

Platonic Ethics in Later Antiquity

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I intend to make three related points with my somewhat tendentious title. First, I am referring to the ethical thought of Platonists as distinct from the ethical thought of Plato himself. Second, I mean to indicate that Platonists themselves did not suppose that this distinction amounted to a difference. Third, I am suggesting that Platonic ethics is more or less a unity; that is, we shall not find substantial differences among *soi-disants* Platonists in what they have to say about human happiness and virtue. I shall not here argue for these claims, though if they are true, an exposition of Platonic ethics might be expected to be gratifyingly concise: ‘assimilate yourself to god; all the rest is an explanation of this’.¹ Much of the explanation that was in fact provided for this famous exhortation amounts to its metaphysical context. I can only provide some of this in the course of this chapter, and then only as it directly bears on the ethical claims being made by Platonists. My primary focus will be on Plotinus, both because later Platonists follow him in his exposition of the Platonic position and because it is for him that we have the largest amount of material extant pertaining to our subject. By way of a supplement, I shall have something to say about how Plotinus’ pupil, Porphyry, and later Platonists systematized Plotinus’ account of virtue.

1.

It is well to begin with the point, obviously central to the Platonists, that Plato makes the first metaphysical principle of all the Idea of the Good.² Whatever else we wish to make of this claim, it does not seem unreasonable to insist that Plato thereby means indicate the relevance of metaphysics to ethics.³ If, as was universally maintained in ancient philosophy, all humans desire the good for themselves, then the claim that the first principle of all is the Idea of the Good is one with numerous, undoubtedly disputable, consequences. First, if there *is* an Idea of the Good, then it is of course possible that *x* is good for me, though *x* is bad for you. It is, however, not possible that if *x* is good for me, then it is bad for you that *x* is good for me, just as it is not possible that if $2 + 2 = 4$ is true for me, then it is possible that it is false for you. The objectivity of the Idea of the Good guarantees that my good is never achievable at your expense: if *x* is good for me, then it is just an instantiation of the Good that makes this so, and this is just as much the case for you as for me, which means that it cannot be not-good or bad for you that *x* is good for me. It is difficult to exaggerate this consequence of positing an Idea of the Good, particularly in

¹ The famous text in Plato’s *Tht.* 176A-B did indeed serve to encapsulate the Platonic view on ethics. But like the Talmudic sage Rabbi Hillel, who, when asked to express the essence of the Torah, said, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Law; the rest is the explanation; go and learn’, so for the Platonists, quite a bit of explanation is called for.

² See *Rep.* 509B6-10; cf. 505A3; 508E1-4; 533C8-D1. For Aristotle’s testimony that the Good is identical with the ‘One’ see *Meta.* 13.4.1091b13-14; cf. 1.9. 990b17-22 and *EE* 1218a24-8. It is worth emphasizing that Platonists took the Aristotelian testimony pretty much at face value, though they frequently disputed the conclusions that Aristotle drew from that testimony.

³ It is presumably this claim that Aristotle is contesting when he separates theoretical from practical science and when in his *NE* (1.6) he complains that the knowledge of the Idea of the Good does not seem to be useful for knowing what the good is in any particular circumstance. As we shall see below, Platonists have an interesting reply to this complaint.

the light of the confrontations Plato creates between Socrates and all those interlocutors whose entire lives are more or less dedicated to the proposition that one's own good is *always* achieved at the expense of others.

The second major consequence drawn from the positing of an Idea of the Good is that 'achieving' it can never be reduced to or identified with attaining a finite good. The textual basis for this is clearly the 'higher mysteries' of love in Plato's *Symposium* (210A-212B) where, on the basis of an identification of the love of the beautiful with the desire for good, an 'ascent' or progression of the right order is described in which the lover passes from love of one beautiful body upward to all beautiful bodies, to beautiful souls, then to beautiful practices and laws, then to beautiful areas of knowledge and then, finally, to beauty 'by itself'. It is only when the lover has reached this goal that he is able to give birth not to images of virtue but to true virtue, since he is only then in touch with true beauty. Leaving aside for the moment the difficult question of the exact relation between good and beautiful in this passage, we can say initially that if they are in fact identified, one apprised of the higher mysteries will never be satisfied with a particular good anymore than he will be satisfied with a particular beautiful object.

The Platonic way of representing the relation between the Idea of the Good and particular goods is, as the above passage suggests, analogous to the relation between true virtue and its images. If this analogy holds, it is clear why the philosopher will prefer the Good to particular goods. But when we come to ask why a particular good—say, pleasure or honor—is analogous to a mere image of the Good, the answer is not so clear at all. Briefly, the Platonic answer is this. The Idea of the Good, as Plato says, is the ultimate cause of the being of everything else. As such, it is distinct from any finite nature or essence or 'whatness', just in the way that 'one' (for Platonists and non-Platonists of antiquity alike) is not a number, but the principle of number. So, the goodness of anything will not be owing to its being the kind of thing it is, but rather owing to its participating in the Good. If, then, you want what is good for yourself, you want the goodness of the object of your desire, not that object itself, whether that be pleasure or honor or anything else. To want honor or pleasure 'for their own sakes' can only mean to want them *because* they are good or *despite* their not being good. The former confirms the Platonic point; the latter is impossible if one wants only one's own good. To insist that one's own good might 'conflict' with the Good is perforce to reject the objectivity of the Idea of the Good.

It might be objected that the goodness of pleasure is constituted by the pleasure itself and it is *that* that is desired, not the Good in which, it may be granted, it participates. The Platonist will reply that there is not one possible instance of pleasure that is not in certain circumstances anything but good for oneself. Though the pleasure can indeed be isolated from these circumstances, its goodness cannot. To admit that the pleasure that one seeks is sought on the condition that it is good is to admit at once that the goodness is *not* constitutive of the pleasure, but something distinct from that.

