

Theages on Virtue

With an essay by Plutarch on whether virtue can be taught



The mission of virtue

From Taylor T. (*Tr. & Com.*). Theages, in his treatise *On The Virtues*, in: *Fragments of the Ethical Writings of Certain Pythagoreans in the Doric Dialect; and a Collection of Pythagoric Sentences from Stobæus and others which are omitted by Gale in his Opuscula mythologica, and have not been noticed by any editor (1818). Together with Political Fragments of Archytas, Charondas, Zaleucus, and other ancient Pythagoreans, preserved by Stobæus; and also, Ethical fragments of Hierocles, the celebrated commentator on the Golden Pythagoric Verses, preserved by the same author (1823).*

Frontispiece: Polishing the Urn by Daniel Ridgway Knight

Αβαππιστος εμι φελλος ως
υπερ ερκος αλμας.

Just like a cork unmerged I keep
On the broad barrier of the deep.

— Pindar, *Pythian Ode 2*

THE ORDER OF THE SOUL subsists in such a way, that one part of it is the reasoning power, another is anger, and another is desire. And the reasoning power, indeed, has dominion over knowledge; anger over impetus; and desire intrepidly rules over the appetitions of the soul. When therefore these three parts pass into one, and exhibit one appropriate composition, then virtue and concord are produced in the soul. But when they are divulsed from each other by sedition, then vice and discord are produced in the soul. It is necessary, however, that virtue should have these three things, viz. reason, power, and deliberate choice. The virtue, therefore, of the reasoning power of the soul is prudence; for it is a habit of judging and contemplating. But the virtue of the irascible part, is fortitude; for it is a habit of resisting, and enduring things of a dreadful nature. And the virtue of the epithymetic or appetitive part is temperance; for it is a moderation and detention of the pleasures which arise through the body. But the virtue of the whole soul is justice. For men indeed become bad, either through vice, or through incontinence, or through a natural ferocity. But they injure each other, either through gain, or through pleasure, or through ambition. Vice, therefore, more appropriately belongs to the reasoning part of the soul. For prudence indeed is similar to art; but vice to pernicious art. For it invents contrivances for the purpose of acting unjustly. But incontinence rather pertains to the appetitive part of the soul. For continence consists in subduing, and incontinence in not subduing pleasures. And ferocity pertains to the irascible part of the soul. For when someone, through acting ill from desire, is gratified not as a man should be, but as a wild beast, then a thing of this kind is denominated ferocity. The effects also of these dispositions are consequent to the things for the sake of which they are performed. For avarice is consequent to vice; but vice is consequent to the reasoning part of the soul. And ambition, indeed, follows from the irascible part; and this becoming excessive, generates ferocity. Again, pleasure pertains to the appetitive part; but this being sought after more vehemently, generates incontinence. Hence, since the acting unjustly is produced from so many causes, it is evident that acting

justly is effected through an equal number of causes. For virtue, indeed, is naturally beneficent and profitable; but vice is productive of evil, and is noxious.

Since, however, of the parts of the soul, one is the leader, but the other follows, and the virtues and the vices subsist about these, and in these; it is evident that with respect to the virtues also, some are leaders, others are followers, and others are composed from these. And the leaders, indeed, are such as prudence; but the followers are such as fortitude and temperance; and the composites from these, are such as justice. The passions, however, are the matter of virtue; for the virtues subsist about, and in these. But of the passions, one is voluntary, but another is involuntary. And the voluntary, indeed, is pleasure; but the involuntary is pain. Men also, who have the political virtues, give intension and remission to these, co-harmonizing the other parts of the soul, to that part which possesses reason. But the boundary of this co-adaptation, is for intellect not to be prevented from accomplishing its proper work, either by indigence, or excess. For that which is less excellent, is co-arranged for the sake of that which is more excellent. Thus in the world, every part that is always passive, subsists for the sake of that which is always moved. And in the conjunction of animals, the female subsists for the sake of the male. For the latter sows, generating a soul but the former alone imparts matter to that which is generated. In the soul however, the irrational subsists for the sake of the rational part. For anger and desire are co-arranged in subserviency to the first part of the soul; the former as a certain satellite, and guardian of the body; but the latter as a dispensator and provident curator of necessary wants. But intellect being established in the highest summit of the body, and having a prospect in that which is on all sides splendid and transparent,¹ investigates the wisdom of [real] beings. And this is the work of it according to nature, viz. having investigated, and obtained the possession [of truth] to follow those beings who are more excellent and more honourable than itself. For *the knowledge of things divine and most honourable, is the principle, cause, and rule of human blessedness.*²

