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# Athens and Byzantium: Platonic political philosophy in religious empire

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ATHENS AND BYZANTIUM: PLATONIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY  
IN RELIGIOUS EMPIRE

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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in

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

It is traditionally understood that there is a gap, which spans well over one thousand years, between Plato's own political philosophy and its successor in medieval Islamic philosophy. A most likely bridge between Plato and these later philosophers is Neoplatonism. However, scholars argue that this philosophic school abandoned its predecessor's emphasis on political philosophy. This dissertation challenges the traditional interpretation by reconstructing a political philosophy based on a Neoplatonic commentary on Plato's *Gorgias*. The first two chapters place this commentary within its historical context, as well as its place within the larger Neoplatonic pedagogy. The remainder of the dissertation reconstructs the commentator's political philosophy. The third chapter discusses his understanding of the best regime and the art of statesmanship, which in many ways is the centerpiece of his political philosophy. Chapters four and five discuss myth and rhetoric, the tools needed by the statesman to bring about the best regime. The following chapter revisits the theme of statesmanship, particularly the notion of the philosopher as statesman.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE TENSION BETWEEN ATHENS AND BYZANTIUM

“[Athenian:] Is it god or some human being . . . who is given the credit for laying down your laws? . . . [Klenias: A god] . . . But since you and this man here were reared in such conventions and habits, I expect it would not be unpleasant for you to pass the present time discussing the political regime and laws, talking and listening as we go on our way.”

—Plato, *Laws* 624a-625a

One of the more significant contributions of political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899-1973) is the recovery of the *tension* between the two roots of Western civilization, religion and philosophy, or as he put it, “Jerusalem and Athens.”<sup>1</sup> By religion, Strauss had in mind monotheistic religion, particularly Judaism and Islam, and by philosophy, he meant Greek philosophy as a “way of life,” exemplified by Socrates.<sup>2</sup> Initially, he recalled the things they share, such as a commitment to monotheism, the love of man, and a “broad agreement” regarding morality, as well as its insufficiency for achieving the highest human happiness. As a matter of fact, Strauss acknowledges that they appear so similar that it is easy to forget their fundamental conflict, a mistake made by many modern thinkers. This conflict is expressed in

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1983); “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979): 111-18; “Progress or Return?” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, edited by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Historically, the tension between philosophy and religion first emerged with the pre-Socratic philosophers. These “natural” philosophers rejected mythological accounts of the cosmos and sought rational explanations for the origins and substance of the cosmos. Thales, for example, argued that water was the substance of which all things were composed. The gods, as presented by the poets, were also the subject of criticism. Xenophanes argued that the poets imagined gods in terms of human beings: “But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own.” Moreover, he writes, “The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.” He continues, “But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves” (Fragments 14, 16, 15). For surviving fragments of the pre-Socratics see G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1983).



terms of what completes morality, either piety (or the need for redemption) in the case of religion or contemplation in the case of philosophy. This initial disagreement points to a second, methodological conflict. Strauss argues that religion believes the good is equated to the ancestral, whereas philosophy seeks to transcend such convention by searching for what is right by nature. The pious person then is obedient to one ancient, divine law and rejects the alternatives, whereas the philosopher transcends the dimension of divine law altogether, in part because of the very recognition of a variety of divine codes that are contradictory between themselves. Thus, in contrast to the religious person, a philosopher can never admit to the “absolute sacredness of a particular or contingent event,” in this case a particular revelation. The philosopher searches for that which is universal, based on “sense perception and reasoning.”

Yet Strauss’ distinction appears problematic when applied to arguably the most influential of the monotheistic religions, Christianity. First of all, Christianity and philosophy were typically viewed as compatible by the Church Fathers. Almost from the religion’s inception, Christian theologians used philosophy as a tool to express and expound the teaching of Christ and his apostles. The precision found in the formulation of doctrine, as it developed in antiquity and the medieval period, was impossible without the language and concepts of philosophy. Second, Christianity abandoned the Judaic focus on divine law, leaving the temporal realm to order itself. Strauss makes this very point and even traces the essential difference between these religions to it: “Revelation as understood by Jews and Muslims has the character of Law (*torah*, *shari’a*) rather than of Faith. Accordingly, what first came to the sight of the Islamic and Jewish philosophers in their reflections on Revelation was not a creed or a set of dogmas, but a social order, of an all-comprehensive order, which regulates not merely actions

but thoughts or opinions as well.”<sup>3</sup> It is this difference that allowed Christianity to incorporate philosophy in part because of the separation of the eternal and temporal realms. By contrast, philosophy was constantly justifying itself before Judaic and Islamic law, which made philosophy a precarious practice. Its precarious nature, however, insured that philosophy was conducted privately and independent of ecclesiastical control, the unfortunate fate (on Strauss’ reading) of philosophy under Christianity.

Given that Strauss acknowledges these differences between Christianity and its monotheistic counterparts, one must assume that he did not intend for his metaphor of “Jerusalem and Athens” to apply to the Christian religion, and in as much as his interpretation of Christianity as a religion of faith is correct, it should not be applied. However, Strauss appears to overlook an important period in the Christian tradition that is similar to Judaism and Islam. Christianity’s focus on faith, and by consequence doctrine, was radically transformed during the late Roman Empire, especially the Byzantine Empire (or the Eastern Roman Empire).<sup>4</sup> Faith was transformed into divine law. This divine law was not the same, ancient and all-encompassing social order of Judaism and Islam. (Of course, this Byzantine divine law emerges before its Islamic counterpart.) Rather, it took a different form—imperial orthodoxy. Though the form of divine law was different, philosophy, i.e., Neoplatonism, became just as precarious. Prior to this imperial orthodoxy, philosophy suffered little if any persecution, even if ecclesiastical oversight

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<sup>3</sup> Strauss, “Introduction,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Though Strauss never provided an extensive analysis of the Byzantine Empire, he does mention it in passing, a reference that is less than flattering. Concerning Alexandre Kojève, a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, and his inability to object to modern-day tyranny, Strauss writes that he “belongs to the very few who know how to think and who love to think. He does not belong to the many who today are unabashed atheists and more than Byzantine flatterers of tyrants for the same reason for which they would have been addicted to the grossest superstitions, both religious and legal, had they lived in an earlier age.” “Restatement on Xenophon’s ‘Hiero,’” in *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 104.

began to threaten philosophy's independence. This lack of persecution was in part because of the perceived compatibility between Christianity and philosophy and in part because Christianity lacked the political power to settle any disagreements they might have had. Philosophy's status changed when religion and politics converged in "Byzantium,"<sup>5</sup> that is religious empire. Not only did this convergence heighten the tension between philosophy and religion, it also incorporated the tension between philosophy and politics, in this case philosophy's commitment to republicanism in an age of empire. Thus, unlike Strauss' metaphor, which emphasized a *single* conflict between religion and philosophy, the metaphor of "Athens and Byzantium" necessarily incorporates two conflicts: the conflict between philosophy and religion and the conflict between classical political philosophy and the politics of empire. The tension between philosophy and religion was not enough in and of itself to threaten philosophy, other than its independence. It took the fusion of Christianity with the politics of empire to make philosophy precarious to the point of violence, as well as ecclesiastically dependent.

### **Platonic Political Philosophy**

The term, "Neoplatonism," coined by an 18<sup>th</sup> century German historian, describes the Platonic tradition that originated with Plotinus (204-270 CE) and lasted in its pagan form into the late 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Neoplatonism is generally distinguished from other Platonic traditions, particularly an earlier tradition in the Roman Empire known as Middle Platonism. Since these later traditions are unfamiliar by and large to political scientists, a brief history connecting Plato

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<sup>5</sup> Byzantium is the Latin derivation of the Greek word Byzantion, the name of a city founded by the Greeks in 667 BCE. The city, later named Constantinople, became the center of the Byzantine Empire, which began in 330 CE with the founding of Constantinople and lasted until it fell in 1453 at the hands of the Ottomans.

<sup>6</sup> For general introductions to Neoplatonism, see A.C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1990); Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 2008); R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995).

with them is needed. After Plato (428-348 BCE), his Academy continued for some time, though there is dispute about how to understand its history.<sup>7</sup> For example, Diogenes Laertius (c. 222-250 CE) divides the Academy into three eras: the Old Academy, the Middle Academy, and the New Academy. By contrast, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) recognizes only an Old and a New Academy. It is universally agreed, however, that the earliest successor to Plato was Speusippus, who ran the Academy from 347-339 BCE, and after some time, the Academy entered an era of skepticism with Arcesilaus (c. 266-241 BCE). Plato's Academy continued in uninterrupted succession until the First Mithridatic War (88 BCE), when Philo of Larissa (c. 110-84 CE), the last philosopher connected with the sacred groves of Athens, fled to Rome. Platonic philosophy continued but not in the institution founded by Plato. Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 125-68 BCE), a student of Philo, rejected his teacher's skepticism and began teaching a rival interpretation of Plato, which began the tradition known as Middle Platonism. Though Antiochus began teaching in Alexandria, he returned to Athens, teaching in a gymnasium, known as Ptolemy, not the sacred groves of the Academy. Two of the most influential thinkers influenced by this interpretation of Plato were Cicero, who studied under Antiochus in Athens, and Plutarch of Chaeronea (c. 46-120 CE), who wrote the *Parallel Lives*. The last known Middle Platonist was Numenius of Apamea, who served as a transitional figure for the rise of Neoplatonism. Though it is unclear whether Numenius taught Plotinus directly, he had a profound impact on this so-called father of Neoplatonism.

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<sup>7</sup> For histories of Plato's academy, see John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy, 347-274 BC* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2003); W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy, vol. V: The Later Plato and the Academy* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1978); D. H. Fowler, *The Mathematics of Plato's Academy* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1999); Harold Cherniss, *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (New York, N.Y.: Garland Publishing, 1980).

Plotinus (205-270 CE) was most likely born in Lycopolis, Egypt, and later studied philosophy under Ammonius Saccas for roughly a decade (232-242 CE) in Alexandria, part of an imperial province of the Roman Empire. (There is debate concerning Plotinus' teacher. It is agreed that his parents were Christian. However, the biographer of Plotinus, Porphyry, claims that Ammonius reverted to pagan philosophy, but others, such as Jerome and Eusebius, argue that he remained Christian throughout his life.) After his education with Ammonius, Plotinus joined a military expedition to Persia, commissioned by Emperor Gordian III (225-244 CE), in part because he wanted to encounter Eastern philosophy. After the expedition, Plotinus traveled to Rome and began teaching philosophy in the home of the wife of Roman Emperor Trebonianus Gallus (206-253 CE). He taught for roughly ten years in Rome before writing his only known work, *The Enneads*, which consists of fifty-four treatises on various topics, later organized by Porphyry into nine (*enneads*) sections of six treatises. The two most influential students of Plotinus were Porphyry (234-305 CE) and Amelius (c. 246-290 CE), also a student of Numenius, the Middle Platonist. Porphyry composed several works, most notably his edition of Plotinus' *Enneads* and his biography of Plotinus. Other works include an *Introduction to Philosophy*, *Life of Pythagoras*, *On Abstinence from Eating Food from Animals*, *Sentences*, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, various commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* and Ptolemy's *Harmonics*, as well as his polemic entitled *Against the Christians*. Though none of Amelius' works survive, he reportedly composed a commentary on Plotinus' lectures, a defense of Plotinus, a polemic against Gnosticism, and several commentaries on the Platonic dialogues.

The next major influential Neoplatonist was Iamblichus (c. 240-325 CE), who founded an academy in Apamea, close to Antioch. He was born to a royal Syrian family and later traveled to Italy to study under Porphyry. Though he wrote several works, most notably *On the Mysteries of*

*the Egyptians*, Iamblichus is most known for his development of a standardized curriculum (discussed in chapter 2). Due to political unrest, Iamblichus' students, such as Sopatros (d. 337 CE), Aedesius (d. 355), Theodore of Asine (fl. 350 CE), and Dexippus (fl. 350 CE), fled Apamea. Most of these students established their own schools in various cities. For example, Aedesius founded a school in Pergamum (Asia Minor) and was later visited by Julian, the future emperor of Rome (361-363 CE), for philosophic education.

Beyond Iamblichus' academy in Apamea, the two most influential Neoplatonic academies were in Athens and Alexandria. Though Plato's original academy was located in Athens, it did not exist in perpetuity; the later Athenian academy has its origins in Iamblichus' school in Apamea. This academy was founded in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century perhaps by Plutarch of Athens (c. 350-431 CE), not to be confused with the earlier Plutarch of Chaeronea. Though much of his work is lost, the later Plutarch wrote commentaries on at least Plato's *Parmenides* and *Phaedo*, as well as Aristotle's *On the Soul*. Among his most influential students are Hierocles (fl. 430 CE), who later taught in Alexandria, and Syrianus (d. 437), most noted as the teacher of Proclus (c. 410-485 CE). Perhaps the most important philosopher to teach in the Athenian academy, Proclus, was born in Constantinople and was educated first in law at Alexandria but later turned to philosophy and mathematics. He then traveled to Athens to study under Plutarch and Syrianus, whom he succeeded in c. 437 CE. A prolific writer, Proclus composed numerous volumes. His five-volume, *Elements of Theology*, provides a systematic treatise on Platonic metaphysics, similar in style to Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*. Beyond this work, other compositions include *Elements of Physics*, *On Evil*, *On Fate*, *Opuscula*, *On Providence*, *Platonic Theology*, as well as several commentaries on Platonic dialogues, including the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*.

After Proclus, the academy was maintained for less than one hundred years, until its closure under political pressure in 529 CE (discussed below). Damascius (c. 460-540 CE) was the head of the academy when it closed. He studied in Alexandria and Athens, under Proclus as well as Proclus' student and successor, Marinus. Damascius' most important work is *On Principles*. His commentaries on Plato's *Parmenides* and *Philebus* survive, as well as some fragments on *Time, Space, and Number*. His most significant student is Simplicius (c. 490-560 CE), whose surviving works include commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories*, *On the Heavens*, *On the Soul*, and *Physics*. Upon the academy's closure, Damascius, along with six other philosophers including Simplicius, fled to Persia, though they returned roughly three years later in 532 CE, after a treaty was signed between the Roman emperor and the Persian king, providing them safe haven.

The history of the Alexandrian academy is less clear. The first known Neoplatonists in Alexandria were Theon and his daughter, Hypatia (370-415 CE), who taught mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. She edited her father's works, only one of which survives—*Commentary on the Almagest*. Though fragments of her own mathematical work remain, nothing is known of her philosophical teaching, except through her pupil, Synesius, who later became the Christian bishop of Ptolemais. After Hypatia, Hierocles (mentioned above) began teaching in Alexandria roughly twenty years after Hypatia's death. Though Neoplatonists studied in Alexandria in the early part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a clear historical lineage cannot be established until the headship of Ammonius (c. 440-526 CE) in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, and it existed in its pagan form until the death of Olympiodorus in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century. The school certainly had ties to Athens as Ammonius studied philosophy under the tutelage of Proclus. Apart from notes on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* and a commentary on Porphyry's *Introduction*, other

extant works were edited by Ammonius' pupils—commentaries on texts such as Aristotle's *Categories*, *Metaphysics* 1-7, *On Generation and Corruption*, and *On the Soul*. He taught four influential students—Damascius, Simplicius, John Philoponus (490-570 CE), and Olympiodorus (c. 500-570 CE). Damascius and Simplicius studied, not only with Ammonius, but in Athens as well. John Philoponus, a self-professed Christian, composed several works, including commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics*, *On the Soul*, *On Generation and Corruption*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, and *Meteorology*. He also composed theological works, including *On the Creation of the World* and *On the Trinity*. Yet after Ammonius, the most influential philosopher in Alexandria was Olympiodorus, who was the last pagan head of the academy there, teaching at least until 565 CE. He composed numerous volumes, of which the extant works are *Prolegomena to Aristotle's Logic*, commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* and *Meteorology*, Plato's *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*, and *Phaedo*. Two known students of Olympiodorus are Elias (fl. 575 CE) and David (fl. 575 CE), both of whom were reportedly Christian. Three works are attributed to Elias—commentaries on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* and *Categories*. David's extant works are an *Introduction to Philosophy* and a commentary on Porphyry's *Introduction*. The last known thinker of the Alexandrian school was Stephanus (fl. 600 CE), another self-avowed Christian. He did not remain in Alexandria but moved to Constantinople, where he became head of the Imperial Academy in 610 CE. However, it is reported that philosophers were still teaching in Alexandria when the city was sacked by Arabs in 641 CE.

Though Neoplatonism is presented as an unified school of thought, it was as diverse as any philosophic sect.<sup>8</sup> As argued most effectively by Karl Praechter, the two most influential

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<sup>8</sup> Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's Hiero," 114.



academies were unique, though they had similar intellectual pedigrees.<sup>9</sup> Both produced scholarly commentaries on various philosophical texts, mostly those of Plato and Aristotle. This approach was different from the metaphysical treatises of earlier Neoplatonists (e.g. Plotinus's *Enneads*). However, the Alexandrian academy avoided much of the metaphysical speculation that still characterized its Athenian counterpart. For example, Olympiodorus avoided lecturing on Platonic dialogues, such as *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, which were considered to be metaphysical works. The Alexandrian academy also devoted more time to the Aristotelian corpus, partly due to Ammonius's interest in Aristotle and his attempt to harmonize Aristotle's philosophy with Plato's thought. To be sure, there were various metaphysical disagreements, concerning levels of reality as well as the nature of the soul, but more specific to the aim of this dissertation, the most important difference regarding the Neoplatonists was between the less-religious, Plotinian philosophy and the theurgic, Iamblichian philosophy. In contrast to the philosophic dialectic that culminated in knowledge of the highest truth(s), Iamblichus and other Neoplatonists argued that, in addition to such dialectic, more mystical, even religious, elements were needed. Most scholars argue that there were two forms of this Neoplatonic theurgy, a high form that transcended philosophic monotheism and a lower, popular form that relied on Greek polytheism and religious ritual (discussed further in chapter four). Though it might be said that the stronghold of theurgic Neoplatonism was in Athens, Alexandria was not without a theurgic influence, even if minimal.

