

Aretē: Excellence or Virtue

Reading 15 – Plotinus

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"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

The Classics Cave • www.theclassicscave.com

Reading 15

Plotinus

Reading 15

Thanks for supporting The Classics Cave.
Please visit and support our sponsors.

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 Plotinus thought and said about *aretē* (excellence or virtue).

PLOTINUS (C. 205-270 AD) WAS A philosopher from Lycopolis (Egypt). After studying with the Alexandrian philosopher Ammonius Sacca, and after attempting a journey to Mesopotamia with the Roman emperor Gordian, Plotinus eventually made his way to Rome, where he set up a school and gave talks and held conferences.

Plotinus is known for what historians call Neoplatonism (a development of Plato's philosophy), the system of philosophy that appears in the *Enneads*, a work written by Plotinus but gathered and arranged

by his student Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234-305 AD).

Significant ideas include the absolutely transcendent One beyond all speech and distinctions. From the One emanates Thought or Mind; from Mind proceeds Soul; and from Soul come individual human souls. These souls plunge into the material world of bodies and matter. The ultimate goal for humans is to return to the One by means of a number of stages that pass beyond sense-perception and discursive thought to mystical union with the One. The wise and virtuous man, therefore, will orient himself to the Su-

preme and thus toward happiness, which is fullness of life. Consequently, virtue is crucial to Plotinus' philosophical program of life (for a summary of Plotinus' view of aretē, see the end of the chapter).

The following lengthy selection comes from Plotinus' treatise *On the Virtues* (found in *Enneads* 1.2). It presents Plotinus' major thinking about virtue and its

significance in moving toward happiness and the Supreme.

Note: this is the only passage we present from Plotinus. Consequently, there is no explanatory commentary as Plotinus' own train of thought, however obscure at times, is sufficient.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Since evils are here in this realm, and since these evils "prowl about this realm by necessity," and since the soul wishes to flee these evils, then "we must flee from this realm."

But what is the nature of this flight we must take? Plato says that it is in becoming like god—like the divinity. And this, he says, is found if one "is becoming just and holy, and in one who is beginning to live by means of practical wisdom"—which is to say the whole of virtue.

But does not likeness in virtue imply likeness to some being that possesses virtue? What god, or divine being, then, would we be like? Presumably, we would be like the being who, above all, possesses such virtue—that is, the soul of the cosmos, the world soul, and the ruling principle within it, the principle endowed with a most wonderful practical wisdom. What could be more fitting than that we, living in this world, should become like its ruler?

Nevertheless, to begin with, we are confronted with the question of whether virtues are even to be found in this divine being—moderation of desires, for instance, or courage. As for courage, nothing can truly harm this being, and so it has nothing to fear. And as for moderation, no pleasant thing could possibly exist that would stir up longing desire when present or absent.

If, in fact, the desire for the intelligibles that is in our nature also exists in this being, then we do not need to look anywhere else for the source of order and of the virtues within ourselves.

But the question remains: does this being possess the virtues?

We cannot expect to find within this being what

are spoken of as the virtues related to the social order—the practical wisdom that has to do with the rational part of our nature; the courage that has to do with the spirited, passionate part of our nature; the moderation that has to do with a certain agreement, a concord between the desiring part of our nature and the reasoning part; or the justice that has to do with the due application of all the other virtues as each in turn should command or obey. . . .

Now, if we admit that likeness is possible—even though by a varying use of different virtues, and even though the virtues related to the social order are not sufficient—then there is no reason why we should not, by virtues that are still our own, achieve likeness to a being in which virtue has no place. But how?

Here's a way to understand it. When anything is warmed by the presence of fire, the fire itself does not need to be heated by the presence of another fire. It might be argued that there is heat in the fire—but it is a heat that is inherent. Reasoning by analogy, then, virtue in the soul comes from the outside, whereas the virtue of the being by which we are virtuous is inherent, an essential aspect of the being.