¹ *i.e.*, In the aetherial vehicle of the soul, which when the soul energizes intellectually is spherical, and is moved circularly. This vehicle also is *ἀγγοειδής*, or luciform, throughout diaphanous, and of a star-like nature. Hence Marcus Antoninus beautifully observes: *σφαῖρᾳ ψυχῆς ἀγγοειδής, (lege ἀγγοειδής) ὅταν μῆτε ἐκτείνηται ἐπὶ τι, μῆτε ἔσω συντρέχει μῆτε συνιζάνη, ἀλλὰ φῶτι λαμπήται, φ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ὄρα τὴν πάντων, καὶ τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ.* Lib. II. *i.e.*,

“The sphere of the soul is then luciform, when the soul is neither extended to anything [external] nor inwardly concurs with it, nor is depressed by it, but is illuminated with a light by which she sees the truth of all things, and the truth that is in herself.”

² Prometheus Trust Edition, 2004, pp. 347-48

The anatomy of virtue

THE PRINCIPLES OF ALL VIRTUE are three; knowledge, power, and deliberate choice. And knowledge indeed, is that by which we contemplate and form a judgment of things; power is as it were a certain strength of the nature¹ from which we derive our subsistence, and is that which gives stability to our actions; and deliberate choice is as it were certain hands of the soul by which we are impelled to, and lay hold on the objects of our choice. The order of the soul also subsists as follows: One part of it is the reasoning power, another part is anger, and another is desire. And the reasoning power indeed, is that which has dominion over knowledge; anger is that which rules over the ardent impulses of the soul; and desire is that which willingly rules over appetite. When therefore, these three pass into one, so as to exhibit one co-adaptation, then virtue and concord are produced in the soul; but when they are seditious, and divulsed from each other, then vice and discord are generated in the soul. And when the reasoning power prevails over the irrational parts of the soul, then endurance and continence are produced; endurance indeed, in the retention of pains; but continence in the abstinence from pleasures. But when the irrational parts of the soul prevail over the reasoning power, then effeminacy and incontinence are produced; effeminacy indeed, in flying from pain; but incontinence, in the being vanquished by pleasures. When however, the better part of the soul governs, but the less excellent part is governed; and the former leads, but the latter follows, and both consent, and are concordant with each other, then virtue and every good are generated in the whole soul. When likewise the appetitive follows the reasoning part of the soul, then temperance is produced; but when this is the case with the irascible part, fortitude is produced; and when it takes place in all the parts of the soul, then justice is the result. For justice is that which separates all the vices and all the virtues of the soul from each other. And justice is a certain established order of the apt conjunction of the parts of the soul, and perfect and supreme virtue. For every good is contained in this; but the other goods of the soul cannot subsist without this. Hence justice possesses great strength both among Gods and men. For this virtue contains the bond by which the whole and the universe are held together, and also by which Gods and men are connected. Justice therefore, is said to be Themis among the celestial, but Dice among the terrestrial Gods; and Law among men. These assertions however, are indications and symbols, that justice is the supreme virtue. Hence virtue, when it consists in contemplating and judging, is called prudence; when in sustaining things of a dreadful nature, it is denominated fortitude; when in restraining pleasure, temperance; and when in abstaining from gain, and from injuring our neighbours, justice.

Moreover, the arrangement of virtue according to right reason, and the transgression of it contrary to right reason, produce [in the former case] a tendency to the decorous as the final mark, and [in the latter] the frustration of it. The decorous however, is that which ought to be. But this does not require either addition or ablation; since it

¹ The original is, *ἡ δὲ δύναμις, οἷον ἀλκὰ τις τῷ σκάνεος ἢ ὑφιστάμεθα, καὶ ἐμμένομες τοῖς πράγμασιν*. This sentence in its present state is certainly unintelligible. For *σκάνεος* therefore, I read *φύσεως*, and then the sense will be as in the above translation. The version of Canter is certainly absurd; for it is "Facultas tanquam robur et causæ, quo ferimus, et in rebus permanemus." And Gale, as usual, takes no notice of the absurdity.

is that which it is requisite to be. But of the indecorous there are two species; one of which is excess, and the other defect. And excess indeed, is more, but deficiency is less, than is decorous. Virtue also, is a certain habit of the decorous. Hence it is directly, both a summit and a medium. For thus, things that are decorous are both media and summits. They are media indeed, because they fall between excess and deficiency; but they are summits, because they do not require either addition or ablation. For they are the very things themselves which they ought to be.

