

Extracted from the 'Auxiliaries to the Perception of Intelligible Natures' of **PORPHYRY**¹

(On Arete, or VIRTUE)²

In all the ancient philosophical systems, known to us as Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Neo-Platonism (so-called), among others, philosophy was not simply a way of thinking, but a way of life as well, which is indicated by the study and practice of what were called the excellences, or Arete, currently known to us by the name 'Virtues.'³ These may also be used as meditational practices, which, once made familiar, can be seen throughout all the works of Plato, Parmenides, Plotinus, Aristotle, etc.

These are so fundamental, that they can be seen not only as essential to aid to the understanding of the individual, but also essential to the individual development, as well as integral to the human social structure as well, witness the Republic, etc. The four primary excellences are wisdom, fortitude, temperance and justice – but as we will see each of these can be exercised at different levels of activity.

As the title above states, this has been extracted from the Auxiliaries to the Perception of Intelligible Natures by Porphyry, the disciple of Plotinus. Porphyry (whose original name was Malchus) was of Phoenician (now Lebanese) royal descent from Tyre. The name Porphyry (circa 233 – 305 c.e) indicating royal purple was taken by him later⁴. It is thanks to him that we have the inspired speeches of Plotinus, as he recorded and arranged them into the Enneads we have today.

"Beatific contemplation does not consist of the accumulation of arguments or a storehouse of learned knowledge, but in us theory must become nature and life itself." – Porphyry, On Abstinence

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a - The levels of activity

34. There is one kind of virtue pertaining to the political character,⁵ and another to those who tend to contemplation and who on this account is called theoretic,⁶ and is now a beholder (of intellectual and intelligible natures). And there are also other virtues pertaining to intellect,⁷ so far as it is intellect, and separate from soul.

¹ From Select Works of Porphyry, Transl. Thomas Taylor, pub. The Prometheus Trust, 2nd Edn. 1999 TTS. (amended slightly).

² Cf also, Plotinus, Ennead I, ii. (TTS Vol.III); and Olympiodorus Comm. on the Phaedo, 138, f. (TTS Vol.XII, p.309, ff.).

³ As Michael Hornum put it in his introduction to Kenneth Guthrie's version of this work, Porphyry's *Launching Points to the Realm of Mind*, published by Phanes Press 1988.

⁴ Cf Porphyry, On the Life & Works of Plotinus, 17; Mackenna, Faber & Faber 1969.

⁵ 'political character' – that is to say, someone who brings to bear their rational powers upon the outer world. The *polis* (or city) was seen by the ancient Greeks as the prime example of the arrangement of the outer world by reason – life beyond the polis being shaped more by nature than by human activity.

⁶ 'theoretic' – the Greek word *theoria* means "contemplation, speculation; a looking at, viewing; a sight, show, spectacle, things looked at," from *theorein* "to consider, speculate, look at," – so theoretic virtue is *the excellence of contemplation*.

⁷ 'intellect' – in the Platonic tradition intellect (*nous*) is an eternally active knower, and as such the cause of soul. When the soul connects with its cause in eternal intellect, it takes on a higher virtue than it possesses when active in itself (even if that activity is contemplative).

b – the four excellences at the political level

The virtues indeed of the political character, and which consist in the moderation of the passions, are characterized by following and being obedient to the reasoning about that which is becoming in actions.⁸ Hence, looking to a beneficial relationship with others, these virtues are called political as indicating a drawing together in fellowship. And here prudence indeed subsists about the reasoning part; fortitude about the irascible part;⁹ temperance in the consent and symphony of the epithymetic¹⁰ with the reasoning part; and justice, in each of these performing its proper employment with respect to governing and being governed.

c – the four excellences at the purificatory level

But the virtues of those who proceed to the contemplative life, consist in a departure from terrestrial concerns. Hence, also, they are called purifications, being surveyed in the refraining from corporeal actions, and avoiding sympathies¹¹ with the body. For these are the virtues of the soul elevating itself to true being.

The political virtues therefore adorn the mortal human, and are the forerunners of purifications. For it is necessary that those who are adorned by the cathartic virtues, should abstain from doing anything precedaneously in conjunction with body.

Hence, in these purifications, not to opine with body, but to energize alone, gives subsistence to *Prudence* (Φρονησις phronesis); which derives its perfection through energizing intellectually with purity.

