Virtue and Hexis in Plotinus

Giannis Stamatellos
American College of Greece
istamatellos@acg.edu

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of ἕξις in Plotinus' virtue ethics. It is argued that since ἕξις signifies a quality of being in a permanent state of possession and virtue is defined as an ἕξις that intellectualizes the soul, therefore, it is suggested that virtue is an active ἕξις of the soul directed higher to the intelligible world in permanent contemplation of the Forms.

Keywords

Plotinus – virtue – hexis – ethics – soul

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* \(^1\) (1106b36-1107a1), Aristotle defines ethical virtue as ἕξις: “a disposition of the soul concerned with deliberate choice” (ἡ ἀρετὴ ἕξις προαιρετική).\(^2\) For Aristotle, moral action lies in moderation

---

\(^1\) For a general account on Aristotle's ethical theory see Ross (1995), chapter VII; see also Wright (2009), pp. 190-193 and Kraus (2010). For recent studies of Aristotle's virtue ethics see Gottlieb (2009) and Russell (2009).

\(^2\) For the importance of this passage in *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aristotle's ethical theory see Rotry (1980), p. 4 ff.; see also Hutchinson (1986), p. 35 ff.

Stamatellos

30


i.e. the appropriate mean between two vices or extremes: deficiency (ἐλλειψις) and excess (ὑπερβολή) (1107a2-6). However, whereas virtue, in terms of ethical practice, is the observance of the mean (μεσότης), in terms of the soul’s excellence and rightness, it is the accomplishment of an extreme (ἀκρότης) (1107a6-8). The term ἕξις in Aristotle is usually translated as ‘disposition’ or ‘habit’ of the soul. However, as Sachs maintains, the Aristotelian ἕξις should be also considered in terms of actuality: as an active state or condition of the soul and not as a mere habit. Sachs relies on Plato’s Theaetetus, Aristotle’s Categories (8b, 29) and De Anima (417b15-17) and offers an informative comparison between the terms ἕξις (in relation to actuality) and διάθεσις (in relation to passivity). Following this interpretation, Aristotle’s ἕξις is considered, not just as a mere habit of the soul, but as an active state or condition, contrasted to διάθεσις that should be conceived as a more passive state or condition of the soul.

In Ennead VI.8 [39] On Free Will and the Will of the One, Plotinus states that virtue is an ἕξις that intellectualizes the soul (5.34-37). Lloyd P. Gerson refers directly to this passage and in the light of Aristotle’s definition of virtue as habit (ἕξις), interprets Plotinus’ definition of virtue as an “odd habit”. However, in this paper it is suggested that for Plotinus ἀρετή should not be interpreted in terms of habit. I shall argue that the Plotinus defines virtue as an ἕξις in terms of an active state of the soul in permanent contemplation of the Forms. After some preliminary remarks on terminology (section I), it is argued that since ἕξις is found at the level of the soul and particularly soul’s intellect (section II) and ἀρετή is an ἕξις that intellectualizes the soul (section III), therefore, it is concluded that ἀρετή is an active ἕξις that is found at soul’s intellect directed

3 The theory of μεσότης in relation to the virtues of character in Aristotle is discussed at length in Gottlieb (2009); see also Urmson (1973).

4 See also NE 1106a26-b35. For “right action” in Aristotle’ virtue ethics see Russell (2009), pp. 35-135.

5 On the importance of ethical practice see Burnyeat (1980) and Irwin (1980).


7 The relationship between ἕξις and actuality in De Anima has been also discussed in Polansky (2007), pp. 240, 273 and 458-465.

8 Sachs (2002), p. xii. Other important occurrences of the notion of ἕξις in Aristotle see Physics vii 3, De anima 11.5, Metaphysics v.20-21, ix.2 and 5-6. For a recent account of the Aristotelian approach to disposition in virtue theory see Russell (2009), p. 237 ff.

9 Gerson (1994) states: “Aristotle says that virtue is a habit (a ἕξις)… Plotinus does in one passage call virtue a ἕξις, but it is an odd habit indeed, one which in a way intellectualizes the soul” (p. 199).
higher to the intelligible world in permanent contemplation of the Forms (section IV).

