Aretē: Excellence or Virtue

Reading 3 – Plato & Socrates

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"Virtue is a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul." —Plato

"Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away." —Antisthenes

"Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue." —Aristotle

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Reading 3

Plato & Socrates

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This reading comes from the Cave's
Aretē: Excellence or Virtue—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē.
As the title indicates, this reading, after a brief introduction, presents what Plato and Socrates thought and said about *aretē*, including a summary at the end.

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PLATO (c. 428/7-347[1] BC) WAS an Athenian philosopher. He is known and valued for his many dialogues and letters that explore the definition of terms (such as piety, justice, and courage) and offer his understanding of things (such as the nature of knowledge, the cosmos, becoming and being, the forms or ideas, human virtue, political well-being, and happiness).

Plato opened a school, the Academy, on the outskirts of Athens in order to research the nature of things in community with others, teach, and circulate his ideas, which—collectively known as Platonism—greatly informed and inspired later thinkers, including Greeks and Romans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Plato's views on aretē have influenced Western ethical philosophy down to today. It is to these views that we now turn (for a summary, see the end of the chapter).

Before we do so, however, a few brief points. One, unless otherwise noted, all the following passages come from Plato. Two, there is the so-called "Socratic problem." When Socrates speaks in Plato's dialogues, it is hard to know whether Plato is giving Socrates'

position or his own. It is a question that scholars have long debated. The consensus seems to be that we encounter the genuine Socrates in Plato's earlier dialogues. For now, however, having noted the problem, we'll let "Plato" stand for both Socrates and Plato, fully realizing that in point of fact the words and ideas may actually belong to one or the other alone.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We begin our exploration of Plato's view of aretē with parts of a dialogue in which Socrates discusses the nature of aretē with Meno, a young man from Thessaly, who was studying in Athens with the sophist Gorgias. Rather than answering every question, the dialogue is a discussion that raises further questions—as Plato's dialogues often do. Socrates begins by asking Meno what he thinks about aretē.

Socrates: Tell me, what is your own account of virtue? . . .

Meno: No problem, Socrates. First, if you want to look at the virtue of a man, it is easily stated that a man's virtue is this: that he be competent to manage the affairs of his city, and to manage them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care to avoid suffering harm himself. Or take a woman's virtue: there is no difficulty in describing it as the duty of ordering the house well, looking after the property indoors, and obeying her husband. And the child has another virtue—one for the female, and one for the male. And there is another for elderly men. And one, if you like, for freemen, and yet another for slaves. And there are very many other virtues besides, so that one cannot be at a loss to explain what virtue is—for it is according to each activity and age that every one of us, in whatever we do, has his virtue. And as I understand it, Socrates, the same also holds for vice.

Socrates: I seem to be in luck, Meno, for in seeking one virtue I have discovered a whole swarm of virtues there in your keeping. Now, Meno, to follow this image of a swarm, suppose I ask you what the real nature of the bee is, and you replied that there are many kinds of bees. And suppose I replied, Do you say it is by being bees—that is, as bees—that they are of many and various kinds and differ from one another, or is their difference found not in that, but in something else—for example, in their beauty or size or some other quality? Tell me, what would be your answer to this question?

Meno: My answer would be this—that they do not differ, one from another, as bees.

Socrates: And what if I went on to say, Here's what I want you to tell me, Meno—What do you call this thing by which they do not differ, but by which they are all alike? I imagine you could tell me, right?

Meno: Sure.

Socrates: And likewise also with the virtues, however many and various they may be, they all have one common form or nature or kind by which they are virtues, and on which one would of course be wise to keep an eye when one is giving a definitive answer to the question of what virtue really is. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Meno: It seems to me that I understand—but I still do not fully grasp the meaning of the question as I would like to.

Socrates: Does it seem to you, Meno, that it is only in the case of virtue that one can say there is one kind that belongs to a man, and another to a woman, and so on with the rest? Or is it the same in the case of health and size and strength? Do you suppose that there is one health for a man and another for a woman? Or is the form or nature of health the same for everyone, whether for a man or anyone else?

Meno: I think that health is the same for both a man and a woman. . . .

Socrates: So then, human beings are all good in the same way since they become good by means of the same things. . . . *Continuing, he asks,* Is justice virtue—virtue itself—or is it a virtue?