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<sup>9</sup> These differences were challenged recently by Ilsetraut Hadot and Koenraad Verrycken. See, for example, Hadot, *Le problem du neoplatonisme, Alexandrin: Hierocles et Simplicius* (Paris, 1978); "The Life and Works of Simplicius in Greek and Arabic Sources," in *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commentators and Their Influence*, edited by Richard R.K. Sorabji (London, 1990), 275-303; Verrycken, "The Metaphysics of Ammonius Son of Hermeias," in *Aristotle Transformed*, 199-204. Praechter, "Richtungen und Schulen im Neuplatonismus," in *Genethliakon fur Carl Robert* (Berlin, 1910), summarized in Christian Wildberg, "Philosophy in the Age of Justinian," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, edited by Michael Mass (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 324-36.

These classifications of Plato's Academy, Middle Platonism, and Neoplatonism are constructs of historians of philosophy and, in many ways, do not reflect the self-understanding of the philosophers themselves. For example, Neoplatonists did not consider themselves Neoplatonists, or as fundamentally altering Plato's philosophy. They considered themselves Platonists, faithfully interpreting his dialogues, a point questioned by modern scholarship. Neoplatonist scholar, Pauliina Remes, summarizes five distinct characteristics of Neoplatonic philosophy that, in her view, separates it from other interpreters of Plato, as well as Plato himself.<sup>10</sup> First, there is a commitment to a first principle, One, above the Aristotelian intellect, from which everything (i.e., intellect, soul, matter) is derived by a process known as "emanation." Though these derivative entities are accessible to reason, the first principle is ineffable. Second, beyond Plato's dualism, made up of a material, changing reality and an immaterial, permanent reality, Neoplatonists further differentiate reality. Third, this reality is expressed hierarchically, increasing in unity and goodness the higher one gets and likewise increasing in complexity and deficiency the lower one gets. Next, these varied levels of reality are at once metaphysically real as well as reside in the mind. Finally, everything, including human beings, move toward unity with reality, reflective of the unity of reality itself (the One). There are several manifestations of this drive for unity, which are themselves hierarchically ordered. For example, the drive for existence is a lower manifestation of this drive, whereas contemplation (or philosophy) is the highest drive for unity. Yet some Neoplatonists argued that the One so transcended the Intellect that philosophy itself was insufficient to achieve unity with the One. It required a more mystical form of union, acquired by theurgy (mentioned above). The higher form of theurgy was less controversial to Christianity than its lower counterpart. As

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<sup>10</sup> *Neoplatonism*, 7-9.

a matter of fact, many Christians were influenced by this higher form of Neoplatonic mysticism, including Pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius.<sup>11</sup> It is the lower, popular form that was the point of contention (discussed below). The elevation of contemplation (or theurgy) to the highest drive of existence resulted in a form of asceticism, neglecting lower elements of human existence in order to pursue the highest things, which led some contemporaries to criticize their practice in which they were accused of daring not “to emerge from their couches or secluded spots.”<sup>12</sup>

These five metaphysical characteristics led to what is arguably the most distinctive characteristic of Neoplatonism, at least the way it is traditionally understood. The political seems less important to the Neoplatonists than it was to Plato, so much so that the traditional interpretation of Neoplatonism argues that they abandoned Plato’s own emphasis on political philosophy, a conclusion succinctly stated by W. Theiler’s phrase “*Plato dimidiatus*,” or “Plato by half.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, any reconstruction of a Neoplatonic political philosophy would challenge the traditional interpretation that claims this philosophic school focused almost exclusively on metaphysical speculation. The traditional interpretation is not without plausibility, however, especially in light of their commitment to contemplation as the highest form of human activity.

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<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, translated by C.E. Rolt (Berwick, Me.: Ibis Press, 2004); Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by Richard Green (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962). For a general discussion of Neoplatonism’s influence on Christianity, see Dominic O’Meara, ed., *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Themistius, *Orations*, 28 (341d), cited in Edward J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 2006), 17.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Neoplatonist scholar, A.C. Lloyd, suggests that “[n]either he [Plotinus] nor his successors had anything substantial to say that we know of on the political writings of Plato or Aristotle.” This traditional interpretation is also reflected in the absence of Neoplatonism in histories of political thought and political theory literature. W. Theiler, “Plotin zwischen Plato und Stoa,” in *Les Sources de Plotin Fondation Hardt Entretiens sur l’Antiquite Classique V* (Vandoeuvres-Geneve, 1960), 67; Lloyd, “The Later Neoplatonists,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, edited by A.H. Armstrong (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 274.

Moreover, the school's reputation for focusing on metaphysical speculation is justified when examining their most noted works. Take, for example, the most familiar Neoplatonist work—*The Enneads*. In explaining his ordering of Plotinus' treatises, Porphyry classifies the vast majority of them as on physics or metaphysics.<sup>14</sup> A simple glance at the titles of other Neoplatonist works confirms this emphasis. Beyond their work, their actions seem consistent with the traditional interpretation. Few Neoplatonists entered political life; most lived an ascetic lifestyle, teaching in secluded academies. Not only did many avoid the political, it seems they often persuaded politicians with philosophical interests to abandon their office. Plotinus, famously praised Rogatianus, a Roman senator, who had a conversion away from political life to a life of philosophy. This conversion led him to renounce all of his possessions, release his servants, and give up his title as senator. He even rejected an invitation by the emperor to become praetor, an office that administered the treasury and performed various judicial functions.<sup>15</sup>

Though these facts give a certain plausibility to the traditional interpretation, it unfortunately misreads this philosophic school. Even though contemplation is the highest form of activity, a genuine concern for political thought is not necessarily excluded. On this point, simply consult the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, who both argue contemplation is the highest form of human activity. This apolitical assumption is even more puzzling when considering the scholarly oversight of explicitly political works by Neoplatonists. For example, Proclus wrote a commentary on Plato's *Republic*. This unique work has received little scholarly

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<sup>14</sup> Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, translated by A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 24.17-26.41.

<sup>15</sup> Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 7.31-46.

attention. As a matter of fact, it has yet to be translated into English. Another work of interest is a treatise entitled *On Political Science*, written by an anonymous philosopher, probably during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, this work has received little attention. Besides these two larger works, shorter political works exist. For example, Iamblichus composed a letter to a certain Agrippa, where he elaborates on the importance of the rule of law. Sopatros the Younger also composed a letter on just governance to his brother, upon his brother's taking office. Moreover, even the most metaphysical works are not devoid of political thought. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus discusses subjects such as political virtue, justice, and regime types (I.2; III.2.4; IV.4.17).

Their supposed abandonment of political philosophy appears assumed, rather than proven, and a serious lack of investigation, along with a general unfamiliarity of this philosophic school (especially among political scientists), propagates this interpretation. To my knowledge, the only investigation, however brief, of Neoplatonism by a political scientist concludes this way: "No one studies the political philosophy of Plotinus because, strictly speaking, there was no such thing in his system."<sup>16</sup> Thus, a serious investigation into Neoplatonic political philosophy is needed. Outside of political science, it is only recently that this traditional interpretation has come under scrutiny, in large part due to Dominic O'Meara's *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, the first book-length analysis of Neoplatonic political philosophy.<sup>17</sup> This dissertation then attempts to provide the first reconstruction of a Neoplatonic political

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<sup>16</sup> James V. Schall, "Plotinus and Political Philosophy," *Gregorianum* 66.4 (1985): 690. Certain political theorists, who one might think would give serious attention to the school, do not. For example, in his analysis of this period of political thought, Eric Voegelin gives only a handful of passing references to Neoplatonism, particularly Plotinus. The focus of these references is exclusively Neoplatonic metaphysics. See *Order and History, vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*, edited by Michael Franz (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2003. For an earlier, shorter attempt see A. Ehrhardt, "The Political Philosophy of Neo-Platonism," in *Studi in onore di Vincenzo Arangio-Ruiz nel XLV anno del suo insegnamento 1-4, vol.1* (Naples, 1953), 457-82.

philosophy in political science, as well as the first extensive analysis of a particular Neoplatonic text (established below) in any field. Before beginning this reconstruction, it is important to place Neoplatonism within its socio-political context.

### **Religious Empire**

Neoplatonists never knew a time without Christianity or without empire. However, their interaction with these two forces changed. In the third century, Plotinus taught philosophy in the home of an emperor's wife and was "venerated" (ἔσεφθησαν) by at least one emperor.<sup>18</sup> Porphyry, his student, published a scathing critique of Christianity, aptly titled *Against the Christians*, without consequence. Yet soon after the empire became more than a republic in disguise and Christianity became its official religion, the tension between Athens and Byzantium became palpable, so much so that Porphyry's work, written without consequence in the third century, was condemned and burned by the imperial Church in 448 CE. Religion existed long before philosophy, so philosophy always adapted itself to the gods of the city. Yet during the Roman Empire, philosophers encountered a radical religion in Christianity, unknown to the classical world for its claims of universality. Moreover, political philosophers were aware of monarchical government, even claims of a divine monarchy, prior to the rise of the Roman Empire. Yet they encountered a form of monarchy more radical in nature for its universal claims and expansionist tendencies.

Though technically considered an empire, the earlier days of its existence maintained some of the earlier republican institutions, even if in appearance only.<sup>19</sup> After defeating Pompey

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<sup>18</sup> Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 12.1.

<sup>19</sup> For histories of Rome, see J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian*, vols. 1-2 (New York, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1958), Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and*

in civil war (49-48 BCE), Julius Caesar took steps to transform the Roman Republic into an empire, when he assumed the office of dictator, a constitutional office established for times of crisis. However, he did not give up the office after the set period of six months and eventually assumed the title “dictator in perpetuity” (*dictator perpetuo*). His reign ended in crisis on that fateful day—the Ides of March, 44 BCE. Another fourteen years after his assassination passed until Octavian Caesar Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE) completed the initial steps taken by his granduncle. Rome then entered a period described by historians as “The Principate,” taken from Caesar Augustus’ self-description as *princeps senatus* (first among senators). During this period, the empire resembled the earlier republic in many ways, or at least gave the appearance of republicanism. Governing authority was still shared between the Emperor and the Senate, and though he was the predominant partner, the Emperor was limited by various constitutional rights of the Senate. In this period, Neoplatonists were still able to influence the regime and import their republican preferences. For example, Plotinus approached Emperor Gallienus about reviving a “city of philosophers” (φιλοσόφων τινὰ πόλιν), in conjunction with constituting a city according to Plato’s *Laws*, that is to say, constituting a republic.<sup>20</sup>

As time passed, virtually all functions of government were assumed by the Emperor, as exemplified by the reigns of Diocletian (244-311 CE) and Constantine (272-337 CE). The empire entered a new age known as the age of “The Dominate,” taken from the emperor’s title “lord and god” (*dominus et deus*). Caesar Augustus derived his imperial authority from the sovereignty of the people, but Diocletian and the emperors who followed justified their authority

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*Fall of the Roman Empire: The History of the Empire from A.D. 395-A.D. 1185*, vols. 1-3 (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1932), H. H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome from 133 B.C. to A.D. 68* (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 12.4.

from a different, more divine source—the god(s). Moreover, the legislative power, which resided in the Senate, was now in the hands of the Emperor. To be sure, earlier in the Roman Empire, the emperor could initiate legislation, though it still needed approval from the comitia of the people. During the Dominate period, not only did the emperor serve as sole legislator, he also reserved the right of interpreting the law. Yet even during this age of virtual absolute power, the emperor was still bound by the law, even if his prerogative to interpret the law minimized its sovereignty. This new form of empire was less amenable to republican sentiments or limitations to the emperor’s political power. For example, Sopatros, a student of Iamblichus, joined Constantine’s court as an advisor, reportedly to “control and reform . . . the purpose and impulsiveness” of Constantine.<sup>21</sup> The philosopher was executed only a few years after his appointment.

At this point, the Roman Empire expanded to encompass much of the known world, an expansion that made the empire difficult to govern. In order to assist governing the vast empire, Diocletian (who reigned from 284-305 CE) established the offices of two emperors—one in the west and one in the east. Though the empire sometimes was ruled by only one emperor, these two offices helped make the division between the western and eastern empires inevitable. The last Roman emperor to govern both the western and eastern provinces of the empire was Theodosius I (347-395 CE). Roughly 100 years after Diocletian’s transformation of the regime, the Western Roman Empire was overtaken by Germanic tribes, illustrated symbolically by the Visigoths’ sack of Rome in 410 CE, and then it officially ended with the last emperor of the west—Romulus Augustulus—in 476 CE, though by this time the Western Empire was an empire

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<sup>21</sup> Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, in *Philostratus and Eunapius, The Lives of the Sophists*, translated by W.C. Wright (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), 462.



in name only. By contrast, the Byzantine Empire, or the Eastern Roman Empire, survived for nearly one thousand years.

Though empire, at least its most potent form, arose in the reign of Diocletian and Constantine, religious empire did not arise until the reign of Theodosius I. During the early empire, Christianity grew from an obscure sect in Jerusalem to an influential religious movement. As early as 64 CE, during the reign of Nero, Christians faced officially-sanctioned persecution in part because of supposed “atheism” and secrecy. The charge of atheism was based on their refusal to worship the pagan gods. However, the most severe and widespread persecution was from 303-312 CE. In February 303, Diocletian issued a decree forbidding Christians to assemble and denying them protection under the law. A later decree, more severe than the first, led to the deaths of numerous Christians. The persecution ceased for a brief period when Diocletian’s successor, Galerius, permitted Christians to assemble, but this decree was shortly overturned by Maximinus. The persecution ended after 312 CE, when Constantine had a vision of Christ, who told him to mark the soldiers’ shields with the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*. In February 313, Constantine decreed a policy of religious toleration, legalizing Christianity, and in many ways, favoring the religion. Yet not long after this spirit of toleration was decreed, it was overturned by the Emperor Julian, the same Julian influenced by Neoplatonism. He took radical steps to purge the increasingly dominant presence of Christianity, revoke its privileges, and resurrect pagan religion. His efforts, however, failed in part because his reign lasted less than two years. Almost two decades later, on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 380, Theodosius I decreed the following: “We desire that all peoples who fall beneath the sway of our imperial clemency should profess the faith which we believe has been communicated by the Apostle Peter to the Romans and maintained in its traditional form to the present day” (*Codex Theodosianus*, XVI, I, 2). By

consequence, paganism was illegal. (Plutarch established the Neoplatonic academy in Athens roughly this same time.) Prior to the rise of religious empire, the tension between philosophy and religion, though even present, was managed. It was managed in part because the empire needed time to acquire its authoritative form. Yet even still, it took the sanctioning of universal religion to provide incentive for suppressing pagan philosophy.

After Theodosius' reign, symbolic of religious empire, Platonic political philosophy faced suppression and outright persecution, especially in the reign of Justinian (527-565 CE).<sup>22</sup> Two sets of examples are illustrative of this tension. The first set illustrates the tension on a local, popular level without imperial interference. The second set of examples illustrates the tension from a series of imperial decrees. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Alexandria was transformed from a city with a Christian minority to a city in which they were the majority. This increase of a Christian presence made paganism less tolerated. Yet the city was still attractive to theurgic Neoplatonists due to the Serapeum, an intellectual and religious center in Alexandria. In 391 CE, Christian workmen uncovered an ancient Mithraic temple at the Serapeum. These workmen took some of the pagan relics to the bishop, Theophilus, who had them paraded down the streets in a mocking manner. In response, pagans organized an attack on the Christian population, in which several Christians were killed. Among this pagan mob were reportedly "professors of philosophy," no doubt a reference to certain theurgic Neoplatonists.<sup>23</sup> The pagans retreated to

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of their social and political context see Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1989); E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Michael Maas, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, "Ecclesiastical History," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2: Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 5.16.

the secure temple of Serapis and remained there until an official imperial amnesty. After they vacated the temple, Christian soldiers plundered it as well as several other pagan temples in the area.

