The god-like Plotinus and Proclus: two Neoplatonic patterns of perfection

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CHAPTER 3

The God-like Plotinus and Proclus

Two Neoplatonic Patterns of Perfection

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In the *Theaetetus* (176a–b), Socrates famously urges Theodorus to flee the evils of this world by becoming like God to the extent possible. This flight is brought about by the cultivation of wisdom and virtue. But what is God himself like? Is God, as Aristotle holds, an Intellect that is self-absorbed in thinking its own thinking? Or should we conceive of God as a benevolent agent who, apart from his self-centered intellectual activities, is also engaged in acts of providential care towards inferior creatures? And what does this imply for our efforts to become like God? In this essay, I will argue that within the Neoplatonic tradition we may distinguish between two answers to these questions. For Plotinus (204/5–270), the God whom we seek to imitate is the Aristotelian Intellect. Since Plotinus holds that this God is present within ourselves, he conceives of the process of deification as a process of introspection.[1] As a result, the Plotinian deified philosopher will be a rather detached figure who focusses on his own inner spiritual life. For many of the later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus (ca. 242–ca. 325) and Proclus (412–485), however, our relation to God is a very different one. The divine is not within us, but divine forces reach down towards us from on high. So-called theurgic rituals allow us to profit from these outpourings of divine goodness into the material universe. It is the task of the philosopher not just to imitate the contemplative activities of the divine, but also divine providential care by performing theurgic rituals in the service of humanity.

In order to make this point, I will in this essay compare Plotinus' interpretation of the famous slogan from the *Theaetetus* in his treatise *On the Virtues* (*Enneads* I.2 [19]) to the biography of Proclus by his pupil Marinus. Marinus models his biography on the so-called Neoplatonic scale of virtues in order to demonstrate that Proclus had achieved complete perfection and hence complete happiness. While Marinus' understanding of the virtues is informed by Plotinus' treatise – he intersperses quotations from Plotinus' treatise on the

1 Cf. Cary 2000, 20–28 for the relation between Aristotle's conception of God as an Intellect and Plotinian introspection.

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virtues throughout his biography –, we will find that the treatise also contains some implicit criticism of the rather intellectual, unworldly ideal of Plotinus. By way of conclusion, I shall argue that Marinus' account of perfection actually makes better philosophical sense than that of Plotinus, since Marinus, unlike Plotinus, is able to offer an explanation of why the perfect sage will care for his fellow human beings.

1 Plotinus: Perfection as Introspection

In the first section of this essay, I will first briefly recall a well-known fact about Plotinian psychology, i.e., his theory of the undescended soul. This theory informs the Plotinian conception of perfection as introspection. I will then illustrate this process of introspection by means of a short discussion of *Enneads* V.1 [10]. We will next find that this process as outlined in *Enneads* V.1 [10] informs Plotinus' treatise on the virtues (*Enneads* I.2 [19]). Finally, we will examine how this notion of perfection as a process of introspection shapes Porphyry' representation of Plotinus as the perfect sage in his *Life of Plotinus*.

1.1 *Psychological Background*

Plotinus has become known as the founding father of Neoplatonism. The term Neoplatonism is a modern invention. Yet, while Plotinus himself claims to be nothing but a mere exegete of Plato, and hence a Platonist, later Neoplatonists acknowledge that his interpretation of Plato inaugurated a new era in the Platonic tradition. Plotinus' major invention consists in his claim that the ultimate cause of all things should not be identified with the divine Intellect, as previous Platonists tended to do, but with an entity that transcends this Intellect. He refers to this supreme deity as the One. Thus, Plotinus distinguishes between three fundamental layers of reality, the so-called hypostases: (1) the One, (2) Intellect, and (3) Soul.

The individual human soul, while not identical with Soul as a universal principle, is closely connected to it. It has become an individual soul because it has chosen to identify itself not with the universal principle of Soul, but with a reflection of itself in the realm of matter, i.e., with its body. For Plotinus, perfection and deification start when the individual soul becomes aware that it does not belong to the body. This realization inaugurates a spiritual journey during which the soul turns away from the body and gradually ascends, first to the level of universal Soul, next to the divine Intellect, and finally to the ultimate principle of all things, the One. Since the One as the ultimate cause is also the ultimate end of all things, the One is also the ultimate Good.

For Plotinus, this process of reversion of the soul upon its causes takes the form of introspection: he believes that we can find God within our own soul. The reason for Plotinus' optimism stems from a peculiar psychological theory of his that the human soul originates from the divine Intellect and never entirely leaves that Intellect.[2] The best part of us, i.e., of our soul, is forever anchored in Intellect. In a famous passage, Plotinus describes the discovery of the divine Intellect within ourselves as a waking up to oneself:

> T.1 Often, after waking up to myself from the body, that is, externalizing myself in relation to all other things, while entering into myself, I behold a beauty of wondrous quality, and believe then that I am most to be identified with my better part, that I enjoy the best quality of life, and have become united with the divine and situated within it, actualizing myself at that level, and situating myself above all else in the intelligible world.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* IV.8 [6] 1, 1–7; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

The first thing to note is that Plotinus describes this waking up to himself as a form of introspection ("entering into myself"/ἐμαυτοῦ δὲ εἴσω) by moving away from the body and external things. The result of this process is that he has "become united with the divine" (τῷ θείῳ εἰς ταὐτὸν γεγενημένος), i.e., the divine Intellect. Plotinus claims he "often" (πολλάκις) experienced unification with Intellect, as one would expect given that Intellect is forever present to us.

Once the identification with the divine Intellect has been achieved, the philosopher is in a position to revert back upon the One. Our sources suggest that this unification with the One was much harder to achieve than that with Intellect and hence to have occurred far less often. According to Plotinus' pupil and biographer, Plotinus managed to do so four times in the years that Porphyry was with him. Porphyry adds that he himself, at the time of writing, had experienced such a union once:

> T.2 So it is that this divine 'daemon' of a man ascended in his thought to the first, transcendent God many times, travelling the roads described by Plato in the *Symposium*; and to him appeared that God who has neither shape nor form, who has his seat above Intellect and every intelligible thing. (I, Porphyry, now 67 years old, once drew near this God and was unified with him.) Anyway, 'the goal appeared near' Plotinus: his aim or

2 Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.8 [6] 8, 1–11.

> goal was to be unified and to be present to the God that is set over all things. This goal, an indescribable state of perfection, he achieved some four times while I was with him.
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> PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus* § 23, 7–17; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

Interestingly, Porphyry here claims that Plotinus made this ascent towards God "in his thought" (ταῖς ἐννοίαις). This is in keeping with the Plotinian idea of perfection as contemplative introspection, but stands in marked contrast to the Iamblichean idea of perfection through theurgical ritual. What, then, does Plotinian introspection look like?

