



PLOTINUS, ARISTOTLE AND THE ORIGIN OF THE FREE WILL*

PLOTINO, ARISTÓTELES Y EL ORIGEN DEL LIBRE ALBEDRÍO

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Abstract

This article has as its main purpose to criticize the mainstream scholar tradition on the free will, according to which, there is no notion of free will in ancient Greek Philosophy. With this aim, I will make a direct critique to Michael Frede's interpretation on the matter, who claims that this concept originates from the Stoic tradition, in some measure, because they are the first to develop an intellectual concept of the free will that, in his point of view, provides the best account on this issue. Moreover, I will show that Aristotle does have a notion of free will, in my opinion, even much more broad and effective than the merely intellectual one, for it explains, among other things, the possibility of choosing evil. Finally, in order to evaluate the limitations of the intellectualist free will, I shall use the analysis of the problem provided by Plotinus.

32

Keywords: Free will, Frede, Aristotle, Plotinus, Stoicism.

Resumen

El presente artículo tiene como propósito hacer una crítica a una de las vertientes interpretativas más influyentes en la tradición filosófica, la cual sostiene que no existe una noción de libre arbitrio en los filósofos griegos clásicos. Con tal fin, haré una crítica directa a los planteamientos de Michael Frede quien sostiene que tal concepto nace en la tradición Estoica, en parte, debido a que son los primeros en desarrollar un concepto intelectualista del libre arbitrio el cual, en su opinión, promete la mejor perspectiva del problema. Además, mostraré que Aristóteles sí tiene una noción de libre arbitrio, incluso mucho más amplia y efectiva que la noción racionalista, ya que, entre otras cosas, explica la posibilidad de elegir el mal. Finalmente, para evaluar las limitaciones que a mi modo de ver tiene el libre arbitrio intelectualista, me serviré del análisis del problema en la teoría de Plotino.

Palabras clave: Libre arbitrio, Frede, Aristóteles, Plotino, estoicismo.

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The problem of freedom and free will

In the scholarly tradition the most wide spread opinion on the origin of the free will comes from Dihle's book *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*. According to the scholar the concept of will originated in Saint Augustine in so far as Augustine has a conception of the will that represents a third kind of a well defined entity that is able to chose between what is right or wrong. At least, two consequences followed in the scholar tradition from this theory proposed by Dihle. The first one is related to the way of addressing the question on free will, and the second one is related to the way in which this scholar tradition has affected our way to conceive the free will. As I hope to show, both problems are closely related. Let me start by the last issue.

In my opinion, the scholar tradition seemed so eager to welcome Dihle proposal of a will capable of clearly choosing between good and evil because it somehow foreshadows the later modern conceptions of the I that seated in a consciousness is able to determine the objects of our thoughts and knowledge. Both concepts, the I in the field of knowledge and the will in the field of ethics, are clearly analogues if not the same, and both give us the peace of mind of having found a first safe principle that allows building systems. However, in my opinion, this is neither the only possible conception of the will and nor the best one that philosophy or even psychology have to offer. On the other hand, this conception of the will conceived as a third definite entity led some scholars to believe that in looking for the origin of the concept of the will we have to look for it in the same way as we look for a lost object that got lost in the past. A good example of this approach is Frede's book *A Free will. Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*.

Frede's position can be seen in the following quote: "My claim is that Christianity's interest in freedom and a free will was motivated by a concern with various forms of Gnosticism and astral determinism, and basically Stoic view on a free will admirably served the purpose of combating these unorthodox views, and that we therefore have no particular reason to expect a radically new notion of a free will's emerging from Christianity." (120) Thus, he will defend



that the concept of free will was originated by the Stoic tradition that greatly influenced Christianity and to whom it has its debt.

In my opinion, he is right in being up set against the claim that the concept of free will is exclusive to the Christian tradition, or that “Christians were able to come to a conception or understanding of the will from which pagans were barred” (129-130). However, I think that his reasons and method to support his case are too limited and I would like to make some comments on this point due to the fact that this way of procedure is not exclusive to Frede. He typifies a widespread attitude of mind.

