

Chapter Title: The “Ladder of Virtues” in Neoplatonism: Stages of a Spiritual Process of Purification

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Book Title: Ageless Arete

Book Subtitle: Selected Essays from the 6th Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Hellenic Heritage of Sicily and Southern Italy

Book Editor(s): Heather L. Reid, John Serrati

Published by: Parnassos Press — Fonte Aretusa. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2w8kbh9.19>

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R. Loredana Cardullo<sup>1</sup>  
**The “Ladder of Virtues” in Neoplatonism:  
Stages of a Spiritual Process of Purification<sup>2</sup>**

***Aretē* from Plato to Neoplatonism**

It is not easy to translate the ancient Greek word *aretē* into a modern language, and any choice made—such as goodness, excellence, or virtue in English—does not fully convey the wide range of meanings that the concept acquired in ancient times, from the Archaic era to late antiquity. Normally, we would translate it as “virtue,” but this translation immediately suggests an ethical-ascetic-Christian dimension, present in the Latin *virtus* but clearly absent in the ancient Greek sense of *aretē*. Since the time of the Homeric heroes and myths, in the pagan Greek world, *aretē* indicated the “excellence” of the warrior in a secular sense: the valor shown in battle by the strong and violent man, whose excellent qualities—superior to those of ordinary men—consisted in his physical beauty, vigor, and success acquired in the arena of war. Therefore, *aretē* referred to a quality that was linked to power and beauty, and to the honor and glory gained in battle—that is, to the external and physical traits of man.

Only since Plato did the concept of *aretē* undergo a semantic shift, so to speak, from describing the external features of a man to his interiority. The idea of a virtuous man has changed from one who excels in physical beauty or fighting skills to one with quite different qualities: the ability to put order and proportion in his

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank the editors and, in particular, Ryan Brown and Heather L. Reid for their careful revision of this paper.

soul (*Republic*, Book 4);<sup>3</sup> the emulation of intelligible and eternal models; the ability to practice the art of death, i.e., the subjugation of the life of the body to that of the soul (*Phaedo* 67d-e);<sup>4</sup> and the capacity to be as much like a god as possible (*Theaetetus* 176a8-b2).<sup>5</sup> From its original “agonistic” and “combative” sense, referring to physical prowess, *aretē* took on a philosophical, ethical, and metaphysical meaning, becoming more and more connected to the incorporeal and psychic sphere of mankind.

With the Neoplatonists, however, *aretē* came to designate a still higher status, no longer indicating simply moral excellence, but instead a *habitus*<sup>6</sup> that became closer and closer to the divine. This *habitus* was thought to be obtained through a long and constant work on oneself, through a construction of the self aimed

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<sup>3</sup> It is above all *sōphrosyne* and *dikaiosyne* that bring order to the soul. See Arianna Fermani, *Attività e virtù: anima e corpo in Aristotele* (Milano: Unicopli, 2021), 146-71; Silvia Gastaldi, *Sophrosyne*, in *Platone, La Repubblica*, ed. Mario Vegetti (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to the exercise of death (the μελέτη θανάτου) practiced by true philosophers, that is, the liberation and separation of the soul from the body, which does not consist of suicide but a different way of living. On philosophy as a way of life, see Pierre Hadot.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 176a5-b2: “Yes, Theodoros, but evil cannot disappear, for there must always be something opposite and contrary to good; nor can it have its seat among the gods but must of necessity wander about on this earth and around our mortal nature. That is why we must also endeavor to flee from here as soon as possible in order to go up there. And this fleeing is as close to being a god as a man can get (φυγή δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῶν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν); and to resemble a god is to acquire righteousness and holiness, and wisdom at the same time (ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὄσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι).” Translations of are mine, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> The Latin word *habitus* alludes to the philosophical meaning of the Greek term *hexis* (“possession,” a noun derived from the verb *echō* “to have”), which, in Aristotelian ethics, indicates a status characterized by the possession of ethical virtues, which become a habit, thus similar to a sort of “virtuous dress” that one possesses and wears when they have acquired, by habit, a type of excellent behavior.

at the purification of the soul and its total detachment from the body, by which the soul is prepared to undertake the path of ascent and return (*anagōgē, epistrophē*) to the First Principle.