1.2 *Introspection as the Way to God* (Enneads *V.1* [*10*])

In *Enneads* V.1 [10], *On the Three Primary Hypostases*, Plotinus provides a vivid picture of the process of introspection that makes us ascend from one hypostasis to the next.[3] The treatise starts with the question how it came about that the souls forgot about "the God who is their father", i.e., Intellect. Plotinus puts this down to the self-motion of the individual soul. Soul, by definition, is a self-mover. It may use this potential for self-movement either for better or worse. In the case of the descended soul, it, regrettably, chose to run away from Intellect, towards the material realm. It next fell in love with the body and forgot its true spiritual nature. The first step towards perfection hence consists in distancing itself from the body. Plotinus starts by exposing the passive nature of bodies. Bodies are by nature lifeless, since they are unable to move themselves. They only come to life and start to move because of the presence of soul, which, since it is a self-mover, is also the principle of life:

> T.3 So, let every soul *first* (my italics, RMvdB) consider that soul itself made all living beings by breathing life into them, those that are nourished by the earth and the sea, those in the air, and the divine stars in heaven.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* V.1 [10] 2, 1–4; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

"Soul itself" in this context refers to the World Soul. Plotinus' point is not that each individual soul is the World Soul, but rather that every soul, because it is

3 As Hadot 1986, 234–236 rightly observes, Plotinus presents us in fact with two routes towards the divine. The first route, as, e.g., described in *Enneads* VI.1 (10) starts from a meditation of the splendor of the visible world, only to discover the superiority of soul in comparison to the body. The second route goes straight to the inner experience. Both routes, however, converge into introspection.

akin to the World Soul, shares in the vivifying force that allows the immaterial World Soul to animate the material cosmos:

> T.4 Our soul is of the same kind, and when you examine it without the accretions, taking it in its 'purified condition', you will find that it has the identical value that soul was found to have, more valuable than everything that is corporeal.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* V.1 [10] 2, 44–47; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

Once we have come to identify ourselves not with our animated body but with our soul perceived in separation from the body that it animates, we are ready to take the next step and move from the hypostasis of Soul to that of Intellect:

> T.5 Since the soul is indeed such an honourable and divine thing, you should by now already be confident in your pursuit of a God like this, and with this explanation in mind, ascend to him. You will certainly not have to cast far, 'nor are the intermediary steps many'. So, understand soul's higher 'neighbouring region', which is more divine than the divine soul, after which and from which the soul comes. For even though soul is the kind of thing shown by the argument, it is an image of Intellect.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* V.1 [10] 3, 1–7; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

The important point to note here is that soul, even though divine, is a mere image of the divine Intellect (εἰκών τίς ἐστι νοῦ). However, since soul is forever connected to Intellect, one could think of Intellect as God being permanently present to us.

'We', now that we have found Intellect within ourselves, seek to unite ourselves with it:

> T.6 The God, then, who is above Soul is multiple, and it is possible for Soul to exist within this, connected to it, so long as it does not want to be 'separated' from it. When it, then, approaches Intellect and in a way becomes one with it, it seeks to know who it is that produced it.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* V.1 [10] 5, 1–4; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

Intellect is characterized by a double activity. On the one hand, divine Intellect thinks in its own particular intuitive manner. That is to say whereas soul thinks all things discursively, Intellect thinks the objects of its thought, i.e., the Forms, all at the same time. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X.7), had defined happiness as the goal of human life and identified it with the perfect activity

of thought. Picking up on this idea, Plotinus now ascribes perfect happiness to the divine Intellect, precisely because of its intellectual activity. 'We', once we have identified ourselves with Intellect, will hence share both in its perfect intellectual activity and happiness.

The second activity of Intellect consists in its reversion back upon the first principle, the hypostasis of the One. Since the ascending philosopher has united himself with Intellect, he also imitates this reversion and strives towards unification with the One. In *Enneads* V.1 [10], Plotinus compares this to a visit to a temple. When one approaches, one first sees the statues of the divinity. For Plotinus, these statues represent the Forms as contemplated by Intellect. Next, however, one enters the temple, where one finds in the inner sanctuary the God, i.e., the One, himself (*Enneads* V.1 [10] 6):

> T.7 Let us speak of this matter, then, in the following manner, calling to God himself, not with spoken words, but by stretching our arms in prayer to him in our soul, in this way being able to pray alone to him who is alone. So, since God is by himself, as if inside a temple, remaining tranquil while transcending everything, the contemplator should contemplate the statues which are in a way fixed outside the temple already – or rather the first statue displayed, revealed to sight in the following manner.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* V.1 [10] 6, 8–15; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

Whereas Plotinus describes both the activities of the soul that looks upwards to Intellect and that of Intellect which contemplates the Forms in terms of 'seeing' things, the soul that enters into its inner sanctuary, will not see the One as some sort of external object, but somehow merge with it:

> T.8 The intimate contact within is not with a statue or an image, but with the One itself. The statue and the image are actually secondary visions, whereas the One itself is indeed not a vision, but another manner of seeing. It is self-transcendence, simplification, and surrender, an urging towards touch, a resting, concentration on alignment, if one is to have a vision of what is in the sanctum. If indeed someone looks in a different way, then nothing is present to him.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* VI.9 [9] 11, 20–26; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

For Plotinus, this union with the One is only possible because it, as well as Intellect, is already present within in us, as he claims in no uncertain terms in *Enneads* V.1 [10]:

> T.9 And just as in nature these aforementioned three (viz. the three hypostases, RMvdB) are found, so it is necessary to believe as well that these are in us. I do not mean that they are among sensibles – for these three are separate from sensibles – but that they are in things that are outside the sensible order, using the term 'outside' in the same manner in which it is used to refer to those things that are outside the whole of heaven. In saying that they belong to a human being, I mean exactly what Plato means by 'the inner human being'.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* V.1. [10] 10, 5–10; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

"In us", Plotinus goes on to explain, does not mean that the three hypostases are within our bodies, but within our spiritual "inner human being", a term which he borrows from Plato (*Republic* 589a7-b1). The divine presences within us imply that for Plotinus the border between us and the divine is not a hard one and can at times be crossed. Thus, in the end, Plotinus sets his sight at something more ambitious than becoming like God. He aims at actually becoming God, if only for a limited span of time. It is only after death has finally separated us from the body, that the philosopher may hope to be truly divine. Porphyry, in order to prove that his master Plotinus had in fact proceeded to a divine existence after death, quotes oracle verses in which Apollo testifies that Plotinus, "formerly a man" was now in divine company.[4]

1.3 *Plotinus and the Platonic Ethics of Divinization* (Enneads *I.2* [*19*])

The Plotinian ideal of becoming God, rather than becoming like God prompts the question of how he interprets Plato's injunction "to become like God" and what place it holds with the process of Plotinian introspection and deification. For this, we have to turn to Plotinus' treatise *On the Virtues*, which takes the form of a long meditation on the Platonic slogan "become like God". As we shall find, Plotinus holds that to become like God is a necessary preparation for actually becoming God. The fact that Plotinus takes this Platonic phrase as a starting point for a treatise on the virtues need not surprise us, since for Plato the process of becoming like God is a process of moral perfection. As Plato has Socrates explain in *Theaetetus* 176b, "a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pious, with wisdom." The treatise raises the question what particular God Plato is talking about and how the cultivation of the virtues

4 Cf. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* § 22, 23–30.

may make us like this God.[5] As one might expect in the light of the previous paragraph, Plotinus identifies this God with Intellect. This, in turn, shapes his discussion of the virtues. Whereas it has often been said that Plotinus' treatise *On the Virtues* provides the starting point for the so-called Neoplatonic scale of virtues that we will encounter in the second part of this essay, this should not obscure the fact that there is something very particular about Plotinus' discussion of the virtues, a particularity which is the result of Plotinus' rather unorthodox psychology of the undescended soul.[6]

On the Virtues takes the form of a dialectical exchange. Plotinus starts from certain questions that the Platonic phrase may evoke ('Which God does Plato mean?'; 'How do the virtues help us to become like that God?'), next suggests answers, which he then subsequently scrutinizes in a sort of inner Platonic dialogue. The upshot of this dialectical procedure is that Plotinus may end up with a modified version of the original answer or even reject it altogether.[7] This means that we should be cautious not to mistake a conditional answer that Plotinus provides for an expression of his definite position on the subject-matter. An illustration in point of such a conditional answer is Plotinus' first attempt to answer the question which God Plato's Socrates is referring to. Could this perhaps be the cosmic soul, which rules the cosmos with its amazing wisdom?[8] This suggestion is in line with the Stoic notion that God is the intelligent ruling principle of the universe and had been championed by various middle-Platonists.[9] This God thus acts as the ruler of the world and ensures that it is a cosmos, i.e., an ordered and harmonious whole. In a similar manner, human rulers should try to bring order to their societies and individual human souls to rule over and bring order to their desires and appetites. Plotinus, picking up a term that Plato uses in a somewhat different sense, refers to the virtues that characterize the World Soul as πολιτικαί, i.e. 'polit-

5 As O'Meara 2019, 59 observes, the title *On the Virtues*, given to the treatise by Porphyry, does not quite cover the content, since it is not a general treatise about the virtues, yet deals with the very specific question how to assimilate to the divine by means of the virtues: "Un titre plus adéquat serait donc: 'Comment s'assimiler au dieu par les vertues'".