Since however, the virtue of manners is conversant with the passions, but of the passions pleasure and pain are supreme, it is evident that virtue does not consist in extirpating the passions of the soul, pleasure and pain, but in co-harmonizing them. For neither does health, which is a certain apt mixture of the powers of the body, consist in expelling the cold and the hot, the moist and the dry; but in these being [appropriately] mingled together. For it is as it were, a certain symmetry of these. Thus too, in music, concord does not consist in expelling the sharp and the flat; but when these are co-harmonized, then concord is produced, and dissonance is exterminated. In a similar manner, the hot and the cold, the moist and the dry, being harmoniously mingled together, health is produced, and disease destroyed. But when anger and desire are co-harmonized, the vices and the [other] passions are extirpated, and the virtues and manners are ingenerated. Deliberate choice however, in beautiful conduct, is the greatest peculiarity of the virtue of manners. For it is possible to use reason and power without virtue; but it is not possible to use deliberate choice without it. For deliberate choice indicates the dignity of manners. Hence also, the reasoning power subduing *by force* anger and desire, produces continence and endurance. And again, when the reasoning power is violently dethroned by the irrational parts, then incontinence and effeminacy are produced. Such dispositions however, of the soul as these, are half-perfect virtues, and half-perfect vices. For the reasoning power of the soul is [according to its natural subsistence] in a healthy, but the irrational parts are in a diseased condition. And so far indeed, as anger and desire are governed and led by the rational part of the soul, continence and endurance become virtues; but so far as this is effected by violence, and not voluntarily, they become vices. For it is necessary that virtue should perform such things as are fit, not with pain, but with pleasure. Again, so far as anger and desire govern the reasoning power, effeminacy and incontinence are produced, which are certain vices. But so far as they gratify the passions with pain, knowing that they are erroneous, in consequence of the eye of the soul being sane, — so far as this is the case, they are not vices. Hence, it is evident that virtue must necessarily perform what is fit voluntarily; that which is involuntary indeed, not being without pain and fear; and that which is voluntary, not subsisting without pleasure and delight.

By division also it will at the same time be found that this is the case. For knowledge and the perception of things, are the province of the rational part of the soul; but power pertains to the irrational part. For not to be able to resist pain, or to vanquish pleasure, is the peculiarity of the irrational part of the soul. But deliberate choice subsists in both these, viz. in the rational, and also in the irrational part. For it consists of *dianoia* and appetite; of which, *dianoia* indeed, pertains to the rational, but appetite to the irrational part. Hence every virtue consists in a co-adaptation of the parts of the soul; and both will and deliberate choice, entirely subsist in virtue.

