Porphyry tells us that ‘mixed in’ with Plotinus’s *Enneads* are ‘concealed Stoic and Peripatetic teachings’.¹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in his understanding of moral psychology, broadly speaking. At the same time, Plotinus thought of himself as an unwavering adherent of Platonism, certainly more a ‘paleo-Platonist’ than a ‘neo-Platonist.’ It is misleading to suggest that this Platonism is a type of syncretism, which I understand to be the view that an amalgam of philosophical positions is thought to result in something new. Rather, it is an application of the principle that Aristotle’s philosophy and, at least in psychological and ethical matters, Stoic philosophy, were in harmony with Platonism. This is the position that Hierocles of Alexandria attributes to Plotinus’s teacher, Ammonius Saccas.² The claim that with regard to an account of *akrasia* Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics are in harmony is bound to appear dubious. For Aristotle seems to consciously develop his account in opposition to Plato; and at least for the Old Stoa, weakness of will seems to be ruled out by the account of the actions of rational creatures. Accordingly, I begin with a brief survey of what I believe Plotinus took to be the received wisdom of the three great schools that preceded his own. I then turn to Plotinus’s synthesis of this material.

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¹ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 1.4.
² Photius, *Bibliotheca* 214.2 (172a2–9); Porphyry, *De Regressu Animae* fr. 302F, 6 Smith.
1. Plotinus’s Predecessors

1.1. Plato

In *Protagoras*, Plato has Socrates argue *against* the possibility of *akrasia.* In *Protagoras,* Plato has Socrates argue against the many that which is commonly called ‘being overcome by pleasure though one knows the right thing to’ is in fact ‘ignorance’ (*amathia*). The basic argument is as follows: (1) Assume, with those who believe that being overcome by pleasure is a fact of life, that someone chooses \( X \) over \( Y \) knowing that \( Y \) is better but being overcome by the pleasurableness of \( X \) (353a5–b2); (2) ‘Pleasurable’ and ‘good’ are two names for the same thing (353b3–c1); (3) So, then, someone chooses \( X \) over \( Y \), knowing that \( Y \) is better because he is overcome by the goodness of \( X \) (355c3–8). This conclusion is taken to be absurd and therefore to reveal the falsity of (1) (355d1–3). That is, assuming that ‘pleasure’ and ‘good’ mean the same thing, it makes no sense to say that someone does what he knows to be not good because he is overcome by pleasure.

Plato and Aristotle both came to believe that on the model of action assumed in this argument, *akrasia* is impossible. This model holds that persons are rational agents, that is, that reasons are the immediate causes of action, where action includes refraining from acting. In addition, it holds that the reasoning that causes action is a unified or coherent process, that is, if the reason for doing something is a belief that \( p \), then one cannot simultaneously believe that not-\( p \). Alternatively, we might put this by saying that the only reasons for acting are effective beliefs, beliefs that, all things considered, doing something is the way to achieve one’s good insofar as one understands that. If I believe that in this instance refraining from doing something is good for me, I cannot be overcome in the relevant sense, for being overcome implies that the action springs from a belief that contradicts what I believe is good for me. If I do act, it is because I have an effective belief that, all things considered, this is the way to achieve my good. Such action may be ill-informed or vicious, or even self-destructive, but it is not acratic.

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3 *Protagoras* 352a 1–c7.

4 357d1 provides the correct name for what at 352e 8–353a 2 is described as ‘being overcome by pleasure’.

5 An ‘effective belief’ is close to what is indicated by Plato in his claim that ‘no one does wrong willingly.’ See *Apology* 37a5; *Gorgias* 488a3; *Protagoras* 345d8, 358c7; *Republic* 589c6; *Timaeus* 86d7–c1; *Laws* 731c–d. An action done ‘willingly’ (hekôn) is one done on the basis of a belief that such an action will achieve one’s own good. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III 3, 1113a2–7.