

Cathartic Arete in the Platonic Tradition

The Importance of Turning Within

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The Greek word 'arete' means excellence but is often translated as 'virtue' that is a suitable translation if understood in its fullest sense. Virtue is present when the possessor fully expresses what it is and is undisturbed by what it is not. In understanding what something is we will be led to an investigation of its causes, but where are causes to be found? If the material world is a realm of ultimate effects how successful can we be in discovering causes if the effects themselves are the only elements in our reasoning? The shifting complexity of the material world presents us with a constant difficulty. The effects we witness are never simple but composite, various qualities and characteristics combine and are ever in flux, confounding our efforts to perceive the causal realities that lie beneath. Cathartic arete, so denominated by the Platonic tradition, is the activity that assists in the perception of causal realities, as it is a turning within away from the uncertainty of generation towards the stability of being. It will be the purpose of this essay to explore how this activity of turning within contributes to the manifestation of true virtue in the human life.

In seeking to discover causes a productive line of enquiry for the human being is to begin with his or her own soul, for what causes can be closer than one's own? This essay assumes the existence of the human soul that may be understood by the reader as the conscious unity providing a continued identity amid the endless change of the world; the rational reflector that moves from unchanging idea to unchanging idea in its contemplations; and the self-motive impulse at the heart of every activity.

The Platonic tradition views the soul in terms of its various faculties, the two most obvious being the gnostic faculty that pursues truth through knowledge and reason, and the vital faculty that pursues beauty through the activity of life. A craftsman, for example, knows how to make a chair by virtue of the gnostic faculty and sets about making as beautiful a chair as possible by virtue of the vital faculty. However the picture is not complete, for if the gnostic faculty is not naturally adapted to *act*, and the vital faculty is not naturally adapted to *know*, how is it that the knowledge of 'chair' is transmitted to the activity of making a chair? The Platonic tradition has recognised that a connective and harmonising principle, denominated the spirited faculty, operates between the gnostic and the vital. Whilst not rational itself, it is responsive to reason and possesses an ordinative power over the vital faculty.

When the human soul is well ordered the gnostic faculty rules as only it can reason what is best for the individual; the vital faculty pursues the beautiful in life, such as sustenance, livelihood, reproduction and creative works etc; and the spirited faculty ensures that the vital activities are commensurate with reason. The need for sustenance provides a clear example: the vital faculty will pursue sustenance as a legitimate requirement for life, the

gnostic faculty will reason what foods are good and in what measure they should be eaten. Now the vital faculty, not being rational, cannot make the same distinctions between the truly good and the apparently good so when it urges for the consumption of unsuitable foods, or for over consumption, it is the spirited faculty, obedient to reason, that steps in and restrains the urge. Each faculty has its own virtue, brought forth through the expression of its essential nature. The virtue of the gnostic faculty is wisdom, by which the soul is led to truth. The virtue of the vital faculty is temperance, by which desires are rendered mild and activities become measured and beautiful. The virtue of the spirited faculty is fortitude, by which the soul is led to goodness and inordinate tendencies are repelled. The three faculties acting together as one bring forth the virtue of the whole, justice, and so when all four virtues are present the human being fully expresses its essential nature.

It may be agreed that humanity flourishes when these virtues are exercised without the impediments of vice, but in seeking to exercise a virtue must we not first come to understand it, at least in some degree? And if we look only to the world and our outward activity, i.e. to things that we are not, how successful can we be in gaining knowledge of our virtues? In Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates, conversing with Simmias on this very matter, observes that all men, except philosophers, are virtuous by a lack of virtue. For example, bravery and boldness come about not of their own accord but through a fear of the shame of cowardice, or moderation and restraint are employed not for their own good but in order to preserve other, more cherished pleasures. But for Socrates this is foolish virtue as he explains to Simmias:

But, O blessed Simmias, this is by no means the right road to virtue, to change pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains, fear for fear, and the greater for the lesser, like pieces of money: but that alone is the proper coin, I mean wisdom, for which all these ought to be changed. And indeed, for the sake of this, and with this every thing must in reality be bought and sold, both fortitude and temperance, justice, and, in one word, true virtue, which subsists with wisdom, whether pleasures and pains, and every thing else of this kind, are present or absent: but if these are separated from wisdom, and changed from one another, such virtue does not merit to be called even a shadowy description, but is in reality servile, and possesses nothing salutary and true. But that which is in reality true virtue is a purification from every thing of this kind; and temperance and justice, fortitude, and prudence itself, are each of them a certain purification.¹

For me this false exchange is very recognisable: I act moderately to avoid the pains of excess, or feeling the pains of excess I vow to live moderately; foolish mistakes result in resolutions to be more careful; bravery arises so as not to appear timid; unjust words produce guilty feelings and an effort to speak fairly. It seems that virtue becomes conspicuous by its absence, and this absence forms the foundation of virtuous behaviour. But can virtue such as this be lasting

¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 69. Thomas Taylor's translation.

and true? Or can we agree with Plato in saying that “such virtue does not merit to be called even a shadowy description”? If we can agree with Plato in this respect we are led to ask what he means by the “proper coin” of wisdom with which true virtue and everything in reality must be bought and sold.

