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**On Purifying Virtue: Resolving Apparent Contradictions in The Theaetetus Digression &
The Ethical Implications of Becoming Like God**

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In her 1999 essay, *becoming like God: Ethics, human nature, and the divine*, theorist Julia Annas investigates an apparent inconsistency in neoplatonic ethics. Her studies revolve around what she calls the ‘unworldly’ strand of virtue found in *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus*; “the idea that virtue is not a matter of coping with the good and evil that we find in our lives, but rather a matter of fleeing from the whole thing, escaping to a realm which is not human at all” (Annas 65). Annas argues that by characterizing virtue as transcending evil rather than intransigence against evil, the unworldly strand in platonic philosophy risks losing the point of virtue (71). Thus, she concludes that the unworldly strand corresponds better to a “religious or spiritual attitude than a moral one” and that its notions present a problematic direction for platonic ethical theory (Annas 65; 71).

Of course, as Annas notes, neither Plato nor the Middle Platonists apparently recognized these contradictions; modern theorists also seem to either ignore or underplay the unworldly strands (63; 71). Unless the past several millennia of platonic scholarship has neglected to consider these passages, the lack of concern regarding them suggests that they are not widely perceived to entail the problems Annas identifies. Yet, her central objection remains compelling: how does Plato’s conventional conception of virtue, e.g. as represented in *The Republic*, cohere with the unworldly strand of virtue presented in *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* when their aims are so apparently divergent (Annas 70)? To answer this question, we proceed by evaluating Annas’ argument. Then, we investigate Plotinus’s attempted reconciliation of the unworldly strand of virtue with neoplatonic philosophy and use the example of St. Basil of Caesara to illuminate a practical counter-example to Annas’s argument. Finally, we explicate a remedy to Annas’ objections from an alternative reading of Plato’s dialogues that coheres with St. Basil’s example.

Annas' Argument & Apparent Ethical Inconsistencies in The Object of The Philosophic Life

Annas begins her argument by recalling a digression in Plato's *Theaetetus* dialogue (172c-177c). In it, Socrates compares the philosopher to the litigious man, noting how the former often embarrasses himself when summoned to court. The philosopher, Socrates explains, does not know his way to the agora; nor does he pay attention to gossiping political cliques (173b-174). Rather, he is concerned with higher order questions about the cosmos—"it is in reality only his body that lives and sleeps in the city. His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its wingéd way" (173e). In this sense, the philosopher demonstrates "constant ignorance and lack of resource in dealing with the obvious" (175b); his studies have fundamentally disconnected him from the happenings of the material world. As such, the philosopher described in *Theaetetus* appears oblivious to evil. If Thales of Miletus was too busy studying the stars to notice the well in front of him until he fell into it, it isn't obvious that he would then notice someone struggling to cross the street (*Theaetetus* 174b; Annas 69). Even if the philosopher may otherwise be disposed by virtue to help the person, his ignorance towards the obvious precludes his intervention.

Annas suggests that the philosopher described in *Theaetetus* is unlike the philosophic ideal portrayed by Socrates in Plato's *Republic* and other dialogues (56). Socrates knows his way to the agora, readily fulfills his political obligations, and actively seeks to engage others' ideas rather than reach those ideas independently through abstract reason (Annas 55). *The Republic*, moreover, presents philosophers as ideal rulers (Annas 55). Thus, the philosophic ideal typically presented by Plato through Socrates is engaged with the world and intransigent against evil. To

that end, there appears to be an inconsistency between the philosophic ideal presented in *Theaetetus* and those found elsewhere in neoplatonic ethical theory.

Annas identifies the source of this inconsistency in “the idea that becoming virtuous is becoming like God”, which is presented in *Theaetetus* as the object of the philosophic life (56; 176a-c). Across Plato’s dialogues, becoming like God is consistently identified with the dominance of the rational aspect of the soul over its other aspects (Annas 58). However, Annas notes that this concept appears nebulous upon further inspection. In *Laws*, for example, becoming like God is likened to traditional attitudes toward piety; it simply entails repressing desires and refraining from self-assertion (Annas 58). In *Timaeus*, however, becoming like God is associated with abstracting from personal considerations to think from the perspective of the universe (Annas 57). The former conception of becoming like God generally coheres with the conventional notion of fulfilling human nature whereas the latter seems to transcend it, entailing that cultivating virtue transforms us into something different altogether. Thus, Annas notes that becoming like God pans out to a cliché in the context of its several possible interpretations; it is as vague and mundane as the notion of heeding reason (59).

Theaetetus appears to cohere with the notion of becoming like God present in *Timaeus*. However, Annas proposes that the philosophic ideal in *Theaetetus* is unique in that it goes beyond universalizing our perspectives (60). According to Annas, the digression in *Theaetetus* entails intellectually escaping the world and its conditions to assimilate with God, a matter of pure rational investigation that does not obviously entail applying the practical wisdom concomitant with being virtuous. Annas identifies this unworldly strand of virtue as being uncommon in Plato’s dialogues. However, she locates a parallel to it in *Phaedo*, wherein Socrates argues that cultivating virtue is a process of purification in practice for death (67d).

Because death is the separation of the soul from the body, and the philosophic life trains the soul to separate from bodily desires, the philosopher prepares for death by desiring to disassociate his soul as far as possible from his body. Although this rationale is unlike the *Theaetetus* digression in its vocabulary, Annas notes that it shares *Theaetetus*'s underlying notion of escaping the evil of the world by fleeing to heaven (176b; Annas 62).

