

Levels of Virtue and the First Step

The dialogues of Plato were at one time thought to constitute a complete moral education. In keeping with Plato's own view on this subject, which he outlines in *The Republic*, such education was thought to be of utmost importance not only in developing the integrity of the individual but also maintaining the integrity of society as a whole. Plato's identification of the moral virtues rests on his characterisation of the human soul, which he thought to be made up of three parts: a part energised by reason, a part energised by raw desire, and a "spirited" part energised by wholesome pride or "anger" typically defined in relation to the other two parts. One who exercises their reasoning part effectively exhibits *prudence*. One who keeps their desirous part in check exhibits *temperance*. One who exercises their spirited part effectively exhibits *courage*. And one who organises these three parts of the soul effectively, giving each part its rightful role in all of its activity, exhibits *justice*. These four virtues became known as the "hinge" or cardinal virtues. They were elucidated by almost 900 years of the Platonic tradition before being adopted and passed on to the Catholic church. Aristotle's ethics was particularly influential in establishing this tradition of "virtue ethics" because it was focused on its practical application. The neoplatonists, (Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblicus, Damascius, and Olympiodorus), were not only interested in how these virtues were expressed in practical or "civic" activities, but also in more inward activities like contemplation and meditation. Compelled by the Socratic invocation to "know thyself" not only as a human being in the world but also as a soul within a vast hierarchy of spiritual being, these four virtues were characterised differently depending on the level of being toward which they were focused. This resulted in a rich model of what we might call the inner dynamics of spiritual development. It also led to a course of Platonic studies aimed at the development of moral character. The study of Plato's dialogue *The First Alcibiades* was pivotal in this curriculum because it was seen as the introduction to and therefore the foundation of the student's moral development. It illustrates the crucial first step of turning inward, which Socrates characterises in the dialog as recognising that one doesn't know but one *wants* to know.

The seven grades of excellence

- from Michael Griffin's introduction to Olympiodorus' *Commentary on First Alcibiades*

Following Damascius, Olympiodorus envisages 'pre-philosophical' forms of excellence that belong to us either **(1)** by our natural constitution (*phusike arete*, over which we have little control, as a lion is bound to be courageous and an ox temperate), or **(2)** by habituation and upbringing (*ethike arete*), which might be fostered by myths and stories and rhetoric (such as Pythagorean *Golden Verses* or the Handbook of Epictetus, although the moralising interpretation of classical myths, learned in schools of rhetoric, could also serve this function).

Next we embark on philosophical training, we begin to foster rational virtues (*logoi khronto..aretai*, Olymp. in *Phaed.* 8.2,9). By contrast to the pre-philosophical forms of excellence, these philosophical forms require conscious, reasoned action (*praxis*). The first is **(3)** civic or social excellence (*politike arete*), which cultivates the right inward organisation of our own soul and the souls of our fellow citizens. Civic excellence places reason (*logos*) in charge of over spirited emotion or pride (*thumos*) and appetitive desires (*epithumia*). It still looks primarily

to the outer world and our actions in it (cf. Olymp. *in Phaed.* 20.4). In Platonic reading curriculum, it is cultivated by studying *the Alcibiades* and *the Gorgias*. Next, **(4)** we get to work on 'purifying' the soul (*kathartike arete*), recognising what distinguishes it from the body, and learning to identify with those psychological functions that are independent of the body, especially reason (*logos*) and our intuitive grasp of eternal principles, the faculty called 'intellect' (*nous*). In the Platonic curriculum, this stage of excellence is fostered by reading *the Phaedo*. Philosophical rational excellence culminates in the achievement of **(5)** contemplative excellence (*theoretike arete*). The contemplative philosopher studies names, human knowledge, nature, and first principles until he directly observes the eternal intelligible realm of the Platonic Forms; to foster this excellence, he studies texts such as *Cratylus* (for names), *Theatetus* (for knowledge), and *Philebus* (for reality). He also proceeds to a second cycle of 'perfect' or 'fulfilled' dialogues, namely *Timaeus* (for nature) and *Parmenides* (for first principles, or theology). In concluding this curriculum and becoming a person of contemplative excellence, he arrives at the summit of philosophical achievement.

