

# Moral Responsibility and what is “up to us” in Plotinus

Draft

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1.

In a recent article, Galen Strawson has presented a rigorous formulation of a much older argument against the possibility of moral responsibility.<sup>1</sup> According to Strawson’s formulation, “the basic argument” goes like this: (1) Nothing can be *causa sui*; (2) In order to be truly morally responsible, one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects; (3) Therefore, nothing can be truly morally responsible. The argument on behalf of (1) is in the form of a dilemma posed for the defender of the possibility of moral responsibility: either one acts for a reason or not; if not, then it is difficult or impossible to distinguish the action for which one is morally responsible from the action which is just a reflex. If one does act for a reason, then that reason must consist in either in whole or in part in one’s mental state at the time of acting. But then in order to be morally responsible, one must be morally responsible for one’s mental state. If, though, this is possible, it is because one is morally responsible for the choices one makes to be in that state. If this is so, then one makes those choices for a reason or not. If not, then no moral responsibility; if so, then the reason must at least in part consist in the mental state on the basis of which one intended to cause one’s original mental state, the state that was the reason for acting in the first place. Thus, a vicious infinite regress threatens. It does not seem that one can be morally responsible for one’s actions because one cannot be morally responsible either for the mental state that caused the action or for whatever caused the mental state that caused the action. As Strawson notes, this argument does not claim that it is impossible for one to change oneself; it claims merely that whatever change one brings about, one is not morally responsible for it.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I propose to consider what Plotinus has to say about moral responsibility in the light of this argument.<sup>3</sup> The first interesting problem we face is the possibility that in fact Plotinus has nothing to say about moral responsibility because he does not have the exact concept of moral responsibility. He certainly does deploy a galaxy of terms, as we shall presently see, including τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, τὸ αὐτοεξούσιον, ἐλεύθερος, ἐκούσιος, αἴτιος, and βούλησις all of which are related to the concept of moral responsibility but none of which, one might suppose, is exactly what Strawson is talking about in his paper.<sup>4</sup> One reason, at any rate,

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<sup>1</sup> See Strawson 1994: 5-24. A similar argument is presented by Nagel 1979 and recently by Persson 2005: ch. 34.

<sup>2</sup> For a remarkably similar argument from antiquity, see Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, 1.6-15, a defense of antiquity’s paradigm of moral blameworthiness. Gorgias argues that either Helen went to Troy by force, in which case she was without blame or she went by persuasion, in which case it was her nature to be persuadable. Gorgias does not explicitly attribute her susceptibility to persuasion to her nature, but that seems a clear enough implication.

<sup>3</sup> At 3.1[3].7.15 Plotinus says that if the Stoics are right, then “that which is up to us will be just a name” (ὄνομα τε μόνον τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ἔσται). It seems clear that even if there is not an exact match between the concepts of moral responsibility and “that which is up to us,” they are close enough to warrant the claim that there is a substantive issue between Strawson and Plotinus and that the difference is not merely conceptual or verbal.

<sup>4</sup> See Henry 1931: 189, takes these terms as virtually synonymous in Plotinus. So, too, Leroux 1996: 292-314.

for supposing this is that the concept of moral responsibility seems analytically tied to the concepts of praise and blame. Thus, typically, to say that one is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy for something is as much as to say that he is not morally responsible for it. Conversely, to claim that one is morally responsible is, it seems, at least to make praise or blame intelligible or relevant, even when there is disagreement over whether it is one or the other that is appropriate. Note, though, that if someone refrains from praising or blaming some action—if someone refuses to be “judgmental”—he does not thereby commit himself to denying that the one who acts is morally responsible. One may decline to judge someone else, while at the same time allowing that that person is morally responsible for his actions. All that is required is that if he does claim that the agent is morally responsible, then praise or blame are intelligible.

I shall assume that the praise or blame for an act for which one is morally responsible is in regard to the agent having met or having failed to meet some standard of behavior. And I shall further assume that the ascription of moral responsibility depends upon the agent having the power to meet that standard. The precise issue in dispute between those who deny the possibility of moral responsibility and those who maintain its possibility is how to determine whether such a power exists or not. A power or a potency is never, on anyone’s account, directly observable or even cognizable as such. Even if moral responsibility is a reality, it is only possible to observe an action and then infer that the agent had the power to perform that action—*ab esse ad posse*, so to speak. But the matter of moral responsibility is more complicated, for in order to determine that one is morally responsible, one must infer from an action or from behavior a counterfactual. Thus, if one acts in a way that is supposed to elicit the blame that is analytically connected to moral responsibility, the one who is doing the blaming has to infer that the agent could have done otherwise. The case is, of course, similar for praiseworthy behavior. And yet it is far from clear how we can determine the truth of this counterfactual and thereby avoid begging the question at issue.

Given these considerations, Strawson seems committed to maintaining that one’s mental state is a sufficient condition for action, and that the agent is not morally responsible for this mental state (or, ultimately, *some* mental state). The proponent of moral responsibility must insist that even if the mental state is a sufficient condition for acting in the sense that it is the reason for acting, one could have acted otherwise given that same mental state. But how could one possibly know this? It seems that even the agent himself could not know this. How could one know after the fact that one could have acted otherwise in the given situation with the identical mental state? If, though, this is not knowable, then the ascription of moral responsibility is meaningless. On the other hand, we need not assume that this ascription could only rest on some quasi-empirical grounds, as if the only way to determine moral responsibility is by seeing someone act otherwise than the way they did act in identical circumstances. There is no need for the proponent of moral responsibility to concede this narrow basis for the determination of its presence. Is there another approach?