Becoming like God according to *The Republic*, however, appears to cohere more with the notion expressed in *Laws*. That is to say: it does not entail withdrawing from the world. Rather, through cultivating virtue, thereby becoming like God in that he has aligned himself with divine order, the philosopher becomes fit to reproduce that order in society at large (*Republic* 500c-d). On its face, this notion seems incompatible with the idea that becoming like God entails a withdrawal from worldly concerns. If becoming like God made the philosopher in *Theaetetus* inept regarding matters of the polis, how could it then also dispose the philosopher in *The Republic* to better order society? How could he identify the root of society's vices if he can't find his way to the agora? It may be supposed that the philosopher could reach these determinations by investigating the disparity between the virtue that he has cultivated in himself and that which is present in his society. However, the apparent obliviousness to evil demonstrated by the philosopher in *Theaetetus* seems to preclude him from actually making these considerations.

Thus, the notion of becoming like God through the cultivation of virtue appears to encompass several different and potentially incompatible ideas throughout Plato's dialogues. Annas demarcates the core difference between *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* on the one hand and the rest of Plato's works, like *The Republic*, on the other, in the former's unique ascription of becoming like God to the aforementioned unworldly strand of virtue, which she suggests struggles to resonate in ethical thought (65). *Prima facie*, desiring to escape the world negates the

relevance of ethical action because ethical action is motivated by the same concerns that the philosopher is attempting to transcend by becoming like God. In this sense, Annas posits that the philosopher is best understood as recognizing a reality that entirely supplants our ordinary concerns, making his considerations appear more religious than ethical in character (65).

Plotinus' Attempted Reconciliation of the Unworldly Strand of Virtue With Neoplatonic Ethics

To substantiate her suspicions, Annas proceeds by evaluating the success of Plotinus' attempted reconciliation of the unworldly strand of virtue with the conception of virtue portrayed elsewhere in Plato's dialogues, which we will do in kind. Plotinus begins his essay on virtue by acknowledging a blaring conceptual issue entailed by likening the cultivation of virtue to becoming like God: God cannot be conceptualized as possessing virtue (Plotinus 127). Cultivating virtue is typically conceptualized in terms of aligning our desires with reason as a means of coping with the good and evil of the world (Annas 66). For example, bravery emerges in resistance to fear. Yet, a disembodied omnipotent God cannot be readily conceived of as frightened. Suggesting otherwise negates the divinity of God, who is presumed to be perfect and thus has no vice to overcome. As such, the traditional conception of virtue seems inapplicable to the figure of God. It is not apparent that cultivating virtue is a viable means of becoming like God when the former fulfills human nature and the latter entirely transcends it.

Plotinus answers this objection, attempting to resolve platonic theory's aforementioned apparent inconsistencies, by demarcating different tiers of virtue. More specifically, he distinguishes the conventional conception of virtue, or 'civic virtue', from the unworldly strand

thus described, or ‘purificatory virtue’ (Plotinus 135). Plotinus likens cultivating civic virtue to becoming like God in the sense that it is a copy of a copy (133). Because the divine is properly ordered and the cultivation of civic virtue brings us further in line with that order by limiting our desires, possessing civic virtue in a limited sense approximates becoming like God. Moreover, because the soul is closer to God than the body, it participates more in those aspects of virtue that are like God such that they may *appear* alike and in that sense be assimilated into God (133). Annas illustrates this relationship in terms of the likeness of two identical houses (67). One house can be like another house in that they are in some sense the same thing; they may be different buildings, but in terms of purpose and construction they are alike.

However, Annas notes that a house can also be likened to its blueprint despite not being a blueprint itself (67). It is in this sense that Plotinus suggests purificatory virtue likens us to God. Rather than limit our desires to subdue vice, our desires transcend vice through purificatory virtue. To that end, justice is described as disposing our desires to not oppose, rather than be subdued by, our reason; courage is similarly described as not fearing the soul’s separation from the body (Plotinus 135). As such, the cultivation of purificatory virtue disposes us to participate in godliness through imitating the activities of God. Unlike the relation of civic virtue to that which it is fundamentally alike, purificatory virtue is not reciprocally related to godliness. God is not similarly disposed to those possessing purificatory virtue because God lacks disposition (Plotinus 135). A blueprint is not structurally sound because it is not constructed. Yet, to the degree that the latter resembles the former, they are alike. Thus, Plotinus suggests that cultivating civic virtue prepares us for becoming like God by disposing us to cultivate their purificatory forms. Once possessed, the purificatory process likens us to God, not merely by limiting but rather transcending our vices, thereby facilitating participation in godliness.

Annas raises two objections to Plotinus' attempted reconciliation of the unworldly and conventional strands of virtue, the first being considerably weaker than the second. She first asks how the purificatory virtues thus described are relevant to the moral actions that pertain to cultivating virtue when they are explicitly abstract and therefore not found in practice (68). Annas illuminates the answer for us: we find examples of moral action being guided by abstract considerations elsewhere in philosophy, such as in some forms of utilitarianism (68). Thus, it is at least conceptually possible that moral action may be guided by purificatory virtue despite the latter being an abstract concept lacking apparent practical applications.