In the first place, as I pointed out already, this kind of approach to the problem seems to be mistaken. Frede appears to be looking for the origin of the concept of free will as if he were looking for a piece of gold. He thinks that the work is done once he has found a certain word that he can safely translate for will or for a well-defined agency of the will.

34

Frede’s procedure is as follows, in the first chapter he tries to show that even if Aristotle does have a notion of choice he has no notion of a will or of freedom, then he shows that the notion of the will originated from the Stoics in opposing themselves to the partition of the soul introduced by Plato and Aristotle, because “[a]ccording to the Stoics, the division of the soul threatens the unity of the person and obscures the responsibility we have for our supposedly non-rational desires” (33). Thus, they will deem that all human impressions are rational and that the will is an “ability of the mind or of reason to make choices and decisions” (46). Therefore, Frede maintains that this idea of will come from Epictetus.

Next, he shows that the notion of freedom came about “by analogy to the political notion of freedom” (10) that is finally established by Chrysippus with his notion of *exousia autopraxias* and is defined as “a matter of having the ability to act one’s own, to act at one’s own discretion, to act on one’s own account, to act independently” (66). Accordingly, the Stoics will claim that only the wise person is free and that everybody else is a slave. However, Frede maintains that Chrysippus did not have a notion of the will and that the notion



of a free will comes actually from Epictetus. According to the scholar, once we have our two ingredients, will and freedom, we have encountered the recipe for the free will and this is Epictetus' s achievement.

In this way, Frede wants to prove that the notion of free will did not originate from Augustine, as the tradition, since Albrecht Dihle' s work *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (1974), maintain. For him, this concept originates from the Stoics as a response to Plato' s and Aristotle' s explanation of the soul and how we are held to be responsible for an action.

Frede does not realize that such way of looking for the concept of free will leads him to a great number of inconsistencies. One that seems to me really evident is that in claiming that the stoics are the first to use the concept of free will and accusing Plato' s and Aristotle' s philosophy of being insufficient in order to explain a "real choice" (in his own words) between good and evil he is totally mistaken. Frede is blind to the fact that the moral intellectualism of the Stoics leads to that same problem of what he is unjustly accusing Plato and Aristotle. Therefore, I consider that the Stoics are not good representatives of the point that Frede wants to make in so far as for them the only thing that we can really chose is good. According to them, we always chose the good even if we mistake it by evil and evil is a mere accident caused by our ignorance of the real good.

Let me make a short digression to make my case clearer taking in account Frede' s critique of Aristotle' s philosophy. According to Frede, the theory of the Stoics originates in response to Aristotle' s and Plato' s theories of the soul. For them, Aristotle and Plato, the human soul has three parts: one rational and two irrational. As Frede rightly claims, these theories were raised against Socrates' intellectualism, who maintains that a human beings act wrong only by ignorance, in other words, that human beings act right if they know what is right and never would chose to act wrong knowing what is right. For Plato and Aristotle this was a narrow and insufficient account of human actions, because, they found that, as a matter of fact,



human beings can act wrong knowing what is good and convenient for them. They call this phenomenon *akrasia*.

Frede states that the Stoics opposed Aristotle and Plato and returned to Socrates intellectualism. Thus, the Stoics claim that there is not such a thing as irrational desires in adult human beings. Once we reach maturity, acting right or wrong is totally up to us because all our choices are mediated by reason and there is not such a thing as irrational impulses forcing us to act. Nothing can compel us to accent or dissent on our beliefs, although external forces can compel us to act in a different way from our rational choice.

It is not my goal to contradict this particular interpretation of the Stoics, which seems very plausible to me. However, I will give you my reasons to argue that there is a notion of free will in Aristotle, and that this notion is even more powerful than the one that Frede is so eager to defend in Stoicism, in the sense that Aristotle really explains our possibility to act according to evil by a personal choice. Let me say that even if Frede criticizes Dihle's date of origin for the concept of the will, this is, in my opinion, a superfluous and trivial critique. Frede follows on Dihle's steps so far as he defends a limited idea of the will, understood as a merely rational one, that, as Frede rightly observes, originates in Socrates (at least for western tradition), and is later adopted, developed and enriched by Stoicism. Thus, in order to show my own perception of the limits of the Stoic point of view on a purely rational will, I shall analyze Plotinus as exemplar. But to begin, let me start with my critique to Frede's interpretation of Aristotle.

