I. The Contemplative Virtues

In his commentary on the *Phaedo*, Damascius provides a survey of the different virtues and their hierarchic structure.¹ Refusing to add the virtues that are mixed with their counterparts (as they are ‘of no value whatever and can be found even in slaves’: *In Phaed. 1 §145.3*), Damascius concentrates on the pure virtues, not attended by vices. This list of virtues is drawn on the basis of the hierarchic structure of the faculties (or levels of being) to which each virtue belongs.² As virtues are always perfections of the soul (§151.1–2), they occur at any stage the soul’s versatile existence can reach. They are perfections in the sense of imposing order on the chaotic, or as Damascius explains this further, of realizing on a lower level that which exists in purity higher up (§151.4–13).

(1) The virtues belonging to the first class, the *natural virtues*, are typical of the soul’s connection with the body (the so-called *κράσις*). As a consequence of this low status, those virtues are often conflicting with one another, and they are found in humans as well as in animals. Although Damascius does not exemplify this class of virtues, he refers to Plato’s *Statesman* and *Laws*. Here we find discussions of primitive natural inclinations that have to be shaped by the educators and the lawgiver. These natural inclinations are, for instance, courage and temperance that are not led by reason.³ (2) The second class of virtues contains the *ethical virtues*, which belong to reason and the irrational parts of the soul simultaneously. They are ‘acquired by

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¹ Dam. *In Phaed. 1 §§ 138–151.*

² This list of the virtues does not stand alone in the Platonic tradition. The classification of the virtues was started by Plotinus *Enn. 1.2*, and systematized by Porphyry (*Sent. 32*). In later Neoplatonism one finds quite a large number of lists and classifications of virtues. A fine study of these classifications is provided in Saffrey-Segonds (2001) LXIX–XCVIII. Gertz (2011) 51–70 thoroughly discusses the relation between the ‘civic’ and the purificatory (and contemplative) ways of life in (among others) Damascius’ *In Phaed.*

³ *Polit. 306a–308b; Leg. 12.963c–e.* Cf. Westerink (1977) 84.
habituation and by a sort of true opinion, and can be found in well-educated children and in some animals’ (§139); they do not conflict with each other, as they stand above the κρασίς. (3) The civic virtues belong to reason only, that is, reason in its function of controlling the irrational: ‘by prudence it governs the cognitive faculty, by fortitude the spirit, by temperance desire and all together by justice’ (§140). These are the classic moral virtues as treated by Plato in the Republic (4.434d–445b). (4) The purifying virtues belong to reason only, ‘but to reason in so far as it withdraws from everything external into itself’ (§141). The main Platonic passage is the one Damascius is presently commenting upon (Phaedo 68c–69c). (5) The contemplative virtues belong to the soul that has left the level of contemplation (and of the distance, ἀπόστασις involved in contemplation). It is now partaking of the intellect that is the Paradigm of all things (§143). It is telling that to exemplify this class, Damascius does not refer to Plato any longer, but rather says that this class was added by Iamblichus in his (lost) treatise On Virtues. (7) Finally, the hieratic virtues ‘belong to the godlike part of the soul; they correspond to all the categories mentioned above, on the difference that while the others belong to being, these are unitary’ (§144.1–3). That is to say, the lower virtues are taken up here in a mode of existence that is entirely unified. For a discussion of this class, again, Damascius does not refer to Plato, but rather to Iamblichus and the school of Proclus.

The discussion of this list is issued, as stated already, by the reference to the purifying virtues in the Phaedo. Yet it gives important clues also about the nature of the contemplative virtues. It is worthwhile to quote the paragraph devoted to them in full:

142. Before these are the contemplative virtues, when the soul has finally abandoned even itself, or rather has joined the superior, not in the way of knowledge only, as the word might seem to suggest, but in the way of appetition as well: it is as if the soul aspires to become intelligence instead of soul, and intelligence is both cognition and appetition. They are the counterpart of the civic virtues; the action of the latter is directed on the inferior and proceeds by reason, while the contemplative virtues are directed on the superior and proceed by intellection. Plato treats of them in the Theaetetus [173c6–177c2]. (tr. Westerink)

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4 The final characterization of the virtues involved here remains unclear, which leads Westerink (1977) 86 to the phlegmatic conclusion that ‘for the hieratic virtues there was always the excuse that they are beyond the range of philosophy’.