Universally therefore, virtue is a certain co-adaptation of the irrational parts of the soul to the rational part. Virtue however, is produced through pleasure and pain receiving the boundary of that which is fit. For true virtue is nothing else than the habit of that which is fit. But the fit, or the decorous, is that which ought to be; and the unfit, or indecorous, is that which ought not to be. Of the indecorous however, there are two species, viz. excess and defect. And excess indeed, is more than is fit; but defect is less than is fit. But since the fit is that which ought to be, it is both a summit and a middle. It is a summit indeed, because it neither requires ablation, nor addition; but it is a middle, because it subsists between excess and defect. The fit, however, and the unfit, are to each other as the equal and the unequal, that which is arranged, and that which is without arrangement; and both the two former and the two latter are finite and infinite.¹ On this account, the parts of the unequal are referred to the middle, but not to each other. For the angle is called obtuse which is greater than a right angle; but that is called acute, which is less than a right angle. The right line also [in a circle] is greater, which surpasses that which is drawn from the centre. And the day is longer indeed, which exceeds that of the equinox. Diseases, likewise, of the body are generated, through the body becoming more hot or more cold [than is proper]. For that which is more hot [than is fit] exceeds moderation; and that which is more cold [than is fit] is below mediocrity. The soul also, and such things as pertain to it, have this disposition and analogy. For audacity indeed, is an excess of the decorous in the endurance of things of a dreadful nature; but timidity is a deficiency of the decorous. And prodigality is an excess of what is fit in the expenditure of money; but illiberality is a deficiency in this. And rage indeed, is an excess of the decorous in the impulse of the irascible part of the soul; but insensibility is a deficiency of this. The same reasoning likewise applies to the opposition of the other dispositions of the soul. It is necessary however, that virtue, since it is a habit of the decorous, and a medium of the passions, should neither be [wholly] impassive, nor immoderately passive. For impassivity indeed, causes the soul to be unimpelled, and to be without an enthusiastic tendency to the beautiful in conduct; but immoderate passivity causes it to be full of perturbation, and inconsiderate. It is necessary therefore, that passion should so present itself to the view, in virtue, as shadow and outline in a picture. For the animated and the delicate, and that which imitates the truth, in conjunction with goodness of colours, are especially effected in a picture through these [*i.e.* through shadow and outline]. But the passions of the soul are animated by the natural incitation and enthusiasm of virtue. For virtue is generated from the passions, and when generated, again subsists together with them; just as that which is well harmonized consists of the sharp and the flat, that which is well mingled consists of the hot and the cold, and that which is in equilibrium derives its equality of weight from the heavy and the light. It is not therefore necessary to take away the passions of the soul; for neither would this be profitable; but it is requisite that they should be co-harmonized with the rational part, in conjunction with fitness and mediocrity.²

¹ Viz. The equal and that which is arranged, belong to the order of bound, and the unequal and that which is without arrangement, to the order of infinity. And bound and infinity are the two great principles of things after the ineffable cause of all. See the third book of my translation of Proclus, *On the Theology of Plato*.

² Prometheus Trust Edition, 2004, pp. 352-55

Can virtue be taught?

From Plutarch's *Moralia*. Published in fourteen volumes as part of the Loeb Classical Library Series, 1939. Vol. VI, translated and annotated by W.C. Helmbold.

WHEN WE DISCUSS VIRTUE we debate the question whether Prudence, Justice, and the Good Life can be taught; then we are surprised that the achievements of orators, pilots, musicians, architects, and farmers are past counting, whereas “good men” is only a name and a mere term, like “Centaur,” “Giants,” or “Cyclopes”! And it is impossible to find any deed that is faultless as regards its virtue, or any character undefiled by passion, or any life untouched by dishonour; but even if Nature does spontaneously produce something that is excellent, this excellence is obscured by much that is foreign to it, like wheat mixed with wild and impure stuff.¹ Men learn to play the harp, to dance and to read, to farm and to ride the horse; they learn to put on shoes and to don garments, they are taught to pour wine and to bake meat. All these things it is impossible to do properly without instruction; but shall that for the attainment of which all these things are done, that is, the Good Life, be unteachable, irrational, requiring no skill, and fortuitous?

O mortal men! Why do we assert that virtue is unteachable, and thus make it non-existent? For if learning begets virtue, the prevention of learning destroys it. Yet truly, as Plato² says, just because a foot of verse is out of measure with the lyre and fails to harmonize with it, brother does not war with brother, nor does friend quarrel with friend, nor do states conceive hatred toward other states and wreak upon each other the most extreme injuries and suffer them as well; nor can anyone say that civil strife has ever broken out in a state over a question of accent, as, for instance, whether we should read Têlchines or Telchínes,³ nor that a quarrel has ever arisen in a household between husband and wife as to which is the warp and which the woof.⁴ Yet, for all that, no one, unless he has received instruction, would attempt to handle a loom or a book or a lyre, though he would suffer no great harm if he did so, but he is merely afraid of becoming ridiculous (for, as Heraclitus⁵ says, “It is better to conceal ignorance”); but everyone thinks that without instruction he will handle successfully a home, a marriage, a commonwealth, a magistracy — though he has not learned how to get along with wife, or servant, or fellow-citizen, or subject, or ruler!

¹ *i.e.*, tares; *cf.* *Moralia*, 51a

² *Cleitophon*, 407c; *cf.* *Moralia*, 534f.

