

From passion to knowledge Plotinus' grades of virtues as stages in the development of practical moral agency

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to situate the practical agency of the sage in an overall picture of the development of the Plotinian moral agent. This development can be seen as a gradual transition from external to internal principles of action guidance which endow the agent with autonomy and coherence in her practical actions. The transition from external to internal principles corresponds to a changing relationship between the agent's telos and particular actions. Non-virtuous agents aim at the attainment of an object of desire, while the civically virtuous person aims to perform virtuous actions irrespectively of the achievement of particular objects of desire. Finally, the telos of the sage is the contemplation of forms and she acts practically as a consequence and external activity of having achieved her goal. The analysis of Plotinus' theory of moral development shows that the sage's inward turn and detachment from external circumstances do not involve inactivity in the practical sphere but figure as a necessary condition of her making an active contribution to the order of the sensible world through her actions as opposed to passively responding to external circumstances.

KEYWORDS

Plotinus, ethics, virtue, motivation, moral development

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INTRODUCTION

Plotinus famously posits two sets of virtues as successive stages of one's moral development. The so-called civic virtues consist in the moderation of passions, while the higher or cathartic virtues are dispositions of a rational soul which is no longer subject to the influence of passions originating in the body and lower soul but is turned towards the intellect and engages in the contemplation of forms. This account gives rise to a dilemma regarding the guidance of the practical actions of the Sage, that is, the person of cathartic virtues. Since cathartic virtues appear to be concerned with theoretical contemplation rather than practical action and the civic virtues are left behind once one has progressed to the higher stage, it becomes a question how the Sage can act virtuously in practical moral situations without virtues related to practical matters.¹

The problem stems from the sometimes tacit assumption that cathartic virtues and the theoretical activities connected to them can not be used in the guidance of practical actions without the contribution of civic virtues. This assumption is widely shared among many scholars, who nevertheless come to different conclusions regarding its import for Plotinian ethics. John Dillon presents the doctrine of the grades of virtues as a sign of the uncompromisingly self-centered and otherworldly character of Plotinus' ethical thought.² In this, he is following the footsteps of Paul Plass, who sees the higher virtues as empty of empirical content and lacking the environmental and contextual sensitivity necessary for the guidance of practical actions.³ Charles Brittain argues for an incoherence between the requirement for the sage's continuous involvement in practical affairs and the lack of emotional affections that he takes to be a necessary requirement for practical moral action.⁴

A second group of scholars share the assumption and seeks to find ways to mitigate its consequences by allowing the sage to return to the exercise of civic virtues when she wishes to engage in practical action.⁵ To alleviate the tension between the moral inferiority of the civic virtues and the need for the Sage's involvement in practical life Dominic O'Meara and John Cooper argue that the Sage acts through refined versions of civic virtues.⁶

A third group of interpreters argues that Plotinus takes theoretical contemplation to be a principle of action guidance and thereby recognizes cathartic virtues as useful in practical matters. According to Pauliina Remes, the sage's actions are guided by her knowledge of the forms and the order of the cosmos rather than by emotions and moral dispositions acquired by habituation. She argues that cathartically virtuous actions are executed from a global standpoint and are aimed at the good of the whole cosmos as opposed to being shaped by individual interests and partial perspectives.⁷ László Bene develops a plausible interpretation of how

¹This question is presented as one of central problems of Plotinus' ethics and philosophy of action in general surveys of the topics such as TUOMINEN (2022) 372, 377; REMES (2014) 458–460; and STERN-GILLET (2014) 396–398, 408–413.

²DILLON (1996) 321–324.

³PLASS (1982).

⁴BRITTAİN (2003) 246–247.

⁵TUOMINEN (2022) 378, and STERN-GILLET (2009).

⁶COOPER (2013) 379–381; O'MEARA (2005) 40–44.

⁷REMES (2006).



theoretical knowledge is transferred to practical action. He analyses Plotinus' concept of *φρόνησις* as a capacity for unfolding intelligible content into the sensible world according to the model of double-activity and points at the role of practical syllogisms in applying general principles to particular situations.⁸ Christopher Noble sees the main difference between civically and cathartically virtuous actions in the telos of their respective agents. He argues that the civically virtuous agent sees her good in virtuous practical actions while the sage places her good in theoretical contemplation alone corresponding to their respective self-identifications as the compound of body and soul and the rational soul alone.⁹

In this paper, I aim to situate the practical agency of the sage in an overall picture of the development of the Plotinian moral agent. I follow Remes, Bene, and Noble in claiming that it is the knowledge of forms that guides the sage's actions without recourse to the exercise of civic virtues. However, while the aforementioned scholars emphasize the radical difference and re-orientation of the sage's agency in comparison to civically virtuous agents, I will argue that the sage's motivational makeup is a logical culmination of a continuous development of moral agency where civic virtues constitute an intermediate stage in between viciousness and cathartic virtues. The moral development of the Plotinian agent can be seen as a gradual transition from external to internal principles of action guidance which endow her with autonomy and coherence in her practical actions. The transition from external to internal principles corresponds to a changing relationship between the agent's telos and particular actions. Non-virtuous agents aim at the attainment of an object of desire, while the civically virtuous person aims to perform virtuous actions irrespectively of the achievement of particular objects of desire. Finally, the telos of the sage is the contemplation of forms and she acts practically as a consequence and external activity of having achieved her goal. The analysis of Plotinus' theory of moral development shows that the sage's inward turn and detachment from external circumstances do not involve inactivity in the practical sphere but figure as a necessary condition of her making an active contribution to the order of the sensible world through her actions as opposed to passively responding to external circumstances.¹⁰ This conclusion is in line with the metaphysical model of double activity, where an external activity results from the completeness and self-sufficiency of an internal act.

The above theses are developed in the course of four sections. First (I), I argue for the role of theoretical contemplation in the motivation guidance of practical actions based on *Enn.* VI 8. 1–3. Second (II), I turn to the motivational makeup of the non-virtuous agent to understand the starting point of the process of moral development. Third (III), I examine civic virtues an intermediate stage between viciousness and cathartic virtues. Finally (IV) I clarify the difference between civically and cathartically virtuous agency through a close reading of *Enn.* I 2. 7.

⁸BENE (2013) 154–159.

⁹NOBLE (2021) 279–285.

¹⁰The fact that the Sage's inward turn and detachment from external circumstances is a necessary condition of being a truly active agent of one's practical actions is at odds with the line of interpretation according to which the Sage is reluctant to interfere in practical affairs and does so only in cases of dire necessity. For this view, see STERN-GILLET (2009) 338–342 and STERN-GILLET (2014) 411–416; BENE (2013) 145. It would follow from the conjunction of these statements that the sage retires from the practical realms as soon as she becomes capable of making a real contribution to it, which is a rather implausible view.



I. Cathartic Virtues in Action

The main differences between the two grades of Plotinian virtues are succinctly summarized in a passage distinguishing one's true self, that is, the rational soul from the compound entity (τὸ κοινόν) composed of the body and the lower powers of the soul.¹¹

But the true man is other, pure of these things, possessing the virtues in intellection, those, that is, seated in the separating soul itself, separating and separate while still here. For when it actually withdraws entirely, the soul illuminated by it departs also, following along with it. But the virtues which are produced, not by reason, but by "habit" and "practice," belong to the common entity: for the vices also belong to this, since envy and jealousy and pity do. (*Enn.* I 1. 10. 7–14)¹²

Cathartic or higher virtues are attained when the rational soul separates itself from the compound in the sense that its activities are not controlled or hindered by the affections of the latter.¹³ These virtues belong to the rational soul as opposed to civic virtues which are dispositions of the compound ordering and limiting its passions. As virtues of the rational soul, they consist in a theoretical activity, namely the contemplation of the forms through the mediation of λόγοι that are the images of the forms composing the essence of the soul,¹⁴ whose content is rendered conscious through the process of Platonic recollection.¹⁵

This general picture might suggest that cathartic virtues are not involved in action guidance so that the sage, if she is active at all in practical affairs, has to resort to civic virtues to act in the sensible world.

1. Since it is the compound that is primarily involved in practical situations of the sensible world and faces problems that require to be settled, while the rational soul is (strictly speaking) unaffected by the dealings of everyday life, one might assume that its virtues have little to do with embodied practical action.

¹¹Even though the treatise I 1 [53], is chronologically much later than I 2 [19], its remarks on the kinds of virtues arguably elaborate on the same theory that is expressed in I 2. This is indicated by the fact that the both treatises distinguish between two grades of virtues, where the higher grade consists in the rational soul's activity of intellection and its separation from the lower components of the human being (I 2. 3, 10–19; 4. 17–25; 6. 11–23) while lower grade is connected to non-rational dispositions (I 2. 2. 13–20).

