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Plotinus on the freedom of action (Enn. VI.8.5-6)

According to a commonly received interpretation (Frede 2011; Bene 2013; Andrade 2020; Coope 2020), Plotinus develops an extremely restrictive notion of what is up to us (eph'hēmin) according to the only properly free activity of human beings is the intellectual contemplation of the forms. Actions and discursive thought leading to actions can be up to us only in a secondary, derivative sense if they are guided by intellectual contemplation. I aim to challenge this interpretation by reconsidering the central arguments of Enn. VI.8.5-6 that are commonly taken to rule out our actions being up to us in a primary sense.

I begin by taking a close look both at the content and the dialectical function of the common notion of 'what is up to us' that guides Plotinus' inquiry into human autonomy in Enn VI.8.1-6. I point out that 'what is up to us' is defined by Plotinus in the domain of human action (VI.8.1.27-33) so that it serves as a criterion by which Plotinus discards accounts that do not leave room for freedom in actions (VI.8.5.36- 6.2; 6.12-14).

Second, I turn to the arguments in VI.8.5. that show (certain) virtuous human actions to be under compulsion. I contend, against the standard interpretation, that these arguments apply only to a subset of all virtuous actions, namely the ones guided by the civic virtues characteristic of people living a practical life, that is, positing their ultimate goal in acting virtuously. In this case, Plotinus argues, the agent is compelled to act by the occurrence of situations that demand their virtuous intervention.

Finally, I examine VI.8.6. which is usually taken to contain a further discussion of the alleged conclusion of the previous chapter that no action is truly up to us. In my interpretation, Plotinus here discusses another subset of virtuous actions: the ones guided by the higher virtues that consist in theoretical contemplation. He applies the metaphysical principle of double-activity to these actions (Emilsson 2012), resulting in a different model of agency than the one criticized in VI.8.5. On this model, an agent can act in the sensible world even when having intellectual contemplation as her ultimate goal. As a result of this contemplation, the agent will act so as to realize the intelligible paradigm in the sensible world as much as possible. Her actions, however, will not be compelled, since the situations of the world do not influence her goal of contemplation, but only the degree and precise manner in which the intellectual content is manifested action.