In fact, the philosopher has 'become' pure intellect (*nous*, Olymp. *in Phaed.* 8.2,19): in a sense, he has come to identify himself with his veridical awareness of the eternal realities and laws described by Plato as Forms, and commonly called 'intelligibles' (*noeta*) by Neoplatonists. The classical Neoplatonist ontology describes three major grades of existence (*hupostaseis*): in ascending order, a) soul (*psukhe*), b) intellect (*nous*), and c) the One (*to hen*). In this framework, the contemplative philosopher has 'graduated' as it were, from foggy and time-bound vision of a) *psukhe* alone, to the veridical and timeless clarity of b) intellect (*nous*), which sees real beings just as they are. In a certain sense, the contemplative philosopher has achieved 'likeness to God' insofar as intellect is regarded as divine, and as Porphyry argued (*Sent.* 32,63-70), here we also arrive at the highest exemplars of the traditional forms of excellence.

Beyond philosophy, however, lies a further sphere of achievement -- at least for the later Neoplatonists, including Iamblicus, Proclus, Damascius, and Olympiodorus himself. This sphere was the purview of the theurgic practitioner, who becomes authentically godlike (Olymp. *in Phaed.* 8.2,1-20) by engaging in 'divine practice' (*theourgia*). Outwardly, the theurgist engaged in creative combinations of traditional religious symbols and practices from a variety of cultural backgrounds, cultivating physical and mental images that 'resonated' with the gods. Through these activities, he strove to open a pathway for divine activity in the sublunar world, perhaps improving his community's material circumstances or his own. But his essential goal was inward: to heal his soul and to uncloud its inner sight (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 1.11-12). The unclouded mind became open to 'blessed visions' (*De Myst.* 1.12; cf. *Phaedrus* 247a), 'as the eye awaits the rising of the sun' (cf. Plotinus *Enn.* 5.5.8,1-5, introducing solar languaging that appeals to the later Neoplatonists): these visions are often portrayed as ascending grades of luminosity, culminating in clear light. Following his preliminary cultivation of ritual symbols and practices and meditations on the visions that arise, the theurgist comes to identify with the clear light of divinity that he beholds, and so achieves likeness to divinity without separation (Olymp. *in Phaed.* 8.2,112-20).

For in contemplation of the 'blessed visions' the soul exchanges one life for another and exerts a different activity, and considers itself to be no longer human -- and quite rightly so; for often,

having abandoned its own life, it has gained in exchange the most blessed activity of the gods....Such activity...renders us...pure and immutable. (Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 1.12,41-42,3) This marks the accomplishment of **(6)** 'exemplary' or 'archetypal' excellence (*paradeigmatike arete*), cultivated through theurgy. Here the practitioner has achieved union with the intelligible, exemplary reality that is the object of contemplation for intellect (*nous*). He has thereby gone beyond the contemplative philosopher, who, as pure intellect, simply observed intelligible reality without obstructions (Olymp. *in Phaed.* 8.2,19-20), but did not yet identify with his divine object. For Olympiodorus, we now arrive at the goal of theurgy (*in Phaed.* 8.2,20): our souls ascend to the eternal, intelligible realm 'beyond the cosmos', where they will remain either for good (as Iamblichus argued, ap. *Damascium in Phaed.* 1.548), or, as Olympiodorus maintained, will remain for a long time before descending again into genesis (Olymp. *in Phaed.* 10.14,8). At this stage, too, there are curriculum readings to do: the Chaldaean Oracles or Orphic poems.

But the intelligible divinity with whom the 'exemplary' theurgist identifies is perhaps not yet the One itself (*to hen*), the loftiest principle of unity and individuality, which is divinity in the strictest and fullest sense. Damascius preferred to break out a seventh, crowning stage of theurgical accomplishment, namely **(7)** 'hieratic excellence' (*hieratike arete*) which transcends the intelligible altogether and arrives at the truly 'godlike part of the soul' (*to theoeides tes psukhes*, Damascius *in Phaed.* 1.144,1). Here the theurgist identifies himself with the One (*to hen*) or Good (*to agathon*), and realises all the previous six grades of excellence in a new way. Olympiodorus omits this stage from his discussion at *in Phaed.* 8.2, and this may be because he regards union with the One as contained already in the 'exemplary' (6), where on his view we already act 'as One' (*henoeidos*, 8.2,18), or for another reason; nonetheless, he certainly has a place for hieratic practice, which he portrays Plato as mastering from the Egyptian priests in his *Life of Plato (in Alc.* 2.134-5).

