

## PORPHYRY'S VIEW OF THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL

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### IMPORTANT PHILOSOPHERS AND SCHOLARS

**Pythagoras**, b. Samos 586 B.C.E. first coined the word *philosophia* (Love of Wisdom). Called the *Yavancharya* (Ionian Teacher) in India

**Plato**, 5<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. refers to himself as the 9<sup>th</sup> teacher in the line from Pythagoras, according to E.J. Urwick in *The Platonic Quest*

**Apollonius of Tyanna**, (c. First Century), an ardent Pythagorean who was initiated into the mysteries of Asclepius, Chaldea, Lesbos, and India. Capable of healing and prophecy, it is thought that he also performed many miracles attributed to Jesus.

**Ammonias Saccas** (c. 200 C.E, Founder of the Neo-Platonic School of *Philalethians*, or “lovers of truth.” Called the *Theodidaktos*, or God-taught, he honored what was good in Christianity, but did not see its superiority over older religions. He is said to have first coined the word, *Theosophia*.

**Plotinus**, b. 204-205 C.E. he is said to have never disclosed his birthplace or his race. A pupil of Ammonius, he is the second greatest of the *Philalethians*. He also studied in Persia and India, and taught a doctrine identical with the Vedanta's, that each human is a Spirit-Soul emanating from the One deific principle, and able to unite with it after a long pilgrimage. His biographer Porphyry says that he was ashamed to be in a body, but was four times united with his god during his lifetime. He wrote 54 books.

**Porphyry**, c. 250 C.E. distinguished pupil of Plotinus, he is said to have been born in Tyre to a Jewish family. Thoroughly Hellenized, he gave a moral and practical bent to Neo-Platonism. He had a famous controversy with Iamblichus over Theurgy, “divine energy” (*Theos Ergon*) or ritual magic. He later reconciled with Iamblichus, and admitted that “theurgy can cleanse but the lower or psychic portion, but can make it capable of seeing lower

being, such as spirits, gods and angels.” (St. Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* x.9)  
Theurgy cannot touch the higher divine nature.

**Iamblicus**, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, C.E. a great theurgist and Neo-Platonic writer, he revived the ancient practice of Theurgy, as benevolent magic. H.P. Blavatsky says, “In other words, he produced the theurgic invocation by which an Egyptian hierophant or Indian Mahatma could clothe their own or any other person’s astral double with the appearance of his Higher Ego, or what Bulwer Lytton terms the “Luminous Self,” the *Augoeides*, and confabulate with it.”

**Athenagoras**, c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century. A Platonic philosopher of Athens who wrote an Apology for the Christians in 177 CE to prove that the accusations against them of being incestuous and eating murdered children were entirely untrue.

**Proclus**, D. 485 C.E. A disciple and commentator on Plato surnamed the “Diadochus.” His last translator and follower was Thomas Taylor, 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Platonist.

**Origen**, c.185- 254 C.E. A Christian Neo-Platonist who taught the pre-existence of souls and metempsychosis. He was anathematized for this teaching at the Council of Constantinople in 543 C.E. According to The Catholic Encyclopedia, this council was not attended by the Western Roman Catholic bishops, but only by the Eastern Orthodox clergy.

**Hierocles** C.400-450 C.E. Composed the Commentary on *The Golden Verses* of Pythagoras. A great scholar, he occupied the successor’s chair at the Alexandrian Academy.

**Emperor Julian II**, b. May 332 C.E., Roman Emperor from 361-363 C.E. tried to promulgate the study of Neo-Platonism, the Academy and the ancient Greek religion upon which civilization was based. Although an “unwilling” Emperor, he was bitterly opposed by the Christians. After studying with a pupil of Iamblichus, he sought to restore pagan monasteries and old religious practices.

### Paraphrase of the Three Hypostases of Being in *The Enneads*

1. *To En* (the One) or The Foundation. Without qualities, it is beyond all human cognition, being neither cognizant nor ignorant. It manifests Intelligence and the Logos.
2. Intelligence or *Nous*. It is the Realm of the Spirit and Mind, and the first development of multiplicity. It is the realm of cyclic law, of destruction and regeneration. Here individual souls first manifest in ethereal form.
3. The embodiment of individual souls. When the souls take on a body, they take on the characteristics of Plato's Guardians, Auxiliaries and Workers in the *Republic*.

### QUOTATIONS FROM *THE ENNEADS* OF PLOTINUS

The souls peering forth from the Intellectual Realm descend first to the Heavens and there put on a body; this becomes at once the medium by which they reach out more and more towards magnitude (physical extension). They proceed to bodies progressively earthier. Some even plunge from heaven to the very lowest corporeal forms; other pass, stage by stage, too feeble to lift toward the higher burdens they carry, weighed down by their heaviness and forgetfulness. (IV, III and 15, Tr. by Stephen MacKenna)

And may he come bringing his universe with him, with all the gods within him; he who is one and all, and each god is all the gods coming together into one. (V, 8-9, 14-17, translated by MacKenna).

