ γένους, τιμήσασαι τᾶλλα καὶ πάντα μᾶλλον ἢ ἐαυτὰς θαυμάσασαι καὶ πρὸς αὐτὰ ἐκπλαγεῖσαι καὶ ἀγασθῆσαι καὶ ἐξηρητημένοι τούτων, ἀπέρρηξαν ὡς οἶον τε ἐαυτὰς ὧν ἀπεστράφησαν ἀτιμάσασαι· ὥστε συμβαίνει τῆς παντελοῦς ἀγνοίας ἐκεῖνου ἢ τῶνδε τιμῆ καὶ ἡ ἐαυτῶν ἀτιμία εἶναι αἰτία. ἅμα γὰρ διώκεται ἄλλο καὶ θαυμάζεται, καὶ τὸ θαυμάζον καὶ διῶκον ὁμολογεῖ χειρὸν εἶναι.

¹⁹³ *ibid.* 2, 49-51: εἰ δ' ὅτι ἐμψυχον διωκτὸν ἔσται, τί παρεῖς τι ἐαυτὸν ἄλλον διώκει; τὴν δὲ ἐν ἄλλῳ ψυχὴν ἀγάμενος σεαυτὸν ἄγασαι.

¹⁹⁴ On this central theme of ancient, medieval, and even some modern thought, cf. Hankey, “Conversion, Ontological and Secular: From Plato to Tom Jones,” *Número Cinq V*, no. 7 (July 2014), <http://numerocinqmagazine.com/2014/07/15/conversion-ontological-secular-from-plato-to-tom-jones-essay-wayne-j-hankey/>

its substance was one thing and its activity another.”¹⁹⁵ But even the activity of Intellect is a conditioned one, dependent upon its principle. Yet, as Plotinus shows, this dependence is not at all comparable to the constraint that belongs to practical activity: “And even if Intellect does have another principle, it is not outside it, but it is in the Good. And if it is active according to the Good, it is much more in its own power and free; *since one seeks freedom and being in one’s power for the sake of the Good.*”¹⁹⁶ Plotinus’ crucial point is that the Good is not to be considered as an external principle, otherwise its force would be an imposition. On the contrary, what constitutes servitude is precisely that which impedes one from pursuing the Good, even, we may say, if such a thing is chosen or willed: “that is enslaved which is not master of its going to the Good, but, since something stronger than it stands of it, it is enslaved to that and led away from its own goods. For it is for this reason that slavery is ill spoken of, not where one has no power to go to the bad, but where one has no power to go to one’s own good, but is led away to the good of another.”¹⁹⁷ As we have already seen, Plotinus is entirely opposed to the view that freedom has anything to do with the capability of selecting between alternatives, whether it is in the case of human action or the divine. His point here is essentially an elaboration of that: to pursue anything other than the Good is to have one’s desire thwarted, and this is the nature of servitude.

What makes our pursuit of the Good free is not only that it is the object of our desire, but that, because it is the source of ourselves, it is in the end not something foreign to us. Thus, our desire for the Good is for our original selves, our selves before they came to be distinct from

¹⁹⁵ VI.8 [39] 4, 26-28: ὡς πέφυκε [...] ἂν ἐνεργεῖν ἄλλης οὐσίας τῆς οὐσίας, τῆς δὲ ἐνεργείας.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.* 4, 32-36: καὶ εἰ ἄλλην δὲ ὁ νοῦς ἀρχὴν ἔχει, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔξω αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ. καὶ εἰ κατ’ ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἀγαθόν, πολὺ μᾶλλον <τὸ> ἐπ’ αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ ἐλεύθερον· ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἐλεύθερον καὶ τὸ ἐπ’ αὐτῷ τις ζητεῖ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ χάριν. My emphasis.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.* 4, 17-22: καὶ δουλεύει τοῦτο, ὃ μὴ κύριόν ἐστιν ἐπὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἐλθεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐτέρου κρείττονος ἐφεσθηκότος ἀπάγεται τῶν αὐτοῦ ἀγαθῶν δουλεῖον ἐκεῖνον. διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ δουλεία ψέγεται οὐχ οὗ τις οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν ἐπὶ τὸ κακὸν ἐλθεῖν, ἀλλ’ οὗ ἐπὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἀγόμενος πρὸς τὸ ἀγαθὸν τὸ ἄλλου.

