

**VIRTUES IN IAMBlichUS AND
THE SHIFT OF PARADIGM:
INTERPRETATION UNDER THE VIEW
OF PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS* AND *SYMPOSIUM* ¹**

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims at pointing out differences between the perception of virtues in Plato's *Protagoras* and especially the *Symposium* and in Iamblichus. The argument is focused on the fact that, although both philosophers agree that virtues can be taught and they are therefore a social activity, in Plato there is a certain significance laid on the social role of virtues as well as on the cardinal importance of love as a sentiment that leads to temperance, in Iamblichus, what is more adequate for a philosopher to exercise is rather the hieratic values, while the temperance is the virtue that leads to the union with god. Based on that argument and in the fact that theurgy as a practice is more personal than social, we could possibly trace in representative philosophical thoughts of these eras the change of worldviews between classical and late antiquity, as, at any rate, the historical research shows.

KEYWORDS: Levels and kinds of virtues, piety, temperance, theurgy, love

Introduction

An ancient Chinese curse says: "I wish you will be born in an interesting time" and has multiple connotations. Besides the fact that this expression denotes the belief in reincarnation, topic which would be very interesting to be treated within the context of Neoplatonism, it indicates on the one hand that there are eras which are consid-

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ered to be more significant or just more attractive and eras without turbulences and major changes. On the other hand, it is rather difficult for someone to live in an epoch, where rapid social, political and ideological transformations take place, but still is more exciting for the human spirit and especially a spirit which is able to comprehend and contribute to the configuration of the new world. Such an era is the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century, in which Iamblichus lived, was taught, taught and wrote.

Although the term “paradigm” is used to describe basic assumptions and theories accepted within the formal scientific theories and Thomas Kuhn appropriated this concept only for the field of sciences, it would not be odd to use it in order to depict historical circumstances, social standards, economic systems and ethics in a sovereign state and a more or less stable society. However this acceptance does not imply that paradigm is a generic term for homogeneous and solid societies. At any rate, the shift of paradigm entails radical and structural changes in the abovementioned domains of activities within the society. It has not to be negative or positive; it seems to be just possible or plausible.

Iamblichus’ era is a very critical period in terms of politics, conflicts, religion and culture. The decadence of the Roman Empire and the military, political and economic recession was named by the historians the “Crisis of the Third Century” and is applied to the period between 235 and 284 AD. This very instability and collapse of institutions is considered to be a main cause for the split of the Empire some decades later and the final destruction of the Western Empire some centuries later.

It is not irrelevant that this era symbolizes the passage from the old to the new one, not only in terms of political systems, but also in terms of philosophical worldviews, metaphysical conceptions, ethical considerations and religious beliefs. On the one hand the uncertainty of the third century gave rise to much controversy about the pertinence of the various philosophical theories bequeathed by the classical thinkers and on the other hand the wide communication among the peoples of the Mediterranean lake gave birth to important movements of thought which combined axiological systems, ideas and arguments from different and sometimes completely opposite traditions, such as paganism, Judaism and Christianity. This is the case of Neoplatonism, Neopythagoreanism, Gnosticism and Christian Apologists.

Quite representative of the coexistence of divergent values not only among the population of the same Empire but also in the spirit of the same person in different periods of his life is Justin the Martyr who, although he was brought up a pagan, he called himself a Samaritan and tortured to death defending his Christian faith. Tertullian of Berber origins, wrote in his *Apologeticus pro Christianis* (XVIII) that Christians are made, not born, phrase that illustrates perfectly the spirit of the times which was dominated by the fluidity of ideas. Clement of Alexandria elaborated a philosophical approach of *Christian* doctrines and tried to incorporate the Greek philosophy into Christianity. As a matter of fact, he unified platonic theories on the assimilation into god and the imitation of god taken from the Bible in his practical philosophy, namely in the description of normative goals in the life of a Christian.

That is why his theory is called Christian Platonism. His successor at the Catechetical School of Alexandria, the father of Theology, Origen, was a New-Pythagorean and New-Platonist, who introduced philosophy in Christian doctrines and replied systematically by using philosophical theories to pagan advocates (e.g. *Contra Cel.*).

