

The Platonic Tradition on Virtue

“O best of men, since you are an Athenian, of a city the greatest and the most celebrated for wisdom and strength, are you not ashamed of being attentive to the means of acquiring riches, glory and honour, in great abundance, but to bestow no care nor any consideration upon prudence and truth, nor how your soul may subsist in the most excellent condition?... For I go about doing nothing else than persuading both the younger and older among you, neither to pay attention to the body, nor to riches, nor anything else prior to the soul; nor to be so much concerned for anything, as how the soul may subsist in the most excellent condition. I also say that virtue is not produced from riches, but riches from virtue, as likewise all other human goods, both privately and publicly.” -

Socrates in the *Apology*, 29d-30b.

The Greek word *arete* is usually translated as ‘virtue’, but can also be rendered as ‘excellence’: it is a subject which continually arises in Platonic dialogues and texts.

What is *arete*? Everything has its intrinsic goodness - its own excellence which, given the right circumstances, will emerge in its interactions with the rest of the universe. We speak of the virtue of the cheetah as speed of foot, the virtue of the oak as its strength, the virtue of the bee its industry: all these qualities arise naturally unless some external event prevents it. In other words, the essence of the creature manifests in its activities through the powers which spontaneously move it to fulfil its role in the cosmos. *Arete* is, then, a *perfective power*, which brings an alignment between the *essence* of something with its *activity*.¹

This view of the triadic structure of things underpins Platonic teaching in both the metaphysical and psychological spheres. Platonism understands that the unbreakable alliance between the first moment – essence – and its subsequent moment – power – means that every power must reflect the nature of the essence.

What then is the essential nature of the human soul? It is worth recalling the assertion of Socrates as he concludes his closely argued demonstration of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedrus* 245e): “Since then it appears that a self-motive nature is immortal, he who asserts that this is the very essence and definition of soul, will have no occasion to blush.”

Platonism understands those things above the level of human rational soul as spontaneously unfolding their essence in appropriate activity – both those things that are truly eternal (because fully eternal entities have the whole of the activity completely

¹ In Platonic metaphysics we have a triplicity: essence, power and activity (*ousia, dynamis, energia*): they have a strict order – power emerges from essence (so there is no power which cannot trace its source to an essence); and activity emerges from power (again, there is no activity that is not the outcome of an appropriate power). If you are reading Taylor translations he tends to translate *energia* as ‘energy’ rather than ‘activity.’

present and clearly do not rely on the passing of time to move from one condition to another) and those souls which are higher than the human because they are properly united to the Gods and therefore have no interruption or distortion to their activity.

Those things below the level of the rational human soul also naturally unfold their virtue (insofar as circumstances permit) because they follow the prompting of the appropriate impulses of their species. Plants and animals have no choice concerning their progress towards their perfection.

But the human soul, with its self-motive nature, requires the cultivation of its virtues from its own choices, and for this reason it can be described as essentially self-perfecting. Proclus says (in his *Elements of Theology*, proposition 43²), “that which is able to revert to itself is self-constituted.” Of course the body which the rational soul animates largely follows the non-rational path towards its temporal perfection, unfolding the stages through which it passes from babyhood to maturity according to the inherited pattern of the human species. Leaving aside the body, however, the soul itself is charged with bringing forward into activity its essential nature deliberately. The very act of doing so is an intrinsic part of its role in the great scheme of things.

The gap between the soul’s essence, and the soul’s activity is bridged by its self-motive and self-willed power. Here are two Platonist commentators on this subject:

“But from the soul perfecting itself, you may especially assume that it is self-moved, and by this you may separate the rational soul from the irrational, and from nature. For it belongs to the rational soul to perfect and excite itself, and to be converted to itself, no one of which pertains to the others.”

Hermias, On the *Phaedrus*, 119, 29

And Thomas Taylor, in his dissertation *On the Nature of Soul*,³ discussing its position between the order of eternal things, and that of purely temporal things writes:

The properties of [eternal] intelligible natures, therefore, are as follows: true being, eternal, indivisible, immoveable, total, perfect, full of essence, replete with life But the properties of sensible natures, different from these by the greatest interval, are such as, not-true-being, temporal according to essence, partible, moveable, particular, indigent of another, always replete with subsistence, living by participation, moved by another, dissimilitude, and occupying place by parts. . . . But the middle [that is rational soul] . . . because it contains in itself all reasons, it is after a manner a whole, but because it is diminished and fallen, ends in parts, and suffers a transition of its activities, it must be esteemed a particular nature: and again, perfecting itself, yet, nevertheless, perfected by natures prior to its own; filling itself with power and strength, and at the same time filled by others . . .”