Meno: What do you mean by saying that?

Socrates: I mean what I would in any other case. Take roundness, for example. I would say that it is a shape and not shape pure and simple—shape in itself. I would do so because there are other shapes besides roundness.

Meno: You'd be right to do so—just as there are other virtues besides justice.

Socrates: What are they? Tell me. In the same way that I can tell you, if you call on me to do so, what other shapes there are, tell me about the other virtues.

Meno: Okay, then. It seems to me that courage is a virtue, as well as moderation, and wisdom, and magnificence of character, and a great many others.

Socrates: Once more, Meno, we are in the same plight. Again, we have discovered many virtues when we were seeking one . . . the one that is common to them all.

After Meno suggests that "virtue is the ability to procure goods," goods such as health, wealth, gold, and political honors and offices, and that justice, holiness, moderation, and other virtues are key to procuring goods, Socrates responds that it is not the ability or power to procure goods that is good, but the means by which we do so, that is, the various virtues. But, he says, these are merely the parts of virtue.

Socrates: After I asked you to speak of virtue as a whole, you said not a word as to what it is in itself, but you told me that every action is virtue as long as it is done with a part of virtue . . . The truth is you are splitting virtue up into fragments! I think, therefore, that you must face the same question all over again, my dear Meno. What is virtue? . . . Do you suppose that anyone can know a part of virtue when he does not know virtue itself?

When Socrates admits his ignorance regarding the nature of virtue, confessing, "I have no idea what virtue is," Meno introduces an all-important question.

Meno: How then—in what direction—will you search for something, Socrates, about which you know absolutely nothing at all? How will you set up something you don't even know as the object of your search? And if you happened to come upon it, how will you know it is the thing you did not know in the first place?

In response to this question—what Socrates calls "a debater's argument"—Socrates reveals what he once learned from certain priests and priestesses—that learning is actually remembering or recollection. As such, even though we may not begin a query by knowing precisely what something is, nevertheless, because we've known it before in a prior existence, we are able to take our first steps in the right direction.

Socrates: The soul is immortal and has been born many times. She has seen all things, both in this world and in the underworld, and so she has learned about everything. Thus, we should not be surprised if the soul is able to recollect all that she knew before about virtue and other things. . . . Consequently, it seems that searching for something and learning about it are wholly recollection. . . . Putting my trust in the truth of this point, I am willing to join you in searching for the nature of virtue.

Continuing in their search for the nature of virtue, Socrates and Meno hit upon the idea that virtue is "wholly or partly practical wisdom."

Socrates: Then may we assert this as a universal rule, that in human beings all other things depend on the soul, while the things of the soul herself depend on practical wisdom if they are to be good. And so, by this account the profitable will be practical wisdom—and virtue, we say, is profitable? . . . Therefore, do we conclude that virtue is either wholly or partly practical wisdom? . . . If this is so, then good men cannot be good by nature.

If good men are not good or virtuous by nature, they must be virtuous by means of teaching. The problem is that they (Meno, Socrates, and Anytus, who has joined the conversation) cannot find anyone who knows how to teach virtue or make anyone good—including parents or the sophists. And "if there are no teachers, then there can neither be students." Therefore, concludes Socrates, "virtue cannot be taught."

Meno wonders if good men actually exist—and, if so, then what process it is by which they come to exist. Socrates suggests that even though one may not be able to teach

virtue by means of exact knowledge, still one may point another in the direction of virtue by means of right or true opinion—just as one may give directions to a town without having actually been there before. "Therefore, true opinion is as good a guide to acting rightly as is knowledge." Still, true opinion, Socrates argues, is an uncertain possession. He claims that he speaks as "one who does not know but only guesses." The conclusion?

Socrates: If through this entire discussion our searches and statements have been given well, then virtue is neither something natural nor is it something taught. Rather, it is something that comes to us by divine providence, without any understanding on our part.[2]

As the following selections demonstrate, there is in other dialogues of Plato further discussion of whether virtue is one thing or many. The conclusion, however elusive or inconclusive it seems at times, is that virtue itself is one in some manner—whether as a participation in wisdom and knowledge, or as the manifestation of Virtue itself, the form or idea of virtue (just as beautiful things participate in or manifest Beauty itself, and other things manifest other forms or ideas).

