

## Self-Knowledge and Prayer on the Ladder of Virtue

One valuable set of teachings from the Platonic tradition concerns what scholars often call the “ladder of virtues.” Briefly, the notion is that all of the core human virtues, or excellences,<sup>1</sup> appear at seven different levels as we progress through our philosophic and spiritual journey. Most discussions of this ladder, quite appropriately, emphasize the four “cardinal” virtues of wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance as they manifest at each successive level. The foundations of this doctrine appear scattered throughout the dialogues of Plato, and are presented in their most systematic form by some of the final Platonic teachers of antiquity, Damascius and Olympiodorus.

In tonight’s session, we’ll look at two other important aspects of the Platonic spiritual journey, as they relate to our progress in virtue: namely, the practice of prayer, and the cultivation of self-knowledge. As Proclus and Olympiodorus, respectively, present each of these aspects, we can see some remarkable parallels with Damascius’ account of the ladder of virtues. By looking at all three alongside each other, we may be able to gain deeper insight into each of these three sets of teachings in their own right. We may also be able to see some ways in which what might appear as disparate strands of the tradition are in fact tightly woven together into a coherent unity — which, as good Platonists, is exactly what we might hope for!

### I. Virtue

We can begin with the teaching on the virtues, as presented by Damascius in his *Commentary on the Phaedo*:<sup>2</sup>

The first of the virtues are the **physical**, which are common to brutes, being mingled with the temperaments, and for the most part contrary to each other; or rather pertaining to the animal. Or it may be said that they are illuminations from reason, when not impeded by a certain bad temperament: or that they are the result of energies in a former life. Of these Plato speaks in the *Politicus* and the *Laws*.

The **ethical** virtues, which are above these, are ingenerated by custom and a certain right opinion, and are the virtues of children when well educated. These virtues also are to be found in some brute animals. They likewise transcend the temperaments, and on this account are not contrary to each other. These virtues Plato delivers in the *Laws*. They pertain however at the same time both to reason and the irrational nature.

In the third rank above these are the **political** virtues, which pertain to reason alone; for they are scientific. But they are the virtues of reason adorning the irrational part as its instrument; through prudence adorning the gnostic, through fortitude the irascible, and through temperance the desiderative power; but adorning all the parts of the irrational nature through justice. And of these virtues Plato speaks much in the *Republic*. These virtues, too, follow each other.<sup>3</sup>

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1 With either ‘virtue’ or ‘excellence,’ we are translating the Greek term *aretē*.

2 Damascius, *Commentary on the Phaedo* I, 138–144. The first five paragraphs are the translation of Thomas Taylor from his notes to the dialogue; the last two, which Taylor did not include in those notes, are based on the translation of Westerink, slightly modified for consistency.

3 That is, they are mutually entailing: from the presence of any one of the four, the others necessarily follow.

Above these are the **cathartic** virtues, which pertain to reason alone, withdrawing from other things to itself, throwing aside the instruments of sense as vain, repressing also the energies through these instruments, and liberating the soul from the bonds of generation. Plato particularly delivers to us these virtues in [the *Phaedo*].

Prior to these, however, are the **theoretic** virtues, which pertain to the soul, introducing itself to natures superior to itself, not only gnostically, as someone may be induced to think from the name, but also orectically [i.e., pertaining to desire]: for it hastens to become, as it were, intellect instead of soul; and intellect, as we have before observed, possesses both desire and knowledge. These virtues are the converse of the political: for, as the latter energize about things subordinate according to reason, so the former about things more excellent according to intellect. These virtues Plato delivers in the *Theaetetus*.

**Paradigmatic** virtues are those of the soul when it no longer contemplates the intellect (for contemplation involves separateness), but has already reached the stage of being by participation the intellect that is the paradigm of all things; therefore these virtues too are called ‘paradigmatic,’ inasmuch as virtues belong primarily to intellect itself. This category is added by Iamblichus in his treatise *On Virtues*.

Lastly, there are the **hieratic** virtues, which belong to the Godlike part of the soul; they correspond to all the categories mentioned above, with the difference that while the others are existential, these are unitary. This kind, too, has been outlined by Iamblichus, and discussed more explicitly by the school of Proclus.

Of these seven levels, the first two — the physical (or natural) and the ethical (or habitual) — are, strictly speaking, pre-philosophical, in that it is possible to fully possess them without the need for the scientific understanding that comes through philosophy. To the extent that some form of knowledge is present at all, the possessor of these virtues can know *that* these things are good (and act accordingly) without knowing *why* it is so. The next three levels are properly philosophical, as necessarily implying scientific knowledge, while maintaining a duality between the knower and the objects known. The final two levels transcend philosophy, as they step beyond that duality of knower and known, to draw closer to unity or the one.

## II. Prayer

Near the outset of the *Platonic Theology*,<sup>4</sup> Proclus declares that “All that have ever touched upon theology, have called things first according to nature, Gods; and have said that the theological science is conversant about these.” While other schools have assumed that certain types of matter, souls, or intellects are “first according to nature,” the tradition of Plato, as Proclus explains in the same chapter, looks “to another principle entirely exempt from intellect, more incorporeal and ineffable,” namely, *to hen*, that is, unity or “the one.”