Against this illustration drawn from fire, it may be urged that the analogy would make this being identical with virtue, whereas we hold it to be something higher.

The objection would be valid if what the soul takes in were one and the same with the source. But in fact virtue is one thing, and the source of virtue is another. The house that is in the material, sense-realm is not identical with the idea of the house conceived in the intellect. Even so it stands in its likeness. The material, sense-realm house has proportion and or-

der, while the pure idea is not constituted of any such elements. Proportion, order, and symmetry are not parts of an idea.

So it is with us. It is from the supreme being that we derive order and proportion and harmony, which are virtues in this realm. But since the Supreme is not lacking harmony, order, or proportion, it has no need for virtue. Nevertheless, it is by our possession of virtue that we become like the Supreme. Such is our demonstration that human assimilation to the Supreme by means of virtue does not necessarily involve the presence of virtue in the Supreme itself. Even so, we need more than a formal demonstration. We must persuade as well as demonstrate.

Let us first examine the virtues by which we say likeness comes. And let us discover what the nature of this thing is, which, as we possess it—as image or copy—is virtue, but as the Supreme possesses it—as model or archetype—is not virtue.

We must first distinguish two modes of likeness or assimilation. The first entails such identity of nature as exists when both like things proceed from the same principle. The second is that of one thing to another that precedes it as its principle. In the latter case, there is no reciprocity. The principle does not resemble that which comes after it; rather, the resemblance must be thought about in an entirely different manner. It does not require that similar objects be of the same kind. Instead, it implies that they are of different kinds inasmuch as they resemble each other differently.

What, then, is virtue—both the whole of virtue and each one? The clearest way forward will be to look at a particular virtue first. Then it will be easy to determine the common essence underlying them all.

The above-mentioned virtues related to the social order lend our souls order and beauty as long as we live. They improve our souls by limiting and regulating our desires and regulating every feeling. They dispel false judgment, deliver us from incorrect views—and this by sheer efficacy of the better, by the very setting of the bounds, by the fact that the regulated or measured is lifted outside of the sphere of the unmeasured and lawless.

This measure given to our souls resembles the form given to matter, and the proportion of intelligible things. It is, as it were, a trace of what is most perfect above. What is unmeasured—since it is no more than measureless matter—cannot in any way resemble divinity. The greater the participation in form, the greater the likeness or assimilation to the formless divinity. The closer we get to form, the greater the participation therein. So it is that the soul, whose nature is closer to the divinity and more alike it than the body is, participates more in the divine and increases that resemblance enough to make it seem that the divinity is all that the soul itself is. This is how the deception comes about that represents the soul itself as the divinity, falsely holding that the soul is the whole of the divine.

So then, this is how virtues related to the social order become like the divine.

We come now to another mode of likeness that is, we read in Plato, the fruit of the higher virtues. In discussing this, we will better understand the nature of the virtues related to the social order, and the higher virtues, and the difference between them.

Plato is evidently making a distinction between two kinds of virtue when he states that “assimilation to the divinity” consists in “a divine flight” from this realm, and when he adds the qualification “for the citizen” to the virtues related to the social order, and when, in another place, he asserts that all the virtues are processes of purification. It is clear from this that he is distinguishing two kinds of virtue and that assimilation to the divine does not follow from the virtues related to the social order.

But in what sense can we call the virtues purifications? And how does purification result in likeness or assimilation to the divine?

It is in this sense: the soul is evil to the extent that it is confused with the body—when it shares in the body’s feelings and experiences and thinks the body’s thoughts. By contrast, the soul possesses good and virtue if it does its work alone and does not think the body’s thoughts (for the soul, this is thinking and living according to practical wisdom); and if it does not share in the body’s feelings and experiences (for

the soul, this is being moderate, showing self-control); and if it does not fear separation from the body (for the soul, this is being courageous); and if reason and intelligence lead the way without opposition (for the soul, this is justice or rectitude). When the soul is disposed in this manner, it thinks dispassionately. This disposition of the soul may be called likeness or assimilation to the divinity since the divinity is pure as is its work. The one who imitates it in this manner, then, possesses practical wisdom.