I

Whereas Plotinus devotes a treatise on ἀρετή (On Virtues I.2 [19]), the term ἕξις is not systematically treated in the Enneads. While considerable scholarly work has been done on Plotinus' notion of ἀρετή and its ethical importance, scant attention has been paid in modern scholarship to the role of ἕξις in the Enneads and its relation to ἀρετή. The term ἕξις (derives from ἔχω) denotes 'possession' or 'being in possession of something'. Plotinus uses ἕξις with this meaning and particularly in his discussions on ἀρετή, the soul and the nature of substance. Plotinus generally treats ἕξις with reference to a quality of the soul in a state of permanent possession.

Plotinus frequently discusses the term ἕξις along with that of διάθεσις. In VI.1.6.26-28, he states that when ἕξις and διάθεσις refer to the possessor (τὸ ἔχον) they signify possession (τὸ ἔχειν) but when they refer to the possessed (τὸ ἐχόμενον) they signify a quality (τὸ ποιὸν). In II.6.3.20-30, VI.1.10.1-10 and VI.1.11.12 both ἕξις and διάθεσις indicate qualities (ποιότητες) of being. However, as it is stated in II.6.3.20-30, ἕξις and διάθεσις refer to qualities that belong to...

---

10 In addition to Ennead 1.2 Plotinus' theory of virtue is also discussed in Enneads 1.4 On Well Being and 1.3 On Dialectic.
12 See LSJ 595.
13 For the term ἕξις see the relevant entries in Sleeman (1980), pp. 393-394.
14 Cf. Enneads 1.3.6.5-7; 1.5.10; VI.1.3.18.24-27; VI.1.8.5.27-37.
15 Cf. Enneads 1.1.2.1-5, 11.1-8, 11.5.7.44-45; IV.3.15.20; IV.4.11-12; V.9.11.7.
16 Cf. Enneads 11.6.3; VI.1.6, 10-12, 23.12-14; VI.1.3.21.46.
17 Armstrong usually translates ἕξις as "state", while διάθεσις as "disposition". The terms are discussed together also by Aristotle in Met. v.19-20, NE 1108a24, EE 1218b and 1228b, Cat. 6b3, 8b27; probably Plotinus' use of ἕξις along with διάθεσις originates in Aristotle's treatment.
19 Armstrong notes (p. 42, n. 1) that this passage refers to Aristotle's Categories 8.8b25 ff. This distinction between the possessor and the possessed probably refers to the distinction between the passive and the active intellect originally found in Aristotle's De Anima and adopted by Plotinus, see for example Ennead 1.1.8.1-8.
the “underlying realities” and not in their archetypes found at the intelligible world. For Plotinus, there are no qualities in the intelligible world; qualities are found in the perceptible realm as activities of the formative principles (logoi) in the soul; qualities are traces or shadows of the substances in the world of the Forms. Therefore, ἕξις and διάθεσις signify qualities of the soul related to the substances of the intelligible world.

The main difference between ἕξις and διάθεσις, as Plotinus explains in VI.1.11.1-7, is a matter of persistence (τὸ μόνιμον) and not a matter of completeness. For Plotinus, there is no specific difference of quality involved in persistence and non-persistence and even a less permanent διάθεσις is sufficient to make something a quality; persistence is an external addition, relative to the soul (VI.1.17.8-10) and what is possessed (VI.1.23). As Plotinus clarifies in VI.3.19: being qualified does not depend on time; ἕξις is a permanent state of the soul, while διάθεσις a less permanent state of the soul (VI.1.19.31-32). Therefore, whereas ἕξις refers to a permanent and established state of the soul, διάθεσις refers to a less permanent and transient state of the soul. In the latter sense διάθεσις has also the meaning of disposition. Thus, for Plotinus ἕξις is associated with a quality of the soul in a permanent state of possession. Bearing in mind this definition of ἕξις let us turn our attention to the connection between ἕξις and the soul in the Enneads.

II

The Plotinian soul has a double life that occupies a middle rank at the boundary between the higher intelligible world of the Forms and the lower perceptible world of the sensible bodies. The soul animates the perceptible universe and the corporeal bodies with its logoi (III.6.19.25-30; III.8.4; IV.3.10.35-42;
Virtue And Hexis In Plotinus

Due to its ontological priority in Plotinus’ metaphysics, the soul is not conceived as placed in the body but the body as placed in the soul: the body is illuminated by the soul at a higher ontological level (IV.3.22-23). The body reflects at the lower perceptible level the structure and powers of the soul found at the higher intelligible realm (I.1.2).