¹²Ὁ δ' ἀληθὴς ἄνθρωπος ἄλλος ὁ καθαρὸς τούτων τὰς ἀρετὰς ἔχων τὰς ἐν νοήσει αἰ δὴ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ χωριζομένῃ ψυχῇ ἴδρυνται, χωριζομένη δὲ καὶ χωριστῇ ἔτι ἐνταῦθα οὕσῃ· ἐπεὶ καὶ, ὅταν αὐτὴ παντάπασιν ἀποστῇ, καὶ ἡ ἀπ' αὐτῆς ἐλλαμφθεῖσα ἀπελήλυθε συνεπομένη. Αἱ δ' ἀρεταὶ αἱ μὴ φρονήσει, ἔθεισι δὲ ἐγγινόμεναι καὶ ἀσκήσεσι, τοῦ κοινοῦ· τούτου γὰρ αἱ κακίαι, ἐπεὶ καὶ φθόνοι καὶ ζῆλοι καὶ ἔλεοι. Translation from O'DALY (2017).

¹³The terminology of cathartic virtues is ambiguous as it can refer either to the process of freeing the rational soul from the influence of passions or to the final state of the soul's being independent of the influence of passions and oriented towards the intellect. Plotinus addresses this ambiguity in I 2. 4 and suggest that the virtues associated with the process of purification are less perfect than the final state (I 2. 4. 4–5) and that cathartic virtues can be identified with the state of the soul resulting from its conversion towards the intellect (I 2. 4. 17–18). I take this to be Plotinus' considered position (see also I 2. 7. 8–9) and use the terminology of cathartic virtues accordingly.

¹⁴I 1. 8. 6–8; IV 3. 5. 9–10; VI 2. 5. 11–17. For the twofold role of λόγοι as innate cognitive content in the soul and as forming principles is matter, see HELMIG (2012) 186–195.

¹⁵For a careful analysis of Plotinus' adoption of the doctrine of recollection and an informative survey of the scholarly debates that surround it, see HELMIG (2012) 195–204.



2. Given that the exercise of cathartic virtues consists in an activity of theoretical contemplation and assuming that there is a sharp distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning, it follows that cathartic virtues are not related to action guidance.

In the rest of this section, I am going to argue that the above impression is misleading and that Plotinus conceives of the sage's theoretical contemplation as a source of motivation and a principle of action guidance. After presenting some of the relevant evidence and sketching a general picture of the connection between theoretical contemplation and practical action, I will briefly return to the above two problematic points.

One of the most detailed discussions of the different sources and types of motivation is found in the discussion of 'what is up to us'¹⁶ as human beings in the first six chapters of *Enn.* VI 8 (*On the Voluntary and on the Free Will of the One*). This highly aporetic discussion of human freedom begins with a sketch of a common notion (ἐννοιᾶ) of 'what is up to us', which is gradually explicated in the course of the subsequent chapters and also serves as a criterion of truth throughout the discussion. This common notion is derived from the experience of being subject to various external forces governing our actions, such as chances, compulsion, and passions, which make us wonder whether there is an internal origin of action distinct from all these whose unhindered exercise could result in actions that are up to us. Plotinus terms such a capacity as 'will' (βούλησις)¹⁷ and explicates the common notion of what is up to us by defining it as something that "would be enslaved to our will and would or would not happen to the extent we willed it."¹⁸

The initial definition of 'what is up to us' is followed by a survey of the different sources and forms of motivation to find out whether there is any one to which the notion applies. Non-rational types of motivation, such as desire and spiritedness are quickly dismissed on the grounds that they stem from instinctive reactions to external stimuli (mediated by representations) over which the agent has no control. Moving on to rational calculation (λόγισμος) accompanied by desire (ὄρεξις), Plotinus inquires into the possible sources of such rational appetitions.

And yet even here one might inquire whether the calculation moved the desire or the desire the calculation. For even if the desires are according to nature, if they belong to a living being, that is, the compound being, the soul has followed the necessity of nature, but if we assign it to the soul alone, many of the things now said to be in our power would be outside this. Then again, what bare calculation precedes the passions? (*Enn.* VI 8. 2. 10–17)¹⁹

¹⁶Plotinus' concept of 'what is up to us' is widely discussed and debated in the literature but going into its intricacies would exceed the scope of this paper. For useful starting points, see ELIASSON (2008), and COOPE (2020).

¹⁷I take βούλησις to stand here denoting an autonomous source of motivation in general and not yet refer specifically to a rational desire of the good as this will be established only in the subsequent chapters. Cf. BENE (2013) 143.

¹⁸ὅ τῃ βουλήσει δουλεύει καὶ παρὰ τοσοῦτον ἂν γένοιτο ἢ μή, παρ' ὅσον Βουληθῆμεν ἂν. Trans. CORRIGAN–TURNER (2017).

¹⁹Καίτοι καὶ ἐνταῦθα ζητήσιεν ἂν τις, πότερα ὁ λογισμὸς τὴν ὄρεξιν ἐκίνησεν, ἢ τοῦτον ἡ ὄρεξις. Καὶ γὰρ εἰ κατὰ φύσιν αἱ ὄρεξεις, εἰ μὲν ὡς ζῶου καὶ τοῦ συνθέτου, ἠκολούθησεν ἡ ψυχὴ τῇ τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκῃ· εἰ δὲ ὡς ψυχῆς μόνης, πολλὰ τῶν νῦν ἐφ' ἡμῖν λεγομένων ἔξω ἂν τούτου γίνοιτο. Εἶτα καὶ τις λογισμὸς πρὸς πρῶσι τῶν παθημάτων; Trans. CORRIGAN–TURNER (2017).



The notion of rational calculation accompanied by desire is here understood as a compound state of a non-rational desire and rational deliberation. The question is, then, which of the two is the original source of motivation? If the initiation lies with the non-rational component, the composite desire cannot be up to us since it has its origin in the needs of the compound and thus belongs to the domain of external determination. Placing the origin in the rational component raises problems as well. First, considering the desires of the rational soul in isolation from its relationship to the compound and its needs (and therefore to the sensible world in general) would possibly leave us with a sphere of what is up to us restricted to theoretical activities directed at the intelligible.²⁰ Second, if desire is understood as a non-rational motivational state, it is hard to see how it could originate from rational calculation.

Plotinus continues to examine the option of rational activity as an independent source of motivation by raising the possibility of a distinctively rational kind of desire.

But if reason or knowledge counteracts and controls desire, we must inquire what this is referred to and generally where this occurs. And if reason itself makes yet another desire, then how must we understand this? (*Enn.* VI 8. 2. 30–33)

The experiences of conflicts between non-rational desires and rational considerations point to rationality being an independent source of motivation. Plotinus raises two questions that are to be settled if one is to give an adequate account of this phenomenon. (a) If a rational appetite does not derive its goal from non-rational desires, where does its end come from? (b) What is the subject of rational desires? Placing them in the compound of body and lower soul would threaten their rationality but ascribing them to the rational soul alone raises the question of whether and how they are related to actions in the sensible world.

Plotinus suggests, which I take to be his considered view, that rational desires take their origin in the activity of the intellect and belong to the rational soul.

That is also why we will not grant to bad people, who do many things in accordance with these representations, either the capacity of having something in their power or voluntary action, but we do grant self-determination to those free of the bodily passions who act through the activities of intellect – tracing what is in our power to a most beautiful originative principle, namely, the activity of intellect, we will also grant that the premises derived from here are truly free, and we shall grant that the desires aroused from thinking are not involuntary... (VI 8. 3. 17–24)²¹

Non-virtuous agents act on the representations that transmit the desires of the compound to the rational soul so that their actions are externally motivated and not up to them. Cathartically virtuous agents, who have separated their rational soul from the influence of the compound and revert towards the intellect act on desires that are generated in the soul by the activity of intellect. According to the double activity model of causation, the external activity of intellect is the soul's internal activity and essence. The soul's reversion to intellect, as accomplished by the

²⁰Some interpreters take this to be Plotinus' considered view about the scope of 'what is up to us'. See COLLETTE-DUČIĆ (2014); LEROUX (1996); LINGUITI (2014); HUTCHINSON (2015). However, in the present argument, this option clearly figures as a potentially problematic consequence.