In the light of such an argument, it is not unreasonable to query the grounds for making the first principle of all the Idea of the Good. After all, one could, like Aristotle, agree that there must be a first principle of all without conceding that this is to be identified with the Idea of the Good. At this point, the Platonic interpretation of the very specific claim by Plato about the Idea of the Good is especially powerful and little noticed in the contemporary literature. As Plotinus argues, since the Good is not any specific nature, the limit of achievement of that Good for most things most of the time consists in the fulfillment of its nature. This is true for human beings as well, but since humans are rational creatures, the fulfillment of our natures consists in identifying

ourselves with our intellects, and realizing the intellect's full achievement which is knowledge of all that is intelligible. I shall return to the crucial point about identification below. How is this achievement supposed to be equivalent to attaining the Good? Plotinus maintains that the Good is virtually all that is knowable, just as white light is virtually all the colors in the spectrum or a mathematical function is virtually all its domain and range. Since our good consists in fulfilling our nature, and since our nature is to know all that is knowable, and since the first principle of all is virtually all that is knowable, it is correct to identify that principle with the Good.⁴ If this is so, then knowing all that is knowable is not quite the having of something good in the way that having pleasure or honor is having something good, that is, having a simulacrum of the real thing. For there is nothing between the having of the good of intellect and the Good itself. Stated otherwise, the highest good we can have is that of the intellect, even while we recognize that this attainment is not equivalent to identification with the Good itself.⁵

There are many other direct and indirect consequences of the positing of an Idea of the Good to which Platonists attended. If we add to these the consequences of the identification of the Idea of the Good with the One, as per Aristotle's testimony, we shall have the elements necessary for a reconstruction of what much later came to be given the pejorative label 'Neoplatonism'. Here, we shall focus exclusively on ethics. First, I shall deal with Plotinus' account of human happiness, and then with his account of virtue, along with Porphyry's adumbrations of this.

2.

Plotinus' *Ennead* 1.4, titled by Porphyry *On Happiness*, is, according to Porphyry, a late work (46th out of 54 in his relative chronological ordering), probably written near the end of Plotinus' life. It has a straightforward structure: a criticism of Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoics accounts of happiness, and then an exposition of the Platonic position. The above metaphysical superstructure is evident throughout. Plotinus assumes that a defensible account of human happiness will amount to an application of general metaphysical principles. If happiness is the good for human beings, then that good must be understood as an expression or image of the primary or Absolute Good.⁶ It is proximity to the Absolute Good or One that provides the index of a thing's goodness, including the goodness of a human being.⁷ More specifically, a human

⁴ Plato at *Rep.* 509B5 specifically says that the Good is that which makes all knowable things knowable. And insofar as we are really or ultimately intellects, it follows that the good of an intellect is doing what intellects do, that is, knowing all that is knowable. I mean to stress here how closely Plotinus is following Plato's argument.

⁵ I leave out of account the so-called mystical union with the Good or the One that Plotinus' pupil Porphyry reports Plotinus to have experienced four times in his life. Whatever this amounts to, it plays no part in his ethics in the sense that it is never proposed as a goal or result of virtue or as constitutive of happiness. The adventitiousness of the experience suffices to indicate that.

⁶ See *Enneads* 1.4.3.28-33: 'So its [the human being's] good will not be some brought in from outside, nor will the basis of its goodness come from somewhere else and bring it into a good state; for what could be added to the perfect life to make it into the best life? If anyone says, "the Absolute Good", that is our own way of talking, but at present we are not looking for the cause, but for the immanent element'. See *Phil.* 60B10-C4 which is perhaps the text indicating why Plotinus refers to 'our own [i.e., Platonic] way of talking'.

⁷ See 4.3.6.27-34: 'For we must understand that souls were called "second" and "third" according to whether they are nearer to or farther from [the intelligible world]; just as among us too not all souls have the same relationship to the realities there, but some men may unify themselves, others nearly reach this point in their striving, and others

life can be ‘graded’ according to whether it is approaching or retreating from the Good. Hence, the terminus of our identification with the Good as human beings is our identification with our intellects. In identifying the human being ideally with his intellect, Plotinus is in general following the Stoics as well as Plato and Aristotle. It is a slightly more complicated matter to explain how, despite this, Plotinus wishes at the same time to side with Plato against his illustrious successors.⁸

Aristotle, in the first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* claims that the human end is happiness (*eudaimonia*) and that happiness is virtuous activity. Perhaps the central problem with these claims is revealed in the standard English translation of the Greek term *eudaimonia*. As we are frequently told by scholars, Aristotle is not talking about a subjective state when he claims that *eudaimonia* is the human end. The achievement or failure to achieve happiness is quite independent of any feeling of happiness. This is evident from the fact that Aristotle acknowledges that a life in pursuit of pleasure is one view about *eudaimonia*, but only one among several.⁹ On the other hand, Aristotle does later in the work argue that the life of virtuous activity is in fact the most pleasant life, but only for the person who is actually virtuous.¹⁰ Such a claim, it goes without saying, will have no persuasive force for someone who is not otherwise attracted to virtuous living. If the virtuous life is subjectively ‘happy’ only for the virtuous person, it might well be the case for all we know that the life of someone otherwise disposed has as much or more subjective happiness. Why, after all, should one want the happiness of a kind of life other than his own?

Aristotle implicitly acknowledges the distinction between objective and subjective happiness when he insists that happiness is not ‘blessedness’ (*makaria*). The latter is primarily a characteristic of the gods.¹¹ The gods are blessed because they are immortal. Their immortality makes them impervious to the misfortunes that threaten human life. A god may become irritated, but he or she is sure to get over it in short order. A god is perpetually subjectively happy, or practically so. Human beings are, so long as they live, faced with the possibility of tragedy. So, though a human being may be happy in Aristotle’s sense, he cannot thereby be counted blessed. A happy man will indeed possess a prophylactic against disaster, because he can draw on his inner virtuous resources to get him through trouble. But he will not be blessed if he should meet with the fortunes of Priam.¹² If he is happy and if he manages to avoid personal tragedy right up to the end, then will we call him ‘blessed’, that is, blessed only in the secondary qualified way that befits a mortal. Moreover, the blessed state of the gods is precisely what makes virtue irrelevant for them. The fact that it is relevant, indeed, essential, for us, on Aristotle’s account, underscores the gap between happiness and blessedness.¹³

Aristotle’s principal response to the problem of the gap between what we might call an objective and a subjective account of happiness is to say in addition to the fact that the virtuous life is the most pleasurable for the virtuous, that a virtuous life is maximally impervious to

attain it in a lesser degree, in so far as they act by powers which are not the same, but some by the first, others by that which comes after it, others by the third, though all of them have all’.