6 On the reception of *Enneads* I.2 [19] and the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, see, e.g., O'Meara 2019, 19–24 for a brief overview and Saffrey-Segonds 2001, LXIX-XCVIII for a much more elaborate one. Chiaradonna 2021 rightly insists on the peculiarity of Plotinus' discussion of the virtues vis-à-vis the later tradition.

7 O'Meara 2019, 59–72 brings out well the dialectical structure of the treatise.

8 Plotinus, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 1, 6–8.

9 Cf., e.g., Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* §28.3, discussed by Paolo Torri in his contribution to this volume.

ical' or 'civic'.[10] While Plotinus admits that these political virtues may make us God-like up to a point, he is quick to dispel the suggestion that Plato has this cosmic ruler and these political or civic virtues in mind.[11] The World Soul, being the perfect Soul that it is, aspires towards the intelligible world.[12] It is there that we should look for God. Our attempts to become like that God thus also require the cultivation of a different, higher type of virtues. Plotinus refers to these higher virtues as 'purifications', since these set us free from the baneful influences of the body.[13] He writes:

> T.10 In what sense, then, should we say that virtues are purifications, and, once we are purified, in what sense are we assimilated to the highest degree?
>
> In fact, since the soul is evil when it is enmeshed in the body, and has come to experience the same things as it, and has come to believe the same things, it would be good, that is, it would have virtue if it were not to believe these things, but were to act alone – which is what thinking and being wise is – and not feel the same things as the body – which is what self-control is – and not fear being separated from the body – which is what it is to be courageous – and if reason or intellect were to lead it, with the appetites not opposing it – which is what justice would be. Indeed, as for such a disposition of the soul, one in which one thinks and is unaffected in this way, if someone were to say that it is a kind of assimilation to God, he would not be mistaken. For the divine is pure and this is its sort of activity, so that someone who imitates it has wisdom.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 3, 10–22; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

What we have here, then, is a human soul which has turned itself away from the material world and its embodied existence. It practices introspection by focusing on the Intellect that it finds within itself.

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10 Plotinus derives the adjective πολιτικαί from Plato, *Republic* 430c3, cf. Saffrey-Segonds 2001, LXXII n. 2.

11 Plotinus, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 1, 22–26: "But if it is according to other virtues, is the assimilation not according to the civic virtues at all? In fact, it would be irrational to maintain that we are not in any way assimilated according to these – legend at least has it that those who practised these are divine, too, and should be said somehow or other to be assimilated according to them – but that the actual assimilation is according to the greater virtues." (tr. Gerson et al. 2017).

12 Plotinus, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 1, 13–15.

13 Plotinus derives the idea of virtues as purifications from Plato, *Phaedo* 69b6-c3.

Plotinus next suggests that this conversion of the soul upon Intellect as it is present within us constitutes yet another degree of virtue. Plotinus does not give this degree of virtue a specific name, but in the later Neoplatonic tradition it is known as contemplative virtue. He writes:

> T.11 In fact, after the purification it has already turned around. Is this, then, its virtue?
>
> In fact, its virtue is what comes to it from turning around. What, then, is this? A seeing and an impression of that which has been seen embedded in it and now active – like seeing in relation to the object seen.
>
> Did it, therefore, neither have them nor recollect them?
>
> In fact, it had things that were not active, but dispersed and unilluminated. If they are to be illuminated and it is to know them as being present, it must impel itself towards that which does the illuminating. And it did not have the things themselves, but impressions. It must, then, harmonize the impressions with the true Beings of which they are impressions. And perhaps it is in this sense that this nature 'has' them, because the Intellect is not alien to it, especially not when it looks towards the Intellect. If this were not so, the Intellect would be alien even when it is present.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 4, 17–27; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

From this passage it appears that the conversion of the soul towards Intellect consists in an actualization of its passive knowledge of the Forms. This actualization is the Plotinian version of Plato's anamnesis-theory. In Plato's version seeing material examples of, e.g., beautiful things may make us recall the Form of Beauty. Plotinus gives his own twist to it. Our soul contains 'imprints' of the Forms. These imprints are only activated once they are illuminated by Intellect, which contains the actual Forms.[14] This illumination is brought about by the soul that turns itself towards Intellect. Among these Forms are also the Forms of the Virtues.

Plotinus refers to these latter Forms as the paradigms of the virtues, which, for this reason, will be known in the later Neoplatonic tradition as paradigmatic virtues. Plotinus, however, insists that the paradigms are not themselves virtues. The reason for this is that Plotinus, following Aristotle, defines virtue as a disposition (διάθεσις) of the soul. Therefore, virtues in the proper sense of the word cannot be found on the level of Intellect:

14 On the Plotinian interpretation of Platonic anamnesis as an activation of our dormant knowledge of the Forms, cf. O'Meara 2019, 95–97.

T.12 And in the intelligible world, there is no virtue; virtue is in the soul.

What, then, is in the intelligible world? Its own activity, that is, what it really is. But in the sensible world, when what comes from the intelligible world is found in another, that is virtue. For neither Justice itself, nor any of the others, is a virtue, but rather a paradigm. That which comes from it in the soul is a virtue. For virtue is someone's virtue. But that which is in itself belongs to itself, and not to something else.

PLOTINUS, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 6, 14–19; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

In the treatises on the virtues, Plotinus stresses that although the soul may be engaged in a sort of intellectual activity when it actualizes its knowledge of the Forms through the illumination of its imprints, this intellectual activity of the soul is not identical to the intellectual activity of Intellect itself, for "soul intelligizes in a different way from Intellect' (*Enneads* I.2 [19] 3, 24: νοεῖ τε ἡ ψυχὴ ἄλλως). One may wonder why Plotinus does not here refer his reader to the possibility of actually transcending the intellectual activity and to become one with that Intellect (cf. T.1 above). I assume that this is because Plotinus in this treatise focusses especially on the topic of the virtues, which are, as we have seen, typical of soul, not of intellect.