## 2.

I think we may safely assume that Plotinus wishes to follow Plato as closely as possible in the consideration of these matters.<sup>5</sup> One place the issue arises is in reference to the passage in Plato’s *Republic* where the famous remark is made that “the one who chooses is to blame; god is

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<sup>5</sup> See 3.1 [3].8-10 wherein Plotinus, after criticizing the Stoic, Epicurean, and Peripatetic views on what is “up to us,” expresses his own Platonic view, dependent in part on *Laws*, Book 10.

blameless” (αἰτία ἐλομένου· θεὸς ἀναίτιος).<sup>6</sup> The choice here is a choice of lives and of one’s guardian spirit. It is difficult to know what to make of such passages, particularly in the light of Strawson’s argument. One who chooses a life (βίος) presumably chooses it, as Strawson says, in the light of a mental state. Did he choose *that*? If he did not, what does it even mean to say that he chose the life in a morally relevant manner as opposed to randomly picked it out by lot? If he did choose the mental state, did he not do so in the light of another mental state? And so on. It is true that in the passage in *Republic*, the opportunity to choose a life is arranged by lot, so that one chooses in an order over which he has no control. Any choice of life is said to be capable of bringing a measure of happiness. But the main point of the passage is that success in a choice of lives depends on the virtue that one brings to the task. A virtuous soul will not be beguiled by the blandishments of one kind of life rather than another. But either this virtue or mental state must be postulated *de novo* or else it is the result of a previous life, which of course is the result of a previous choice, and so on. Plotinus seems to endorse the view that one is morally responsible for one’s entire life, that is, for the life that one has chose. And this is as much as to say that this sort of moral responsibility has little to do with praise and blame for actions in this life. For to say that one is morally responsible for one’s life whatever that may be, is to say nothing about whether a particular action is praiseworthy *or* blameworthy. Moral responsibility as a foundation for all is irrelevant to the moral responsibility which differentiates one person and one act from another. In this respect, moral responsibility without praise or blame is practically equivalent to an act with negative consequences (*actus reus*) without a guilty mind (*mens rea*). Someone who chooses a bad life will undoubtedly suffer the consequences whether or not he is morally responsible in the sense that he could have done otherwise.

There is another passage in the treatise *On Providence* wherein Plotinus is reflecting on the passage in Plato’s *Laws* in which the Athenian Stranger is considering divine providence. He says that “all our actions are ensouled” (ἐμψύχους οὔσας τὰς πράξεις ἀπάσας) meaning, I think that they are all a function of the state of the soul of the agent.<sup>7</sup> The Stranger then adds that the “King”

“made responsible the acts of willing of each individual for the generation of the state of the soul. This is so because in whatever way one manifests desire and whatever state his soul is in, it is almost always in this way that he acts each time and [this is the way] the state of the soul comes to be.”<sup>8</sup>

Commenting on this passage, Plotinus says that

So there is a place for every man, one fit for the good and one fit for the bad. Each kind of man, then, goes according to nature and the λόγος in him to the place that suits him, and holds the position he has chosen. There one speaks blasphemies and commits crimes, the other speaks and acts in the opposite way; for the agents existed before the play and bring their own selves to it. Now in human plays the author provides the words, but the agents, each and every one

<sup>6</sup> *Rep.* 617E4-5. Cf. *Tim.* 42D. Cf. *Enn.* 3.2 [14].7.19-20; 3.4 [15].5.1-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Lg.* 10.904A6-7.

<sup>8</sup> *Lg.* 10.904B8-C4: τῆς δὲ γενέσεως τοῦ 904.c ποίου τινὸς ἀφῆκε ταῖς βουλήσεσιν ἐκάστων ἡμῶν τὰς αἰτίας. ὅπη γὰρ ἂν ἐπιθυμῆ καὶ ὁποῖός τις ὦν τὴν ψυχὴν, ταύτη σχεδὸν ἐκάστοτε καὶ τοιοῦτος γίγνεται ἅπας ἡμῶν ὡς τὸ πολὺ. Cf. 9.867D-868C where the catalogue of criminal offenses clearly distinguishes between acts for which the agent is and is not morally responsible.

of them, are responsible by themselves and from themselves for the good or bad acting of their parts, for there is action, too, which is theirs in addition to the words of the poet.<sup>9</sup>

In the subsequent elaboration of the metaphor of a play, Plotinus makes it clear enough that he wants to defend the Platonic position by distinguishing divine psychic endowments from personal or individual psychic achievements. The former, according to Plato, seems to be the sorts of dispositions rooted in bodily character that would have been, roughly, identified with racial or ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> The latter is entirely up to the individual, according to his choices.