⁸ Cf. *Rep.* 443E1 and 554D9-10 where Plato describes the virtuous person as ‘becoming one out of many’ which Plotinus interprets as a sort of self-unification. Cf. 1.2.6.3-7, 17-28 where Plotinus specifically mentions the state of one who has ‘become one’ and who in this state practices embodied virtue. So, too, 6.9.3.20-3.

⁹ *NE* 1.3.

¹⁰ *NE* 1.9.1099a11-21.

¹¹ Cf. Homer, *Od.* 10.299.

¹² *NE* 1.10.1101a6-8; cf. 1.9.1099b2.

¹³ Aristotle’s only extant poem, *Hymn to Hermeias*, expatiates on the arduousness of virtue.

misfortune.¹⁴ But the fact that a virtuous person will bear life's tragedies with equanimity and a certain 'nobility', as Aristotle puts it, hardly amounts to an unanswerable recommendation. Better, one might respond, to avoid avoidable misfortunes in the first place, including those that arise from the exigencies of virtuous living. Ancient ethics after Aristotle is strongly characterized by its focus on this problem.¹⁵

Epicurus and the Old Stoa employ a similar strategy, that is, they attempt to show that in fact happiness and blessedness are identical. Epicurus straightforwardly treats 'happy' as synonymous with 'blessed'.¹⁶ So, there is no possibility that one should be happy and 'unhappy' or wretched at the same time. He does this by claiming, in effect, that 'happy' and 'blessed' are two different names for one state, that of an 'absence of disturbance' (*ataraxia*).¹⁷ Against the obvious objection that this cannot be so because the divine nature is blessed owing to its immortality, Epicurus famously argues that 'death is nothing to us'.¹⁸ If the gods are blessed just because they need not fear death, then if we, too, need not fear death, we can be blessed as well. Epicurus does not, however, maintain that virtue is irrelevant to the blessed state of satisfaction: 'we choose virtues, too, for the sake of pleasure and not for their own sake'.¹⁹ Epicurus refuses to consider the life of virtue and the life of pleasure as alternatives, the commensuration of which makes any sense at all. He refuses to countenance the possibility that one could rationally conceive of happiness and blessedness as real alternative goals, opting for the former in the hopes that only in this way will he come as close as possible to the latter.

In the case of the Old Stoa, as with Epicurus, the identification of happiness and blessedness is made by identifying them both with 'absence of disturbance'.²⁰ But, unlike Epicurus, for the Stoics, since happiness (and therefore blessedness) is constituted of virtue, virtue is chosen for its own sake.²¹ And so like Epicurus, there is no possibility for rational opposition between virtue and happiness, if happiness is taken subjectively. The sense in which the Stoics make this claim is best seen in their view that things normally indicated as constituting subjective happiness—health, pleasure, beauty—are in fact 'indifferents' (*adiaphora*).²² It is possible to be happy without these.²³ By contrast, one cannot be happy if one is not virtuous.²⁴

In the face of such an extreme view, one might suppose that the Stoics have merely redefined 'happiness' to exclude or trivialize the subjective altogether. If this is so, then their position is hardly compelling. Surely, what the Stoics need is an argument designed to show that objective Stoic happiness—the virtuous life—is the life that anyone would choose if we were

¹⁴ *NE* 1.11.1100b22-33.

¹⁵ Antiochus of Ascalon, *apud* Cicero, *De fin.* 5.68, 81, defends the Aristotelian distinction in the course of his rejection of the Stoic *identification* of happiness (*vita beata*) and blessedness (*vita beatissima*). Antiochus identifies the latter as depending on 'external' goods, the possession of which would put us on a par with the gods who have these automatically, so to speak.

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of the Philosophers* (D. L.), 10.128; cf. 122.

¹⁷ D. L., 10.78; cf. Cicero, *de natura Deorum* 1.53.

¹⁸ D. L., 10.124-6.

¹⁹ D. L., 10.138; cf. 140 = *Principal Doctrines* 5.

²⁰ Cf. Seneca, *Epistles* 92.3: *securitas et perpetua tranquillitas*.

²¹ D. L., 7.89 = *SVF* 3.39.

²² D. L., 7.101-3. The distinction between preferred and dispreferred indifferents. Stobaeus, *Eclogues* 2.7d, p.79, 18ff Wachsmuth-Hense = *SVF* 3.133, 140.

²³ D. L., 7.104 = *SVF* 3.104.

²⁴ Plutarch, *de Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1042A = *SVF* 3.55; cf. *SVF* 3.585, where the Stoics are reputed to have insisted, presumably, against Aristotle or other Peripatetics, that it is indeed possible to be happy inside the notorious bull of Phalaris.

fairly apprised of the contents, so to speak, of that life, from the inside. If, however, being apprised of the contents of the virtuous life from the inside requires that one be virtuous, then the sought for Stoic argument would only show, in effect, that virtuous people prefer being virtuous. To insist, as the Stoics do, that all non-virtuous people are mad is not likely to count as a telling point against those who are satisfied to live the putative madness of the dissolute life. How, then, does one convince the ‘mad’ non-Stoic that he is indeed mad?

The Stoic approach is to hearken back to Socrates.²⁵ Their insistence on the sufficiency of virtue for happiness is equivalent to the Socratic absolutist prohibition of wrongdoing.²⁶ According to Socrates, wrongdoing inevitably and necessarily harms the soul of a person. Why, though, should one prefer the health of one’s soul at all costs, in particular, at the cost of harm to one’s body? The Socratic response in brief is that the soul is identical with the self, and the neglect of soul care is equivalent to self demolition. Wrongdoing is presumably the antithesis of soul care. A wrongdoer can no more hope to benefit from his wrongdoing than one can hope to preside over one’s own funeral. Why exactly wrongdoing should lead to self destruction is nowhere explicitly explained in Plato’s dialogues. However, Plato’s remarks on personhood, especially in *Republic* and *Timaeus*, do indicate the direction of an answer, and it is this direction that the Stoics and Plotinus will eventually follow.

The Socratic identification of the soul with the self is sophisticated by Plato’s tripartition of the soul and his subsequent designation of the rational part as the true self, the ‘human being within the human being’.²⁷ It is somewhat misleading to speak of the rational part if this suggests that reason or rationality is not involved in the operation of the other two parts of the soul, the appetitive and the spirited. Thus, the embodied person who acts to satisfy an appetite is not acting independent of his reason, for reason is deployed both in conceptualizing the object of desire and in calculations made on how to achieve it. The identification of the person with the rational part of the soul is the identification of the person with the subject of embodied human action, all of which is rational in the above sense. But reason, and hence, the self or subject, is present both as the subject of a desire and as the subject that endorses or fails to endorse the desire that it has itself.²⁸ The rational subject is essentially self-reflexive in this way. So, to address questions about the satisfaction or happiness of the self and self destruction, one must consider how rationality thus construed is exercised and how it is destroyed.