Plotinus' quasi-dialogue *On the Virtues* about the correct understanding of the famous line from the *Theaetetus* recalls *Enneads* V.1 [10], *On the Three Primary Hypostases*. In both treatises the reader is led on an inward journey.[15] In both cases Plotinus makes us first look at and marvel about the World Soul, as being somehow a superior version of the individual soul. Closer examination of Soul, however, reveals that Soul, for all its beauty and virtue, actually depends on and desires something even more beautiful and perfect. Further investigation reveals that this object of desire is the Intellect that we can find within ourselves. In the course of this process of introspection, the soul increasingly distances ("purifies") itself from the body, until it is entirely focused on the contemplation of the Intellect and the Forms that it contains. By doing so, we will become truly happy and immune to the evils that are part and parcel of the embodied existence. The purificatory virtues thus produce freedom from bodily affections (ἀπάθεια). In this respect too, they are superior to the political virtues, which, since they are concerned with the relation of the soul to the body and to the material world, do not set us completely free from the affections, but only result in the moderation of these (μετριοπάθεια). As Plotinus puts it in the final lines of the treatise *On the Virtues*:

15 Cf. Chiaradonna 2021, 37 for the similarity between *Enneads* I.2 [19] and V.1 [10] in this respect.

> T.13 Should we state, at least, that the virtuous person will know them and how much he will have of them? Perhaps he will act according to some of them if circumstances demand. But advancing on to the greater principles, and the other measures, he will act according to those. For example, he will not locate the act of self-control in imposing a measure, but in separating himself entirely as far as possible, absolutely not living the life of the good human being, which civic virtue values, but leaving this, and opting for another, the life of the Gods. For assimilation is to the Gods, not to good human beings. Assimilation to good human beings is making an image of an image, one from another. But the other assimilation is like making an image according to a paradigm.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 7, 19–30; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

1.4 *Plotinus as an Embodied Intellect*

What does it mean to leave the political virtues and the life of good human beings behind and opt for the life of the Gods instead? In recent scholarly literature, there has been much debate about this issue: should we assume that Plotinus, regardless of his ideal of the contemplative life, also feels an obligation towards his fellow human beings, or is he so lost in contemplation that he simply fails to register what is going on in the world around him? If the latter, this raises the question whether Plotinus has an ethics at all. In a recent publication, Suzanne Stern-Gillet (2014) provides an illuminating analysis of this debate. She rightly insists that Plotinian ethics should be understood within the larger frame-work of Plotinus' metaphysics and psychology as we have discussed it above: "Plotinus' description of the emanation and return of the Soul is the anchor point of his ethics".[16] On this line of reasoning, Plotinus appears to think of the political virtues, which are about moderation of the emotions and desires typically of the embodied life, as a preparation for the purifying virtues, which are about a complete purification of these. The upshot of this is that, in a way, the philosopher will transcend both the political virtues and societal concerns:

> T.14 Whoever has the greater ones will have the lesser in potency, too, necessarily, though one who has the lesser will not necessarily have the greater. This is actually in a nutshell the life of the virtuous person. Whether he who has the greater has the lesser in actuality, too, or has them in another manner, should be investigated in each case.
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> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 7, 10–15; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

16 Stern-Gillet 2014, quote on p. 401; cf. Chiaradonna 2021 for a similar approach.

This is, in the words of Riccardo Chiaradonna, "a problematic passage: possibly Plotinus is suggesting that those who have the greater virtues act like those who have the lesser ones, but they do so on different grounds, as a sort of by-product of their theoretical contemplation".[17] Such an interpretation, according to which the philosopher may practice the political virtues as some sort of activity that is secondary to the primary activity of contemplation, is in line with the portrait that Porphyry paints of his master in his biography. Porphyry presents Plotinus as someone who would, almost casually, perform acts of political virtue, while at the same time staying focused on his contemplative activities. Having mentioned the fact that Plotinus acted as a guardian of orphaned children, Porphyry remarks:

> T.15 Plotinus, then, although he never relaxed his mental concentration so long as he was awake, undertook his share of responsibility for the lives and concerns of other people – many of them.
>
> PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus* § 9, 16–18; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

This passage about Plotinus' care for orphans is often quoted as proof that Plotinus was not an otherworldly sage.[18] Yet, this is the only passage from which we get a glimpse of Plotinus' societal concerns. What is more, Porphyry stresses that while caring for others, Plotinus "never relaxed his mental concentration", or, more literally, "his fixation on intellect" (τὴν πρὸς τὸν νοῦν τάσιν). In fact, throughout the biography, Porphyry is especially interested in Plotinus' intellectual excellence. See, for example the following passage:

> T.16 When he spoke, his intellect was manifest even in the way it lit up his face. He was handsome to look at, but even more beautiful in those moments. He perspired a bit; he exuded kindliness; his face looked gentle but also intellectually rigorous when he was questioned.
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> PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus* § 13, 5–10; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

17 Chiaradonna 2021, 43.

18 See, e.g., O'Meara 2003, 15, who infers from this passage that Porphyry recommends Plotinus to our attention as "a model of practical virtue, benevolent and selfless stewardship, and fair arbitration, exercised in conjunction with contemplation of transcendent principles". Against O'Meara's influential interpretation of Plotinus as a model of practical virtue, see Stern-Gillet 2014, 412–415, who concludes that Plotinus, under normal circumstances will "not be content to devote their time and energy to improving conditions in the darkness below" (p. 415).

Most translators assume that it is Plotinus' own personal intellect which lit up his face. Yet, we may also translate it as to refer to the divine Intellect: "[w]hen he spoke, Intellect was manifest even in the way it lit up his face".[19] For Plotinus, there would of course be no clear distinction between the intellect of the sage and the divine Intellect. Porphyry's description thus suggests that Plotinus had himself become an epiphany of divine Intellect.

1.5 *The Four Plotinian Stages of Perfection*

In conclusion of this section, we may thus distinguish the following stages in the Plotinian path to perfection through introspection:

Stage 1: Becoming like God by cultivating the political virtues.

Stage 2: Becoming like God by cultivating the purificatory virtues. As a result of this purification, the soul withdraws from the sensible world and the body ('purification') towards God (= divine Intellect) who is present within us. Becoming like God in this context means that the soul imitates the contemplative activity of the divine Intellect in its own soul-like fashion. Plotinus understands this imitation in terms of Platonic anamnesis: divine Intellect illuminates the copies of the Forms as they are present in the intellect of the human soul, thus activating our knowledge of the Forms. The soul that has become like God may still exercise the political virtues, yet these are no more than some sort of by-product to his contemplation.

Stage 3: Once the philosopher has prepared himself in this way, he may actually unite with the divine Intellect and engage in the contemplative activity of the divine Intellect in the manner of the divine Intellect. Since Intellect is forever present to us, the philosopher who has become God-like by cultivating the purifying virtues may do so on a regular basis.

Stage 4: The philosopher who has united himself with the divine Intellect may now also join the divine Intellect in its contemplation of the One and thus unite himself to the One. Even the practised philosopher will only rarely achieve this special state.

Below (Table 3.1), I will juxtapose this Plotinian path to perfection to that of Proclus.

1.6 *Intermezzo: Plotinian & Augustinian Introspection*

While, as we will find below, Plotinian introspection as a pathway to God did not have much traction among the later Neoplatonists, it was met with

19 Ἦν δ' ἐν τῷ λέγειν ἡ ἔνδειξις τοῦ νοῦ ἄχρι τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ τὸ φῶς ἐπιλάμποντος.

approval by the Christian Augustine. This need not surprise us. Jews and Christians were, their monotheism notwithstanding, part of the intellectual and spiritual culture of their day. As already A.-J. Festugière has demonstrated, the idea that the human soul is a temple of God can be traced back to Plato *Timaeus* 90c. This evocative image was adopted not just by pagan Neoplatonists such as Plotinus (cf. T.7 and T.8 above) and Porphyry, but also by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria and even Paul (1 Cor 3:16: "Don't you see that you are a temple of God and that the spirit (*pneuma*) of God dwells within you").[20] Thus, the idea that God can be found within us, may not have struck Augustine as typically pagan, even though in *Confessiones* VII he ascribed the method of introspection to the pagan philosopher Plotinus. Having wrestled with the problem of evil for a long time, Augustine describes how he came to realize that the solution lay in a different conceptualisation of God. Up till that moment, he had entertained a rather physical concept of God, but by now he had come to think of God in more spiritual terms. This new conception, he tells the reader, was informed by his study of Platonic philosophy. He continues as follows:

> T.17 By the Platonic books, I was admonished to return into myself. With you as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given the power to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind – not the light of every day, obvious to anyone, nor larger version of that same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude. It was not that light, but a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light. It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above earth. It was superior because I was made by it. … When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make see that what I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being. And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe. And I found myself far from you 'in the region of dissimilarity', and heard as it were your voice from on high: 'I am the food of the fully grown: grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me'.
>
> AUGUSTINE, *Confessiones* VII (x) 16; tr. Chadwick 1991

20 Festugière 1954, 212–215.

Scholars agree that the 'Platonic books' refer to a Latin translation of some of Plotinus' treatises, including *Enneads* V.1 [10].[21] This is, obviously, not to say that St. Augustine was a Neoplatonist. In fact, towards the end of *Confessiones* VII (XXI) 27, he condemns "the books of the Platonists" precisely for not being Christian. Nor is it to say that Augustine simply takes over the practice of Plotinian introspection. As Philip Cary (2000) has shown in great detail, Augustine, on the back of the Plotinian theory of introspection, develops the influential notion of the inner self as some sort of private space.

Cary argues that, when it comes to introspection, Augustin, unlike Plotinus, distinguishes between two movements. Plotinus, thus Cary, holds that human nature is essentially divine. For Plotinus, introspection thus suffices to find God. Augustine, by contrast, denies the divine nature of the soul. The soul thus first has to look into itself and next look upwards, towards God.[22]

In a response to Cary's book, Pauliina Remes (2008) has argued, rightly to my mind, that when it comes to this double movement, Augustine follows much closer in the footsteps of Plotinus than Cary allows for. As we have already seen above, for example, Plotinus describes Intellect as "soul's higher 'neighbouring region', which is more divine than the divine soul, after which and from which the soul comes" (T.5). Just as Augustine says that he "heard as it were your voice from on high", Plotinus ends *Enneads* V.1 [10] with an appeal to his readers to block out the noises from the physical word and direct their attention to Intellect:

> T.18 Just as if someone were waiting to hear a voice that he wanted to hear, and, distancing himself from other voices, were to prick up his ears to hear the best of sounds, waiting for the time when it will come – so, too, in this case one must let go of sensible sounds, except insofar as they are necessary, and guard the soul's pure power of apprehension and be ready to listen to the sounds from above.
>
> PLOTINUS, *Enneads* V.1 [10] 12, 15–21; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017

All of this is not to say that Cary is wrong in claiming that for Plotinus the human soul is in a way divine and that Augustinian inner contemplation is not identical with its Plotinian counterpart. Yet, as Pauliina Remes rightly observes:

21 See, e.g., Cary 2000, 35–38; Chadwick 1991, 123 n. 18.

22 Cf. Cary 2000, 38–40.

> [For Plotinus] the inward turn is not enough: reaching truth and the divine requires a lengthy process in which one's gaze is further directed towards the highest part of human nature. This is nicely visible in Plotinus' famous sculpting metaphor of looking within. What we immediately see inside our soul may not be beautiful, but it is our task to act as sculptors of our selves: to cut away all that is excessive, to straighten what is crooked and to illuminate what is overcast (I.6 [1] 9). *Nous* may be part of our nature, but it is largely unknown to and hidden from our everyday consciousness and thought.[23]

2 Deification through Theurgy: Proclus & Marinus

As with Plotinus, I shall start my discussion of Proclus' view on perfection by briefly recalling the well-known fact that later Neoplatonists, from Iamblichus onwards, reject the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul and that, for this reason, they are attracted to theurgy. After a brief discussion of Neoplatonic theurgy, I will then move on to discuss the relation between theurgy and perfection as it transpires from Marinus' *Life of Proclus*. Finally, we will compare the Plotinian road to perfection to that of Proclus.

2.1 *Psychology and Theurgy*

The Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul proved itself to be, as Plotinus had already feared, controversial among later Neoplatonists. Iamblichus famously rejected this doctrine, since it blurs the distinction between the hypostases of Soul and Intellect. This has far-reaching consequences for the philosopher who wishes to unite himself to the divine Intellect and practice divine contemplation. Plotinus had suggested that imitating divine, intellective, contemplation at the level of soul is sufficient preparation for the unification with Intellect. Iamblichus denies this. Whereas the cultivation of one's intellectual powers does matter, the philosopher has to appeal to divine assistance in order to be lifted up from his human condition. This divine assistance can be called forth by means of so-called theurgic rituals. As Iamblichus says in a critical exchange with Porphyry about the merits of theurgy:[24]

23 Remes 2008, 161.

24 The work, properly entitled *Reply to Porphyry*, is also known as *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*, a title attributed to it by its first editor, Ficino. On this issue, see Saffrey & Segonds 2018, IX–XXI.

> T.19 [It] is not thought that joins theurgists to the Gods. Indeed what would hinder those who are contemplative philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the Gods. But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of rituals (*erga*) not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the Gods which establish theurgic union.
>
> IAMBLICHUS, *Reply to Porphyry* (= *On the Mysteries*), p. 73, 1–8 ed. Saffrey-Segonds 2018; trans. Clarke, Dillon & Hershbell 2004

Neoplatonic theurgy combined philosophical ideas about metaphysical causation with existing religious practices. This may most easily be demonstrated by means of theurgic rituals that aim at the animation of statues. There is not necessarily much that is Neoplatonic about the animation of statues: rituals to summon up the divine presence had been practised long before the Neoplatonists got interested in it. Yet, when Proclus discusses the animation of statues in his little treatise *On the Hieratic Art*, he accounts for it in terms of metaphysical causation.[25] The animation of statues consists, among other things, in constructing a statue out of materials that were likely to attract the divinity that was invoked. Proclus refers to these materials as *symbola*. He assumes that they owe their attraction to the fact that these derive their existence from the divinity that is invoked, albeit indirectly. Thus, to take an example from *On the Hieratic Art*, there exists the God Helios. This God should be situated at the level of the so-called Henads. These Henads, which for Proclus represent the Gods properly speaking, are manifestations of the One or the Good. They are the One in so far as other things can participate in it, and thus stand at the apex of Neoplatonic metaphysics. These Gods are causative principles, which cause other divine entities to exist, which, in their turn, are productive of still lower entities, and so forth until we reach the material realm. The Neoplatonists refer to such a chain of downward causation as a series (*seira*). To the series of Helios, for example, belong not just the sun as a heavenly body, but also mundane animals such as roosters. This, thus Proclus, is evident from the fact that roosters greet the rising sun. In a similar way, the heliotrope belongs to the same series as is evident from the fact that this flower follows the movements of the sun. Roosters and heliotropes do this because they are linked to the causative principles higher up in the series through a bound of sympathy (*sympatheia*). A theurgist who wishes to call forth a sunlike deity, i.e. a lower

25 Edited by Bidez 1928, 148–154; an English translation can be found in Copenhaver 2016, 207–210; a new edition with English translation is being prepared by Eleni Pachoumi.

manifestation of Helios, prepares a statue for the reception of that divinity by stuffing it with such *symbola*, thus making it sympathetic to sunlike divine powers.