their source: “But the ancient nature and the desire of the Good, which is of itself, leads to what is really One, and every nature presses on to this, to itself. For this is the good to this one nature, belonging to itself and being itself: but this is being one. It is in this sense that the Good is rightly said to be our own; therefore one must not seek it outside.”¹⁹⁸ Indeed, because the Good is none other than one original self, to act according to the Good is not to obey any rule other than our own. The attainment of the Good is nothing other than the achievement of a process of enfranchisement by which we rid ourselves of all extrinsic attachments which determine us from outside. Through this, we come to commune with the freedom of our source: “if we ever see in ourselves a nature of this kind which has nothing of the other things which are attached to us by which we have to experience whatever happens by chance [...], when we ascend to this and become this alone and let the rest go, what can we say of it except that we are more than free and more than independent?”¹⁹⁹

This moment of union and freedom is certainly not that which Bréhier feared: the abyss in which “toutes les relations morales et intellectuelles qui font une pensée et une personne se perdent.”²⁰⁰ Far from empty abstraction, this union coincides with the infinitely productive, and yet perfectly unified, source of all things. Nor may we say that the attainment of our true selves is a vanity. The true self and its liberty are altogether distinct from that which belongs to

¹⁹⁸ VI.5 [23] 16-21: ἡ δ' ἀρχαία φύσις καὶ ἡ ὄρεξις τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ὅπερ ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ, εἰς ἓν ὄντως ἄγει, καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦτο σπεύδει πᾶσα φύσις, ἐφ' ἑαυτήν. τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι τὸ ἀγαθὸν τῇ μιᾷ ταύτῃ φύσει τὸ εἶναι αὐτῆς καὶ εἶναι αὐτήν· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ εἶναι μίαν. οὕτω δὲ καὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὀρθῶς λέγεται οἰκεῖον· διὸ οὐδὲ ἕξω ζητεῖν αὐτὸ δεῖ. The thesis that the Good is ‘our own’ (οἰκεῖον) appears on several occasions in the works of Plato, although it is never endorsed outright. Cf. *Republic* IX 586e, *Symposium* 205e, and *Lysis* 222c. Francisco Gonzalez has argued that this is in fact the position of Plato at least in the *Lysis*. Cf. Francisco Gonzalez, “Plato’s *Lysis*: An Enactment of Philosophical Kinship,” *Ancient Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (1995): 69-90; *idem* “Socrates on Loving One’s Own: A Tradition Conception of ΦΙΛΙΑ Radically Transformed,” *Classical Philology* 95, no. 4 (2000): 379-398.

¹⁹⁹ VI.8 [39] 15, 14-23: εἴ ποτε καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐνίδοιμὲν τινα φύσιν τοιαύτην οὐδὲν ἔχουσαν τῶν ἄλλων, ὅσα συνήρτηται ἡμῖν, καθὰ πάσχειν ὃ τί περ ἂν συμβῆ [καὶ] κατὰ τύχην ὑπάρχει [...], εἰς ὃ δὴ ἀναβάντες καὶ γενόμενοι τοῦτο μόνον, τὰ δ' ἄλλα ἀφέντες, τί ἂν εἴποιμεν αὐτὸ ἢ ὅτι πλέον ἢ ἐλεύθεροι, καὶ πλέον αὐτεξούσιοι;

²⁰⁰ Bréhier, *La Philosophie de Plotin*, 135.