Crucially, Plato argues for a disembodied rational self, identified with the immortal part of the soul.²⁹ This disembodied self evidently desires nothing that requires a body; it has no bodily appetites, for example. Yet, it is no doubt continuous with the embodied self. If it were not, post-mortem rewards and punishments would be meaningless, to say nothing of reincarnation. So, we must suppose that the embodied person is a sort of image of its disembodied exemplar. I would argue that this is so in exactly the way that instances of Plato’s Forms are images of these Forms, but that is not the central point here.³⁰ That point is that if I make a commitment to pursuing what ‘I’ really want—objective or subjective happiness—then I must be in a position to identify that ‘I’. And the identification in a Platonic context is not so

²⁵ The Socrates of the dialogues, who in my view is not distinguishable from the author of the dialogues, Plato.

²⁶ See *Cr.* 49B8: ‘One must never do wrong’; cf. 49A6-7, *Ap.* 29B6-7; *Gorg.* 469B12, 508E, etc.

²⁷ *Alc.* I 130E8-9; *Rep.* 589A7-B1.

²⁸ Failing to endorse it in the prerequisite for incontinence or *akrasia*.

²⁹ *Tim.* 90C.

³⁰ See my *Knowing Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chs. 3 and 6.

straightforward, since I can identify it either as the embodied 'I' or the disembodied 'I', the former being merely an image of the latter.

The ambiguity imported into ethical calculation by the distinction between an ideal and its image is not uniquely Platonic in origin. Consider, as the Stoics do, for instance, the person who has to choose between present satisfaction and future well-being. The choice between what the present 'I' wants and what the present 'I' thinks the future 'I' will want is exactly analogous to the choice between what the subject qua image wants and what the subject qua image thinks the ideal subject wants. This is so even if in the former case the future 'I' is bound to become a present 'I' with another future 'I' to consider. Now just as a claim about what 'I' want now might be challenged (whether by oneself or by another) by a comparison with what 'I' will want in the future, so the choices of the subject qua image might be challenged by a comparison with the ideal self. The point of course is that the challenger does not have to say things like, 'you ought to want something different for yourself' but rather either 'you will want something different for yourself' or, more radically in the case of the ideal self, 'you do want something different for yourself'. A youth does not have to be convinced that he does not now want what he wants; he only (!) needs to be convinced that when he grows up he will want something else and that his present pursuits will make that impossible or at least unlikely. The argument for privileging the future person over the present is in part that one is likely to spend a much longer time as an adult than as a youth. How much stronger would this argument be if the two poles of comparison were a mortal embodied self and an immortal disembodied self?

The Stoic exhortation to 'live in agreement with nature' is the basis for their interpretation of the Socratic-Platonic account of the self.³¹ In one sense, a human being cannot fail to live in agreement with nature. That is the sense in which he is an embodied subject of rational activity. But in another sense, a human being can and typically does fail to live in agreement with nature, when living in agreement is taken to be an ideal. For the Stoics, the ideal is not a disembodied one; nevertheless, it is an ideal wherein the subject is identified with the rule of reason or with Zeus himself.³² It is to be emphasized that the Stoics thus import normativity into the fabric of nature. The ideal is as natural as an endowment. And the Platonic identification of the endowment with a counterfeit or image is no less censorious than is the Stoic description as mad anyone who lives a life according to the endowment and not according to the ideal.

It may be worth noting as we proceed to Plotinus that the Socratic-Platonic-Stoic view is not at all rejected by Aristotle himself. In his remarks concerning the best life at the end of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says,

Such a life would be above that of a human being, for a human being will live in this manner not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has something divine in him; and the activity of this divine part of the soul is as much superior to that of the other kind of virtue as that divine part is superior to the composite soul of a human being. So, since the intellect is divine relative to a human being, the life according to this intellect, too, will be divine relative to human life. Thus we should not follow

³¹ D. L., 7.87 = *SVF* 3.4; Stobaeus, *Eclogues* 2.7, 6a, p.76, 3 Wachsmuth-Hense = *SVF* 1.55.2

³² D. L., 7.88 = *SVF* 1.162.

the recommendation of thinkers who say that those who are human beings should think only of human things and that mortals should think only of mortal things, but we should try as far as possible to partake of immortality and to make every effort to live according to the best part of the soul in us; for even if this part be of small measure, it surpasses all the others by far in power and worth. It would seem, too, that each man is this part, if indeed this is the dominant part and is better than the other parts; so it would be strange if a human being did not choose the life proper to himself but that proper to another. And what was stated earlier is appropriate here also: that which is by nature proper to each thing is the best and most pleasant for that thing. So for a human being, too, the life according to his intellect is the best and most pleasant, if indeed a human being in the highest sense is his intellect. Hence, this life, too, is the happiest.³³

This remarkable passage, so frequently discounted in the literature, explicitly acknowledges first that ‘a human being in the highest sense is his intellect’. So, the life according to the intellect (whatever that means) is the happiest life for a human being. But this life is ‘above that of a human being’; it is a divine life compared with a human one. The divine life is the ideal. It is that life which is unqualifiedly blessed. It is that life which is most pleasant, but only for one who acknowledges that it is his own ideal life. One who prefers satisfaction to virtue or blessedness to happiness as construed by Aristotle is not completely wrong because he is implicitly acknowledging the distinction between the divine ideal and the human endowment. And in this acknowledgment is the starting point for a substantive dispute over the nature of that ideal as opposed to a mere conflict of incommensurable subjective valuations.

3.

Plotinus identifies ‘happiness’ with ‘blessedness’, not, like the Epicureans and Stoics because both terms express or are equivalent to ‘absence of disturbance’, but because both terms are equivalent to ‘identification with intellect’, that is, with intellectual activity.³⁴

It is obvious from what has been said elsewhere that a human being has a perfect life by having not only a soul capable of sense-perception but also one capable of reasoning and true intellection. But is he different from this when he has it? No, he is not entirely a human being if he does not have this, whether in potency or in actuality (happiness being the actuality, we maintain). But shall

³³ *EN* 10.7.1177b26-1178a8. Cf. 9.4.1166a22-3, 9.8.1168b31-3. Cf. *Protr.* B62, 85-6 (Ross).