Therefore, it should be made clear at the outset that the term *virtue* can be used to render the meaning of *aretē* in the ancient Greek world, provided that it is understood in its broader meaning of complete and excellent fulfillment of one's specific function (*ergon*), a condition that can also be achieved in the case of an object (i.e. a cloak, a ship, or a house which fulfills its purpose can be virtuous), an animal (a horse that runs fast is virtuous), or a bodily organ (an eye that sees perfectly possesses the virtue of sight). Only later does it take on a semantic ethical value, and then a metaphysical and theological one, pertaining only to the human being.<sup>7</sup> This semantic shift of the concept of *aretē* from an ethical-political perspective towards an increasingly religious dimension is particularly evident in Neoplatonism, the last phase of the ancient Platonic tradition, which is the focus of this article.

### ***Aretē* in Neoplatonism**

Starting from the Platonic conception of virtue but going beyond the ethical-political sphere to which Plato limited himself, the Neoplatonists created a veritable "ladder of virtues," each step of which would repurpose the four cardinal virtues of the *Republic* but defined in an increasingly lofty and spiritual way. This ladder offered young disciples of the school a path of moral elevation, the goal of which would be the highest point of the universe, the Supreme One—the original divine transcendent source from which everything comes and to which everything must return.

The cornerstones of the Platonic doctrine of *aretē*, understood as "excellence" of character expressed in the practical action of the philosopher, thus remained as foundational principles in Neoplatonism, but in this late phase of the Platonic tradition, the

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle states in *Eudemian Ethics* 2.1, 1218b37-1219a2 that *aretē* is "the disposition or habitual state or best power of each of those things of which there is a use or a function (ἔργον)." Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.5, 1106a 14-24, *Eudemian Ethics* 2.1, 1218b 37-38.

ethical scenario changed radically, merging with metaphysics and theology while the political sphere was almost totally abandoned. As Father Saffrey pointed out, in Neoplatonism philosophy itself becomes theology and the activity of the philosopher is configured as a continuous liturgy.<sup>8</sup> Everything is aimed at finding in Plato's words the theological truths and moral teachings that can help the disciple purify his soul and elevate it towards the First Principle, the One-Good from which all reality derives and to which everything must return. The different steps of neoplatonic "aretaic ladder" correspond to the same number of progressive stages of the process of moral and spiritual training that the man must go through to purify his soul, free it from bodily pleasures as well as the dangerous temptations of the sensible world, and then to bring it back up towards the divine. Moreover, just as Neoplatonism has different trends and schools<sup>9</sup> which sometimes contrast with one another, in the same way, the theme of the virtues presents substantial theoretical variations in the different Neoplatonic schools that succeeded each other from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

For all the philosophers of the Platonic tradition, virtue is the means by which the final goal of every human being is realized. This final goal is to live a good and happy life and return to the supreme principle. Accordingly, the Neoplatonists devote a great deal of space to the elaboration of this doctrine in their lessons and writings. Plotinus dedicates a treatise to it, *Enneads* 1. 2 (*On the Virtues*); Porphyry illustrates the "ladder" in *Sententiae* n. 32; Iamblichus had composed a treatise on the subject in the form of a

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<sup>8</sup> Henri D. Saffrey, "Quelques aspects de la spiritualité des philosophes néoplatoniciens," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 68 (1984): 169-82; "Les débuts de la théologie comme science," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 80 (1996): 201-20.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Praechter "Richtungen und Schulen im Neuplatonismus" in *Genethliakon. Carl Robert zum 8. März, 1910* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910), 103-56 (reprinted in *Kleine Schriften*, ed. H. Dörrie [Hildesheim: Olms, 1973], 165-216), uses this term to refer to the long development of this school from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE, expanding geographically and giving rise to various trends.

letter, now lost, to which Proclus—the most important exponent of Neoplatonism after Plotinus—refers in many of his works, enriching this important doctrine with new details and handing it down to subsequent centuries.