The study of classical Greek thought during the Hellenistic years was followed by the large-scale use of philosophical theories, especially Plato's, during the late roman times, towards the support of this new religion against idolatry. Indeed, it seems that Platonic ideas on Form, Soul, Virtues and on metaphysical principles as well as Pythagorean mathematics and practical philosophy, found a fertile ground to be developed. In the intellectual context of confusion between Christian doctrines and traditional paganism, in the religious conflict between polytheism and monotheism, the philosophy of Iamblichus seems to stand in the middle: been inspired by Platonic philosophy and following the Pythagorean tradition, he proposed a life style trying to present the best way towards deification. Therefore, if Sophists and Socrates brought down philosophy from heaven to earth, Neoplatonists showed the way from earth to heaven. We will try then to approach some of Iamblichus' theories regarding virtues and ethics.

This paper aims at examining the above-mentioned shift of paradigm by pointing out Iamblichus's perception of platonic theories regarding virtues; firstly, the possibility for a virtue to be taught, namely the significance of knowledge as a presupposition for a virtuous living and salvation; secondly, the kinds and levels of virtues and the particular focus on specific kinds and levels on Iamblichus and Plato, comparison that can explain the different needs of philosophical thought between the two eras; finally, the question of love in both eras and both philosophers and its connection with the idea of beauty on the one hand, and with theurgy on the other.

1. Can virtue be taught?

In his *Protrepticus* or *Exhortation to Philosophy*, Iamblichus gives an account of theories he considers essential for the human beings in order to live a happy and moderate life and reach the final goal, which is theosis, becoming by grace what god is by nature. In his set of principles, he seems to lay emphasis on the theoretical as well as on the practical part of ethics. That is why his suggestions are on the one hand interpretations of Platonic dialogues and on the other hand citations of Pythagorean maxims. What is really astonishing is that among the Platonic dialogues commented in this work, *Protagoras* is missing. Given that virtues and the exercise of virtues are considered in the Neoplatonic environment as the presupposition of *unio mystica*, at least according to Plotinus and Iamblichus, and therefore as means to the achievement of deification, and if we take for granted the fact that a big part of the population and of the philosophers of this era were born pagans – let us remember here Tertullian's belief –, it is rather reasonable to wonder why Iamblichus did not turn to Plato's *Protagoras* in his effort to prove that virtue can eventually be taught.

Nevertheless, it is a common topos in philosophers of the last centuries of the Roman Empire that virtues are a matter of knowledge. For instance, Clement of Alexandria, in his *Protrepticus* or *Exhortation to the Greeks*, proposes that the attainment of virtue is a philosophical task, while ignorance is the cause of sin. It does not matter whether the philosophical knowledge of what is virtue and how one can live according to this, is a practical incitement to good behavior or towards eudemonia or towards god; what really matters in this context is that virtue is a product of knowledge just as Socrates concludes in *Protagoras*. Justin the Martyr, in his *Apology* (XIII) claims that the teaching of the Creator of all things leads to perfect morality. In that case, (Christian) truth is identified with knowledge and the later is identified with virtue. In that very case the acceptance that virtue supposes knowledge is obvious but it raises also the question about what kind of knowledge human beings have to seek for.

The identification of knowledge with the truth of an apocalyptic teaching is rather problematic. There is a gnoseological distance between rational inquiry of knowledge and its revelation. The second one supposes faith. Tertullian tried to bridge the gap between knowledge and faith. Although, the dictum “credo quia absurdum” is erroneously attributed to him – his exact words in *De Carne Christi* (5.4) are “credibile est, quia ineptum est” – he seems to acknowledge the fundamental difference of our era between scientific thought and faith in saying in *De praescriptione haereticorum* “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” (“Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis”). Nowadays, it is not acceptable for a scientific theory to call upon faith in order to present its arguments.

However, the argument of Tertullian is that pagan philosophers seek truth by their senses and their mental capacity, which are not enough. In any case, truth keeps pace with knowledge which is a sine qua non condition for a virtuous living. In this point we have to mention Plato’s distinction between the knowledge provided by the senses (*doxa*), which is false, and the one provided by the view of Ideas, which is the knowledge of the immortal and necessarily true (*Rep.* 476d ff.).

As far as Iamblichus’ philosophical attitude is concerned, it is obvious that he not only claimed that virtue is knowledge and thus it can be taught, but also, as a genuine Pythagorean, he linked straightforwardly his theory to practical action. As a matter of fact, he argues that theoretical philosophers – without practical action – cannot reach the union with the divine (*De Mysteriis*, II 11). Practical action has two significations, or, rather, two forms: theurgy and social activity.