²¹Διὸ καὶ τοῖς φαύλοις κατὰ ταύτας πράττουσι τὰ πολλὰ οὔτε τὸ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς οὔτε τὸ ἐκούσιον δώσομεν, τῷ δὲ διὰ τοῦ ἐνεργειῶν ἐλευθέρῳ τῶν παθημάτων τοῦ σώματος τὸ αὐτεξούσιον δώσομεν – εἰς ἀρχὴν τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν καλλίστην ἀνάγοντες τὴν τοῦ νοῦ ἐνέργειαν καὶ τὰς ἐντεῦθεν προτάσεις ἐλευθέρως ὄντως δώσομεν, καὶ τὰς ὀρέξεις τὰς ἐκ τοῦ νοεῖν ἐγειρομένας οὐκ ἀκούσιους εἶναι δώσομεν. Trans. CORRIGAN–TURNER (2017).



cathartically virtuous person, consists in becoming aware of and gaining access to the knowledge of the forms through the activity of λόγοι constituting the soul's essence.²² The activity of intellect, therefore, is present in the virtuous soul through the soul's activity of intellectual contemplation, which is an image and external manifestation of the activity of intellect.

What Plotinus claims is that the activity of intellect generates in the soul not only a further activity of theoretical contemplation but also certain rational desires.²³ Even though the mechanism is not explicated in detail, the use of the term „premises” (πρότασεις) gives a hint at a possible explanation. According to László Bene's interpretation, which has become well-received in the literature, Plotinus makes use of a version of the Aristotelian theory of practical syllogisms to build a bridge between theoretical contemplation and practical action.²⁴ On this model, the virtuous soul's knowledge of the forms supplies the major premise of our practical syllogisms, that is, the ends of our virtuous actions. Although the perception of particular situations and the deliberation about the best way to achieve a given end will still be necessary for acting practically, the theory of practical syllogism makes good sense of the claim that (cathartically) virtuous actions have their origin in the activity of intellect. Such actions are clearly contrasted with those of non-virtuous agents, which are said to be governed by “the premises expressing the passion”²⁵ conveying the needs and desires of the compound.

I have tried to show, that even though Plotinus is aware of the difficulties involved, he establishes the activity of an intellect as reflected in the theoretical activity of the cathartically virtuous person's soul as an independent source of motivation for practical action. To conclude this section, let us briefly return to our two initial problems concerning the role of cathartic virtues in action guidance.

1. It turns out that the rational soul's metaphysical detachment from concrete practical situations, far from being a hindrance, is what makes autonomous action guidance possible. While non-rational motivations stem from passive reactions to our circumstances, the rational soul can offer an independent contribution by deriving general normative premises from the knowledge of forms.
2. The sage's theoretical contemplation is not a substitute for practical reasoning but a source of motivation that is independent of and can be opposed to our non-rational driving forces. Practical deliberation figures in the guidance of both non-rationally and rationally motivated actions, the difference lying in the source of the major premises of practical syllogisms.

In this section, I have shown that Plotinus posits a rational source of motivation and action guidance distinct from the passions. The reasons for this that emerged from the argumentation

²²Plotinus identifies the soul as the λόγος of Intellect (IV 3. 5. 8–18; IV 6. 3. 5–15). In VI. 2. 5. 10–14, he clearly rules out the possibility that the λόγοι would be contents of the soul as distinct from its essence and identifies them rather with its internal activity. Cathartic virtues are identified with the contemplation of forms as the result of the soul's conversion, where the soul becomes of its possession of the imprints (τύποι) of the forms (I 2. 4. 17–25). These imprints can be plausibly identified with the λόγοι constituting the soul's essence.

²³Plotinus' application of the double activity model to the relationship between intellectual contemplation and practical action was pointed out by [EMILSSON \(2012\)](#), suggesting that it was inspired by the distinction between internal and external action in *Republic* (443c–e).

²⁴[BENE \(2013\)](#) 156–159.

²⁵IV 4. 44. 1–6.



of *Enn.* VI 8. 1–3 were to ground the possibility of actions that are ‘up to us’ and to account for the experience of conflict between non-rational desires and rational considerations. The origin of rational motivations lies in the activity of intellect that the rational soul partakes in through the activity of theoretical contemplation supplying the major premises of practical syllogisms. The existence of rational motivation grounded in theoretical contemplation points to the role of cathartic virtues in action guidance as they orient the soul towards intellect and thereby allow practical actions to be guided by the knowledge of forms.²⁶

II. Non-virtuous agency

Although there is no systematic discussion of the non-virtuous agent either in the treatise on virtues (*Enn.* I.2) or elsewhere in the corpus, Plotinus does give a succinct description of her state in contrast to that of the cathartically virtuous person.

Since the soul is evil when it is thoroughly mixed with the body and shares its experiences and has all the same opinions, it will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone, (*Enn.* I.2.3.11-15)²⁷

Following the *Phaedo*, Plotinus describes the non-virtuous agent as someone whose soul is in a way intermingled with the body. Of course, this cannot be taken literally given the incorporeal nature of the soul. The metaphor of mixing is thus spelled out in terms of a community of affections and opinions between body and soul, which raises the following problem. Neither the body nor the compound can be a subject of opinions, which appear only at the level of the rational soul, while the rational soul cannot be a subject of passions.

To make sense of the notion of the community of affections and opinions between soul and body I will first provide a more detailed sketch of the entities composing the Plotinian human being, with an emphasis on the intermediaries connecting body and rational soul. Then, I give an account of the genesis and transmission of affections from the body to the rational soul to shed light on the condition of the non-virtuous agent with respect to the community of affections and opinions between body and soul. I shall argue that the community in question consists in the rational soul’s formation of opinions that take over the affective and conative content of passions transformed into a propositional format.

The body is not animated directly by the rational soul but by the lower soul, consisting of the vegetative (φύσις), a power of representation (φαντασία), and sense-perception (αἴσθησις), which are images of the rational soul.²⁸ The compound of the body and lower soul constitutes

²⁶REMES (2006) 19–21 argues that the sage’s knowledge of the order of the cosmos deriving from the knowledge of forms includes a knowledge of her own place in this order and in this sense combines universal and particular perspectives. Since I see no conclusive evidence for this, I prefer the view that the particular viewpoint required for practical action is supplied by perception and empirical knowledge and enters action guidance through the minor premises of practical syllogisms.

²⁷Ἡ ἐπειδὴ κακὴ μὲν ἐστὶν ἡ ψυχὴ συμπεφυρμένη τῷ σώματι καὶ ὁμοπαθῆς γινομένη αὐτῷ καὶ πάντα συνδοξάζουσα, εἴη ἂν ἀγαθὴ καὶ ἀρετὴν ἔχουσα, εἰ μὴτε συνδοξάζοι, ἀλλὰ μόνη ἐνεργοῖ. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).

²⁸The vegetative soul of individual living beings does not come from their individual rational souls but is provided by the world-soul (IV 9. 3. 23–29; IV 3. 10. 39–40). For a detailed discussion of this issue, see KARFIK (2014) 124–128.



the living being, the subject of passions and other non-rational states.²⁹ However, since the lower soul is still a soul, that is, an incorporeal entity, it cannot directly interact with the body so that Plotinus posits a further intermediary called the soul trace (ἵχνος).³⁰ The trace is no longer a soul but a kind of vitality present in the body provided by the vegetative power, sometimes likened to an Aristotelian enmattered form. The trace provides the body with basic life functions, making it a qualified body (τοιόνδε σῶμα), that is, a living body as opposed to an inanimate physical object.³¹

Affections originate at the level of the qualified body due to its instinctive movement towards self-preservation, that is, the preservation of the biological unity provided by the presence of the soul trace. For example, when the living body undergoes something that threatens its integrity, it immediately reacts with a contraction to move away from the source of danger.³² This first response is not yet cognitive but is rather like what we would call a reflex and as such, it is not yet a full-blown passion but a kind of pre-passion akin to the Stoic προπάθεια. The full-blown passions are generated by the vegetative soul in response to the pre-passions of the qualified body since its function is to preserve the life of the latter.³³ At the same time, the power of sense perception picks up the movements of the qualified body as well, resulting in a representation (φάντασις). Representations, in turn, are accessible to the rational soul, which may or may not assent to and act upon the contents of the passions.

Based on the above model of the genesis of passions and their transmission to the rational soul, we can give a plausible reading of the community of affections and opinions characterizing the relationship of the non-virtuous agent's rational soul to the lower components of the human being. Even though passions belong to the vegetative soul, their contents are available for the rational soul by the mediation of representations. By assenting to these representations the rational soul of a non-virtuous agent forms opinions, which take over the content of the passions, and can thus be said to share in the passions and opinions originating in the body. Now, to gain a better understanding of the non-virtuous disposition, there are three more questions to be asked: (1) What is the kind of content that is transmitted from passions to opinions? (2) How does the rational soul transform and render the content of non-rational passions into a propositional format? (3) What is it about the rational soul of the non-virtuous agent that makes her assent to the representations accompanying the passions?