During this period, Hypatia was already teaching in Alexandria. Unlike these theurgic Neoplatonists, Hypatia apparently did not engage in these pagan religious rites. Moreover, there is no evidence that she took up arms in defense of paganism. To the contrary, she had a good reputation among local town councilors as well as governors. Damascius records that the governors of the city always paid their respects to her when they first entered Alexandria.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, one source suggests that Theophilus, bishop at that time, encouraged two of her students to become priests. However, her situation changed after the bishop's death. Theophilus trained his nephew Cyril to succeed him as bishop, but he was never officially appointed his successor. Upon Theophilus' death, a power struggle ensued between Cyril and Timothy, Theophilus' deacon. Cyril soon won control. His victory was followed by harsh revenge. For example, he confiscated church property from the Novatianists, a Christian sect that supported Timothy. Such efforts provoked the prefect of Egypt, Orestes, to organize an opposition to Cyril from among influential Alexandrians. Among these Alexandrians was Hypatia. Cyril, or at least his supporters, began to disperse propaganda against her and her teaching. She was accused of magic, including casting a spell that initiated the conflict between Orestes and Cyril. In 415 CE, based in part on this propaganda, a Christian named Peter assembled a mob; they dragged Hypatia through the streets to a local church, and then slashed her flesh with pottery shards. After her murder, the crowd burned her body and placed it outside the city, a practice reserved

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<sup>24</sup> Damascius, *Life of Isidore*, 43E. For a recent translation, see *The Philosophical History*, edited by Polymnia Athanassiadi (Athens: Apamea Cultural Association, 1999).

for the most abhorrent criminals in the city. One source records that the people glorified Cyril “as a ‘new Theophilus’ for he had destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the city,” which conveys that the events at Serapeum and Hypatia’s murder were connected, at least in the minds of the citizens.<sup>25</sup>

Though imperial amnesty was given to the theurgic pagans at Serapeum, these two events were local and populist in nature. In early 6<sup>th</sup> century Athens, however, the actions against Platonic political philosophy were imperial in nature. Unlike Alexandria, which was heavily Christianized by the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, Athens was able to maintain a distinctly pagan culture through the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Changes in imperial administration at the regional level made this culture diminish. For example, in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Emperor Anastasius limited the administrative functions of local councils, which in Athens were made up of influential pagans, as well as transferred the responsibility of appointing local officials to Christian bishops and landholders. To be sure, Christians demonstrated animus toward pagan philosophers prior to the 6<sup>th</sup> century in Athens. Proclus was exiled for some time; Hegias, another influential Neoplatonist, was publicly reprimanded for his paganism. Nevertheless, the increased Christian presence in the 6<sup>th</sup> century was coupled with political power, as well as an emperor in Justinian who was eager to oblige Athenian Christians by putting imperial pressure on the Athenian academy.

The reason for Justinian’s focus on the academy was not simply that it was pagan in nature but that it was influential as well. Ever since its genesis, the academy in Athens, as well as other Neoplatonic academies, taught many of the Roman elite. By the late Roman Empire,

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<sup>25</sup> John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, translated by R.H. Charles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916), 84.103.

philosophy was one component, if not the culminating component, of an elite education. It was the education of gentlemen. It was a liberal education in the fullest sense of the word, and as discussed in the next chapter, it included topics from morality to the highest sciences, including theology. Earlier in the empire, the Neoplatonic focus on metaphysics and theology was tolerated by Christians, who chose to receive a philosophic education for its moral and cultural benefits. However, as time passed, the rigors of philosophical speculation on theological matters caused some Christians to doubt their faith, and certain strands of Neoplatonism began emphasizing this theological speculation, as well as theurgic rituals, which enraged the Christian community.

These trends caught the attention of Christians at the local level, as well as the emperors themselves. As a matter of fact, in 425 CE, Emperor Theodosius II established a Christian academy to compete with its pagan counterparts. It was Justinian, however, who finally sought to purge the empire of these pagan influences through a series of laws that targeted Platonic philosophy.<sup>26</sup> The initial decree did not close the Athenian academy directly; however, it did forbid one type of teaching—Neoplatonism.<sup>27</sup> The only ancient source that records this proclamation is the *Chronicle* (18.47) of John Malalas, who writes, “the emperor [Justinian]

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<sup>26</sup> It should be acknowledged however that Justinian’s legislation against paganism was not unique. He not only desired to put political pressure on paganism but Christian heterodoxy as well. Perhaps the most important heterodox group that Justinian pressured was the Monophysites. The core belief of this group, a belief condemned by the Council of Chalcedon roughly seventy-five years earlier, was that Christ possessed only one nature, his divine nature; his human nature was absorbed by his divine nature. The formula of Chalcedon asserts that Christ possessed two natures: one divine, one human. Near the beginning of his reign, Justinian took upon himself the abilities to instantiate into law official church teachings, as well as to punish those who subscribe to heterodox teaching (*Codex* 1.1.5).

<sup>27</sup> For analyses of the final days of the Athenian academy, see J. Blumenthal, “529 and Its Sequel: What Happened to the Academy?” *Byzantion* 48 (1978): 369-85; Alan Cameron, “The Last Days of the Academy at Athens,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 195 (1969): 7-29; A. Frantz, “Pagan Philosophers in Christian Athens,” *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 119 (1975): 29-38.

issued a decree and sent it to Athens ordering that no one should teach philosophy nor interpret the laws.”<sup>28</sup> Roughly two years later (531 CE), Justinian issued two laws that took this purging of paganism to another level. The first of these laws (1.11.9) prevented pagans and pagan institutions from receiving bequests. Though the decree in 529 CE made it impossible to collect fees from students (since they technically could not teach), the school could still receive bequests. The second law (1.11.10) exhorted pagans to be baptized, and it prohibited them from teaching and receiving a municipal salary. Moreover, it mandated the confiscation of pagan property, the exile of recalcitrant pagans, the Christian education of pagan children, and the charging of penalties for those who accept baptism disingenuously.

### **Platonic Political Philosophy in Retreat**

With such hostility, how did Neoplatonists maintain classical political philosophy? Such a question is not altogether new. Ever since Socrates, the tension between the philosopher and the city has led to various tactics in order to protect the philosopher as well as the city. For example, Plato did not teach from the open marketplace but retreated to the secluded locust groves. Moreover, he did not write in his own voice but spoke through the voice of Socrates, which made it difficult to determine Plato’s own teaching. To be sure, the earlier Neoplatonists continued these tactics. They taught in private academies and in some instances private homes; they often wrote treatises and commentaries that were presented as expositions of Plato’s philosophy as opposed to their own speculations. Yet it is unclear exactly if these Neoplatonists forgot the tensions illustrated so vividly by Socrates’ death, for many of these philosophers (e.g., Proclus and Damascius) were uncompromising and quite public in their defiance of Byzantium,

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<sup>28</sup> Some translations of this passage read “no one should teach philosophy nor interpret astronomy nor in any city should there be lots cast using dice.”

which led to many of these conflicts in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, there is evidence that they were aware of this tension. For example, Proclus demonstrated an awareness of the need to protect the city: “If I had the power,” he says, “of all the books of the ancients I would have only the *Oracles* and the *Timaeus* survive, and all the rest I would conceal from the men of the present, since they have even caused harm to some of those who approached them in a causal and uncritical manner.”<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, with the emergence of religious empire, these Neoplatonists compounded the tension by emphasizing theological speculation and theurgic ritual (the reasons of which are discussed in chapter 4). Regardless of the attitude of these Neoplatonists, the lesson of Hypatia and Justinian’s political pressure reminded at least one late Neoplatonist, namely Olympiodorus, of the need to retreat.

One of the most important tactics used to protect the philosopher (and the city) was an “art of writing,” an art known as esoteric writing. This art was rediscovered by Leo Strauss, after carefully reading the works of medieval political philosophers.<sup>30</sup> These philosophers, such as Maimonides and Al-Farabi, lived during a time when philosophy was considered dangerous, if not outright forbidden, in part because of its threat to the dominant religion, either Judaism or Islam. Accordingly, these authors composed works that contained “exoteric teaching,” that is to say, edifying and publicly acceptable teaching, as well as “esoteric teaching,” the true teaching. This true teaching was hidden through various means and noticeable only to the attentive reader. Such writing protected the philosopher in part because the philosopher gave the appearance of assenting to the city’s conventions, especially its religion, all the while quietly carrying on the

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<sup>29</sup> Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, in *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students*, translated by Mark Edwards (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 38.

<sup>30</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1988); “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” in *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, 221-32.

philosopher's task of questioning all things in search of the truth. It also protected the city, which requires these conventions for a stable and ordered regime.

This “art of writing” became all the more important in the Roman Empire. Unlike Plato, whose academic teaching and writing were somewhat disconnected from each other, most of the Neoplatonists' works are intimately related to their teaching in the academy. As a matter of fact, many of the extant commentaries are lecture notes, edited by the lecturer or compiled by the students. Thus, for the Neoplatonists, at least Olympiodorus, the “art of writing” became an art of teaching, where one had to conceal the true teaching amidst the exoteric teaching in lectures. This was needed in part because many of the students in the academy were not philosophers, but citizens of an aristocratic class, seeking a liberal education, and in many instances committed to both empire and Christianity.

One work seems more appropriate, given the virtually uncharted territory of the subject matter, as well as the level of analysis needed to discuss the intent of the author, writing in an age of persecution. In terms of the optimal text, shorter works, such as letters, do not provide enough material to reconstruct a political philosophy. There are three book-length works concerning political thought—Proclus, *Commentary on the 'Republic,'* Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the 'Gorgias,'* and the anonymous, *On Political Science*. Even though the anonymous work has clear Neoplatonic influences, its anonymity provides an uncertainty regarding its authorship. Moreover, its stand-alone nature makes it difficult to connect it with the Neoplatonic tradition at large. Proclus' commentary has the same problem. Though it is a commentary in the Neoplatonic tradition, the *Republic* was not part of the Neoplatonic curriculum (discussed in chapter 2), an advantage only possessed by Olympiodorus'



commentary, the subject of which is, as he says, “the principles of political science (πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης)” (0.5).<sup>31</sup>

## Overview

Having established the text under investigation, it is important to discuss the structure of analysis. The next chapter places this work of political science within the larger framework of Neoplatonic pedagogy, standardized by Iamblichus and adopted by the later academies. The Neoplatonists argued that each Platonic dialogue contained one specific aim, and these dialogues were ordered in hierarchical fashion based on their respective aims. Ultimately, this hierarchy corresponds to the division between practical and theoretical science. Olympiodorus’ commentary concerning political science is a work of practical science. It is worth noting that his works are all preliminary or concerned with practical science. His works on Aristotle were considered prolegomena to the study of the Platonic dialogues, and his commentaries on *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*, and *Phaedo* are considered works of practical science. As a matter of fact, most scholars speculate that he never lectured on the higher, theoretical dialogues. The avoidance of this higher science is possibly another tactic to protect classical political philosophy against religious empire.

The third and fourth chapters turn to the two specific tensions between Athens and Byzantium, as historically incarnated in the sixth century. The former focuses on the tension between republicanism and empire, the latter, on the tension between philosophy and religion. Cognizant of this tension, Olympiodorus provides a surface teaching that is deferential to the

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<sup>31</sup> I rely for the most part on the English translation—Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato’s ‘Gorgias,’* translated by Robin Jackson, Kimon Lycos, and Harold Tarrant (Boston, Ma: Brill, 1998)—but sometimes make changes, whenever appropriate, based on a Greek edition of the commentary—Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Gorgiam*, edited by William Norvin (Leipzig: Teubner, 1936).

imperial regime, comparing Byzantium to the regime in heaven. Yet on closer examination, he does not argue for empire but republicanism. Such a conclusion is conveyed through a clever use of the word “aristocracy,” as well as his teaching concerning statesmanship. True statesmen turn out to be great founders of republics, as opposed to the divinely sanctioned monarch, reminiscent of Plato’s philosopher-king. Based on these republican commitments, he offers prudential advice to an unjust regime that is determined to expand its borders at all costs. Thus, Olympiodorus is not only concerned with constituting (or reconstituting) a republic but also preserving it.

Given that constituting a republic assumes the presence of some working political order, it follows that a statesman must garner the consent of the governed in order to move the regime toward republicanism, the focus of the fourth and fifth chapters. This consent is garnered through two instruments, namely myth (Chapter 4) and rhetoric (Chapter 5), which educate and inculcate virtue in the citizenry. Though myth is a broad notion in the Platonic corpus, the commentator specifically has religion in mind. Religion consists in part of theological myth that persuades citizens to live virtuous lives, generally through the threat of punishment in the afterlife. Moreover, religion employs ritual, such as prayer, to habituate citizens to virtue. As a philosopher, Olympiodorus is not concerned with the truthfulness of religious claims, a conclusion impossible for the philosopher to demonstrate. Rather, he is concerned with the political use of religion by the statesman. Thus, he maintains the classical distinction between philosophy and religion, as well as assume the superiority of philosophy to religion. Though previous Neoplatonists maintained similar positions, they appeared to reject the value of Christianity as a political instrument and assert the need for pagan religion, or lower forms of

theurgy. It is only with Olympiodorus that we find a pagan philosopher that accepts Christianity as a political instrument (with some important exceptions), perhaps even the first to do so.

Rhetoric is also used by the statesman to persuade citizens. Though both rhetoric and myth are instruments, used to persuade citizens, rhetoric did not produce the same hostility with Byzantium. For Olympiodorus, it was more important to demonstrate rhetoric's insufficiency in establishing the best regime. Interestingly however, Olympiodorus appears to accept the Stoic concept of common notions, which asserts that there are certain truths, even moral truths, which are universally held by humanity. This concept makes the need for the persuasion of myth and rhetoric seem unnecessary. However, even if Olympiodorus genuinely believes these popular notions, he argues that they alone are insufficient to establish virtue in citizens and sustain a republican regime. Both myth and rhetoric are needed.

Though the statesman is to move a regime toward republicanism, according to Olympiodorus, the opportunity to do so is rare, extremely rare. The sixth chapter then examines the statesman's response to this inability. Olympiodorus argues that the statesman must retreat from the city because, being virtuous himself, he is unwilling to join in their injustice. However, it becomes clear that a different sort of statesman is in mind here. Much like the term "aristocracy," Olympiodorus uses the term "statesman" in different ways to make this shift possible. Here, the commentator is not concerned with the founder of republics but the philosopher, including himself. Though it is somewhat strange to understand philosophers as statesmen, Olympiodorus focuses on Socrates' claim to be "one of the few who practice statesmanship in Athens" (521d). He argues that the philosopher does not rule but advises those with political power or those aspiring to such power. This activity is understood in terms of a retreat. Because of the tension between the philosopher and the city, the philosopher cannot rule

but must retreat, influencing politics in an indirect fashion. Socrates “retreats” to the marketplace, but his death demonstrates the need for a more radical retreat evidenced by Plato’s academy and writing. Olympiodorus follows this Socratic path of statesmanship. However, the issue of money presents an apparent compromise. Unlike Socrates, who did not charge fees, some Neoplatonists received official salary from the empire, which permitted imperial oversight and did not provide philosophy its necessary independence, if it is to reform the regime. Though Olympiodorus was not on official payroll, he did accept fees from his students. Yet as he makes clear, these fees were given voluntarily, out of gratitude.

The seventh, and concluding, chapter reflects on this reconstruction of a Neoplatonic political philosophy. In many ways, the central claim of this dissertation is that there is such a thing as a Neoplatonic political philosophy and that it is typical of classical political philosophy. Naturally, then, many of the specific conclusions drawn from Olympiodorus’ political philosophy are not new. For example, his commitment to a small regime is in contrast with empire, as well as modern republicanism. However, there are a few unique insights. Olympiodorus’ attempt to validate Christianity as a civic religion, the first such attempt by a philosopher, influenced successive generations. Moreover, we see that a Platonic political philosophy is a philosophy of statesmanship. This philosophy provides perspective on the foundations of political science, as well as the political role of the philosopher. Finally, classical political philosophy is not relegated to the history of ideas, nor limited to the Greek *polis*, but is capable of offering an universal political science, relevant for any political order in any age.

## CHAPTER 2

### POLITICAL SCIENCE IN THE NEOPLATONIC CURRICULUM

Political science was not an isolated field of study in the Neoplatonic academies, nor was Olympiodorus' *Commentary on Plato's 'Gorgias'* an unconnected volume in the Neoplatonic corpus. Rather, they both were part of an overall pedagogy, that is now known as the Neoplatonic curriculum, devised by Iamblichus (c. 240-325 CE). Though the curriculum was composed of various non-Platonic works (discussed below), the core of Neoplatonic education was the study of Platonic dialogues. This core did not, however, consist of the entire Platonic corpus but was limited to just twelve dialogues. The rationale for the selection of the dialogues, and their order in the curriculum itself, is based on a literary theory, reflective of Neoplatonic philosophy, in which the overall aim (σκοπὸς) of each dialogue is identified; certain dialogues are then selected based on this aim, and those selected dialogues are finally ordered according to a hierarchy of aims. It is these ordered dialogues that make up the core of the curriculum. Political philosophy finds its place in this curriculum as a matter of seeming low estimation. However, in his commentary, Olympiodorus offers a strikingly different picture, a picture in which practical science, including political science, appears to take on the highest priority.

#### The Aim of the Platonic Dialogues According to the Neoplatonists

Unfortunately, the only surviving source wherein the Neoplatonic hermeneutic and curriculum are explained is an anonymous source, the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The text is unclear and incomplete, which produced some speculation. The authoritative interpretation of the curriculum, found in L.G. Westerink's edition of the prolegomena, is used here. Interpretative difficulties are mentioned in subsequent footnotes. *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1962), 26.13-34.

most likely written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> This source begins with a brief life of Plato, followed by a categorization of various philosophic schools that argues for the superiority of Platonism. The remainder of the prolegomena addresses various hermeneutical questions regarding the Platonic dialogues, particularly Plato's justification for writing, the definition of a dialogue, the composition and division of the dialogues, and the proper order of the dialogues. Besides these questions, the anonymous author provides extensive guidelines for determining the aim of each dialogue, which is (1) one, not many; (2) general, not particular; (3) total, not partial; (4) exact, not approximate; (5) higher, not lower; (6) in agreement with the content; (7) not negative, (8) affective, (9) instrumental, or (10) material.<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest is the author's assertion that there is only one aim for each dialogue. He provides two illuminating reasons to justify his claim, both of which demonstrate a correlation between Neoplatonic philosophy and literary theory.<sup>4</sup> First, he says that there is only one aim per dialogue because God (τὸ θεῖον) is one. Second, in comparing a dialogue to a living being, the author says that, just as a living being has one purpose, i.e., the good, a dialogue also has one purpose.