² See also proposition 189: “*Every soul is self-vital*. For if it is converted to itself, but everything which is converted to itself is self-subsistent, the soul also is self-subsistent, and produces itself.”

³ This dissertation was one of four written to accompany his translation on Proclus’ *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid*. The quote is p. 63- 64.

This requirement laid on the human soul leads the Platonic tradition to formulate the concept of *arete* as centred on the rational soul - so that alongside the general use of the word, there is also a stricter sense which reserves it as the prerogative of the human soul. Thus Socrates dismisses mere images of virtue as slavish - simply because a slave insofar as he is a slave is effectively unable to exercise free will.⁴ It is the view that virtue arises from the self-motive activity of soul that leads Socrates to attribute the condition of the soul to the actualised power of virtue in his defence at his trial.

But the soul, being a free-ranging creature has a number of relationships with levels of reality, and therefore requires the exercise of its powers – in other words, virtues – directed to these differing levels. As Olympiodorus says,⁵

‘[S]elf-knowledge’ is said in many ways (*pollakhōs*): it is possible [0] to know oneself with respect to one’s external [possessions]; and of course it is possible [1] to know oneself with respect to one’s body; and it is possible [3] to know oneself constitutionally (*politikōs*), when one knows oneself in the tripartition of one’s soul [as reason, emotion, and desire in harmony]; and it is possible [4] to know oneself as a purificatory person (*kathartikōs*), when one knows oneself in the act of liberation (*apolusis*) from the affections (*pathē*); and it is possible [5] to know oneself as a contemplative person (*theōrētikōs*), when one contemplates oneself as liberated (*heauton... theasētai*) [from the *pathē*]; it is possible [6] to know oneself theologically (*theologikōs*), when one knows oneself according to one’s paradigmatic Pattern (*idea*); and it is possible [7] to know oneself as an inspired person (*enthousiastikōs*), when one knows oneself as oneness (*kata to hen*) and, thus bonded to one’s proper god (*oikeios theos*), acts with inspiration (*enthousiāi*). [Olympiodorus here excludes, but elsewhere e.g. at *On Phaedo* 8.3, includes, [2] modes of knowing and virtue caused by habituation, *ēthikē aretē*].

A good summary of these virtues, as arranged in an ascending sevenfold scale, is offered by Damascius in his (*Commentary on the Phaedo* I, 138–144):⁶ Here we may note that it is the middle three levels which are especially considered to be true soul virtues (the two lower existing when the soul is conjoined with body, the two higher when it passes beyond its rational sphere).

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*^[306a] and the *Laws*.^[963c]

The **ethical** [or **habituated**] 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

⁴ *Phaedo* 69b. Of course a slave is never simply a slave, and insofar as he is human he will possess an inalienable free will.

⁵ in *Alc.* 172.5–12

⁶ Translated by Thomas Taylor from his notes to the *Phaedo*, with the last two (descriptions of the paradigmatic and hieratic virtues) by L G Westerink as Taylor did not include these in his notes.

temperaments, and on this account are not contrary to each other. These virtues Plato delivers in the *Laws*.^[653a] They pertain however at the same time both to reason and the irrational nature.

In the third rank above these are the **political**⁷ 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*.^[434d] These virtues, too, follow each other.

Above these are the **cathartic** [or **purifying**] 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*.

But above these, however, are the **theoretic** [or **contemplative**] virtues, which pertain to the soul, introducing itself to natures superior to itself, not only gnostically, as some one may be induced to think from the name, but also orectically: 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*.^[173c]

Next, the **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.

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All this (virtues as perfective powers) is from the human point of view: we might want to recognize that Plato in the *Phaedrus* talks of every soul as it rises through the celestial regions “beholds justice herself, it beholds temperance, and science herself” – and so we may also consider, from another perspective, virtues in themselves as divine forms (which are themselves from the Gods).

⁷ Called political (or civic) because the city (*polis*) was seen as organized by a human work of art, once removed from that of nature.