

Γενέσθω θεοειδής πᾶς: Likeness to God in Plotinus and Plato

In his final moments of life, Plotinus was filled with a deep and earnest longing. No sooner had his friend Eustochius arrived at his deathbed than he spoke his last words: “I have been waiting a long time for you; I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All.”¹ This brief remark encompasses what Plotinus understood to be the principal goal of the Platonic philosophy: “To approach and be united to the God over all” (ἐνθῆναι καὶ πελάσαι τῷ πᾶσι ἐπὶ θεῷ).² In the First Ennead, this goal manifests as the ethical ideal of Likeness to God (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ). As Plotinus would insist, however, his ideas are by no means pure innovation: his reliance on Plato is evident throughout the *Enneads*. One cannot fully apprehend Plotinus’ conception of Likeness to God until it is illuminated by the Platonic dialogues from which it is derived.

Only recently have some contemporary scholars begun to recognize that Likeness to God is vital for understanding Platonism. It is, however, still greatly underappreciated compared to the preeminent position it held for ancient Platonists.³ David Sedley surmises that if you were to

¹ Porphyry, “On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work,” in *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992), §2. The question of how best to translate and interpret Porphyry’s rendering of his teacher’s dying words has long been the subject of scholarly debate, the last clause being considered one of the most controversial in later Greek literature. Despite the controversy, no translation undermines the view that Plotinus’ goal is to return to the Divine, whether in that instance he was expressing the goal for himself (Harder, Pépin), Eustochius specifically (Igal), his disciples (Henry), or people in general (Schwyzer). See Glenn Most, “Plotinus’ Last Words,” *Classical Quarterly* 53 (2003): 576-587.

² Porphyry, “On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books,” in *Plotinus*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, vol. 440 of *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, (Cambridge, MA: Loeb – Harvard University Press, 1966), §23. My translation. All Greek of Porphyry and Plotinus comes from this volume. For Plotinus’ articulation of this goal, see especially *Enneads* I.6.7-9, II.3.9, III.4.2, V.8.11, VI.5.7, and VI.9.8-9.

³ Among the few studies that take Likeness to God seriously, and which I make use of here, are Mark Anderson, “Purification,” in *Pure: Modernity, Philosophy, and the One* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2009), esp. §5; Julia Annas, “Becoming Like God: Ethics, Human Nature, and the Divine,” in *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 52-

ask “any moderately well-educated citizen of the Roman empire to name the official moral goal, or *telos*,”⁴ of Plato’s philosophy, he would respond with Plato’s own words: “Becoming like god as much as possible” (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν).⁵ You will not often hear this response today.⁶ There are those, however, who have argued convincingly that Likeness to God is an important feature of Plato’s thought, and that its presence in the dialogues cannot simply be written off as idle metaphor.⁷ But even they have tended to either limit or dismiss completely one of the most prolific exponents of this idea, Plotinus.⁸ This paper is my attempt to promote a richer understanding of Likeness to God by revealing the comprehensiveness of Plotinus’ treatment of the doctrine. I will elucidate four aspects of Likeness to God as found in Plotinus’ treatises on virtue, dialectic, happiness, and beauty, and will further connect Plotinus’ views to the Platonic dialogues from which they seem to derive. In this way, I hope to show that Plotinus offers a much greater contribution to an understanding of Likeness to God, the *telos* of the Platonic philosophy, than is often recognized.

71; Daniel C. Russell, "Virtue as 'Likeness to God' in Plato and Seneca." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44 (2004): 241-60; David Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophy, Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, ed. Gail Fine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 309-328. Sedley cites only three more that he is aware of, bringing the count of recent studies dedicated to the theme of Likeness to God to only seven.

⁴ Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," 309.

⁵ *Theaetetus* 176b. My translation. All Greek of Plato comes from Perseus Digital Library Project, ed. Gregory R. Crane, last updated January 12, 2011 (updated daily), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

⁶ Annas lists studies on Plato’s general ethical philosophy in which Likeness to God is ignored completely. See footnote 7 in Annas, "Becoming Like God," 53.

⁷ For the argument see especially Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," 309-328.