His philosophic letters of ethical content are also exhortations to a life style which is consistent with the principles of philosophy and with the final goal of reaching divinity. The didactic purpose of the letter is shown through its content which is mostly moral. The role in the society a philosopher must assume is clearly revealed by this choice of the philosopher to address letters to his pupils and to persons involved in policy making. Dillon and Polleichtner mention in the introduction of the translation of Iamblichus’ letters (2009, 8): “This is philosophy for the general (educated) public, and it reminds us forcefully of the public role in society which all philosophers of this

period played, despite their strongly otherworldly tone.” Therefore, the concept of virtue as an idea that can be transferred or taught is a strong platonic inheritance to be found in theories and actions of Neoplatonists and especially Iamblichus.

However, in the Platonic dialogue, Socrates and Protagoras reached the conclusion that virtue is knowledge and can be taught, but agreed to discuss the topic of its content some other time. Let us now explore the content of virtue in Iamblichus.

2. Kinds and levels of virtues

The Platonic conception of virtues survived intact and is to be found in almost all Neoplatonic philosophers. For instance, in Origen, who, in his effort to defend the free will, considered that the world is a creation of the goodness of god, while the evil derives from human beings, put forth the idea that the revelation of god was dictated by his goodness, justice and wisdom. This is an anthropocentric image of god, since these virtues are attributed to man and at the same time in accordance with the philosophical and theological acceptances on the Supreme Being.

Even if it seems that the Neoplatonic virtues are useful only for the effort of humans to return to their divine nature, in Iamblichus this is not the case. Although not as much significant as the cathartic levels of virtue, the civic levels of virtue are presented in Iamblichus’ letters in form of advice towards the governors and the simple citizens. This distinction to be found in Plotinus *Ennead* I, derives from the Platonic analysis of virtues in the *Republic* and in the *Phaedo*, as Dillon indicates. This categorisation has its roots to Iamblichus’ master, Porphyry. In *Sententia* 32 Porphyry distinguishes between four levels of virtue: civic, purgative, contemplative and paradigmatic. According to the taxonomy of these levels, the paradigmatic virtues are the most important because they comprise all the other levels and correspond to the Platonic Forms. As Plato suggested extensively (e.g. in the Allegory of the Cave, *Republic* VII), the knowledge of Ideas or, in that case, the possession of paradigmatic values could be beneficial for the society through its transformation to knowledge of ruling or civic virtues.

Moreover, according to Porphyry, all levels comprise the four fundamental virtues of Plato’s *Republic* (wisdom, temperance, justice and bravery). This fine distinction of levels and kinds of virtues is also made in the Platonic *Protagoras*, when the philosopher examines the question of whether virtues can be taught and therefore the purpose of being virtuous. An apparently slight difference between the two Platonic dialogues is that in *Protagoras* there are not only four cardinal virtues but five: the fifth is piety. Even if we follow and accept Socrates sequence of syllogism – which leads inevitably either to the conclusion that there are not five virtues but just one with five parts or to the assumption that there are five virtues identified the one with the other – the problem of categorisation of this fifth virtue still remains. Of course in the *Euthyphro* (12c-d) Socrates states that piety is a part of justice. Notwithstanding the fact that justice is a kind of virtue and not a level, as well as piety, could we

assume that piety as a kind of virtue participates at the same time in all levels of virtue, just as justice does?

Iamblichus' ethic theory makes things more complicated. He accepted (*De Mysteriis*, I 12; III 31; *De Vit. Pyth.*, 137) that there is also another level of virtues apart from those accepted by Porphyry: the hieratic virtue. It would be rather reasonable to identify the hieratic virtue with the purgative one; however, the purgative virtue contains a series of actions of social character as well as nutritional and general everyday habits, which can not be classified as hieratic. Hieratic is the level of virtue per se, which unites the human being with god (V 26). It is self-evident that in the hieratic level of virtue, one must be wise, just and temperate, but it seems that above all he must be pious (X 4). Nevertheless, piety as virtue seems to be personal, since it is the royal way to the deification and one can be pious only towards god and the rituals of a religion (X 6). This is not the case with purgative level of virtue, which, as the civic level, being however above the latter, entails social uses of virtues that determine the daily life.