But not to be similarly passive with the body, constitutes *Temperance* (Σοφροσυνη - Sophrosyne).

Not to fear a departure from body, as into something void, and non-entity, gives subsistence to *Fortitude* (Ανδρεία- Andreia).

But when reason and intellect are the leaders, and there is no resistance (from the irrational part), *Justice* (Δικη- Dike) is produced.

⁸ It is very important to be aware that by the term 'moderation' it means just that, not repressing, but channelling the energies involved.

⁹ 'irascible part' – just like the epithymetic part which TT has noted below, this phrase needs explaining: put simply, the irascible part is that faculty which seeks to bring back into order that which has become disordered. In Platonic psychology this 'irascible part' (sometimes translated as 'anger' and sometimes as the 'spirited part') sits between reason and desires and acts as an intermediary between the two.

¹⁰ That part of the Soul which is the source of all-various desires.(TT)

¹¹ Thomas Taylor, the translator, is here using language very accurately, to the extent that this passage may be misunderstood by the modern reader: the original meaning of sym-pathia was "a movement with" or "being passive with" – Porphyry's point here is that the soul should be moved by the eternal ideas from which it is born, and in turn it should move the body bringing to it the beauty and order derived from its contemplative vision.

The disposition therefore, according to the political virtues, is surveyed in the moderation of the passions; having for its end to live as conformable to nature. But the disposition, according to the theoretic virtues, is beheld in apathy,¹² the end of which is a similitude to God.

d – the distinction between the purificatory and full theoretic excellences

(or how the process of becoming purified is different from the state of being pure)

Since, however, of purification, one kind consists in purifying, but another pertains to those that are purified, the cathartic virtues are surveyed according to both these significations of purification. For the end of purification is to become pure. But since purification, and the being purified are an removal of everything foreign, the good resulting from them will be different from that which purifies; so, that if that which is purified was good prior to the impurity with which it is defiled, purification is sufficient. That, however, which remains after purification, is good, and not purification. The nature of the soul also was not good (prior to purification), but is that which is able to partake of good, and is boniform.¹³ For if this were not the case, it would not have become situated in evil. The good, therefore of the soul consists in being united to its generator, but its evil in an association with things subordinate to itself. Its evil also is twofold; the one arising from an association with terrestrial natures, but the other from doing this with an excess of the passions. Hence, all the political virtues which liberate the soul from one evil may be denominated virtues, and are honourable. But the cathartic are more honourable, and liberate it from evil, so far as it is soul. It is necessary, therefore, that the soul, when purified, should associate with its generator. Hence, the virtue of it, after its conversion, consists in a scientific knowledge of (true) being; but this will not be the case, unless conversion precedes.

e – the theoretic (or contemplative) excellences

There is, therefore, another genus of virtues after the cathartic and political, and which are the virtues of the soul *energizing intellectually*. And here, indeed, wisdom and prudence consist in the contemplation of those things which intellect possesses. But *Justice* consists in performing what is appropriate in conformity to, and energizing according to intellect. *Temperance* is an inward conversion of the soul to intellect. And *Fortitude* is apathy,¹⁴ according to a similitude of that to which the soul looks, and which is naturally impassive. These virtues also, in the same manner as the others, alternately follow each other.

¹² Again the language of Taylor may be misunderstood here – in fact for the same reason as before – because apathy means "without movement", so the modern reader might understand by this assertion that true soul vision is beheld in stillness – a stillness which imitates divinity.

¹³ i.e. Having the form of The Good. (S.O.E.D.)

¹⁴ i.e. Απαθεια – impassive (not subject to emotions or desires) – see note 12. In the theoretic excellences, the soul finds its own stillness, which is why Porphyry says that we become like eternal intellect.

f – the paradigmatic excellences

The fourth species of the virtues is that of the paradigms subsisting in intellect: which are more excellent than the psychical virtues, and exist as the paradigms of these; the virtues of the soul being the similitudes of them. And Intellect indeed is that in which all things subsist at once as paradigms. Here, therefore, Prudence is science; but intellect that knows (all things) is Wisdom. Temperance is that which is converted to itself. The proper work of intellect, is the performance of its appropriate duty (and this is Justice). But Fortitude is sameness and the abiding with purity in itself, through an abundance of power.

g – summary of the four levels of excellence

There are therefore four genera of virtues; of which, indeed, some pertain to intellect, concur with the essence of it, and are paradigmatic.