⁸ See Anderson, "Purification," 79-81; Annas, "Becoming Like God," 67-71; Russell, "Virtue as 'Likeness to God' in Plato and Seneca," 241; Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," 322-324. Only Anderson and Sedley seem to read Plotinus’ interpretation favorably, but Anderson gives only a short and broad overview of Plotinus’ thought in relation to unification and likeness to the divine, while Sedley limits Plotinus’ treatment of the idea to *Enneads* 1.2.

Plotinus is commonly characterized as a mystic, often more religious than philosophical.⁹ Indeed, Porphyry tells us in his short biography of Plotinus that he lived and taught under divine direction and supervision, and achieved a mystical state of union with God four times during the period of their acquaintance.¹⁰ Even so, it would be a mistake to think this lofty mysticism, this “intoxication” of Divine Union,¹¹ the extent of Plotinus’ commitment to divinization (θεώσις). We see throughout the *Enneads* that to become like God, one must first learn how to be human. And to be properly human, of course, one must display the virtues.

In his treatise on virtue, Plotinus presents an account of the virtues that are specific to human beings. Nevertheless, the *goal* of human virtue is to become immortal and divine. “Our concern,” he says, “is not merely to be sinless, but to be God (θεόν εἶναι).”¹² What, then, as an ethical enterprise, does it mean to become God? Or in Plato’s phrasing, how does one become as God-like as possible for a human being? Answering this query is Plotinus’ primary task in “The Virtues.” But what has prompted the question in the first place?

As is proper for a good Platonist, Plotinus takes his cue from the Master himself, drawing directly from the *Theaetetus*. He begins the treatise with quotations from Plato’s dialogue:

Since Evil is here, ‘haunting this world by necessary law’, and it is the Soul’s design to escape from Evil, we must escape hence. But what is this escape? ‘In attaining likeness to God,’ we read. And this is explained as ‘becoming just and holy, living by wisdom’, the entire nature grounded in virtue.¹³

⁹ For a particularly elaborate example of this characterization, see Lloyd P. Gerson, “Philosophy of Religion” in *Plotinus* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 203-224.

¹⁰ Porphyry, “Life of Plotinus,” §23.

¹¹ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992), VI.7.35. All citations of Plotinus’ *Enneads* refer to this volume, except where otherwise noted.

¹² *Enneads*, I.2.6.

¹³ *Enneads*, I.2.1.

First and foremost, then, Likeness to God consists of an escape from evil (τὰ κακά), which Plotinus defines as vicious attachment to the crude material world.¹⁴ In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates exhorts his interlocutor to such an escape in response to his expressed wish that there would be less evil in the world:

But it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed—for there must always be something opposed to the good; nor is it possible that it should have its seat in heaven. But it must inevitably haunt human life, and prowls about the earth. That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pure, with understanding.¹⁵

What could this flight from earthly life have to do with virtue, by which one learns to live as a man among men? How can one become like God while bound to human nature?

In response to these questions Plotinus distinguishes between two types of virtue, which correspond to the two distinct components or aspects of human nature. First, there are the civic virtues (πολιτικᾶς ἀρέτας), which “are a principle of order and beauty in us as long as we remain passing our life here.”¹⁶ These social virtues regulate and maintain the composite body-soul that lives and acts in the physical world, to which belong passions, pleasures, and pains. But the civic virtues do not suffice for Likeness, for even the man who has perfected them essentially remains within “this world’s ways and things.”¹⁷ Rather, one is truly brought to Likeness by the purificatory virtues (καθάρσεις). These superior virtues are attributed to the higher soul, which

¹⁴ See especially *Enneads* I.8.6, in which Plotinus explains evil in the context of *Theaetetus* 176a-b.

¹⁵ Plato, “*Theaetetus*,” in *Complete Works*, trans. M.J. Levitt, rev. Myles Burnyeat, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1997), 176a-b. All citations of Plato’s dialogues refer to this volume, except where otherwise noted.

¹⁶ *Enneads*, I.2.2.

¹⁷ *Enneads*, I.2.3.

has “thrown off” the body’s passions.¹⁸ Plotinus identifies this pure intellectual soul as the veritable self, one’s true identity:

The true man is the other, going pure of body, natively endowed with the virtues which belong to the Intellectual-Activity, virtues whose seat is the Separate Soul, the Soul which even in its dwelling here may be kept apart.¹⁹

According to Plotinian psychology, above or within the physical body, the *apparent* man, “there is the pure soul: the inner, spiritual man, whose proper activity is thinking, or more precisely contemplating God.”²⁰ It is this true man, identified with the soul, who becomes like God by the process of purification.