The main distinction that separates philosophers within the Neoplatonic tradition on the subject of virtue lies in the novel adherence of the post-Plotinians, especially Iamblichus and Proclus, to the Chaldean and Orphic religious culture. In a passage from his *Commentary on the Phaedo* (123.4), Damascius, the last exponent of Greek Neoplatonism, attests to and sanctions this doctrinal shift by classifying Plotinus and Porphyry as “philosophers” and Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus as “hieratics,” i.e., priests of a philosophy that has become theology. In particular, it is theurgy (a magical practice applied to the divine and conveyed by the *Chaldean Oracles* with a Pythagorean vision of Platonic philosophy absent at the beginning of Neoplatonism) that distances Iamblichus and Proclus from Plotinus. The conviction that philosophy alone, understood as intellectual and purely contemplative speculation, is insufficient to unite with the principle, but theurgical practices and a more operative approach to the divine are necessary, inaugurated a new course in post-Plotinian Neoplatonism. It also brought about a new conception of virtue, no longer considered merely as a means of purifying the soul and contemplating the divine, but as a way to increase the involvement of the divine itself—solicited through the theurgist’s prayers and practices—in man’s ethical and theological path.

### The “ladder of virtues” in Neoplatonism

[...] but God, if you talk about him without true virtue,  
is only a name. (Plotinus *Enneads* 2.9 [33] 15, 39)

There is no sin in anything of this sort for a man, but  
only right action. Our concern, though, is not to be out of  
sin, but to be god. (Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.2 [19] 6, 1-3)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> All the translations of Plotinus’s text are by Arthur H. Armstrong, *Plotinus. Enneads* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989-90).

Plotinus deals extensively with the subject of the virtues in treatise 1.2 of the *Enneads*, the 19<sup>th</sup> in chronological order, titled Περί ἀρετῶν (*On the Virtues*). Its composition dates from a period before Porphyry's arrival in Rome, but not from the earliest stages of Plotinian thought. However, in the Porphyrian edition, it appeared among the initial writings on ethical issues in the first *Ennead*—which marked it as dealing with “lighter” issues.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it was considered by critics until recently as a simple treatise on an exclusively moral subject. In reality, despite its brevity, the treatise *On the Virtues*, like the other treatises Plotinus wrote in the same period, contains important teachings that are closely connected with difficult metaphysical and theological questions, such as the nature of soul and its relation to the intelligible realm; intelligible forms; and dialectic method as a bridge for going back to divine.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this short but very insightful treatise shows us how the moral perspective in Neoplatonism—while taking its cue from the doctrinal outlines provided by Plato in the dialogues—is fueled by a new metaphysical-theological vision distinct from any other Platonic doctrine conceived until then. With specific regard to the theme of virtues, if the goal of man is to “become similar to a God,” as Plato said in *Theaetetus* 176b1-2, and if this goal can be achieved by escaping this world full of evil “by becoming just and holy men with wisdom” (176b2-3), it is clear that even for Plotinus and all the Neoplatonists, the virtues indicated by Plato continue to represent the necessary means for this assimilation.

However, already in Plotinus there is the need for a higher level of virtue, and a further path of introspection and conversion of the self toward the intelligible, which paves the way for what will become a veritable ladder of virtues. Starting with the four political or civic virtues of *Republic* 6 500b-d (*andreia*, *sōphrosynē*, *phronēsis*, and *dikaiosynē*), Plotinus demonstrates that they are necessary but not sufficient to achieve assimilation to god; indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> See Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 24, 16-17, which says that, in his editorial organization of the 54 treatises, the lighter issues were placed first.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent study on *Enneads* 1.2, see Giovanni Catapano, *Plotino. Sulle virtù, I 2 [19]*, Edizioni Plus (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006).

