CHAPTER TWO

POLITICS AND PURIFICATION
IN SOCRATES’ SECOND DEFENCE
(PHD. 63B–69E)

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we have seen how Olympiodorus found a compromise solution to the question whether suicide is lawful or not. If he had resolved the problem by making considerations concerning the soul ‘trump’ concerns about the dissolution of the living being, the relation between soul and body will come into even sharper focus in the next part of the Phaedo Commentaries. In the following, I will trace the contrast between the philosopher involved in civic life (ὁ πολιτικὸς) and the philosopher pursuing the path of purification (ὁ καθαρτικὸς, who may upon fully separating himself from the body become ὁ θεωρητικὸς) in Socrates’ second defence speech (Phd. 63b–69e). As we will see, the distinction between the two is condensed into a difference in attitude towards the body and the use of pleasure and pain. What consequences would such a move entail for Neoplatonic political theory? Specifically, do the civic and the purificatory way of life pursue the same end, different and compatible ends, or different and incompatible ends? My main conclusion in this chapter will be that much of what Olympiodorus and Damascius have to say about the difference between the civic and the purificatory life, and the philosophers who engage in them, suggests that they pursue different ends. Whether these different ends are ultimately compatible or not is a question they do not discuss at any length, but, by the evidence I shall produce, their attitude towards civic life seems ambivalent at best.

1.1. The Civic Virtues and the Statesman

Let us begin with the question of the civic virtues. Book IV of Plato’s Republic contains an elaborate description of the virtues of the just city, which are concerned with the right relationships among three different classes. By analogy, the soul is also made virtuous by the relations that
obtain among different soul parts. Justice consists in each soul part fulfilling its proper task; courage is the preservation of reason’s rule by the desiring part; wisdom the rule of reason over spirit and desire, and moderation the harmony of the three parts in their agreement that reason should rule (441e–442d). Yet the ancient tradition of Platonism did not consider the Republic’s account of virtue as Plato’s final, or even most important, word on the matter.¹ Much more important to ancient Platonists is the characterization of virtue as ‘likeness to god’, a conception that Socrates sets out in a famous passage in the Theaetetus (176a–b). On this account, we must escape from this world to ‘become like god’; but god is virtuous; therefore, by escaping from the world, we become truly virtuous.

I have sketched these two accounts of virtue with broad strokes, because they provide the background for Plotinus’ influential attempt to define true virtue in relation to the virtues of book IV of the Republic. In Enneads I.2, Plotinus analyses the idea of ‘likeness to god’ in greater detail than we find in Plato, and concludes that the greatest likeness is obtained by cultivating the ‘purificatory’ virtues, whose main task it is to ‘strip away’ anything alien to the soul. Under this perspective, the civic virtues take a far off second place, as conducive to a likeness to good men rather than to god. Moreover, Plotinus’ discussion, focused as it on the soul’s relation to what is above and what is below it, makes no mention of the social or political significance of the civic virtues.² They are defined as ‘measures in the soul as matter’ (μέτρα ἐν ἕνεκῇ τῆς ψυχῆς; Enn. I.2.2.19), without ostensibly involving any form of engagement in the city or relations to others.

In Porphyry’s restatement of his master’s ethical doctrines in Sentences 32, on the other hand, the civic virtues are defined both in terms of their ability to moderate the passions and their significance for practical action in a community. The central passage describes them as follows:

Αἱ μὲν τοῦ πολιτικοῦ ἐν μετριοπαθείᾳ καὶ ἀκολουθείν τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ καθήκοντος κατὰ τὰς πράξεις: διὸ πρὸς κοινωνίαν

¹ This point has been made with particular force and clarity by Annas (1999), who focuses mainly on the Middle Platonists.

² At Rep. IV.442d–443b, the just man is praised for passing the common tests of moral behaviour. Civic virtues thus enable just actions among citizens, a dimension not present in Plotinus’ account. So rightly O’Meara (2003), 44: ‘Plotinus is concerned with good order in the inner life of the soul, as defined in the Republic, neglecting, however, the outer order between citizens that Plato also describes in the Republic in terms of the cardinal virtues.’