This, in turn, can be brought together with Socrates’ statement in the *Theaetetus* (176a), which sets out the philosopher’s aspiration of “becoming as much as possible similar to divinity.” Together, these suggest that when we describe the soul’s journey toward the Gods, and her

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4 Book I, chapter 3.

journey toward unity or unification, we are (quite fittingly) talking only about one thing, rather than two – and that this characterizes the soul’s excellence or virtue.

To see the modes of prayer which correspond to the first two levels of virtue, we can turn to Plato’s *Alcibiades*, where we learn of the education of the Persian heirs in the ethical virtues:<sup>5</sup>

At fourteen years of age they are put into the hands of those who are called the royal preceptors. And these are chosen out from such as are deemed the most excellent of the Persians, men of mature age, four in number; excelling severally in wisdom, justice, temperance, and fortitude. By the first of these [who excels in **wisdom**] they are taught the magic of Zoroaster the son of Oromazes, by which magic is meant the worship of the Gods: and the same person instructs them likewise in the art of government. He who excels in the science of **justice** teaches them to follow truth in every part of their conduct throughout life. The person who excels in **temperance** enures the young prince not to be governed by sensual pleasure of any kind, that he may acquire the habits of a free man, and of a real king; by governing first all his own appetites, instead of being their slave. And the fourth, he who excels in **fortitude** forms his royal pupil to be fearless and intrepid; for that his mind, under the power of fear, would be a slave.

While for the natural or physical virtues, we might recall Proclus’ moving image of the heliotrope, the flower which turns throughout the day to follow the course of the Solar orb through the sky:<sup>6</sup>

For how shall we account for those plants called heliotropes, that is, attendants on the sun, moving in correspondence with the revolution of its orb; but selenitropes, or attendants on the moon, turning in exact conformity with her motions? It is because all things pray, and compose hymns to the leaders of their respective orders; but some intellectually, and others rationally; some in a natural, and others in a sensible manner. Hence the sun-flower, as far as it is able, moves in a circular dance towards the sun; so that, if any one could hear the pulsation made by its circuit in the air, he would perceive something composed by a sound of this kind, in honour of its king, such as a plant is capable of framing.

As Proclus goes on to describe even the ways in which stones hymn their proper Gods, it becomes apparent that some mode of prayer extends even to this most foundational level. Yet as we noted in our discussion of the ladder of virtues, these first two levels are, strictly speaking, prior to philosophy and her rational understanding and deliberation. For the higher levels – those three which are properly philosophical, and the two highest which transcend philosophy – we turn to the brief essay on prayer, from the beginning of the second book of Proclus’ *Commentary on the Timaeus*. Because this account of the stages of prayer begins from

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5 *Alcibiades* 121e–122a. In his commentary on this passage, Olympiodorus shows that these must be the virtues of the ethical level. They cannot belong merely to the physical, which (unlike those at hand) are not taught. But these virtues are imparted by four different teachers, rather than all four being taught by a single preceptor. The ethical (and physical) virtues do not mutually entail one another, whereas all of the higher grades, beginning from the political, are traditionally held to be mutually entailing – a doctrine attributed to Socrates himself, even by sources from outside the Platonic tradition. Thus for any of the higher levels, only one teacher would be necessary, rather than four.

6 From the fragment “On Sacrifice and Magic,” which Taylor translated in his notes to the *Alcibiades* (on 121e, note 23 on pages 206–208 in the PT edition).

the properly philosophical, we should mentally “add two” to Proclus’ enumeration as we read, such that his “first place” corresponds to the *third* level of virtues, and so forth.

To a perfect and true prayer however, there is required in the first place, a knowledge of all the divine orders to which he who prays approaches. For no one will accede to the Gods in a proper manner, unless he has a knowledge of their peculiarities. Hence also the oracle admonishes, *that a fire-heated conception has the first order in sacred worship.*

But in the second place, there is required a conformation of our life with that which is divine; and this accompanied with all purity, chastity, discipline, and order, through which our concerns being introduced to the Gods, we shall attract their beneficence, and our souls will become subject to them.

In the third place, contact is necessary, according to which we touch the divine essence with the summit of our soul, and verge to a union with it.

But there is yet farther required, an approximating adhesion: for thus the oracle calls it, when it says, *the mortal approximating to fire will possess a light from the Gods.* For this imparts to us a greater communion with, and a more manifest participation of the light of the Gods.

In the last place, union succeeds establishing *the one* of the soul in *the one* of the Gods, and causing our energy to become one with divine energy; according to which we are no longer ourselves, but are absorbed as it were in the Gods, abiding in divine light, and circularly comprehended by it. And this is the best end of true prayer, in order that the conversion of the soul may be conjoined with its permanency, and that every thing which proceeds from *the one* of the Gods, may again be established in *the one*, and the light which is in us may be comprehended in the light of the Gods.