In Ennead 1.1.2, Plotinus distinguishes the soul that is related to the body (= the perceptible soul) from the soul that is related to the nous (= the intelligible soul): soul itself. He explains that better and worse states and dispositions (ἔξεις καὶ διαθέσεις χείρους καὶ βελτίους) belong to the composite (σύνθετο) part of the soul that is related to πάθη: (1.1.2.1-5):

First we must consider soul. Is soul one thing and soul itself another? If this is so, soul will be a composite thing and there will be nothing strange in its admitting and possessing feelings of this kind (if the argument turns out to require this) and in general better and worse states and dispositions.

[trans. Armstrong modified]

This passage is part of the discussion on the problem of pleasures and feelings in Ennead 1.1. What is the origin of πάθη? What is it in us that feels and thinks? Is it the soul, the body or the body-soul compound? For Plotinus, the perceptible bodies are composite of matter and form (III.4.2) and so, worse ἔξεις and διαθέσεις belong to the body-soul composite. In Ennead III.5.7, Plotinus further explains that evils are not acts which the soul produces of itself but they are passive affections (πάθη) of the body-soul composite; they are like false thoughts which do not have substantial realities as their basis and they come into existence together with the vice of the soul in its false ἔξεις (42-46).

For Plotinus’ theory of the soul see Blumenthal (1971) and Helleman-Elgersma (1980).

It has been suggested that Plotinus mainly relies on Plato’s Timaeus 34d3-8, 36d9-e3; see Kalligas (2009), pp. 404-414.

See Armstrong comments (1994, p. 96, n. 1) that Plotinus refers to Aristotle’s Metaphysics 1043b3; see also Kalligas comments (1994, pp. 185-188).

According to Armstrong, the starting-point of this inquiry seems to be a passage of Aristotle’s De Anima 1.4.408b where Aristotle raises the question whether the soul is really “moved” when it is affected. However, it is also possible that Plotinus has in mind Plato’s description in the Laws 897a on the motions of soul. Armstrong maintains that the passage in Plato’s Laws is more relevant than Henry-Schwyzer suggestion of Republic 429c-d and 430 a-b; Phaedo 83b. See also Armstrong’s comments (vol. 1, p. 96, n. 1) that Plotinus refers to Aristotle’s Metaphysics 1043b3; see also Kalligas comments (1994, pp. 185-188).
However, as Plotinus clarifies in II.4.16.1-10 and IV.7.83, the relation of ἕξις to πάθη should not make us approach ἕξις and the soul in a materialistic perspective (II.4.16.6)28 Particularly in IV.7.83 Plotinus refutes the bottom-up evolutionary progress theory of ἕξις in which the soul develops from material realities, criticizing, in all probability, the Stoic theory of ἕξις:29 “So they [the Stoics] find themselves making the worse first, and before this another of less good quality, which they call ἐξειν, and intellect last, obviously originating from the soul” (IV.7.83.6-9).30 For Plotinus, generation progresses ontologically from the higher to the lower realities, from the Intellect to the Soul. Since the Intellect is prior to animated things, then the Soul comes after the Intellect and produces the perceptible world through the actualization of its intelligible logos.

Plotinus’ argument, probably against the Stoics,31 is found at V.9.5.23-26: if the Stoics support the claim that the logos are sufficient, then the logos must be eternal, but if the logos are eternal, then they are not subject to affection and so they must be placed in the higher intelligible realm prior to ἕξις, the nature and the soul (προτέρῳ ἕξεως καὶ φύσεως καὶ ψυχῆς). For Plotinus, logos are intelligible forming principles that exist in the soul but derive from the higher reality of Intellect (V.9.5). As Plotinus explains in IV.4.11, the administration of the cosmos is maintained at a higher level by the world soul, which sustains the universal body by contemplating directly the intelligible world (IV.8.4). Therefore, for Plotinus, ἕξις should be placed at the level of the soul and in terms of the ontological generation of the soul-body compound, starting from the higher reality of the intelligible world and progressing down to the lower reality of the perceptible realm.