Purification (κάθαρσις) is an indispensable component of Platonic ethics, which Plotinus affirms often in the *Enneads*. The most candid source of the doctrine is the *Phaedo*, in which we find the original distinction between civic and purificatory virtues, and Socrates’ insistence that purification is essential to proper philosophy:

While we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join with it more than we must, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god frees us...It is only those who practice philosophy in the right way who want to free the soul.²¹

This “freeing from the foolishness of the body” (ἀπαλλαττόμενοι τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἄφορσύνης)²² is the project of purification, and the basis for Socrates’ famous characterization of philosophy as training for death.²³ Understanding the *Phaedo* in this context, it is apparent that purification just is the process of becoming like God. Julia Annas notes that in the *Phaedo* we

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Enneads*, I.1.10.

²⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 69.

²¹ *Phaedo* 67a (trans. G.M.A. Grube).

²² *Phaedo* 67a. My translation.

²³ *Phaedo* 67e.

find “a real similarity with the idea in the *Theaetetus* digression, that true virtue is a flight from, and a getting-rid of, the mix of good and evil in the world, toward another kind of state.”²⁴ Also in the *Phaedo* Plotinus seems to find support for the ancient view that Likeness to God and purification are the *telos* of proper philosophy: Socrates goes so far as to say that the old Bacchants, whose religion was generally considered to be inferior to philosophy, are actually the ones “who have practiced philosophy correctly” (πεφιλοσοφηκότες ὀρθῶς),²⁵ for they understood, he says, that “whoever arrives in the underworld uninitiated and unsanctified will wallow in the mire, whereas he who arrives there purified and initiated will dwell with the gods.”²⁶ According to Socrates, what ultimately matters, what has been the purpose of his entire life and the only true goal of philosophy, is to be counted among those who identify with the divine.²⁷

Generally, studies of Plotinus’ Likeness to God doctrine have been limited to his treatise on virtue, in which, admittedly, the phrase is most often, and perhaps most intentionally used. Plotinus’ use of direct quotations from the well-known *Theaetetus* digression has likely contributed to this restricted understanding of Plotinus’ treatment of the concept. As I will go on now to show, Likeness to God is for Plotinus the principle not only of virtue, but also of dialectic, happiness, and beauty. It seems likely too that this was not his innovation—Plotinus extended Likeness to God beyond virtue because he found it so extended in Plato’s dialogues. Before moving on to dialectic, however, it is necessary to show the sort of misinterpretation and

²⁴ Annas, “Becoming Like God,” 62.

²⁵ *Phaedo* 69d. My translation.

²⁶ *Phaedo* 69c-d.

²⁷ “And I, to the best of my ability, left nothing undone in my life, but was eager in every way to become one of those [who dwell with the gods].” (ὤν δὴ καὶ ἐγὼ κατὰ γε τὸ δυνατόν οὐδέν ἀπέλιπον ἐν τῷ βίῳ ἀλλὰ παντὶ τρόπῳ προθυμήθην γενέσθαι). *Phaedo* 69d. My translation.

misrepresentation that takes place when Plotinus' account of Likeness and purification is limited only to virtue.

In a recent essay, Daniel C. Russell defends Likeness to God as a legitimate ethical concept in Plato's dialogues against those who have ignored or dismissed it in order to pursue more "down-to-earth" ideas about virtue.²⁸ Drawing from the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus*, Russell argues that Plato's Likeness to God is not an escapist ideal, as the *Theaetetus* passage makes it seem, but primarily promotes rational activity in the world—Likeness to God, too, is down-to-earth. Russell briefly contrasts his rationalistic conception with Plotinus' overtly spiritual perspective on the idea, which has made Plato's Likeness to God seem "too otherworldly to be of much relevance to us."²⁹ Thus, Russell blames Plotinus for causing us rational and forward-thinking moderns to dismiss Likeness to God as a component of Plato's ethics.