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<sup>2</sup> There is debate over the authorship of this prolegomena. Though it was traditionally ascribed to Olympiodorus, Westerink suggests that he was not necessarily the author because of significant differences between that work and others known to be by Olympiodorus. Though he is not willing to reject Olympiodorus as a possibility, he concludes that the most likely source is one of the philosopher's successors in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps Elias. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, IX-X, XLI-L.

<sup>3</sup> The author justifies identifying the aim on the basis of the *Phaedrus* (237b-c): "There is only one way, dear boy, for those to begin who are to take counsel wisely about anything. One must know what the counsel is about, or it is sure to be utterly futile," though the author takes a couple textual liberties to change Socrates meaning from speech to written dialogue. It is ironic that the author of the prolegomena, in substantiating his hermeneutical approach to the Platonic dialogues, relies almost exclusively on the *Phaedrus*, the very dialogue where Socrates questions the value of the written word. Nevertheless familiar with the criticism, the author defends the strange fact that Plato wrote text. He argues, in imitating God, Plato created both corporeal and incorporeal entities, the dialogues and lectures respectively. Thus, the anonymous author concludes that Plato chose a greater good (μείζον ἀγαθόν) over a lesser evil (ἐλάττωτος κακοῦ), namely writing text. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, 13.1-23.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this literary approach, see James A. Coulter, *Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists* (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

This correlation between philosophy and literary theory is discussed in greater detail earlier in the prolegomena, where the author justifies the literary form of dialogue.<sup>5</sup> One of the central justifications given is that the dialogue is a kind of cosmos (ὁ διάλογος οἷον κόσμος ἐστίν), and by using this literary form, Plato was imitating (μιμούμενος) God's creation (δημιουργήματα). In carrying the analogy further, the author states that every component of the cosmos is found in the dialogue: (1) matter (ύλη), (2) form (εἶδος), (3) nature (φύσις), (4) soul (ψυχή), (5) intelligence (νοῦς), and (6) divinity (θεότης). (1) The various characters make up the material component. The author compares the different characters, who express themselves according to their nature, to the cosmos that acts in accordance with its nature. Interestingly, the author does not distinguish the characters on the basis of their moral character but on the basis of cognition. The division is three-fold: true knowledge (ἐπιστημονικά), correct opinion (ὀρθοδοξαστικά), and ignorance (ἄμαθῆ), which is itself further divided into four different types: simple ignorance, double ignorance, supreme ignorance, and sophisticated ignorance. Simple ignorance is when one does not know something and knows that one does not know it; double ignorance is when one does not know a thing, but in contrast to simple ignorance, is unaware of one's ignorance. Supreme ignorance is like simple ignorance, however one refuses in this case to give up the ignorance. Finally, sophisticated ignorance is ignorance that is hidden by specious reasoning. It is rather strange that the author uses Socrates to exemplify double ignorance, not simple ignorance, or even true knowledge. Stranger still is the author's textual evidence (*Phaedrus* 229e): "I am not yet able, as the Delphic inscription has it, to know myself." The

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<sup>5</sup> The author provides seven reasons why Plato used dialogue as his preferred literary form: (1) dialogue is a kind of cosmos; (2) the cosmos is a kind of dialogue; (3) dialogue is comparable to the most beautiful living being; (4) dialogue imitates characters; (5) dialogue removes abstraction; (6) dialogue reproduces dialectical disputation; and (7) dialogue provides variety, which keeps the reader's attention. Most of these reasons are fairly self-explanatory, except for the difference between the first and the second reasons, which appear rather synonymous. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, 15.1-17.39.

passage seems to indicate that Socrates is simply ignorant, i.e., he does not know something and knows that he does not know, as opposed to doubly ignorant. Yet, the highest form of cognition is considered double ignorance, not true knowledge. Beyond the characters, however, he acknowledges that, in some sense, both the time and the place factor into the material component, but it is the time and place of composition (i.e., historical chronology), not the time and place of the dialogue itself (i.e., dramatical chronology), that the author has in mind. In terms of composition, the author claims that Plato wrote each dialogue on certain holy days and festivals to the gods (e.g., *Timaeus* at the Bendidia, *Parmenides* at the Panathenaea).

(2) The “form” of the dialogue is its style, which can be powerful (*ἀδρῶς*), intermediate (*μικτός*), or plain (*ἰσχνός*). Though the author does not define these terms, the powerful style is linked to myth; the plain style, to logical demonstration. The intermediate style is either intermediate by mixture, a blending of the two styles, or by juxtaposition, which uses both the powerful and the plain. The style is chosen on the basis of subject matter—theological dialogues use the powerful style, or myth (e.g., *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*); ethical dialogues, the intermediate (e.g., *Gorgias*); and all other dialogues, the plain. (3) Next, the procedure, whether expository, investigatory, or intermediate, is the “nature” of the dialogue. Expository dialogues express Plato’s opinion without investigation or proof and are either theoretical or political; investigatory dialogues raise a problem and can be classified as either controversial or discussional. The intermediate procedure combines the two. (4) The arguments serve as the “soul” of the dialogue, and (5) the problem around which the arguments revolve is the “intelligence.” Like the aim, there is only one problem addressed in a given dialogue, and the author again relates this to Neoplatonic philosophy by comparing the problem to indivisible intelligence. (6) Finally, the



good to which the dialogue aims reflects “divinity,” or as it is later called, God. This component reaffirms the theoretical reason that the aim, or the good, of the dialogue is one in nature.

The single aim of each dialogue is clearer in certain dialogues than others. For example, according to the Neoplatonists, *Alcibiades I* taught self-knowledge, the very aim of Socratic philosophy noted in the *Apology*. The dialogue begins with Socrates claiming his enduring love for Alcibiades, even while others have since fled. The reason for this endurance is his love of Alcibiades’ soul, not his body, which over time lost some of its boyish beauty.<sup>6</sup> Socrates then confronts Alcibiades’ desire to achieve greatness in the political world, particularly as Athens’ advisor (συμβουλευέσων). Socrates asks Alcibiades what knowledge he possesses that qualifies him for this role. The only subjects he knows are writing, harping, and wrestling—subjects quite unrelated to questions of governance. However, concerning justice, a subject essentially tied to proper governance, Alcibiades has only a conventional understanding.<sup>7</sup> Socrates demonstrates that reliance on a conventional understanding of justice is insufficient, for unlike other subjects upon which the many agree, there is deep disagreement over justice. To make Alcibiades a sufficient advisor, he must pursue the Delphic inscription—“know thyself.”<sup>8</sup> In the remaining portion of the dialogue, Socrates defines human nature essentially as soul with the body as an

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<sup>6</sup> Socrates admits to standing in the background and not engaging Alcibiades earlier because of divine forbiddance.

<sup>7</sup> Alcibiades learned justice from the masses (τῶν πολλῶν), that is to say from convention. Even as young as two years old, he possessed this conventional understanding; Socrates tells of Alcibiades, as a confident child, rebuking other children for cheating in games. This notion of justice has some resemblance to later Stoic and Christian conceptions of natural law. Yet, this early, non-rational recognition of justice is rejected by Socrates, demonstrating a fundamental distinction between Plato’s classical natural right and later conceptions of natural law (discussed later in chapter five).

<sup>8</sup> Earlier Socrates claimed that most politicians were ignorant of such matters, which made Alcibiades arrogant, seeing no need to pursue knowledge, yet Socrates told Alcibiades that his political competitors were not fellow Athenians, but rather the superior kings of Sparta and Persia. It is interesting to note that, immediately after proclaiming the kings of Sparta and Persia as his competition, Socrates contradicts himself by identifying Meidias, an Athenian, as his competitor.

instrument (ὄργانون), and it is this very definition that the Neoplatonists emphasize in their use of *Alcibiades I*.

Yet by contrast, the aim of the *Gorgias*—political virtue—is not as clear. This dialogue opens with Chaerephon and Socrates arriving too late to hear a speech by Gorgias. Chaerephon invites Gorgias to entertain a series of questions regarding his profession. Gorgias agrees and identifies himself as a rhetorician, able to alter the Athenians' beliefs on matters of justice. In a discussion with Polus, Socrates classifies rhetoric as a habitude (ἐμπειρία), as opposed to an art (τέχνη).<sup>9</sup> The fundamental difference between the two is that art is concerned with the good, whereas habitude is concerned only with the appearance of good.<sup>10</sup> Polus then discloses his real interest in rhetoric—power, i.e., doing what one wants and escaping punishment. Socrates turns the discussion from rhetoric to justice, positing that (1) doing wrong is worse than suffering it, and (2) for those who do wrong, escaping punishment is worse than taking it.<sup>11</sup> The discussion with Callicles, the third interlocutor, contrasts a life of injustice with a life of justice. For

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<sup>9</sup> Socrates does later admit two beneficial, yet peculiar, exceptions to this otherwise critique of rhetoric: (1) rhetoric used to persuade the courts of one's own injustice or the injustice of one's family or friends; and (2) rhetoric used to persuade the court to excuse the injustice committed by an enemy, making them carry their injustice without restitution. Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, translated by W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1925).

<sup>10</sup> In the *Gorgias* (463a-466a), Socrates classifies the types of art according to their relationship to either the body or the soul. Both gymnastics and medicine are true bodily arts, and legislation and administrative justice are true soulful arts. Four habitudes correlate to these true arts: cosmetics to gymnastics, cooking to medicine, sophistry to legislation, and rhetoric to the judicial art. Much later in the dialogue (520a-b), Socrates provides a hierarchical order to the arts and habitudes themselves—(1) gymnastics is finer than medicine, as by implication cosmetics is finer than cookery and (2) legislation is finer than administrative justice, as sophistry is finer than rhetoric. This hierarchy appears justified because legislative justice, concerning the more universal or general, is of greater concern than the judicial art, which deals with particular instances of justice.

<sup>11</sup> Later, Socrates provides an analogy using medicine (the lower of the bodily arts) to explain the benefits of the judicial art (the lower of the soulful arts), namely that as the sick person is healed through medical treatment, the unjust person is healed through punishment. Thus, rhetoric, used as a tool to escape punishment, ultimately harms the soul, leading to misery, not happiness.

Callicles, justice is not natural (φύσις), but conventional (νόμος), defined as the fabrication of the many, or the weak, who condemn as unjust any attempt by the strong to take advantage of them. In contrast, Callicles looks to natural right (δικαίου φύσει): the worse disadvantaged by the better, later defined as those with wisdom (φρονίμους) and courage (ἀνδρείους) in public affairs (491b-c). Thus, because justice is conventional, Callicles argues that the best life is a life of passion. By contrast, Socrates argues that the just and moderate life is the best life. To persuade on this point, Socrates concludes with a myth concerning the judgment of souls in the afterlife.<sup>12</sup> In this dialogue, at least two subjects are discussed, namely rhetoric and justice. Thus, it is less than clear that the dialogue should be limited to just one aim, as claimed by the Neoplatonists. Moreover, if one aim was isolated, rhetoric seems like the natural choice, certainly more natural than political virtue, which leads to the next point.

Not only is limiting the dialogue to one aim sometimes unclear, but even the aim selected is sometimes less than obvious. For example, the aim, namely theoretical knowledge via names (τεπὶ ὀνομάτων), is clear in the *Cratylus*. This rather technical dialogue opens with a dispute between Hermogenes and Cratylus concerning Hermogenes' name. According to Cratylus, "correctness in naming" comes by nature as opposed to convention, thus Hermogenes (literally, son of Hermes) is not his real name, because Hermogenes is nothing like Hermes. By contrast, Hermogenes believes that "correctness in naming" is conventional. They bring Socrates into the debate, in hopes of resolving the issue. Socrates asserts that, in general, actions are performed

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<sup>12</sup> In the *Gorgias* (523a-527a), the myth describes the state of divine governance after the reign of Cronos, when Zeus, Poseidon, and Pluto divide sovereignty. During the time of Cronos, the law stated that the just and holy went to the Isle of the Blest, while the unjust went to Tartarus. But during the age of Zeus, Poseidon, and Pluto, judgments were amiss, because both the judges and those judged were "clothed." The problem was that the judge's perspective was skewed, seeing people through their beauty or wealth and not their souls. Thus, a decree was given that both the judges and those judged were to be stripped to their soul, so as to insure a proper sentence.

according to their nature, not convention.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the action of speaking, particularly the action of naming, is done properly when it is in accordance with nature. Moreover, Socrates concludes that a name is an instrument that teaches reality.<sup>14</sup> Yet, he points out that various names express contradictory understandings of nature. Thus, an investigation into names is ultimately an insufficient guide to reality; something else is needed to determine “correctness in naming.” He goes further and claims that, even if one can come to know things through names, it is still better to know the things themselves, than the imitations (i.e. the names) that point to those things. That names instruct in reality and that they are ultimately insufficient in this task are two principles that the Neoplatonists highlight. These two principles are evident in the structure of the curriculum itself (discussed below). According to the author of the *Prolegomena*, the *Cratylus* is the first dialogue to teach theoretical knowledge, yet it is superseded by the *Sophist*, teaching concepts of things, and the *Statesman*, teaching the things in themselves.

However, to take another example, the aim chosen for the *Sophist* is not as obvious. In the curriculum, it was used to teach physics, when the subject of the title itself seems a more reasonable aim. The dialogue opens with Theaetetus, Theodorus, and Socrates, returning from

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<sup>13</sup> Though it might appear that Socrates and Cratylus agree that proper names are according to nature, Socrates nuances his point in the latter stages of the dialogue. For example, he admits that convention must contribute something towards proper naming. Moreover, he says that the imitation found in naming is never exhaustive or exact. By contrast, Cratylus claims that, when one knows the nature of the name, one knows the thing itself. Moreover, he claims that the name-giver produced names on the basis of a knowledge of nature. Being suspicious, Socrates wonders if the name-giver was incorrect, but Cratylus cannot believe this because the name-giver was either a spirit or a god.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Socrates says that the one who provides the names is the lawgiver. Just as an artist finds the instrument most naturally suited for the task, the lawgiver must find the proper syllables and sounds to educate. Later, in discussing the gods, particularly Hestia, he claims that the lawgiver agreed with Heraclitus concerning the nature of reality—that is to say, reality is in constant flux. It is important to mention a couple of things regarding Socrates’ discussion of the gods. First, Socrates admits that he knows nothing of the gods, “neither of them nor of their names.” Second, he moves the conversation from names of the gods to more human things, such as virtue, which he describes as the loftiest height (415a).

yesterday's discussion, recorded in the *Theaetetus*.<sup>15</sup> In this dialogue, Theodorus brings another interlocutor—the Eleatic Stranger. The discussion is mostly between this stranger and Theaetetus. The Eleatic Stranger agrees to define the philosopher, the statesman, and the sophist, and the remainder of this dialogue is devoted to the definition of the sophist, and by chance, the philosopher.<sup>16</sup> The sophist is defined in various ways: a paid hunter, a merchant and retailer in articles of knowledge, a peddler of his own products of knowledge, an athlete in a contest of words, and a purifier of souls. At one point, the stranger defines the sophist simply as a disputer (ἀντιλογικὸν), who disputes all subjects, but as the Eleatic Stranger concludes, one cannot know all things, thus the sophist disputes on the basis of opinion. The sophist is then labeled an imitator of reality. This label leads to a digression (236d-264b) on the existence of non-being, the existence of which is necessary for false opinion to exist. It is argued that non-being is not the opposite of being but rather is “the other” that is scattered throughout all things, including being itself of which non-being must take some part in order to exist. After demonstrating the existence of non-being, the Eleatic Stranger demonstrates the existence of false opinion. The conclusion of the dialogue defines the sophist, not in terms of an acquisitive art (as above), but in terms of productive art, namely imitation. Overlooking the obvious aim—the definition of the sophist, the Neoplatonists focus on a digression in the dialogue, a discussion of non-being and physics more generally.

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<sup>15</sup> Though the dialogue occurs the following morning, the *Sophist* is not the next dialogue in the dramatical chronology. Between the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* are two dialogues—*Euthyphro* and *Cratylus*.

<sup>16</sup> The Eleatic Stranger argues that some things mingle and others do not. Yet, in order to know which things mingle and which do not, the “greatest science” is needed. The stranger states that he has stumbled on the definition of the philosopher—the one who understands “the division of things by classes and the avoidance of the belief that the same class is another, or another the same” (253d).