For Plotinus, better ἕξις should be found in the soul’s intellect and particularly the soul’s middle region between the higher intelligible world and the lower perceptible realm (I.1.8.1-8, 11.1-15; VI.7.1.25-28). As it is explained in Ennead V.3.3, soul’s intellect is the principal part of the soul (τὸ κύριον

28 As Kalligas comments on II.4.16.1-4 and 16.4-13 (p. 279), Plotinus refutes the argument of Aristotle (Physics 192a9-22) contra Plato (Sophist 258e2-3) that matter is the same thing as otherness. For Plotinus, matter results from otherness as the part that is opposed to the logos (II.4.16.3).

29 The Stoic ἕξις is a state or tension of the πνεῦμα providing stability or cohesion to things; ἕξις is a force that exists even in objects such as a stone, log, or cup. See Sellars (2006). See also Kalligas ibid.

30 See Armstrong p. 369, n. 1. Plotinus seems generally to refute the Stoic theory of the soul and particularly that of transfusion; see also Ennead I.11.7. See also Kalligas’ comments on IV.7.83, pp. 591-592.

31 See Armstrong’s note on V.9.5, p. 297.
VIRTUE AND HEXIS IN PLOTINUS

32 Kalligas observes that Plotinus consistently keeps the distinction between the two intellects; see 1.8.2.7-15; v.1.3.12-17, 10.12-18; v.3.3.21-26.

τῆς ψυχῆς), in the middle region between two powers (μέσον δυνάμεως διττῆς): the higher activity of Intellect and lower activity of sense perception (36-45). For Plotinus, what “we are” (ήμεις) is our soul’s acts of intelligence in discursive reasoning directed either “up” to the reality of the Forms (=higher act) or “down” to the reality of the senses (=lower act) (35-37). Hence the soul is vividly described as ἀμφίβιον; a denizen between the intelligible and the perceptible world (IV.8.4.32).

In Ennead I.1.8.1-8 Plotinus further clarifies the distinction between the intellect of the soul and Intellect itself (Νοῦν δὲ λέγω οὐχ ἣν ἢ ψυχὴ ἐξεύβει ἐξιν υφίσταν τῶν παρὰ τού νοῦ, ἀλλ’ αὐτόν τὸν νοῦν.).32 Our soul possesses the higher Nous in two ways: the hypostasis of Intellect is possessed by our soul in “unified” way; our intellect is a state, an ἕξις of the soul, that derives from the hypostasis of Intellect but in an “unfolded” and “separated” way:

But how are we related to the Intellect? I mean by “Intellect” not that state (ἕξις) of the soul, which is one of the things which derive from Intellect, but Intellect itself. We possess this too, as something that transcends us. We have it either as common to all or particular to ourselves, or both common and particular; common because it is without parts and one and everywhere the same, particular to ourselves because each has the whole of it in the primary part of his soul. So we all possess the forms in two ways, in our soul, in manner of speaking unfolded and separated, in Intellect all together.

[trans. Armstrong]

Plotinus’ distinction between the soul’s intellect and the hypostasis of Intellect seems to be based on the distinction between the passive and the active intellect in Aristotle’s De Anima (III.4-5)33 and the relevant Peripatetic interpretations of this theory such as that of Alexander of Aphrodisias.34 However, as Nyvlt states, Plotinus disagrees fundamentally with Aristotle and Alexander in that the intelligibles are distinct from the intellection of Nous.35 Plotinus recognizes the duality of the Aristotelian Nous but reverses the principle of actuality preceding potentiality by admitting the potentiality of Nous as prior
to actuality due to the transcendent metaphysical priority of the One that precedes everything.\textsuperscript{36}

In I.1.11.1-9 Plotinus also relates ἔξις to ἀντίληψις and the middle region of the soul:

When we are children the powers of the compound are active, and only few gleams come to it from the higher principles. But when these are inactive as regards us their activity is directed upwards: it is directed towards us when they reach the middle region. But then does not the “we” include what comes before the middle? Yes, but there must be a conscious apprehension. We do not always use all that we have, but only when we direct our middle part towards the higher principles or their opposites, or to whatever we are engaged in bringing from potency or disposition to act.