I have two objections to Russell. First, his dismissal of Plotinus, and indeed his entire argument, rests on the assumption that the "rational-ethical" and the "spiritual" are essentially opposed to one another. Russell attempts to demonstrate the legitimacy of Likeness to God while maintaining Plato's respectability among contemporary scholars by arguing that it is a rational-ethical concept, and not a spiritual or mystical one, which, he says, "cannot even get on the table for our serious consideration."³⁰ Russell does not attempt to justify this opposition or his dismissal of anything he deems too spiritual, nor does he hint that these assumptions can be found in Plato's dialogues. As a starting point for interpretation, therefore, it is entirely

²⁸ Russell, "Virtue as 'Likeness to God' in Plato and Seneca," 242.

²⁹ Ibid, 241.

³⁰ Ibid, 260. Also: "Our greatest obstacle to understanding likeness to God is the natural assumption that we already know what it means—that it is a spiritual ideal, *rather than* an ethical one," and, "[T]he moral force of becoming like God is not so much that doing so is a way of preparing for an afterlife as it is that doing so constitutes the fulfillment of our nature and our full maturity as rational agents" (246, 260). My emphasis.

unfounded. Second, Russell has clearly made the same mistake that he is defending Plato against: he has presumed that Plotinus' concept of Likeness to God neglects the rational aspect before really understanding it. Throughout the *Enneads*, Plotinus refers to reason as a divine principle in man, which guides the philosopher toward the good and true. Even in his treatise on virtue, the main text in which Plotinus explicates Likeness to God, he clearly asserts that the soul's proper function is to rule over the body with reason, keeping the passions and affections in check. The soul, purified and thoroughly disengaged, reaches a state of *rational* tranquility:

There will be no battling in the Soul: the mere intervention of Reason is enough: the lower nature will stand in such awe of Reason that for any slightest movement it has made it will grieve, and censure its own weakness, in not having kept low and still in the presence of its lord.³¹

Interestingly enough, the political language that Plotinus uses here to describe reason as an authority in the soul is directly reminiscent of the Platonic dialogues to which Russell refers when attempting to remove the taint of hyper-spirituality from Plato's Likeness to God doctrine: in the *Philebus*, Socrates says that reason "is forever the ruler over the universe;"³² in the *Timaeus*, reason is called the most sovereign part of our soul, and is made to rule over man's mortal aspect.³³ No doubt, Plotinus' conception of Likeness to God is spiritual, but he also emphasizes its rational aspect whenever necessary. For Plotinus, man's good is found in God, but it is also "the activity of life according to his nature."³⁴ The opposition between the spiritual and rational-ethical was clearly not one that Plotinus recognized, probably because he did not find it in the Platonic dialogues from which he worked. Contra Russell, Plotinus' account considers reason preeminent in man's efforts towards the realization of his end, which will

³¹ *Enneads* I.2.5.

³² *Philebus* 30d (trans. Dorothea Frede).

³³ *Timaeus* 47b-c, 90a (trans. Donald J. Zeyl).

³⁴ See *Enneads* I.7.1. My translation.

become even more evident as we gain a more comprehensive understanding of Plotinus' conception of Likeness to God.

Reason plays its most important role in the third tractate of the First Ennead, entitled "Dialectic," which, in MacKenna's first edition, is supplemented by a second title: "The Upward Way."³⁵ On the surface, dialectic is the sort of logical investigation that we find employed in most of Plato's dialogues. True dialectic, however, goes deeper: it is the intellectual journey by which one is led up into the intelligible realm, and ultimately to the Primal-Principle, the One, God.³⁶ Proper reason, Plotinus explains, acts as a sort of initiation for dialectic, leading the lover of wisdom to recognize his true end; he must commit this rational act before he is worthy to begin the journey. Along the way, reason provides "the power of pronouncing with final truth upon the nature and relation of things"—the ability to distinguish Being from non-Being, Good from not-Good.³⁷ Eventually, the philosopher's intellect reaches the sublime height of the upward way: contemplation of the First Principle:

Now it rests: caught up in the tranquility of that sphere, it is no longer busy about many things: it has arrived at Unity and it contemplates: it leaves to another science all that coil of premises and conclusions called the art of reasoning.³⁸

Logical systems, which deal with words and propositions, are mere preliminaries to true dialectic, and are left behind when one comes to contemplation of universals:

Dialectic does not consist of bare theories and rules: it deals with verities...Dialectic, that is to say, has no knowledge of propositions—collections of words—but it knows the truth.³⁹

³⁵ Throughout the treatise, Plotinus describes dialectic as a kind of "leading up" (ἀναγωγή).