## The Order of the Platonic Dialogues

In a more general way, as each dialogue has a single aim toward one good, the Neoplatonic ordering of the dialogues aims at the highest good—theoretical knowledge, more specifically, knowledge of the Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ). Unlike the predominant approach in modern scholarship, the dialogues are not ordered according to historical chronology.<sup>17</sup> Rather, they are ordered around five hierarchical virtues, culminating in this knowledge of the Good.<sup>18</sup> Though this approach to the Platonic dialogues appears peculiar to modern interpreters of Plato, ordering philosophical works in terms of a hierarchical structure has precedence as early as Porphyry's ordering of Plotinus' *Enneads*. At Plotinus' request, Porphyry arranged the fifty-four treatises, according to subject matter, disregarding the time of composition. He divided the treatises into six sets of nine (ἐννεάδα), highlighting the perfection of the number six.<sup>19</sup> The first ennead

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<sup>17</sup> Ordering the dialogues historically is the predominant view of Platonic scholarship in recent decades. Underlying this approach is a developmental view of Platonic philosophy that divides the dialogues into early, middle, and late periods. The early dialogues, such as the *Apology*, portray the historical Socrates; the middle dialogues, like the *Republic*, express Plato's views through the character of Socrates. In the late dialogues, Plato presents his philosophy through non-Socratic philosophers, such as the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*. For two of the most influential works expressing this view see Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the developmental view of Plato's philosophy, this Neoplatonic reading is considered "unitive," explaining tensions and contradictions in the Platonic corpus, not in terms of development of thought, but in terms of synthesis. Though unitive approaches are currently unpopular in Plato scholarship, there are a couple of modern unitive approaches worth noting. Most recently, Catherine Zuckert orders Plato's dialogues according to the dramatic dates. She argues that this ordering reveals three major parts to Plato's philosophy: (1) Socrates' response to the Athenian Stranger and the elderly Eleatic, seen in the *Laws* through *Hippias Major* and *Hippias Minor*; (2) Socrates' dialogic philosophy as superior to Timaeian contemplation in the *Symposium* through the *Meno*; and (3) a defense of Socrates, both philosophically and politically, in the *Theaetetus* through the *Menexenus* (*Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* [Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009]). Another modern unitive approach is found in Paul Shorey, *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1903).

<sup>19</sup> Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, translated by A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 24.1-41.

discusses ethics; the second and third ennead, the cosmos. These three enneads make up the first of three sections. The fourth ennead focuses on the Soul (ψυχῆς), the fifth on the Intellect (νοῦ). These two enneads are the second section. The sixth ennead consequently makes up the third and final section, and interestingly, its subject matter is not explicitly stated, though it is certainly the One, the highest principle in Plotinus' three hypostases. The six enneads ascend from the lowest knowledge, knowledge of ethics, through the knowledge of the cosmos, then the three hypostases—Soul, Intellect, and the One.

In the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (26.23-25), the hierarchy of virtues used to order the Platonic dialogues is as follows: natural (φυσικῶν), ethical (ἠθικῶν), political (πολιτικῶν), purificatory (καθαρτικῶν), and theoretical (θεωρητικῶν). Unfortunately, the prolegomena does not expand on these virtues. It is important then to examine the understanding of virtue in Neoplatonism in order to comprehend this peculiar ordering of the Platonic dialogues. The hierarchy of virtues began in its infancy with Plotinus and was expanded to the list above by later Neoplatonists.<sup>20</sup> In the *Enneads* (I.2), commenting on the *Theaetetus* 176a-b, Plotinus (204-270 CE) discusses virtue. He argues that it allows the soul to escape (φυγεῖν) from the evils of this world, and this escape comes in the form of being made like God (θεῶ ὁμοιωθῆναι). Plotinus distinguishes between two types of virtue: political (πολιτικὰς) and purificatory (καθάρσεις). Political virtue is defined by Plotinus in terms of the four cardinal virtues: wisdom (φρόνησις), courage (ἀνδρίζεσθαι), moderation (σωφρονεῖν), and justice (δικαιοσύνη). The definition of these virtues are taken from Plato's discussion of virtue in the

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<sup>20</sup> For other discussions of virtue in Neoplatonism, see Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics: Old and New* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); John Dillon, "An Ethic for the Late Antiquity Sage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, edited by Lloyd P. Gerson (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315-35; Dirk Baltzly, "The Virtues and 'Becoming Like God': Alcinoüs to Proclus," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 26, edited by David Sedley (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2004), 297-321.

*Republic* (427e-434d), where virtue is understood as properly ordering the tripartite soul. Plotinus makes much of Socrates' identifying courage as "political" (430c). (It is perhaps not accidental that Socrates only mentions courage here as political virtue. The implications of courage as political virtue are considered in the following chapter.) Plotinus then defines political wisdom in terms of calculative reason (*λογιζόμενον*), political courage in terms of spirit (*θυμούμενον*), political moderation in terms of agreement and harmony, and finally, political justice as the parts of the soul "minding their own business where ruling and being ruled are concerned." Yet, Plotinus is quite clear that these political virtues cannot make one godlike (the goal of virtue), though they do make one better, i.e., providing a limit and measure to desire. The virtue that makes one godlike is the higher virtue, purificatory virtue, and it is defined in terms of the four cardinal virtues as well: intelligence and wisdom (*νοεῖν καὶ φρονεῖν*), moderation, courage, and justice. Though both types of virtue are said to be the four cardinal virtues, they are essentially different, the major difference being that purificatory virtue, instead of assuming a tripartite soul in need of harmony, begins with a rational soul already in harmony. Thus, the focus of purificatory virtue is not on properly ordering the parts of the soul, but assuming that the soul is now rational, this virtue frees one from the corruption of bodily affections. In other words, political wisdom calculates right action, whereas purificatory wisdom seeks knowledge for knowledge's sake; political courage is an ability to resist fear in action, whereas purificatory courage is resisting fear while freeing oneself from the body. Political moderation resists temptations and desires, while purificatory moderation seeks to abolish bodily affection. Finally, political justice establishes harmony amongst the various parts, and purificatory justice deepens this harmony because of the lack of influence by bodily affection.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This two-fold understanding of virtue is an excellent example of the Neoplatonic "unitive" approach to



Later Neoplatonists extended the number of virtues, beyond Plotinus' two-fold division. In his *Sentences* (32), Porphyry (239-305 CE) extended the types from two to four, adding theoretical and paradigmatic (παραδειγματικοί) virtue. Marinus (c. 450-500 CE), successor to Proclus at the school of Athens, differentiated the virtues further still: natural (φυσικοί), ethical (ἠθικοί), political, purificatory, theoretical, and theurgic (θεουργικοί).<sup>22</sup> Damascius (c. 460-540 CE), the last head of the Athenian academy, has a similar list to Marinus—natural, ethical, political, purificatory, theoretical, paradigmatic, and hieratic (ἱερατικοί).<sup>23</sup> Finally, from his commentary on the *Phaedo*, Olympiodorus' list is as follows: natural, ethical, political,

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Plato that seeks to synthesize tensions within his philosophy. For example, in the *Phaedo* 69b-c, Plato offers a very different description of virtue than the description provided in the *Republic*. In the former dialogue, Socrates says that the philosopher should seek purification (κάθαρσις) from the evils of this world, and that the four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, moderation, justice) provide that purification. Later in the dialogue, he compares this purificatory virtue with a virtue that resembles the virtue of the *Republic* and reminds his interlocutors of judgment in the afterlife. He identifies three types of persons, two types connected to the corporeal, and one detached from the corporeal. The first type is indicative of one who clings to various bodily desires, and after death, is forced to roam the earth as a shadowy figure until the desire is removed, then the person is born as an animal in some way connected to that desire. The third type, separated from the corporeal and presumably the one who attained the purificatory virtue, is the philosopher, who alone has communion with the gods. However, the second type is a person who attained, what Socrates called, the popular and political virtues (τὴν δημοτικὴν καὶ πολιτικὴν ἀρετὴν). These virtues, Socrates says, are practiced by nature and habit, without philosophy.

<sup>22</sup> Marinus lists a seventh, about which he says “we shall keep silence.” Mark Edwards wrongly identifies this virtue as paradigmatic virtue. This identification is misguided because, in every other instance, paradigmatic virtue is either lower than theurgy or equivalent to it. Never is it higher. This virtue is excluded from the above list because it is not mentioned by any other Neoplatonist, and Marinus says that it is an unattainable virtue, which exceeds the human condition. The evidence for its unattainability is in the biography itself. Marinus describes how Proclus possessed all the virtues from the natural to the theurgic with no further mention of this seventh virtue. He concludes his account as follows: “I have demonstrated that the activity of his soul proceeded according to perfect virtue, sufficiently furnished as it was with all the other goods, both human and divine, and in a completed span of life.” Though it might appear that these “divine goods” attained by Proclus is a reference to the seventh virtue, it is clear that these goods are acquired through theurgy instead. Marinus, *Proclus*, in *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students*, 3, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Damascius provides helpful references to the Platonic dialogues for each type of virtue: natural (*Statesman* 306a5-308b9, *Laws* 963c3-c9); ethical (*Laws* 653a5-c4); political (*Republic* 434d2-445b4); purificatory (*Phaedo* 68c5-69c3); and theoretical (*Theaetetus* 173c6-177c2). These last two virtues—paradigmatic and hieratic—are not referenced to Plato, but instead, are credited to Iamblichus. Damascius, *Commentary on Plato's Phaedo*, in *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, vol. 2, edited by L.G. Westerink (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1977), 1.138-144.

purificatory, theoretical, paradigmatic, and then he mentions theurgy, though it is not clear that he intended for theurgy to be considered a separate virtue from paradigmatic virtue.

With Porphyry as the exception, every later Neoplatonist included both natural virtue and ethical virtue in their hierarchies. In his commentary on the *Phaedo* (I.138), Damascius says that natural virtue is simply the outcome of temperament (χράσεως), linked to the animate body and held in common with animals. Like Plotinus’ two-fold hierarchy, this virtue is defined in terms of the four cardinal virtues. Marinus describes natural virtue as keenness of sense (wisdom), sight and hearing (courage), beauty and symmetry (temperance), and bodily health (justice). However, ethical virtue, by contrast, is not acquired simply by birth but rather by habituation (ἔθισμῶ) and right opinion (ὀρθοδοξία); it is the virtue of well-bred children. Describing Proclus’ education, Marinus says that, though natural virtue was given by his biological mother, ethical virtue was granted by the deities of two cities: Rhea, the goddess of his birthplace, Byzantium (Constantinople),<sup>24</sup> and Apollo, the god of Xanthus, the town of his childhood.

Table 2.1 The Hierarchy of Virtue

Philosopher	Hierarchy (lowest to highest)	
Plotinus (204-270 CE)	Political	(πολιτικῶν)
	Purificatory	(καθαρικῶν)

<sup>24</sup> It is interesting that, writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, Marinus calls the city, Byzantium, its older Greek name, instead of Constantinople, the name by which the city was called since 330 CE. No doubt, Marinus rejects this Christian refounding by claiming that Rhea, not the God of Christianity, as the patron deity. Moreover, this suggests that the Greek religion and culture was considered right opinion, as opposed to the recently established Christendom.

Table 2.1 (continued)

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Porphyry (239-305 CE)	Political	(πολιτικῶν)
	Purificatory	(καθαρτικῶν)
	Theoretical	(θεωρητικῶν)
	Paradigmatic	(παραδειγματικῶν)
Marinus (c. 450-500 CE)	Natural	(φυσικῶν)
	Ethical	(ἠθικῶν)
	Political	(πολιτικῶν)
	Purificatory	(καθαρτικῶν)
	Theoretical	(θεωρητικῶν)
	Theurgic	(θεουργικῶν)
Damasicus (c.460-540 CE)	Natural	(φυσικῶν)
	Ethical	(ἠθικῶν)
	Political	(πολιτικῶν)
	Purificatory	(καθαρτικῶν)
	Theoretical	(θεωρητικῶν)
	Paradigmatic	(παραδειγματικῶν)
	Hieratic	(ἱερατικῶν)
Olympiodorus (c. 495-570 CE)	Natural	(φυσικῶν)
	Ethical	(ἠθικῶν)
	Political	(πολιτικῶν)
	Purificatory	(καθαρτικῶν)
	Theoretical	(θεωρητικῶν)
	Paradigmatic	(παραδειγματικῶν)

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As far as the later Neoplatonists are concerned, both political and purificatory virtue have similar definitions as those given by Plotinus, namely political virtue concerns the proper ordering of the tripartite soul, and purificatory virtue is the rational soul seeking freedom from its connection with the irrational parts of being, specifically the body and the lower elements of the soul. Nevertheless, certain ambiguities in Plotinus are clarified, particularly in regards to political virtue. In the *Enneads*, the interpersonal nature of political virtue is unclear, leading some Neoplatonist scholars to question their political role altogether. However, this political role becomes explicit, if not emphasized, by these later thinkers. For example, in *Sentences* (32), Porphyry argues that the political virtues, “based as they are on moderation of the passions, consist in following and going along with the process of reasoning relative to our duty in the field of practical action. And that is why, since they have regard to a community of action which avoids doing harm to one’s neighbours, they are called civic by reason of their concern with gregariousness and community.” Moreover, Macrobius writes, “The political [virtues] are of man, in as much as man is a social animal. By these virtues good men look after the state, protect cities; by these, they revere parents, love children, and cherish those close to them; by these they guide the welfare of the citizens.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, concerning Proclus’ political virtue, Marinus says that he frequented public debates concerning political affairs and persuaded them with philosophic frankness (*παρρησια*) to pursue justice.

Though theoretical virtue was not mentioned by Plotinus, there was a consensus concerning its nature among later Neoplatonists, even though it is somewhat difficult to differentiate between purificatory virtue and theoretical virtue. Similar to Plotinus, Porphyry

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<sup>25</sup> Macrobius, *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis*, 1.8.6, cited in O’Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2003), 44.

defines purificatory virtue in regards to the four cardinal virtues—wisdom as “the pure exercise of the intellect” without sharing in the opinions of the body; courage as the lack of fear when departing from the body; moderation as not sharing in the experiences of the body; and justice as the rule of reason without resistance. By comparison, Porphyry defines theoretical virtue in relation to the four cardinal virtues as well: wisdom contemplates what intellect contains; courage is freedom from all emotion; moderation is turning inward toward the intellect; and justice is maintaining the task of intellection. Though it is still somewhat vague exactly what the essential difference is for Porphyry, Damascius summarizes it well: purificatory virtue is freedom from the body and its affection through the rational part of the soul, whereas theoretical virtue is the soul abandoning even itself (i.e., its individuation) and aspiring to become intelligence, through contemplating intelligence.

After theoretical virtue, there is some ambiguity about higher virtues. For Porphyry, there is only one higher virtue—paradigmatic virtue. This virtue, instead of concerning the soul, is in relation to the intellect itself. Instead of the soul contemplating the intellect, at this stage, the soul is joined to the intellect by participation (μέθεξις). In his commentary on the *Phaedo* (8.2), Olympiodorus explains it this way: “for just as our eye, when illuminated by the sunlight, is at first different from the source of the light, as its recipient, but is afterwards somehow united with it and joined to it, and becomes as it were one with it and ‘sun-like,’ so our soul is at first illuminated by intelligence [theoretical virtue] . . . and afterwards it becomes in a way identical with the source of illumination [paradigmatic virtue].” Beyond paradigmatic virtue, there is a seeming divergence on theurgic virtue, whereby human beings obtain unity with the One, the highest hypostases. Yet on closer examination, there is agreement in principle. For example, both Porphyry and Olympiodorus include what is later differentiated as theurgic virtue in their

definitions of paradigmatic virtue. Porphyry says that the one who practices theoretical virtue is a god, yet paradigmatic virtue makes one a father of the gods (θεῶν πατήρ), a phrase from the *Chaldaean Oracles* later used by Iamblichus to justify the practice of theurgy. In his commentary on the *Phaedo*, Olympiodorus says that philosophy makes one “intelligence,” the goal of theoretical virtue, but the work of theurgy is to unite one to intelligence and to conform one’s action to the paradigms (παραδειγματικῶς), the goal of paradigmatic virtue. Moreover, through paradigmatic virtue, one’s soul becomes indistinguishable from the source of illumination, the One. Only Damascius draws an explicit distinction between paradigmatic virtue and theurgic virtue, or what he calls, hieratic virtue. Damascius relates this later virtue to the God-like (θεοειδές) part of the soul. It is understandable, given the basic three-fold hypostases in Neoplatonism of Soul, Intellect, and the One, that Damascius differentiated between these two virtues, since that division then provided distinct virtues relative the soul (ethical, political, purificatory, theoretical), the intellect (paradigmatic), and the One (hieratic), whereas other accounts conflated the virtues dealing with the intellect and the One.

The Platonic portion of the curriculum begins with political virtue and ends with theoretical virtue, leaving out both natural and ethical virtue (as explained above), but also paradigmatic virtue and theurgic virtue. In the overall curriculum, natural virtue is not included for an obvious reason, namely natural virtue is not teachable but is obtained by birth and disposition. Even though it is teachable, ethical virtue is not considered part of philosophy proper, and therefore, it is not included in the Platonic portion of the curriculum. However, it is incorporated into the earliest stage of Neoplatonic education (see below). These two highest virtues described by later Neoplatonists were not included in the Platonic portion of the curriculum, if they were even part of the overall curriculum. Unlike the other virtues, these

higher virtues were never accredited to Plato himself. Damascius credits paradigmatic virtue to Iamblichus and theurgic virtue to Iamblichus and students of Proclus. It is somewhat strange that Iamblichus, the philosopher who provided these virtues and the curriculum itself, does not include them. However, if they were not Platonic in the sense that they are not found within his dialogues, then their absence is understandable. It is unclear if these virtues were in the curriculum at all. Olympiodorus suggests that the paradigmatic virtue, of which theurgy is a part, is beyond philosophy. Yet, there is some evidence that a few Neoplatonists (e.g., Proclus, Damascius) included a couple of other texts beyond Plato's dialogues. The texts—the *Orphic Hymns* and the *Chaldean Oracles*—were considered of a theurgic nature.