But it is not the divinity that possesses such a disposition, for dispositions are only the property of souls. Moreover, the soul thinks in one way, and the divine being in another. . . . The divinity's thought is a primary principle from which our thought is derived and differs. As a spoken word is an image of a thought in the soul, so is a thought in the soul an image of the divinity's thought. . . . In the same way, then, virtue is in the soul. Virtue does not belong to the supreme mind or to that which is beyond.

But now we must investigate whether this purification is the same as virtue, or whether, purification leading the way, virtue comes after it. Does virtue consist in being pure or in the process of becoming pure?

The process itself is incomplete relative to being pure, which is at present the goal. Being pure is the removal of everything alien to the soul. But the good itself is something else—something more.

If one was good before one was impure, then purification would suffice. But if purification suffices in this manner, then what remains is the good and not the purification. We must, therefore, investigate what it is that remains.

The good cannot have the same nature of whatever it is that remains. This is so because the good cannot come to be with an evil thing.

Should we say, then, that what remains is that which is like the good, that which *seems* good? Yes, for it is unable to remain in the good since it goes both ways—both toward good and toward evil.

Coming together with what is like it is the good itself, whereas coming together with its opposite is evil. So then, it must purify itself and come together

with what is like it. This coming together is a turning around, a conversion.

So then, does this conversion occur after the purification? No. The turning around happens at the same time as the purification.

Is virtue, then, a conversion? No, virtue is the result of the conversion.

So then, what is this turning? That it sees. That it receives the impression of the thing perceived just as the eye receives the impression of the thing seen.

But wasn't this always there? Wasn't it merely forgotten? Yes—what it now sees it most definitely always possessed, yet it possessed it as though it was lying in the dark, inactive. Light was required to drive away the darkness and come to know it was there. Thus, it must be thrown into the light. . . .

We must now speak about the extent of the purification. With this, the nature of likeness to the divine being will become clear.

The question is substantially this: how far is purification able to go to dispel desire and longing and every other thing like this, as well as grief and everything like it? And to what degree is the soul able to separate itself from the body?

Separation simply means that the soul withdraws to its own place. It will be without feeling. It will make use of necessary pleasures and all the activity of the senses only for the restoration and health of the body, and to be released from bodily distress, so that it may not be troubled, but the suffering is removed. If such is not possible, then the soul gently endures the suffering and makes it smaller by not giving in to it—by not feeling with it. Desire, whether for or against, is removed. If possible, all passionate desire. But if not, at least it does not allow these desires to run wild. Rather, it regulates the involuntary to the body where it becomes small and weak.

The soul has nothing to fear, though doubtlessly there will be an occasional involuntary feeling of fear. Sometimes, though, fear serves as a warning, an admonition. And what about longing? Whatever there is, it is clear that it is never for anything bad. It won't even hold within itself the longing for the food and drink that restores—nor for those things belonging to

Aphrodite. And if it does desire, it has desire only for natural things, I suppose, and not without deliberation or purpose. And if any indeliberate desire does take place, it'll go no further than the imagination and will be no more than a fleeting thing.

But the soul itself is spotless when it comes to all of these and wishes to purify the irrational so that it will not be confused—or at least to make the incidence of confusion smaller and infrequent given the proximity of that which is straight, just as a man who is neighbors with a wise man will benefit from the proximity of the wise man and becomes like him. At the very least he feels shame, daring to do nothing that the good man does not wish to do.

So then, there is no battle in the soul since it is enough that the reasoning part is present. The inferior part of the soul stands in awe of and respects the reasoning part—so much so, that for any movement contrary to the reasoning part, the inferior part is vexed and censures its own weakness for not having remained quiet in the presence of its master.