³⁶ *Enneads* I.3.1.

³⁷ *Enneads* I.3.4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Enneads* I.3.5.

So far Plotinus has only described dialectic as the way to approach God intellectually, but in the last section of the treatise he connects dialectic to virtue, especially that virtue most closely associated with the divine: *sophia*. Wisdom, which the philosopher attains through dialectic, supplements the natural virtues and “perfects the character” (τελειοῖ τὰ ἦθη).⁴⁰ Dialectic, therefore, has a moral end as well as an intellectual one, and both consist of an approach and likeness to God.⁴¹

Throughout his treatise on dialectic, Plotinus draws from Plato’s *Republic*. Here, Socrates describes dialectic as the journey out of the cave’s obscurity and into the pure light of the intelligible realm. “Dialectic,” says Socrates, “is the only inquiry that travels this road, doing away with hypotheses and proceeding to the first principle itself,” which is the divine form of the Good (αὐτὴ ἀρχή; τὸ ἴδεα ἀγαθοῦ).⁴² At this point the philosopher reaches “a rest from the road, so to speak, and an end of journeying.”⁴³ One need not, and indeed cannot go any further: the goal has been attained; the end and source of knowledge has been reached. It is not difficult to imagine dialectic as a sort of intellectual purification: the philosopher takes to the arduous road that leads up and out of the dark world of the senses, into the blinding light and pure air of the divine Intellectual Principle, “just as some are said to have gone up from Hades to the gods.”⁴⁴ After the eye of the soul has shed its fondness for the shadows of the material realm and become accustomed to seeing things as they truly are, it strains to behold the source itself: the First

⁴⁰ *Enneads* I.3.6. My translation.

⁴¹ It is true that Plotinus does not use the phrase “likeness to God” in “Dialectic”(I.3). Nevertheless, there is a undeniable connection between what the philosopher becomes when he lives virtuously and what he achieves when he engages in dialectic, namely, a realization of the divine in himself, and therefore a likeness and approach to God.

⁴² *Republic* VII 532a-533d (trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve).

⁴³ *Republic* VII 532e.

⁴⁴ *Republic* VII 521c.

Principle, the Good.⁴⁵ Plato too connects contemplation of the Good, achieved through dialectic, to virtuous action: “It is necessary for anyone who is going to act wisely either in public or in private to behold this [first principle, the Good]” (δεῖ ταύτην ἰδεῖν τὸν μέλλοντα ἐμφρόνως πράξειν ἢ ἰδίᾳ ἢ δημοσίᾳ).⁴⁶ In the *Sophist* too, the interlocutors agree that a genuine dialectician is “one who practices philosophy purely and justly” (τῷ καθαρῶς τε καὶ δικαίως φιλοσοφοῦντι).⁴⁷ This lover of wisdom draws so near the brightness of the divine that the eyes of most people’s souls have difficulty distinguishing him.⁴⁸ We can see in all of this how and why Plotinus implemented Platonic dialectic into his Likeness to God doctrine: the philosopher comes to know divine truth, and thereby ascends (ἀναβαίνειν) toward the Good by both his intellect and his virtue.

Immediately following “Dialectic” is Plotinus’ treatise on happiness (εὐδαιμονία),⁴⁹ in which we find another aspect of the Likeness to God doctrine. Naturally, Plotinus is working within the eudaimonist tradition of ethics, epitomized by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵⁰ Plotinus, however, is not without his peculiarities. He explicitly denies, for example, the Aristotelian notion that a man who suffers miseries too great cannot be considered happy.⁵¹ In

⁴⁵ *Republic* VII 517b-c.

⁴⁶ *Republic* VII 517c. My translation.

⁴⁷ *Sophist* 253e. My translation. See also 230b – 231b for dialectic of refutation as intellectual purification.

⁴⁸ *Sophist* 254a (trans. Nicholas P. White).