### The Neoplatonic Curriculum

One of the more lasting legacies of Iamblichus' (c. 240-325 CE) is his standardized curriculum for philosophic education adopted by the later academies.<sup>26</sup> Though there were certain texts that were possibly added by some Neoplatonists, the curriculum that follows was the consensus core of Neoplatonic education. The curriculum did not begin with Platonic philosophy but rather with two propaedeutic stages. The first stage was studies in non-philosophic works, such as Epictetus's *Enchiridion*,<sup>27</sup> the pseudo-Pythagorean *Golden Verses*,<sup>28</sup> and various works by Isocrates, all of which introduced the student to a rudimentary moral

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<sup>26</sup> For further discussion of the Neoplatonic curriculum in general, see A.J. Festugière, "L'ordre de lecture des dialogues de Platon aux V/Vie siècles" *Museum Helveticum* 26 (1969): 281-96; M.O. Goulet-Caze, "L'Arrière-plan scolaire de la Vie de Plotin," in *Porphyre: La vie de Plotin*, edited by L. Brisson and A. Segonds (Paris, 1982); Ilsetraut Hadot, *Le Problème du Neoplatonisme alexandrine: Hierocles et Simplicius* (Paris, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> The only surviving Neoplatonic work on *Enchiridion* is a 6<sup>th</sup> century commentary by Simplicius. Charles Brittain and Tad Brennan, *Simplicius: Commentarius in Enchiridion Epicteti* (London, 2002). See also I. Hadot, *Simplicius: Commentaire sur le Manuel d'Epictète* (Leiden: Philosophia Antiqua, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Hierocles's commentary is the only commentary on this text by a known author. There are two other surviving commentaries, possibly authored by Iamblichus and Proclus. See H. Schibli, *Hierocles of Alexandria* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002).

education. After these works, students began their education in philosophy proper with the Aristotelian corpus.<sup>29</sup> The texts were divided into three major classifications: particular (τὰ μερικά), intermediate (τά μέσα), and general (τά καθόλου).<sup>30</sup> The particular texts were classified as such because they were written to someone in particular, such as the *Letters*. Intermediate texts were historical in nature (e.g., *The Constitution of Athens*), whereas the general texts were an inquiry into the nature of things (e.g., *de Anima*, *de Caelo*). However, not all of Aristotle's corpus was incorporated into the curriculum; only a portion of the general texts was used. (This preference for the general over the particular is an essential part of their overall hermeneutic, as discussed above.) The general texts themselves were divided into commentaries (ὕπομνεματικά) and systematic works (συνταγματικά), the latter of which was further divided into dialogues and self-named works. The commentaries were not used in the curriculum because they were only a summarization of the author's philosophic points, not helpful in teaching philosophy understood as demonstration. It was only the systematic works, and the self-named works in particular, that were used in the Neoplatonic academies. These self-named works (αὐτοπρόσωπα) were considered private and only for the philosophers, in contrast to Aristotle's dialogues, which were considered popular (εἰς ὄχλους) and concealed philosophic truth.<sup>31</sup> They were ordered in

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<sup>29</sup> For a helpful discussion on the role of Aristotle in the Neoplatonic curriculum, see I. Hadot, "The Role of the Commentaries on Aristotle in the Teaching of Philosophy According to the Prefaces of the Neoplatonic Commentaries on the *Categories*," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol. 1991, edited by Henry Blumenthal and Howard Robinson (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1991), 175-89.

<sup>30</sup> Ammonius, *On Aristotle's Categories*, translated by S. Marc Cohen and Gareth B. Matthews (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 3.20-4.28. For similar analysis, see the commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* by Simplicius, Philoponus, Olympiodorus, and Elias.

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to compare the division of the Aristotelian corpus with the Platonic dialogues in terms of their style, though the divisions are from two different Neoplatonic sources. It is argued that Aristotle used the dialogue to hide philosophic truth from the public, whereas Plato, who wrote almost exclusively in dialogue form, relied on the powerful style, or myth, to conceal those truths.



ascending fashion: logical (*Organon*);<sup>32</sup> ethical (*Nicomachean Ethics, Politics*); physical (e.g., *Physics, De Caelo, de Generatione et Corruptione*); mathematical (*De Lineis Insecabilibus*); and theological (*Metaphysics*).<sup>33</sup> Since this portion of the curriculum was considered philosophic, or demonstrative, logic was chosen as the best starting place, even though technically, ethics was the beginning stage of education. Moreover, because Aristotle's works were considered philosophic, his ethical works would have been considered an education in political virtue, not ethical virtue (or right opinion).

Familiarization with these propaedeutic texts led to the culmination of the curriculum—a study of the Platonic dialogues. According to the anonymous author of the prolegomena, this Platonic curriculum was divided into two cycles—the first consisted of ten dialogues, the second of two perfect (τελείους) dialogues—*Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. The first cycle began with *Alcibiades I*, which taught students self-knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Though this single aim is explicit in the prolegomena, it is unclear which particular type of virtue was in mind.<sup>35</sup> After this initial dialogue, students progressed to the *Gorgias*, which taught political virtue, understood as properly constituting the elements of the soul. Going beyond political virtue, the *Phaedo*

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<sup>32</sup> This term, given by the Peripatetics, is short-hand for the Aristotelian works on logic, namely *Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, and Sophistical Refutations*.

<sup>33</sup> This general division of Aristotle's corpus is further confirmed outside these Alexandrian commentaries on the *Categories* by Marinus, *Life of Proclus*. Here, he reports that Proclus completed the Aristotelian portion of the curriculum in less than two years. This portion consisted of logical, ethical, physical, and theological works. The only difference between these accounts is the loss of the mathematical section. Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 75-77.

<sup>34</sup> Surviving commentaries on *Alcibiades I* include Westerink, *Olympiodorus: Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato* (Amsterdam, 1956); Alan P. Segonds, *Proclus: Sur le premier Alcibiade de Platon* (Paris: 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Even beyond textual vagueness, there are significant debates on its purpose among Neoplatonists. Some (e.g., Proclus) saw the commentary as simply an introduction to Plato's overall philosophy. Others (e.g., Damascius) believed that the dialogue, along with the *Gorgias*, taught political virtue.

instructed students in the purificatory virtues, viewed as the rational soul cleansing itself of bodily influences.<sup>36</sup> The other seven dialogues guided students in the realm of theoretical virtue (listed in ascending fashion): logic (*Cratylus*,<sup>37</sup> *Theaetetus*);<sup>38</sup> physics (*Sophist*, *Statesman*);<sup>39</sup> theology (*Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Philebus*).<sup>40</sup> The second cycle, the climax of the entire Neoplatonic curriculum, focused exclusively on theoretical science—physics (*Timaeus*)<sup>41</sup> and theology (*Parmenides*).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The surviving commentaries on Plato's *Phaedo* include Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo: Olympiodorus, vol. 1* (Amsterdam, 1976) and *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo: Damascius* (Amsterdam, 1977).

<sup>37</sup> The emphasis here is the agreement between the Neoplatonic curriculum and the conclusion of the *Cratylus*, namely that the things-in-themselves are better known through an investigation of those things than in the nature of their names. The next study, the *Theaetetus*, concerns the concepts of reality, and the final five dialogues in the first cycle are studies in the things themselves, both physical and theological. Thus, *Cratylus*, as a study in the imitation of things, is viewed as the lowest level dialogue concerning knowledge of things-in-themselves.

<sup>38</sup> According to Westerink, both the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus* are considered dialogues about logic, the study of words (περί ὀνομάτων) and the study of concepts (περί νοημάτων) respectively. However, the text indicates something altogether different, namely that the *Cratylus*, along with the *Theaetetus*, are not dialogues of theoretical virtue, but rather ethical virtue: εἶτα ἐρχόμεθα ἐπὶ τὴν γνῶσιν τῶν ὄντων, ἥτις διὰ τῆς ἠθικῆς ἀρετῆς προσφίνεται. Relating these two dialogues with ethical virtue makes little sense. First, the prolegomena states that this virtue teaches knowledge of reality (γνῶσιν τῶν ὄντων), not the fruit of ethical virtue (see below). Second, the dialogues themselves more naturally consider theoretical virtue, as opposed to ethical virtue. Third, in Neoplatonic philosophy, ethical virtue is lower than both political and purificatory virtue (see below). Moreover, Westerink labels the *Theaetetus* a study of concepts (νοημάτων). However, the text identifies the *Theaetetus* as a study of things (πραγμάτων), a label that Westerink uses for the *Sophist* through *Philebus*. For commentaries on the *Cratylus*, see Giorgio Pasquali, *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Cratylum commentaria* (Romano, 1989).

<sup>39</sup> In the prolegomena, when the author begins to mention the sixth and seventh dialogues in the curriculum, a portion of the text is missing. These two unnamed dialogues are said to teach natural philosophy (φυσικῶν διδάσκοντα). Westerink provides evidence that these dialogues are the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, 37-38.

<sup>40</sup> The only surviving commentary on the *Phaedrus* is Paul Couvreur, *Hermiae Alexandrini in Platonis Phaedrum scholia* (Hildesheim, 1971). The surviving commentary on the *Philebus* is Westerink, *Damascius: Lectures on the Philebus Wrongly Attributed to Olympiodorus* (Amsterdam, 1982).

<sup>41</sup> See Ernst Diehl, *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Timaeum commentaria* (Amsterdam, 1965).

<sup>42</sup> See Victor Cousin, *Procli commentarium in Platonis Parmenidem: Part III of Procli philosophi Platonici opera inedita* (Hildesheim, 1961); Westerink and Joseph Combes, *Damascius: Commentaire du Parmenide de Platon* (Paris, 2003).

It is somewhat curious that both the *Republic* and the *Laws* are not incorporated into the curriculum, in part because the former is one of the most studied of the Platonic dialogues, at least by modern students of Plato, and in part because these two dialogues are the more logical choices for a study in politics. Nevertheless, they were suggested by some Neoplatonists, the most obvious candidate being Proclus, who composed a commentary on the *Republic*. This suggestion was so influential that the author of the *Prolegomena* mentions them and even provides the aim of these dialogues, along with the *Letters*. He states that there are three kinds of regimes (πολιτείας): the corrective (ἐπανορθώσεως), the adapted (ὑποθέσεως), and the ideal (ἀνυποθέτου). The corrective regime is attained by reforming evil action and returning to our natural condition; the adapted regime, by contrast, takes for granted certain laws and customs already in the regime. The ideal regime is regarded as a communal regime, where everything is common property. These regimes are found respectively in the *Letters*, the *Laws*, and the *Republic*.

Table 2.2 The Neoplatonic Curriculum

Stage	Science	Virtue	Text
Right Opinion		Ethical	<i>Enchiridion</i> <i>Golden Verses</i>
Philosophy (lesser mysteries) [Logic]			<i>Organon</i>
	Practical	Political	<i>N. Ethics</i> <i>Politics</i>
	Theoretical	Theoretical	
	(i) physics		<i>Physics</i> <i>De Caelo</i>

Table 2.2 (continued)

	(ii) mathematics		<i>De Lineis Insecabilibus</i>
	(iii) theology		<i>Metaphysics</i>
Philosophy (higher mysteries)			
<i>Cycle 1</i>	Practical	Political	<i>Alcibiades I</i>
			<i>Gorgias</i>
		Purificatory	<i>Phaedo</i>
	Theoretical	Theoretical	
	(i) logic		<i>Cratylus</i>
			<i>Theaetetus</i>
	(ii) physics		<i>Sophist</i>
			<i>Statesman</i>
	(iii) theology		<i>Phaedrus</i>
			<i>Symposium</i>
<i>Cycle 2</i>	Theoretical	Theoretical	
	(i) physics		<i>Timaeus</i>
	(ii) theology		<i>Parmenides</i>

### The Commentary and the Prolegomena

The genre of the commentary has a long history.<sup>43</sup> The earliest interpretations of literary works are about various poetic and religious works (e.g., 6<sup>th</sup> century allegories of Homer's epics

<sup>43</sup> For discussions on ancient commentaries, see H. Baltussen, "From Polemic to Exegesis: The Ancient Philosophical Commentary," *Poetics Today* 28.2 (2007): 247-81; P. Hoffman, "What was Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentaries," in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, edited by M.L. Gill and P. Pellegrin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 597-622; D.N. Sedley, "Plato's Auctoritas and the Rebirth of the Commentary Tradition," in *Philosophia Togata II: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, edited by M. Griffin

or a 5<sup>th</sup> century allegory of an Orphic theogony). Philosophic interpretation is dated as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE with an exegesis of the *Timaeus* by Crantor, one of Plato's students. However, it was not until sometime between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and CE that a formal commentary emerged in the anonymous *Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus*. Besides a few other commentaries by Aristotelians, such as Aspasius and Alexander of Aphrodisias, and the Platonic, Galen, the genre of the commentary was really taken up and standardized by Neoplatonists. However, unlike modern commentaries that are often running notes, without a unifying principle, generally produced as a result of working through the curriculum, these commentaries were mediums for philosophic speculation. As a matter of fact, many of the Neoplatonic commentaries including Olympiodorus' *Commentary on Plato's 'Gorgias,'* were written "απο φωνης," that is to say a compilation of notes taken by students in the course.<sup>44</sup>

In many ways, Olympiodorus' commentary is a prime example of the hermeneutic and philosophy expressed in the prolegomena and the Neoplatonic curriculum. The commentary itself was delivered at the Alexandrian academy around 525 CE as a series of fifty lectures with an additional proem. The lectures themselves follow a general pattern, wherein a particular passage from the *Gorgias* is read, known as a *lemma* (literally, a "snatch" of text), followed by an interpretation of that passage. However, not every passage receives equal space. The length of text analyzed in any given lecture varies from just a few lines to a larger portion of the dialogue. Moreover, in every lecture, the first lines of that particular *lemma* receive the most

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and J. Barnes (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2007), 110-29; Miira Tuominen, *The Ancient Commentaries on Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> See M. Richard, "Apo Phōnēs," *Byzantium* 20 (1950): 191-222. It is interesting to consider reasons for the philosopher to compose either the commentary himself or rely on a compilation of notes by his students. Perhaps, most important, the choice seems to relate to the political art of writing. Like the Neoplatonist shift from writing mostly treatises to mostly commentaries, having their commentaries be notes, compiled by students, provided another layer of detachment, under which the philosopher could hide.

attention, whereas the later portions receive scant comment. Unlike Plotinus' *Enneads*, where the actual division of the text is philosophically significant, there is not any such pattern to the division of this commentary, perhaps a consequence of its composition “απο φωνης.” Nevertheless, each lecture, which on average spans five pages of Greek text, covers an average of nine sections of the Platonic dialogue, according to Stephanus numbering. Yet, it is noteworthy that two of the most significant lectures in the commentary, lectures 44 and 46 (discussed in chapters 3 and 4), are devoted to only one section of the Platonic dialogue.

In harmony with the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, Olympiodorus provides various introductory remarks considered important in interpreting the dialogue, such as the aim and structure of the dialogue. He mentions three previous proposals concerning the aim of the dialogue—rhetoric, justice, and the creator. However, these proposals are ultimately rejected as possibilities because they all focus on a part of the dialogue, instead of the whole. This desire to find an aim that covers the whole, instead of the parts, is in agreement with the guidelines for establishing the aim of a dialogue in the prolegomena (discussed above). Olympiodorus unsurprisingly settles on political virtue, the aim suggested by the Neoplatonic curriculum. He equivocates political virtue with political science (πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης) and explicates the component, or causes, of political happiness (πολιτικὴν εὐδαιμονίαν), namely matter (ὄλη) in terms of the tripartite soul;<sup>45</sup> form (εἶδος) in terms of justice and moderation; the creative cause (ποιητικὸν αἴτιον) as the philosophical life;<sup>46</sup> the paradigm (παράδειγμα) as the cosmos; the

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<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that the matter under consideration is the tripartite soul, not the rational soul. Political virtue is concerned with the tripartite soul, as opposed to the higher, purificatory virtue of the rational soul.

<sup>46</sup> In the beginning of the 45<sup>th</sup> lecture, Olympiodorus names the creative cause, not as the philosophic life, but rather as virtue. However, it seems that this is simply a textual error, for in the lecture, he contrasts virtue with instructive (διδασκαλική) and demagogic (δημαγωγική) rhetoric, a contrast that makes more sense when contrasted with philosophy.

instrument (ὄργανον) as both habit and education; and the final cause as the good.<sup>47</sup> There are a couple of peculiar aspects to this list. First, it is curious why Olympiodorus only mentions justice and moderation as the form of political happiness and does not reference all four cardinal virtues. Though he only mentions two, he later says that he has all four in mind, yet justice and moderation are the most neglected of the four, which is the reason for their emphasis.<sup>48</sup> Olympiodorus claims that the other two virtues—wisdom and courage—are naturally desired, if not genuinely, then at least in the spurious (ψευδωνύμων) sense.<sup>49</sup> (In his commentary on the *Phaedo*, he defines spurious virtue as an imitation of genuine virtue, exchanging passions for passions (πάθη παθῶν ἀνταλλαττομένας), instead of pursuing virtue for virtue’s sake.) Another strange aspect of the causes of political happiness is that Olympiodorus divides the final cause into two goods: (1) political (πολιτικόν) good, related to maturing (γίνομενοις), and (2) theoretical (θεωρητικόν) good, related to dying (ἀπογίνομενοις). Olympiodorus appears to connect these two goods to political virtue and purificatory virtue respectively. Purificatory

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<sup>47</sup> These causes of political happiness are augmentations of Aristotle’s four causes, with his efficient cause being differentiated into the creative cause and the instrument(s). Moreover, with both formal and paradigmatic causes, there is an attempt to harmonize Aristotle’s understanding of matter and form with Plato’s ideas or paradigms. The origin of these six causes are in Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum*, edited by E. Diehl (Leipzig, 1903), 1.2. These same causes are also found in the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (17.33-39), discussing the various elements of a dialogue: the material (characters), the formal (style), the creative (the soul), the final (the good), the paradigmatic (the problem), and the instrumental (the arguments).

