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Consciousness and agency in Plotinus

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An agent is one who acts, or more precisely, one who initiates one's own actions. This concept of agency had been treated with sophistication long before Plotinus wrote the *Enneads*. In dialogues such as the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws* Plato develops a view according to which soul is essentially a self-mover and is the source of motion to all things that move and change in the cosmos, and in the *Republic* and the *Philebus* he develops a view according to which soul is the source of motion to one's actions.¹ In treatises such as the *Eudemian Ethics*, *Magna Moralia*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Physics* Aristotle develops a view according to which human beings are principles of action and stand in efficient causal relations towards their voluntary actions.² In the extant fragments and select treatises the Stoics develop a view according to which adult human beings initiate their action by rationally assenting to their impulsive impressions, which is 'up to them'.³

Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics influence Plotinus' theory of agency each in their own respective ways. However, Plotinus' theory of agency is unique in that it requires a degree of inwardness that Plato, Aristotle and even the Stoics lacked due to the fact that he locates the three principles of reality – One, Intellect and Soul – also in us.⁴ He writes, 'Just as in nature there are these three of which we have spoken, so we ought to think they are present also in ourselves. I do not mean in [ourselves as] beings of the sense world – for these three are separate [from the things of sense] but in

[ourselves as] beings outside of the realm of sense-perception' (V.1.10.5–8).⁵ For Plotinus the intelligible realm is not a supra-cosmic place from which one is separated during one's life and to which one hopes to return in the afterlife. Rather, since it is also located in us the intelligible realm is 'the self at its deepest level' (Hadot 1989: 25) and can be reached by turning inwards and ascending upwards (III.4.3.21–4, IV.8.1.1–11).

This theoretical doctrine has profound implications for practical agency. In order to be the sole causal source of our own actions Plotinus holds that we must derive the premises of our actions from Intellect. For which reason, the key to understanding his theory of agency is to understand his theory of consciousness, since being an agent involves being conscious in a very particular sense. In what follows I will show that awareness plays an essential role in Plotinus' theory of agency since in order to progress towards self-sufficiency and self-determination one must, first, be an embodied subject with the minimal level of unity that is required for impulse-directed movements and, second, one must become cognisant of one's intellect and establish right reason as the guiding force in one's embodied life. Without awareness neither of these would be possible since it plays the role of unifying the qualified body in the sensible world, and enabling the soul to turn inwards, ascend upwards, and recognise what is its own in the intelligible world.⁶

Consciousness

Extended in space and divisible into parts, bodies are by their very nature subject to being scattered (IV.2.1.12–17). Due to the fact that the parts that constitute a body differ from one another and from the whole of which they collectively are parts, bodies possess a limited degree of unity. They are one by continuity, i.e., they are unified to the extent that their parts are contiguous with one another (IV.2.1.60–3). The human body is no different. So how does something that is essentially extended, divisible, and subject to dispersion acquire the unity that is required for impulse-directed

¹ See *Rep.* 437b–444a; *Phaedr.* 245c–e7; *Philh.* 34c7–d3; and *Laws* 892a–896a.

² See *Eth. Eud.* 2.6, 1222b15–1223a20; *MM.* 1.10, 1187b30–111, 1187b8; *Eth. Nic.* 3.4, 1100a5–18 and 5.8, 1134a7–28; and *Phys.* 2.3, 194b30–33, 8.5, 256a3–13 and 257a27–30. See Meyer 2011: chs. 4 and 6.

³ See Diogenes Laertius 7.49–51 (*SVF* 2.52, 55, 61; *LS* 39A); Origen *De princ.* 3.1.2–3 (*SVF* 2.988, part; *LS* 39A); Stoheaus *Eth.* 2.86, 17–87, 6 (*SVF* 3.159, part; *LS* 320); Plutarch *Stoic. rep.* 1037e (*SVF* 3.177, part; *LS* 335); and Alexander of Aphrodisias *De fato* 13.182.6–19.

⁴ I am not claiming that the Stoics lacked inwardness, but rather that Plotinus has a richer notion of inwardness than the Stoics. On the development of inwardness in Stoicism, particularly Epicurus, see Kahn 1988; Long 1991; and more recently Remes 2008.

⁵ Unless otherwise specified, all translations are taken from A. H. Armstrong's Loeb Classical Library Edition of the *Enneads*.

⁶ It is important to note that although awareness is required for us to become agents and establish right reason as the guiding force in our embodied lives, conscious awareness is not required for all of our embodied actions after having placed reason in charge and acting from reason. In III.8 (treatise 30) *On Nature and Contemplation and the One* Plotinus treats nature's contemplative activity as the paradigm case for action, which produces without consciously reflecting on its activity, and holds that we strive to contemplate and act on the model of nature's productive actions. See Wildberg 2006 and Wildberg 2008a.

movements?⁷ The answer lies with soul, and in particular with two psychic capacities whose role it is to unify the qualified body at the level of nature.⁸

Plotinus holds that animals and embodied human beings share a type of consciousness, which enables them to unify their qualified bodies and function as structured and coherent wholes. The qualified body (*to raioidē simnē*) is the body, which has been informed by the lower soul. However, in the case of human beings the qualified body is not who 'we' really are. Plotinus uses the first-personal and reflexive pronoun, 'we', to refer both to discursive reasoning and the qualified body when discussing the embodied person. However, properly speaking 'we' are discursive reasoning: the qualified body merely belongs to 'us', in the way that a tool belongs to a craftsman. Nonetheless, 'we' can sink to the level of the qualified body by adopting a way of life that involves acting on the basis of non-rational sources of motivation such as appetite or passion, since the dominant pursuits of our life-activities dictate the level of self at which we live and act.⁹

This type of consciousness is awareness (*synaisthēsis*). It differs from sense-perception (*aisthēsis*) by being directed towards one's own internal parts and activities.¹⁰ Awareness is the most general form of consciousness in Plotinus, occurring at all levels of the human self and in each of the hypostases. However, at the level of the qualified body it functions as a form of proprioception or bodily self-awareness that enables living beings to recognise that the parts and activities that constitute themselves are their own, and to activate specific bodily parts over others in order to accomplish specific tasks, such as standing on our feet in order to walk or extending our hands in order to grab.