³⁴ See 1.4.4 with 1.6.7.33 and 5.1.4.14-19.

we say that he who has this kind of perfect life has this as a part of himself? Is it not the case rather than other human beings have it as a part by having it potentially, whereas the happy human being who is this life in actuality and has transformed himself in becoming identical with it, is this. The other things are then just what he wears, which one could not call a part of him since he wears them without wanting to. It would be a part of him if it were joined to him according to an act of will. What then is the good for him? He himself is the good for himself which he has.³⁵

The transformation to which this passage refers is from the use of intellect to the identification with it, roughly in the way that, say, one identifies with a ‘cause’ or with the plight of another person.³⁶ With this identification, one detaches from embodied desires such that they seem (almost) to be those of another. This detachment is the psychological manifestation of the ontological distinction between goods and the Good. All in fact desire the Good, but those who have not transformed themselves in the way that Plotinus indicates, mistake particular goods for that one true object of desire.³⁷ The desire for the Good is, for an intellect, satisfied in the cognitive identification with all that is intelligible, all that the Good is virtually. This is what the ‘undescended’ intellect of each of us is eternally achieving.³⁸ So, the identification we are able to achieve with our own intellects while embodied is limited. Contrary to Epicurus and the Old Stoa, and in line with Plato, Plotinus rejects the idea of a ‘heaven on earth’. Accordingly, perfect happiness for an embodied human being is a relative notion.

Plotinus considers the perfectly reasonable objection that a life of detachment from embodied desires amounts to a life bereft of the satisfaction that is subjective happiness.

If some people were to say that a human being in this state is not even alive, we shall insist that he is alive, but that his happiness, like his life, escapes them. If they are not persuaded, we will ask them to begin with the living human being or the excellent person (*spoudaios*), and thus to ask if he is happy, and not having diminished his life, to seek to discover if he is living well, and, without removing his humanity, to seek to discover human happiness, and while conceding that the excellent person turns inward, not to seek for his happiness in external activities nor in general to seek the object of his will in externals. For if one were to say that externals were willed and that the excellent person willed these, in this way one would be denying that happiness exists.³⁹

³⁵ 1.4.4.6-19.

³⁶ Cf. the Old Testament story of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1: 16-17): Ruth declares to her mother-in-law Naomi, ‘Your people will be my people; your God will be my God’.

³⁷ Plotinus tends to use one word for desire for the Good (*epheisis*) and another for desires for particular goods (*orexis*). Cf. 1.6.7.3; 6.7.21.1-6; 6.7.27.24-7.

³⁸ See 1.1.2.25-30; 4.7.13, 4.8.8; 6.7.5.26-9.

³⁹ 1.4.11.1-12.

The central point of this passage is that the critic, before dismissing the present account of happiness as inhuman, must look at the actual life of the excellent person (*spoudaios*). In the interstice between disembodiment and a life of embodied desire, his happiness is to be found.

The principal characteristic of the life of the excellent person is that he is 'self-sufficient' (*autarkēs*).⁴⁰ The excellent person is happy because he is self-sufficient or perhaps his excellence consists in his self-sufficiency. We recall that Aristotle makes self-sufficiency a hallmark of happiness. But we also saw that for Aristotle this self-sufficiency falls short of blessedness. Plotinus, identifying happiness with blessedness, alters the meaning of 'self-sufficient' in order to identify it with the interior life of the excellent person. This interiority or self-sufficiency is the obverse of attachment to the objects of first order embodied desires. Interiority is happiness because the longing for the Good for one who is ideally an intellect is satisfied by cognitive identification with all that is intelligible. If this is not unqualifiedly possible for the embodied human being, it does at least seem possible that one should have a second order desire that amounts to a profound indifference to the satisfaction of first order desires. Whether one takes this indifference to be a symptom of depression or of a morbid asceticism or whether it is evidence of true self-discovery no doubt depends entirely on one's assessment of the metaphysics adduced to justify it. Understanding that the Good for an intellect is contemplation of all that the One is means that the will is oriented to one thing only, whatever transient desires may arise.⁴¹ The 'weight' that one gives to these desires depends entirely on one's metaphysics, even if that consists in the position that metaphysics is irrelevant to ethics.

4.

Plotinus' account of virtue in *Ennead* 1.2 should be viewed in the light of all the above. Although this treatise is relatively early (number 19 in Porphyry's ordering), it considers virtue insofar as it contributes to identification with one's intellect and, therefore, achievement of the Good. It is in fact an extended commentary on *Theaetetus* 176A-B, the passage cited at the beginning as an emblem of Platonic ethics. Thus, virtue is necessary for the assimilation to god. The basis for the assimilation is the metaphysical hierarchy with the Idea of the Good at the top and the human being somewhere in the middle, struggling to appropriate once again his or her ideal self. The process of appropriation is the assimilation itself. The completion of the process performs amounts to the transcending of virtue, or at least to the transcending of embodied virtue.

Plotinus naturally presents his account of virtue as simply that of Plato. Despite his disagreements with Aristotle regarding the nature of happiness, he is evidently content to employ a considerable amount of material from the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a means to articulate the Platonic position. In particular, he employs Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtue as an expression of a hierarchical ordering of virtue that he finds in Plato. The superiority of the intellectual to the moral reflects the ideal identification of the person with the intellect, as

⁴⁰ See 1.4.4.23-5; 1.4.5.23-4.

⁴¹ In 1.3., 'On Dialectic', Plotinus argues that the practice of dialectic as described by Plato is essential to moral improvement. He frequently describes this practice as a sort of purification. It is essential because, though all desire the Good, one must first know what that is. The goal of dialectic is to know what the Good is virtually, that is, the intelligible world. In knowing that, one longs for it, and interiority is a state of willing the achievement of that longing. The language of purification is applied here especially to desire which is transmuted into the resultant purified longing for the Good.

Aristotle himself acknowledges. Thus, the transcending of embodied virtue amounts to the transcending of embodied intellection, that is, practical thinking.