Before we get to the conclusion, however, let's look at a variety of proposed ideas. The first example from the Laches *proposes that virtue is essentially a kind of knowledge whereby a person knows "all good things." Here we listen to Socrates dialoguing with Nicias, who assents to Socrates' propositions.*

Socrates: Then courage is knowledge not merely of what is to be dreaded and what dared, for it comprehends goods and evils not merely in the future, but also in the present and the past and at any stage, like the other kinds of knowledge. . . .

So the answer that you gave us, Nicias, covers only about a third part of courage—whereas our question was about the nature of courage as a whole. And now it appears, according to your own view, that courage is knowledge not merely of what is to be dreaded and what dared but practically a knowledge concerning all goods and evils at every stage . . .

Now do you think, my excellent friend, there could be anything lacking in the virtue of a man who knew all good things, and all about their production in the present, the future, and the past, and, similarly, about all evil things? Do you suppose that such a man could be lacking in moderation or justice or holiness? . . .

Therefore, what you now describe, Nicias, will be not a part but the whole of virtue.[3]

The second example from the Protagoras *explores whether various virtues are actually a single thing, or they are somehow related to a single thing, as the parts of a face to the face as a whole, or a brick of gold divided into parts. In it Socrates is dialoguing with the sophist Protagoras.*

Socrates: "You said that Zeus had sent justice and respect to mankind, and, furthermore, it was frequently stated in your discourse that justice, moderation, holiness, and the rest were all but one single thing—virtue. Go on, then, and deal with these in a more precise exposition, stating whether virtue is a single thing, of which justice and moderation and holiness are parts, or whether the qualities I have just mentioned are all names of the same single thing. This is what I am still yearning to know."

"Well, the answer to that question is easy, Socrates," he replied. "It is that virtue is a single thing and the qualities in question are parts of it."

"Do you mean parts," I asked, "in the sense of the parts of a face—the mouth, nose, eyes, and ears? Or do you mean it as in the parts of gold? Is there no difference among the pieces, either between the parts or between a part and the whole, except in greatness and smallness?"

"I mean it in the former sense, I think," Socrates, "as the parts of the face are to the whole face."

Though this is the initial conclusion, it is not the final one. The Protagoras *covers many other points, and we find Socrates at dialogue's end still declaring,* "For my part, Protagoras, observing the extraordinary tangle into which we have managed to get the whole matter, I am most anxious to have it thoroughly cleared up. And I would like to work our way through it until at last we reach what virtue is, and then go back and consider whether it is teachable or not."

Regrettably, Protagoras postpones the discussion to another time, suggesting, "Let's pursue the subject on some other occasion."[4]

The third, fourth, and fifth examples, all from the Laws *(in which "the Athenian" is speaking in dialogue with Clinias of Crete and Megillus of Sparta), suggest two major points. One, a city-state's legislation should aim at promoting the whole of virtue. Two, although there are many terms that identify different ends or objectives or virtues, they all actually refer to the same end or objective—to virtue itself.*

The Athenian: We assert, then, that this type of man proves himself . . . a far better man than the other [*who is courageous alone without the other virtues*] in the measure in which justice, moderation, and practical wisdom, combined with and bolstered by courage, are better than courage alone. For a man will never prove himself loyal and sound in times of faction unless he has the whole of virtue, whereas there are plenty of hired combatants . . . Now, to what does our argument conclude? . . . The legislation of Lycurgus of Sparta and Minos of Crete was framed in the interest of virtue as a whole, not of one fragment of it.[5]

The Athenian: I must ask you not to be surprised that we have already more than once proposed certain ends as those to which the legislator must look, and that our proposals have not always appeared to be identical. You must consider that when we say he must look to moderation, or again to practical wisdom, or to friendship, these ends are not distinct but identical. And if we find ourselves using a further variety of expressions to the same effect, we must not be confused by that.[6]

The Athenian: Take our language about the four types of virtue. If there are four of them, obviously we must hold that each type by itself is one. . . . And yet we give one name to all of them. In fact, we speak of courage as virtue, of practical wisdom as virtue, and similarly the other two. And this implies that they are not really several things but just this one thing—virtue. . . .