However, let us examine a passage (Fr. 1) of the Iamblichus' letter to Anatolius on justice and try to juxtapose it with a passage from *Protagoras* (331b). Iamblichus says: "It is to the very culmination of all the virtues and the summation of all of them, in which, indeed, as the ancient account tells us, they are all present together, that one would come by being led to justice." It is plausible thus to assume that Iamblichus accepts the Platonic principle in *Protagoras*, as well as in the *Republic* IV, where he shows that all virtues are one within society and within the soul, that all kinds of virtues – and, we must note, not all levels of virtue – are summarized to one, which, in that case, is not the notion of "goodness" but "justice".

Notwithstanding the validity of this hypothesis, if we take into account the identification of piety (or holiness) with justice – following also the assumption in the *Euthyphro* that the first is a part of the latter – and assume that this is something that Iamblichus would accept, piety is then not only a personal virtue, namely a purgative, hieratic, paradigmatic and contemplative one but also a civic one, given that justice is to be found in all levels of virtue – of course civic virtue included. In other words, the identification – partly or entirely – of piety with justice, allows us to accept that all particular virtues can participate in all possible levels. Socrates says to Protagoras in the Platonic dialogue: "I should say myself, on my own behalf, that both justice is holy and holiness just, and with your permission I would make this same reply for you also; since justness is either the same thing as holiness or extremely like it, and above all, justice is of the same kind as holiness, and holiness as justice." We have therefore to justify in a certain way how piety can be civic virtue, given that it does not participate only in the hieratic level of virtue, but also in the others. In that case, the piety is not a mere individual virtue but also a social one, fact that introduce us to the mysteries of Christian religion and the role of priest as a mediator between human beings and god. Let us now examine the content of this not mere hieratic virtue, namely piety.

3. Theurgy, temperance and piety

Independently of whether Iamblichus' Theurgy is a kind of magic or just another religious practice, it follows the short tradition created in late antiquity, according to which, deification presupposes temperance. For instance, Clement of Alexandria in his *Protrepticus* or *Exhortation to the Greeks*, speaks about the true virtue, which is attainable through a moderate way of living, and at the same time he turned against Sophists, for they refuse the acceptance of a single objective truth, and against Epicureans, because of their doctrines in favour of a hedonistic way of living. Tertullian was also a severe adherent of discipline and strict practice as a *modus vivendi*, while Plotinus believed that the union of the Soul with One is achievable through austere meditation. This Pythagorean principle is to be found in Iamblichus' reply to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*.

The two core kinds of virtue that could be presented as essential to this goal are on the one hand temperance and on the other hand piety. As for the first one, although in all his texts (e.g. *De Vit. Pyth.*, 68) he defends the cathartic practice which liberates human soul from its sinful body, it is surprising that in his *Protrepticus* or *Exhortation to Philosophy* he does not include arguments taken not only from *Protagoras* but also from the *Symposium*. In his letter to Arete on Self-control (Fr. 2) he argues that: "For every virtue holds in contempt the mortal element, and embraces the immortal; but in a very special way self-control has this aim, inasmuch as it despises the pleasures which 'nail' us 'to the body' (*Phd.* 83D), and 'stands upon holy foundations', as Plato says (*Phdr.* 254B)."

He evokes passages from *Phaedrus* and *Phaedo*, although a part of Agathon's speech in the *Symposium* would be much more persuasive, for it would introduce a very crucial concept for Christianity: Love. Agathon says (196c): "Then, over and above his justice, he is richly endowed with temperance. We all agree that temperance is a control of pleasures and desires, while no pleasure is stronger than Love: if they are the weaker, they must be under Love's control, and he is their controller; so that Love, by controlling pleasures and desires, must be eminently temperate."

Even though this passage seems to contradict Iamblichus' theory on the priority of justice as a virtue, it is very important, because it gives another aspect of this universal sentiment, love, which in that case has nothing to do with hedonism or vices but, on the contrary, with love towards the beautiful and the good. Love is here presented as a presupposition of temperance and piety that propels the soul towards the ideas of *kalon kagathon*. These virtues could be both count on the one hand as civic, according to Plato, because they control instincts and bad behaviours. On the other hand, we could say that Agathon expresses here an ideal concept of *eros* to be found in original Christian social doctrines, which is absent in Iamblichus at least to this extend, given that the latter speaks of contempt of all pleasures, which hinder the rise of soul to god.