[trans. Armstrong modified]

In the above passage, as Kalligas observes, Plotinus uses again Peripatetic terminology but in order to describe something different; for Plotinus it is the “ἐγώ”, our inner consciousness that actualizes with its ἀντίληψις\textsuperscript{37} the κάθ’ ἔξιν intellect.\textsuperscript{38} Both ἔξις and ἀντίληψις as related to the μέσον of the soul\textsuperscript{39} and Plotinus identifies our ἀντίληψις with ἡμεῖς;\textsuperscript{40} our ἀντίληψις is formulated and refined as we grow up and we become conscious of our higher self and the perfection of the intelligible realm. He maintains that our ἀντίληψις is directed either upwards to the Intellect or downwards to the perceptible realm;\textsuperscript{41} it is a power that can go both directions: towards the intelligibles and the perceptibles.\textsuperscript{42}

On the one hand, when we direct our ἀντίληψις “down” to our lower perceptible part and our bodily condition, the soul becomes passive in a state of worse ἔξις. For instance, in cases of constant pain, time brings an increase and

\textsuperscript{36} Nyvlt ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} See Kalligas ibid. p. 209. See also V1.1.23.12 ff. for κάθεξιν αὐτήν and ἔξις.
\textsuperscript{40} Dodds (1973), p. 136, supported the view that Plotinus, along with Alexander of Aphrodisias, is the first writer to formulate the general idea of self-consciousness, the ego’s awareness of its own activity. See Kalligas ibid.; on ἡμεῖς and ἀντίληψις cf. also Schibli (1989), pp. 212-213; Aubry (2008), pp. 285-288.
\textsuperscript{42} See also Ennead 1.4.10.1-6.
illness becomes chronic in a permanent ill state (1.5.6.6-9). In the state of ill-being, evil will grow worse the longer it lasts since the badness of the state will be increased by its persistence (13-15). The bad condition of the body may dull and restrict our powers of judgments; it may bring psychological instability, expressed in variations of our state of mind at different times (1.8.8.34-35: Μαρτυροῦσι δὲ ταύτα καὶ αἱ πρὸς καιρὸν ἐξεις.).

On the other hand, when we direct our ἀντίληψις “up” towards the Intellect the soul becomes active in a better ἔξις. The soul actualizes its higher intelligible powers (ὅσα ἀπὸ δυνάμεως ἢ ἔξεως εἰς ἐνέργειαν ἀγομεν) (1.1.11.7-8). The soul is purified through the constant contemplation of the intelligible realm of the Forms and the recognition of its own element of noetic perfection and goodness. For Plotinus, apprehending εὐδαιμονία is related to ἀντίληψις and the μέσον of the soul directed upwards to the perfect life of the intelligible world (1.4.10).43 The question of εὐδαιμονία lies in the kernel of Plotinus’ virtue ethics and its philosophical background that is discussed in the next section.

III

Plotinus’ theory of ethical virtue44 is mainly exposed in Enneads 1.2 On Virtues, 1.3 On Dialectic and 1.4 On Well-Being. Plotinus’ notion of virtue underlies not only his ethics but also his metaphysics and psychology. He reconciles Plato’s metaphysics of εὐδαιμονία as it is related to the soul’s contemplation of the Forms45 and Aristotle’s ethics of εὐδαιμονία as it is related to the telos of human life.46 Plotinus also rejects the Stoic theory of virtue as a disposition of the bodily soul.47 Plotinus follows the Socratic view that virtue is the knowledge

43 For the soul’s apprehension of happiness and the middle soul in Plotinus see Schibli (1989); this discussion is also related to ἀντίληψις and the middle soul in 1.1.11.1-9; cf. Aubry (2008) pp. 286-287. Aubry recognizes the ethical value of 1.1.11.1-9.

44 For Plotinus’ theory of ethical virtue see Rist (1976) Plass (1982); Kalligas (1994) introductory notes on Ennead 1.2; Gerson (1994), ch. 1X; Dillon (1996); Smith (1999); Remes (2006); Stern-Gillet (2009).

45 See Plato’s the Phaedo, the Phaedrus and the Republic; for an overview of Plato’s ethics see Frede (2009); see also Price (1997).

46 See mainly Aristotle’s ethical works the Nicomachean Ethics and the Eudemian Ethics; for a general overview of Aristotle’s ethics see Kraus (2010); see also Ross (1995), chapter VII. See also Wright (2009), pp. 190-193.

of the good and accepts Plato’s position that εὐδαιμονία is the highest aim of ethical thought, in harmony with the perfection of the Forms. Ethical virtues are the prerequisite skills of human character development and excellence towards transcendent goodness and divine knowledge. Plotinus is also aware of Aristotle’s ethics and particularly follows two positions maintained in the Nicomachean Ethics: (1) gods, as pure intelligible beings, cannot possess ethical virtues (NE 1178b) and (2) there are two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral (NE 1139a ff.).