First of all, it is not true, as Frede claims, that Aristotle does not think that we cannot follow a desire originated in our non-rational part of the soul deliberately. All his discussion on the *deinotes* in book VI, that is, the man who is really clever but has no *sophrosyne*, due to the fact that his intellectual virtue is not accompanied with a virtue of the good character is a clear proof of this. Moreover, Frede is dismissing all the discussion that Aristotle has against Socrates comparisons between technical abilities and the virtues of the character. This is, by the way, the whole point of Aristotle's distinction between moral virtues or virtues of the



character, in book II, III, IV and V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the intellectual virtues in book VI.

Furthermore, I think that Frede's idea that for Aristotle there is no possibility for reason to mediate between rational and non-rational desires is also mistaken. For, what sense should we make of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where the whole point is to figure out what is the kind of life worth living and the place that each kind of desire plays in our lives in order to attain happiness (*eudaimonia*)? Or what about his theory of habits and moral education? On this matter, Aristotle claimed "[i]n fact pleasures and pains are the things with which moral virtue is concerned. For pleasure causes us to do base actions and pain cause us to abstain from doing noble actions. Hence the importance, as Plato points out, of having been definitely trained from childhood to like and dislike the proper things; this is what good education means" (1104 b 11). By the way, if he mentions Plato in this point is not by mere chance.

Furthermore, it is true, as Frede suggests, that Aristotle claimed "we think that the irrational feelings are just as much a part of human nature as the reason, so that the actions done from anger or desire also belong to the human being who does them. It is therefore strange to class these actions as involuntary." (1111 b 1). This claim goes against those who affirm (and this goes directly against Socrates intellectualism) that we should only be held responsible on what we do according to reason. This is a clear prove that Aristotle thinks that one can make choices according to irrational or non-rational desires but it is also true, as Frede also claims, that this is conditioned by one's past history, in Aristotle's words, by one's habits and moral education. The point that Aristotle actually wanted to make, as the scholar shows later on his second chapter is "that it is [in some respect] our responsibility to tame this unruly animal [the nonrational part of our soul], establish the rule of reason in ourselves, and thus create a unified person" (33), but this claim, in no ways, denies the fact that we can chose to act wrong deliberately in Aristotle's perspective.



On the other hand, Aristotle's analysis and description of the intemperate person (*akrates*) and the unrestrained one (*akolastos*) is totally dismissed by Frede's interpretation. The case of the licentious or unrestrained person is very important insofar as it shows that a person can choose to do wrong willingly and deliberately. According to Aristotle, this person can rarely change his or her character due to the fact that in this case there is no conflict between non-rational desires and deliberation; the licentious (*akolastos*) feels no remorse and therefore hears no advice. On the contrary, in the case of the intemperate person, he or she knows what is right but cannot help acting according to his or her non-rational desires. Although changing one's character is a very difficult task, Aristotle deemed that in the case of the intemperate there could be still a chance to do so.

Frede goes on even to claim that "Aristotle's notion of responsibility also applies to children and to animals" (98) as a proof of the fact that he does not have a notion of will. From my point of view, this is a total misconception of Aristotle's term of *to hekousion*, notion that applies to human beings, animal and children, but that does not determine the responsibility upon someone's actions. This term is rightly translated by Gauthier-Jolif as acting *de son plain gré* and refers only to the grade of acceptance or desire that accompanies one's actions. It is one of the criteria that we use to hold someone responsible for his or her actions, but it is not the only one or the most important one. In the book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle made clear that there are a variety of factors (such as the knowledge of the agent about the instrument used, the performed action, the way to perform an action, among others) to be considered as *guides* for establishing the responsibility of a person upon his or her actions and, moreover, that such a responsibility can only be established in a context, never before hand. Therefore, I consider Frede's reading of Aristotle's concept of responsibility dismissive and narrow, to say the least.¹