civic virtues (*politikai*) are indispensable to achieve order and proportion in the soul (*metriopatheia*), but they are not sufficient to achieve the ultimate goal—becoming like a god—since to attain this, man needs to acquire even higher virtues, since the goal is not to be a man who lives a good life down here (1.2, 7, 25), but to “be a god” (1.2, 6, 2-3).<sup>13</sup> These higher-level virtues retain the names of the civic virtues—courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice—but take on a new meaning, no longer related to the parts of the soul but to the contemplation of the intellect. Plotinus calls them *katharseis* (purifications), but claims that Plato himself had alluded to this higher type of virtue in some passages of his dialogues: i.e., in *Phaedo* (67e-69d), where he mentions the specific virtues of the philosophers, and in the *Theaetetus* (176a-b), when he speaks of “escape from the world” as the realization of a total detachment of the soul from the body and the world, achievable only with a type of virtue superior to civil virtues. Plotinus makes this explicit in the following passage (*Enneads* 1.2, 3, 1-10):

But, since Plato indicates that likeness is different as belonging to the greater virtue, we must speak about that different likeness. In this discussion the real nature of the civic virtue will become clear, and we shall also understand what is the virtue which is greater than it in its real nature, and in general that there is another kind different from civic virtue. Plato, when he speaks of “likeness” as a ‘flight to God’ from existence here below, and does not call the virtues which come into play in civic life just “virtues,” but adds the qualification “civic,” and elsewhere calls all the virtues “purifications,” makes clear that he postulates two kinds of virtues and does not regard the civic ones as producing likeness.

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<sup>13</sup> To be precise, one of the gods who comes immediately after the First (1.2, 6-7). Plotinus’s reference is to the eleven hosts of gods and demons that follow Zeus’s winged chariot as described in Plato, *Phaedrus* 246e-47a.



According to Plotinus's interpretation, the civic and purifying virtues are both images of higher, paradigmatic virtues based in the hypostatic Intellect;<sup>14</sup> only by contemplating (*thea*) these intelligible patterns will the soul, now purified and virtuous, be able to live the divine life of pure contemplation (*theōria*). The soul that has acquired these higher virtues, having become emotionless like the intellect, will be able to think without hindrance. It is in this that the assimilation to god lies.<sup>15</sup> In a soul thus purified, both theoretical and practical wisdom consist in the "contemplation of what is contained in the intellect" (ἐν θεωρίᾳ ὧν νοῦς ἔχει); justice is soul's "activity toward the intellect" (τὸ πρὸς νοῦν ἐνεργεῖν); temperance is its "turning inwardly to the intellect" (ἡ εἴσω πρὸς νοῦν στροφή), after eliminating desires; courage is "freedom from the emotions, according to the likeness of that to which the soul looks" (ἀπάθεια καθ' ὁμοίωσιν τοῦ πρὸς ὃ βλέπει).

Therefore, Plotinus goes beyond Plato by distinguishing two kinds of virtue. The first kind, linked to the sensible world, are indispensable for setting a measure and limit to the desires and impulses of the irrational soul; these correspond to Plato's civic virtues. The second, of a purifying nature, are characteristic of a superior, purely contemplative dimension, reserved for that part of the human soul which has never descended from the intelligible and which constitutes our true self.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> However, these paradigms are not themselves virtues since the divine intellect is not "virtuous," but the cause of virtue in the soul (1.2, 1, 31-50; 1.3, 22-24; 1.6, 18-19). Virtue pertains only to the two parts of the human soul, the one bound to the body (the civic virtues), and the one always remaining in the intelligible (the purifying virtues).

<sup>15</sup> 1.2, 3, 19-22: "one would not be wrong in calling this state of the soul likeness to God, in which its activity is intellectual, and it is free in this way from bodily affections. For the divine too is pure, and its activity is of such a kind that that which imitates it has wisdom."