It looks as though the guardians of our god-given constitution too must be compelled, first and foremost, to observe exactly what is the identity permeating all the four virtues—the unity to be found, as we hold, alike in courage, moderation, justice, and practical wisdom that allows them all to be called by the one name, virtue.[7]

The final example regarding the unity or plurality of virtue comes from the Republic. *In it Socrates reinforces the conclusion that virtue is one.*

Socrates: And truly, I said, now that we have come to this height of discourse, I seem to see as though from a point of outlook that there is one form of virtue, and that the forms of vice are infinite.[8]

Whatever—exactly—virtue is, and whether it is one thing or many, Plato contends that virtue, which is to say, living well, is central to happiness and human flourishing. In the next few selections, we learn that virtue is the means by which we are happy.[9]

Diogenes Laertius Plato held that the goal of life is to become god-like, and that virtue is sufficient in itself for happiness.[10]

The Athenian: One kind of life is sweeter than the other . . . In short, in comparison with a vicious life, the virtuous life in body and soul is not only more pleasant but it also rises above the other in terms of beauty, correctness, flourishing, and good reputation. Consequently, if a man lives with virtue, he will live with complete happiness.[11]

Socrates: Will the soul be able to perform its own function well if it is lacking its own virtue? Or will it be unable?

Thrasymachus: Unable.

Socrates: Necessarily, then, a bad soul rules and manages things badly, and a good soul does everything well?

Thrasymachus: Necessarily. . . .

Socrates: But he who lives well is blessed and happy.[12]

If happiness comes about by means of virtue, then what is virtue? We are thus led back to the central question.

According to Plato, virtue is the easy, unimpeded flow of the good soul. It is the soul's beauty, its healthy, good condition. Most importantly, perhaps, in terms of definition, virtue is "the means by which a thing performs its function well."

Socrates: In the first place, virtue signifies ease of motion, and secondly, that the flow of the good soul is always unimpeded.[13]

Socrates: It appears, then, that virtue is a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul.[14]

Socrates: Virtue is the means by which a thing performs its function well.[15]

If virtue is "the means by which a thing performs its function well," then what is a thing's function or work? With the first statement, Socrates offers a simple definition of "the function of a thing." The second passage explains "function" with several examples, ending with the prior simple definition.

Socrates: The function of a thing is that which it alone can do, or what it does better, than anything else.[16]

Socrates: Would you say that a horse has a specific function or work?

Thrasymachus: Sure.

Socrates: Would you be willing to define the function or work of a horse—or of anything else for that matter—to be that which one can do only with it or best with it?

Thrasymachus: I don't understand.

Socrates: Well, let me express it this way. Aside from the eyes, is there anything else by which you can see?

Thrasymachus: Of course not.

Socrates: Again, can you hear with anything other than the ears?

Thrasymachus: There's no other way.

Socrates: Isn't it right, then, to say that seeing is the function of the eyes and hearing the function of the ears?

Thrasymachus: Yes, by all means.

Socrates: Once more, you could use a dagger, a sword, a butcher knife, and many other instruments to trim vine branches. . . . But I imagine that nothing will work or perform as well in comparison with a pruning-knife.

Thrasymachus: True.

Socrates: Must we not assume, then, that pruning is the function of a pruning-knife?

Thrasymachus: We must.

Socrates: I imagine you will now better understand that the function of a thing is that which it alone can do, or what it does better, than anything else.[17]

Since for Plato happiness corresponds to virtue, and virtue corresponds to a thing's function, and because a thing's function corresponds to its nature (a point Plato makes in the Timaeus *and the* Cratylus*), then we must investigate what a human being is, that is, what human nature is. First, there is general human nature, which is a composite of body and soul.*

Socrates: The whole [human being], composed of a soul and a body, is called an animal, that is, a living being.[18]

What is the body? The body serves the soul as its means of locomotion; it is, as it were, the soul's chariot.