In Ennead 1.2, Plotinus focuses on intellectual virtues and maintains a grading of virtues by offering an analysis of Plato’s four cardinal virtues: wisdom (φρόνησις); justice (δικαιοσύνη); self-control (σωφροσύνη) and courage (ἀνδρία). The four cardinal virtues are further discussed in a fourfold hierarchical classification at (1) practical level (=civic) (1.2.1.17-21); (2) purification level (=soul-body) (3.15-9); (3) contemplative level (=soul-intellect) (6.12-27); (4) intelligible level (=the Forms) (7.3-6). Plotinus maintains that the higher virtues correspond to intelligible Forms, which are not virtues themselves, but contribute to the noetic ascent and theoretical excellence of the soul. Furthermore, in Ennead 1.3, Plotinus offers a distinction between higher virtues and lower virtues. The lower virtues, or natural virtues, may exist without such higher virtues as dialectic and theoretical wisdom. The lower virtues are incomplete and defective, completed and perfected only with the development of the higher virtues that lead to εὐδαιμονία. In Ennead 1.4, Plotinus shows that εὐδαιμονία should not be related to the accomplishment of natural ends (1.4.1). For Plotinus, εὐδαιμονία is not achieved in ethical practice, but in pure contemplation of the true being at the intelligible realm of the Nous (1.4.3-4).

Plotinus emphasizes the virtuous life of the wise man (σπουδαῖος) and stresses the need for our own likeness to God (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ). An “empty”
reference to God is worthless: “if we talk about God without true wisdom, God is only a name” (II.9.15.39-40). Every virtue is a purification that leads to the soul’s ascent to the divine realm of true beauty, perfection and intelligence (1.2.4; 1.6.6). The wise man aims to live the higher life of the intelligible realm: the life of self-sufficiency through constant contemplation of the Forms (1.2.6-7). The wise man is not just a good man but a God. The σπουδάσιος is freed from the lower perceptible realm and ascends purified to the higher intelligible realm and the perfect state of well-being (εὐδαιμονία) identified with the soul’s self-thinking intelligible activity (1.4.4-9). Therefore, well-being should not be located in praxis but in theoria (1.5.10.20-23):

To place well-being (εὐδαιμονία) in actions is to locate it in something outside virtue and the soul; the activity of the soul lies in thought, and action of this kind within itself; and this is the state of well-being.

[trans. Armstrong modified]

The state of εὐδαιμονία is not depended on praxis; virtue is an internal activity of the soul that is related to the contemplation of the Forms. The life of εὐδαιμονία is a good life in eternity outside extension and time (1.5.7).

However, Plotinus’ ethical theory is not indented to deny moral actions to the σπουδάσιος. Plotinus aims is to stress the priority of the true virtues not at the level of praxis but at the intelligible state of the soul prior to praxis. It is not praxis that defines ethical virtue, as Aristotle would argue, but the soul’s theoria of the intelligible realm. However, in Ennead 1.3, Plotinus argues that moral philosophy is not only related to intellectual virtues such as φρόνησις but also deals with practical issues. Whereas lower virtues are related to praxis, higher virtues are related to theoria. Yet, it is not the lower virtues that produce the higher virtues, but the higher virtues that develop and complete the lower ones. Moral philosophy derives from dialectic on its contemplative side (6.5-8):

… moral philosophy derives from dialectic on its contemplative side, but adds the virtuous dispositions and the exercises which produce them. The intellectual virtues have principles from dialectic almost as their proper possession; although they are with matter most of their principles came from that higher realm.

[trans. Armstrong]

as a direct reference to Plato’s Theaetetus 176a-b. For soul’s ὁμοίωσις θεῷ through virtue in Plotinus see also Wallis (1995) p. 85 ff. I would like to thank Brian Prince for his discussion on this issue.
Plotinus describes dialectic as “the purest part of intelligence and wisdom” (τὸ καθαρώτατον νοῦ καὶ φρονήσεως) and φρόνησις as the τιμιωτάτην ἕξιν (5.5-6), the most valuable mental faculty concerned with real being; it is defined as ἡ λόγῳ περὶ ἐκάστου δυναμένη ἕξις (4.2-3); our ability to express ourselves about a thing in a reasoned and orderly way.