Just as roosters and heliotropes belong to the series of the god Helios, in the same way individual human souls belong to the series of a specific god. Thus, some souls belong, say, to the series of Athena, whereas others belong to the series of Hephaestus. We are marked out as belonging to our specific series by means of certain tokens in our soul, once again referred to as *symbola* or *synthêmata*. We make our ascent through the particular series to which we belong. The philosopher prepares his soul, as if he were some sort of theurgic statue, by activating these internal *symbola*. In this way, he establishes a connection with the divine, which is often presented as a channel or ray of intelligible light. In this way, he is illuminated and may even ascend to the divine through such a channel of light. This type of theurgy, which is about the elevation of the human soul and depends for its efficacy on soul-symbols is often referred to as 'higher theurgy' in order to distinguish it from the sort of theurgy that involves among other things the animation of statues. Whereas the former depends on material *symbola* and physical ritual, the latter depends on spiritual *symbola* and spiritual rituals.

Theurgic rituals play a role in different stages of the philosopher's ascent. Neoplatonists of the theurgic school assume, for example, that purification is not only a matter of turning one's attention away from the physical world, as Plotinus has (cf. § 1.5, stage 2 above), but also of physical purificatory rituals, about which more below. In a similar way, Iamblichus holds that Plotinian anamnesis, i.e., the illumination of the copies of the Forms that lie dormant in the intellectual part of the human, is brought about by theurgic techniques, presumably of a sort that combines forms of physical and spiritual ritual.[26] As for the Plotinian stages 3 and 4 of ascent, the actual unification with Intellect and the One, these are especially associated with forms of higher theurgy. We should be careful not to oversystematize Neoplatonic theurgic practices. For a nuanced view of Neoplatonic theurgy, one would best evaluate one by one the views and practices of the various Neoplatonists, as has been done by Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013). In this essay, I will focus on theurgy as practiced in Proclus' school on the basis of the reports by Marinus in his biography of his master.

26 Finamore 2021, 73–75.

2.2 *Marinus' Proclus or on Happiness: Virtues and Theurgy*

Just as Porphyry had produced a biography of his revered teacher Plotinus, in a similar manner Marinus wrote one of his master Proclus. Marinus' intention is to show that Proclus had achieved ultimate perfection by climbing the ladder of virtues during his lifetime. Thus, Marinus' biography doubles as a treatise on the virtues. The very notion that there exists such a thing as a hierarchy of virtues, i.e., a scheme of successive stages of virtues, points to a development within Neoplatonic philosophy regarding the theory of virtues. Above, we found that Plotinus had originally distinguished between political virtues and purifying virtues, the former being a preparation for the latter. While Plotinus had left it at these two types of virtue, already Porphyry distinguished between four successive stages of virtues, whereas Iamblichus appears to have taken things even further by postulating that there are no less than seven stages of virtues. Moreover, since Iamblichus was convinced that perfection requires theurgy, the different degrees of virtue also include different sorts of theurgic activity. While Iamblichus' own treatise on the virtues is lost to us, Marinus' biography gives us a good impression of the relation between degrees of virtue and theurgy.[27]

Starting with the (1.) natural virtues, which include such things as a healthy constitution, and (2.) moral virtues, which are the product of habituation (i.e. the ones discussed at length in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*), Marinus next moves to Proclus' (3.) political virtues. These show us Proclus as a courageous and committed member of his society, who cared as good as he possibly could for the city of Athens and for those near and dear to him. Theurgy does not play any prominent role at this stage. This changes when Proclus advances to (4.) the purificatory virtues. Marinus has the following to say about this stage:

> T.20 [...] let us now pass on to the purificatory virtues, which are a different class beyond the political ones. For if the principle task assigned to the latter is to purify the soul in some way, and to enable it to consider human affairs without prejudice, so that it has a likeness to God, which is its highest end, nevertheless not all virtues bring about separation in the same way, but some more and some less. ... And it was these (i.e. the purificatory virtues, RMvdB) that the philosopher pursued throughout the whole of his life, not just by eloquently teaching in words what they

27 For an overview of the development of the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, see Saffrey-Segonds 2001, LXIX–XCVIII; for the relation between the Neoplatonic scale of virtues and theurgy in Iamblichus, see Finamore 2021.

> are and how one comes to possess these also, but especially by living in accordance with them, doing on all occasions the things that produce separation for the soul. Day and night he made use of apotropaic lustratory and other purifications, sometimes the Orphic, sometimes the Chaldaean, going down to the sea without fear at the beginning of every month, and sometimes indeed twice or thrice in the same one; and this he did not only in the prime of his life, but even as he was approaching the evening of his life he observed these customs unceasingly, as though they were mandatory.
>
> MARINUS, *Proclus* § 18, 4–11; 21–34; tr. Edwards 2000 adapted

Like Plotinus before him (stages 1 and 2), Marinus associated both the political and purificatory virtues with the Platonic ideal of becoming God-like. Both agree that the purificatory virtues contribute more to achieving Godlikeness than the political virtues.[28] After this introductory remark about the relation between political and purificatory virtues, Marinus continues to outline the nature of the purificatory virtues in a passage that I have omitted here. As the French editors of the text, H.D. Saffrey and A.-Ph. Segonds, observe, Marinus here follows closely in the footsteps of Plotinus' treatise on the virtues.[29] Yet, note that Marinus next tacitly criticizes Plotinus, when he informs us that Proclus had not only pursued these purificatory virtues by teaching about these "in words", as Plotinus does in his treatise, but especially by "living in accordance with these", i.e. by performing all sorts of demanding rituals, including Chaldaean ones.[30] Given the close connection between the so-called *Chaldaean Oracles* and Neoplatonic theurgy, we may assume that Proclus' year-round baths in the sea were some sort of theurgic purification ritual. And this is not all: in the reminder of his discussion of Proclus' purificatory virtues, Marinus (§§ 19–20) dwells at length on all sorts of religious activities that Proclus' undertook, such as observing religious festivals, hymn-singing, fasting and abstinence. Notwithstanding such ritualistic purifications, Proclus pursued the same spiritual end as Plotinus, i.e., to loose oneself completely in

28 Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* I.2 [19] 1, 21–26: "But if it is according to other virtues, is the assimilation not according to the civic virtues at all? In fact, it would be irrational to maintain that we are not in any way assimilated according to these – legend at least has it that those who practised these are divine, too, and should be said somehow or other to be assimilated according to them – but that the actual assimilation is according to the greater virtues."

29 Saffrey & Seconds 2001, 126 n. 8 to p. 21.

30 Cf. Saffrey & Seconds 2001, 127 n. 3 to p. 22.

contemplation. Because of these purifying virtues, the soul of Proclus, thus Marinus (§ 21), "had collected itself from every side and gathering itself within itself" and "had all but departed from the body", "knowing in itself, pure and simple, a reversion to itself without any share in impressions of the body" (tr. Edwards 2000).