However, Annas' second objection poses a far greater problem for Plotinus' attempted reconciliation. She asks whether the person possessing purificatory virtue would also possess civic virtue, and more importantly, whether they would practice it (Annas 68). Plotinus argues that those possessing purificatory virtue would necessarily also possess civic virtue (145-147); that much is entailed by the latter being requisite for the former's cultivation. That said, Plotinus is not confident that civic virtues would actually be practiced following purification. He suggests that "[p]erhaps the possessor of the virtues will know them, and how much he can get from them, and will act according to some of them as circumstances require. But when he reaches higher principles and different measures he will act according to these" (Plotinus 147). To that end, if compelled to imbibe, the person would do so moderately. However, lacking desire for anything base, he is unlikely to imbibe at all. More concerningly, following Annas' objection, if he recognized someone in danger, he would be disposed to help, but would likely never notice the imperiled person in the first place because he is so far detached from worldly concerns.

Therefore, as Annas notes, Plotinus' reconciliation seems to portray virtue in a manner that is self-defeating (71). Whereas civic virtue strives to control fear and desire, purificatory

virtue, having entirely risen above those dispositions, instead focuses on fleeing the world and its problems. As Socrates confesses, “[b]ut it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed...nor is it possible that it should have its seat in heaven...[t]hat is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven...becoming as like God as possible” (*Theaetetus* 176a). If in the process of purifying our virtue, we lose impetus for engaging in civic virtue, i.e. we cease to practically apply our cultivated wisdom, we have lost the point of being virtuous. By imitating God and ridding ourselves of desire, we dispose ourselves towards that which lacks disposition, which plausibly negates any capacity for our virtues to provide moral instruction. That is not to say that the person thus described would be immoral but rather that he could not appeal to his purified virtue as the basis for how he should respond to any given situation. The separate tiers of virtue he has cultivated would either compete such that the person is rendered indifferent by their unworldly considerations, or otherwise, any moral decision they come to would be made in reference to the civic virtues alone. Thus, according to Annas, it appears that the unworldly strand of virtue demonstrated in *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* lacks resonance as an ethical theory. It instead appears to better cohere with certain religious attitudes.

An Illuminating Practical Counterexample To Annas’ Objections Found In The Life of St. Basil The Great

Of course, there are several practical counterexamples to Annas’ argument which suggest that the ‘unworldly’ strand of virtue thus described is resonant with neoplatonic ethical theory. The most instructive of these counterpoints for the purposes of our investigations can be identified in St. Basil The Great’s philosophic experiments in Pontus. St. Basil dedicated his life to Christianity, serving as the Bishop of Caesarea, and is regarded as one of the most influential

theologians of the 4th century. However, he did not initially aspire towards an ecclesiastical career. Rather, in his youth, upon completing his education in Athens, St. Basil retreated to his family's estate in Pontus to lead a 'philosophic life' (Russell 206). During this period, he withdrew himself from the world and swore off his secular vocation as a teacher in Caesarea, taking a vow of poverty and even distancing himself from his family, to whose patronage he owed his ability to undertake his experiment. Reflecting on this period, his brother Gregory noted that "[Basil] withdrew from the worldly show and began to look down upon acclaim through oratory and went over to this life full of labors for one's own hand to perform, providing for himself, through his complete poverty, a mode of living that would, without impediment, lead to virtue" (167-168 Callahan).

Although St. Basil did not justify his period of seclusion in Pontus through an explicit appeal to Plato, the conception of virtue he presents is based in a neoplatonic framework. On several occasions in *Address To Young Men On The Right Use of Greek Literature*, St. Basil appeals to Plato as an authority on the subject of virtue. While writing about the importance of practically embodying the virtues we profess, he appeals to the wisdom of pre-Christian philosophers that have extolled virtue, saying "[s]uch men must one obey, and must try to realize their words in his life" (Padelford VI). Appealing to Plato specifically, St. Basil continues: "[b]ut to seem to be good when one is not so, is, if we are to respect the opinion of Plato at all, the very height of injustice" (Padelford VI). By appealing to the wisdom of philosophers like Plato, acknowledging that their ideas on virtue are instructive even in a Christian context, St. Basil displays a belief in the coherence of Christian conceptions of virtue and neoplatonic philosophy. From this perceived coherence we gather that St. Basil does not meaningfully demarcate a difference between pursuing Christian virtue and those prescribed by neoplatonic philosophy.

St. Basil's ecclesiastical background provides valuable context for our investigations. Recall that Annas describes the unworldly strand of virtue as presenting more of a "religious or spiritual attitude than a moral one" (65). To that end, she mentions an apparent, though indirect, reference to the *Theaetetus* passage from St. Augustine: "[i]f, then, Plato defined the wise man as one who imitates, knows, loves this God, and who is rendered blessed through fellowship with Him in His own blessedness, why discuss with the other philosophers?" (City of God, 8.5). This notion of being 'rendered blessed through fellowship with Him in His own blessedness', is instead translated by Annas as 'being happy' 'by partaking in Him' (66). The latter's vocabulary more clearly communicates the idea that becoming like God is the final end of virtue; the former's meaning is somewhat obfuscated by religious terminology. However, in either case, Annas is correct to suggest that the unworldly strand of virtue portrays a religious attitude; the conception of virtue presented by Plato in *Phaedo* and the *Theaetetus* digression is compelling from a Christian perspective, as demonstrated by St. Basil and St. Augustine's acknowledgement that Plato's works on virtue are instructive even in a Christian context.