⁴⁹ While ‘happiness’ is a famously clumsy way to translate εὐδαιμονία, it is the most common, and the most convenient for my purposes. Readers should be aware that our conventional use of the word “happiness” does not capture the full sense of the Greek concept of εὐδαιμονία—a problem that Armstrong tries to alleviate by translating “well-being.” For a concise account of the differences between happiness and εὐδαιμονία, see Mark Anderson, “Happiness and Eudaimonia,” in *Pure: Modernity, Philosophy, and the One* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2009), 5-10.

⁵⁰ See especially Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I – II.

⁵¹ Plotinus, *The Enneads* I.4.5, 6. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 10, 1100a. We must be cautious, however, when considering Aristotle’s relation to the Platonists; the contrasts may not

Plotinus' view, even the woeful King of Troy might have been εὐδαίμων, for man's happiness does not consist merely of the "heaping together" (or in Priam's case the loss) of particular goods, but the attainment of the one Supreme Good, God.⁵² Everyone possesses happiness either potentially or actually, but the latter, the man who is "in possession of this true reality, who is this perfection realized, who has passed over into *actual identification with it*"⁵³ has attained εὐδαιμονία. Here we begin to see the Likeness doctrine come into view:

To the man in this [happy] state, what is the good? *He himself by what he is and has.* And the author and principle of what he is and holds is the Supreme (the One), which within Itself is the Good but manifests Itself within the human being...⁵⁴

That Plotinus says anyone could be his own good seems strange, until he clarifies that it is the divinity within man that is the principle of his happiness. Here too Plotinian psychology plays an important role. The truly happy man identifies with his soul, and requires nothing outside of himself: no material necessity or bodily ailment can tear him away from the Good that he has attained.⁵⁵ His true self is complete and perfect inasmuch as it is God-like. Plotinus explicitly connects the Likeness doctrine to the Platonic understanding of happiness: "Plato rightly taught that he who is to be wise and to possess happiness draws his good from the Supreme, fixing his gaze on That, becoming like to That, living by That."⁵⁶

be as stark as is often supposed. Aristotle too suggests something like Likeness to God: "But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in vol. 2 of *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Burnet, Revised Oxford Translation (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1861.

⁵² *Enneads* I.4.6

⁵³ *Enneads* I.4.4. My emphasis.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

⁵⁵ *Enneads* I.4.4, 6, 12.

⁵⁶ *Enneads* I.4.16.

Although generally more known as its grand cosmological theorizing than its sparse ethical claims, Plato's *Timaeus* seems to inform much of what Plotinus says about happiness. In his speech, Timaeus describes the creator god (δημιουργός) fashioning man as a mixture of divine and mortal parts, but man's divine and rational soul is what really distinguishes him from the other mortal creatures.⁵⁷ This is perhaps why Plotinus claims that all men have at least the potential to attain the Good: the divine is within all; one need only actualize it. Timaeus claims that if man's divine nature governs well the turbulent passions of his irrational part, he will be just and good, and it will be his destiny to live a life of happiness.⁵⁸ Timaeus' account of the *kosmos* culminates in a grand declaration concerning man's moral *telos*:

If a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself above all, then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to become immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp. And to the extent that human nature can partake of immortality, *he can in no way fail to achieve this*: constantly caring for his divine part as he does, keeping well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him [reason], *he must indeed be supremely happy*.⁵⁹

In the *Timaeus*, as in the *Enneads*, man cannot fail to attain happiness as long as he lives according to the divine that is within him. Because the Demiurge “wanted everything to be as good and like himself as was possible,”⁶⁰ he gave man the ability to discern the supremely rational movements of the divine heavenly bodies, and by imitating them, “stabilize the straying revolutions” within himself.⁶¹ Becoming like these visible gods and their creator, he will be

⁵⁷ *Timaeus* 41d – 42c.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Timaeus* 90b-c. My emphasis.

⁶⁰ *Timaeus* 30e.

⁶¹ *Timaeus* 47c.

attain “that most excellent life offered to humankind by the gods, both now and forevermore.”⁶²

Only a divine life such as this is worthy to be called εὐδαιμονία.