Timaeus: The offspring of the creator-god made the mortal body to be the chariot of the soul. . . . It is the means of easy transportation . . . upon the earth, which has all manner of heights and hollows.[19]

What is the soul? The soul itself has three parts, here (in the Phaedrus*) compared to a charioteer and the two horses hitched to the chariot, one of which is good and noble, whereas the other is not. We'll discover more about these three parts of the soul in a moment.*

Socrates: The soul is like the composite union that arises from a yoked pair of winged horses and their winged charioteer. . . . As for human beings, the charioteer of the soul holds the reigns, driving and guiding the pair

of horses. Yet another point: one of the horses is good and noble, of noble stock, whereas the other horse is quite the opposite. This is why driving the chariot of the soul is necessarily difficult and troublesome for us.[20]

Plato offers another image of the soul in the Republic*, a dialogue that explores the nature of justice. In order to understand what justice is, Socrates and his interlocutors search for it in an imaginary city. The city itself has three basic parts: the ruling, the auxiliary guarding and law-enforcing, and the producing-trading-money-making parts. The question is whether the soul is like the city, and so whether it similarly has three parts.*

Socrates: Our inquiry is to see whether the soul possesses these three parts, or forms, or not. [*"These three parts" refers to the three parts of the city.*] We are agreed that the same number and same kinds, or parts, are in both the city and the soul.[21]

Shortly after their agreement, Socrates and Glaucon (Plato's brother) attempt to discover the three parts of the soul. Corresponding respectively to the three parts of the city mentioned a moment ago, they are the rational, the spirited, and the desiring parts.

Socrates: It would be reasonable, then, to state that these two parts of the soul are different from each other. We'll call the part of the soul by which it calculates and reasons the rational part. And the part with which it desires, hungers, and thirsts, and feels the passionate excitement of other longings, we'll call the non-rational and desiring part of the soul—the companion of various fill-me-ups and pleasures.

Glaucon: Yes, it would be reasonable. . . .

Socrates: Let us assume, then, that these two parts, or forms, have been separated from each other and marked off in the soul. Still, is the *thumos*—the heart or spirit, that by which we are provoked and feel angry—a third, spirited part, or is it the same as the rational or desiring part? . . . Again, is this high-spirited *thumos* a third part in the soul just as we found three separate kinds of people that held the city together—the counselor-deliberators, the auxiliary guardians, and the money-makers?

Glaucon: It must be a third part.[22]

If there are three parts of the soul, then each part must have its own function (what it alone can do, or what it does better, than anything else) and virtue (the means by which it performs its function well). The same must be true for the body, as well as for the whole of human nature operating as a unity, body and soul (just as a city as a whole may operate well).

Let's look at each of these virtues in turn, beginning with the body and working our way through each part of the soul until we get to the excellence of the whole. As for the body, health is its excellence.

Socrates: Physical training and medicine combine into a single art to care for the body. *And,* Simplicity in physical training or exercise begets health in bodies.[23]

The general nature of the soul is self-motion—that is, by nature a soul is something that can move itself. To do so, however, the soul must decide where to go. Consequently, the general function of the soul is to deliberate and direct.

Socrates: The very nature of the soul is self-motion.[24]

Socrates: The function of the soul is . . . management, rule, deliberation, and the like.[25]

But what is the function of each part of the soul? And so, what is the virtue of each part?

The function of the rational part is to rule and direct the whole soul. It does this by means of wisdom, its virtue.

Socrates: It is the rational part's function to rule since it is altogether wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul. . . . *The rational part* will rule the desiring part . . . and guard the whole soul and body . . . by taking counsel and by deliberating. . . . We call a man wise because of the small part in him that rules and delivers these orders and exhortations, and by its knowledge of what is beneficial for each part and for the whole soul, the community of the three parts.[26]

Socrates: The truth is that when wisdom is present, he who has it has no need for good luck.[27]

The function of the spirited part of the soul is to obey and carry out the rational part's directives. Given the fight put up by the oftentimes disobedient desiring part, as well as the agitation caused by pleasure and pain (what the desiring part moves toward or away from), this function requires courage, the spirited part's virtue.