1. Passions, as we have seen, come about as the vegetative soul exercises its function of preserving the integrity of the qualified body. Accordingly, they aim at attaining things that support the life of the body and avoiding those that threaten it.

²⁹GUBA (2024), in this same issue, argues convincingly that the distinction between the functions of the lower soul and those of the higher (rational) soul corresponds to the boundary between externally determined and autonomous activities.

³⁰For a similar survey of Plotinian anthropology, see NOBLE (2021) 273.

³¹For an excellent discussion of the soul-trace and a close analysis of Plotinus' arguments for introducing it, see NOBLE (2013).

³²IV 4. 20. 10–20.

³³IV 4. 20. 26–36.



for fears are for the composite nature, dreading its dissolution; and sorrows and pains belong to it when it is being dissolved; desires arise when something interferes with the composition or when one is planning a remedy to prevent its being interfered with. (*Enn.* I 8. 15. 15–18)³⁴

The basic passions of pleasure, pain, fear, and desire are all straightforwardly connected to preserving the integrity of bodily life, that is, the union of body and lower soul granted by the immanent presence of the soul trace. Pain and pleasure are affective attitudes toward the changes in the degree of integrity, while desire and fear are conative states towards the pursuit or avoidance of objects that bring about such changes. We can infer the content of the accompanying representations from this basic picture. Representations of pain and pleasure presumably represent internal states of the body with either a positive or a negative emotional colouring, while those of desire and fear represent things that bring about pleasure or pain as to be pursued or to be avoided.³⁵

2. The question then becomes how such content is taken over by the rational soul's propositionally structured opinions when we assent to the representations of passion. According to the relevant passages, the concept of the good plays a crucial role.

for to pursue what is not good as if it was good, drawn by the appearance of good by irrational impulses, belongs to one who is being ignorantly led where he does not want to go. And what would anyone call this other than magical enchantment? The man, then, is alone free from enchantment who when his other parts are trying to draw him says that none of the things are good which they declare to be so, but only that which he knows himself, not deluded or pursuing, but possessing it. (*Enn.* IV 4. 44. 30–36)³⁶

The non-virtuous person will form beliefs that the passions' objects of pursuit or avoidance are good or bad for oneself. Judging that something is good (or bad) is a distinctively rational activity since it makes use of the innate notion of goodness available to the rational soul through its relationship to intellect.³⁷ Beliefs that an object is good or bad for oneself motivate the rational agent to pursue or avoid it. The non-virtuous person, therefore shares the passions and opinions originating in the body in the sense of forming beliefs that the objects of pursuit or avoidance of the passions (connected to the vegetative soul's function of preserving the integrity of bodily life) are good or bad for oneself.

3. It remains to be understood what it is about the non-virtuous person that makes her susceptible to forming beliefs corresponding to the contents of passions. As the quoted passage

³⁴καὶ γὰρ φόβοι τῶ συνθέτω, μὴ λυθῆ, καὶ λύπαι καὶ ἀλγηδόνες λυομένοι· ἐπιθυμίας δὲ ἐνοχλοῦντός τινος τῆ συστάσει ἦ, ἴνα μὴ ἐνοχλῆ, ἴασιν προνοουμένου. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).

³⁵Fear, desire, pleasure, and pain are the primary passions posited by the Stoics, who also postulate a strong connection between the former and the latter pair. The crucial difference between the Stoic view and Plotinus' theory is that while for the Stoics passions are rational in the sense that they consist of value judgments, Plotinian passions are non-rational states which may or may not give rise value judgements in the rational soul. For the Stoic view, see LONG–SEADLEY (1987) (abbr. LS) 65 A–D.

³⁶τὸ γὰρ οὐκ ἀγαθὸν ὡς ἀγαθὸν διώκειν ἐλχθέντα τῶ ἐκείνου εἶδει ἀλόγοις ὀρμαῖς, τοῦτό ἐστιν ἀγομένου ὅπου μὴ ἦθελεν οὐκ εἰδότης. Τοῦτο δὲ τί ἂν τις ἄλλο ἢ γοητείαν εἴποι; Μόνος οὖν ἀγοήτευτος, ὃς ἐλκόμενος τοῖς ἄλλοις αὐτοῦ μέρεσι τούτων οὐδὲν ἀγαθὸν λέγει εἶναι ὧν ἐκεῖνα λέγει, ἀλλὰ μόνον ὃ οἶδεν αὐτὸς οὐκ ἠπατημένος οὐδὲ διώκων, ἀλλ' ἔχων. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).

³⁷V 3. 3. 9–12.



makes it clear, judging the objects of passions to be good is a cognitive mistake enabled by the ignorance of what is in fact good for oneself. Plotinus often describes the non-virtuous person in terms of ignorance, most notably in the opening chapter of *Enn.* V.1, where the soul is said to be ignorant of her origins and (consequently) her metaphysical and axiological status.³⁸ Such ignorance is closely connected to the pursuit of external, bodily objects.

so that their honour for these things here and their contempt for themselves is the cause of their utter ignorance of God. For what pursues and admires something else admits at the same time its own inferiority; but by making itself inferior to things which come into being and perish and considering itself the most contemptible and the most liable to death of all the things which it admires it could not possibly have any idea of the nature and power of God. (*Enn.* V 1. 1. 15–22)³⁹

Here Plotinus presents the positive value judgments concerning sensible objects as explanatory to rational soul's ignorance of its status and its origins in Intellect. However, there appears to be circularity of explanation since, as we have seen, ignorance of the good, that is, of the axiological value of different realities stemming from their metaphysical status is also a precondition of the mistaken evaluation and pursuit of the sensible objects of the passions. Circularity notwithstanding, there clearly is a mutual implication between the pursuit of a given object and the respective value judgments concerning oneself and the object in question. Therefore, in the case of the rational soul, the pursuit of sensible objects and the ignorance of oneself as an intelligible entity go hand in hand.

The rational soul's knowledge or ignorance of its status relative to the sensible world is closely connected to its relationship to the compound living being.

We ourselves are not it, nor are we clear of it, but it depends upon and is attached to us. "We ourselves" refers to the dominant and essential part of us; this body is in a different way ours, but ours all the same. So we are concerned with its pains and pleasures, more in proportion as we are weaker and do not separate ourselves, but consider the body the most honourable part of ourselves and the real man, and, so to speak, sink ourselves in it. For we must say that experiences of this kind do not belong entirely to the soul, but to the qualified body and something common and composite. (*Enn.* IV 4. 18. 13–21)⁴⁰

Caring for a particular body is a proper function of the rational soul. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the rational soul is distinct from both the body and the living being composed of the body and the lower psyching powers. As Plotinus succinctly puts it, the body is not us (ἡμεῖς) but ours (ἡμῶν). Ignorant of its metaphysical status, the non-virtuous soul mistakenly identifies

³⁸For the intertwinement of metaphysics and ethics in Plotinus based on the axiological aspect of metaphysical dependence, see BENE (2013) 150–151.

³⁹ὥστε συμβαίνει τῆς παντελοῦς ἀγνοίας ἐκείνου ἢ τῶνδε τιμῆ καὶ ἡ ἑαυτῶν ἀτιμία εἶναι αἰτία. Ἄμα γὰρ διώκεται ἄλλο καὶ θαυμάζεται, καὶ τὸ θαυμάζον καὶ διῶκον ὁμολογεῖ χειρὸν εἶναι· χειρὸν δὲ αὐτὸ τιθέμενον γιγνομένων καὶ ἀπολλυμένων ἀτιμωτάτων τε καὶ θνητότατον πάντων ἂν τιμῆ ὑπολαμβάνον οὔτε θεοῦ φύσιν οὔτε δύναμιν ἂν ποτε ἐν θυμῷ βάλωιτο. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).

⁴⁰Οὔτε γὰρ τοῦτο ἐσμεν ἡμεῖς, οὔτε καθαροὶ τούτου ἡμεῖς, ἀλλὰ ἐξήρηται καὶ ἐκκρέματα ἡμῶν, ἡμεῖς δὲ κατὰ τὸ κύριον, ἡμῶν δὲ ἄλλως ὅμως τοῦτο. Διὸ καὶ ἡδομένου καὶ ἀλγούντος μέλει, καὶ ὅσω ἀσθενέστεροι μᾶλλον, καὶ ὅσω ἑαυτοὺς μὴ χωρίζομεν, ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἡμῶν τὸ τιμιώτατον καὶ τὸν ἄνθρωπον τιθέμεθα καὶ οἷον εἰσδυόμεθα εἰς αὐτό. Χρῆ γὰρ τὰ πάθη τὰ τοιαῦτα μὴ ψυχῆς ὄλως εἶναι λέγειν, ἀλλὰ σώματος τοιοῦδε καὶ τινος κοινοῦ καὶ συναμφοτέρου. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).



itself with the body and the living being. Thus, understanding (through philosophy) that the rational soul is a metaphysically distinct intelligible entity is an essential element of the soul's separation from the body.