The broad strategy that Plotinus must employ to counter an argument such as that of Strawson is to locate moral responsibility in the choices that are not caused by one's endowment, that which is clearly out of one's control. Strawson wants to maintain that one acts according to one's mental state. Plotinus, in effect, needs to show that "mental state" is ambiguous: it can refer either to endowment or achievement, and one's choices are not necessarily determined by the former, but are themselves determinative of the latter.<sup>11</sup> In part at least, this strategy is Aristotelian, that is, in its distinguishing "first" and "second" nature and locating the source of praise and blame in the latter. If the "first" nature determines the "second," then there is no conceptual space for moral responsibility; only if the "first" nature is not a sufficient condition for the "second" is the conceptual space potentially available. But to make such a claim, one would have to suppose that *nothing* that occurs between the moment of endowment and the development of the "second" nature is necessary for the latter. That is a remarkable claim, indeed. It is also a claim that seems entirely beyond empirical verification.

Before we consider Plotinus' argument, we need to keep in mind that his and Plato's commitment to the idea of moral responsibility is made against the background of the principle: no one does wrong willingly (οὐδεὶς ἐκὼν ἀμαρτάνει).<sup>12</sup> Taken in one way, this claim is tautologous: no one willingly acts counter to their best interests as they conceive them to be. Taken in another, a paradox emerges: no one willingly acts counter to what are in fact their best interests, regardless of how they conceive of them. The quasi-tautology focuses on the meaning of "does wrong" or ἀμαρτάνει, for this implies one is trying to hit a target, this being one's own good. And, of course, no one willingly fails to hit that target. By contrast, the paradox relies on an implicit distinction between what one really wills and what one thinks one wills. But the paradox does not consist in this distinction, which is in itself banal. Nor does it even consist in the claim that if one believes that something is bad for oneself, then one cannot will it, as the existence of the phenomenon of ἀκρασία clearly shows. What turns the tautology into a paradox is the claim that one's own good is in fact never achievable at the expense of others. In that case,

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<sup>9</sup> 3.2 [47].17.22-32: οὕτω τοι καὶ ἔστι τόπος ἐκάστῳ ὁ μὲν τῷ ἀγαθῷ, ὁ δὲ τῷ κακῷ πρέπων. Ἐκάτερος οὖν κατὰ φύσιν καὶ κατὰ λόγον εἰς ἐκάτερον καὶ τὸν πρέποντα χωρεῖ τὸν τόπον ἔχων, ὃν εἴλετο. Εἶτα φθέγγεται καὶ ποιεῖ ὁ μὲν ἀσεβεῖς λόγους καὶ ἔργα πονηρῶν, ὁ δὲ τὰ ἐναντία· ἦσαν γὰρ καὶ πρὸ τοῦ δράματος οἱ τοιοῦτοι ὑποκριταὶ διδόντες ἑαυτοὺς τῷ δράματι. Ἐν μὲν οὖν τοῖς ἀνθρωπίνους δράμασιν ὁ μὲν ποιητὴς ἔδωκε τοὺς λόγους, οἱ δὲ ἔχουσι παρ' αὐτῶν καὶ ἐξ αὐτῶν τὸ τε καλῶς καὶ τὸ κακῶς ἕκαστος—ἔστι γὰρ καὶ ἔργον αὐτοῖς μετὰ τὰς ῥήσεις τοῦ ποιητοῦ. Cf. 3.2 [47].10.11-19; 3.3 [48].3; 4.2 [4].24.11-16.

<sup>10</sup> Lg. 10.904B6-8: μεμηχάνηται δὴ πρὸς πᾶν τοῦτο τὸ ποῖόν τι γιγνόμενον ἀεὶ ποῖαν ἔδραν δεῖ μεταλαμβάνον οἰκίζεσθαι καὶ τίνας ποτὲ τόπους. Cf. *Enn.* 1.1 [53].12.

<sup>11</sup> 3.1 [40].7.20-1: καὶ νῆ Δία καὶ πυρὸς ὄρμαι καὶ πάντων ὅσα δουλεύοντα τῇ αὐτῶν κατασκευῇ φέρεται κατὰ ταύτην ("indeed, there are impulses in fire, and everything subservient to its constitution is moved according to this"). Here Plotinus recognizes that it is possible that some people act like a natural substance whose action is determined entirely by its constitution. Cf. 6.8 [39].2.21ff.

<sup>12</sup> See Plato *Ap.* 37A5; *Gorg.* 488A3; *Protag.* 345D8, 358C7; *Rep.* 589C6; *Tim.* 86D2, E1; *Lg.* 731C-D.

what one really wills is only the good *simpliciter*. And so if one errs it is always with respect to mistaking what appears to be good as the real good. This is an intellectual error, to be sure. But it is highly misleading to characterize it exclusively thus. For we might well wonder why anyone would be convinced that there is never—absolutely never—a divergence between my own good and the good *simpliciter*. According to both Plato and Plotinus, such a conviction arises only in one who has radically reconceived his own identity. Such a person comes to think of his good only as the sort of thing that is obtainable without negative consequences for anyone else. In short, he comes to identify himself as an intellectual soul or simply an intellect whose only good is enjoyment of cognition of all that is intelligible.<sup>13</sup>

The identity of “good” and “good for me” is, for Plato and Plotinus, analogous to the identity of “true” and “true for me.” The words “for me” add nothing to the content contained in any attribution of the predicate “good” to some subject or state of affairs. Accordingly, a claim that goods “conflict” must be spurious. If it appears to me that my good is achieved by doing something that is bad for someone else, then my appearance is false. And so, since I only want what is good for me, I cannot really want that which appears to me to be good. This point will be paramount in locating the conceptual space for moral responsibility between our “first” and “second” natures even though it is the case that anyone who does something bad does so unwillingly. What we are seeking is culpable, yet unwilling, wrongdoing.