Closely related to awareness is the notion of sympathy (*sympatheia*). Plotinus borrows this notion from the Stoics,¹¹ but significantly modifies it. He agrees with the Stoics that soul unifies the body and provides stability and coherence; however, he disagrees that soul sustains the body by means of the tensile movement of air and fire (or anything physical,

for that matter) and that sympathy is a shared affection between soul and body. The basis for his disagreement is his view that soul is incorporeal and, therefore, non-spatial, indivisible and impassible. Interestingly, Plotinus assigns to sympathy the role of unifying the qualified body, but he does so without specifying a physical mechanism such as tensile movement. This may appear to be a shortcoming in Plotinus' view, but it is entirely consistent with his 'top-down' approach towards natural phenomena. In so far as souls are unitary substances that occupy a higher level in the hierarchical ordering of reality and organise bodies by delivering formative principles into matter, the unity, structure and coherence that bodies exhibit comes from a higher level.

Accordingly, Plotinus maintains that soul is present to the body as a whole in all the parts of the body, and that this unique mode of presence places all the parts in a community of common feeling with one another.¹² It is this sympathetic relation that living beings have towards themselves that enables them to function as unites despite being composed of a multitude of bodily parts. Thus, awareness and sympathy work together to unify the qualified body that is attached to us and enable the human being to engage in impulse-directed movements. Sympathy provides a unified subject in which awareness can occur; awareness provides the recognition that the bodily parts and activities that constitute this subject are one's own or belong to oneself.

However, in order to achieve higher levels of unity and to progress towards self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) and self-determination (*autexousias*) one must turn inwards and ascend upwards in order to direct one's attention away from the concerns of the lower soul and towards the good of the higher soul (1.1.3.23–7).¹³ Self-sufficiency and self-determination are the normative ideals towards which our embodied efforts are oriented. Their accomplishment involves living according to the noblest part of us, intellect, acting on premises derived from the noblest principle, intellect, and fulfilling one's nature as a moral and intellectual being by voluntarily striving towards the Good. Realising these ideals enables us to engage in the activity that constitutes our essence without anything external or beyond our control impeding our activity. Moreover, by identifying

⁷ I am borrowing this term from Susanne Bobzien, who defines impulse-directed movements as 'movements that are the result of an externally induced impression in the mind, which prompts the impulse, which in turn brings about the movement – provided no hindrances interfere'. See Bobzien 2000: 379.

⁸ I have argued for this at length in Hutchinson 2012. I here summarise the main results of my argument. For further evidence and argumentation please refer to the earlier article.

⁹ See III.4.2.3–24, IV.4.45.40–8 and VI.7.6.18.

¹⁰ See V.8.11.32, III.4.4.11, IV.4.24.21–2 and V.3.2.4–5.

¹¹ See Nemesius *De nat. hom.* 8.6–10 (SVF 2.790); Alexander of Aphrodisias *De mixtionē* 216.14–218.6 (SVF 2.473); LS 48c) and Hierocles *Elements* 4.4–22 and 4.32–53.

¹² The three main passages on which I base my interpretation of sympathy in are V.2.1.48–53, IV.7.3.34–6 and VI.4.9.36–7.

¹³ Plotinus distinguishes between a lower soul and a higher soul. The former is the form present in the form-matter composite that organises the body and provides it with life capacities; the latter is that which makes the form in the form-matter composite and is separate from it. See IV.3.20.38–9.

¹⁴ See III.2.10.19–21, VI.8.3.18–26, VI.8.4.12–17 and IV.4.18.21–2.

oneself with one's intellect and shaping oneself towards this end one becomes one's true self. As Paulina Remes notes, 'Ultimately there remains one major responsibility, that of self-improvement of the embodied self, that is, realizing aspects of the ideal and autonomous self at the level of ordinary human existence' (2007: 209).

Now that we have investigated the role that awareness plays at the level of nature, let us turn to the role awareness plays at the level of Intellect. Plotinus treats Intellect paradigmatically, characterising it as the primary thinker and its unique mode of self-thinking as primary thinking, whose being and activity we aspire towards.¹⁵ Intellect is the primary thinker because it is the primary form of life and activity, which process directly from the One and takes part in creating and sustaining the universe through providing essences to all things, including individual intellects (III.8.8.26–9 and 41–3, IV.7.9.11–15, V.4.2.22–6; Getson 1994: 57; Horn 2012: 215, 217). Intellect's self-thinking is primary because it is a self-contained activity in which the subject is directed towards itself as its own object, which is the simplest form of activity beneath the One (V.3.7.18–20, V.6.1.1–14). For this reason, Intellect is the principle of human intellects, and insofar as discursive reasoning is the intellect unfolded on a lower level, what Plotinus calls the dividing intellect (V.9.8.21–3, VI.5.2.1–7), it serves as the principle of discursive reasoning as well.¹⁶

Awareness plays a crucial role in the generation of Intellect from the One. During the procession Intellect generates the world of Forms by halting and looking back towards its source and, upon doing so, begins to think. Its thinking is directed towards itself since it generates the world of Forms internally and it shares the same actuality with the Forms. Moreover, Intellect becomes aware of itself and its contents the moment it constitutes itself as a definite entity (VI.7.16.19–21, VI.7.35.31–3). Important for my purposes, awareness also plays a crucial role in Intellect's eternal act of self-thinking. Plotinus writes at V.3.13.12–22:

For in general thinking (*to noein*) seems to be an awareness (*sunaitēsis*) of the whole when many parts come together into the same [subject]. This occurs when something thinks itself, which in fact is thinking in the primary sense. Each one is just itself, and seeks nothing. However, if thought will be of what is external it will be deficient and not be thinking in the primary sense. That which is entirely simple and truly self-sufficient

needs nothing. That which is secondarily self-sufficient, that which needs itself, this is what needs to think itself, and that which is deficient in relation to itself produces self-sufficiency by being a whole, with a sufficiency deriving from all its parts, being with itself and inclining towards itself. Since indeed awareness (*sunaitēsis*) is a perception of something that is many: even the name bears witness to this. (translation mine)

In this passage Plotinus distinguishes between that which is truly self-sufficient and that which is secondarily self-sufficient. The One is truly self-sufficient because it does not stand in need of being completed by anything external to itself and its activity is not impeded by anything outside itself beyond its control, whereas Intellect is secondarily self-sufficient because although it is a purely self-directed and self-contained activity, it nevertheless stands in need of being completed by the One.¹⁷ Moreover, Plotinus claims that in order to be secondarily self-sufficient Intellect must collect its parts (i.e. itself as a subject, act of thinking and the world of Forms with which it is identical as object) through the activity of self-thinking, which he characterises as an 'awareness of the whole when many parts come together into the same [subject]'. Even though Intellect is the paradigm form of life and activity, it stands in need of being aware of its parts and activities because it is a multiplicity (VI.7.41.17–29). Awareness is playing the same role it does at the level of nature, namely enabling a living being composed of a multitude of parts to unify itself into a structured whole. Intellect is no exception (VI.7.41.17–29).