As a result, I claim that there is a notion of free will in Aristotle, in so far as he considers

¹ A nice interpretation on this issue can be found in Rapp, Christof, *Freiwilligkeit, Entscheidung und Verantwortlichkeit* (III 1-7) "In: Aristoteles Die Nikomachische Ethik. Berlin: Akademie Verlag. 1995.



the kind of actions for which we are held responsible of when he talks about what is up to us (*eph' hemin*) and the things about which we deliberate (*proairesis*) in his *Nicomachean Ethic*. Accordingly, he also has a notion of a human will in the sense that he considers ourselves as source of some of our actions, and, therefore, responsible agents, even if his conception is more vague and complex than what the moral intellectual tradition could ever tolerate, and even if the notion and its technical use was not so important for them as it is for us, in my opinion, partly due to our necessity of defining it in facing the threat that God' s omnipotence and Nature' s mechanistic causality represent for our possibility of acting freely and being held responsible for our actions.

On the method assumed by the scholarly tradition to approach the origin of the concept of free will I want to conclude what follows. Frede thinks that the first thing that we should do in order to find the origin of free will is to find who talks about freedom first, and, then, who talks about the will, and, as a result, once we have a concept of freedom plus the concept of will, we have the whole equation, freedom plus will equal free will. To recapitulate, in my opinion, the problem of a will and the problem of freedom go hand in hand, as I wanted to show through Aristotle philosophy. One cannot talk about freedom and responsibility without having some kind of idea of the source of the choices that make actions our own, and therefore free. For this reason, it seems to me that the question must be established in a different way and, if you want, according to a more teleological approach. Thus, in acknowledging the fact that we are held responsible for some of our actions, the problem should be to establish the kind of actions for which we can or should be held responsible and, in that measure, how should we consider the source of our actions, that is our will. ²

39

Now, Plotinus is also follower of this moral intellectualist tradition founded by Socrates and strengthened by the Stoics. Thus, he is going to hold the opinion that a “real” free act comes about when we act according to our reason, because, when we act according to our

² For a similar approach see Irwin' s article “Who discovered the Will.”



desires we are merely reacting to the influx of our passions. Therefore, we are passives, not actives.³

Plotinus and the problem of free will

The fact that Aristotle has a notion of freedom and free will is so evident, in my opinion, that most of the thinkers or scholars who talk about this issue have to refer, either explicitly or implicitly, to Aristotle's analysis, and Plotinus is no exception. As a matter of fact, Plotinus' analyses on the free will, mainly in VI.8, are built as a reply to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁴

Plotinus vocabulary is not new at all. It comes mainly from Aristotle even if he wants to build his own theory upon it, terms as 'what is in our power' (ti e)fh(min), 'will' (bo/ulhsij), 'voluntary act' (e)kou/sion) sound rather familiar to any Aristotelian reader.

40

It is clear, nonetheless, that Plotinus' and Aristotle's concerns are not the same in addressing this issue. In the one hand, Aristotle's inquiry in his ethics is concerned mainly with the problem of happiness. Thus, Aristotle's inquiry is always stated on human terms. He knows, from the beginning, that virtue and, by extension happiness, do not concern either to animals or gods, but humans (N.E. 1145a20-26; see also *Politics* Book I). On the other hand, Plotinus is more concerned with the life and knowledge of the One, and even if at some point he

³ Don't blame me if this sounds just like Kant or Spinoza. I would say that Stoicism had a great influence in modernity and Enlightenment. In fact, going back to my remark on the analogy between the concepts of the I and the will Kant is the best way to see it. In the *Groundwork* Kant claims that the only thing absolutely good is the good will. Furthermore, he will claim that the will must be determined by the sole law of reason that he calls the "categorical imperative" and in this way it will produce actions according to the moral law that are free, in rejecting happiness as our main moral goal in so far as it taken and sum of our desires which constantly change. On the other hand, in the *First Critique*, he claims that the I of the apperception must always accompany my representations so far as it is the only way to establish the difference between the subject and the object, and, thus, apply the categories upon it. In both cases, the idea is to state a definite and rational source of our knowledge and our actions. No wonder Freud, in the field of morals, and phenomenology, in the field of knowledge, have raised so much discomfort to those who believe in the kingdom of reason. However, I will need more time and space to develop this idea better.