That said, it is not apparent that the unworldly strand of virtue is *merely* compelling from a religious perspective, as Annas concludes in her essay. Rather, such religious perspectives may instead be concomitant with sound ethical theory. The doctrine of theosis according to the Cappadocian tradition proves particularly instructive to that end. Theosis, otherwise referred to as deification, is the Christian conception of becoming like God. Until the end of the fourth century, the doctrine of deification followed two parallel lines of development. The former pertaining to "the transformation of humanity in principle as a consequence of the Incarnation", and the latter being "the ascent of the soul through the practice of virtue" (Russel 14). These two strands are respectively understood as the realistic and philosophic approaches to deification.

The realistic and philosophic approaches to deification have since been synthesized by theologians like St. Dionysius of Areopagite and St. Maximus The Confessor. However, we find two distinct, albeit concomitant ideas of becoming like God permeating their synthesis. The realistic approach, based on incorporation into Christ through baptism, explicitly conveys the sort of religious attitude that Annas suggests resonates with the unworldly strand of virtue. The philosophic approach, however, is purely ethical and analogical; it does not entail transformation of the flesh nor movement from the contingent to the self-existent orders of being (Russell 13). Rather, following the philosophic approach, Christians are deified by imitating Christ, who according to Christian tradition deified his incarnate form, such that we may attain likeness to God through cultivating the virtues Christ exhibited (Russell 13). St. Basil's conception of theosis operates according to the latter approach (Russell 208). Thus, understanding that St. Basil recognized mutual intelligibility between neoplatonic and Christian virtue, a practical counterexample to Annas' objection may be illuminated through his engagement in the philosophic approach to deification, which may prove useful to our investigations.

Investigating St. Basil's Philosophic Experiment at Pontus

St. Basil describes the goals of his ascetic project to a friend, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, in an attempt to inspire the latter to join him in his endeavors. Expressing his discontent with civic life, St. Basil writes that:

“He who is not yet yoked in the bonds of matrimony is harassed by frenzied cravings, and rebellious impulses, and hopeless attachments; he who has found his mate is encompassed with his own tumult of cares; if he is childless, there is desire for children; has he children? Anxiety about their education, attention to his wife, care of his house,

oversight of his servants, misfortunes in trade, quarrels with his neighbours, lawsuits, the risks of the merchant, the toil of the farmer. Each day, as it comes, darkens the soul in its own way; and night after night takes up the day's anxieties, and cheats the mind with illusions in accordance" (ep. 2).

To Basil, the tumult of civic life, of upholding the secular expectations of family, profession, and other miscellaneous obligations, presents a clear impediment to the pursuit of a mind quieted enough to apprehend the truth of its engagements (ep. 2). This sentiment bears striking resemblance to the notion of withdrawal from the world demonstrated in the unworldly strand of virtue that Annas identifies in *Theaetetus* and *Phaedo*. Rather than be concerned with practicing virtue according to his engagements, St. Basil seemingly presents his anxieties as being best resolved through detachment. He recognizes that his longing for matrimony, if satisfied, would present new desires and thus cause further longing. If being unwed entails tumult and being wed entails tumult, the only apparent remedy for the pursuing virtue appears to be forgoing desire. St. Basil therefore seems thoroughly disinterested in grappling with evil or controlling his desires; he instead wants to transcend them.

St. Basil proposes a remedy for the tumult of life in "separation from the whole world; that is, not bodily separation, but the severance of the soul's sympathy with the body" (ep. 2). Therein we find a rather direct appeal to the purificatory process as it is described in *Phaedo*; "[a]nd purification...consists in separating the soul as much as possible from the body" (67d). In St. Basil, this process of separation began with his resolve "to live so without city, home, goods, society, possessions, means of life, business, engagements, [and] human learning" (ep. 2). However, because he understands that physical separation from society does not alone facilitate

the cultivation of virtue, Basil compares this period of withdrawal from civic obligation to clearing a slate of its preexisting markings so that something new might be written on it (ep. 2).

Once the slate has been cleared, quieting the mind, Basil then suggests that virtue should be cultivated through imitating the saints. He writes that just as painters do their best to transfer the lineaments of the paintings they copy to their own work, so too must those in pursuit of virtue make the saints' virtue their own through imitation (ep. 2). Herein we find a similar methodology to that which was described earlier by Plotinus, i.e. pursuing civic virtue as one creates a copy from a copy (133). Having divested himself of civic obligation, Basil prepares himself for purification through imitating those that resemble God. Here again it is important to note that Basil's withdrawal from society precedes the purification of his virtues. Otherwise, we may be inclined to understand Basil as apparently having left the realm of practical wisdom in favor of the sort of pure contemplation that Annas suggests misses the point of virtue (71).

Rather, Basil at this point of his experiment is still involved in the business of grappling with evil. He describes cultivating virtue through imitating the saints as "due medicine for his ailment" (ep. 2). This description does not portray someone who is unburdened by the temptations of sin but rather one who is struggling to align their soul with reason. To that end, even in isolation, Basil appears committed to cultivating civic virtue in preparation for purification. However, how Basil could actually achieve this endeavor is another matter to consider; some virtues are certainly more difficult to cultivate in isolation than others. Cultivating temperance and wisdom, entailing moderation and sound judgement respectively, seems straightforward in this context, being a matter of self-restraint on the one hand and contemplation on the other.