Plotinus’ most extensive treatment of the issues surrounding moral responsibility is in the treatise 6.8, a work which is principally focused on whether volition or will can be ascribed to the One. But Plotinus, reasonably enough, starts with human beings, analogous to the way that Aristotle starts with sensible substance on the way to understanding primary being. With certain qualifications, Plotinus is prepared to use the terms ἐκούσιον, θέλησις, αὐτοεχούσιον, βούλησις, ἐλεύθερος, and τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν extensionally equivalent even if they differ in definition. The qualification is significant. An action is voluntary (ἐκούσιον) if it is done with knowledge and is not subject to force.<sup>14</sup> This same action would also be said to be “up to us” (τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν). But it would be involuntary if it were done out of ignorance, even though it continued to be “up to us”. In the next sentence, however, Plotinus raises a doubt as to whether if in the presence of the ignorance that would turn an otherwise voluntary action into an involuntary one that action can actually be said to be “up to us”.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as this doubt is maintained, no room is left for undermining the extensional equivalence of the voluntary and what is “up to us”. We shall return to the significance of this point below.

It seems that “up to us” indicates a causal claim; voluntary action (if it is different) presupposes the identical causal claim, but differs in imposing two further conditions, namely, that there is knowledge present and the action is not forced. Presumably, it is because of the

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<sup>13</sup> See 6.4 [22].15.32-40: : Τοῦτο δὲ καὶ ἀνθρώπου κακία αὐτῷ ἔχοντος δῆμον ἐν αὐτῷ ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν καὶ φόβων κρατησάντων συνδόντος ἑαυτὸν τοιοῦτου ἀνθρώπου δῆμῳ τῷ τοιοῦτῳ· ὅς δ’ ἂν τοῦτον τὸν ὄχλον δουλώσῃται καὶ ἀναδράμη εἰς ἐκείνον, ὅς ποτε ἦν, κατ’ ἐκείνόν τε ζῆ καὶ ἔστιν ἐκείνος διδοὺς τῷ σώματι, ὅσα δίδωσιν ὡς ἐτέρῳ ὄντι ἑαυτοῦ· ἄλλος δὲ τις ὅτε μὲν οὕτως, ὅτε δὲ ἄλλως ζῆ, μικτός τις ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ κακοῦ ἐτέρου γεγεννημένος. (“This is also the vice of humans; he, too, has a populace of pleasures and appetites and fears which gain control when a human being of this sort gives himself over to a populace of this sort. But whoever subdues a mob of this sort and runs back to the being he once was, and lives according to that and is that and gives to the body such things as belong to something other than himself. Someone else at one time lives this way and at another lives another way, having become something mixed from his own good and the evil of the other”). This passage is essentially a commentary on *Lg.* 689A5-E3. Cf. *Phdr.* 256B2 .

<sup>14</sup> See 6.8 [39].1.33-4.

<sup>15</sup> 6.8 [39].1.38-9.

causal claim that an action that is forced is not only not voluntary but also not “up to us”. The latter point is crucial if, as we shall see, we include among “forces” not only physical ones, but so-called mental ones as well. For these mental forces are exactly the mental states that Strawson wants to hold cause action and so eliminate moral responsibility. And in fact, Plotinus readily concedes that when we are moved by “opposing contingencies” (ταῖς ἐναντίαις τύχαις), “compulsions” (ἀνάγκαις), and “strong passions” (παθῶν ἰσχυραῖς) what we do is “enslaved” and so not “up to us”.<sup>16</sup> But, he reasons, if this is so, are we then to suppose that when these are absent, our actions are still “enslaved” and not “up to us” because they are determined by our “will” (βούλησις)?<sup>17</sup> As it will turn out, the answer to this question is “no” but only when a proper definition of “will” is given.

Plotinus seems to anticipate Strawson’s point that genuine moral responsibility would seem to require that one be *causa sui*, that is, the uncaused cause of one’s actions:

How, generally speaking, can something come from oneself which comes from something else, and whose origin is in something else and which has come about in the way it is from there?<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the “origins” of many of our actions seem to be in diverse desires (ὀρέξεις). As Plotinus tells us elsewhere, desires are divisible into two sorts: (a) those that are productive and follow intellect and (b) those that are passive and derived from elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, when the latter are present, one is not the origin of one’s actions and so those actions are not “up to us”. In the former case, the desire is also, strictly speaking, not the origin of the action; rather, the intellect is. It is the intellect that determines the desire, meaning, roughly, that because we think something is good, we desire it. But the intellect is that which we really are. So, in this case, what we do really is “up to us”.

It is not entirely clear here as to whether Plotinus is thinking of theoretical or practical intellect. He gives as an example a case of continence (ἐγκράτεια), where intellect resists a desire and the person refrains from acting.<sup>20</sup> This would seem to be practical intellect in operation. And yet in the remainder of our passage, it is clear that “intellect” refers primarily to our undescended intellect whose sole desire is for the good, a desire which is eternally satisfied by contemplation of all that is intelligible. In fact, Plotinus seems to say that in the actions of embodied intellects, one never unequivocally finds what is “up to us”.