The final aspect of Likeness to God is found in Plotinus’ treatise on beauty (τό κάλος). For Plotinus, beauty is found in all things shaped and ordered by divine Reason (θεῖος λόγος).⁶³ Objects most worthy to be called beautiful are sights not for the eyes, but for the soul: “the splendour of virtue...the face of Justice and Moral-Wisdom beautiful beyond the beauty of Evening and Dawn.”⁶⁴ However, it is not for the soul merely to behold beauty, but to *become* beautiful through virtue and intellection. For God, the Supreme Beauty, “fashions Its lovers to Beauty and makes them also worthy of love.”⁶⁵ This soul-fashioning Plotinus likens to the art of sculpting:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring to light all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.⁶⁶

In this passage, we once again encounter the doctrine of purification. If the soul’s vision is dimmed by vice, if its impurity has obscured the brightness of truth and virtue, it will not see the Supreme Beauty. Only when the soul is rectified and all uncleanness removed will it attain the vision of Beauty:

And it is just to say that in the Soul’s becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God, for from the Divine comes all the Beauty and all the Good

⁶² *Timaeus* 90d.

⁶³ *Enneads* I.6.2.

⁶⁴ *Enneads* I.6.4.

⁶⁵ *Enneads* I.6.7.

⁶⁶ *Enneads* I.6.9.

in beings... Therefore, first let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and Beauty.⁶⁷

Plotinus is explicit on this point: the highest form of beauty for man is Likeness to God; by Likeness he both beholds Beauty and becomes beautiful himself.

In the background of Plotinus' treatise on beauty is Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*. In the dialogue, Socrates delivers a speech about divine Love (ἔρως), in the course of which he recalls what he was taught by Diotima, a wise woman from Mantinea. Diotima claims that the purpose of love is to give birth to beauty, a principle that is most obvious in human love and the act of procreation. "The mortal nature," she says, "seeks as much as possible to live forever and be immortal" (ἡ θνητὴ φύσις ζητεῖ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἀεὶ τε εἶναι καὶ ἄθάνατος),⁶⁸ and this drives us to procreate. But far more valuable than the love of the body is love of the soul, which gives birth to the soul's beauty: "wisdom and the rest of virtue."⁶⁹ The true lover of wisdom, beholding beautiful things in the correct order, is led from one beauty to another, always upwards until he comes to know the end and perfection of beauty itself (αὐτὸ τελευτῶν ὃ ἔστι καλόν).⁷⁰ To the banquet guests, Socrates dispenses Diotima's wisdom:

"But how would it be, in our view," she said, "if someone got to see the Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality, but if he could see the divine Beauty itself in its one form? ...In that life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty)."⁷¹

We see here again that the beauty of the soul is none other than virtue, the instrument of purification. The philosopher's goal, according to both Diotima and Plotinus, is to attain the

⁶⁷ *Enneads* I.6.6, I.6.9.

⁶⁸ *Symposium* 207d

⁶⁹ *Symposium* 209a.

⁷⁰ *Symposium* 211c-d.

⁷¹ *Symposium* 211e-212a.

vision of the divine and supreme Beauty through a process of purification, by which he himself becomes a vision of beauty. Before loud applause, Socrates concludes Diotima's speech: "The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, and if any human being could become immortal (γενέσθαι...ἄθανάτω), it would be he."⁷²

It should by now be obvious that Plotinus' conception of Likeness to God has considerable depth and dimension—much more than he is usually given credit for. It should also be clear that Plotinus has not simply abstracted a few of the more fantastic statements from Plato's dialogues and embellished them to the point of inventing a new hyper-spiritualized philosophy. No one doubts that virtue, dialectic, happiness, and beauty are among the most important ideas within the Platonic dialogues, and Plato, as we have seen, has described each as having its perfection and completion in the realm of the divine. These divine standards, too, are meant to act as guides for living a good life here on earth. Both Plotinus and Plato are explicit on this point: "becoming like God as much as possible" is a goal for this life, and has significance not merely for the sage or mystic, but for every ethical human being who seeks to live life to its greatest capacity. There are, no doubt, innumerable possibilities when it comes to interpreting Plato's dialogues, and it would be naïve for anyone to claim that a particular idea represents an unshakable doctrine of Plato's personal philosophy. What I do claim, though, is that Plotinus' understanding of the Platonic philosophy and its *telos*, besides being greatly attested in antiquity, embraces the ideas found in the dialogues in a perspicacious and insightful way, and absolutely deserves to be reckoned with.

⁷² *Symposium* 212a.

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