Courage and justice, however, are less apparently applicable to someone who has cloistered himself away from the world. Given bravery's typical application in combat and the role of justice in the courts, both seem to entail an inherently social element. How can someone practice justice in isolation; would not reason regarding what should be feared be distorted by the security of a life spent in solitude? To answer these concerns, let us look at how Plato characterizes these virtues in *Republic*; Plato explains that we call someone brave "when, namely, his high spirit preserves in the midst of pains and pleasures the rule handed down by the reason as to what is or is not to be feared" (442c). One might then ask, what should be feared?

We find valuable instruction regarding these questions in the *Theaetetus* digression. After explaining the notion of pursuing virtue as withdrawal from the world to Theadorus, Socrates comments that the unjust do not typically understand the consequences of their injustice (176d). Beyond any sort of physical reprimand, Socrates identifies the more serious punishment for injustice in following a pattern of behavior that disposes us towards "the deepest unhappiness" (176e-177a). Herein we find the answer to how someone could cultivate bravery in isolation; through reason we understand that this pattern of the deepest unhappiness should be feared and thus avoided. Moreover, we understand that its inverse, the pattern of divine and supreme happiness, should be desired and therefore pursued. Thus, by dedicating himself to the contemplative life in pursuit of virtue, St. Basil demonstrates bravery in refusing the pattern of deepest unhappiness and not fearing the loss of its material or immaterial features.

Next, we should inquire about the definition of justice, which Plato identifies as the proper ordering of someone's soul such that none of its parts interfere with the duties of the others; it is analogically related to the proper ordering of society, wherein the cobbler refrains from the business of the carpenter, etc. (*Republic* 443c-444a). St. Basil's aspiration for a mind

quieted such that it “falls back upon itself, and thereby ascends to the contemplation of [becoming like] God” (ep. 2) demonstrates such an attempt to properly order the soul, seeing as, according to Plato, the final end of virtuous pursuits, i.e. cultivating justice, is becoming like God (Annas 52). Thus, even in isolation, St. Basil could practice justice by cultivating the underlying proper order in his soul that would so dispose him to exercise justice in external contexts. As such, Basil’s physical withdrawal from society does not preclude him cultivating civic virtue.

Returning to the methodology of St. Basil’s experiment, after quieting his mind by withdrawing from society and preparing himself for purification by cultivating virtue, St. Basil begins to withdraw from the world entirely, purifying his desires. He writes that:

“When that beauty shines about [the mind], it even forgets its very nature; it is dragged down no more by thought of food nor anxiety concerning dress; it keeps holiday from earthly cares, and devotes all its energies to the acquisition of the good things which are eternal, and asks only how may be made to flourish in it self-control and manly courage, righteousness and wisdom, and all the other virtues, which, distributed under these heads, properly enable the good man to discharge all the duties of life.” (ep.2)

Thus, having reached his methodological conclusion, St. Basil appears to have developed a process for purifying his virtues that thoroughly invests himself in the neoplatonic process associated by Annas and Plotinus with the ‘unworldly’ strand of virtue. Rather than seeking to only be changed by the Lord through sacrament, St. Basil endeavors to become like God through cultivating virtue and purifying his desires. Thus, through the example of St. Basil, we illuminate a practical example suggesting the unworldly strand of virtue’s potential resonance, not only in religious life, but also in neoplatonic ethical theory through the cultivation of virtue.

A Potential Objection To The Relevance of St. Basil's Example

That said, even if St. Basil's retreat in Pontus constitutes a serious philosophic experiment in conversation with neoplatonic ethical theory; it is still not apparent how the purificatory process present in the unworldly strand of virtue resonates as a sound ethical theory. Even in St. Basil's example, although we see how one might order himself properly in isolation, it is not apparent how he extends that order to the world around him. Rather, if his aim is to "enable the good man to discharge all the duties of life" (ep. 2), then Annas' objection seems to be further substantiated. Even if St. Basil could cultivate civic virtue while withdrawn from society, it is not apparent that upon the purification of his virtues, St. Basil would have any reason or desire to activate his practical wisdom. Rather, like the model philosopher represented in the *Theaetetus* digression, St. Basil would render himself a fool in civic life as he becomes ignorant to the obvious in favor of contemplating God.

However, St. Basil did not spend the remainder of his life in quiet isolation. Rather, he was called to service by the Church on three separate occasions during his retreat and eventually left Pontus to serve in the clergy. Recalling the chronology of St. Basil's ascetic experiments:

"Basil traveled in the East in 356 and 357. Probably in 357 he was baptized by Dianius of Caesarea. He then retired to Pontus and was joined by Gregory. In 359 or 360 he attended a synod in Constantinople. In the latter year he was ordained a reader by Dianius; but, suspecting among other things the orthodoxy of his bishop, he withdrew again to Pontus. It was there, early in 362, that Gregory joined him for the second time, having been just recently ordained by his father. Shortly after Gregory had returned to Nazianzus, Basil went back to Caesarea to be reconciled with Dianius on his deathbed; and he was ordained a priest by Dianius's successor, Eusebius. A year or so later, the two men

became estranged, and Basil went for a third time to Annisa. He stayed there until 365 and then returned to Caesarea finally.” (Rosseau 127)

St. Basil’s willingness to pause and even conclude his ascetic experiments may initially appear discordant with the philosophic model presented in *Phaedo* and the *Theaetetus* digression. If the philosopher does not know his way to the agora, how could we expect St. Basil to find the synod? To that end, it is important to note that St. Basil only ever left Pontus following a call to service by the Church. He was summoned to a synod and was later ordained, first as a reader by Dainius and then as a priest by Eusebius.