Since everything in action, even if reason should dominate, is mixed and cannot be a pure case of what is up to us.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 6.8 [39].1.23-4. Note that in making internal states a compelling cause, Plotinus narrows the Aristotelian account of that which is voluntary at *EN* 3.1. According to that account, the only sort of compelling forces, apart from ignorance of particulars, are external. Aristotle does, however, allow for mixed cases in which external *circumstances*, rather than forces, can be compelling.

<sup>17</sup> 6.8 [39].1.30-3.

<sup>18</sup> 6.8 [39].2.21-3: Πῶς δ’ ὅλως αὐτό τι παρ’ αὐτοῦ, ὃ παρ’ ἄλλου καὶ ἀρχὴν εἰς ἄλλο ἔχει κάκειθεν γεγένηται οἷόν ἐστι; .

<sup>19</sup> See 6.1 [42].21.16-23.

<sup>20</sup> 6.8 [39].2.30-2.

<sup>21</sup> 6.8 [39].2.35-7: ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἐν πράξει πᾶν, κἂν κρατῆ ὁ λόγος, μικτὸν καὶ οὐ καθαρὸν δύναται τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ἔχειν. Cf. 3.1 [3].8.9-11: Ἄνευ μὲν οὖν σώματος οὔσα κυριωτάτη τε αὐτῆς καὶ ἐλευθέρα καὶ κοσμικῆς αἰτίας ἔξω· ἐνεχθεῖσα δὲ εἰς σῶμα οὐκέτι πάντα κυρία, ὡς ἂν μεθ’ ἐτέρων ταχθεῖσα (“When, then, the soul is without a body, it

Worthy of particular note here is a point to which I shall return, namely, the implication that there are degrees of being “up to us”. This is a claim that Strawson naturally must dismiss if moral responsibility is an impossibility. Plotinus, by contrast, is prepared to grant that much that is usually taken to be “up to us” is in fact not unqualifiedly so. And yet to reduce the options to the binary “either up to us or not” is, for him, to refuse to face the plain facts about human behavior. It is to conflate not only virtue and continence on the one hand and vice and incontinence on the other, but, finally, to collapse all four into one. Strawson would say that the putative difference between, say, the encratic and the acratic is illusory and that the restraint that the former shows does not prove that the latter “could have done otherwise” given *his* mental state. So, continence and virtue collapse and incontinence and vice collapse, and finally, with respect to moral responsibility they all collapse into one. Plotinus would say that it is not necessary to insist that embodied action is unqualifiedly up to us in order to acknowledge the above distinctions among agents. Qualified moral responsibility will do the job, so long as the reality of the paradigm of unqualified moral responsibility is intact. That paradigm is the completely unfettered will. But how is this supposed to work?

An important clue to Plotinus’ position is his assertion that bad men neither act voluntarily nor do they do what is “up to them”.<sup>22</sup> These people are in the precise condition that Strawson says everyone is in. Although no one does wrong or is bad willingly, the vicious are the extreme case. They have unequivocally identified themselves as the subjects of their bodily appetites and for them reason is exclusively a means of satisfying these. Most people are not like this. Their self-identification as subjects of bodily appetites is episodic and even if continual, it is not permanent. They are variously encratic and acratic. But even the virtuous man—the polar opposite of the vicious—does not and, indeed, cannot permanently identify himself with the intellect that he really is. And that is why even virtuous action is not unequivocally “up to us”. Virtue is a “kind of intellect,” meaning that actions done according to virtue are as close to being “up to us” as it is possible to attain while embodied.<sup>23</sup> As Plotinus dryly notes, no one wishes for war in order to have the opportunity to act courageously.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, brave acts are not unqualifiedly up to the virtuous individual.

So, in a way, the true polar opposite of the vicious individual is not the virtuous one, but the separate and undescended intellect whose activity is, paradigmatically, “up to it”.<sup>25</sup> The closer one is to the life of intellect (in fact, one’s own true life), the more one’s actions are “up to oneself” or free; the farther one is away from that life, the more is one “enslaved” to something or someone else.

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is authoritative over itself and free and stands outside of cosmic causality; but when it is borne into a body, it is no longer authoritative over everything, since it is in a [causal] order with other things”).

<sup>22</sup>6.8 [39].3.17-19: διὸ καὶ τοῖς φαύλοις κατὰ ταύτας πράττουσι τὰ πολλὰ οὔτε τὸ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς οὔτε τὸ ἐκούσιον δῶσομεν. The ταύτας refers to states of imagination produced by bodily passions.

<sup>23</sup> See 6.8 [39].5.34 and 6.8 [39].6.22 for virtue as τις νοῦς.

<sup>24</sup> 6.8 [39].5.13-20. Cf. Graeser 1972: 119, who notes the “aspect” of action to which the term αὐτοεξούσιον applies, namely, the “quality of his conduct.” Thus, to act courageously is at once to be compelled by circumstances and to act autonomously inasmuch as one is acting virtuously. See Persson, *op. cit.*, 416, who takes the fact that the formation of intention depends on opportunity, to support the argument that praise and blame, hence moral responsibility, are illusory.

<sup>25</sup> 6.8 [39].6.41-3: Εἰ οὖν βουλήσει τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ τίθεμεν τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, τὸ ἤδη ἐν ᾧ θέλει ἡ βούλησις εἶναι ἰδρυμένον πῶς οὐ τὸ ἐφ’ αὐτῷ ἔχει; (“If, then, we place ‘being up to us’ in the willing of the Good, then how can it not have what is ‘up to it’, since it is already situated in that which the will wants?”)