Above we found that Plotinus presents the contemplation of the Forms as the culmination of the purificatory virtues. In the later tradition, this set of virtues is understood as a separate class of virtues, the (5.) contemplative virtues (θεωρητικαί). These consist in the contemplation of the Forms as they are present in the divine Intellect. Marinus indicates that at this stage Proclus had surpassed mere discursive thought and had adopted the intuitive way of thinking that is proper of the divine Intellect (§ 22). Interestingly, Marinus does not connect this stage to any specific ritual, but rather to Proclus' penetrating philosophical analyses and interpretations of Plato's philosophical writings:

> T.21 And one who encounters them will know that the whole of the foregoing narrative concerning him is true, and all the more so if anyone has seen him and enjoyed the spectacle of him, hearing his exposition and his delivery of the most exquisite discourses, as year by year he celebrated the festivals of Plato and Socrates. For it seemed that he spoke under divine inspiration, and that the words truly fell like snow from the wise man's mouth. For his eyes seemed to be filled with some sort of brilliance, and the rest of his visage had a share of divine illumination. Once in the course of his exposition, a man called Rufinus, one of the most conspicuous figures in politics, a truthful person and otherwise worthy of respect, saw a light playing round his head. And when he had reached the end of his exposition, Rufinus stood up, made an obeisance and testified on oath to the divine vision.
>
> MARINUS, *Proclus* § 23, 12–29; tr. Edwards 2000

Marinus thus pictures Proclus here as a sort of epiphany, an embodied manifestation of divine Intellect, just as Porphyry had done in the case of Plotinus (cf. T.16 above). What is more, Marinus connects these contemplative virtues explicitly to Plotinus' description of the special stage of God-like contemplation that we may reach through practising the purifying virtues (cf. T.13 above):

> T.22 [Proclus was] … living entirely, as Plotinus says, not the human life of the good man, which political virtue thinks proper to live, but leaving

> this behind and exchanging it for another, which is that of the Gods. For it was their likeness not that of good man that he was attaining.
>
> MARINUS, *Proclus* § 25, 8–13; tr. Edwards 2000

In the case of Plotinus, this is where the story of the virtues ends: to become God-like means to contemplate the intelligible Forms in the manner of the divine Intellect. Not so for Marinus. According to Marinus, contemplation is only one of the two activities that is characteristic of the divine. The other divine characteristic consists in the providential care that the Gods exercise towards their inferiors:

> T.23 Consequently Proclus did not live according to just one of the two distinguishing properties of the divine. Rather than being only engaged in intellectual activity and reaching out towards what is superior, Proclus started to exercise providential care towards inferior things in a divine manner and not in the political manner that was discussed above.
>
> MARINUS, *Proclus* § 28, 3–8; tr. my own

The Greek word for providence is πρόνοια. Marinus here seems to suggest that the etymology of the word indicates that divine providence is something that comes before (προ-) intellect (νοῦς), i.e., it is superior to intellect. Not surprisingly, Marinus derives his theory of the double activity of the divine from Proclus. According to Proclus:

> T.24 For the primary good is not contemplation, intellective life, and knowledge, as someone has said somewhere. No, it is life in accordance with the divine Intellect which consists, on the one hand, in comprehending the intelligibles through its own intellect, and, on the other, in encompassing the sensibles with the power of [the circle of] difference and in giving even to these sensibles a portion of the goods from above.
>
> PROCLUS, *On the Existence of Evils*, § 23, 9–12 ed. Strobel; tr. Opsomer-Steel 2003

The "someone" who is on record for saying that the primary good is contemplation is probably Aristotle, who had informed Plotinus' conception of God-likeness as contemplation.[31] In his contribution to this volume, Thibaut Lejeune, following the pivotal analysis of Annas (1999), calls attention to the ambiguity of the Platonic ideal of becoming God-like. For, according to

31 For this identification, see, e.g., Opsomer-Steel 2003, 115, n. 147; cf. also the discussion of this passage by Lejeune in his contribution to this volume.

Socrates to become God-like means to flee this world. Yet, to flee this world demands of us that we become "just and pious with understanding", thus suggesting that we should also engage with our fellow human beings in the material world. On the basis of T.24 and other passages, mostly taken from Proclus' *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, Lejeune argues that Proclus solves this paradox by arguing that in order to do the good, one should know the good, and that therefore God-likeness consists in a combination of intellectual activity and action.[32]

Marinus' biography of Proclus allows us to elaborate on this suggestion. From the passages that Lejeune quotes from the *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, one may be led to believe that the contemplation of the Forms somehow informs acts of political virtues. In fact, as was noted above (T.14), this is how the relation between political and contemplative virtues in the case of Plotinus is usually understood. Note, however, that Marinus stresses that this is not the case: Proclus cared for others "in a divine manner and not in the political manner that was discussed above" (T.23). Proclus agrees. In *Ten Problems Concerning Providence* § 65, he argues that the Gods, precisely because they are Henads, exercise providence. Henads, it will be recalled, are participable manifestations of the One. They are the Gods proper with whom we are connected by means of spiritual *synthêmata* or *symbola*. These may be activated through spiritual theurgy, which results in a temporary unification with these Henads. According to Proclus:

> T.25 When the souls are established in the good, in virtue of the One [in them], they are active in a divinely possessed manner and with the Gods and the kinds that are superior to us they exercise providence in a transcendent manner just like these too [i.e. the superior kinds] did. And their providence consists not in conjectural calculations about the future, as in the case of political affairs, but by positioning themselves firmly in the One of the soul and therefore being illuminated all around by the unitary lights of the Gods they see the things in time non-temporally, divided things undividedly, things in location non-locally; and they do not belong to themselves, but to those who illuminate [them].
>
> PROCLUS, *Ten Problems Concerning Providence*, § 65; 8–14 ed. Strobel; tr. Opsomer-Steel 2012 slightly adapted

32 For a similar interpretation of God-likeness according to Proclus as a combination of theoretical contemplation and practical activity based on Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, cf. Baltzly 2004.

In other words, the virtues that Proclus exercised at this stage are not the lower, political virtues, but a set of vastly superior virtues, the so-called theurgic ones. Both virtues are about our obligations towards others. What sets apart political virtues from theurgic ones, however, is the corresponding mode of cognition. Political actions stem from discursive thought, which is typical of the human soul (T.25: "conjectural calculations about the future, as in the case of political affairs"), whereas providential actions stem from the divine way of seeing all things in an intuitive fashion (T.25: seeing "the things in time non-temporally, divided things undividedly, things in location non-locally"). I suggest that the political virtues foreshadow as it were the theurgic virtues. When we are still engaged in a human mode of cognition, we imitate divine providential care as good as we possibly can with the help of discursive reasoning. Once we have mastered intuitive contemplation in the manner of divine Intellect (i.e., seeing "the things in time non-temporally, divided things undividedly, things in location non-locally"), we care for the world in the providential manner of the Gods.

Marinus does not call this category of virtues 'theurgic' for no reason. While it is probably through higher, spiritual theurgy that "the souls are established in the good" (T.25), such blessed souls exercise their providence through actual theurgic rituals, as appears from the fact that Marinus next dwells on Proclus' activities as a theurgist. Take, for example, the following story about the miraculous cure of a girl Asclepigeneia. When she had fallen seriously ill and doctors could do nothing for her, her parents came to Proclus as their "benevolent saviour".

> T.26 Taking with him the great Pericles from Lydia, a man who was himself no mean philosopher, Proclus visited the shrine of Asclepius to pray to the God on behalf of the invalid. For at the time the city still enjoyed the use of this and retained intact the temple of the Saviour. And while he was praying in the ancient manner, a sudden change was seen in the maiden and a sudden recovery occurred, for the Saviour being a God, healed her easily.
>
> MARINUS, *Proclus* § 29, 16–24; tr. Edwards 2000

Note that the success of Proclus' intervention depends on the correct performance of the ritual: it matters that the temple of Asclepius was still intact, that Proclus goes there to pray, and that he did so "in the ancient manner". Above, we have seen that theurgists set up statues in order to channel the divine energy that surrounds us: the divine animates the statue and is present to it. In the same way, Proclus now appears to have become a living theur-

gic statue. Asclepius operates through him (cf. T.25: "and they do not belong to themselves, but to those who illuminate them"). Marinus refers to both Proclus and Asclepius as Saviour, thus suggesting that Proclus had somehow become a manifestation of Asclepius himself, just as in the case of the contemplative virtues Proclus had become a manifestation of Intellect (T.22). Proclus did not restrict himself to curing those who had fallen ill beyond human remedy. Marinus claims that, among other things, Proclus was capable of causing rain, preventing earthquakes and calling forth divine epiphanies. In short, Proclus was able to perform miracles, because he had, with the help of the Gods, achieved complete mastery of the physical world. Such miracles are a far cry from the more mundane actions that are usually associated with political virtues, such as Plotinus' care for orphans.