Returning to our question, I would like to suggest that it is the non-virtuous soul's general ignorance about its metaphysical status and its mistaken self-identification with the body that lies behind its tendency to regard the objects pursued or avoided by passions as constituting its good or evil.⁴¹ Since it does not make any difference between itself and the body or the compound, it regards its concerns as its own, automatically taking them to be related to its good.⁴²

Because the non-virtuous agent sees her good in the objects contributing to the preservation of bodily life, her actions are determined by the ever-changing circumstances of embodied life.

Is it because there are many things which rule and are moved, and it is not one which has the power? Yes, and it is because there is one thing after another related to our needs and the present moment, not definite in itself but always related to one external thing after another; as a result our decisions are different and relevant to the occasion when the need arises, and now this and now that external incident occurs. For because there are many that rule it is necessary that there should be many mental images, and they must come in from outside and the images of one must be new to another, and they must get in the way of the movements and activities of each individual part... and the needs of the body and the passions make us have continually different opinions. Then there is ignorance of the [true] good, and the soul's not knowing what to say when it is dragged in every direction, and still other results from the mixture of all these. (*Enn.* IV 4. 17. 4–11, 16–19)⁴³

Since the needs of the living body constantly change in the course of its interaction and exchange with its environment, the soul caring for the body is continuously facing new and new challenges. The non-virtuous soul will therefore, again and again, reformulate its opinions concerning the good by following the ever-changing circumstances. As a result, the actions of the non-virtuous agent are externally determined rather than autonomous and do not exhibit any kind of coherence or constancy. Moreover, different needs arise at the same time, communicated to the rational soul through different, conflicting representations. Since the non-virtuous soul is ignorant of its true good, it lacks internal criteria for deciding or prioritizing between

⁴¹Plotinus' emphasis on the importance of general knowledge for action guidance is present also in his correction of Aristotle's concept of voluntary action (τὸ ἐκούσιον). While Aristotle claims that general ignorance is compatible with acting voluntarily as long as the agent is aware of the particular circumstances of the action (*EN* 1110b31–1111a2), Plotinus dismisses this distinction as ungrounded and argues that general knowledge is also a necessary condition for voluntary action (*VI* 8. 1. 39–44).

⁴²NOBLE (2021) 271 explicates Plotinus' concept of self as that of a principle of action, that is, "the nature according to which an agent lives." Noble makes a difference between a descriptive and normative concept of self. Descriptive insofar as the agent can identify with any nature that enters the composition of a human being. Normative because, she ought to identify with the rational soul because it is the essence of the human being and is causally prior to the other psychic faculties.

⁴³Ἡ καὶ ὅτι ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο πρὸς τὴν χρεῖαν καὶ πρὸς τὸ παρὸν οὐχ ὠρισμένον ἐν αὐτῷ, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸ ἄλλο αἰεὶ καὶ ἄλλο ἔξω· ὅθεν ἄλλο τὸ βουλευμα καὶ πρὸς καιρὸν, ὅτε ἡ χρεῖα πάρεστι καὶ συμβέβηκεν ἔξωθεν τουτί, εἶτα τουτί. Καὶ γὰρ τῷ πολλὰ ἄρχειν ἀνάγκη πολλὰς καὶ τὰς φαντασίας εἶναι καὶ ἐπικτήτους καὶ καινὰς ἄλλου ἄλλω καὶ ἐμποδίου τοῖς αὐτοῦ ἐκάστου κινήμασι καὶ ἐνεργήμασιν... καὶ αὐτοῦ σώματος χρεῖαι καὶ τὰ πάθη ἄλλα ποιεῖ καὶ ἄλλα δοξάζειν· καὶ ἡ ἀγνοία δὲ τῶν ἀγαθῶν, καὶ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ὅ τι εἶπη πάντη ἀγομένη, καὶ ἐκ τοῦ μίγματος τούτων ἄλλα. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).



different externally determined motivations so that its motivational makeup is generally incoherent.

The agency of the non-virtuous person is characterized by external determination and (diachronic and synchronic) incoherence. Both of these shortcomings are explained by the lack of an internal principle that could serve either as a criterion to filter and organize the different impulses prompted by the ever-changing circumstances of the sensible world and the body or as an independent, internal source of motivation. Since the non-virtuous soul is ignorant of its nature and mistakenly identifies with the body and the living being, it does not pursue its proper good, that is, the turning towards the intellect and the contemplation of forms, which could serve as internal principles of action. One could say, that the activities of the non-virtuous soul exhibit a kind of flux and multiplicity otherwise characteristic of the sensible world. In this sense, Plotinus's characterization of the non-virtuous person is an ingenious interpretation of Socrates' claim in the *Phaedo* that the soul is mixed with the nature of the body unless it separates itself through the practice of philosophy.

III. Civic virtues

Civic virtues are internal dispositions that bring order and limitation into one's passions originating in the living body's interaction with its changing circumstances.

The civic virtues, which we mentioned above, do genuinely set us in order and make us better by giving limit and measure to our desires, and putting measure into all our experience; and they abolish false opinions, by what is altogether better and by the fact of limitation, and by the exclusion of the unmeasured and indefinite in accord with their measuredness; and they are themselves limited and clearly defined. And so far as they are a measure which forms the matter of the soul, they are made like the measure There and have a trace in them of the Best There. (*Enn.* I 2. 2. 13–20)⁴⁴

Concerning the main dividing line drawn between the compound living being of body and lower soul and the rational soul, civic virtues are more properly ascribed to the compound since they are limitations imposed on the passions originating in and belonging to the living being. However, there are details in Plotinus' account of civic virtues which call for a qualification of the sense in which they can be attributed to the compound.⁴⁵ Civic virtues are described also in the terms of Platonic tripartition where practical wisdom (φρόνησις) belongs to discursive reason (τὸ λογιζόμενον) and justice is a state of harmony in which each part does its own job with respect to ruling and being ruled.⁴⁶ This suggests that civic virtues cut through the division between the compound and the rational soul by involving both non-rational powers and the rational soul. Moreover, Plotinus' detailed account of how passions can be a source of action guidance also includes the rational soul as the subject of assenting to or rejecting the impulses originating in the qualified body as pre-passions and turned into proper passions by

⁴⁴ Αἱ μὲν τοίνυν πολιτικαὶ ἀρεταί, ἃς ἄνω που εἶπομεν, κατακοσμοῦσι μὲν ὄντως καὶ ἀμείνους ποιοῦσιν ὀρίζουσαι καὶ μετροῦσαι τὰς ἐπιθυμίας καὶ ὄλως τὰ πάθη μετροῦσαι καὶ ψευδεῖς δόξας ἀφαιροῦσαι τῷ ὄλως ἀμείνῳ καὶ τῷ ὀρίσθῃ καὶ τῶν ἀμέτρων καὶ ἀορίστων ἕξω εἶναι κατὰ τὸ μεμετρημένον· καὶ αὐτὰ ὀρισεῖσθαι, ἢ μέτρα γε ἐν ὕλῃ τῆ ψυχῆ, ὁμοίωσθαι τῷ ἐκεῖ μέτρῳ καὶ ἔχουσιν ἴχνος τοῦ ἐκεῖ ἀρίστου. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).

⁴⁵ Thanks to László Bene for pressing me on this issue.

⁴⁶ I 2. 1. 16–21.



the vegetative power.⁴⁷ One could argue that since it is the rational soul that ultimately decides which passions resist or act upon, civic virtues, which are said to impose limits on passions, should also be attributed to the rational soul.

I would like to argue that even though they do involve the rational soul to some degree, civic virtues can primarily be attributed to the compound. In the quoted passage, the imposition of order and limit on the passions is likened to the imposition of form on matter. Matter, for Plotinus, lacks any kind of structure or determination, since as the last product of the process of emanation, it is the antithesis of the One in that it is a pure multiplicity that does not constitute any complex, structured unity. Sensible objects made of matter and sensible forms are determinate and structured entities by virtue of their formal component. The analogy of matter and form suggests that civic virtues are to be understood as limitations inherent in the passions themselves or, more precisely, dispositions of the subject of passions that put limitations on what kind of passions it can engage in.