Prayer therefore, is no small part of the whole ascent of souls. Nor is he who possesses virtue superior to the want of the good which proceeds from prayer; but on the contrary the ascent of the soul is effected through it, and together with this, piety to the Gods, which is the summit of virtue.<sup>7</sup>

It’s on the basis of this final paragraph that we seem to be especially justified in examining the stages of prayer alongside the ladder of virtues. There is quite a lot that we might consider in this passage; here are just a few *prima facie* correspondences with the ladder of virtues.

The stage of knowledge is reflective of the political or constitutional level of virtue, insofar as it is the first place at which knowledge is required, in contrast with the lower levels of prayer (of the heliotrope and the Persian youth) which can be carried out merely on the basis of nature or habituation. Furthermore, Proclus’ description of this stage speaks to a *division* or classification of the Gods into various orders, reminiscent of the classification of the soul’s impulses according to her various parts, at the constitutional level of virtue.

The next stage, where Proclus appeals to the “conformation of our life with the divine” by way of purity, points to the cathartic.

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<sup>7</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, I.211,9–212,5.

The following stage, in which we contact the Gods with the highest part of the soul, echoes the upward-looking motion of the theoretic virtues, and also mentions the separation between the two, which Damascius identifies as what *drops away* at the subsequent (paradigmatic) level, thus applying only as far as the theoretic.

In the next stage, the language of “approximating” and of “manifest participation” both call to mind the paradigmatic. And the final stage deals explicitly, for Proclus on prayer as for Damascius on the virtues, with unity or the one.

### III. Self-Knowledge

In his *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, Olympiodorus offers a seven-fold sequence of ways in which we might follow the Delphic injunction to “know oneself.” It’s worth considering this sequence in light of the seven-fold ladder of virtues – both in their obvious parallels, and in any places where the two accounts seem to diverge or point in separate directions.

For the third through fifth levels, the correspondence between these modes of self-knowledge and the levels of virtue could not be more clear, for Olympiodorus simply takes the standard adjective that names each level of virtue, and turns it into an adverb. Thus, where Damascius’ list mentions “cathartic” virtue, Olympiodorus refers to knowing oneself “cathartically,” and so forth. Here is Olympiodorus’ compact but suggestive account:<sup>8</sup>

‘Self-knowledge’ is said in many ways: it is possible to know oneself with respect to external things; and of course it is possible to know oneself with respect to one’s body; and it is possible to know oneself **politically** (i.e., constitutionally), when a person knows himself in the tripartition of his soul; and it is possible to know oneself **cathartically**, when a person knows himself in the act of liberation from the passions; and it is possible to know oneself **theoretically** (i.e., contemplatively), when a person contemplates himself as liberated; and it is possible to know oneself **theologically**, when a person knows himself according to his form (*idea*); and it is possible to know oneself **enthusiastically**, when a person knows himself as a unity (or “according to the one,” *kata to hen*) and, thus bonded to his proper God, acts with inspiration (*enthousiâi*). Now Socrates did not know himself enthusiastically, which is also why in the *Phaedrus*<sup>9</sup> he says, “it is ridiculous to look into other things, while remaining ignorant of myself.”

There are three primary modes according to which we might know something: we can know a thing in its effects, in itself, or in its causes. But we know a thing most perfectly or completely when we know it, not merely in what it does, nor even as it is in itself, but at the level of its causes. We can apply this to the various ways in which we as human individuals might know ourselves.

We know from the arguments offered by Socrates in the *Alcibiades* that, strictly speaking, each of us *is* a soul, who *has* a body and various other material possessions. Thus Olympiodorus’ first two levels of “self-knowledge,” corresponding to the pre-philosophical virtues at the

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<sup>8</sup> Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Alcibiades* 172,5–14. This is based on the translation of Michael Griffin (page 102, in his second volume), but heavily modified for precision and consistency in technical terms, and for fluid reading aloud. Prof. Griffin’s original is available from <https://www.olympiiodorus.net/texts>

<sup>9</sup> *Phaedrus* 229e–230a.

physical and habitual levels, look not to the soul considered in herself, but downstream, to the effects of which she is a cause, or which depend upon her in some way.

Olympiodorus' three middle levels of self-knowledge, which correspond to the three grades of properly philosophical virtues, consider the soul in herself. This is most emphatic at the central, cathartic level, where we examine the soul in herself, as looking to herself. The levels to either side still speak to the soul in herself, but with the qualification that although she is in herself, she is casting her gaze not upon herself, but either downstream toward the division of the material world, or upstream toward her own causes.

The final two levels, in turn, address two modes by which the soul can know herself in her causes. At the paradigmatic level, she knows herself in the forms, or paradigms, by which she is a member of various classes or kinds (including that of "being a soul"). In other words, she knows herself as a member of a kind, included among others of like kind who are governed by a common paradigm – that is, according to what is called the formal or "eidetic" procession.

At the very highest level, the soul knows herself in an even deeper way. Now, at this most perfect moment, she knows herself as an individual suspended from her proper, individual God or Goddess – that is, according to the synthematic procession, whose name derives from the tokens (*synthēmata*) which her Leader-God has left in her, and in all other things belonging to that God's series. It is the presence of these tokens that the soul is able to make her theurgic ascent, back home to intimate union with that personal source. The soul's highest self-knowledge, then, is at once her supreme excellence (or virtue), and the highest form of prayer.