Plotinus had denied that the paradigms of the virtues are themselves virtues, because they belong to the realm of Intellect, whereas virtues are typical of the human soul. Marinus appears to disagree with Plotinus in this respect. The point of his biography of Proclus is to demonstrate that Proclus was a "man equally furnished with all the virtues to a degree that men have never seen in a long time" (§ 34,3–5; tr. Edwards 2000). It is for this reason that Marinus in his biography does not go beyond the theurgic virtues. Yet he recognizes the existence of an even higher type of virtues, as appears from the introduction of his biography, where, by way of program of his biography, he lists the various degrees of virtues:

> T.27 First, let us divide the virtues into their kinds, the physical, the ethical and the political, and again those which transcend these, the purificatory, the contemplative, and those that are called theurgic, while as to those that are higher even than these we shall keep silence, because they exceed the human condition.
>
> MARINUS, *Proclus* § 3, 1–6; tr. Edwards 2000

It is commonly assumed that this last class of virtues coincide with Plotinus' paradigmatic virtues.[33] Since these virtues "exceed the human condition", they belong to the divine proper. For this reason, they should be treated with full respect, hence Marinus' silence. We may assume that these virtues too involve a fair degree of theurgy, hence Damascius, another late Neoplatonist, refers to these virtues as hieratic (i.e., priestly) virtues.

33 See, e.g., Saffrey & Segonds 2001, XCIII-XCVIII.

2.3 *Concluding Remarks*

Porphyry, in his biography of Plotinus, has the following story to tell about Plotinus' attitude towards the ritualistic worship of the divine:

> T.28 Amelius was fond of sacrifices, and used to busy himself with rites of the new moon, and rites to allay fears. He once tried to get Plotinus to participate with him, but Plotinus said: 'They must come to me, not I to them.' We did not know what consideration led him to make such a grand pronouncement, and did not have the nerve to ask him.
>
> PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus* § 10, 33–38; tr. Gerson *et al.* 2017: 26

According to Tanaseanu-Döbler, this anecdote testifies of "a spiritualized conception of cult, which naturally leads to the consequence that the contemplation of the divine being the goal, this can be achieved independently of material cultic acts".[34] To be more precise, Plotinus viewed the inner self as the spiritual temple where the divinity dwelled and where it had to be worshipped (cf. T.7 and T.8). Seen from this perspective, going to physical temples and performing physical acts of worship is of no use to the philosopher in search of God. Instead, he should turn his gaze inwardly and connect to the divine within him. This makes for a rather detached intellectual life, even though a sage may, almost in an accidental manner, perform acts of political virtue as some sort of by-product of his contemplation (cf. T.14).

For many of the later Neoplatonists, by contrast, the divine was not to be found in our inner self, but in the outside world. The entire cosmos testifies of the providential care of the Gods proper, the Henads, which reach us through the meditation of lower divine entities that partake in the respective series. These outpourings of divine goodness can and should channelled by means of the correct performance of theurgic rituals in which physical *symbola* play a crucial role.

These later Neoplatonists appear to criticize the Aristotelian-Plotinian contemplative ideal. We should not think of the care for others as a by-product of intuitive contemplation, but as the culmination of intuitive contemplation. Providence (*pronoia*) is an activity that literally comes before (*pro-*) intuitive contemplation (*nous*). It is itself an expression of the goodness that characterizes the One (cf. T.25). Therefore, intuitive contemplation and providence are presented as the two characteristics of the divine (cf. T.23). Hence Marinus' suggestion that Plotinus, who had contended himself with achieving

34 Tanaseanu-Döbler 2013, 52. On this anecdote, see also Van den Berg 1999.

contemplate virtue, fell short in comparison to Proclus who had cultivated both intuitive contemplation and providential care. It is telling that Marinus refers to the virtues that have to do with providential care as 'theurgic': the sage administers divine providential care to others with the help of the Gods. The only way in which this divine help can be obtained is through theurgy, i.e. precisely the sort of material cultic acts from which Plotinus sought to distance himself.

Many modern readers of the Neoplatonists may feel more attracted to Plotinus' spiritualized conception of cult than to the, often rather outlandish, theurgic rituals that Proclus and his school practiced. Yet, however one may feel about theurgy, the fact is that Proclus has a philosophically more consistent story to tell about the societal role of the philosopher (cf. Table 3.1). Within Plotinus' philosophy, the ethical commitments of the sage are problematic. As we have seen, the Plotinian sage may practice ethical virtues, if he so wishes, as a sort of by-product of his contemplation. But why would a sage exchange a higher degree of virtue for a lower one? And why should the concern for others be a matter of personal whim? In the scheme of Proclus, the philosopher who has achieved contemplative virtues does not descend to the lower level of ethical virtue but proceeds to the superior level of providential care. This providential care is not some arbitrary aspect of the life of a divine sage, but an essential component of it, since it is an expression of the Goodness that characterizes the divine.

The inclusion of the theurgic virtues that are about divine providential care also lend greater importance to the political virtues. In Plotinus the political and purifying virtues make a human being God-like as a sort of preparation for actual divinization, i.e. the exchange of the life of men for that of the Gods (T.13). His focus is, however, mainly on the purificatory virtues, since these prepare us for the intuitive contemplation of the Forms (cf. T.11). About the political virtues, he has little to say. The same goes for Porphyry's biography of Plotinus (cf. T.15). Marinus, however, is happy to elaborate on Proclus' political virtues, just as Proclus himself dwells on the importance of ethics in, e.g., the *Commentary on the Alcibiades*.[35] The reason for this is that, in the scheme of Proclus and Marinus, the political virtues reflect and prepare for the theurgic virtues, just as the purifying virtues prepare for the contemplative virtues.

35 As Dirk Baltzly 2004: 319 concludes in regard to the role that ethics (i.e. political virtue) plays in the philosophies of Plotinus and Proclus respectively: "But it seems to me that by identifying the person with only the 'higher part', Plotinus belittles the role that virtuous souls may play in the administration of divine providence. By contrast, Proclus thinks that becoming like our leading god requires that we play our parts seriously and well."

TABLE 3.1 Plotinus vs. Proclus on becoming God-like

Plotinus		**Proclus**
Stage 1:	Becoming like God in an inferior way by cultivating the political virtues as a preparation for stage 2.	Becoming like God (1) by cultivating the political virtues in imitation of divine providence. ⇒ prepares both for Becoming like God (2) and for the Life of the Gods (2)
Stage 2:	Becoming like God in a superior way by cultivating the purificatory virtues as a preparation for intuitive contemplation.	Becoming like God (2) by cultivating the purificatory virtues as a preparation for intuitive contemplation. ⇒ prepares for the Life of the Gods (1)
Stage 3:	Life of the Gods: unification with our inner Intellect.	Life of the Gods (1): contemplative virtues that connect us to Intellect (*Nous*) through illumination. ⇒ prepares us for Life of the Gods (2): that of *pronoia*, that which is beyond *Nous*.
Stage 4:	Unification with the One	Life of the Gods (2): theurgic virtues that connect the One in us to the Henads through illumination: the sage as a theurgic instrument of providential care.
Stage 5:	Definitive deification after death	Definitive deification by means of the unspeakable supreme virtues

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