In *Phaedo*, we find a reference to 'popular or political virtues'.⁴² These are the 'ordinary virtues', that human beings practice by custom and habit and 'without philosophy and intellect'. As the parallel *Republic* passages make clear, this sort of virtue is concerned with 'externals', that is, with behavior. By contrast, the virtue that is 'a sort of purification' is the justice, temperance, and courage of a philosopher.⁴³

With this background, Plotinus' treatise begins with a reflection on the *Theaetetus* passage. He asks how the practice of virtue can make us like the divine and intelligible reality since there is no virtue there. The divine has no need of virtue because it is perfect.⁴⁴ In particular, it has no need of the popular or political virtues, which Plotinus identifies as achievements of an embodied tripartite soul.⁴⁵ All true virtues are understood as advancements or contributions towards the identification of the person with the activity of a disembodied intellect.⁴⁶

Plotinus asks if the popular or political virtues are real virtues. And his answer is an insistence that whatever serves to make us godlike is a virtue.⁴⁷

These virtues do truly organize our lives and make us better by giving limit to and giving measure to our appetites and in general to all our feelings. And they eliminate false beliefs, by what is generally better and by limiting the unmeasured and unlimited.⁴⁸

These virtues, as they are described by Plato in the fourth book of *Republic*, are aspects of an embodied life under the aegis of reason. The practice of these virtues contributes to our godlikeness because they nudge us towards identification with our intellects. They do this because acting as reason dictates means at least sometimes acting against our appetites or emotions, those parts of our embodied lives which we falsely believe identify us. Since every person acts on behalf of his own good as he perceives that, continual acting under the aegis of reason and over the blandishments of appetite and emotion contributes to a self-identification with the former. We become habituated to believing that what reason determines is good is our good. This is the principal true belief that virtue substitutes for those false beliefs the substance

⁴² *Phd.* 82A10-B3. Cf. 69B6-7, where this sort of virtue is called an 'illusory façade', fit for slaves. Cf. *Protag.* 323A7, B2; 324A1 where Protagoras uses the term 'political virtue' in the same way without of course the pejorative Platonic overtones. Cf. *Rep.* 365C3-4 and 500D8 with 518D3-519A6 where the 'popular' virtues are identified as the 'so-called virtues of the soul' and especially 619C7-D1 for participation in virtue by 'habit' 'without philosophy'. At 430C3, courage is characterized as 'political'. At 443C10-D1, characterizing justice, Plato contrasts 'external' behavior with 'internal' virtue, which is concerned with what is 'truly oneself and one's own'.

⁴³ See *Phd.* 67C5, 69B8-C3.

⁴⁴ 1.2. 3. 31.

⁴⁵ 1.2.1; 1.1.10.11-13.

⁴⁶ See 1.1.10.11-14, where Plotinus distinguishes the virtues that result from 'habit' as belonging to the 'composite' whereas the intellectual virtues belong to the true person.

⁴⁷ 1.2.1.23-6.

⁴⁸ 1.2.1.13-18. These virtues are here understood according to a general account of *Philebus* 23Bff., especially 26B-C, in which the imposition by the Demiurge of form on the sensible world is taken to be the imposition of limit on the unlimited. Plotinus simply assumes this metaphysical framework for his account of virtue.

of which is that one's good is to be identified with the satisfaction of an appetite or the discharge of an emotion.

What, then, of the 'higher' virtue that is a 'purification'? In contrast to the popular and political virtues which consist essentially in behavior, these virtues constitute a 'disposition' of the soul. According to this disposition, the soul 'thinks and is in this way free of affections'. Plotinus, no more than Plato, is endorsing or even contemplating the extirpation of anything that is natural to the embodied state. It is a confusion to see in this a recommendation of a kind of pathological asceticism. It is something else. It is more a psychological distancing of oneself from one's embodied state than it is self-mortification.

Plotinus goes on to argue that the person purified by virtue will have transcended incontinence or weakness of the will.⁴⁹ This means that the person has no or few desires that are 'unchosen', meaning not that he never desires food or sleep or sex or other pleasures, but that he never acts on them except under the aegis of reason. And that is because, as a virtuous person, he has identified with his rational self and never supposes that his own good is other than a rational one. We should notice here in particular how Plotinus uses incontinence to make the conceptual distinction between the two types of virtue. The popular and political virtues in *Republic* are developed on the basis of a theoretical argument explaining how incontinence is possible. The incontinent person, like the pathetic Leontius, has an appetite he knows is bad but cannot control. A continent person is one who has the bad appetite, but can control it. Someone practicing continence would be practicing the 'lower' virtue. But the truly virtuous person has been purified of bad desires. He does not have them in the first place. Or at least ideally so. Plotinus seems to recognize degrees of purification and an ideal purified state which is, nevertheless, not unqualifiedly ideal since it is still embodied.⁵⁰

The distinction between the two types of virtue parallels exactly the distinction between the virtuous person envisioned at the end of book four of *Republic* and the philosopher or 'aristocratic human being' envisioned at the end of book nine. Platonists recognized that the virtues described in book four are capable of being present in a man, as Plato later says, 'without participating in philosophy'.⁵¹ In the case of every virtue of the purified person, there is an activity 'in the direction of' intellect.⁵² The person in each case affirms his identity with reason much as someone might be said to identify with a cause or the fate of another. Such a person is profoundly different, for example, from the wise person as described in book four.⁵³ The latter's wisdom consists entirely in knowing what is 'beneficial' for each part of the soul and for the whole soul together. This prudential wisdom is available to one who knows that he ought to

⁴⁹ 1.2.5.17-21.

⁵⁰ *Enneads* 1.2.4.1-7. One might argue that in *Rep.* 4, Plato holds that the presence of ethical virtue rules out continence, not just incontinence. But this is not I believe so clear. If the 'appetitive part of the soul' (*to epithumētikon*) does its job and obeys the 'rational part of the soul' (*to logistikon*), this does not necessarily mean that there are present no appetites whose satisfaction (like that of Leontius) would constitute a vicious act. It just means that they are not 'strong' enough to prevail. I am inclined to believe that if we take seriously the distinction between popular or political virtue on the one hand and the true virtue of the philosopher on the other, we shall be obliged to recognize that only the latter transcends continence. That is, only the latter is authentically virtuous. The distinction between continence and virtue is, of course, thematized by Aristotle.

⁵¹ See *Rep.* 619C6-D1.

⁵² *Enneads* 1.2.6.23-7.