<sup>16</sup> The Plotinian doctrine of virtues appears strongly aporetic, especially since it depends on the theory of the "undescended soul" and an underlying ethical intellectualism that devalues activity in acquiring

Porphyry formalized and developed this Plotinian theory but structured the virtues on a scale of four levels, the highest three of which were intended as further specifications of the purifying virtues, which for Plotinus had constituted the second and final degree. Porphyry retained the political virtues, moderators of the passions and propaedeutic to *katharseis*, at the base of his "ladder," but then he divided and distinguished the purifying virtues into three further levels. He placed the theoretical or contemplative virtues (thanks to which the soul is fully purified) above the properly purifying virtues, which determine the detachment of the soul from the body by setting conditions for contemplation. Above the virtues properly called purifying and contemplative virtues, rest the paradigmatic or exemplary virtues. These are the absolute intelligible models of every virtue, at which the soul gazes, filling itself with them, once it has been assimilated to the intellect.

Like Plotinus, Porphyry considered the political virtues to be limited to a lower ontological level and merely human; likewise, Porphyry believed that the "purifications" are the only virtues that enable the assimilation to god because they pertain to a dimension of the self that is superior to the one still subject to the pressures of the body.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the good man aims at a higher ontological level,

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virtues and happiness. Plotinus is uninterested in the political dimension virtue, which in Plato, if not prioritized, is parallel with their psychological dimension. See Dominic O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), 43: "Plotinus is concerned with good order in the inner life of the soul, as defined in the *Republic*, neglecting, however, the outer order between citizens that Plato also describes in the *Republic* in terms of the cardinal virtues." Cf. Riccardo Chiaradonna, "Esiste un'etica nella filosofia di Plotino?", in *Il senso della virtù*, eds P. Donatelli and E. Spinelli (Rome: Carocci, 2009); John Dillon, "An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. L. Gerson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 314-35.

<sup>17</sup> O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 45: "They govern a life according to human nature, whereas the higher virtues, relating to the intellect, represent

at which point he can ascend to different degrees of “divinization:” the man who acts according to the contemplative virtues (second level for Plotinus, third for Porphyry) is certainly a “god” (*theos*), but the one who rises to paradigmatic virtues (fourth and last level in Porphyry) is called “father of the gods” (*theōn patēr*). Edwards synthesizes this Porphyrian concept well, noting that it surpasses both the Platonic and Plotinian positions and echoing *Sententiae* 32,90-94: “To borrow more religious terms, the aspirant is first a man, then a daemon, then a god, and at the best, a father of gods.”<sup>18</sup>

### The “ladder of virtues” in the works of Iamblichus and Proclus.

Virtue is something simple and very similar to the divine itself, to which we say that the One especially belongs.

(Proclus, *In Rem Publicam Commentarii* 5.49, 26-27)

The turning point toward the definitive formulation and systematization of this important doctrine came with Iamblichus, a philosopher who had a profound effect on the physiognomy of Neoplatonism, both through the multiplication of the divine hypostases and the introduction of Pythagorean, oriental, and mystical cults and beliefs into the Plotinian speculative system. After Iamblichus, the Neoplatonic system would assume a completely different structure, more theological and practical than theoretical or contemplative, as it had been in its first Plotinian configuration. Indeed, if for Plotinus the conversion of the soul to

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assimilation to the divine (Porph. *Sent.* pp. 22, 1-23, 3; 25, 6-9).” Cf. Dirk Baltzly, “The Virtues and ‘Becoming Like God’: Alcinoos to Proclus,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2004), 297-321.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints. The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), xxxiii; Porphyry, *Sententiae* 32, 90-94: “[H]e who acts according to practical virtues is an honest man; he who acts according to cathartic virtues is a demonic man or even a good demon; he who acts only according to virtues directed to the mind is a god; and he who acts according to paradigmatic virtues is the father of gods.” Cf. Andrew Smith, *Porphyry’s Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition. A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 50.

the Principle is realized through a rational and contemplative path that is merely philosophical,<sup>19</sup> for the "hieratic" followers of Iamblichus, contemplation and intellectual speculation are not sufficient to achieve unifying contact with the divine, which must be done in an active way through theurgic practices and rituals.