The full hierarchy according to Damascius and Olympiodorus may have been sketched as shown in **Table 1**, bearing in mind that Olympiodorus may have collapsed stages (6) and (7) into a single stage of theurgy.

Philosophical Excellence

In approaching the Platonic curriculum, Olympiodorus focused on the rational or 'philosophical' grades of human excellence, which fall in the middle of this broader hierarchy: (3) civic excellence, (4) purificatory excellence, and (5) contemplative excellence. Each could be inculcated by the close study, with a teacher, of one or more dialogues in the Platonic curriculum that had previously been advanced by Iamblichus. We might tabulate these as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 1:

| | | |
|------------|----------------------|---|
| Excellence | (1) Natural (innate) | Beneath philosophy (innate or habituated) |
| | (2) Habituated | |
| | (3) Civic | Philosophical |
| | (4) Purificatory | |
| | (5) Contemplative | |
| | (6) Exemplary | Beyond philosophy (divine, inspired) |
| | (7) Hieratic | |

Table 2:

| | | | | |
|------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Excellence | (3)Civic | | 1. <u>Introduction: Alcibiades</u> | |
| | | | 2. <i>Gogias</i> (civic) | |
| | (4)Purificatory | | 3. <i>Phaedo</i> (purificatory) | |
| | (5)Contemplative | On names | | 4. <i>Cratylus</i> (names) |
| | | On concepts (<i>noemata</i>) | | 5. <i>Theatetus</i> (knowledge) |
| | | On realities (<i>pragmatica</i>) | Natural | 6. <i>Sophist</i> (natural) |
| | | | | 7. <i>Statesmen</i> (natural) |
| | | | Theo-logical | 8. <i>Phaedrus</i> (theological) |
| | 9. <i>Symposium</i> (theological) | | | |
| | | | | 10. <u>Culmination: Philebus</u> (Good) |
| | (5)Two 'complete' dialogues | | | 11. <i>Timaeus</i> (Physics) |
| | | | | 12. <i>Parmenides</i> (Theology) |

First Alcibiades: (117e - 118b)

Socrates: Do you perceive that errors, committed in the doing of anything, are all to be ascribed to this kind of ignorance in a man, -- his imagining that he knows what he knows not?

Alcibiades: How do you mean?

Soc: Whenever we undertake to act in any affair, it is only when we imagine we know what to do.

Alc: Certainly.

Soc: And such as have no opinion of their own knowledge in the affair resign it up to others to act for them.

Alc: How should they do otherwise?

Soc: Ignorant persons of this kind live therefore without committing errors, because they give up the management of those affairs in which they are ignorant into the hands of others.

Alc: True.

Soc: What kind of personas then, are those who err and act amiss? For certainly they are not such as know how to act?

Alc: By no means.

Soc: Since then they are neither the knowing, nor those of the ignorant who know that they are ignorant, are any other persons left than of that kind who are ignorant, but imagine themselves knowing?

Alc: None other than these.

Soc: this kind of ignorance, therefore, is the cause of wrong doings, and is the only kind which is culpable.

Alc: Very true.

Soc: And where it concerns things of greatest moment, is it not in these cases the most of any mischievous and shameful?

Alc: By far the most so.

Soc: Well then. Can you name any things of great moment than those which are honest, and beautiful, and good, and advantageous?

Alc: Certainly none.

Soc: Is it not on these subjects that you acknowledge yourself to waver in your opinions?

Alc: It is.

Soc: And, if you are thus wavering, is it not evident from our past conclusions, not only that you are ignorant in subjects of the greatest moment, but that amidst this ignorance you imagine that you know them?

Alc: I fear it is so.

Soc: Fie upon it, Alcibiades! What a condition then are you in! A condition which I am loth to name: but however, since we are alone, it must be spoken out. You are involved, my good sir, in that kind of ignorance which is the most shameful, according to the result of our joint reasoning, and according to your own confession. From this kind of ignorance it is, that you are eager to engage in politics before you have learnt the elements of that science. Indeed, you are not the only person in this sad condition; for in the same state of ignorance are the numerous managers of our civil affairs, all of them, except perhaps Pericles, you guardian, and a few more.