To return to our intellects, when we ascend to the intelligible world and recognise that our true self is an intellect we become aware of our kinship with intelligible Being and adopt the mode of intellection and self-awareness appropriate to Intellect.¹⁸ This involves thinking the Forms directly and all-at-once, sharing in the actuality of Intellect, Being and the Forms, and becoming aware of our identity with Intellect. Plotinus writes:

When it [i.e. the soul] is purely and simply in the intelligible world it has itself too the characteristic of unchangeability. For it is really all the things it is: since when it is in that region, it must come to unity with Intellect, by the fact that it has turned to it, for when it is turned, it has nothing between, but comes to Intellect and accords itself to it, and by that accord is united to it without being destroyed, but both of them are one and also two. When therefore it is in this state it could not change but would be

¹⁵ See II.9.1.47–52, V.3.6.1–3 and V.6.1.1–14.

¹⁶ See V.11.1.1–8, V.3.3.7–13 and V.3.4.1–24. Cf. Emlisson 2007: 207–13.

¹⁷ See III.8.11.12–19, V.1.6.42–3, V.3.13.18–22, V.3.17.6–14, VI.7.2.40–3, VI.7.9.45–10.10.

¹⁸ See IV.7.10.30–7, III.4.3.22–3 and VI.5.7.

unalterably disposed to intellection while at the same time having an awareness of itself (*sunaithesthai autōs*) as having become one and the same thing with its intelligible object. (IV.4.2.23–33)

It is in virtue of this heightened self-awareness and recognition that our intellect is identical to the intelligible Beings in Intellect that we are capable of determining ourselves. As we will see in the next section, becoming a self-determining agent involves identifying oneself with one's higher soul, acting on premises derived from Intellect, and establishing right reason as the guiding force in one's daily life. Given the fact that Intellect is also in us, the process by which we achieve this autonomy is essentially an inward process that requires a unique mode of consciousness.

Agency

Plotinus develops the concept of agency throughout the *Enneads*. The most detailed analysis of this concept occurs in III.8 (treatise 30) *On Nature and Contemplation and the One* and VI.8 (treatise 39) *On Free Will and the Will of the One*. However, the set-up for these treatises occurs in the natural-philosophical treatises devoted to providence and destiny, namely II.3 (treatise 52) *On Whether the Stars are Causes*, III.1 (treatise 3) *On Destiny* and III.2–3 (treatises 47–8) *On Providence (i–ii)*. The central problem that Plotinus faces in the latter set of treatises is the compatibility of autonomous agency with universal causal determinism, since he holds that autonomous agency consists in being the causal source of one's actions but that destiny appears to fully determine the sensible world in which human beings live and act. Importantly, the Stoics shape Plotinus' understanding of both universal causal determinism and autonomous agency. By the second century CE Stoic compatibilism was a lively topic of debate amongst philosophers of the era (Bobzien 2001: 358), and Plotinus was eager to stake his position in this debate.

Plotinus attempts to solve the central problem by introducing his view that the higher soul is a principle (*archē*), which is capable of initiating its own actions. Moreover, he sets up his conception of autonomous agency, which he fully develops in III.8 (treatise 30) and VI. 8 (treatise 39), by distinguishing between actions based on non-rational sources of motivation deriving from the lower soul and actions based on rational sources of motivation deriving from the higher soul, and establishing that the former actions are subject to destiny but the latter are outside the causation of the physical universe (*kosmikēs aitias exō*). It is in virtue of the lower soul that

human beings are rooted in the sensible world and experience non-rational appetites and passions, whereas it is in virtue of the higher soul that human beings retain a foothold in the intelligible world, occupying a unique place in the intelligible realm and embodying a unique perspective on the intelligible Beings (IV.7.10.8–II, IV.7.10.30–8; Kalligas 1997: 223–6 and 2000: 25).

Plotinus follows the moral psychology of Plato and Aristotle in holding that embodied human beings have both non-rational and rational motivations for action (I.1.7.18–25). Moreover, he appears to follow Aristotle in dividing desire (*borexis*) into rational desire (*boulēsis*) and non-rational desires (*epithumia* and *thumos*), with rational desires being of what is good and non-rational desires being of what appears good.¹⁹ Uniquely, however, Plotinus locates appetite (*epithumia*) and passion (*thumos*) in the lower soul²⁰ and willing (*boulēsis*) in the higher soul.²¹ The former desires are concerned with goods of the soul–body compound, but the latter desire is concerned with the good of the soul or intellect. Importantly, each of these sources of desire is a motivation for action. Consistent with the entire Greek philosophical tradition, Plotinus viewed reason as a motivating force for action (Cooper 2012: II–16).

Let us now turn to the treatises on providence and destiny in order to understand the set-up to Plotinus' conception of autonomous agency. Plotinus identifies Intellect with the Platonic demiurge since it is ultimately responsible for the generation and organisation of the sensible world, being prior in nature to the sensible world and the model on which the sensible world is based. However, Plotinus often includes the activities of Soul and the world soul within the demiurgic activity since they are needed to carry out the activities of Intellect, on a lower level, by delivering formative principles into matter and establishing the ordering in the All.²² Unlike the creation story of the *Timaeus* (at least on the literal interpretation) the All does not come into being as the result of rational planning (see III.2.14.1–5, V.8.7). Rather, it is an eternal image of Intellect that emerges due to the principle of plenitude (III.2.1.20–7). As an image, the All possesses the features found in Intellect but in a dimmer, less pure form due to its diffusion into space and time and proximity to matter

¹⁹ See *De an.* 413b3–24, 414b1–2, 432b5–7, 433a7–25; *MA* 700b21–9.