Many will say that there are no *true* virtues and that they have no reality beyond what we, through our own conceptions, impart to them, and that the proof of this is demonstrated by the fact that everyone has their own shifting ideas about what constitutes a virtue. It is true that most people will have their own opinions or beliefs about what virtuous behaviour looks like, but this is not the same with the idea. The idea is the unchanging principle which allows us to agree, disagree and communicate about the particular virtue.

As an example we can consider justice: there are a great variety of views about what constitutes just behaviour, each person thinking and acting differently in accordance with their own conceptions. In fact, among human beings, nothing produces more disharmony and strife than disagreements about the nature of justice; no wonder if many are led to believe that justice itself has no stable reality. But if we consider further: each person’s conception of justice *seems* to embody the idea of justice and this seeming will be shaped by memories, belief structures, social norms, upbringing etc. But what is that same thing which each person feels is expressed in their version of justice? Perhaps we can say, in line with the Platonic tradition and as a working definition, that what one believes they see is *an appropriate distribution of goods*.

One person may believe that justice reaches no further than the laws of the natural world and that an appropriate distribution of goods is achieved by the domination of the weak by the strong. Another may believe that all men and women are equal and that an appropriate distribution of goods is achieved by the equal allocation of wealth. Yet another may believe that cleverness and guile are the best measures of worth and an appropriate distribution of goods is therefore achieved when the clever outwit the foolish. The thief may believe that it’s everyone for themselves and that right distribution lies in taking what you can. The priest may believe that we are all servants of God and right distribution is achieved when we obey scripture and give charitably. In every instance the individual's beliefs are referred to the unchanging idea of justice, or right distribution.

So if we accept this, or are at least intrigued by the possibility, how can we come to know true virtue “*which subsists with wisdom*” rather than its obscured effects in the world? This is where the work of the philosopher come to the fore. If we are to follow Socrates as lovers of wisdom we can consider true virtue as “a purification from everything of this kind”, but what is meant here by purification and what are the practicalities involved? Purifying virtue, or cathartic arete, is present when the human being finds full expression of themselves, *by themselves*. It is a turning within, away from the flux of the material world, towards the uninterrupted substance of the inner life, or soul. It involves, quite literally, a ‘letting go’ of what we are not and an assumption of what we truly are.

If we have need of drinking water, but all we have available is muddy water, then we must discover some way of purifying it. Perhaps we let it sit undisturbed for a time, or pass it

through a filter. In either case no judgement is being made about the mud other than it is not water, and as far as we're interested in the virtues of water, the mud will only confuse or prevent their manifestation. Likewise if we're aiming to know and manifest the virtues of the soul we must remove it from what it is not. This is not to suggest that impressions received from the body and the world are bad or of no value, or that the soul should never receive them, but in as far as they are not the soul they will hide and confuse her truth.

This letting go of what we are not, i.e. the body and its relationships with the world, is, of course, easier said than done, but it may be useful to consider the mechanism behind this attachment. Porphyry writes "The soul is bound to the body by a conversion to the corporeal passions; and again liberated by becoming impassive to the body", and also "Nature, indeed, bound the body to the soul; but the soul binds herself to the body"². This suggests that there are two attachments: nature attaching body to soul (through procreation) which is out of our control; and the soul attaching herself to body, which is an activity within our control. The soul forms its attachment by identifying with the body and its passions, and can dissolve the attachment by letting go of the identification. Perhaps an analogy can make these two attachments still clearer: Consider a child being lifted and carried through a busy and crowded place. The child has no choice in the matter, she must remain in the person's arms until they have cleared the crowd. Whilst the child must submit to being carried, there is no need for her to cling. If she clings through affection or fear, there will be great commotion and difficulty when it's time to be put down. Similarly, the more the soul clings to the body the more difficulty will be experienced during the cathartic process.

If we can recognise this tendency towards bodily attachment perhaps we can begin to see that the process of letting go and turning within is essential if we are to fully discover and manifest our true virtues. Proclus provides a beautiful description of the required process in his commentary on Plato's *First Alcibiades*:

In the first place, therefore, we must fly from "the multitude of men going along in a herd," as the oracle says, and must neither communicate with their lives, nor with their opinions. In the next place we must fly from multiform appetites, which divide us about body, and make us to be at different times impelled to different externals; at one time to irrational pleasures, and at another to actions indefinite, and which war on each other: for these fill us with penitence and evils. We must also fly from the senses which are nourished with us, and which deceive our dianoëtic part: for they are multiform, at different times are conversant with different sensibles, and assert nothing sane, nothing accurate, as Socrates himself says.[Phædo 69b-c] We must likewise fly from imaginations³, as figured, and divisible, and thus introducing infinite variety, and not suffering us to return to that which is impartible and immaterial; but,

² Porphyry, *Auxiliaries to Intelligibles*. Thomas Taylor's translation.