A difficulty for this reading is how to give an account of Plotinus' claim that civic virtues not only delimit passions but "abolish false opinions"⁴⁸ as well. Since opinions belong to the rational soul it once again seems that civic virtues can not be confined to the non-rational components of the human being. However, Plotinus talks about the elimination of false opinions not as a wholly distinct aspect of civic virtues but as a consequence of imposing order and limit on the passions. Since, as we have seen, passions lead to adopting beliefs by assenting to the representations of their content, I take it that civic virtues have an indirect influence on our beliefs through the limitation of passions. In this case, civic virtues primarily inhere in the compound of body and lower soul as the subject of passions, while indirectly influencing the rational soul as well. Even though it is the rational soul that finally decides whether to act on a given passion or not, civic virtues do not belong to the rational soul but regulate the formation of passions prior to their rational evaluation.

This reading of the account of civic virtues in *Enn.* I 2 is consonant with Plotinus' distinction between the two kinds of virtues that we find in later treatises.

But the true man is other, pure of these things, possessing the virtues in intellection, those, that is, seated in the separating soul itself, separating and separate while still here. For when it actually withdraws entirely, the soul illuminated by it departs also, following along with it. But the virtues which are produced, not by reason, but by "habit" and "practice", belong to the common entity: for the vices also belong to this, since envy and jealousy and pity do. (*Enn.* I 1. 10. 7–14)⁴⁹

One set of virtues, which consist in understanding (νόησις) is ascribed to the rational soul, which is separate from the body and the compound and is identified as one's true self. Another set of virtues belongs to the compound, which are emphatically denied to be linked to thought or practical wisdom (φρόνησις) but are claimed to result from habit and training.⁵⁰ As I have just

⁴⁷IV 4. 20. 10–36.

⁴⁸I 2. 2. 16–17.

⁴⁹See also *Enn.* VI 8. 6. 22–25.

⁵⁰Although according to *Enn.* I 2, there is a civic version of practical φρόνησις, the one in this passage is most likely different from that and is rather to be understood along the lines of *Enn.* I 3. 6. 12–15, where φρόνησις is said to be informed by dialectics and wisdom (σοφία), that is, the knowledge of forms. For an insightful analysis of Plotinus' concept of φρόνησις, see BENE (2013) 154–156.



argued, the civic virtues of *Enn.* I 2 are non-rational dispositions so that the claim of the late treatises that lower virtues are brought about by habit and training can be applied to them without any difficulty.

However, one might wonder whether the attribution of lower virtues to the compound of body and lower soul is already present in or at least compatible with the early account of civic virtues. If this is not the case, we will have to conclude that the late treatises contain a substantially different account of virtues, which would put the possibility of a unitary interpretation of Plotinus' account of virtues into question. Upon a closer look at Plotinus' sparse remarks on the attribution of various states and dispositions to different components of the human being in *Enn.* I 2, we find that these remarks vary in precision partly according to the demands of each given context and partly due to the influence of the terminology of the respective Platonic treatises inspiring different parts of his discussion. In the first two chapters, Plotinus attributes virtues to the soul, which he takes to be the subject of becoming like God mentioned in *Theaetetus* 176A–B. He does not yet distinguish between the rational soul and non-rational powers or raise the question of whether the different grades of virtues inhere in the same substrate. As he moves on to the discussion of cathartic virtues, he adopts the *Phaedo's* notion of separating the soul from the body and expounds his views in the framework of a simple distinction between body and soul. It is nevertheless clear that the body in this context is not a mere physical entity but includes psychic elements as well since Plotinus attributes to it passions and even opinions. As the discussion progresses, the terminology is also refined so that the subject of passions comes to be termed as “the non-rational part” (τὸ ἄλογον) and as “that which he [the rational soul] took up his dwelling with” (ὃ συνῴκησθη). At this point, the main dividing line is located between the rational soul and the non-rational components of the human being, which corresponds to the distinction of the later treatises between the rational soul and the compound. If Plotinus, as I argued above, indeed attributes civic virtues to the subject of passions, there is no substantial doctrinal difference between the account of I 2 and the late treatises concerning the subject of civic virtues but only variations in emphasis and terminological precision.

To get a better picture of how the civically virtuous person acts, it is helpful to understand what the organizing principles of order and limitation are; in other words, what determines which passions are too extreme for such a person and to what extent they should be moderated. Since Plotinus does not go into detail on this question anywhere in the corpus, we can approximate an answer by looking at how civic virtues come about and from where they derive their order and measure from. Plotinus' claim that the order inherent in civic virtues is similar to and has a trace of intelligible order seems to suggest that it can be traced back to the intellect, giving the impression that the civically virtuous person's affections are ordered by having access to the forms in intellect.

Such an impression, however, is inconsistent with Plotinus' claim that it is only the cathartic virtues that involve knowledge of the forms, while the civic virtues rely on habituation and practice. Since the habituation and practice imposing the order of civic virtues on the passions of the compound is not governed by the rational soul's knowledge of forms, it remains a question of what guides the aforementioned process, that is, what the proximate source of the order and measure in question is.

Since Plotinus does not explicitly address this point, there are several options to consider. In the *Phaedo* (68C–69E), the virtues of the philosopher, which consist in intelligence (φρόνησις)



and the soul's purification of bodily influences are contrasted to the virtues of ordinary people. These virtues are based on prudential reasoning which enables the agent to endure apparent evils (such as death) to escape greater apparent evils, or to abstain from certain pleasures to attain greater pleasures. Socrates concludes that these dispositions are not real virtues, since accepting them as such would lead to the absurd consequence that one can be brave by fear or be moderate by intemperance. Even though Plotinus models his cathartic virtues on the *Phaedo's* conception of the virtues of the philosopher, his civic virtues do not appear to correspond to the (apparent) virtues of ordinary people as described in the *Phaedo*. Apart from the fact that Plotinus does not connect civic virtues to prudential reasoning, he also gives them a much more positive evaluation than Socrates does to ordinary virtues. While the latter are conceptually incoherent and no real virtues at all, Plotinian civic virtues are genuine virtues that constitute an important stage of one's moral development. Another option would be to attribute the order and measure in civic virtues to a certain moral sensibility grounded in the latent knowledge of the forms inherent in all human souls. However, as the non-virtuous agent has latent knowledge of the forms no less than the civically virtuous person, one would have to explain why this knowledge is effective only in the latter and not the former.

I would like to argue that the available evidence points toward the view that civic virtues are developed through the internalization of social norms through the imitation of morally exemplary individuals. When arguing that civic virtues also entail a kind of becoming like God, Plotinus claims that civically virtuous people are held to be godlike by common opinion (φήμη).⁵¹ Although the strength of this argument is questionable, it clearly indicates that civically virtuous behaviour corresponds to socially accepted moral norms and expectations.

The concluding lines of the treatise on virtues suggest that civic virtues might not only correspond to socially accepted moral norms but also come about by the imitation of exemplary individuals.

[the cathartically virtuous person] will altogether separate himself, as far as possible, from his lower nature and will not live the life of the good man which civic virtue requires. He will leave that behind, and choose another, the life of the gods: for it is to them, not to good men, that we are to be made like. Likeness to good men is the likeness of two pictures of the same subject to each other; but likeness to the gods is likeness to the model, a being of a different kind to ourselves. (*Enn.* I 2. 7. 23–30)⁵²

The civically virtuous person lives the life of a good man (ἀγαθός ἄνθρωπος), while the cathartically virtuous person acts according to a different set of the norms belonging to the life of gods. I take the life of the good man to refer to patterns of behaviour held to be morally commendable by one's social environment. Conversely, the life of gods is guided by norms that are only accessible to those who have recollected their knowledge of the forms, so that the behaviour of cathartically virtuous people does not always correspond to social norms. Plotinus

⁵¹I 2. 1. 19. 27.