²⁰ See II.5.27–8, II.4.6–10, II.5.22–9, IV.4.18.9–21, IV.8.8.17–25, IV.4.8 and IV.4.28.

²¹ See I.4.6.9–19, I.6.7.1–6, IV.8.4.1–3, VI.8.6.37–8 and VI.1.21.16–23.

²² Compare VI.8.1–14 with IV.4.10.1–5, IV.3.10.10–42, IV.3.12.31–5 and II.3.17.15–18. Gary Guntler also notes this. See Guntler 2002: 100.

(V.8.7.17–18). For this reason, Plotinus tells us, 'providence for the All is its being according to Intellect' (III.2.1.22–3).

What he means by this is that providence sees to it that the sensible world reflects the beauty of the intelligible realm by producing a universe that is in sympathy with itself, by equipping living things with the parts and capacities they need to flourish, by establishing an incapable system of karmic justice whereby wrongdoers are punished for their actions in this life or the next, by natural phenomena operating according to causes, and individual causes taking place in a network of causes that are oriented towards the good of the whole. Although providence reaches the sublunary world and even extends towards individuals (see III.2.6.23–6, III.2.13.18–20), it is actually destiny that carries out the activities of providence in the sensible world (III.3.5.15–17).

Soul directs the All according to a rational order (*logos*) by establishing that all events in the realm of becoming happen according to causes, that individual causes are woven together into a network, and that the network is ordered to the good of the whole. The precise nature of Soul's direction is brought out clearly in chapter 16 of his late treatise, II.3 (treatise 52) *On Whether the Stars are Causes*.²³ Herein he develops his own view through critically engaging with three Stoic-inspired determinist positions. The first holds that Soul creates the natural kinds and lets the interweaving and succession of consequences that follow from their interaction with each other occur without playing an additional causal role (lines 6–13); the second holds that Soul creates the natural kinds but effectively causes the interweaving and succession of all consequences that follow (lines 13–15); the third is a middle path between the first two, holding that Soul creates the natural kinds and knows the interweaving and succession of consequences that follow, through its possession of formative principles (*logoi*), but that it is not the efficient cause of everything that ensues. Crucial to the third option is the idea that

The forming principles certainly exist, but not as causing (*poionton*) but as knowing (*eidontin*) – or rather the soul which contains the generative rational principles knows the consequences which come from all its works; when the same things come together, the same circumstances arise, then it is altogether appropriate that the same results should follow. Soul takes over or foresees these antecedent conditions and taking account of them accomplishes what follows and links up the chain of consequences, bringing

²³ I am thankful to Pavlos Kalligas for sharing his commentary on this passage with me. See Kalligas 2014.

antecedents and consequents into complete connection, and again linking to the antecedents the causes which precede them in order, as far as it can in the existing circumstances. (I.3.16.18–27)

In other words, Soul causes individual things to come into existence and furnishes them with capacities associated with their nature (antecedents); individual things act on each other in ways associated with their natures from their own impulses (consequences); and Soul, in virtue of containing the formative principles derived from Intellect, foresees these events and links the consequences with the antecedents and places them into a harmonious network (IV.4.39.6–18).

Plotinus finds the first view unappealing since he holds that the providential ordering extends to particulars in the realm of becoming and, as such, Soul could not be indifferent to the consequences that follow. He finds the second view unappealing since it entails that Soul is the efficient causal source of everything that happens. This view, perhaps belonging to a Stoic or a Middle Platonist, he argues against in his early treatise III.1 (treatise 3) *On Destiny*, on the grounds that a single animating principle that permeates and sustains the cosmos leaves no room for animate beings to act from their own impulses or for human beings to have actions which are their own (III.1.4.21–30, III.1.7.13–24).²⁴ However, he does find the third option appealing since it entails that Soul knows the consequences that follow but does not cause them, which leaves open the possibility that animate parts of the whole contribute to the good of the whole from their own impulses (II.3.13.11–13).

Plotinus is committed to preserving the idea that although animate beings are subject to destiny they are not restricted to reacting mechanically or automatically to external stimuli. Instead, they are conscious of the effect external stimuli have on their bodies and respond in ways that give rise to bodily movements through appetites, desires and, in the case of human beings, voluntary actions through reasoned thoughts, that is, thoughts about what reasons there are for acting and whether the reasons for acting are good reasons. Of course, the Stoics are also committed to preserving this. The late Stoic theory that Alexander of Aphrodisias reports and criticises in his *De fato*, perhaps belonging to Philopator, holds that

²⁴ Plotinus discusses this view in chapters 2, 4, and 7–10. Emilie Bréhier and A. A. Armstrong identify this view as belonging to a Stoic or a Stoicising Middle Platonist. See Bréhier 1925: 4–5, 10, 14 and Armstrong 1967: 6–7, 18–19. More recently, Paul Kalligas has strengthened the case that it belongs to a Middle Platonist by showing the similarities it has with Articus' theory, according to which Destiny is treated as a substance identified with the cosmic Soul. See Kalligas 2014: Introduction to III.1 (treatise 3) and Commentary on III.1.4 (treatise 3).

although our actions are necessitated and are brought about *by* fate, nonetheless they occur *through* impulse and assent, and therefore are 'up to us'.²⁵ However, Plotinus holds that a corporeal soul embedded in an inescapable network of corporeal causes is not capable of being the causal source of its own actions. Only an incorporeal soul capable of living according to a higher code of laws (*nomothetic*) can achieve this (IV.3.15.11–25).

Although Plotinus does not subscribe to (his interpretation of) Stoic determinism due to the restrictions he thinks it places on agency, it is worth pointing out how close his view comes to universal causal determinism. For he holds the general causal principle that nothing happens in the sensible world without a cause: 'as for things which come into being, or which always really exist but do not always act in the same way, we must say that all always have a cause for coming to be; nothing uncaused can be admitted' (III.1.1.14–17). The second clause refers to individual souls, who always exist but whose activities change, and the lines that follow make it clear that this principle applies not just to coming into being but to human action in the realm of becoming (lines 16–24). And he appears to hold the further specified causal principle that ensures regularity or uniformity between types of causes and types of effects: 'when the same things come together, the same circumstances arise, then it is altogether appropriate that the same results should follow' (II.3.16.21–3).