<sup>48</sup> There is precedence for this emphasis in the *Gorgias* itself. In the discussion contrasting nature with convention, Callicles states that natural right (δικαίου φύσει) is wisdom and courage in political affairs (φρονίους εἰς τὰ τῆς πόλεως πράγματα καὶ ἀνδρείους). Interestingly, Socrates shifts topics and discusses moderation (491d-497a) and justice (504d), which supports Olympiodorus’ claim that moderation and justice are neglected by Callicles and those like him. Moreover, in the *Phaedo* (82a-b), Socrates characterizes popular and political virtues as moderation and justice.

<sup>49</sup> In lecture 28.2, Olympiodorus makes a similar claim: all lay claim to wisdom for their benefit and likewise with moderation. It is unclear whether Olympiodorus intended to say moderation or courage. However, there are a couple of textual reasons that would indicate a textual error. The first reason is the mentioning of wisdom and courage in the proem, and the second reason is that the entire context of the 28<sup>th</sup> lecture is the relationship between wisdom and courage, not moderation.

virtue is related to dying in the *Phaedo* as the philosopher's art of dying. Olympiodorus makes this connection in his commentary on the *Phaedo* (3.3); he even makes much of the verb tense used in the dialogue. There, Socrates says "dying" in contrast to "being dead," the former defined as purificatory virtue, purifying oneself from passion; the latter, theoretical virtue, having already freed oneself from the passions. Yet, the connection of maturing with political virtue is not as clear. However, it would seem to indicate that political virtue is the proper use of one's existence, as opposed to leaving one's existence by escaping through purification, or the art of dying. (It is also worth mentioning that only two of the causes are not incorporated into his structure of the dialogue. These two causes, and their peculiar absence from the structure, will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4.)

Olympiodorus then turns to a division of the dialogues with these causes of political happiness in mind. The division is three-fold: the creative cause discussed in the dialogue with Gorgias (lectures 1-14); the formal cause, with Polus (lectures 15-24); and the final cause, with Calicles (lectures 25-50). Though Olympiodorus states that this division is clear (ἡ διαίρεσις ἀναφαίνεται), it is not without ambiguity. These themes are not as easily divided as he suggests, a point Olympiodorus himself later acknowledges. The division of the dialogue into these three causes (corresponding to the three interlocutors) is followed, except in two instances. First, the initial series of lectures that focus on the creative cause goes beyond the discussion with Gorgias into the conversation with Polus, which covers Socrates' well-known discussion of the difference between art (τέχνη) and habitude (ἐμπειρία). This conversation more naturally fits under the section on the creative cause (as opposed to the formal cause), since it concerns rhetoric and not virtue. Second, Olympiodorus adds a fourth division, late in the series of lectures (the 46<sup>th</sup>). This division encompasses the discussion on myth, the paradigmatic cause of political happiness.



Robin Jackson, et al., argue that this three-fold division contradicts the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*. According to the prolegomena (19.1-4), the division (διαίρέσεις) of a dialogue should be in regards to doctrine (δογμάτων) as opposed to characters. As a matter of fact, the anonymous author uses the *Gorgias* as the prime example of wrongly dividing the text along the lines of characters—Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. However, this contradiction is only apparent for Olympiodorus does not divide the dialogue on the basis of characters, but rather the six causes. Though he does initially divide the dialogue in correlation with a change in character, as shown above, it is the change in cause that drives the division of which there is only a rough correspondence to a change in character.

Though Olympiodorus gives precedence to causes in the division of the dialogue, he is not oblivious to the importance of characters in Plato’s dialogues, the material component of a dialogue according to the *Prolegomena*. As a matter of fact, the use of “characters in conversation” is the defining essence of a dialogue in both the Olympiodorus’ commentary (0.1) and the *Prolegomena*. However, this use of characters bears a striking resemblance to both comedy and tragedy, literary forms that Plato notoriously criticized, a point to which both Olympiodorus and the author of the *Prolegomena* were aware. Their solution offered is that, in contrast to comedy, which encourages pleasure-seeking, and tragedy, which promotes grief, the dialogues criticize and admonish those with unhealthy souls toward well-being. In the *Gorgias*, each character possesses a defining trait: Socrates—intelligence and knowledge (νοερῶ καὶ ἐπιστημονικῶ), Chaerephon—right opinion (ὀρθοδοξαστικῶ),<sup>50</sup> Gorgias—distorted opinion (διεστραμμένω), Polus—unjust and honor-seeking (ἀδικία καὶ φιλοτίμω), and Callicles—swinish

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<sup>50</sup> It is interesting to note that earlier in the proem (0.3), Chaerephon is explicitly identified as a philosopher (φιλόσοφον). It seems somewhat strange to identify Chaerephon as a philosopher and then characterize him as right opinion, as opposed to knowledge.

and pleasure-seeking (ὠόδει καὶ φιληδόνω).<sup>51</sup> Olympiodorus diverges slightly from the prolegomena by defining some of the characters, not on the basis of cognition, but moral character. Yet perhaps, more interestingly, he characterizes Socrates in terms of knowledge, instead of the high form of cognition, “double ignorance.” Olympiodorus is well-aware of this term, as he defines it as the Thalean-like philosopher in the *Theaetetus* (173c6-175b7), in the commentary on the *Phaedo* (6.3).

### The Commentary and the Curriculum

With little exception, Olympiodorus follows the hermeneutic of the *Prolegomena*, but his use of the texts in the curriculum is also consistent for the most part. The non-philosophic works and the earlier dialogues are referenced in predictable ways. The higher dialogues, on the other hand, are either ignored or usually not referenced in regards to their aim. The curriculum began with non-philosophic texts, introducing students to ethical virtue. One of these texts was Epictetus’s *Enchiridion*. Not surprisingly, Olympiodorus cites this work during a lecture on Socrates’ discussion of ethics with Polus (468e6-470a12). As a matter of fact, four of the six references to the *Enchiridion* are found in that 17<sup>th</sup> lecture.<sup>52</sup> In his discussion on being killed unjustly, Olympiodorus makes an interesting claim, namely that the person killed unjustly is really killed *justly* by divine retribution for an offense in a former life. He even applies this

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<sup>51</sup> Beyond these traits, the characters are compared to Neoplatonic metaphysics. Socrates imitates the monad (μονάδα μιμείται) for God is simple. Chaerephon also imitates the monad, yet is inescapably tied to matter. The three other characters represent an inferior plurality. Olympiodorus argues that neither the superior (monad) nor the inferior (plurality) proceed directly from one to the other and thus require a mediator. For Olympiodorus, it is the monad, inescapably tied to matter, that is the mediator. Thus, Chaerephon plays the role of mediator between Socrates and the orators. For Olympiodorus’ discussion of Chaerephon in that role see 1.7, 10; 2.6; and 25.1.

<sup>52</sup> Of these four references, two refer to more hermeneutical matters, namely the Neoplatonic insistence on looking to the general rather than the particular. See 17.1 and 17.4, where Olympiodorus cites the *Enchiridion*, 3.11-12.

principle to the death of Socrates. Citing the *Enchiridion* (17), Olympiodorus then implores his students to live an ethical life with divine retribution in mind.<sup>53</sup> In the second reference, he describes a life of vanity (κενοδοξία) as when one's condition is deplorable but the actions choiceworthy. This lifestyle is not enviable because the vain seek the good, not for the good itself, but for the opinion of men (δόξαν ἀνθρωπίνην). Here, Olympiodorus quotes a passage from the *Enchiridion*, advising not to display publicly one's virtue.<sup>54</sup> Though he uses Epictetus to demonstrate a certain harmony between Platonic philosophy and Stoicism, the Stoic morality is not considered political virtue, the first of the philosophic virtues, but rather ethical virtue, or right opinion. Olympiodorus is clear on this point regarding another author, used in the ethical portion of the curriculum, Isocrates. Concerning the notion that intemperance is evil, Olympiodorus says that Isocrates, along with others, handed this teaching down through their ethical writings (ἠθικὰ γράψαντες), whereas Socrates proved it demonstratively (αποδείξεν αὐτὰ εἰρηκότι) (36.1). The contrast here is between Isocrates' ethical writing and Socrates' philosophic demonstration.

The references to Aristotle are greater and cover several of his works, yet as expected, the two most important themes discussed are logic<sup>55</sup> and ethics.<sup>56</sup> One such use of Aristotle is in the 32<sup>nd</sup> lecture (32.5), concerning Socrates' discussion with Callicles about good and bad pleasure. During this discussion, Socrates claims that there are various degrees of goodness, such that one

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<sup>53</sup> For a similar use of the *Enchiridion*, see 48.4.

<sup>54</sup> For another incorporation of this Stoic notion, see 26.25.

<sup>55</sup> See 2.8, 15.1, 23.10, 31.8.

<sup>56</sup> See 14.2, 16.2. Other topics are epistemology (6.10, 14.3, 22.3, 37.2), metaphysics (30.3), and human nature (6.1, 48.5). Olympiodorus also provides one of Aristotle's few surviving poems known as an elegy (41.9). For fragments of this elegy see Fr. 650 and 673 in Valentin Rose, ed, *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta* (Leipzig, 1886).

can be just a good man or a good man in greater measure. Olympiodorus then discusses relative happiness in the soul, which is of greater nature than happiness in the body. He then cites Aristotle as saying “one kind of happiness is ordinary (κοινή) and one kind is distinct and choiceworthy (ἰδίᾳ καὶ κατ’ἐξαιρέτων),” most likely a reference to the final portion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1177a12-1179a34). In that passage, Aristotle argues that contemplation provides the greatest happiness to human beings, whereas moral virtue provides happiness in a secondary sense (1178a7-9). Therefore, Olympiodorus argues that moral virtue is essentially related to the body and provides a lower degree of happiness, than rational calculation (λογισμὸν), which is related to our souls.

Yet, in harmony with the curriculum, just because Olympiodorus emphasizes Aristotle’s ethics, it does not mean that Aristotle was viewed the same as Epictetus. To the contrary, Aristotle’s works, including his ethics, are considered philosophic. However, although Aristotle is viewed as philosophic, his corpus is not equal to that of Plato’s. Even though they regarded Aristotle highly, the Neoplatonists saw Plato’s works philosophy as the “highest mysteries” and Aristotle’s works as “lesser mysteries.” Moreover, they harmonized his views with those of Plato. There is no evidence of a conflict between Plato and Aristotle in Olympiodorus’ commentary. To the contrary, every place where Aristotle is invoked, Plato is credited with the same teaching. For example, most modern scholars view Plato’s division of the sciences as somewhat rudimentary, often collapsing theoretical and practical science, the very collapse that Aristotle apparently criticizes in the *Politics*. Olympiodorus, by contrast, credits Plato for anticipating Aristotle’s division of practical science into three spheres: the ethical, the economic, and the political (43.8).<sup>57</sup> According to Olympiodorus, the evidence for such division is in the

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<sup>57</sup> See also 3.7, 22.3, 23.1, 31.8.

*Gorgias* (520e2-3), where Socrates distinguishes between three actions: finding the way to be as good as possible (ἄν τις τρόπον ὡς βέλτιστος εἶη), managing one's own household (τὴν αὐτοῦ οἰκίαν διοικοῦ) and managing the city (ἢ πόλιν).

After these two propaedeutic stages in the curriculum, the Platonic cycles begin with *Alcibiades I*, used to impart self-knowledge. Olympiodorus cites this dialogue to that end on several occasions, and other themes, even beyond this initial aim.<sup>58</sup> Setting aside the *Gorgias* for later chapters, the next dialogue is the *Phaedo*, which taught purificatory virtue and was the last dialogue concerning practical science. Olympiodorus's use of the *Phaedo* is interesting in part because the students had not read the dialogue (at least presumably), nor any other dialogue in the curriculum beyond *Alcibiades I* and the *Gorgias*. This fact might explain the minimal number of references to any dialogue beyond the *Phaedo*. Oddly, Olympiodorus does not refer to the dialogue in regards to virtue, either civic or purificatory, except one passing allusion (29.3). It is understandable that he left the discussion of purificatory virtue for later, but the *Phaedo* explicitly mentions political virtue. Instead of virtue, his main use of the *Phaedo* revolves around myth.<sup>59</sup>

In the curriculum, the *Cratylus* marks the crucial transition from practical science, encompassing political and purificatory virtue, to theoretical science, or theoretical virtue. Olympiodorus makes only two implicit references to this dialogue in his entire commentary, and both concern the etymology of names (4.3, 47.3). The fifth dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, is

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<sup>58</sup> For references to self-knowledge, see 0.6, 1.1, 18.2, 25.3, 31.9, 38.1, 39.3, 40.4. Three lesser themes that Olympiodorus picks up from *Alcibiades* are (1) philosophic method [3.4, 11.3, 19.1, 41.9]; (2) the philosophic life [1.6, 41.3]; (3) ethics [3.10, 5.1-2, 10.1, 13.6, 21.1]; (4) *eros* [25.3, 43.5]; and (5) Pericles [7.3].

<sup>59</sup> Cf. 14.3, 20.3, 23.3, 44.7, 46.8, 47.6-7. Other themes discussed include human nature (18.2, 25.11, 30.1); persuasion (41.9); notion of opposites (25.2, 31.3); use of language (4.9); and substance (19.10).

referenced twice on knowledge, one about Protagoras' teaching that perception is knowledge (13.2) and another on false opinion (8.6).<sup>60</sup> There are only two, rather unrelated, references to the next dialogue, the *Sophist*—a reference to classification (4.1) and a medical analogy (*Sophist* 230b-c). In the dialogue, the Eleatic Stranger relates the purging of opinion through dialogue to the art of doctors who remove obstructions to health. In the dialogue, this ability to purge is attributed to the sophist, yet Olympiodorus attributes it to the philosopher (8.1).<sup>61</sup> The *Statesman* is only referenced one time in Olympiodorus' entire commentary, a reference on myth (46.8).

The next three dialogues taught theoretical knowledge, more specifically, theological knowledge. In terms of the *Phaedrus*, the theme of rhetoric is the most noted reference.<sup>62</sup> The other two dialogues—*Symposium* and *Philebus*—are virtually ignored in the commentary. Apart from a few allusions to them,<sup>63</sup> only the *Symposium* is explicitly mentioned, and like the other later dialogues, it is used in the discussion of myth (46.8). After this first cycle of Platonic

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<sup>60</sup> Other themes discussed are Socratic ignorance (34.3), the philosophic life (1.6), a reference to Thales (26.16), and a reference to Homer's golden chain (47.2).

<sup>61</sup> This misidentification is similar to another mistake in applying the *Phaedo*. There, he applied a passage about poets to philosophers. In that reference, Socrates discusses the ability of myth to calm child-like fear (*Phaedo* 77d-78a). Olympiodorus uses it in reference to Plato. As Socrates assured his interlocutors that Greece was full of charmers that could ease their fears once he departed, Olympiodorus says that Plato did just that and found the Pythagoreans and Socrates himself. The curious part of this reference is that Socrates clearly meant musicians. Moreover, Olympiodorus even understood it that way. However, he applies it to philosophers. It could simply be applied out of context, or perhaps more interestingly, it should be viewed in light of Socrates' opening claim in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is the "greatest kind of music" (61a).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. 9.4, 14.13, 40.10. Beyond rhetoric, Olympiodorus refers twice (2.1, 5.2) to the same line cited by the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, when discussing the aim of a dialogue: "There is only one way, dear boy, for those to begin who are to take counsel wisely about anything. One must know what the counsel is about, or it is sure to be utterly futile." In all of these references, the citation is incomplete, leaving off the final portion of the sentence, a portion that is the most controversial of the claim: "most people are ignorant of the fact that they do not know the nature of things."

<sup>63</sup> For allusions to the *Symposium*, see 3.2, 41.3, and 43.5; for the *Philebus*, see 33.3 and 21.5.

dialogues, the second cycle consisted of only two, the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*. Like the later dialogues in the first cycle, there are no explicit references to either of these two “perfect dialogues.” As a matter of fact, there are only a few allusions to the *Timaeus* and seemingly no allusions to the *Parmenides*.<sup>64</sup>

The non-Platonic texts, and even the earliest Platonic dialogues, are referenced in accordance with their aim in the curriculum. However, the later dialogues are generally not used in regards to their aim, or they are ignored altogether. Of course, their absence in the commentary can be explained in terms of not wanting to reference dialogues higher in the curriculum that were unknown by the students. Certainly, the references generally are to the lower dialogues in the curriculum; among the higher dialogues, only the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus* are frequently referenced. However, this reason does not explain these references, nor does it explain frequent references to other dialogues there were not even in the curriculum, most notably the *Republic*. Moreover, it does not explain why these dialogues were not referenced according to their aim. Another possible reason is that Olympiodorus does not reference these higher dialogues, or their aims, because the students had not been taught those higher aims. This does explain why, when these higher dialogues are referenced, they are often used in regards to lower aims. However, the students were exposed to these higher aims, even if in a lesser degree, when studying Aristotle. Furthermore, some of the higher aims in these dialogues are in fact referenced in the commentary.