Socrates: The spirited part's function is to listen to, obey, and be allied with the rational part of the soul. . . . *With the rational part, it will* guard the whole soul and body . . . by carrying out the rational part's resolutions by means of courage. . . . We call a man courageous, I suppose, because of the spirited part in him—when the spirited part carries out, through both pleasure and pain, the orders and exhortations of the rational part regarding what is to be feared and what is not.[28]

Next, the desiring part of the soul. As we see in the Symposium, *for Plato, desire itself is a kind of lacking. Generally speaking, what is lacking is what is necessary. Therefore, the function of the desiring part of the soul is to seek what is generally necessary for survival and sufficient for well-being.*

As Plato sees it, the problem with desire is not the yearning we may feel for wisdom (this is philosophy, the desire for or love of wisdom) or the desire we may feel to know and experience the Good or the Beautiful. Instead, for most people the problem appears relative to things like honor, money, food, wine, and sex. Rather than desiring enough food for health, for instance, or enough sex for reproduction and the continuance of the species, humans desire and seek these things in excess, in ways that are oftentimes positively unhealthy.

Corresponding to the above function, then, the virtue of the desiring part of the soul is moderation, that excellence by which it listens to and obeys the ruling part of the soul and so properly directs desire toward what is necessary for each person's survival and well-being. When this happens, the whole soul operates together well.

Socrates: Moderation is some kind of order—power over and control of certain pleasures and desires. It is what people mean when they use the term, "self-control." . . . The intended meaning of speaking this way seems to me to be that the soul of a man has a better part and a worse part, and to say "self-control" or "having power over oneself" means the control of the worse part by the naturally better part of the soul.[29]

Socrates: The most significant features of moderation for most people are the following: one, listening to and being obedient to the rulers, and two, ruling over the pleasures of eating, drinking, and having sex.[30]

Socrates: Moderation spreads throughout the whole soul, making the strongest, weakest, and intermediate parts sing in unison.[31]

Socrates: The wise man is moderate because of the friendship and concord of the three parts of the soul, when the ruling part and the ruled agree that reason should rule.[32]

The aforementioned "friendship and concord" point to the function and virtue of the soul as a whole. It is to operate in such a way that each part performs its own function well and does not interfere with or do the work of the other parts.

It may be useful to recall the imaginary city that runs well when each part does what it is supposed to do. Some in the city rule. Some enforce the directives of the ruling part. And some produce goods and trade these goods for the survival and well-being of the city. When each part functions well and does not interfere with the work of the other parts, the whole city thrives with harmony and well-being.

The same is true for the soul. When the rational part rules with wisdom, the spirited part enforces the directives of the rational part with courage, and the desiring part moderately desires, heeding the rule of the rational part, then the whole soul operates in harmony. Like a string trio, it is a harmonious unity. This harmony is justice, the virtue of the soul as a whole, the means by which the soul does well.

Socrates: Justice is doing one's own work and not doing this, that, and the other thing that are not your own.[33]

Socrates: The just man does not allow each part of the soul to perform the function or do the work of another part, or to interfere and meddle with another part's function or work. Rather, the just man does a good job arranging what is his own—ruling, ordering, and befriending himself, and harmonizing the three parts of the soul like three notes or intervals in a musical scale, high, low, and middle. And having joined and bound all three together, and all those in between, he himself becomes a harmonious unity, entirely one. . . . The just man believes that in everything the just, noble, and beautiful action is the one that preserves and brings about this harmonious condition of the soul, and that wisdom is the knowledge that presides over and supports such action."[34]

We see in the report of the biographer Diogenes Laertius how wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice were the key virtues for Plato.

Diogenes Laertius (reporting Plato's view) Of perfect virtue there are four kinds or forms: practical wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. Of these, practical wisdom is the cause of right conduct, and justice is responsible for straight dealing in partnerships and commercial transactions. Courage is the cause that makes a man not give way but stand his ground in alarms and perils. Moderation causes mastery over desires, so that we are never enslaved by pleasure but live in an orderly manner.[35]

As for the how of virtue, Plato never precisely states how one becomes virtuous. Rather, various ideas are presented and discussed. Certain virtues, for instance, are acquired thanks to the directives of the law, which is to say the rational direction of a city-state's constitution. Others are attained by means of habituation and practice. Finally, some come about more mysteriously, by a turning of the soul in understanding, inspiration, or by direct contact with What Is, whether the Good or the Beautiful itself.