Although the appearance of the specified causal principle occurs in a polemical passage, the remaining lines of the chapter, and related comments he makes elsewhere, suggest that he endorses the third view. However, he endorses this view with one crucial qualification: it does not apply to the higher soul or, more precisely, the embodied human being who identifies with the higher soul. Together with his view, in accordance with the Myth of Er, that each individual soul chooses its lot based on its previous life and this choice determines the position in which it is born and the role it plays in the cosmic drama, suggest that the sensible world in which the human being lives is a determined world. However, it is in virtue of the higher soul that we, like actors in a play, can decide whether or not to play our assigned role well or badly.²⁶

In virtue of being informed by the lower soul the embodied human being is subject to destiny in the sensible world. The reason for this is that

the soul acquires a vehicle in the heavens in the course of its descent from the intelligible world, which transports it downward through the celestial regions until it reaches earthly bodies. Upon acquiring the soul-vehicle and descending through lower regions of the cosmos, the lower soul acquires the capacity to undergo affections and act on the basis of non-rational impulses and thus becomes a part belonging to the powers of the whole.²⁷ Consequently, Plotinus is willing to grant that 'more remote causes' such as the stars do play a limited causal role in our lives, since they contribute to our bodily constitution, bring about changes in our temperaments, and can even foretell our fortunes. However, neither the position of the stars nor the motion of the planets is responsible for our characters or ways of life. These are *our* responsibility.²⁸ But what does it mean for our actions to be subject to destiny?

As I mentioned above, Plotinus holds that all living beings act on the basis of their own impulses (*hormai*), but that human beings also deliberate about whether or not it is good to act from certain impulses and decide whether or not to carry their impulses through to action on the basis of their deliberations (III.1.1.14–24, III.1.1.7.13–25). In the case of human beings, impulses can be rational and come from the higher soul or they can be non-rational and come from the lower soul. Actions that are subject to destiny are those committed on the basis of impulses deriving from the lower soul, and can be based either on the soul-body composite or even on a mixture of the soul and the soul-body composite. Take the following example:

1. Eating in order to indulge a craving for some particular food
2. Eating in order to indulge a craving for some particular food but knowing that maintaining a healthy body requires providing it with sustenance

In the case of impulses deriving solely from the composite (case 1), the source of the impulse lies in some pre-existing circumstance in the external world. In the case of impulses deriving from the mixture of soul and the soul-body composite (case 2) the source of the impulse still lies in a pre-existing circumstance in the external world but it also involves making a choice (*prohairesis*) to act on the impulse, which requires reason. The difference between case 1 and case 2 is that in case 1 I am compelled to act and not in charge of my action, whereas in case 2 I am still compelled to act but I exercise some authority over my action (III.1.8.11–18). However,

²⁵ See Alexander of Aphrodisias *De fato* 13.181.12–182.20 and 34.205.25–206.3. Susanne Bobzien provides a convincing argument that this view belongs to Philopator. See Bobzien 2001: 367–70.

²⁶ See II.3.15.1–13, III.2.7.15–28, III.2.17.24–90 and III.4.5. Cf. *Rep.* 617c–618b.

²⁷ See II.3.9.7–31, II.3.10.4–8, II.3.15.13–15, III.1.8.4–21 and IV.3.15.1–12.

²⁸ See III.2.4.37–47, III.2.7.15–28, III.2.10, III.3.3.4–17, III.3.3.35–7 and III.3.4.5–8.

in both cases the efficient cause of my action is ultimately the desired food item even though case 2 involves the intermediation of reasoning. Thus, in both cases I am living under destiny since my actions can be traced back to external causes that fully or partially determine them. As we will see below, Plotinus holds that actions that involve reason and the non-rational affections – ‘mixed actions’ – remain subject to destiny because they are not truly in our power.²⁹ While engaged in mixed actions we are agents to the extent that we are a causal source of our actions, but we are not autonomous agents engaged in self-determination since we are the not the *sole* causal source of our actions.

In virtue of possessing the higher soul the embodied human being can avoid living under destiny. Plotinus writes, ‘now when the soul is without body it is absolutely in charge of itself and free (*berriōtātē te autēs kai elenuthērā*), and outside the causation of the physical universe (*kosmikhōs aitiaōs exō*); but when it is brought into body it is no longer in all ways in charge, as it forms part of an order with other things’ (III.1.8.9–12). The higher soul is outside the realm of becoming, and consequently outside the causation of the physical universe. When disembodied it is in charge of its actions and free, and therefore purely self-determining. However, embodiment subjects it to natural necessity and forces it to lose complete authority over its actions, which can result in error or vice (I.1.9.5–16). Although the phrase ‘without body’ in this passage refers to an actual separation of soul from body, the ensuing chapters in which Plotinus develops his view make it clear that human beings can achieve this state while embodied through establishing right reason in charge of its impulses (see III.1.9.5–17, III.1.10.4–15). Moreover, related passages make it clear that we achieve this state of being ‘without body’ by turning inwards, ascending upwards, and identifying with our higher soul or intellect (II.3.15.15–18, II.3.9.24–32). Thus, when the embodied human being acts on the basis of rational impulses it is fully in charge of its actions, free, and outside the causation of the physical universe. It is no longer a part that belongs to the powers coming from the whole, but an autonomous agent that belongs to itself.

The basis for this conception of autonomous agency is that the higher soul, and not just Soul or the world soul, is a principle (*archē*). After claiming that embodied human beings can rise above the powers coming from the whole and preserve the ancient part³⁰ of the soul, Plotinus writes:

For we must not think of the soul as of such a kind that the nature which it has is just whatever affection it receives from outside, and that alone of all things it has no nature of its own; but it, far before anything else, since it has the status of a principle, must have many powers of its own for its natural activities. It is certainly not possible for it, since it is a substance, not to possess along with its being desires and actions and the tendency toward its own good. (II.3.15.17–23)

His view of the soul as a self-subsisting and self-moving entity, with a permanent residence in the intelligible world, leads Plotinus to regard the individual soul as a principle in its own right. By this he means that soul has a nature of its own, has the capacities to engage in its own activities, and is the efficient causal source of its own voluntary actions. Plotinus reiterates this point several times in the treatises on destiny and providence, but it is not until the next treatise in the chronological order after II.3 that he explains which capacities he means (see I.1.5–13 (treatise 53)). Briefly, Plotinus has in mind rational desire for the good and the capacities of imagination and discursive reasoning in virtue of which we pursue the good of the soul, namely virtue. It is owing to the possession of these capacities that embodied human beings can deliberate over whether or not there are reasons to act and can cause their voluntary actions through decision.