Thus, in sum, a divine being and dweller in the loftier realms, has entered a body; it is a god, a later phase of the divine; but under stress of its powers, and having a tendency to bring order to its next lower, it penetrates to this sphere in a voluntary plunge...if it turns back quickly all is well; it will have taken no hurt by acquiring knowledge of evil and by discovering what sin is. (IV, 8, 5 Tr. by MacKenna)

Did Intellect, when it looked toward God, think that One as many, and because it was itself one being think him as many, dividing him in itself by

not being able to think the whole at once? But it was not yet Intellect when it looked at him, but looked unintellectually (anoeitōs). Or rather we should say that it did not ever see the Good (Agathon), but lived towards it and depended on it and turned to it (*edzei men pros auto kai aneireito autou kai epestrapto pros auto*), and its movement was fulfilled because it moved there and round the Good and filled Intellect, and was not just movement, but movement satiated and full; and thereupon it became all things and knew this in its own intimate **self consciousness** and was now at this point Intellect, filled full that it might have what it was going to see, but looking at them in a light, receiving this light too far from the giver of them. (*Enneads* 6, 7, 16.)

From Porphyry's *Letter to his Wife Marcella: Concerning the Life of Philosophy and the Ascent to the Gods*, Phanes Press, 1986.

...I should be most truly present and associated with you night and day and with the fairest kind of converse, which can never be broken up, if, you would practice to ascend to yourself. Collecting all the parts which the body has scattered into a multitude of parts, unlike their former unity and strength, you should collect and combine into one the thoughts implanted in you, endeavoring to isolate those that are confused, and to drag to light those that are enveloped in darkness. (p.46) Tr. by Alice Zimmern

Look on the love of mankind as the foundation of your piety. (P.49)

Commentary on Porphyry's *Letter to Marcella* by David Fideler

The Four Platonic Virtues: **Wisdom, Courage, Temperance and Justice.**  
Manifest properties on difference Levels of Being:

<b>Levels of Being</b>	<b>Types of Virtues</b>	<b>Forms of Cognition</b>
Pure Intelligence	Exemplary	Direct Knowledge
Rational Intellect	Contemplative	Discursive Reason
Soul	Cathartic	Opinion or Belief
Body	Civil or Social	Sensation

The Four Cardinal Virtues manifest properties on different level of Being:

1. On the level of pure Mind or Intelligence the virtues are exemplary or paradigmatic principles of eternal being itself, of the Intelligence, which proceeds, even Soul. At this level, wisdom consists in Thought; courage is characterized by identity, perseverance and concentration of intelligible essence; temperance is manifest in the conversion of intellectual essence toward itself; and justice consists of the intellect's accomplishment in the characteristic function.
2. On the level of discursive Intellect the object of the virtues is contemplative, the knowledge and science of the true existence or reality. Here wisdom consists of contemplating beings or principles obtained by intelligence; courage consists of the steadfastness and impassibility by which the soul becomes assimilated to what she contemplates above; temperance consists of the conversion of the soul towards Intelligence; and justice consists of the soul fulfilling her characteristic function, that is to say, directing her gaze toward intelligence.
3. On the level of animal Soul, the functions of the virtues are purificatory or cathartic, their object being to raise the Soul to genuine existence.
4. Finally at the level of the Body or the sensible world, the function of the virtue is civic, and their object is to make us benevolent in their dealings with fellow human beings.

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Only the civil and purificatory virtues are attainable by non-philosophers in this life. One must cultivate philosophy to attain the higher virtues. The question, what are specific examples of these virtues? Who would be considered exemplars of them? The civil and cathartic virtues may be fairly easy to pick out, the contemplative virtues harder, and those on the level of pure Mind very difficult. Can you think of some examples of action on four of these levels? What does Porphyry mean by telling Marcella to ...”ascend to yourself and I will be present to you night and day...”

From Hierocles *Commentary on The Golden Verses*

Verse 1. Revere the Immortal Gods as they are established and ordained by Law

And it is to distinguish them from the souls of men that we here call them immortal Gods, because they never die and never forget, one single moment, either their own Essence or the goodness of the father who created them. Consider the passions and alterations to which the soul of man is subject; sometimes it remembers its God and the dignity with which it was created, and sometimes it entirely forgets both the one and the other. For this reason the souls of men may justly be called *Mortal Gods*, as dying sometimes to the Divine Life by going astray from God, and sometimes recovering it again by their return to Him, living thus in this last sense in the life divine and in the other dying as much as possible for an immortal essence to participate in death—not by ceasing to be, but by being deprived of well being. For the death of a Reasonable Essence is ignorance and impiety, which drag after them disorders and revolt of the passions, and the ignorance of good necessarily plunges us into the slavery of ill—a slavery whence it is impossible to be redeemed except by return to the knowledge and to God, which is done by recollection and the faculty of reminiscence.

1. What is the difference between the Immortal Gods and Mortal Gods?
2. What is the difference between the Intelligible World and Realm of the Mind, and the world the body lives in? How can we reach the “Launching Points” to this higher realm?
3. How can we connect the metaphysics of Plotinus’ *Enneads* to Porphyry’s practical wisdom?
4. What is the relationship between Porphyry and Marcella, and why did many oppose the marriage? What does Porphyry say about desire for wealth, offspring and earthly pleasures in this context?