So then, not one of these things are failures—not one is a sin since the human being has been set straight, he's reformed. But the object of attention is not merely to flee from failures, but it is to be divine, god. . . .

What form, then, does each virtue take in such a one? Wisdom and practical wisdom consist in the contemplation of all that exists in the Intelligence, the divine Mind—that which the Intelligence knows by direct contact, without mediation.

Each virtue is twofold—one in the Intelligence and one in the soul. That which is in the Intelligence is not virtue, but that which is in the soul is virtue.

So then, what is it in the Intelligence? It is its act and its essence. The act and essence of the Supreme, manifested in a new way in this realm, is virtue. The Supreme is not justice itself or the absolute of each

virtue. Rather, it is the exemplar—the pattern, model, the blueprint—the source of what is virtue in the soul. . . .

But if justice is really taking care of one's own affairs, that is, carrying out one's own proper function, then does justice always involve many parts? The justice appropriate to what involves many parts does, but not justice in itself. It can be one. Justice that is true, justice revealed, justice in itself is one to itself—a unity in which there is no this, that, or the other.

In this way, the higher justice in the soul is to act in a way that is oriented toward the Supreme, to the Intelligence; the higher moderation is that internal turning toward the Supreme; the higher courage is a freedom from emotion that is similar to the characteristic lack of feeling of the Supreme toward which the soul looks—but which the soul must gain by means of virtue so that it will not suffer along with the inferior part dwelling within. . . .

In the soul, wisdom and practical wisdom are the seeing, the vision, of the Intelligence. . . .

Plotinus recognizes the need for adaptation and that one improves. . . .

And as one reaches to higher principles and other standards, these in turn will serve as the measure for what he does. From this point on, he does not limit moderation to the regulation of things desired, but, insofar as he is able, he is separated from the whole of life, even the life of a conventionally good human being that is directed by the virtues related to the social order. He lets go of all this, choosing another life in its place, the life of the gods. He advances toward the gods, not toward good human beings or toward the likeness of them. Likeness to good human beings is similar to the likeness one image has to another image . . . But likeness to the other is likeness to the model itself.¹

SUMMARY OF ARETĒ FOR PLOTINUS

For Plotinus, virtue is the means by which we humans are assimilated to the Supreme, the divine; it is the path by which we “flee from this realm,” this material,

sensible realm, which is full of evils, and make our way to the divine realm. Though virtue is not in the Supreme (as the Supreme does not long for things or

READING 15 ▪ PLOTINUS

fear things, for instance, and therefore there is no need for moderation or courage), the Supreme nevertheless serves as the archetype or model of virtue. Virtue itself is an image or copy. Consequently, in being virtuous, we reflect and thus manifest the Supreme.

Traveling along the path of virtue first requires a conversion or turning around that involves seeing in a new manner that is facilitated by abundant light. Conversion occurs simultaneously with purification, which dispels various desires and feelings, and separates the soul from the body, allowing the soul to withdraw “to its own place.”

In terms of virtue, which Plotinus calls “the result

of conversion,” the path is twofold, corresponding to two goals or goods. One is the goal of becoming a “conventionally good human being.” The virtues that aim at and achieve this goal are what Plotinus calls “the virtues related to the social order” (what some give as “civic virtues”). These virtues “improve our souls by limiting and regulating our desires and regulating every feeling.” The higher virtues, by contrast, aim at and directly achieve assimilation to the divine. With them we become godlike, the other goal.

As for specific virtues, Plotinus names and describes practical wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice.

So ends Reading 15. **See you in Reading 16, “Lucian of Samosata”** (from Part 3: Comic Interlude).

NOTES

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.2.1-7.

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

“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

The Classics Cave ▪ www.theclassicscave.com



THE CLASSICS CAVE
The earliest light for a brighter life
www.theclassicscave.com