everyday embodied life, all that belongs to us as historical individuals.²⁰¹ The attainment of our end depends precisely on relinquishing these. As Trouillard says, “Pour que l’homme soit vraiment lui-même, il faut qu’il change sa confusion en complexité, son ambiguïté en ambivalence. Il faut qu’il transcende sa finitude d’essence en s’identifiant à son foyer générateur.”²⁰² But, because this freedom depends precisely on overcoming our humanity and our particularity, it would be wrong to suppose that this achievement is “ours,” that is, the result of our own striving and effort as humans and particular individuals. On the contrary, it is only thanks to the liberty of our principle that we are able to be free. It is the source of our being, and, as Plotinus says elsewhere, what lifts us by our love.²⁰³ This is what ensures that, at bottom, we are not the products of external forces, and what prevents us from being inescapably subject to them. It is in this sense that the One is not merely itself free, but is called by Plotinus the ‘liberator.’²⁰⁴ Trouillard’s remark could not be more apt: “seul un être déjà libre peut se libérer.”²⁰⁵ The inalienable presence of the Good, even in what is other than it, is what Plotinus expresses obliquely in his final words of the treatise: “but it is something which has its place high above everything, this which alone is free in truth, because it is not enslaved to itself, but is only itself and really itself, while every other thing is itself and something else.”²⁰⁶ Yet, if it is possible to rid ourselves of the ‘something else,’ then we too can truly and freely be ourselves: “That One, therefore, since it has no otherness is always present, and we are present to it when we have no otherness.”²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ Cf. Gerard O’Daly, *Plotinus’ Philosophy of the Self*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973) 82-94.

²⁰² Trouillard, *La purification plotinienne*, 210.

²⁰³ VI.7 [38] 22, 17-19.

²⁰⁴ *ibid.* 12, 19: ἐλευθεροποιόν.

²⁰⁵ Trouillard, “Rencontre du néoplatonisme,” 6.

²⁰⁶ VI.8 [39] 21, 30-33: ἀλλ’ ὑπεράνω κείμενον μόνον τοῦτο ἀληθείᾳ ἐλευθερον, ὅτι μηδὲ δουλεῦδόν ἐστιν ἑαυτῷ, ἀλλὰ μόνον αὐτὸ καὶ ὄντως αὐτὸ, εἴ γε τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστον αὐτὸ καὶ ἄλλο.

²⁰⁷ VI.9 [9] 8, 33-35: ἐκεῖνο μὲν οὖν μὴ ἔχον ἑτερότητα ἀεὶ πάρεστιν, ἡμεῖς δ’ ὅταν μὴ ἔχωμεν.

We have thus examined the liberty of the One in relation to the procession all things from it, and the return of them to it. In the first place, the self-will of the One was found to contain the will of the all, insofar as the One itself possesses indistinctly the complete articulation of that which comes after it. Thus, Plotinus placed the freedom of the Good at the root of providence and the ordering of the cosmos. At the same time, because the act of the Good is eternal, there is never a point where we do not retain some connection to it, and this is the basis of our return to it. Although presuming ourselves to possess the freedom of the One immediately in embodied life is terribly pernicious, through a conversion to ourselves we may come to our source and commune with its freedom.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

We began this study by considering the perceived threat that Plotinus' metaphysics posed to ethical philosophy, and in particular the problem of irrationalism in relation to freedom. Yet, we have found that this is a problem of which Plotinus was intimately aware, and which he consistently took pains to guard against. For Plotinus, as for much of the tradition that preceded him, our freedom is choosing whatever end might appear good at a particular time, but rather always being directed towards and pursuing the Good. Plotinus has no interest in legitimizing a freedom or self-determination that would allow one to act against what is universally and objectively good. Indeed, to act against the Good, even if one chooses to do so, is, for Plotinus, the essence of servitude. On this account, reason is crucial for dispelling the allures of false and imperfect ends. It is reason that reveals to us shortcomings of practical action, insofar as this remains enslaved to external circumstance. Thus, beyond its calculative function, reason initiates a conversion away from praxis towards self-related activity of Intellect which is subject to nothing outside of itself.

This same question of reason and irrationality appears again when considering the freedom of the One. Plotinus goes to great lengths to ensure that the will of the One, despite being entirely free from all external constraints and determinations, is not in any way capricious or even directed to anything other than itself. Indeed, one of the threats that Plotinus sees in the accusation that the One 'happened to be' is that this account conflates what is above reason with what is below it, so that it undoes the very basis of rationality and order. His account of the freedom of the One is thus, on one level, an attempt to preserve rationality against a blind

chance. While Plotinus firmly maintains that the One neither possesses intellect nor is intelligible, he would find it abhorrent to deduce from this that the One is irrational. Indeed, as Narbonne has shown, one of the central efforts of the Neoplatonists across the ages is to distinguish carefully an empty and sterile nothingness from the profoundly potent and productive One beyond being which is principle of all things.²⁰⁸