In a series of letters recorded by Stobaeus, especially the 16<sup>th</sup>, which is an essay on virtues dedicated to Sopater, his favorite pupil, Iamblichus discusses the theme of virtues extensively, closely intertwining it with psychological and pedagogical-moral reflections. Other works fundamental to the reclassification of the virtues include the fragments of his lost *De Anima*, as well as the *Pythagorean Life*, the *Protrepticus*, the *De Mysteriis Aegyptorum*, and accounts of later authors such as Marinus, Damascius, and the anonymous author of the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*—an exponent of the second Neoplatonic school of Alexandria.<sup>20</sup> Although Iamblichus did not expound his doctrine of the virtues systematically in any of the writings known to us, it is nevertheless possible to trace its structure and details thanks to numerous direct and indirect sources. From the *Prolegomena* (26.30-32) we learn that, as opposed to previous philosophers, Iamblichus added a further level to the hierarchy of virtues, proposing a five-degree structure. In introducing Plato's philosophy as a manual, and after referring to the order of reading the twelve dialogues selected and included in the so-called canon of the divine Iamblichus (*Prolegomena* 26.16), the anonymous author ascribes to the philosopher a precise order of virtues, organized "according to a ladder" and achieved precisely through reading those twelve dialogues that exact order (from *Alcibiades I* to *Parmenides*). From the anonymous description, we see that Iamblichus orders the following five sets of virtues from bottom to top: natural (*physikai*),

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<sup>19</sup> Chiaradonna, "Esiste un'etica," 62 explains that: "in the doctrine of the *Enneads* there is no room for an extra-philosophical and extra-intellectual type of purification."

<sup>20</sup> On the contexts from which we may deduce the doctrine of the virtues, see Daniela P. Taormina and Rosa M. Piccione, *Giamblico. I frammenti delle epistole*. (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2010), esp. 227-71.

ethical (*ēthikai*), political (*politikai*), purifying (*kathartikai*), and contemplative (*theōretikai*).

However, we can add important evidence to this valuable testimony that enables us to integrate the outline provided by the anonymous author with two more types of virtues: paradigmatic (*paradeigmatikai*), and hieratic (*hieratikai*) or theurgical (*theourgikai*). Marinus, pupil and biographer of Proclus, attributes authorship of these latter types of virtues to Iamblichus, and Damascius confirms it in his commentary on the *Phaedo* (1.143-44):<sup>21</sup>

[Proclus] rose to the heights of the virtues accessible to the human soul, those that Iamblichus, the one inspired by the gods, excellently called theurgic. (Marinus *Vita Procli* 26.20-23)

The paradigmatic virtues [παραδειγματικαὶ ἀρεταί] are those of the soul which no longer contemplates the intellect (indeed, contemplation occurs in conjunction with a separation), but which has now established itself, by participation, in the intellectual being, which is the paradigm of all things. Therefore, these virtues are paradigmatic, because they are primarily the virtues of the intellect itself. Iamblichus adds these virtues [ταύτας δὲ προστίθησιν ὁ Ἰάμβλιχος] in his writings *On the Virtues* [...]. (Damascius, *In Phaedo* 1.143)

There are also the hieratic virtues [εἰσι καὶ ἱερατικαὶ ἀρεταί], which subsist in accordance with the deiform part of the soul and extend parallel to all the above virtues [i.e., natural, ethical, political, purifying, contemplative, and paradigmatic] in that the latter are in the sphere of being, while the hieratic virtues are specifically unifying [ἐνιαῖα γε ὑπάρχουσα]. Iamblichus makes these virtues known [καὶ ταύτας δὲ ὁ Ἰάμβλιχος ἐνδείκνυται], while

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Psellus also provides the same testimony, *Philosophica Minora* 2.3.18-19: “Iamblichus compiled a more complete catalog of virtues.”