⁴ Armstrong also point this out in his translation of Plotinus: "[Plotinus] takes account of earlier, mostly Peripatetic, discussions, especially Aristotle's treatment of the voluntary and involuntary in *Nicomachean Ethics*" (p. 228).



acknowledges that our human experience of freedom is not suitable for talking about the One, he uses our own experience as a path to understand through analogy how the life of the One can be approached through human eyes.

Paul Henry has a trilogy of articles on the evolution of the concept of freedom in Plotinus. Unfortunately, they are from 1933 and I was only able to find the first one of them “*La liberté chez Plotin.*” I have to say that in spite of its age, this article is a good approach on the matter. Proof of this is that most of the scholars refer to this study as the best or at least the most complete account of Plotinus’ concept of freedom (See Rist and Leroux).

According to Henry, we can see the evolution of Plotinus’ s concept of freedom mainly in three stages: the first one in the treatise on *Fate* where he criticizes the fatalistic and deterministic theories of the Stoics, the atomist, and the astronomers in order to defend our responsibility for our actions. The second one, with a primary metaphysical concern, is reflected in his treatises on the Providence and the Free will, where he tries to conciliate his idea of personal freedom and the concept of necessity and autarky as the free will of the One. Finally, the third one, not fully developed in the first article, has a stronger moral tone, but does not contradict with his former ideas developed in the metaphysical stage of his thought.

Thus, according to Henry, in the first stage of his thought Plotinus is going to establish the grounds of his belief on human free will, and, next, he is going to try to conciliate human freedom, as imperfect as it is, with the free and perfectly rational will of the One. Moreover, as Henry also asserts, there is not only the problem of conciliating Plotinus’ s own idea of personal freedom (in the sense that he believes against the stoics and the atomist that our personality is our own doing), and moral intellectualism, but also his own attempt to give a general idea of consistency and systematicity to the whole platonic corpus. He is also trying to put together the idea from the *Phaedo*, according to which the relation of the soul with the body evil by itself, and the cosmological texts of the *Timaeus* according to which it was god himself



who sent the universal soul and the particular souls for the general good (See Henry, 61). This is no easy task, as we will see.

Personal freedom

In this part I will try to explain Plotinus' idea of human free will and freedom. In the next section, I will comment his section on the free will of the One and, then, I will finish with some general comments.

Although human free will and the free will of the One are interrelated, in so far as Plotinus defends a metaphysics of universal emanationism —where every particular is a manifestation of the One—, there is a difference in the way that we conceive our freedom of action and that of the One, but in order to understand human free will I will have to explain first Plotinus' psychology.

42

Stoics and Neo-platonics still keep the basic division of the soul introduced by Plato and Aristotle between desires and reason, but, at this point, we can see little by little the transformation of the conception of soul as life toward the pure intellectual conception of the soul that reached its summit in modern philosophy. Philosophers like Descartes, for instance, will maintain that animals have no soul and that soul is exclusively human insofar as only humans have the capacity of thinking.

Following his notion of an emanationist conception of the cosmos, Plotinus claims that the individual soul is like the radii of a circle. It still belongs and depends on the center of the circle, which is the One, indivisible and impassible, but is different from it. Leroux explains this analogy as follows, after the fall of the human soul into the body the soul is divided into two parts: the first part, the impassive rational self is oriented to the center insofar as we are part of the One, and the second part, the empirical self, descends and is troubled by the disturbances of desires. This is going to generate the freedom of the fall and the freedom of ascension.