³ The latter, according to Herodianus Technicus, I p. 17 (ed. Lentz)

⁴ [*i.e.*, the essential foundation of any structure, organization, or argument; from weaving, in which the warp (the threads that run lengthwise) and the woof (the threads that run across) make up the fabric.]

⁵ Diels, *Frag. d. Vorsokratiker*, I p. 172, *Frag.* 95; the fragment is given more fully in *Moralia*, 644f and in a different form in *Frag. 1 of That Women Also Should be Educated* (Bernardakis, Vol. VII p. 125)

Diogenes, when he saw a child eating sweet-meats, gave the boys' tutor a cuff, rightly judging the fault to be, not that of him who had not learned, but of him who had not taught. Then, when it is impossible to eat and drink politely in company if one has not learned from childhood, as Aristophanes¹ says,

Not to laugh like a clown, nor dainties gulp down, nor to cross one leg on the other;

yet can men enter without censure the fellowship of a household, a city, a marriage, a way of life, a magistracy, if they have not learned how they should get along with fellow-beings? When Aristippus was asked by someone,

So you are everywhere, it seems, aren't you?

He replied with a laugh,

Well then, I am wasting my fare,² if indeed I am everywhere.

Why, then, would you also not say, "If men do not become better by teaching, the fee given to their tutors is wasted"? For these are the first to receive the child when it has been weaned and, just as nurses mould its body with their hands,³ so tutors by the habits they inculcate train the child's character to take a first step, as it were, on the path of virtue. So the Spartan,⁴ when he was asked what he effected by his teaching, said,

I make honourable things pleasant to children.

And yet what do tutors teach? To walk in the public streets with lowered head; to touch salt-fish with but one finger, but fresh fish, bread, and meat with two;⁵ to sit in such and such a posture; in such and such a way to wear their cloaks.⁶

What then? He who says that the physician's art concerns itself with rashes and hang-nails, but not with pleurisy or fever or inflammation of the brain, in what does he differ from one who says that schools and lectures and precepts are for instruction in trifling and childish duties, but that for the great and supreme duties there is only brute knocking about and accident? For just as he is ridiculous who declares that one must be taught before pulling at the oar, but may steer the boat even without having learned; so one who grants that the other arts are acquired by learning, but deprives virtue of this, appears to be acting directly contrary to the practice of the Scythians. For the Scythians, as Herodotus⁷ says, blind their slaves that these may hand over the cream to themselves; but such a man as this gives Reason, like an eye, as it were, to the subservient and ancillary arts, while denying it to virtue.

¹ Adapted from *Clouds*, 983

² Cf. Juvenal, VIII.97: *furor est post omnia perdere naulum*, which indicates the proverbial character of the expression. Aristippus, having the *entrée* everywhere, need waste no money in transit.

³ Cf. *Moralia*, 3e; Plato, *Republic*, 377c.

⁴ Cf. *Moralia*, 452d, *infra*.

⁵ The point is obscure and the text corrupt.

⁶ Cf. *Moralia*, 5a and 99d. See Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 973 ff, for the way good boys should sit and walk in public; *Birds*, 1568, for the proper way to wear a cloak.

⁷ Herodotus, IV.2, which passage is not at all explicit, but appears to mean that the slaves are blinded to prevent their stealing that part of the milk considered most valuable by their masters.

Yet when Callias, son of Charias, asked the general Iphicrates,¹

Who are you? Bowman, targeteer, horseman, or hoplite?

Iphicrates replied,

None of these, but the one who commands them all.

Ridiculous, therefore, is the man who declares that the art of using the bow, or of fighting in heavy armour, or of manipulating the sling, or of riding a horse may be taught, but that the art of commanding and leading an army comes at it chances and to whom it chances without previous instruction! Surely he is more ridiculous who affirms that prudence alone cannot be taught, for without prudence there can be no gain or profit from the other arts. But if prudence is in command, the principle which orders all the arts, which assigns each person to a place of usefulness,² what joy, for instance, can one have at a banquet, though the servants are well-trained and have learned to

Carve the meat and roast it well and pour the wine,³

if there be no system nor order in the servitors?⁴



¹ Cf. *Moralia*, 99e, 187b.

² There is, perhaps, a lacuna at this point, as indicated by Pohlenz, who supplies
“how, then, must one not pay even more heed to prudence than to the other arts?”

³ Homer, *Odyssey*, XV.323

⁴ Possibly a large part of the essay is missing.