St. Basil’s behavior in these instances resonate with the conception of civic justice presented by Plato in Book 7 of *The Republic*. In the dialogue, Glaucon asks Socrates why an educated man should be compelled to heed a political calling at the expense of their ability to lead the philosophic life (Rep. 7, 519e). Socrates responds that the law is not concerned with specially producing happiness in individuals, but in the city as a whole, and that the educated man will participate in the state’s labors out of respect for the order that the state instilled in him through his education, which facilitated his recognition of the philosophic life (Rep. 7, 520b-520d). Glaucon then concedes Socrates’ argument, saying that it would be impossible for men under those conditions to refuse to participate in labors of the state because “we shall be imposing just commands on men who are just” (Rep. 7, 520e).

Thus, Plato argues that the philosopher, being invested in the cultivation of virtue, can be compelled to withdraw from the contemplative life in respect for just commands from recognized authorities. In *The Republic*, the philosopher citizen is compelled to serve the state in reciprocation for his just education and upbringing. Similarly, St. Basil was compelled to ministry and pastoral responsibility by his presiding bishops in apparent reciprocation for the

Church's contributions to his spiritual wellness. Recognizing that parallel, it is notable that during this period, St. Basil only returned to Pontus when estranged from Dainius or Eusebius respectively. That his willingness to heed their commands depended on his perception of their Orthodoxy suggests that he was not compelled by personal loyalty to either Bishop but rather to a belief in the justice of their commands and authority to compel his service.

In this respect, St. Basil better resembles the ideal demonstrated by Socrates, who as Annas notes "knows his way to the agora...and fulfills his political obligations rather than being blithely unaware of politics" (52). He may have been content pursuing the philosophic life during his retreat at Pontus, which is suggested by the fact that he thrice returned to his family's estate, but was ultimately willing to heed calls to service when justly compelled to do so. As such, we find in St. Basil a practical counterpoint to the apparent contradiction that Annas suggests exists between *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, and the rest of Plato's works on virtue. As previously mentioned, despite dedicating himself to the philosophic life during his retreat at Pontus, St. Basil was thrice compelled to clerical service and was eventually ordained Bishop of Ceasarea. Following Annas' argument, if the cultivation of purificatory virtue instilled an obliviousness to evil in philosophers such that they entirely cease to engage in civic affairs, and St. Basil's experiments in Pontus were directed towards the cultivation of virtue following a framework influenced by neoplatonic philosophy, St. Basil should not have felt compelled to leave Pontus in spite of it bringing him greater contentment. That he did regardless suggests purified virtue resonates as motivation for ethical action.

Explicating A Remedy For Annas' Objection That Is Coherent With The Example Set Forth By St. Basil The Great

However, here we note a final challenge against the 'unworldly' strand of virtue that lends credence to Annas' objection. That the purificatory and civic virtues might be harmonized in practice, as demonstrated through St. Basil, does not convey how that situation is actually possible. The unworldly strand of virtue has still not been conceptually reconciled with the rest of platonic philosophy. Rather, we have merely demonstrated through practical example that such a remedy might exist. To that end, it may be instructive for us to revisit the digression in Plato's *Theaetetus*. During the dialogue, Socrates says:

"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 prowl about this 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 pious, with understanding. But it is not at all an easy matter, my good friend, to persuade men that it is not for the reasons commonly alleged that one should try to escape from wickedness and pursue virtue. It is not in order to avoid a bad reputation and obtain a good one that virtue should be practiced and not vice; that, it seems to me, is only what men call 'old wives' talk'." (176b-c).

Socrates explains that because evil should neither be destroyed nor permitted in heaven, instead remaining a permanent fixture in human life, we should endeavor to escape evil by fleeing to heaven. He then notes that "escape means becoming as like God as possible" and that becoming like God means becoming just and pious with understanding (*Theaetetus* 176b).

Upon first impression, Plato's emphasis on fleeing to heaven as a means of transcending evil may appear to affirm Annas' suspicions. Escaping a problem seems to preclude actively remedying that problem. However, Socrates then clarifies that the process of escape, of becoming wise, produces in men an alternative impetus for pursuing virtue. He seems to suggest that becoming like God does not entail becoming entirely oblivious to evil, and thus ceasing to practice civic virtue as Plotinus asserts (147). Instead he notes that "[i]n God there is no sort of wrong whatsoever; he is supremely just, and the thing most like him is the man who has become as just as it lies in human nature to be" (*Theaetetus* 176c). Thus, the philosopher who endeavors to become like God will practice virtue out of respect for the justice inherent in its pursuit. Even if the philosopher must then be compelled to practically exercise virtue by an external authority, his willingness to heed that call is an ethical decision that his purified virtue disposes him towards. To that end, and as previously mentioned, Plato does not appear to recognize an inconsistency between practically exercising virtue and becoming like God. Rather, the latter is presented as the teleological objective of the former. Of course, Annas is aware that Plato does not recognize the apparent inconsistency between *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, and the rest of his philosophy (63), appealing instead to later neoplatonists like Plotinus to justify her suspicions. As such, revisiting Plotinus' categorization of civic and purificatory virtue and his justification for demarcating one from the other might help dispel the confusion that Annas has illuminated.

