“Oh sir!” said La Vallière, shaking her head with a most engaging smile, “present or absent, you do not appear to my mind more at one time than at another.” (A. Dumas, Louise de la Vallière, ch. 82 “The Apparition”)*

Plotinus’ theory of the grades of virtue in Ennead 1.2 seems to present an attractive solution to some apparently intractable problems in the Platonic dialogues about the relation between wisdom and happiness. The central problem can be stated most concisely in Aristotelian terms: how are the exercise of practical and theoretical reason to be ranked as goals or ends for someone who has perfected both capacities? But a good solution, Plotinus thinks, would have to explain not just why the perfection of theoretical reason is superior to its rival, but also why Plato considers the practical virtues to be “virtues” at all, and in what sense their exercise can produce “happiness” if a better life is available to the sage.¹ Plotinus’ own resolution in 1.2 depends on two characteristic claims: first, that any order manifested in the world is derived from higher metaphysical principles; and, secondly, that the term “human being” may refer either to the person identified with an embodied soul with both rational and irrational faculties, or to the person identified with an intellectual substance or purely rational soul. By applying the first thesis to Plato’s suggestion that human perfection consists in “likeness to God,” Plotinus argues that the God to which we are likened is the divine Intellect, which doesn’t itself have virtues or dispositions of any kind, but is rather a pure activity partly constituted by the forms of the virtues. He then uses the second thesis to show that there are two ways in which a human might be assimilated, at the inferior metaphysical level of soul, to intellect: directly, by living in accordance with the virtues of the intellectual or purely rational soul, and indirectly—that is, as a reflection of the direct mode (see 1.2.7 fin.)—by living in accordance with the virtues of an embodied soul.

* I am very grateful to Michael Pakaluk, Gisela Striker, and Carlos Steel for allowing me, with almost excessive grace, a second opportunity to write this paper. I also owe profound thanks to Tad Brennan for his vital criticisms.

¹ On the Platonic problems, see e.g. Annas 1999, ch. 3, and Sedley 1999.
The result is a theory of two grades of virtue, each containing the four classical virtues of wisdom, temperance, courage and justice, and each offering a form of happiness appropriate to the level of “humanity” that its possessor has achieved. The civic or political virtues are spelled out along the familiar lines of Republic IV; they are summed up by Porphyry in Sententia 32, his influential recension of Ennead 1.2, as “those that depend on measured emotional states (μετριοπαθεία), i.e., in following and obeying one’s reasoning of what is appropriate in actions.” These are the virtues of a “good” man. The second grade, the “cathartic” virtues which Plotinus derives from the Phaedo and Theaetetus, are spelled out in two ways: negatively, in Ennead 1.2.3, as “purifications” of the rational soul from “the body,” and positively, in 1.2.5, as intellectual activities. These are the virtues of a “daemonic” man or a god. (In Porphyry’s version these become two distinct grades of virtue, a lower grade of cathartic virtues depending on lack of emotion (ἀπαθεία), and a higher grade of “theoretical virtues,” which are only achievable after death.) The general form of the theory can be grasped by looking at a single virtue at each level. Temperance, for example, is defined as the ethical virtue constituted by imposing measure and limit on the emotions, and as the cathartic virtue constituted by not sharing in “the body’s” emotions (1.2.3) or by turning inside towards intellect (1.2.5); and the paradigmatic source of both kinds of temperance in the divine intellect is its activity of being self-related or directed towards itself (τὸ πρὸς αὑτόν, 1.2.7.4).

But, whatever the merits of this theory as a reconciliation of Plato’s apparent inconsistencies on the nature of the virtues, it is not obvious exactly how it deals with the fundamental problem noted above. Perhaps we can see how there might be two kinds of virtue, and hence two kinds of happiness; but this much was pretty clear already from Aristotle’s discussion in Nicomachean Ethics 10.6-8. What we want to know from Plotinus is precisely how they are related. There seem to be two sorts of difficulty here. The first concerns the interpretation of Plotinus’ position in Ennead 1.2

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2 For a useful commentary on Enn.1.2 and some of its antecedents, see Dillon 1990.1 & 1990.2. Schissel von Fleschenberg 1928 is still important for the range of further texts it cites. Gerson 1994, ch. 9, offers a useful introduction to Plotinian ethics.

3 Porphyry Sent. 32.6-8 (cf. Enn.1.2.2.14-20): Αἱ μὲν τοῦ πολιτικοῦ ἐν μετριοπαθείᾳ κείμεναι τὸ ἔπεσθαι καὶ ἀκολουθεῖν τῷ λογισμῷ τοῦ καθήκοντος κατὰ τὰς πράξεις.

4 See Porphyry Sent. 32.94-6: Ἐπιμελητῇ τὸν καθηκόντα ἥμιν σκε-ψαμένοις, ὅτι τούτων μὲν ἡ τεῦξις ἐν τῷ βίῳ τούτῳ, διὰ τούτων δὲ καὶ ἡ εἰς τὰς τιμιωτέρας ἄνοδος.

5 Plotinus’ interpretations of Phaedo 67-9 are collected in Charrue 1993, 190-5, but this is a small part of Plotinus’ general reading of Plato’s theory of virtue.