The idea of enslavement is particularly important in Plotinus' argument. The person tending towards wickedness is enslaved to his own nature, which implies that there are two things, namely, the slave and that to which he is enslaved.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the latter refers to the bad nature. To what does the former refer? It seems to refer to the "calculation" (λογισμός) already mentioned in chapter 2, line 4. As Plotinus there argues, what is "up to us" is neither to be found in passions nor in the calculations made on how to satisfy these. In contrast to children or animals or madmen, it is at least conceivable that one who is capable of calculating the means to the satisfaction of a desire is also capable of resisting that desire. Recall that it is Plato's point in *Republic* that the akratic is one who does not resist such a desire, despite his calculation that the desire ought to be resisted.<sup>27</sup> So, if we are to say that such a one is not morally responsible, it could not be exactly because his mental state (that is, an occurrent state of his nature) was the true cause of the action. Rather, the true cause was the enslavement of reason to desire, only after which was the causal dominance of desire fixed.<sup>28</sup> But why should we not insist, along Strawsonian lines, that either the mental state was such as to enslave reason or the mental state of reason was such as to enslave itself. In the former case, we have perhaps at the extreme the case of what Plotinus would call a madman. In the latter, we have the problem of commensurability. That is, we have the problem of how an affective state is supposed to overcome, that is, be stronger than, a cognitive state. Thinking that the desire to act and the calculation to refrain from acting are incommensurable, one ends up with desires that have their own reasons, producing *homunculi* within the person. Alternatively, one ends up with a position like that of Strawson according to which it is *always* desires ("mental states") that "overcome" and that therefore efface moral responsibility.

I believe that explaining psychical conflict is actually a problem only for the critic of Platonism who supposes that "rational" is to be taken univocally such that if appetite opposes reason, appetite must be non-rational. Yet I think both Plato and Plotinus maintain that all human desires are rational in the sense that they must be conceptualized in terms of the kind of thing desired. They are not necessarily rational in the normative sense, that is, good reasons. Even if one desires a particular object, one must desire it as an example of a certain *kind*. Furthermore, in order to desire it one must conceptualize it as good for oneself. Although there are undoubtedly cases in which one is overcome by some purely physical state, these are not within the ambit of the discussion of moral responsibility anyway. No one supposes that one is morally responsible for a brain aneurysm. The enslavement that Plotinus speaks of consists in one's endorsement of one's own desire as the ἀρχή of action. This "second-order" desire is exactly what βούλησις is. There is, as Plotinus explains, a sharp distinction between endorsing the desire as the ἀρχή of the action and βούλησις itself as the ἀρχή.<sup>29</sup> Thus, one who realizes that a desire, such as a desire for food, must be satisfied in order to live is not enslaved to that desire; rather, in this case, his βούλησις is the true ἀρχή or cause of the action even if it is the

<sup>26</sup> 6.8 [39].4.22-4: Τὸ δὲ καὶ δουλεύειν λέγειν τῇ αὐτοῦ φύσει δύο ποιούντος ἐστὶ τό τε δουλεῦον καὶ τὸ ᾧ ("To speak of being subservient to one's nature is to make two things: that which is subservient and that to which it is subservient").

<sup>27</sup> See *Rep.* 439D-440A.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. 1.4 [46].7.44-5 where Plotinus argues that if one resigns oneself to slavery "unreasonably" (ἀλόγως), then he is "responsible" (αἰτιος). Such a one, if he were to act based on reason rather than on his desire to live, could have committed suicide.

<sup>29</sup> 6.8 [39].6.27-9: αὕτη ἡ βούλησις ἡ κυρία καὶ ἐφ' ἑαυτῆς οὕσα, καὶ εἴ τι ἐπιτάξει πρὸς τὰ ἔξω ἐξ ἀνάγκης. Cf. 6.4 [22].15.32-40 ("the will itself is authoritative and has what is 'up to it', even if something directs it to externals by necessity").

case that his βούλησις here is not unqualifiedly unfettered. This is in contrast to the one who is enslaves and who acts solely because he desires something.<sup>30</sup>

All that which comes from βούλησις alone and all that is done according to it is “up to us”.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, the only mental state that is relevant to moral responsibility is ignorance. As we have seen, for Plotinus no one does wrong willingly. And so the question is whether the ignorance that leads to wrongdoing is culpable or non-culpable. If it is non-culpable, then it would seem that blame is not appropriate and there is no moral responsibility. If it is culpable, what explains the culpability? Perhaps some light will be thrown on this question if we examine one of the most famous passages in Plotinus in the light of the present discussion. At the beginning of 5.1 [10] we read:

What can it be, then, that has made the souls forget the god who is their father and be ignorant both of themselves and him even though they are parts of the intelligible world and are completely derived from it? The starting-point for their evil is audacity, that is, generation or primary difference or wanting to belong to themselves. Since they then appeared to be pleased with their self-determination and to have made much of their self-motion, running as far away as possible and producing the maximum distance, they were also ignorant that they themselves came from the intelligible world. They were like children who at birth are separated from their fathers and, being raised for a long time far away, are ignorant both of themselves and of their fathers. Since they no longer can see their father or themselves, they dishonor themselves, owing to ignorance of their lineage, honoring instead other things, in fact, everything more than themselves, marveling at and being awestruck and loving and being dependent on these, and they severed themselves as much as possible from those things from which they turned away with their dishonor.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> 3.1 [3].9.4-16: Ὅταν μὲν οὖν ἀλλοιωθεῖσα παρὰ τῶν ἔξω ψυχὴ πράττη τι καὶ ὀρμᾶ οἷον τυφλῆ τῇ φορᾷ χρωμένη, οὐχὶ ἐκούσιον τὴν πράξιν οὐδὲ τὴν διάθεσιν λεκτέον· καὶ ὅταν αὐτὴ παρ’ αὐτῆς χεῖρων οὐσα οὐκ ὀρθαῖς πανταχοῦ οὐδὲ ἡγεμονούσας ταῖς ὀρμαῖς ἢ χρωμένη. Λόγον δὲ ὅταν ἡγεμόνα καθαρὸν καὶ ἀπαθῆ τὸν οἰκεῖον ἔχουσα ὀρμᾶ, ταύτην μόνην τὴν ὀρμὴν φατέον εἶναι ἐφ’ ἡμῖν καὶ ἐκούσιον, καὶ τοῦτο εἶναι τὸ ἡμέτερον ἔργον, ὃ μὴ ἄλλοθεν ἦλθεν, ἀλλ’ ἐνδοθεν ἀπὸ καθαρᾶς τῆς ψυχῆς, ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς πρώτης ἡγουμένης καὶ κυρίας, ἀλλ’ οὐ πλάνην ἐξ ἀγνοίας παθούσης ἢ ἦτταν ἐκ βίας ἐπιθυμιῶν, αἱ προσελθοῦσαι ἄγουσι καὶ ἔλκουσι καὶ οὐκέτι ἔργα ἐῶσιν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ παθήματα παρ’ ἡμῶν (“When, then, the soul is altered by externals, and so does something and acts on a sort of blind impulse, neither the action nor the disposition should be said to be free. And this is true, too, when it diminishes itself and does not have its impulses altogether correct or controlled. When, though, its impulse has in control its own pure and dispassionate reason, this impulse alone should be said to be ‘up to us’ and voluntary, and this is our own act, which does not come from somewhere else, but is internal to the soul, when the soul is pure, from a primary principle in control and authoritative, not suffering error from ignorance or being bested by violent appetites, which come to it and act and drag it around and do not allow any deeds to come from us, but only passive responses”). In this early treatise, third in the chronological order, the same idea is expressed, but instead of βούλησις, the term used is “pure and impassive reason”.

<sup>31</sup> 6.8 [39].6.29-31. Cf. 3.1 [3].9

<sup>32</sup> 5.1 [10].1.1-17: Τί ποτε ἄρα ἐστὶ τὸ πεποιηκὸς τὰς ψυχὰς πατρὸς θεοῦ ἐπιλαθέσθαι, καὶ μοίρας ἐκεῖθεν οὐσας καὶ ὅλως ἐκείνου ἀγνοῆσαι καὶ ἐαυτὰς καὶ ἐκείνον; Ἀρχὴ μὲν οὖν αὐταῖς τοῦ κακοῦ ἢ τόλμα καὶ ἡ γένεσις καὶ ἡ πρώτη ἑτερότης καὶ τὸ βουλευθῆναι δὲ ἐαυτῶν εἶναι. Τῷ δὲ αὐτεξουσίῳ ἐπειδήπερ ἐφάνησαν ἡσθεῖσαι, πολλῶ τῷ κινεῖσθαι παρ’ αὐτῶν κεχρημένοι, τὴν ἐναντίαν δραμοῦσαι καὶ πλείστην ἀπόστασιν πεποιημένοι, ἡγνόησαν καὶ ἐαυτὰς ἐκεῖθεν εἶναι· ὥσπερ παῖδες εὐθὺς ἀποσπασθέντες ἀπὸ πατέρων καὶ πολὺν χρόνον πόρρω τραφέντες ἀγνοοῦσι καὶ ἐαυτοὺς καὶ πατέρας. Οὐτ’ οὖν ἔτι ἐκείνον οὔτε ἐαυτὰς ὀρῶσαι, ἀτιμάσασαι ἐαυτὰς ἀγνοία τοῦ γένους, τιμήσασαι τᾶλλα καὶ πάντα μᾶλλον ἢ ἐαυτὰς θαυμάσασαι καὶ πρὸς αὐτὰ ἐκπλαγεῖσαι καὶ ἀγασθεῖσαι καὶ ἐξηρημέναι τούτων, ἀπέρρηξαν ὡς οἶον τε ἐαυτὰς ὧν ἀπεστράφησαν ἀτιμάσασαι· ὥστε συμβαίνει τῆς παντελοῦς ἀγνοίας ἐκείνου ἢ τῶνδε τιμῆ καὶ ἡ ἐαυτῶν ἀτιμία εἶναι αἰτία.