In his essay *On Virtues*, Plotinus clarifies:

"Plato, when he speaks of 'likeness' as a 'flight to God' from existence here below, and does not call the virtues which come into play in civic life just 'virtues', but adds the qualification 'civic', and elsewhere calls all the virtues 'purifications', makes clear that he postulates two kinds of virtues." (135)

As previously discussed, Plato classifies virtues as purifications in *Phaedo*. Furthermore, the ‘civic’ qualification may be made in reference to book IV of the *Republic*. In it, Plato attributes the following dialogue to Glaucon and Socrates respectively: “‘Well then,’ he said, ‘I accept this as bravery.’ ‘Do so,’ said I, ‘and you will be right with the reservation that it is the courage of a citizen’” (430c). However, it is not apparent that Plato’s conceptualization of courage in this context implies the distinction that Plotinus suggests it does. Rather, Plotinus seems to be asserting that because Plato sometimes presents virtue in civic contexts and other times in purificatory contexts, that entails him supposing two separate types of virtues.

However, recognizing that Plato does not seem aware of the possibility for confusion between the different presentations of virtue in his various dialogues, and that he does not make such a distinction between civic and purificatory virtue in any of the works we have thus far investigated, a more plausible reading of *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, and *Republic* respectively might be that Plato conceives of several different impetuses for pursuing virtue, some of which are superior to others, and that practical wisdom presents differently in various contexts. For example, when comparing the litigious citizen to the philosopher, on first impression, the latter might appear to have ceased to practice virtue because he has withdrawn his sympathies from the activities of the former. Yet, when we investigate the activities of the philosopher we find that, like the citizen, they are justly ordered with understanding in proportion to his cultivated virtue.

Thus, though he may appear foolish and need directions to the Agora, the philosopher presented in the *Theaetetus* digression still respects his summons to court. If escaping to heaven, i.e. becoming just and pious with understanding, entailed becoming oblivious to evil, the philosopher should not feel compelled to obey commands that impede his capacity to participate in the contemplative life. Even if he is then dragged to court, it is not apparent why he should not

simply ignore his captors and continue to ponder the cosmos rather than give his testimony. Therefore, we must either suppose that Plato is severely confused or that the demarcation of purificatory and civic virtue is itself the source of the confusion we are investigating.

Revisiting The Example of The Philosopher Sage

As previously discussed, Annas identifies the source of the unworldly strands' confusion in the fact that the notion of 'becoming like God' potentially presents several sufficiently intelligible yet mutually incompatible readings regarding what cultivating virtue entails (65). Her objection presents a reading of the aforementioned platonic dialogues that would render the cultivation of virtue self-defeating to the extent that it is purificatory. However, the justification for this idea lies in the supposition that becoming like God requires "the recognition of a reality which transcends our ordinary concerns utterly" (65). Yet, when Plato qualifies his advocacy for flight from the world by saying that "it is not for the reasons commonly alleged that one should try to escape from wickedness and pursue virtue" and then suggests that to become like God is to become virtuous and just to the greatest extent possible within human nature (*Theaetetus* 176b-c), he implies that we should pursue virtue for the sake of becoming like God. To that end, rather than utterly transcending them, becoming like God seems to merely entail properly ordering our concerns. Recalling Annas' agreement with the example that although the sage might be disposed to help an old woman across the road, they would not be likely to notice her in the first place, it may prove fruitful to resume our comparison between the activities of the philosopher and the litigious citizen.

On his way to the agora, the litigious citizen might encounter an old woman struggling to cross the street and by virtue be disposed to help her. However, he will certainly also recognize

that publicly assisting the old woman may be recognized in a manner that makes him seem noble, thereby elevating his reputation. Socrates acknowledged this as a commonly alleged reason for the pursuit of virtue, saying “it is not in order to avoid a bad reputation and obtain a good one that virtue should be practiced and not vice” (*Theaetetus* 176c). Because his success in court and public forums in large part depends on how he is perceived, the litigious citizen will be disposed to have concern for his reputation. Out of concern for his reputation, he will then be motivated to assist the old woman not merely out of respect for justice, but also with the reasonable expectation that by doing so he may be in some sense rewarded.

By contrast, the philosopher en route to court in respect of his summons may not be disposed to recognize the old woman’s struggle at first; he will be too caught up in his consideration of higher concepts. However, if the old woman then calls out to him and asks for his assistance, it is not obvious that he would ignore her. Rather, the philosopher would likely assist her for the same reason that he obeys his summons. In book 7 of Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates reminds Glaucon that “the law is not concerned with the special happiness of any class in the state, but is trying to produce this condition in the city as a whole, harmonizing and adapting the citizens to one another by persuasion and compulsion, and requiring them to impart to one another any benefit” (519e). He further proposes that just men agree to partake in the labors of the law out of respect for their society’s harmonious order and the goods it produced in them (*Rep.* 7 520d-e). As such, according to Socrates, the justice inherent in a properly ordered city lies in its capacity to motivate the reciprocation of goods between its citizens; it lies in the notion that having been beneficiary to benefits imparted by others, we should then become a benefactor of those same benefits to others.