⁵²οἷον τὸ σωφρονεῖν οὐκ ἐν μέτρῳ ἐκείνῳ τιθεῖς, ἀλλ' ὅλως κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν χωρίζων καὶ ὅλως ζῶν οὐχὶ τὸν ἀνθρώπου βίον τὸν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ὃν ἀξιοὶ ἢ πολιτικῆ ἀρετῆ, ἀλλὰ τοῦτον μὲν καταλιπὼν, ἄλλον δὲ ἐλόμενος τὸν τῶν θεῶν· πρὸς γὰρ τούτους, οὐ πρὸς ἀνθρώπους ἀγαθοὺς ἢ ὁμοίωσις. Ὅμοίωσις δὲ ἢ μὲν πρὸς τούτους, ὡς εἰκὼν εἰκόνι ὁμοίωται ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐκατέρᾳ. Ἡ δὲ πρὸς ἄλλον ὡς πρὸς παράδειγμα. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988) (explanatory insertion by me).



claims that virtue might even command the sage to sacrifice her children and country—something clearly at odds with conventional morality.⁵³

Previously in the treatise, while discussing how virtue can be said to be a becoming like a god that does not itself possess virtues (the Intellect), Plotinus distinguished between two kinds of becoming like something (ὁμοίωσις). One is reciprocal and requires that the two relata possess the same trait. This is how, for example, two human beings are similar to each other by both of them participating in the form of human being. There is also another kind of becoming like something, which obtains between items standing in a non-reciprocal relationship of ontological dependence. In this case, what is ontologically posterior becomes like what is prior but not the other way around. In other words, the relationship of an image to its paradigm is a non-reciprocal kind of likeness.

In our quoted passage, Plotinus avails himself of the distinction between the two kinds of likeness to explain the difference between civic and cathartic virtues. The person of civic virtues lives the life of a good man by becoming similar to other good men. This relationship is like that between two images of the same original. The sage, on the other hand, becomes like the Intellect, which is a non-reciprocal relationship of an image to its paradigm. This suggests that the origin of order and measure in the civically virtuous soul lies in the imitation of the moral characters of exemplary individuals. Habituation and practice, which bring about civic virtues are therefore guided not by an understanding of the intelligible paradigms of virtues but by an imitation of patterns of behaviour held to be exemplary by one's social environment.⁵⁴ Such imitation, from a Platonist point of view, has its inherent limitations because it is an imitation of images (examples of virtuous behaviour) as opposed to the things themselves, namely the forms of virtues.

The non-virtuous person was characterized by an uncritical adoption of non-rational motivations originating in the self-preservation of the living body. Civic virtues impose a certain limit and order on the passions, internalized through the imitation of the behaviour of exemplary individuals. As a result, the primary concern of the cathartically virtuous „good man” is not the attainment of certain objects of desire but the moral quality of her actions. However, since the moral nobility of virtuous actions is still but an image of what is truly noble (the forms of virtues), cathartic virtues constitute only an intermediate stage of moral development.

But if someone says that noble practical activities are free from enchantment, or, if they are not, contemplation also, which is of noble objects, is under enchantment, [the answer is] that if one carries out the so-called noble activities as necessary ones, and grasps that what is really noble is something else, one has not been enchanted...But if one is content with the nobility in practical activities, and chooses activity because one is deluded by its vestiges of nobility, one has been enchanted in one's pursuit of the nobility in the lower world; (*Enn.* IV 4. 44. 16–20, 25–27)⁵⁵

⁵³VI 8. 6. 14–18.

⁵⁴COOPER (2013) 379–381 argues for the Plotinus would have had to introduce another set of civic virtues which are based on the understanding of the forms from the assumption that cathartic virtues alone are not sufficient for action guidance but ordinary civic virtues are left behind in the course of one's moral development.

⁵⁵Εἰ δὲ τις λέγοι τὰς πράξεις τῶν καλῶν ἀγορευτούς εἶναι ἢ καὶ τὴν θεωρίαν καλῶν οὖσαν γοητεύεσθαι λεκτέον, εἰ μὲν ὡς ἀναγκαίαις καὶ τὰς καλὰς λεγομένας πράξεις πράττει ἄλλο τὸ ὄντως καλὸν ἔχων, οὐ γεογήτευται... Εἰ δὲ τὸ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν ἀγαπήσας καλὸν τὰς πράξεις ἀφίρειται ἀπατηθεὶς τοῖς ἴχνεσι τοῦ καλοῦ, γεογήτευται τὸ περὶ τὰ κάτω καλὸν διώκων. Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).



The problem addressed in this passage is whether virtuous actions are „under enchantment”, that is, externally determined by one’s circumstances and dealings in the sensible world just as non-virtuous actions are. Plotinus’ answer differentiates between the two kinds of virtuous actions. The sage has a grasp of the forms of virtues, the contemplation of which constitutes their telos. As a result, she carries out virtuous actions as a necessary byproduct (external activity) of her internal activity of contemplation. Such actions are not externally determined since, although they take place under certain circumstances and situations, the goal of the agent is not determined or changed by these external factors but remains fixed on the contemplation of forms. Other agents, in contrast, place their goal in the noble quality of their actions, which is something external and dependent on external circumstances. Since the virtuous character of actions is an image of the forms of virtues, these agents fall into the cognitive mistake of taking images to be originals, stemming from the lack of knowledge of forms.

In other passages, Plotinus directs the same kind of critique specifically against the Stoics, who place the goal of virtuous agents in the correct selection of preferred indifferents.⁵⁶ Even though he approves of their efforts to connect virtue to rational activity as opposed to pleasure and pain (as Epicureans do), he criticizes them for their ignorance of its adequate objects (the forms). Such ignorance, Plotinus argues, forces them to define virtuous rational activity in terms of a correct selection of sensible objects in the practical sphere. The middle position ascribed to the Stoics in between non-virtuous people and the sage largely corresponds to that of the civically virtuous person. Both the Stoic and the person of civic virtues are above the indiscriminate pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain of the non-virtuous by limiting the possible objects of their pursuit through certain principles. However, they do not have access to the forms, the contemplation of which could serve as an intelligible, theoretical goal of their life. As a result, these agents place their goal in the practical sphere, namely in the performance of actions in accordance with their moral principles.

The motivations of the non-virtuous agents were characterized by heteronomy and incoherence. It is due to the lack of an internal principle that could regulate and organize the passions originating in the interaction of the living being with its circumstances in the sensible world. Civically virtuous agency is midway between the external orientation of non-virtuous agents and the possession of a truly internal principle of action. The order imposed on the passions does not arise from an internal source but is rather internalized through habituation and the imitation of exemplary moral behaviour. It is also intermediate in the sense that it does not replace the passions as a source of motivation but orders and refines them. Looking at the relationship between the civically virtuous agent’s telos and her particular actions we find that she occupies an intermediate position in this respect as well. In contrast to the non-virtuous agent, whose goal lies in the attainment of particular objects of desire, the civically virtuous agent places her goal in the morally noble quality of her actions. Actions can be seen as an intermediary between the agent and the external objects of the sensible world, so by putting her focus on the quality of actions, the civically virtuous agent’s goal lies in a sense halfway between the external and the

⁵⁶V 9. 1. 10–16; I 4. 2. 31–55. For the Stoics theory under critique, see Stobaeus 2. 76. 9–15 (*LS* 58K): „Diogenes [of Babylon] represented the end as: reasoning well in the selection and dissection of things in accordance with nature... and Antipater: to live continuously selecting things in accordance with nature and dissecting things contrary to nature. He also frequently rendered it thus: to do everything in one’s power continuously and undeviatingly with a view to obtaining the predominating things which accord to nature.” See also *LS* 64 C, F and Epictetus, *Discourses* 2. 5. 6–8.



internal. The order and limits imposed on passions arguably provide one's actions with a certain degree of coherence as the same moral qualities are expressed in different particular actions.⁵⁷ Since the moral quality of one's actions is more in one's control than the outcome, the orientation of the civically virtuous agent comes with a degree of autonomy that non-virtuous agents lack.⁵⁸

IV. Cathartic Virtues

The moral development of the Plotinian agent, as argued above, is a progress from external determination and incoherence in one's actions to establishing an internal principle of motivation providing autonomy and consistency in one's practical actions. Civic virtues bring order and limitation to passions and shift the goal of the agent from the attainment of external objects to the moral quality of the actions through which these are attained. I have suggested that civic virtues thus constitute an intermediate stage of moral development as an agent and cathartic virtues bring an even higher degree of autonomy and coherence into our practical actions by making the activity of intellect the principle of our actions: a principle truly internal to the agent and independent from the changing circumstances of the sensible world.

According to another line of interpretation, cathartic virtues do not deal with practical actions so that even the sage's practical actions are guided by civic virtues, which remain accessible even when one has attained the purification from passions and the contemplation of forms through the rational soul's reversion towards the intellect. One of the main passages taken to support this view is the discussion of the relationship between the two kinds of virtue, where Plotinus claims that the cathartically virtuous agent retains the civic virtues potentially and may even act according to them in certain circumstances. I will argue that on a closer look, the passage in question rather presents the two sets of virtues as mutually incompatible ways of organizing one's practical actions.