It is important to note that standing outside the causation of the physical universe does not entail that our actions are causeless or that we are not involved in the ordering of the All. Plotinus denies the indeterminist view that actions could occur without causes, on the grounds that acting without causes would render us more compelled than acting on the basis of antecedent causes that determine our actions, since we would be carried around by movements that are uncaused, unwilling and, as a result, would not belong to ourselves (III.1.1.16–24; cf. III.1.8.2). Moreover, he claims that providence and the ordering of the whole includes us ‘as the persons we are’, by which he means as the embodied human being who is capable of acting freely and being in charge of his actions (III.2.10.16–20, III.3.3.1–4, III.3.4.6–8).³¹ What it does entail is that we cause our own actions and we contribute to the interweaving of causes as co-authors of the providential ordering (see also Dillon 1996a: 330; Leroux 1996: 310–11). In other words, we are no longer dragged around passively by acting on the basis of impulses stemming from the soul-body composite; rather, we contribute actively to the ordering by

²⁹ See III.1.9.1–2, IV.4.43.19–22, IV.4.44.5–7 and VI.8.2.36–7. Cf. O’Meara 2003: 133.

³⁰ Plotinus uses the adjective *archaios* in reference to the higher soul at II.3.15.16–17, II.3.8.13–15, IV.7.9.28–30. Cf. Plato *Rep.* 547b6–7.

³¹ Laura Westra also notes this. See Westra 2002: 132, 135.

acting on the basis of impulses stemming from the higher soul in the intelligible world (II.3.13-18-32, IV.3.15-II-25).

Once we identify with our higher soul and initiate our own activity we not only pursue our own good but, in doing so, we also contribute to the interweaving of causes that promote the good of the whole since both are oriented towards the Good (IV.4.35.33-5). In keeping with the analogy between the cosmos and a drama alluded to above, we no longer merely play the roles assigned to us by the playwright but we help write the script. As John Dillon notes:

If Plotinus is not a Stoic determinist, it is only, I think, because of a daring conception of his which sees the highest element in us, the 'undescended' intellect, as in fact the autonomous component of the hypostasis Intellect, and thus in its own right (since every intellect in Intellect is in a way coextensive with the whole) a guiding principle of the universe. (1996a: 330)

In the early treatise on destiny and the late treatises on providence Plotinus does not explain what he means by being in charge of one's actions or being free.³² His primary concern in III.1 (treatise 3) is to show that destiny does not exclude human agency, and his primary concern in III.2-3 (treatises 47-8) is to show that providence is not responsible for evil and that human beings are morally responsible for their actions. The discussion of these issues occurs in the opening chapters of VI.8 (treatise 39) *On Free Will and the Will of the One*, which I turn to next.

Plotinus departs from Plato and Aristotle by holding that the virtuous life does not consist in moderating the appetites and passions but in completely detaching oneself from them, and attending to them only when necessary and without experiencing their emotional excitement. For the appetites and passions produce an involuntary impulse (*to aprōaitōton*) that is compulsory and leads us away from the Good (VI.8.4.15-17, 1.2.5.13-22). We are led away from the Good because, when an external object moves the appetitive or passionate powers an impression (*phantasia*)³³ is produced in the imagination, which informs the soul of the experience the body is undergoing and demands that we should follow along with the

impression and obtain the desired object. When this occurs false opinions concerning what should be pursued or avoided and what is good or bad are produced, resulting in 'us' falling into a state of perplexity and becoming increasingly ignorant of the Good (IV.4.17.12-20). Plotinus thinks the imagination stores impressions in an emotionally laden way and when the impressions 'come like a perception and announce and inform us of the experience' they do so in an emotion-triggering way that has the effect of making demands on the soul (IV.3.32.3-7). Thus, the Plotinian virtuous agent aims to satisfy the needs of the body without sharing in the emotional excitement of the lower impulses since, in doing so, he runs the risk of evaluating the pleasures that result from satisfying the lower impulses as good (I.8.4.8-13) and self-identifying with the soul-body compound (I.4.4.13-18, IV.4.18.16-19).

This is the background Plotinus has in mind when he asks in VI.8.2 how our actions can be said to be up to us if impression and non-rational desires compel us to act? Were we merely to react automatically to our non-rational impulses we would be no different from children, animals or madmen who are carried wherever their impulses lead with nothing under their authority (III.1.7.13-25, VI.8.2.5-9). However, following the Stoics Plotinus holds that in between impression and impulse there occurs a rational assent that governs our response to non-rational impulses and ensures us ownership of our actions.³⁴ Moreover, this assent of reason constitutes the motivating psychological impulse that impels us to act and carries us through to action (VI.8.2.30-7).³⁵ For which reason, acting on the basis of a rational impulse is a *willing*. Plotinus employs the Stoic term for assent (*sunkatathesis*) only once,³⁶ probably because of its association with the Stoic physicalist theory of soul. However, it is clear from his discussion of the relationship between the will and non-rational impressions in VI.8 that he holds this view.³⁷

We are now in a position to see why, in order to be the *sole* causal source of our own actions, we must act from reason and derive the premises of our actions from Intellect. Let us begin with the notion of the 'up to us' (*to eph' hēmin*). Plotinus reasons that actions that are up to us are not those which are enslaved to impulses that carry us in whichever direction they lead or

³² Due to space constraints, I will discuss the meaning and significance of being in charge of our actions. For a discussion of freedom see Kevin Corrigan's chapter in this volume (Chapter 7).