In Ennead vi.8.5.27-37, Plotinus explicitly defines virtue as a state (ἕξις) that intellectualizes the soul:

And what about virtue itself which is according to state and disposition? Are we to say that when the soul is in a bad way it comes to set it to rights by bringing the passions and desires within proper limits? In what way then are we saying that being good is in our power and “virtue has no master”? Yes, it is if we wish and choose it; or because when virtue comes to be in us it constructs freedom and being in our own power and does not allow us any longer to be slaves of what we were enslaved to before. If then virtue is a different kind of intellect, a state which in a way intellectualises the soul, being in our power does not again belong to the realm of action but in intellect at rest from actions.

[trans. Armstrong]

The above passage alludes to both Plato and Aristotle. Plotinus’ reference to the ἀδέσποτον of ἀρετὴ (31) is an allusion to Plato’s Myth of Er in the Republic (617e3),56 while the identification of virtue and ἕξις (35: ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετὴ καὶ ἕξις) seems to refer to Aristotle’s definition of virtue in the Nicomachean Ethics (1106b36-1107a1).

Lloyd P. Gerson considers Plotinus’ definition of virtue as ἕξις in the above passage as an “odd habit”.57 However, Plotinus’ definition of ἕξις in vi.8.5.35 should not be conceived in terms of ‘habit’. Plotinus argues that what is in our power should not be found in the sphere of praxis but in the sphere of theoria beyond praxis (36-37: οὐκ ἐν πράξει τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐν νῷ ἡσύχῳ τῶν πράξεων). Virtue purifies the soul in noetic ascent (35-36: νοωθῆναι τὴν ψυχὴν ποιοῦσα); it is an ἕξις not established at the level of praxis but at the level of theoria. Virtue is a permanent state of the soul above habitual actions at a practical level (ἐν πράξει); it is a state of contemplation of soul’s intellect activity and not of practical activity (ἐν νῷ ἡσύχῳ τῶν πράξεων).58

56 See also Enneads 11.3.9.17; IV.4.39.2.
58 At the intelligible level the soul is closer to the identity between intellect and being. This identity results in the quietness or imperturbability of the soul experience the divine ησυχία of Nous (See v.9.8.8.). On the imperturbability of being Plotinus recalls
As Plotinus puts it, the σπουδαῖος does not have the intention to act (VI.8.5). Plotinus brings the example of the wise physician, like Hippocrates, who wishes nobody needed his curative skills (5.18: τὴν ἡσυχίαν τῶν πράξεων οὐδενὸς θεραπείας δεομένου). Virtue is an ἕξις of the soul as in the case of courage (II.5.2.34-35). In Ennead 11.3 Plotinus clarifies that our behavior should not be influenced by external factors; actions and emotions derive in this case from a passive ἕξις of the soul (9.13: ἀπὸ ἕξεως παθητικῆς). In contrast, Plotinus considers virtue as an active ἕξις of the soul that frees ourselves from evil: “for we do not need virtue when we are in peace but when there is a risk of being in evil if virtue is not there” (9.18-19). For an action to be ethical the soul has to follow the laws and principles of the intelligible world (IV.3.15.14-23). Virtue is as an active and undisturbed ἕξις of the soul that assimilates (as far as possible) the pure actual and eternal state of the Forms in the intelligible world (20: πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων ἕξιν).

So what depends on us (τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν) does not depend externally in the realm of action but in our virtuous actions based primarily on our internal activity of soul’s intellect directed in the intelligible world and independently from practical activity. Hence Plotinus suggests three conditions for virtuous action: an action must be (1) voluntary (i.e. we should not be forced to act), (2) conscious (i.e. we should have knowledge of what we are doing) and (3) self-determined (i.e. we should be masters of ourselves). With the third condition of self-determination, Plotinus moves the emphasis from the action to the soul, from outward activity to inner activity, from praxis to theoria. A noble action should not be based on moral activity, but on the quality of the virtuous soul prior to moral activity; the virtuous soul acts autonomous in self-determination and not heteronomous in outward actions determined by external factors or conditions (VI.8.6.19-22).