Others pertain to soul now looking to intellect, and being filled from it.

Others belong to the soul of man, purifying itself, and becoming purified from the body and the irrational passions.

And others are the virtues of the soul of man, adorning the man, through giving measure and bound to the irrational nature, and producing moderation in the passions.

And he indeed who has the greater virtues, has also necessarily the less; but the contrary is not true, that he who has the less, has also the greater virtues. Nor will he who possesses the greater, energize precedaneously according to the less, but only so far as the necessities of the mortal nature require. The scope also, of the virtues is as we have said, generically different in the different virtues. For the scope of the political virtues, is to give measure to the passions in their practical energies according to nature. But the scope of the cathartic virtues, is entirely to obliterate the remembrance of the passions; and the scope of the rest subsists analogously to what has been before said.

Hence he who energizes according to the *practical* virtues, is a *worthy* man; but he who energizes according to the *cathartic virtues*, is an *angelic* man, or is also a good daemon. He who energizes according to the *intellectual* virtues alone, is (*as*) a God; but he who energizes according to the *paradigmatic* virtues, is (*as it were,*) the *father of the Gods*.¹⁵ We, therefore, ought especially to pay attention to the *cathartic* virtues, since we may obtain these in the present life. But through these, the ascent is to the more honourable virtues. Hence, it is requisite to survey to what degree purification may be extended; for it is a separation from body, and from the passive motion of the irrational part. But how this may be effected, and to what extent, must now be unfolded.

¹⁵ Not, of course, that a human actually becomes a "father of a god" but by exercising the highest form of virtue, the soul gives birth, so to speak, to its inherent divine powers.

h – the acquisition and exercise of soul excellences

In the first place, indeed, it is necessary that he who intends to acquire this purification, should, as the foundation and basis of it, know himself to be a soul bound in a foreign thing, and in a different essence. In the second place, as that which is raised from this foundation, he should collect himself from the body, and as it were from different places, so as to be disposed in a manner perfectly impassive with respect to the body. For he who energizes uninterruptedly according to sense, though he may not do this with an adhering affection and the enjoyment resulting from pleasure, yet, at the same time, his attention is dissipated about the body, in consequence of becoming through sense in contact with it. But we are addicted to the pleasures or pains of sensibles; in conjunction with a promptitude, and converging sympathy; from which disposition it is requisite to be purified. *This, however, will be effected by admitting necessary pleasures, and the sensations of them, merely as remedies, or as a liberation from pain,¹⁶ in order that (the rational part) may not be impeded (in its energies).* Pain also must be taken away. But if this is not possible, it must be mildly diminished. And it will be diminished, if the soul is not co-passive with it.

Anger, likewise, must as much as possible be taken away; and must by no means be premeditated. But if it cannot be entirely removed, deliberate choice must not be mingled with it, but the unpremeditated motion must be the impulse of the irrational part. That however which is unpremeditated is imbecile and small. All fear likewise must be expelled. For he who is adapted to this purification will fear nothing. Here, however, if it should take place, it will be unpremeditated. Anger therefore and fear must be used for the purpose of admonition.

But the desire of everything base must be exterminated. Such a one also, so far as he is a cathartic philosopher, will not desire meats and drinks (except so far as they are necessary). Neither must there be the unpremeditated in natural venereal connexions; but if this should take place, it must only be as far as to that precipitate imagination which energizes in sleep. In short, the intellectual soul itself of the purified man must be liberated from all these (corporeal propensities). He must likewise endeavour, that what is moved to the irrational nature of corporeal passions, may be moved without sympathy, and without animadversion; so that the motions themselves may be immediately dissolved through their vicinity to the reasoning power.

This, however, will not take place while the purification is proceeding to its perfection; but will happen to those in whom reason rules without opposition. Hence, in these, the inferior part will so venerate reason that it will be indignant if it is at all moved, in consequence of not being quiet when its master is present, and will reprove itself for its imbecility. These, however, are yet only moderations of the passions, but at length terminate in apathy. For when co-passivity is entirely exterminated, then apathy is present with him who is purified from this passivity. For passion becomes moved when reason imparts excitation, through verging (to the irrational nature).

¹⁶ Conformably to this, as we have before observed, Aristotle says, in the 7th Book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "that corporeal pleasures are remedies against pain, and that they fill up the indigence of nature, but perfect no energy of the rational soul." (T.T.)