³³ Plotinus uses the terms *phantasia* to refer both to the imagination and to images produced in the imagination. In the case of the latter usage, he also uses *phantasia* interchangeably with the Stoic terms *typos* and *typhōis*. Plotinus follows the Stoics in maintaining impressions (*phantasiai*) reveal themselves and their cause (LS 398; SVF 2.54) but disagrees that they are affections of the soul and have extension. See III.6.1.7-12 and IV.3.26.30-3. Hence *phantasia* can be translated either as image or impression.

³⁴ See Plotarch *Stoic rep.* 1057a (SVF 3.177, part LS 538).

³⁵ See Stobaeus *Ekl.* 2.86.17-87.6 (SVF 3.169, part LS 530).

³⁶ See I.8.14.4-5. Cf. similar usage of *epithēnē* at IV.4.43.7.

³⁷ Michael Frede and John Cooper have argued convincingly that Plotinus is heavily influenced by the Stoic theory of adult human agency. See Frede 2011: 57-9, 62-3 and 125-52 and Cooper 2012: 363-81.

those constrained by external circumstances that prevent us from accomplishing what we wish to accomplish. Rather, actions that are up to us are those whose efficient cause is our will and those the accomplishment of which depend solely on us willing them. He writes: 'What is up to us is enslaved to the will (*te bouleset*) and would occur or not depending upon whether [or not] we willed it, for everything is voluntary (*hekousion*) that is done without force but with knowledge, whereas what is "up to us" is, in addition, what we are in charge (*kurios*) of doing' (VI.8.1.31-4). In order for an action to depend solely on willing it must be more than voluntary in the Aristotelian sense, however. It must also be one that we are in charge of doing or have authority over doing, which, as we will see, requires us to act solely from reason.

Plotinus' characterisation of the voluntary as an action that is 'done without force but with knowledge' is an obvious reference to Aristotle, who defines voluntary actions as those which are not forced but originate in the agent and are performed with knowledge of the particulars of a given situation (*Eth. Nic.* III.2-4). However, the Aristotelian notion of voluntariness is insufficient for Plotinus since one could act voluntarily without being in charge of what one is doing. For example, if while walking in front of my favourite café and noticing a flaky croissant I suddenly experience an appetitive desire to eat the croissant, and I act on this appetitive desire, I am doing so voluntarily. No one is forcing me to do it, and I am doing it with full knowledge of the particulars of the situation. However, the premises (*protasis*) on which my practical action is based originate in the soul-body compound since the motivating psychological impulse is coming from the non-rational desire.

By 'premises for action' Plotinus probably has in mind the kind of reasoning employed in the Aristotelian practical syllogism in which the universal premise identifies some good or apparent good (e.g. flaky croissants should be eaten), the particular premise spots the good to be achieved in some present situation (e.g. this is a flaky croissant) and the conclusion results in action (e.g. eat this).³⁸ Even though I am using reason in conjunction with appetite to enter the café and eat, it is ultimately the non-rational desire that serves as the efficient cause and sets the reasoning in motion. Or in Plotinus' terms, 'reason does not produce the impulse [to act] but the non-rational also has an origin in the premises derived from the affection' (IV.4.44.5-7). It is only when reason serves as the efficient cause and sets the desire in motion that I am fully in charge of my actions.

The notion of reason Plotinus has in mind is not just any instance of reasoning or calculation, but rather right reason (*orthos logos*) that belongs to the understanding (*epistēmē*). Acting on the basis of a right belief, without knowing why one's belief is right, would not count as truly self-determining since the basis for the right belief could be chance or the imagination, which are beyond our control (VI.8.3.2-8). Hence the rational assent that constitutes the motivating psychological impulse must be right (*orthos*) and the agent must know why what he is doing is right, which requires understanding (*epistēmē*). But what makes a rational assent right?

Plotinus does not employ the phrase 'right reason' often. However, his usage of the phrase and related variants suggest that the *orthos logos* is inborn, belongs to the purest and most untroubled part of us, is oriented towards the Good, and that when we act according to it we are free and active, but that it becomes weakened and fettered when the appetitive and passionate parts of the soul are in control and impel the person to action.³⁹ Taken with VI.8.3.2-8, this suggests that we know why what we are doing is right and act on right reason, as opposed to right belief, due to the fact that our intellects are activated and in touch with the Forms in Intellect.⁴⁰ This is consistent with Plotinus' view that practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), the intellectual virtue responsible for deliberating well concerning what is good or bad for a human being, derives its principles from dialectic and is a superior form of reasoning concerned with grasping the universal.⁴¹

This usage of right reason highlights a crucial feature of the Plotinian notion of voluntariness: voluntary actions are those that are naturally inclined towards the Good (VI.8.4.13-20). Hence, for Plotinus voluntary actions are not simply those that stem from within and with knowledge of the particulars, but also with knowledge of the universal (VI.8.1.36-45). Plotinus inserts orientation towards the Good into the notion of voluntariness due to the close relation he sees between voluntariness

³⁸ See III.1.9.5-17, III.1.10.4-15, III.5.7.31-9, IV.4.17.21-4 and IV.4.33.32-4.

³⁹ Although *orthos logos* is commonly associated with Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* I.107a1-4, 1138b18-23) and the Stoics (Diogenes Laertius 7.88 and Stobaeus *Ekl.* 510, 114c), Plotinus may have employed this notion in connection with a passage from Plato's *Phaedo* to highlight the inborn connection we have with the intelligible world. While introducing the theory of recollection Plato writes, 'there is one excellent argument, said Cebes, namely that when men are interrogated in the right manner, they always give the right answer of their own accord, and they could not do this if they did not possess the knowledge (*epistēmē*) and the right explanation (*orthos logos*) inside them' (73b7-10). For Plato and Plotinus human beings have the right reason in virtue of their connection with the Forms. I am thankful to Charles H. Kahn for bringing this passage to my attention.

⁴¹ See I.3.6.6-14. Cf. I.2.1.17, I.2.3.15, I.2.6.13-15, I.2.7.7, I.2.7.14-31, I.8.9.2-3 and I.8.15.7-9.