For Plotinus, the fall of the soul into a body, even if it is not deliberated, is voluntary and therefore our responsibility. “Inasmuch as it expresses an inclination of the individual soul, this is certainly voluntary (IV.7.13.4), though unintentional and nondeliberate (IV.3.13.17-18). This movement results form a guilty will to be itself (V.1.1.5) but insofar as it participates in the general dynamic of that flow which constitutes the very heart of metaphysics, the self-abasement is determined.” (See also Leroux, 295-296).

For Plotinus there is a higher law that determines the fall of the soul, it is necessary, but insofar as we are the ones who move it is our own responsibility.

The Ineluctable, the Cosmic Law [of the fall] is, thus, rooted in a natural principle under which each several entity is overruled to go, duly and in order, towards that place and Kind to which it characteristically tends, that is towards the image of its primal choice and constitution. (···)

The souls go forth neither under compulsion nor of freewill; or, at least, freedom, here, is not to be regarded as action upon preference; it is more like such a leap of the nature as moves men to de instinctive desire of sexual union, or, in the case of some, to fine conduct; the motive lies elsewhere than in the reason: like is destined unfailingly to like, and each moves hither and thither at its fixed moment. (IV. 3.13)

Plotinus also believes in reincarnation and, apparently inspired by the myth of Er in the Book X of the *Republic*, he thinks that we are also responsible for the kind of soul we are going to get in the next life. However, this is a kind of passive free will. We are somehow responsible for the fall, but it is not strictly chosen. Plotinus explains this as follows: “For everything which goes to the worse does so unwillingly, but, since it goes by its own motion, then it experiences the worse it is said to be punished for what it did” (IV. 8.5).

On the other hand, in the freedom of ascension, as Leroux, calls it, human beings have a more active role. It is achieved through the movement of purification and the pursuit of the



Good. We have to control our passions and direct our empirical self towards the impassive rational self in order to produce the unity with the One.

Moreover, unity, independence, and reason lead the conception of the plotinian soul, not as the harmonizing master of the other parts, as it is the case by Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *De Anima*, but in order to attain the mystic union with the One.

According to Plotinus, the soul is actually one, it cannot be divided, it is a unity. Hence division "is an occurrence in body, not in soul" (IV.2.1). The nature of the particular soul "at once divisible and indivisible [...] has not the unity of an extended thing: its divisibility lies in its presence at every point of the recipient, but is indivisible as dwelling entire in the total and entire in any part" (IV.2.1). In conclusion, soul is intellect (See IV. 2.1).

Freedom is synonym of autonomy, therefore, he also considers that the intellect is what is free, thus, he claims:

[T]he contemplative, that is the primary, Intellect is what is in its own power in this way, that its work in no way depends on another, but it is all turned to itself and its work is itself and it rests in the Good, being without need and fulfilled, and one may say, living according to its will; but its will is its thought, but was called will, because it was to its mind; for what is called will imitates what is to its mind. (VI.8.6)

In a footnote to the passage, Armstrong claims that Plotinus plays with the common meaning of *kata noun* "according to one's mind" or "as one likes it" and the sense of "according to Intellect." This, according to Armstrong, shows that Plotinus does not make a sharp distinction between thinking and willing, like other Greek philosophers. However, this again makes a sharp distinction between Aristotle and Plotinus. This sharp distinction between willing and intellect does exist in Aristotle and that is what allows him to claim in the X Book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* that even if the life according to the intellect is in theory the most



autarkic one, and apparently the happiest, human beings are not suited for that kind of life, so far as, we need a community in order to be autarkic and do not suffice for ourselves.

Finally, Plotinus concludes that we are free with the purpose of attaining the Good, therefore, if we affirm that the One, which is the Good, has a free will we would claim it in a different way from what happen with human beings, because we have two principles one passive, passions and desires, and one active, intellect, and we have to use our active principle to attain freedom from our passions and desires. On the contrary, the Good does not have a passive principle it is pure activity and consequently the good has self-determination in the sense that “it remains on its own and does not need to move to something else” as we creatures do.

Soul, then, is not material, against the atomistic conception, it is not a harmony, probably against the Pythagoreans, and is not an entelechy, clearly against Aristotle.