IV

Based on the above analysis: since for Plotinus ἕξις signifies a quality of being in a permanent state of possession (section 1) that is related to the soul’s intellect in at the middle part of the soul (τὸ μέσον) (section 11) and virtue is

also Parmenides’ fragment 3 on as well as fragments 1.29 and 8.4; see Stamatellos (2007), pp. 72-80; 84-88. On ἡσυχία and its relation to eudaimonia in the Enneads I have been greatly benefited from Stern-Gillet’s paper “The Plotinian Concept of Stillness” presented in the isns Tenth International Conference in Cagliari 2012. For some key passages for ἡσυχία in the Enneads see 1.4.10.13; 11.9.1; 111.7.11; V.3.6-7 and VI.3.2.27.

59 See Eliasson (2008), pp. 188-201.
defined as an ἕξις that intellectualizes the soul (section III), therefore, it can be concluded that virtue is an active state (ἕξις) of the soul's intellect in permanent contemplation of the Forms. Plotinus' theory of virtue as active ἕξις is in accordance with the interpretation of Aristotle's ἕξις as an active state or condition of the virtuous soul. The difference between Plotinus and Aristotle seems to lie on the metaphysical rather than practical establishment of morality. Particularly in contrast to Aristotle's notion of μεσότης that is related to external action and practice, Plotinus' μέσον is related to internal activity and contemplation. Plotinus' ἀρετή is not to be found at the μεσότης of ethical practice and exercise but at the μέσον of the soul and its intellect. Whereas for Aristotle virtue is an excellence (ἀκρότης) of the soul apprehended through the practical observance of μεσότης between two vices (=deficiency and excess), for Plotinus the excellence of the soul is an ἀκρότης apprehended through the theoretical observance of μέσον between two worlds (=the intelligible and the perceptible).60 While for Aristotle the ἀκρότης of the soul derives from ethical practice, for Plotinus the ἀκρότης of the soul is established beyond ethical practice in the contemplation of the intelligible world.

Thus, for Plotinus, virtue is an active ἕξις of the soul's intellect directed higher to the intelligible world in permanent contemplation of the Forms. Virtue is a purification of the soul (1.2.4) and so the wise direct their aim to their own soul perfection; as Plotinus puts it, the wise has to work out the statue of themselves till the “divine glory of virtue shines out” (1.6.9.13-15). Virtue contributes to the excellence and realization of our intelligible self beyond praxis; ἀρετή is an active state of permanent possession that purifies the soul by actualizing its higher intelligible potentials. The wise man is free from passions and desires by apprehending in constant contemplation the perfection of the intelligible world of the Forms. However, the Plotinian virtues as ἕξεις are qualities of the soul and so not found in the divine Nous; the Forms are not virtues in the way that we possess them but they are the principles from which virtues arise (1.2.1-3). Virtue leads the soul to εὐδαιμονία by exercising its

---

60 As Plotinus explains, in Ennead 11.9.9.6-11, there are two kinds of life (διττὸς ὁ ἐνδόθε βίος): the life of the wise (τοῖς σπουδαίοις) and that of the mass of men (τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων). Whereas (1) the wise direct their life to the highest level (πρὸς τὸ ἀκρότατον) at the intelligible world, the mass of men, either (2) participate somehow in virtue and share some sort of good (ἀρετῆς μετίσχει ἄγαθος τῶν), or (3) belong to the common crowd (φαῦλος ὄχλος). See the comment of Kalligas (1997), pp. 361-362; Kalligas compares Enneads 11.9.9, 1.3.1 and 5.9.1; for ἄκρος and its virtue ethics context in the Enneads see also 111.2.9 f. and 14.19.
Virtue and Hēxis in Plotinus

higher intelligible activity; ἀρετή purifies the soul through its own apprehension of true being in ἡσυχία. Virtue is an active ἕξις established at the μέσον of the soul directed upwards to the intelligible realm. The power of ἀρετή intellectualizes the soul through its noetic ascent to the divine and through its likeness to divine Nous. At the highest intelligible level the soul becomes Intellect without any further necessity of virtue or ἕξις. After virtue the σπουδάζων is not just a soul apprehending the divine Nous but a God in eternal contemplation of the Forms.

Bibliography