The Athenian: Responsiveness and pliability to virtue—that is clearly what the legislator hopes to achieve in all his legislation.[36]

Socrates: If through this entire discussion our searches and statements have been given well, then virtue is neither something natural nor is it something taught. Rather, it is something that comes to us by divine providence, without any understanding on our part.[37]

Socrates: Then the other so-called virtues of the soul do seem similar to those of the body since it is true that where they do not pre-exist, they are later produced by habit and practice. But the virtue related to thinking wisely, it seems, is certainly of a more divine quality, a thing that never loses its power, but, according to the way it is turned, it becomes useful and beneficial or useless and harmful.[38]

Socrates: It is easy to imagine into what creatures all the other kinds of soul will go—they will do so in accord with their own practices in life. . . . The happiest people, those who come to the best place, are those who have pursued, without philosophy or understanding, the democratic and social virtues by means of habit and practice. . . . They are happiest because they will probably pass again into some other kind of social and tamed creature such as bees, wasps, and ants—or even back into humankind again . . . But no one who has not been a philosopher, and who is not wholly pure when he departs from this life, is allowed to come into the presence of the divine kind, the gods. No, that is only for the lover of knowledge, the one yearns to understand.[39]

The prophetess Diotima of Mantinea is speaking to Socrates "In this state of life above all others, my dear Socrates," the woman from Mantinea said, "a man finds it truly worthwhile to live, as he contemplates the Beautiful itself. Once this is acknowledged, you will not imagine that the beautiful has anything to do with gold and clothing and beautiful boys and young men—those who, if you see them now, drive you out

of your senses, making you and many others who look at the boys and always spend time with them ready to go without eating and drinking, if that were possible, just as long as you can look at them and be with them.

"But tell me," she said, "what would happen if a man were able to look upon the Beautiful itself—simple, pure, and unmixed, and untouched by the flesh and the decorative embellishments belonging to men and all the other nonsense having to do with mortal creatures? What if this man could behold the divine Beautiful itself in its one form?

"Do you suppose," she went on, "it is a pitiful life for a man to lead—looking that way and gazing over there as he should, and joining with it?

"Consider well," she said, "that it is only there with Beauty itself that it will happen to him. Seeing the beautiful through that which makes it visible, he does not give birth to an image of virtue inasmuch as he is not in touch with images; rather, he gives birth to true virtue inasmuch as he grasps the truth—what is real and actual.

"So, when this man has produced true virtue, nourishing it and letting it grow, he becomes dear to the gods. And if ever immortality is granted to humans, that man, above all others, will be immortal."[40]

SUMMARY OF *ARETĒ* FOR PLATO (AND SOCRATES)

For Plato (and Socrates), every specific virtue or excellence is a manifestation of or participation in virtue itself, which is a unity.

Generally speaking, virtue (or a specific virtue) is "the means by which a thing performs its function well," where a thing's function is "that which it alone can do, or what it does better, than anything else." For example, the virtue of a pruning knife is the sharpness of its uniquely shaped blade that works to trim grapevines (its designed function that follows from its given nature or unique shape) rather than any other function it may have or work it may otherwise accomplish (to cut meat, for instance, or to serve as a papyrus weight or toothpick).

For human beings, virtue manifests itself relative to human nature (something designed and given by the creator) and its composite parts, the body and soul—the latter being for Plato the most significant. The virtue of the body is health. As the vehicle of the soul, the body must be healthy enough for the soul to perform its proper function. The general virtue of the soul is to direct the human person by means of deliberation.

More specifically, the virtues of the soul correspond to its three parts. Each part of the soul has its own function and matching virtue. The rational part of the soul rules by means of wisdom. The spirited part enforces the rule of the rational part by means of courage. The desiring part listens to and obeys the rational part and thus moves toward what is necessary and sufficient for the body and soul by means of moderation. Together, when each part of the soul performs its own proper function well, without interfering with the work of the other parts, the soul harmoniously operates as a whole. This harmony is justice, the soul's virtue as a whole.

When soul justice (harmony) occurs, the whole person is living well and happily, deliberating, directing, and acting in accord with wisdom. So it is that Plato concludes that virtue, or living well, is central to happiness and human flourishing. Virtue is the means by which we humans are happy.