³⁸ See *Eth. Nic.* I.147a25-32; *De an.* 434a17-22; and *MA* 701a7-701b.

and self-determination. The more our actions are inclined towards the Good the more they derive from within ourselves, and the less they depend on external factors that are beyond our control and that constrain us from acting the way we rationally desire to act. For which reason, voluntary actions belong only to those who are self-determining. Plotinus writes, 'We will designate those as self-determining who, owing to the activities of Intellect, are free from the affections of the body. Referring "up to us" to the most noble principle, the activity of Intellect, we will designate as really free the premises that come from there and claim that desires that arise from thinking are not involuntary (*non abekousios*)' (VI.8.3.20-4).

The desire that arises from thinking is voluntary because it originates in the best part of us, intellect, and is concerned with truths contained in the noblest principle, Intellect. Following Lloyd Gerson, I take the 'thinking' to be concerned with universal truths found in Intellect and the 'premises that come from there' to refer to the universal premises in the kind of reasoning employed in a practical syllogism (Gerson 1994: 161). Taken thusly, Plotinus is saying that the self-determining agent is one whose universal premise of a practical syllogism contains a universal truth that such and such is good, who recognises that the universal truth that such and such is good is also good for oneself, and desires to act with this conformity of our good with the Good in mind. Unlike the above case, the premises on which this action is based originate within our intellect, and the motivating psychological impulse comes from rational desire. With reason serving as the efficient cause and setting desire in motion, we are fully in charge of our actions.

Deriving our premises from Intellect requires more than self-awareness, however. Importantly, it also requires turning inwards and ascending upwards through practising the virtues. Briefly, Plotinus holds that there are three levels of virtue: the civic, the purificatory and the intellectual. The civic virtues are those that impose limit and measure on our non-rational desires of appetite and passion and abolish false opinions arising in the compound (1.2.2.14-20); the purificatory virtues are those that separate the soul from the body by stripping away everything alien to it, thereby enabling it to act independently of the non-rational desires and opinions arising in the compound (1.2.2.11-23); and the intellectual virtues are those possessed by a soul, which, upon being purified from its involvement with the body, realises its nature as an intellect and fully absorbs itself in contemplation of the Forms (1.2.6.7-27; cf 1.6.6.1-21). It is only when we have realised our nature as intellects, through purification, that we can derive our premises from Intellect and establish reason as the guiding force

in our embodied lives. Crucial to my emphasis on the role of consciousness, this process of purification involves turning inwards, ascending upwards, and consciously shaping ourselves towards our ideal selves (1.6.9.7-16).

This spiritualisation of the virtues has profound implications for Plotinus' concept of autonomous agency. We are self-determining, and therefore in charge of our actions and free, only when we are operating at the level of our intellects. This can be seen from Plotinus' discussion of the civic virtues. These virtues are those that result from habit and training as opposed to thought (1.1.10.12-14), and correspond roughly to what Plato and Aristotle refer to as the moral virtues. When we act in circumstances that require performance of these virtues, for Plotinus, we are not truly free or in charge of our actions. In order to be brave there must be a war; in order to be just there must be injustice; in order to be liberal there must be poverty. In each of these circumstances the virtuous person's actions are constrained by circumstances that he himself would not choose. A truly virtuous person would prefer rather that there not be wars, injustice or poverty in the first place, just as a physician would prefer that her patients not be sick and in need of medical treatment (VI.8.5.7-20). To be truly free and in charge of our actions would involve us acting in circumstances that we ourselves choose and that we would always choose under ideal circumstances, since these choices are oriented towards what is best, namely the Good. This can only occur when we are operating at the level of intellect and we 'leave behind in actuality' the civic virtues and engage in the intellectual virtues. However, should the circumstances arise we can perform the civic virtues guided by right reason since we retain them potentially (1.6.9.11-31).⁴²

With this framework of virtue in mind, we can see why Plotinus holds that self-determination is not achieved when 'we' engage in practical reasoning or practical actions but when our intellects contemplate the Forms. He writes 'So, also in actions, that which is self-determining and "up to us" is referred neither to the acting nor to what is external but to the activity of the interior, that is, thinking or the contemplation of virtue itself' (VI.8.6.20-2). Because practical action constrains us from acting the way our intellect rationally desires to act, Plotinus attributes the 'up to us' to the intellect detached from actions, engaged in the contemplation of virtue (VI.8.5.23-37). Due to being external to the soul and other-directed,

⁴² On the question whether we perform virtuous actions via deliberation or automatically see Wilberding 2008a.

practical reasoning and action split our attention in multiple directions, rendering us multiple and in need of objects outside ourselves to flourish (in the mistaken way that the soul-body compound identifies). It is only when we have purified ourselves of the non-rational desires and opinions stemming from the compound and contemplate the Forms that our activity is entirely self-directed, our attention is purely focused in the singular direction of what is best, and we are completely self-sufficient. At this level, our will and our intellect coincide and what we know to be good we will to accomplish (see Rist 1967: 136-7).

Paradoxically, it turns out that in order to be the causal source of our actions we must not engage in actions associated with the civic virtues but rather engage in activities associated with the intellectual virtues. In what sense then is this a theory of agency? Like much of Plotinus' philosophy his notion of agency is worked out at the ideal level. However, that should not distract us from seeing the effects of the ideal on the mundane realities of daily life. What Plotinus has shown, I think, is that even in a world governed by destiny human beings can initiate their own activity, in varying degrees, depending upon the extent to which they are free and in charge of their actions. However, in order to do this we must strive to attain the freedom and authority belonging to the best part of ourselves, namely our intellects. Although most of our actions are 'mixed' due to the demands of the non-rational desires serving the needs of the body, we nonetheless should strive to establish reason as the guiding force in our lives. Doing so results in us achieving self-determination and self-sufficiency and, to the best of our abilities while embodied, approximating the One.

Conclusion

I have argued that in order to engage in impulse-directed movements awareness is required to unify the qualified body. Moreover, to become an agent capable of mixed actions or an autonomous agent capable of self-determination and self-sufficiency, awareness is required to turn inwards, ascend upwards, and establish right reason in charge of our embodied lives. The Plotinian theory of agency requires us not only to 'look inwards' and correctly use our impressions along Stoic lines, but also to 'ascend upwards' and identify with our higher soul and derive our premises for action from our knowledge of the Forms. I hope to have shown that accomplishing this feat requires a degree of inwardness and a type of consciousness unattested in the earlier Greek philosophical tradition.