⁵³ See *Rep.* 442C5-8.

obey the dictates of the philosopher even though he himself has no philosophy in him.⁵⁴ It is only he who pursues philosophy 'in a sound manner' who is destined for happiness.⁵⁵

In the last chapter of the treatise, Plotinus asks two questions: (1) do the virtues entail each other and (2) do the higher and lower virtues entail each other? The answer to the first question is that since in the intelligible world all the Forms are mutually implicated or virtually identical, so here below possession of one virtue entails possession of all. More convincingly, Plotinus argues that since there is a single process of purification, when that process is completed, all the virtues are present.⁵⁶ This is the 'principal part of the life of the excellent person'.⁵⁷

The answer to the second question would seem to be equally straightforward, but though the person in possession of the higher virtues is said to have the lower 'in potency', it is not so clear that he will practice these in the way that the one in possession *only* of these practices them.⁵⁸ Plotinus is here worried about how one who has been purified of attachments to embodied life can be said to possess the virtues which consist in giving 'limit and measure' to desires. He seems to think that practicing the lower virtues implies an 'impure' attachment to embodied life, in other words, to a political life.

But when he [the one who is purified] attains to higher principles and different measures he will act according to these. For example, he will not locate self-control in that measure [i.e., of the lower virtues], but completely separating himself as much as possible, he will completely not live the life of the good human being as political virtues conceive of it, but leaving this behind, he will choose another life, the life of the gods. For assimilation is in the direction of these, not in the direction of good men. The latter type of assimilation is a case of making one image like another, both of which are derived from another. Assimilation to the other [the life of the gods] is in the direction of the paradigm.⁵⁹

As many scholars have pointed out, this claim implies neither world-renouncing asceticism nor Nietzschean transcendence of value any more than Socrates' claim that philosophy is preparation for dying is an endorsement of suicide.⁶⁰ There is nothing inconsistent in choosing not to live a

⁵⁴ See *Rep.* 445C10-D1 where the philosopher is described as a lover of truth and where, by implication, his wisdom consists in attaining that truth.

⁵⁵ See *Rep.* 619D8-E1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1.2.7.8-10.

⁵⁷ See 1.4.16, where Plotinus compares the *spoudaios* with the ideal of political life, the *epieikēs anthrōpos*. See Alexandrine Schniewind, *L'éthique du sage chez Plotin. Le paradigme du spoudaios*, Paris: Vrin (2003) on the *spoudaios* in Plotinus. The *spoudaios* is one who has attained the heights of embodied virtue. Such an attainment is, nevertheless, short of the disembodied ideal.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 1.2.7.10-12. Cf. 1.3.6.17ff where he suggests that the lower and higher virtue can grow at the same time.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 1.2.7.21-30.

⁶⁰ See, for example, J. Bussanich, 'The Invulnerability of Goodness. The Ethical and Psychological Theory of Plotinus,' *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy* 6, edited by J. J. Cleary, University Press of America: Lanham, Md. (1990), 151-184; J.M. Dillon, 'An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage,' *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, edited by L. Gerson, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (1996), 315-35; A. Smith, 'The Significance of Practical Ethics for Plotinus,' *Traditions of Platonism. Essays in Honour of John Dillon*, edited by J. J. Cleary, Aldershot: Brookfield, USA (1999), 227-36.

political life and yet practicing political virtue insofar as this is required. That is the key. Practicing this virtue as required is opposed to making it the central focus of one's life.⁶¹ As Plotinus elsewhere says, one does not wish for the drowning of a child in order that one can practice virtue and save him. To have missed such an 'opportunity' is not to suffer a diminution of virtue.

Porphry in his *Sentences Leading to the Intelligible World* 32, offers an influential expansion or precision of the Plotinian scheme.⁶²

It has been shown then that there are four kinds (*genē*) of virtue: (1) those of intellect, which are paradigmatic and coincide with its essence; (2) those of the soul already in relation to intellect and imbued (*plēroumenēs*) with it; (3) those of the human soul that is being purified (*kathairoumenēs*) and has been purified of the body and of arational passions; (4) those of the human soul that manage the human being, putting limits to and moderating the passions (*metriopatheian*) by means of imposing measures (*metra*) on the arational.⁶³

As Porphyry has already explained, at each of these levels, the four virtues of temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice can be found in a distinct form. That is, the virtues at level (2) are an image of those at (1), and so on. The lower are images of the higher in the Platonic sense that the ontologically derived or posterior is an image of the ontologically prior. According to Porphyry's description of these levels, (4) is equivalent to the political and popular virtue as understood by Plotinus in *Phaedo*; (1) and (2) comprise a division of Plotinus' theoretical virtue into its practice by intellect and by the soul.⁶⁴ I would suggest that this is in fact a division of theoretical activity as practiced intuitively and discursively, though I cannot develop this interpretation now. Porphyry here seems to be relying on the distinction Plotinus makes

⁶¹ See 6.8.6.14-18 where Plotinus expresses the core world-renouncing idea. One may compare in this regard the point of Martin Luther's provocative remark: 'Christianity has nothing to do with virtue'.

⁶² See I. Hadot, *Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrien : Hiéroclès et Simplicius*. Paris: Études Augustiniennes (1978), 152-158; J. M. Dillon, 'Plotinus, Philo, and Origin on the Grades of Virtue', *Platonismus und Christentum . Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie*, edited by Horst-Deiter Blum and Friedholm Mann, Munster: Aschendorf (1983), 92-105; C. Wildberg, 'Pros to telos: Neuplatonische Ethik zwischen Religion und Metaphysik,' *Metaphysik und Religion. Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens*, edited by T. Kobusch and M. Erler, München/Leipzig: K.G. Saur (2002), 261-78; M Lurje, 'Die Vita Pythagorica als Manifest der neuplatonischen Paideia. Jamblich,' *PERI TOU PUQAGOREIOU BIOU*, edited by M. von Albrecht, J. M. Dillon, M. George, M. Lurje and D. du Toi, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (2002), 221-254, especially 242-248, on the Porphyrean gradations of virtue and its development in later Platonism.