By contrast, vice is the means by which a thing fails to perform its function well, as with the opposites of the aforementioned virtues—ignorance, cowardice, immoderation, and injustice, which, Plato suggests, is "a kind of civil war between the three parts of the soul."[41] If the virtuous person is happy, then the vicious person is not. The obvious thing to do, then, is to strive toward virtue, a venture that involves intuition, education, training, practice, legislation, and a (somewhat mystical) turning toward and participation in What Is—toward the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

So ends Reading 3. **See you in Reading 4**, "Zeno of Citium & the Early Stoics."

NOTES

[1] Though most give 428 or 427 BC as Plato's date of birth, some scholars, including *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, give 429 BC.
[2] Plato, *Meno* 71d; 71e-72d; 73c; 73e-74a; 79b-c; 80d; 81c; 88e-89a; 99e-100a. Although we (in 88e-89a) give *phronēsis* as "practical wisdom," one should note that, broadly speaking, *phronēsis* means thoughtfulness or wisdom.
[3] Plato, *Laches* 199c-e.
[4] Plato, *Protagoras* 329c-e; 361c.
[5] Plato, *Laws* 1.630a-e.
[6] Ibid., 3.693b-c.
[7] Ibid., 12.963c-d; 12.965c-d.
[8] Plato, *Republic* 4.445c.
[9] Many of the following examples are taken from *Happiness: What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2026).
[10] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 3.78.
[11] Plato, *Laws* 5.734d-e.
[12] Plato, *Republic* 1.353e, 1.354a. To reiterate the point, for Plato, to "live well" means to live according to virtue.
[13] Plato, *Cratylus* 415c-d.
[14] Plato, *Republic* 4.444d-e.
[15] Ibid., 1.353c. Faithful to Plato's intention (evident in Socrates' position), we have modified the line by transforming Socrates' question into a positive statement. The question: "I am asking about whether a thing that has a function performs it well by means of its own virtue . . ."
[16] Ibid., 1.353a. This definition of function appears at the end of the next selection. The Greek for function or work is *ergon*.
[17] Ibid., 1.352d-353a.
[18] Plato, *Phaedrus* 246c.
[19] Plato, *Timaeus* 69c and 44d-e.
[20] Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a. Interestingly, a similar analogy appears in Indian philosophy in the *Katha* Upanishad 3.3 ff.
[21] Plato, *Republic* 4.435c.
[22] Ibid., 4.439d-e; 4.440e-441a. Socrates further compares the three to a shepherd (the rational part), his sheep (the non-rational desiring part), and the sheepdogs (the spirited part) that help the shepherd guide the sheep (see ibid., 4.440d).
[23] Plato, *Gorgias* 464b and *Republic* 3.404e.
[24] Plato, *Phaedrus* 245e.
[25] Plato, *Republic* 1.353d.
[26] Ibid., 4.441e; 4.442a-c. "Wise" is *sophos*, the adjectival form of *sophia* (wisdom).
[27] Plato, *Euthydemus* 280b. Wisdom is *sophia*.
[28] Plato, *Republic* 4.441e; 4.442a-c. Courage is *andreia*.
[29] Ibid., 4.430e; 4.431a. Moderation is *sōphrosunē*. Self-control is *enkrateia*.
[30] Ibid., 3.389d-e.
[31] Ibid., 4.432a.
[32] Ibid., 4.442c-d.
[33] Ibid., 4.433a-b. Though this definition of justice is intended for justice in general, it may equally be applied to the soul and its parts. Justice is *dikaiosunē*.
[34] Ibid., 4.443d-e.
[35] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 3.90-91. Rather than Plato's use of *sophia* for wisdom, Diogenes Laertius uses *phronēsis* (what Aristotle terms "practical wisdom.)"
[36] Plato, *Laws* 4.718c.
[37] Plato, *Meno* 99e-100a.
[38] Plato, *Republic* 7.518d-519a. We may expand "habit and practice" to training. If health is produced in the body by physical training or exercise, then health of the soul—virtue—may be assumed to be cultivated, in some measure, by soul training or exercise. For physical training (*gumnastikos*) see Plato, *Republic* 3.404e.
[39] Plato, *Phaedo* 82a-c.

[40] Plato, *Symposium*, 211d-212a.
[41] Plato, *Republic* 4.444b.