For Aristotle the soul is not divisible either, but in a different sense, his division between the different capacities that the soul is able to perform (nutritive, desire, and reason) is for Aristotle a mere product of abstraction that we implement in order to explain how it works (See Book II of *De Anima*). Intellect is also divine, for him, but he is clear about the fact that once the person or the animated being dies the soul is gone. Soul, understood as a first entelechia, that is, as the capacity to perform life, is gone once it has no body to perform its proper action. It is also for this reason that Aristotle does not believe in the transmigration of the soul and the possibility of a human soul to enter in the body of a dog, for instance, as the Pythagoreans assumed. For him, each body has a particular kind of soul. According to Aristotle, when a hand is taken out from the body it has lost its soul and we continue calling it a hand only by analogy. In the same way, a corpse is a human being only by analogy once it has lost the capacity of performing its particular kind of life.

Moreover, as we already saw, Plotinus, unlike Aristotle, collapses voluntary actions and what is up to us, insofar as he deems us responsible for both of them. Thus, in his early treatise on *Providence* he claims that evil and good are both up to us:



The act of the libertine is not done by Providence or in accordance with Providence; neither is the action of the good done by Providence—it is done by the man—but it is done in accordance with Providence, for it is an act consonant with the Reason-Principle. Thus a patient following his treatment is himself an agent and yet is acting in accordance with the doctor’s method inspired by the art concerned with the causes of health and sickness: what one does against the laws of health is one’s act, but an act conflicting with the Providence of medicine.” (III.3.5)

But then, how can we conciliate this idea of responsibility of good and evil and still defend the conception that “everything which goes to the worse does so unwillingly”? How can we do evil and be responsible for it if there is no real choice at this point? This states the problem of our responsibility for the fall at the same level of our responsibility for evil actions. In both cases, no real choice is implied. However, we are responsible for those actions in the same way that we are responsible for punching a friend when someone takes our hand to perform the action.

In his remarks to the problem of the fall, Henry claims that this is an issue inherited from Plato, and that both, Stoics and Plotinus, wanted to conciliate them (See 68). However, even if Plotinus developed this issue in more extent, through his analyses on the individual freedom, the consequent responsibility of the individual for the fall and its necessity from the standing point of the One, as Henry rightly claims against Gollwitzer, this solution is far from being perfect. In affirming our responsibility for the fall as well as for evil, but claiming their necessity from the One’s point of view and our unwillingness to perform them, Plotinus can be accused for the same charges he is accusing the Stoics in his treatise on *Fate*: “personal action becomes a mere word. That we are the agents does not save our freedom when our action is prescribed by those causes; we have precisely what belongs to everything that lives, to infants guided by blind impulses, to lunatics; all these act; why, even fire acts; there is act in everything that follows the



plan of its being, servilely” (III.1.7). In my opinion, Plotinus only fills into the details of the paradox without giving a real solution to the problem.

One would think that there is no possible conciliation between the idea of personal freedom, as depicted by Plotinus in his treatises on *Fate* and *Providence*, and his analysis on the free will of the One in VI.8. Next, let me give you a general account of his proposal.

Freedom of the One

As Armstrong points out in his translation to VI.8, the first six chapters of this treatise are concerned in analyzing Aristotle’s conception of the voluntary and involuntary actions. In fact, these first passages will help him to explain his own conception of the human free will in order to explain that of the One. Later in the treatise he will affirm that this is the only way we can approach this issue and that we have to think the free will of the One by analogy with ours (τοῖσι) (VI.8.13), because actually we cannot say anything positive of the free will of the One if compared to ours. From chapter seven to chapter fourteen, he will establish the unsuitability of our language to talk about the free will of the One, to devote the last chapters to the disambiguation of the concept of the free will of the One and to establish the One, once again, as the origin of all there is, even our own free will. This makes a smooth connection with the next tractate *On the Good, or The One*, but I will not deal with it, insofar as it is out of our main concern here.