⁶³ Porphyry, *Sentences Leading to the Intelligible World* 32.71-78. Olympiodorus, evidently relying on Iamblichus, *Commentary on Plato's Phaedo* 8.2-3, expands the Porphyrean list of four levels of virtue to five: (1) 'natural' (*phusikai*), resulting from temperament; (2) 'moral' (*ēthikai*), owing to habit; (3) 'civic' or 'political' (*politikai*), concerned with the tripartite soul and the moderation of the passions; (4) 'purificatory' (*kathartikai*); and (5) 'contemplative' (*theōrētikai*). The same list is given in Damascius' *Lectures on Phaedo* I, 138-144. Both give the 'paradigmatic' referring to the virtues of the gods as a sixth category, alluding to Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.2.7.2-6. See Westerink (1976), v.1, 18, on Proclus' relation to Olympiodorus and Damascius. See also Eustratius' Christianized version of the grades of virtues and the ascent to union with God, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* 4. 25-38.

⁶⁴ On the equivalence of the political and ethical virtues see Hierocles of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Carmen Aureum* Proem 3.9-10 (Koehler).

elsewhere between using intellect and being identified with it.⁶⁵ In addition, in (3) Porphyry erects a distinct form of virtue constituted by the purification process of *Phaedo*. These are the virtues of the soul that is being 'elevated' (*aphistamenēs*) to the intellectual realm.⁶⁶ At this level, wisdom consists in refusing to 'share the opinions of the body' (*sundoxazein*), and in acting according to intellect; temperance in refusing to 'feel what the body feels' (*homopathein*); courage in having no fear of separation from the body; and justice in the unimpeded rule of reason.⁶⁷

The virtue of refusing to share the opinions of the body should put us in mind of *Phaedo* where Socrates in the affinity argument warns his interlocutors of the perils of embodiment: by sharing opinions and pleasures with the body the soul is forced to become of like character and nurture with it.⁶⁸ We should not suppose that the possibility of 'sharing the body's opinions' indicates that the body is being represented by Plato as the sort of thing capable of having opinions. Rather, one is being exhorted to refuse to share the opinions possessed by oneself insofar as one is the subject of bodily states, namely, opinions that the satisfaction of bodily desires constitutes one's good.⁶⁹ One is being exhorted to renounce those opinions. Similarly, refusing to feel what the body feels amounts to refusing to make one's bodily feelings the principle of one's actions. Courage is the refusal to believe that one's good is eliminated by the death of the human being. The unimpeded rule of reason is just the establishment of reason as the sole principle of action. This establishment is identical with the identification of oneself as ideally a rational agent or subject.

The cathartic virtues serve to indicate the continuity of the practices of ethical and intellectual virtue. That is why, as Porphyry insists, the possession of the higher *necessitates* the possession of the lower.⁷⁰ I take Porphyry here to be making the important claim that there is a linear progression in moral development leading ultimately towards identification with the divine. Life is a continuum in which one is either approaching or receding from the ideal state. One who has ascended to the practice of the cathartic virtues will necessarily manifest the behavior of one who possesses the 'popular and political virtues' as well. But one who merely practices the latter has not thereby achieved what a person is ideally capable of, that is, identification with his intellect. This necessary linear progression also, I believe, explains why Porphyry tends to disdain the 'theurgical virtues' of Iamblichus, that is, the devotion to religion rites that might enable one to omit one or more of the hard won stages on the way to the divine.

What Porphyry has here done is in effect recognized that the practices of the philosopher are distinct from the achievement of the philosopher as a contemplator. He recognizes philosophy as part of a virtuous way of life other than yet, importantly, inferior to, the virtuous state consisting of the contemplation of eternal truth. A moral preparation or purification of the

⁶⁵ Cf. *Enneads* 5.3.3.44; 5.3.4.1.

⁶⁶ *Sentences Leading to the Intelligible World* 32.18-19. Cf. Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras* 122.10 – 123.4. Iamblichus insisted that 'theurgical' virtues were above the philosophical and necessary for union with God. See *On the Egyptian Mysteries* II 11; Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Phaedo* 114.20-2; Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 26.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-9.

⁶⁸ *Phaedo* 83D7-8.

⁶⁹ See L. Gerson, *Knowing Persons*, cc. 2-3 on the incoherence of treating the bodily appetites as originating in a *homunculus* within the soul.

⁷⁰ See *Sentences Leading to the Intelligible World* 32, 78-9: 'And he who has the greater necessarily has the lesser, though not vice versa'.

soul is a necessary prelude to intellectual activity.⁷¹ In other words, one does not prepare for the virtues of the intellect merely by practicing moderation of the passions.

In my opinion, the fundamental truth contained in the Platonic interpretation of Plato's ethics is the refusal to foist upon Plato a facile view of human personhood. Platonists never for a moment supposed that Plato thought that what was good or virtuous for the human being, the *anthrōpos*, was identical with what was good or virtuous for the person. For persons have a destiny that transcends humanity.⁷² The 'popular and political' virtues pertain to the human being. But the philosopher and the philosopher alone recognizes that persons are souls, not human beings. More particularly, they are rational souls or minds and their ideal activity is thought. As Plotinus might put it, the ability to identify and pursue human virtue is itself proof that human virtue is insufficient to fulfill one capable of such recognition. Thus, ethical virtue or 'relational [read: 'interpersonal'] activity' (*schetikē energeia*) as Proclus aptly puts it, is inferior to theoretical virtue which, at its highest, constitutes identification with the divine.⁷³

The Platonic interpretation of Plato's ethics does not so much contradict those modern interpretations of Plato's ethics that more or less focus on the so-called Socratic paradoxes as it does supersede them in its comprehensiveness. That interpretation supposes that 'assimilation to god' is equivalent to 'achieving the good' and that 'achieving the good' for us consists in cognitive identity with the intelligible world, which is what the Idea of the Good is virtually. The role of 'ordinary' virtue in this achievement is to foster the rediscovery of our true identities as intellects. At least for Platonists, if in fact we were not really or ideally intellects, then Plato's central ethical claims would be at best question-begging and at worst, sadly, false.

⁷¹ Ibid. 51-5.

⁷² There is a particular vivid description of this in Hierocles of Alexandria's *Commentary on the Carmen Aureum* 84, 16-20 (Koehler): 'For the rational soul, being midway between intellect and the irrational [part of the soul], can only associate without disturbance with the intellect that is before it when it is purified of its attachment to the things that come after it thereby grasping them in a purified manner'.

⁷³ See *Commentary on Plato's Republic* 1.208.27. The life of relational activity is contrasted with the life 'in itself' (*kath' auto*) (209.4).