- (1) Whoever has the greater virtues must necessarily have the lesser ones potentially, but it is not necessary for the possessor of the lesser virtues to have the greater ones. Here, then, we have described the life of virtuous person in its principal features. (2) The question whether the possessor of the greater virtues has the lesser ones in act or in some other way must be considered in relation to each individual virtue. Take, for example, practical wisdom. If other principles are in use, how is it still there, even inactive? And if one kind of virtue naturally permits so much, but the other a different amount, and one kind of self-control measures and limits, the other totally abolishes? The same applies to the other virtues, once the question of practical wisdom has been raised. (3) Should we state, at least, that the virtuous person will know them and how much he can get from

⁵⁷REMES (2006) 6–7 emphasizes the degrees of internal harmony and coherence that the grades of virtue impart to the agent's soul. She argues that civic virtues impose an essentially unstable harmony on metaphysically distinct parts of the soul while cathartic virtues provide a stable unity by separating the activity of the rational soul as a unitary being from external influences. I complement her account by showing how the differences in internal dispositions give rise to different degrees of coherence in external, practical actions.

⁵⁸In VI 8. 5, Plotinus argues that placing one's goal in the noble quality of one's action affords a higher degree of autonomy than aiming the attainment of a certain result. However, he adds that the autonomy of such actions is nevertheless qualified by the fact that they are conditioned and even necessitated by the circumstances the agent finds herself in.



them? Perhaps he will act according to some of them if circumstances demand. But when he reaches higher principles and different measures he will act according to these. (*Enn.* I 2. 7. 10–22)⁵⁹

Let us go through the text section by section.⁶⁰ 1. As part of the discussion of the inter-entailment between different virtues, Plotinus raises the question if there exists such a relationship between civic and cathartic virtues. Since the two kinds of virtue constitute distinct, successive stages of moral development, there is a non-reciprocal relationship of entailment. The later stage of cathartic virtues necessarily implies the possession of civic ones but not the other way around. However, civic virtues are present in the sage only potentially (*δύναμει*). This claim has been interpreted as suggesting that the civic virtues are available to the sage whenever she wishes to engage in practical actions since cathartic virtues do not play a role in action guidance. I propose that the potential presence of civic virtues is granted by the fact that the habitual dispositions of limit and order in one's affective life are retained even after progressing to the stage of cathartic virtues but since at this stage, passions are altogether deprived of their role in action guidance, the civic virtues are also rendered inactive in this respect.

2. The question is then raised whether civic virtues can play an active role in the sage's agency. A negative answer is supported by an emphasis on the respective differences between the two kinds of practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*) and self-control (*σωφροσύνη*). Civic and cathartic practical wisdom use different principles. The practical deliberations of the sage are governed by normative premises derived from Intellect. The civically virtuous person does not have access to these premises but her actions are guided by the passions moderated by habituation through the imitation of exemplary moral behaviour. Plotinus claims that the difference in the source of motivation renders the two kinds of practical wisdom incompatible. One's actions are either guided by intellectual insight or by non-intellectual moral dispositions acquired by habituation. The analysis of self-control (*σωφροσύνη*) yields a similar conclusion. Civic self-control consists in „a sort of agreement and harmony between the desiderative part and reason,” whereas cathartic self-control is the rational soul's „inward turning towards intellect.” Accordingly, the former moderates the desires of the compound, while the latter belongs to the rational soul and makes sure that it is motivated by the knowledge of forms rather than the passions of the compound. Once we have attained cathartic virtues, the passions and their moderation by civic virtues become irrelevant to the guidance of our actions.⁶¹
3. This being said, Plotinus explores an alternative suggestion, according to which the cathartically virtuous person possesses the civic virtues in the sense that she has knowledge of them and the

⁵⁹Καὶ ὁ μὲν ἔχων τὰς μείζους καὶ τὰς ἐλάττους ἐξ ἀνάγκης δύναμει, ὁ δὲ τὰς ἐλάττους οὐκ ἀναγκαίως ἔχει ἐκείνας. Ὁ μὲν δὴ προηγούμενος τοῦ σπουδαίου βίος οὗτος. Πότερα δὲ ἐνεργεῖα ἔχει καὶ τὰς ἐλάττους ὁ τὰς μείζους ἢ ἄλλον τρόπον, σκεπτέον καθ' ἐκάστην· οἷον φρόνησιν· εἰ γὰρ ἄλλαις ἀρχαῖς χρήσεται, πῶς ἔτι ἐκείνη μένει κἂν εἰ μὴ ἐνεργοῦσα; Καὶ εἰ ἡ μὲν φύσει τοςόνδε, ἡ δὲ τοςόνδε, καὶ ἡ σωφροσύνη ἐκείνη μετροῦσα, ἡ δὲ ὄλως ἀναίρουσα; Ταῦτόν δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὄλως τῆς φρονήσεως κινήσεις. Ἡ εἰδήσει γε αὐτὰς καὶ ὅσον παρ' αὐτῶν ἔξει; τάχα δὲ ποτε περιστάτικῶς ἐνεργήσει κατὰ τινὰς αὐτῶν. Ἐπὶ μείζους δὲ ἀρχὰς ἤκων καὶ ἄλλα μέτρα κατ' ἐκείνα πράξει.” Trans. ARMSTRONG (1966–1988).

⁶⁰The division is mine.

⁶¹O'MEARA (2005) 44 takes the abandonment of civic virtues to belong to the soul's ascent to the intelligible and suggest that it may again make use of them when descending again to bring divine order into the practical realms. This interpretation implies the introduction of a refined type of civic virtues similar to what Cooper suggests (see n. 33).



kind of actions they would command in a given situation. He does grant that in certain situations the sage may perform the same action that a civically virtuous agent would do. However, he hastens to add that even in this case, she is not guided by the civic virtues anymore. What happens is rather that in certain circumstances the actions of the two kinds of agents happen to coincide, even though their internal motivational makeups are entirely different.⁶²

CONCLUSION

Developing the line of interpretation propounded by Remes, Bene, and Noble, according to which the theoretical contemplation characteristic of the sage is an adequate source of action guidance, I have situated cathartically virtuous practical agency in the course of the moral development of the Plotinian agent. I have sketched the trajectory of the development of moral agency as a gradual transition from external to internal guiding principles, which endows the agent with ascending degrees of autonomy and coherence in her actions. The stages of transition from external to internal principles correspond to different relationships between the agent's telos and particular actions.⁶³ The motivations of non-virtuous agents originate in the living body's striving for self-preservation through its exchanges with a constantly changing environment and aim at the attainment or avoidance of particular sensible objects. Her actions follow the changes in circumstances without being organized by an internal principle and are thus characterized by heteronomy and incoherence. Civic virtues moderate and refine non-rational motivations through principles internalized through habituation endowing our actions with a certain degree of autonomy and coherence by placing our telos in acting virtuously. Civically virtuous agency can thus be seen as an intermediate stage between the external orientation of non-virtuous people and the internal focus characteristic of the sage. Bringing the course of reorientation from external to internal principles to its conclusion, the sage places her telos in the internal activity of the knowledge of forms, which functions as an internal principle of action guidance by supplying the general normative principles (major premises) of her practical deliberations.⁶⁴ Acting on internal guiding principles that are independent of the changing circumstances affords the highest degree of autonomy and coherence possible in the realm of practical actions.⁶⁵

⁶²This interpretation is in line with REMES (2006) 8 arguing that the actions of the sage coincide with the conventional morality of civic virtues for the most part but not always. While she emphasizes the difference of the stability of internal dispositions, I call the attention to the different guiding principles and motivational structures behind the seemingly identical actions.

⁶³NOBLE (2021) recognizes that civically and cathartically virtuous agents pursue different ends and thus live by different principles of actions but he does not go into the question of the relationship between the telos and particular actions.

⁶⁴STERN-GILLET (2009) 334 holds that cathartic virtues are instrumental to the sage's happiness. I would argue for closer connection between the possession of higher virtues and the activity of contemplation which is the telos of the sage, since state of the soul's being turned towards the intellect is rather a constitutive element of that an instrumental means to the activity of contemplation.

⁶⁵I agree with REMES (2006) 16–18 that the sage's actions are organized from the perspective of the good of the cosmos as a whole and take this to be constitutive of the coherence of her actions.



Taking a look at the development of the Plotinian agent has shown that the gradual detachment from one's particular circumstances and the exclusion of non-rational emotions from one's motivational makeup does not lead to inactivity in the practical sphere. Rather, the transition to internal principles is what makes it possible to offer an independent, active contribution to one's environment through one's actions instead of being moved about by the circumstances at hand in a passive way.

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