Proclus and his people make them known more clearly.  
(Damascius, *In Phaedo* 1.144)

In a nutshell, Iamblichus's work was to summarize and harmonize together the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions on the concept of virtue and the role of the *aretē* in the formative process of mankind, with the Pythagorean culture on the one hand, and theurgical culture on the other. In this way, he went beyond the classical ethics, those of Plotinus and Porphyry, as well as earlier traditions by clearly distinguishing between philosophical virtues and theurgical virtues. If Plotinian ethics had already moved away from Platonic ethics in indicating to man a goal that was no longer merely ethical-political (an ordered and measured life in the *polis*, achieved thanks to the civil and cathartic virtues) but metaphysical-theological (becoming godlike, separating from one's body and world through intellectual contemplation), then with Iamblichus, the Plotinian perspective is also surpassed in its recognition that mere intellectual contemplation is not sufficient to obtain union with the divine. Instead, practices are required which act on and are appreciated and favored by the gods themselves. These include prayers, hymns, mystery ceremonies, consecration of statues with herbs and talismans, interpretation of symbols and signs, mediumistic practices, spells, propitiatory rites, all taken from mystical cultures, such as the Pythagorean and Chaldean.

Regarding, in particular, the doctrine of virtues, Iamblichus increased the number of steps on the “ladder” by distinguishing seven types of *aretai* (and not five, as the *Prolegomena* mistakenly testifies),<sup>22</sup> and definitively established the fact that virtue—understood as the “accomplished realization and right measure” (τελειότης καὶ εὐμετρία) of the soul—is a goal reached only on the last steps of the ladder, when the soul is fully purified and has

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<sup>22</sup> Damascius, *In Phaedo* 113, 14-15. On the doctrine of virtues in Iamblichus, see John Dillon and Wolfgang Polleichtner, eds, *Iamblichus of Chalcis, The Letters*, (Atlanta: SBL, 2009); Taormina and Piccione, *Giamblico*. See also O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 46-49.

achieved reunion with the divine, beyond the noetic sphere and through theurgical practices, as is clear from the *De Mysteriis*:

This [i.e., theurgy], then, is the only kind of mantic, which is undefiled and sacerdotal, and truly divine [...]. For in such a fashion arise, at the same time, both infallible truth in oracles and perfect virtue in souls [ἡ τελεία ἀρετή]. (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 3.31, 178.16-18, 179.6-8)

[...] it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all intellection (ὑπὲρ πάσαν νόησιν), and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 2.11, 96.13)

The more elaborate structure of Iamblichus's "ladder," in which each step is preparatory and all contribute to the process of the progressive divinization of man, is directly proportional to the complexity of the onto-metaphysical system of the master of the school of Apamea, a system which comprises multiple philosophical and religious principles of both Western and Eastern origin. This hierarchy finds confirmation and consolidation in Proclus, the *diadochos*<sup>23</sup> of the School of Athens, who refers to it especially in his commentaries on *Alcibiades I*, *Timaeus*, and *Republic*. The biography of Proclus, written by Marinus, is fundamental for understanding the central role played by virtues in late Neoplatonic ethics and the way the last Neoplatonic masters specified the virtues and taught their realization by example.

As is well known, rather than true biographies, Marinus's *Life of Proclus*, Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, and Damascius's *Life of Isidore*<sup>24</sup> are forms of praise for their masters written by affectionate followers, fictionalized tales in the style of encomiastic rhetorical literature and Christian hagiography. In particular, in the *Life of*

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<sup>23</sup> In late antiquity, Proclus was referred to as Διάδοχος, meaning that he was seen as Plato's successor in the chair of the Platonic school.

<sup>24</sup> On these biographies in light of the virtuous path doctrine, see Dominic J. O'Meara, "Patterns of Perfection in Damascius' Life of Isidorus," *Phronesis* 51 (2006): 74-90; Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*.