³ The word being translated here is 'phantasia' that is the gnostic faculty of the soul residing above the senses but below reason, it allows images to be formed and retained in the lowest part of the mind. It should not be confused with the higher, creative imagination which brings forth new expressions of truth and beauty from the contemplation of real ideas.

when we are hastening to apprehend an essence of this kind, drawing us down to passive intelligence. We must fly too from opinions; for these are various and infinite, tend to that which is external, are mingled with phantasy and sense, and are not free from contrariety; since our opinions also contend with each other, in the same manner as imaginations with imaginations, and one sense with another. But, flying from all these divisible and various forms of life, we should run back to science⁴, and there collect in union the multitude of theorems, and comprehend all the sciences in one according bond.⁵

It seems to me that only at this stage, having turned within and retreated “from all these divisible and various forms of life”, can a true excitation of virtue take place. No longer is it most conspicuous by its absence, but the notion we have of it in our worldly affairs is made immediately more clear and we can proceed to investigate its activity and contemplate its essence in stable conditions. But the passage doesn’t only urge us fly from the outer world but also from the motions of the soul that arise from its association with the world *viz.* imaginations and opinions. Imaginations are described as “figured, and divisible, and thus introducing infinite variety, and not suffering us to return to that which is impartible and immaterial”, whilst opinions “are various and infinite, tend to that which is external, are mingled with phantasy and sense, and are not free from contrariety”, all things which, like the motions of the outer world, will introduce confusion to our reasoning. But of what does thought consist when subtracted from these things? And how are we to direct it?

A further analogy at this point suggests itself: If we wish to know the stable simplicity of the cinema screen, that which receives impressions from a thousand different films yet remains unchanged, then we will need to remove the film reel and consider the screen in the undifferentiated light of the projector; the moving images will make it quite impossible to focus on the screen itself. Likewise, to know the soul and the stable reasons she contains we must consider them in their simple intellectual light, without irrational and distorting imaginings. Thought can then become deliberate and directed, isolating the peculiarities it finds, unfolding their effects scientifically, and contemplating their essences in stillness.

In this act of contemplation the philosopher is introduced to the real beings who supply existence to the peculiarities discovered in the soul, and the knowledge derived thence is naturally manifested in wisdom. Perhaps this is what Socrates meant when he referred to “true virtue, which subsists with wisdom” for wisdom has been variously described as living truth, knowledge in action, and a fullness of truth. And so in coming to know a virtue in its fullness the soul can manifest it truly, and each virtue is then a species of wisdom.

Some may be dubious as to the practical benefit of inwardly realised virtue, but while the soul is in the world she is bound to worldly activity and knowledge gained within can also

⁴ ‘Science’ here should be understood broadly as the knowledge of causes.

⁵ *The First Alcibiades*, end note 12. Thomas Taylor’s translation (contains excerpts from Proclus’ commentary in the end notes)

be channelled without. By turning within and uncovering the true, unchanging, and ever vital idea at the heart of each virtue, the knowledge gained can be brought to play in the individual's unique circumstances of time, place and condition. The life led may well become a true image of virtue, freed to some extent from the yoke of fears, desires, murky opinions, and harmful patterns of behaviour.

By focussing on cathartic arete we have been considering the soul in itself and in doing so have offered a view of what, in the Platonic tradition, constitutes the crucial turning point between the darkness and flux of the material world and the stability and plenitude of real being. By touching upon virtue manifested in the world we have also considered the soul as a cause of her effects. It is left now for the philosopher to investigate soul as an effect of her causes, her immediate cause being intellect or nous. Whilst the exploration of virtue above and beyond the level of soul lies outside the scope of this essay it is worth considering a passage from Proclus in which he provides a beautiful overview of the soul's inner journey towards divinity:

“For the soul when looking at things posterior to herself, beholds the shadows and images of beings, but when she converts herself to herself she evolves her own essence, and the reasons which she contains. And at first indeed, she only as it were beholds herself; but, when she penetrates more profoundly into the knowledge of herself, she finds in herself both intellect, and the orders of beings. When however, she proceeds into her interior recesses, and into the adytum as it were of the soul, she perceives with her eye closed, the genus of the Gods, and the unities of beings. For all things are in us psychically, and through this we are naturally capable of knowing all things, by exciting the powers and the images of wholes which we contain.”⁶

What conclusions can be drawn from these thoughts? True virtue, or what we are and can potentially be, is not to be found in what we are not and can never be. The discovery of what we are, and can bring to bear, will only be hampered by an introduction of foreign and irrational motions. Our true virtue can only be found through, and will at the same time encourage, a purification from what we are not. So if a human being is to both live in the world and progress in virtue and philosophy, cathartic practices and deliberate thought will be invaluable in maintaining the necessary clarity of soul, for, returning to Proclus, “in material concerns, variety obscures unity, difference sameness, and dissimilitude similitude; since forms here do not subsist without confusion, nor are the more excellent unmingled with the baser natures.”⁷

⁶ Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*; 1, iii. Thomas Taylor's translation.

⁷ *The First Alcibiades*, end note 12. Thomas Taylor's translation (contains excerpts from Proclus' commentary in the end notes)