The main complaint that Plotinus has against Aristotle is his idea of introducing the external circumstances as relevant factors for our free actions. As we have seen, Plotinus’ idea of freedom is equal to necessity and autarchy. But in rejecting the idea of fatalism that he criticizes from the Atomist, the Stoics and the Astronomers, he will try to define a particular kind of necessity that he will call a pre-eminent form of necessity (IV.8). He deems that the One “is the father of reason and cause and causative substance, which are certainly all far from chance, he would be the principle and in a way the exemplar of all things which have no part in



chance, truly and primarily, uncontaminated by chances and coincidence and happening, cause of himself and himself from himself and through himself; for he is primarily self and self beyond being” (VI.8.14).

Thus, he criticizes Aristotle’s conception of what is up to us (εφ’ ἡμῶν) as the kind of actions determined by our own choice, because he considers that it does not fit with his idea of freedom as a form of pre-eminent necessity. Plotinus attacks Aristotle’s example for the virtue of courage that there must be a context of war in order to act virtuously, that is, courageously. For Plotinus such situation cannot be considered as an accurate example of a free action. He sees several problems in Aristotle’s explanation. Plotinus thinks that circumstances are not up to us and therefore not free. Furthermore, he thinks that Aristotle’s conception of virtuous action as “the correct calculation accompanied by the correct desire” is totally misleading (IV.8.2). In his opinion, imaginations and passions leave no place for self-determination. For him, there is no mastery when we are led by passions and desires.

48

Two outcomes follow from this. First, Plotinus claims that the only possible conception of human free will is self-determination and the only thing that is really in our power is “in Intellect when it thinks” (IV.8.5.). Secondly, and as a consequence of the former, freedom does not lie in practical actions according to reason, as Aristotle claims. In his own words, what is up to us “is not referred to practice and outward activity but to the inner activity of virtue itself, that is, its thought and contemplation” (VI.8.6).

Thus, he will try to define the free will of the One as follows:

since you see it as without definition, you will be able to speak of all the things which come after it, but you will affirm that it is none of these, but, if anything at all, that it is all power, really master of itself, being what it wills to be, or rather throwing ‘what it wills to be’ away to the beings, and being itself greater than all willing, setting willing after itself. It did not then will the ‘in this way’ so that it might conform to it, nor did another make it like this. (VI.8.9)



At this point, one can see why Aristotle's explanation is so insufficient for Plotinus. For Aristotle, there are several senses in which something may be said Good, whereas for Plotinus good has a unity that must be defended above all. For Plotinus, and this constitutes an important difference from Aristotle, human beings can be gods, and that is their purpose in life, to reach that state of communion with the One above language through purification in a mystic union, as stated in the first remarks of his treatise *On Virtues* "Our concern is not to be free of sin, but *to be god*" (I.2.6.2-3). On the contrary, for Aristotle, human beings cannot be gods, we are finite and our only purpose is Happiness, which is not suitable either for beast or for gods, because we belong to a world in between the two. From the point of view of spiritual or the authentic freedom, good actions emanate from our approaching to the One in the same manner that our lives emanate from the One; from the point of view of our finite and empirical life, the control of our passions by our intellect is a step forward in our pursuit for the authentic and highest freedom. From the point of view of the authentic freedom, virtuous actions come along in our search for the good but they are not our main purpose and there is not a particular *technic* to perform them, because for him, as Leroux rightly puts it, "[a]uthentic freedom resides outside of action" (309). (See also VI.8).

49

If the real or authentic freedom is reached in our communion with the One and this freedom privileges autarky, and impassibility achieved through intellect, accordingly, if there is no other way to be free than to follow the idea of good and the One and to be evil is just a lack or some kind of mistake in our part, but not the real product of an active choice, in other words, if evil is involuntary, the complexity of freedom is totally lost.

To conclude, in my opinion, Plotinus' philosophy is a philosophy suited for the One, not for human beings. We could say that if according to Protagoras "Man was the measure of all things" according to Plotinus "the One is the measure of all things." For this reason, he has no problem in scarifying our imperfect and human experience of freedom to affirm the freedom of the One Φ



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