We may thus agree with Leroux that *Ennead* VI.8 [39] ought to be understood fundamentally as a reinterpretation of Plato's account of the Good.²⁰⁹ What underlies Plotinus' account of the freedom of the One, as well as his account of human freedom, is the determination of the First as the Good. In order to explain why the One wills itself rather than something else, Plotinus does not have recourse to any sort of formal or logical necessity, but rather to the One's own goodness, which begets a desire for itself. Having granted that the One has a will, there is, in effect, nothing else to which the One could or would be inclined aside from its own goodness. As we have seen, this creates a fundamental relation between the Good and what comes after it. Because the Good is the cause of everything else, in willing itself it wills itself as a cause, so that it is simultaneously a will of its own fecundity, indeed a will of the all. Thus, Plotinus directly connects the freedom of the One to ground of the procession, and the origin of providence. Although Plotinus, and Neoplatonists more generally, have been at times maligned for espousing a doctrine of mechanistic emanationism, our study has shown that, not unlike certain Christian thinkers to which he has been opposed, Plotinus is concerned to reconcile freedom and necessity in the nature of the first principle.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie, et Ereignis*, 21-70.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Leroux, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un*, 36.

In line with many common approaches to the problem of freedom, Plotinus is concerned with the problem of necessity and compulsion, but he also sees contingency and chance as no less troubling. We saw this first in his engagement with Stoic and Epicurean accounts of human action. Plotinus found that both of these in their own way abrogated human freedom: the Stoics by over determining the rule of Fate, and the Epicureans by granting too much to contingency and making the human subject to a blind chance. Plotinus' solution to these problems depended upon allowing for a real difference between Fate and the human individual, which was necessary both to preserve the individual in separation from Fate, while also granting something for Fate to act upon. These problems reappear in two significant ways when considering the freedom of the One. First, Plotinus finds that he must also defend the freedom of the One against both chance and necessity – a tension that was reflected in some of the possible sources for the objection stated against him in the middle of the treatise. Secondly, when considering the relation of the One to the All, Plotinus again needed to uphold rigorously the distinction between the ordering principle and that which is ordered, in this case, the plurality of causes indistinctly unified in the One and their differentiation in the All at the level of Intellect.

The only thing, however, that remains truly free of external causation is the Good itself, and so only it is properly free. Yet, for Plotinus, the higher principles are never entirely separate from us, and we always retain a connection to them even if we have become oblivious to it. The Good is our source, and indeed our true self, because what we have become is ourselves mixed up with otherness and difference. The ethical programme that Plotinus recommends, then, is for us to 'let go' of what we have accumulated in our departure from it and to become once again united to our principle. In this, we attain our freedom and our good, because insofar as we possess the Good we no longer differ from it. Crucially, just as the One is not irrational but

above reason and intellect, this ought to be seen as communion with our source above reason, and not an endorsement of irrationalism.

Ennead VI.8 [39] undeniably remains one of the most idiosyncratic treatises in the Plotinian corpus. But, as Trouillard says, “Plotin est le tourment de ceux qui aiment les oppositions tranchées.”²¹⁰ This resistance to categorization, far from diminishing Plotinus’ status as a philosopher, rather provides an indication of the richness of his thought. Although many of arguments and notions Plotinus here develops have no parallel elsewhere in the *Enneads*, we may trace this to the peculiar and unprecedented objection raised against him, which lead him to think and write in a novel way. We have attempted in our examination to consider carefully how Plotinus’ response to this objection, although unorthodox, coheres in many ways with the methods and doctrines we find elsewhere in the *Enneads*. Throughout our analysis we have drawn comparisons to other, perhaps more canonical, texts in Plotinus’ *oeuvre* in addition to the broader tradition in which he resides, in order to illustrate the continuities between this treatise and other works of Plotinus and his successors, as well as to highlight some of their deviations. If the argument of *Ennead* VI.8 [39] is unconventional for Plotinus, it is far from being unfaithful to his general philosophical tendencies. Indeed, because of its unconventionality, it offers a perspective on Plotinus’ thought to which we might otherwise be blind.

²¹⁰ Trouillard, *La purification plotinienne* 204.

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