In this passage, many of the points later to appear in 6.8 are anticipated. Here “audacity” or τόλμα is glossed as “generation” and “primary difference” and βούλησις for belonging to oneself and “self-determination” or αὐτοεξουσία. It is not so clear, however, whether ignorance is the cause or the effect of audacity. I suspect that it is safest to interpret ignorance as meant by Plotinus to be taken as constitutive of the psychical, in which case it makes the apparent culpability of this ignorance (“the starting point for their evil”) all the more puzzling. I wonder, though, whether the words “their evil” need to be taken so narrowly that they do not include that which is non-culpable as well. In that case, it seems open for us to suppose that culpable ignorance is something over and above a ubiquitous non-culpable ignorance which is just a sort of natural original sin borne by any embodied soul.

What would we ordinarily take to be a clear cut case of culpable ignorance? I suppose the culpability would be found in a case in which one could not possibly or perhaps reasonably claim that one was not responsible for not knowing. The limiting case here is presumably one in which one acknowledges or expresses that one knows, but then acts as if one did not. In such a case, there would no longer be ignorance but only feigned ignorance. Real ignorance approaches feigned ignorance when we are inclined to say, “he should have known even if he did not”. How can we ever justifiably say this? I think the Plotinian answer to this question is that if anyone is blamed for bad behavior, he can either attempt to justify that behavior or admit to the justice of the blame or he is unable to do either. If the latter, then he is what Plotinus would call a madman and he is not within the scope of this discussion. If he does either of the first two, he has to do it by appealing to universal rules or the universal premises of practical syllogisms. In short, he has to employ reason. This is so even if—or especially if—he employs specious reasoning. Someone who argued that everyone ought to look out for “number one” is still announcing himself as a rational being. So, the culpability flows from what someone who employs reason should have known about being a subject who employs reason. What is that? After all, from Strawson’s perspective, this person may be in a mental state (for which he is not responsible) that only permits him to employ reason instrumentally, so to speak. But such a person *believes* that exculpating observation by offering a justification for his behavior. If he claims that the way he is acting is the way that people ought to act, then he is committing himself to the acknowledgement of his essential rationality. And note that this rationality is not equivalent to a disposition to reason or to employ reason instrumentally; for such a disposition is only intelligible as a function of an actual state. One is able to reason because one is rational, not the other way around. And if one acknowledges the force of a universal premise—as he must if he is giving a justification of his behavior—then he must acknowledge that he is a rational being, or at least that being a rational being is part of what he is. If this were not the case, he could not make any sense of the idea that a universal claim had any force on him at all.

In the above passage, Plotinus’ main point is that embodied souls are ignorant of their true identity, just like babies. But when one grows up and is able to reason, the excuse for this ignorance begins to seem more and more hollow. One’s ignorance of the unicity of goodness may indeed be ubiquitous, and it may be, generally speaking, equivalent to ignorance of one’s “lineage”. This is perhaps the natural “original sin” and if so it is as such non-culpable. But it is the root of culpable ignorance, the ignorance displayed in the practical reasoning of all but the virtuous.<sup>33</sup> Plotinus seems wise not to attempt to provide anything like a fine grained analysis of

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<sup>33</sup> 4.8 [6].5.8-10: Πᾶν μὲν γὰρ ἰὸν ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον ἀκούσιον, φορᾷ γε μὴν οἰκεία ἰὸν πάσχον τὰ χεῖρω ἔχειν λέγεται τὴν ἐφ’ οἷς ἔπραξε δίκην (“Everyone goes to the worse involuntarily; at least, he is borne by his own impetus and,

the degrees of moral responsibility or culpable ignorance. I take it that this is something he learned from the Stoics, especially Epictetus. For after all, one mired in vice may actually be closer to reform than one who is casually acrotic, where reform begins and really ends with a recognition of one's true identity.

If all wrongdoing is done out of ignorance, the claim that we are morally responsible for our actions amounts to the claim that there is such a thing as culpable ignorance. The ignorance is of one's true identity as a rational soul for whom the attainment of that which is good is never a "zero-sum game". The culpability resides in the undeniable fact (undeniable to the agent himself) that in acting we necessarily make appeal to universal propositions and that insofar as these propositions factor into our actions, we make normative judgments regarding them. It is always the subject who makes these judgments—the subject of "second-order" desires—that "trumps" the subject of embodied appetites either by resisting that subject or endorsing its desire. Degrees of moral responsibility are degrees of ignorance regarding one's true identity. Although the identity of an embodied rational soul is never transparent to anyone, it is never entirely opaque either, at least so long as practical rational activity is possible. The unchosen "mental states" that Strawson thinks must always be sufficient conditions for action are in fact not sufficient, albeit they are necessary. The reasoning that is a constituent of every action is always available as a manifestation of our true identity as rational subjects desiring the good. No human action springs from these mental states without giving the agent a glimpse of the subject undetermined by and capable of resisting them.

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experiencing bad things, he is said to be subject to justice for things he did"). I take it that the words *φορῶν οἰκεία* ("by its own impetus," i.e., a motion that is uniquely its own) indicates the culpable ignorance. Cf. 3.2 [47].7.20; 4.3 [27].24.15-16. These words indicate the voluntariness of the action upon which follows involuntary results. The *δίκη* that the malefactor receives must be *deserved*. That is, the act is culpable. The impetus for the act is psychical, that is, it is a specific sort of activity of the soul, in this case, the activity of identifying with appetite as the *ἀρχή* of the action rather than reason. Reason, that is, normative reason, only endorses the appetite; it is not an *ἀρχή* itself.

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