*Proclus*, Marinus describes his master's life as a virtuous path of progressive spiritual elevation toward the heights of theological excellence. This was achieved by Proclus through the acquisition of the entire catalog of virtues already indicated by Iamblichus, from ethical to theurgical virtues. These were acquired through a wide range of practical and ascetic behaviors, assiduously and systematically practiced: from commentary on philosophical and theological texts, to composition of hymns to the gods; from vigils, abstinences, and prayers, to implementation of miraculous actions, apotropaic and lustral rites, and the celebration of mystery cults.<sup>25</sup>

Hence, the *Life of Proclus* gives us a tangible example of the spiritual path that, according to Neoplatonic metaphysical ethics, leads man to beatitude. The chapters of Marinus's work deal with various types of virtues that Proclus acquired and their temporal scale. They start with the natural virtue pertaining to the body: sharpness of senses; and the natural virtues pertaining to the soul: facility for learning by heart and greatness of mind (*Life of Proclus* 3-6). They continue with ethical (*ivi* 6-13) and political virtues, among which, besides the four cardinal virtues, Marinus mentions liberality, solidarity, and friendship (*ivi* 14-17). The cathartic virtues follow, including moderation and self-control (*ivi* 18-21), then the contemplative virtues (*ivi* 22-25), and finally the theurgical virtues, including familiarity with the divine and sharing one's life with it (*ivi* 26-33).

It is a spiritual progression that involves, holistically, the entire make-up of the human being, from the body, affected by natural, ethical and political virtues, to the higher psychic and intellectual faculties, whose purification is preliminary to the *epistrophē*. It is a gradual existential path that Proclus exemplifies perfectly, both by living and operating in a virtuous manner, as Marinus testifies, and by exhorting his students to live a good and pure life, which begins with self-knowledge and ends with the full

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<sup>25</sup> The list of Proclus's virtues is in chap. 3 of the *Life of Proclus*: "First of all, therefore, dividing the virtues by genres – natural, ethical, and political – as well as those superior to these, that is, the cathartic and contemplative virtues and the so-called theurgic ones [...]."



acquisition of divine principles. As mentioned above, this itinerary had been defined by Iamblichus through his canon of twelve Platonic dialogues, which students of the Neoplatonic schools had to read and comment on in the classroom along with their teacher, according to a precise order, to be able to acquire the spiritual and philosophical-theological education which would make them perfect followers of Plato. For this reason, the Proclean commentaries on the Platonic dialogues included in the list are fundamental to the reconstruction of the stages of the moral path of purification assigned to the student. Therefore, also in the Proclean system, ethical-pedagogical reflection cannot disregard its metaphysical-theological structure; indeed, if the aim of man is—as Plato taught us—to realize the good in one’s own existence, and if this good consists in “making oneself similar to a god” (ὁμοίωσις τῷ θεῷ), then it is through the knowledge and the experience of the divine that such an aim can be fully realized.

At this point, far from the ethical intellectualism of Plotinus, for whom assimilating oneself to a god meant returning to the intelligible through one’s own rational resources and from there making the mystical leap toward the One-Good, the supreme god, Proclus—the exponent of a “theological philosophy” more similar to liturgy than a merely speculative path—populates his pantheon with numerous divinities: Olympic, oriental, and mystical, all reachable by man thanks to a universal *sympatheia*, which provides traces and signs of the divine scattered everywhere in the real world. From the Henads to the demons, passing through the hypercosmic and encosmic gods, vertical hierarchies of god-guides (a legacy of the *Phaedrus*), they form the interface between the human being and the One. Each of these deities can be worshipped and evoked with the appropriate mystical formulae, mediumistic and telestic techniques, prayers, and spells. Thus, the ethics of late Neoplatonism are inextricably intertwined with theology. The gods represent the model of the virtuous and happy life; it is in their emulation and in the unifying contact with them, attained with the highest virtues, that the happiness of man lies.