Herein we identify one final potential issue—the aforementioned platonic dialogues have thus far advocated for respecting calls to service made by just *legal* authorities for the sake of repaying good for good. To that end, excepting the potentiality that helping pedestrians across the street is a codified legal obligation understood by the philosopher, it is unlikely that he will be compelled by an authority to actually reciprocate customary goods, such as assisting the ailing pedestrian. In book 4 of *Republic*, however, Plato argues that a respect for customs, like helping someone across a street, extends beyond codified law. Socrates and Glaucon explain:

“‘Then such men rediscover for themselves those seemingly trifling conventions which their predecessors abolished altogether.’ ‘Of what sort?’ ‘Such things as the becoming silence of the young in the presence of their elders; the giving place to them and rising up before them, and dutiful service of parents, and the cut of the hair and the garments and the fashion of the foot-gear, and in general the deportment of the body and everything of the kind. Don't you think so?’ ‘I do.’ ‘Yet to enact them into laws would, I think, be silly’.” (Rep. 425a-425b)

Following the logic thus presented, although there is value in respecting customs, i.e. the young being silent in the presence of elders, it is not reasonable to codify those customs in law as “such laws are not obeyed nor would they last, being enacted only in words and on paper” (Rep. 425b). Thus, to the extent that the young show deference to their elders regardless of whether they are actually legally obligated to obey that custom, the justly ordered may be externally compelled to help a fellow citizen across the street in respect for the customary good of doing so.

To that end, every citizen in a society benefits from informal social services, such as helping someone across the street. The philosopher, not knowing his way to the Agora, must first ask for directions to answer his summons to court. And if the philosopher were denied these

directions, if indeed every lost person was denied similar support, then far fewer people would be able to honor their appointments, degrading the proper ordering of society. Thus, because the philosopher has benefited from similar informal services, he will help the old woman across the street when asked out of customary respect for reciprocating benefit for benefit.

Moreover, unlike the litigious citizen, who may in part be motivated by concern for his reputation, the philosopher will be motivated to assist the old woman by nothing other than his acknowledgement of the justice inherent in doing so. It is in this sense that he has become like God. Thus far, becoming like God has been described as transcending humanity in a real sense. Annas asks “how could virtue lie in altering yourself into some other kind of being?” (56). However, noting that Socrates limits the deifying aspect of cultivating virtue in saying that we become like God insofar as “it lies in human nature to be” (*Theaetetus* 176c), it is not apparent that, according to Plato, becoming like God actually entails a change that radical in caliber.

God cannot be thought to possess virtue because he has transcended the need to resist evil. However, because “[God] is supremely just” (176c), his actions will nonetheless cohere with activities that are concomitant with virtue. And as previously explained, we become more like God by being just to the greatest extent that our humanity permits. Plotinus explicates the connection between imitating God and cultivating virtue in saying that “the Divine too is pure, and its activity is of such a kind that that which imitates it has wisdom” (135). Therefore, even if God cannot be conceived of as possessing virtue himself, imitating him produces virtue in people because his activities align with the goods that virtue disposes us towards. As such, as in the case of the philosopher helping the woman across the road, becoming like God entails acting dispassionately out of respect for justice itself rather than due to partialist concerns. The person who becomes like God in this manner does not become an entirely different sort of being; he

does not completely transcend disposition like God has. Rather, he becomes like God analogically in that God is supremely just and his actions are motivated solely by respect for justice.

The reading of Plato thus presented better qualifies why Socrates associates fleeing to heaven with adopting an alternative impetus for virtue in the *Theaetetus* digression. It further suggests that according to Plato, we become like the Divine analogically by acting solely with respect to justice, thereby imitating its activities. Furthermore, it dispels any confusion that Annas identifies in the unworldly strand of virtue. Although her objection appears compelling at first, Annas seems to have erred in suggesting that becoming like God entails transcending human concerns such that we become oblivious to evil and cease to activate our practical wisdom. Plotinus seems to have similarly erred in suspecting that Plato's philosophy meaningfully demarcates the civic and purificatory contexts of virtue.

Instead, Plato seems to suggest that becoming like God is a result of the whole project of cultivating virtue and that we become like God, not by entirely transcending our humanity, but by being motivated solely out of respect for justice. Such a disposition transcends human concerns in the sense that it diverges from the commonly alleged reasons for pursuing virtue. Unlike the litigious citizen, God is not concerned with reputation, and therefore neither is the philosopher who imitates him. However, because Plato clarifies that we may only become like God to the extent that it is possible for human nature to be disposed towards imitating the activities of the divine, the unworldly strand of virtue that Annas identifies in *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* does not appear to actually entail the sort of transcendence that Annas supposes would make it unlikely for the philosopher to practically activate his cultivated wisdom.

Thus, upon further inspection, the unworldly strand of virtue presented in *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* does not appear to be discordant with Plato's presentations of virtue elsewhere in his works. Moreover, as has been demonstrated through the example of St. Basil and explicated in the previous section, the notion of becoming like God through cultivating virtue appears to be ethically resonant. That the philosopher may be compelled by respect for justice to appear at court, or in the case of St. Basil, serve in the clergy, despite his service coming at the expense of philosophic pursuits he finds greater contentment in, suggests that imitating God does not impede our sense of ethical direction. Rather than becoming oblivious to evil, escaping to heaven means practicing virtue for reasons superior to those commonly alleged; becoming God does not mean abandoning through transcendence, but instead purifying our impetus for pursuing virtue.

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