

The Life of Virtue in Greek Philosophy

David Nowakowski, Ph.D.

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I. Virtue as Excellence

A. Greek *aretē*. Latin *virtus*.

II. Aristotle

A. The goal of human life:

- i. Flourishing, “happiness” (*eudaimonia*).
 - a) The modern notion of “happiness” is too narrow.

B. Virtue: performing a function in an excellent way.

- i. “It should be said, then, that every virtue causes its possessors to be in a good state, and to perform their functions well. The virtue of eyes, for instance, makes the eyes and their functioning excellent, because it makes us see well. And similarly, the virtue of a horse makes the horse excellent, and thereby good at galloping, at carrying its rider, and at standing steady in the face of the enemy. If this is true in every case, then the virtue of a human being will likewise be the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well.” (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.6)

C. Two types of virtue:

- i. Ethical virtues (virtues of character)
 - a) A pun in the name: in Greek, *ēthos* means “character,” while *ethos* means “habit.”
- ii. Intellectual virtues.

Table 1: Ethical Virtues as a Mean Between Extremes

<i>Deficiency (Vice)</i>	<i>Virtue</i>	<i>Excess (Vice)</i>
cowardice	Courage	excessive boldness/rashness
ungenerosity, miserliness	Generosity	wastefulness, lavish spending
self-deprecation (“pretense that understates”)	Truthfulness	boastfulness (“pretense that overstates”)

III. Platonism

A. The goal:

- i. “Becoming like God, insofar as possible for a human being” (*Phaedrus* 248b).
- ii. Unity, unification, oneness.

Table 2: Grades of Virtue in Platonic Philosophy

<i>Grade of Virtue</i>	<i>Reign of</i>	<i>Predominant</i>	<i>Characterizes</i>	<i>Focus (for Unification)</i>	<i>How is it Acquired?</i>	<i>Dialogue(s)</i>
(5) Contemplative, Theoretic	Ouranos	Wisdom	Gods			many others, esp. <i>Phaedrus</i>
(4) Purificatory, Cathartic	Kronos	Courage	Daimones	the bipartition (division) between soul and body		<i>Phaedo</i>
(3) Political, Civic	Zeus	Justice	Humans	the tripartite (three-part) soul – see Table 4	rationally chosen	<i>Gorgias</i> , <i>Republic</i>
(2) Ethical	Dionysos	Temperance	“Higher” Animals	disparate parts, which do NOT imply each other	learned by habit/training	<i>Alcibiades</i>
(1) Natural, Physical	(Dionysos)	—	Animals	—	innate (with some caveats)	—

Since the grades of virtue signify an ascent to the highest things, read this table from bottom to top.

Even though one cardinal virtue is said to be predominant at each level, all four virtues are present at every level.

Table 3: Interpretations of the Cardinal Virtues at Different Grades

<i>Cardinal Virtue</i>	<i>Natural/Physical</i>	<i>Ethical</i>
Wisdom	good perceptual capacity (esp. sight & hearing)	worship of the Gods, knowing what a king (or free person) should know
Courage	bodily strength	being fearless and undaunted
Moderation	bodily beauty (symmetry or harmony of body parts)	“not being mastered by even a single pleasure” (thus being a free person, whose first duty is to rule himself)
Justice	bodily health (general vitality, not getting sick)	being truthful throughout one’s whole life

What about the other grades? As Plato writes after this presentation of the ethical virtues in the *Alcibiades* (122b):

“It would be a long story, and besides, you can probably imagine the later stages from what I’ve told you so far.”

Table 4: Political Virtue, and Three Parts of the Soul or City (in Plato)

<i>Part of the Soul</i>	<i>Chariot Image (Phaedrus)</i>	<i>People in the Model City (Republic)</i>	<i>Virtue</i>
rational	the charioteer	the rulers (“guardians”)	wisdom
spirited	the good horse	soldiers (“auxiliaries”)	courage
appetitive	the bad horse	ordinary citizens: craftspeople, etc.	moderation

As a political virtue, justice applies to the entire soul (city) when every part is doing its own proper work.

Recommended Readings

- For Aristotle:
 - The entry on Aristotle’s ethics in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is pretty good, but a little heavy lifting: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>
 - *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin. Hackett, 1999. You want the second edition (which is much, much improved over the first). This can be a challenging text, since it seems to be a set of lecture notes collected by Aristotle’s students, and not something which Aristotle himself put in a polished form for publication.
 - The basic account of human flourishing, the function argument, and the initial division between ethical and intellectual virtues, can all be found in Book I.
 - Aristotle’s account of the ethical virtues begins in Book II.
 - He finally gets back to the intellectual virtues in Book VI.
- For Plato:
 - The translations of Plato’s works published by Hackett Publishing Company are generally accurate, easily accessible, reader-friendly, and very reasonably priced. (Since they’re commonly assigned in universities, they are also widely available as used books.) I recommend the following specific volumes, for themes on virtue:
 - Plato, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper.
This hardcover is now the standard English edition for Plato’s entire corpus. It contains all the same translations as the individual paperbacks listed below, plus much more, in a single place.
 - *Plato on Love*, edited by C.D.C. Reeve.
This contains the *Alcibiades* (translated by D.S. Hutchinson), along with the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* (both translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff).

- Plato, *Five Dialogues*, 2nd edition, trans. by G.M.A. Grube, revised by John M. Cooper. For our purposes, the most important dialogue here is the *Phaedo*, but the others which are included are also well worth reading. But see the note below about translations to avoid, and purchase carefully.
 - Plato, *Gorgias*, translated by Donald J. Zeyl.
 - Plato, *Republic*, translated by G.M.A. Grube and revised by C.D.C. Reeve. Today, this is probably the most famous and widely-read of Plato's works, though in antiquity, it was not even part of the standard Platonic curriculum. (All of the other dialogues mentioned here *were* part of that curriculum.) Hackett publishes two different versions of the *Republic*. This classic one is my favorite, since I think it captures more subtle nuances of the text. Some of my colleagues like the newer one, done from scratch by C.D.C. Reeve alone.
- For most of these popular dialogues, there are a wide variety of other translations available. The ones from Penguin Books are also generally good, and typically include helpful headings to divide the text into smaller sections. I have not even come close to examining every available version.
- Even though they are now free in the public domain, I do NOT recommend the translations by Benjamin Jowett. The English language has changed a lot in the century since these translations were made, and Jowett's archaic language makes the texts needlessly difficult for modern readers. (Note that some unscrupulous people have made print-on-demand books using these free translations, but with titles like "Five Dialogues" which are meant to be confused with the editions above. The people who did this need a few lessons in virtue; you simply need to read the fine print carefully, and check the translator's name in addition to the title.)