Moreover, the union, which Iamblichus, Plotinus and other philosophers of that era consider as the end, the *telos*, the final goal of their life and their contemplation,

can not be accomplished without love towards god. This truth, which corresponds to the perfect practice of the hieratic virtue, reflects not only the affection towards god but also the result of this activity, which is described in other terms in the same work of Plato through Diotima's words (206a-d): "Briefly then,' said she, 'love loves the good to be one's own for ever.' [...] "Let me put it more clearly,' she said. 'All men are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul: on reaching a certain age our nature yearns to beget. This it cannot do upon an ugly person, but only on the beautiful: the conjunction of man and woman is a begetting for both. It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal; and it cannot occur in the discordant."

This very passage could possibly stand for the desired progress from a certain civic virtue – temperance as described above by Agathon – to purgative and eventually to hieratic virtue. It is the account of the ascendance of mortal qualities – useful for social life – to immortal, that is, salvation and union with god. What seems to be missing in Iamblichus' theory of virtues is the occasion for one to achieve temperance through love and gradually pass in this way through civic virtues to hieratic. Diotima's passage can bear multiple interpretations and applications. It could of course signify the union between the two sexes; the union of a thinker with the object of his thought; the union of an artist with a piece of art; the union of a theurgist with god. That is why love – closely linked with temperance, as Agathon proposes – became a cardinal concept in Christian doctrines.

Conclusion

To sum up, in Iamblichus the final goal is salvation. The meaning of salvation is the deliverance of the soul from the body and its return to divinity. The means to this purpose is theurgy or the practice of religious rituals. One can reach this state of being if he is wise, brave, just and principally temperate. However, although this attitude is in accordance with the Pythagorean way of life, this exhortation in Iamblichus' philosophy seems to contradict some aspects of the Platonic conception of love and goodness. Firstly, as we have already mentioned, this moderate way of living presupposes the abstinence from bodily pleasures, while in the *Symposium* love is the infallible method to dominate over them – not to refuse them – and at the same time acquire self-control, while any kind of manifestation of love is not excluded. Secondly, while in Iamblichus the union with god or the attainment of virtue and goodness is an entire procedure which demands self-control and hard practice, in Plato (Sykoutris, 1934: 154) the identification of good ("agathon") with familiar or intimate ("oikeion") indicates a rather optimistic attitude on the capacity of human beings to find the truth. So we read in Diotima's speech (205e-206a): "For men are prepared to have their own feet and hands cut off if they feel these belongings to be harmful. The fact is, I suppose, that each person does not cherish his belongings except where a man calls the good his own property and the bad another's; since what men love is simply and solely the good." Plato seems to focus on education based on

the natural inclination of human beings towards good, which is a social activity to virtue, while Iamblichus begins his long way to god with practice, which is a more individual way to virtue.

Moreover, the attitude towards some kinds of love and this difference on the competence of human beings to approach goodness are not simple philosophical divergences between Plato and Iamblichus, or Plato and Neoplatonism; what these points reveal is rather a profound differentiation in terms of political and economic conditions as well as socially-mediated worldviews and expectations prevailing in both eras, the classic and the late roman. In the *Symposium* we encounter the assertion that human beings are to express their immanent tendency towards the immortal good and beautiful through love that controls vices. This love has nevertheless various significations, civic and individual. In Iamblichus the steps towards the immortal truth of god is a matter of practice and rejection of the body, which is a rather personal affair.

The fact that the hieratic virtue is quite significant in Iamblichus indicates that the major objective of people's activities in that time is to find a relatively individual peace of mind through the personal union with god. On the contrary, the classic ideal is the development of social and political conscience which would contribute to the collective eudemonia and through this to the personal one. Of course, Iamblichus suggests guidelines for the governors and other officials; it is also not to be ignored that his doctrine on theurgy was a subject of teaching and advice to his acquaintances. Civic virtues are a duty of a consistent philosophy. Nevertheless, theurgy, as a religious practice, is more personal than collective and does not have any direct influence in the social functions, unless it is institutional. That is why Iamblichus' philosophy reflects a time of individualism, fear and insecurity and not a self-confident society, where the development of social thought is the rule; hence the shift of historical paradigm.

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