Olympiodorus’ overlooking the higher parts of the curriculum is a consequence of a larger motivation, namely a motivation to emphasize prudentially practical science over the

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<sup>64</sup> Allusions to the *Timaeus* are found at 11.2, 30.2, 39.2, and 50.3.

higher sciences.<sup>65</sup> (It is also worth mentioning here that most scholars agree that Olympiodorus did not lecture on the later dialogues.) This emphasis is nowhere more clearly stated than in a reference to the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue of theological knowledge. In discussing the myth of the Minotaur (44.6), Olympiodorus begins by stating that there is disagreement on its meaning and that such disagreement is expected because of the nature of myth in general. Interestingly, immediately after mentioning this disagreement, Olympiodorus brings up the disagreement in philosophy through a hypothetical question. “If someone says,” he writes, “neither ought we to put our trust in philosophers, since they dispute, some saying the soul is water, others that it is air, some that it is mortal, others that it is immortal” (44.7). Given the disagreement concerning myth and theoretical science, he says that one should reveal (ἀναπτύσσειν), or explain the meaning, of a myth, but not stay (μένειν) there; one should take thought of (φροντίζειν) the best regime (ἀρίστης πολιτείας) of which “there is nothing greater.” To support his conclusion, he cites the *Phaedrus* (229b-230a), where Socrates discusses the myth of Boreas. Socrates says, “I am not yet able, as the Delphic inscription has it, to know myself; so it seems to me ridiculous, when I do not yet know that, to investigate irrelevant things.” At this point, Olympiodorus’ definition of myth, and more importantly its relationship to theoretical knowledge, is unclear. But regardless of this relationship, he is clear in regards to the merit of practical science—there is nothing greater than it, reflective of the “Socratic turn.” No doubt, Olympiodorus emphasizes the subject matter because the students are learning it, yet his language is much stronger than this. Ironically, Olympiodorus almost immediately focuses on the subject of myth in the

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<sup>65</sup> This emphasis is not unlike Simplicius, who in his commentary on the *Enchiridion*, argues that action, not contemplation, is the purpose of life and that contemplation is performed for sake of action itself. *Commentary on Epictetus’ Handbook*, 135-136.30. For an interpretation of Simplicius’ claim, see Pauliina Remes, “Inverting the Order of Priority: Simplicius on Theory and Practice.” Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies (2007).



remaining portion of the commentary (lectures 46-50). Regardless of his emphasis of practical science and seeming inversion of the curriculum, Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the Gorgias* is in harmony with the overall hermeneutic and philosophy of Neoplatonic pedagogy and thus is the best text for a reconstruction of Neoplatonic political philosophy because the curriculum identifies the *Gorgias* as the most pertinent dialogue for an education in political virtue, and though other Neoplatonists produced commentaries on the *Gorgias*, his commentary is the only surviving commentary on that dialogue, which makes it invaluable for acquiring insight into their political science.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE STATESMAN AND THE BEST REGIME

The traditional interpretation of Neoplatonism, the dominant interpretive school of Plato from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, claims that this philosophic school focused almost exclusively on metaphysical speculation, while abandoning Plato's own emphasis on political thought. This supposed silence is accounted for in part by the suppression and persecution of those philosophers, particularly during the period of religious empire. Nevertheless, through a close reading of Olympiodorus' *Commentary on Plato's 'Gorgias,'* it is argued that, far from abandoning this political emphasis, he offers a surprisingly rich, even critical, science of politics, when extremely dangerous to do so, and what is even more striking is that it serves as the centerpiece of his philosophical enterprise (as suggested above). The danger involved with his political science in part concerns the issue of the best possible regime, the more fundamental tension between Athens and Byzantium.<sup>1</sup> Oddly enough, Olympiodorus portrays the best possible regime as a divinely-modeled monarchy, a portrayal that appears as an endorsement of Byzantium itself. Yet there is compelling evidence that, far from an endorsement of empire, or even monarchy, this surface teaching is intended to make his philosophic enterprise appear compatible with the Byzantine Empire, when in fact the true teaching is unabashedly republican, a position hostile to the empire and its expansionist efforts under Justinian.

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning the preeminence of political science, Aristotle writes that the highest good belongs to "the most sovereign and most comprehensive master science, and politics clearly fits this description. For it determines which sciences ought to exist in states, what kinds of sciences each group of citizens must learn, and what degree of proficiency each must attain." *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Ostwald (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), 1094a-b.

## Divinely-Modeled Monarchy

According to Olympiodorus, the best regime is an aristocracy (ἀριστοκρατίαν), and relying on metaphysical speculation, he describes this regime as a divinely-modeled monarchy (42.2). The city (πόλις)<sup>2</sup> is understood as a microcosm (μικρὸς κόσμος) that should imitate (μιμεῖσθαι) the metaphysical order found in the cosmos. Olympiodorus expresses this cosmic order in political terms—there is a single ruler (ἄρχων), a God, who governs all things. To justify this expression, he cites a line from a rather odd source, a source not from philosophy, but poetry—Homer’s *Iliad* (2.204): “No good [thing] is the rule of many lords; one lord may there be.” Beyond the number of rulers desired, certain divine traits are required of this ruler. “Not only should there be one ruler, imitating the divine in number,” he says, “but this ruler should also resemble (ἐμιμοῦντο) God in character, the traits of which include goodness (ἀγαθόν), knowledge (γνῶσιν), and power (δύναμις)” (32.4, 11.2).<sup>3</sup> Again, his discussion of divinity is rooted in poetry, not philosophy, drawing this time from Homer’s *Odyssey* (8.325, 4.379, 10.306). In sum, a multitude of ordinary people (πλῆθος δημοτῶν) should not rule, Olympiodorus says, but rather one prudent statesman (ἔμφορνα πολιτικόν), an aristocrat. Such an imitation of the cosmic order ensures just governance. Earlier, he contrasts the unjust consequences of democratic rule with aristocratic rule (32.4). He defines democracy as a

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to mention that Olympiodorus uses the term “city” and not a more contextual term, such as kingdom (βασίλειά). To be sure, Olympiodorus uses the term based on the nature of his commentary. Yet he also uses the term in a normative manner, as he does here, not merely to convey Plato’s usage or describe the type of regime in Athens.

<sup>3</sup> Olympiodorus discusses these three traits in his commentary, during the transition from the character Gorgias to the second interlocutor, Polus. Olympiodorus argues that this portion of the dialogue establishes exactly who the true statesman is *not*, namely rhetoricians. At this point in the lecture, he discusses the entire dialogue in terms of those divine traits. He says that Gorgias describes the orator as one possessing all three traits—“a good orator who has the power to commit injustice yet has knowledge of justice.” However, Polus claims only two traits, leaving out knowledge; Callicles argues for goodness alone—goodness, defined in terms of pleasure.

disorderly regime (τεταραγμένη πολιτεία) with rulers chosen by lot and at random, whereas rulers in an aristocracy are chosen on the basis of merit, particularly education in “literature, gymnastics, and mathematics,” allowing them to govern for the common good, an education reminiscent of the philosopher-king in Plato’s *Republic*. Thus, in democracy, it is the citizens’ lack of knowledge, one of the necessary divine traits, that prohibits a just regime from emerging because the best element—reason—does not rule.<sup>4</sup>

Such a sentiment is grounded in Plato’s concept of justice or, more specifically, natural right (φύσιν δίκαιου), succinctly defined by Olympiodorus as “the best rules” (τὸ ἄριστον ἄρχει) (43.3).<sup>5</sup> In the *Gorgias*, natural right is not raised by Socrates but Callicles.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to Athenian democracy, where Callicles says the weak hide behind the notion of equality for protection from the strong, he argues that nature is rightly aristocratic, that is to say, it is just for the stronger to have advantage of the weak (483b-484c). However, Callicles misnames the “stronger” element, and through a series of questions, Socrates leads him to the conclusion that the “stronger” are those with wisdom (φρονίμους) and courage (ἀνδρείους). Olympiodorus agrees with Callicles’ conclusion on natural right, namely that “the stronger should have a

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<sup>4</sup> Describing the best possible regime in this manner is not exclusive to Olympiodorus. As a matter of fact, it appears that such a description is common among Neoplatonists. One of the few scholarly examinations of such a topic concludes that their political thought is a “metaphysical-theological political philosophy” in which there is great harmony between metaphysical speculation and political prescription (Michelle Abbate, “Metaphysics and Theology as Methodological and Conceptual Paradigms in Proclus’ Ethico-Political Theory” in *Proklos: Methode, Seelenlehre, Metaphysik* [Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2006], 186-200). For example, in similar language to Olympiodorus, Proclus writes that the paradigm (παράδειγμα) of the best regime is in heaven (ἐν οὐρανῶ). Moreover, the demiurge of heaven (τοῦ οὐρανοῦ δημιουργός) is considered the best of politicians (τῶν πολιτικῶν ἄριστος). (Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam*, edited by W. Kroll [Leipzig: Teubner, 1899], I.16.21.)

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis of classic natural right, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 120-64.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, translated by W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1925).

greater share than the weaker” (26.3-4). The stronger are defined by Olympiodorus in terms of that divine trait, knowledge, acknowledging that, by the term “stronger,” he means quality (i.e., the few wise), not quantity, that is the many, whom he disparagingly calls worthless (φάλου). The nature of this greater share is in the realm of governance, understood as the power (δύναμις) to commit injustice, without actually committing it, reflecting the other divine trait of goodness. Thus, Olympiodorus concludes on the basis of natural right that the one, who imitates the divine in knowledge, power, and goodness, should rule.

This commitment to natural right is also confirmed by Olympiodorus’ discussion of justice, found in his commentary on *Gorgias* (507e-508a) (35.13). In that portion of the dialogue, Socrates says that a person seeking self-advantage cannot commune (κοινωνεῖν) with anyone, and thus, there can be no friendship (φιλία). In the place of Callicles’ commitment to self-advantage, Socrates says that “gods and men are held together in communion by orderliness, moderation, and justice.” A few lines later, he defines this justice in terms of “geometrical equality” (ἡ ἰσότης ἢ γεωμετρίας). Olympiodorus echoes Socrates’ sentiment that the city should be a community. In the 35<sup>th</sup> lecture (35.12-13), he writes, “community (κοινωνία) is a kind of friendship (φιλία) . . . [f]or friendship is present at the origins of all things, since at that level unity (ἕνωσις) is everywhere and division (διάκρισις) is nowhere.” One of the elements that holds this community together is justice, particularly geometrical equality.<sup>7</sup> According to Olympiodorus, there are three types of equality: geometrical, arithmetical, and harmonic. Geometrical equality is defined as equality “when analogy is preserved.” For example, as 8 is to 4, so 4 is to 2. The analogy of 2 to 1 holds. Arithmetical equality maintains the same excess, not the same analogy. Just as 6 exceeds 5 by 1, so 5 exceeds 4 by 1. Harmonic equality is where the

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<sup>7</sup> See Aristotle’s discussion of natural right and justice in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1129a-1138b.

parts of the multiples are the same. Of these three, the first two are politically significant. Olympiodorus argues that geometrical equality determines distribution of honors in the city, whereas arithmetical equality is limited to contractual dealings. Thus, in regards to honors, unequal shares are rewarded to unequal persons. He writes, “For when a general distributes the spoils, he does not give the same to all, but more to those who fought best, and less to the others.” In just governance then, the best, that is to say the aristocratic, rule.

At first glance, it is strange that Olympiodorus calls this monarchy an aristocracy. After all, the very definition of these regimes seems to prohibit such conflation, for monarchy is traditionally understood as rule of one; aristocracy, the rule of few. In anticipating this concern, Olympiodorus offers a response taken from the Neoplatonic tradition (42.2). He writes that, if someone objects and says this regime is a monarchy, not an aristocracy, then reply as the philosopher Ammonius did: “let him feel your fist and do not deign to speak.” No doubt, this response conveys the importance of this correlation for Olympiodorus, but it is quite striking in its violent nature. Curiously however, after suggesting such violent coercion as opposed to persuasion, he offers evidence from the *Republic* (445d-e),<sup>8</sup> where Socrates actually defines an aristocracy in monarchic terms, saying that “rulers should be either one in number or in life.” Thus, an aristocracy is monarchic in its very nature, and here, he explicitly defines the best regime as one in number, not one in life. (Yet the ambiguity of the term “aristocracy” allows Olympiodorus to prescribe another aristocratic regime, one more republican in nature.)

Though Olympiodorus discusses regimes, the traditional interpretation of Neoplatonism is not easily dismissed, for even in this discussion, he appears more interested in properly

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Paul Shorey (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1930).

ordering the human soul than political institutions. For example, in the 42<sup>nd</sup> lecture (42.2), he cites Demosthenes, a noted Athenian orator, who argues that a city is not institutions (κτίσματα) but people (ἄνθρωποι). Thus, along with Demosthenes, Olympiodorus concludes that, when he speaks of the city, he is speaking of people. Moreover, in the introductory proem of his commentary, the stated object of his study is the soul (ψυχὴν) (0.5).<sup>9</sup> According to Olympiodorus, there are six causes (ἀρχῶν) of political happiness (πολιτικῆς εὐδαιμονίας)—the material cause, or the “matter,” of which is the tripartite soul, consisting of reason, spirit, and the passions.<sup>10</sup> In other words, like a builder using wood (the matter) to construct a house, the soul is the object that, when properly ordered by the craftsman, becomes happy. Perhaps, Olympiodorus demonstrates how to order the soul, and politics becomes a means to illustrate its proper ordering, not provide political prescription: “just as in cities, there are rulers (ἄρχων), auxiliaries (στρατιῶτας), and money-makers (θῆτες),” he writes, “so too in human beings, there is reason, spirit, and the passions.”

This illustration above is grounded in the larger Platonic analogy between the city and the soul, most clearly expressed in the *Republic* (435b). In short, this analogy is in regards to justice, namely that justice is the same in both the city and the soul. After moving beyond the “city of

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<sup>9</sup> Like other Neoplatonists, Olympiodorus was influenced heavily by a lesser-known Platonic dialogue, *First Alcibiades*, particularly its discussion of human nature. The most important passage comes in response to Socrates invocation of the Delphic motto—“know thyself” (124a-b). Drawing a distinction between a craftsman and his tools, Socrates gets Alcibiades to admit that human beings use their bodies as tools, and thus the body is not the essence of a human being but merely a tool. It is then agreed that the essence is the soul and the soul alone (128b-130c). Neoplatonists adopt this conclusion regarding the essence of human nature.

<sup>10</sup> Beyond the material cause, Olympiodorus provides five other causes, namely the formal cause (justice and moderation), the creative cause (the philosophical life), the paradigmatic cause (the cosmos), the instrumental cause (habits and education), and the final cause (the good). These principles are an augmentation of Aristotle’s four causes, with the creative cause and the instrumental cause being an expansion of Aristotle’s efficient cause, discussed in the *Metaphysics*. The Neoplatonic origin of these six causes is in Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum*, edited by E. Diehl (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903), I.2.2-4.

pigs,” as well as the city of guardians, Socrates and his interlocutors arrive at the truly just city, consisting of three classes—philosopher-king, auxiliaries, and money-makers (434b). This city-in-speech is truly just for each class “minds its own business,” that is to say, the philosopher rules, the auxiliaries protect, and the money-makers produce. Plato’s analogy is grounded in the fact that the soul consists of these same three “classes,” or parts, and that the just soul functions in a similar manner—reason rules the spirit and the passions, spirit enforces the rule of reason, and the passions acquiesce in this governance. Thus, Olympiodorus’ discussion of regimes might simply serve as an illustration for his real concern—human happiness. Concerning the analogy between the city and the soul, Plato is even sometimes interpreted as more interested in ordering the human soul than political institutions. Indeed, it is Socrates that introduces the city simply as a means of illustrating the soul (*Republic* 368c-69a).

Moreover, when Olympiodorus discusses regime types later in the commentary (43.3), he emphasizes the soul over political institutions. In discussing the decline of the soul from an aristocracy to a tyranny, much like the *Republic*, Olympiodorus defines the best regime of the soul as an aristocracy, when the best, that is to say, reason (λόγος) rules. However, if spirit governs, then a timocracy is produced. If passions rule, then three types of regimes are possible, depending on the type of dominant passion. If it is passion for money, then oligarchy ensues; if lawful passion, then democracy; if unlawful passion, tyranny. In contrast to the *Republic*, where Socrates discusses the decline of both city and soul, here, Olympiodorus seems concerned with the soul alone.

Though this account closely follows Plato’s decline of regimes in the *Republic*, there are a few noticeable differences, which indicate that more than the soul is at issue. For example, democracy is not defined as an “indulgence in all manner of passions” as in Plato’s account, but



rather as an indulgence in lawful (ἔννομον) passions. This difference does not indicate a divergence from Plato’s account as much as a deliberate elevation of the legal, or political, nature of the indulgences. In similar fashion, tyranny is not described as a “lust for power” as in the *Republic* but as an appetite for unlawful (παράνομον) passions. Perhaps more conclusively, Olympiodorus’ description of oligarchy cannot be understood, if applied to the soul. If passion for money rules, then he says, the regime is an oligarchy for it is “the few (ὀλίγοι) that possess money,” clearly referring to a specific economic class. This definition is *only* intelligible when applied to politics. For Olympiodorus then, politics is a concern, not simply an illustration for the proper ordering of human existence. Thus, he intends to provide principles for *both* moral and political happiness, consistent with Plato’s analogy between the city and the soul, yet inconsistent with the traditional interpretation of Neoplatonism as silent on politics.

Not only is Olympiodorus concerned with politics, it is possible that the regime, and not the soul, is the *chief* concern. To begin with, those very causes of political happiness (mentioned above) are explicitly declared as “principles of political science” (πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης), and as stated earlier, one of the principles of political science is the material cause—the tripartite soul (0.5). The reason Olympiodorus uses the tripartite soul as the subject matter of investigation, as opposed to, what he calls, the rational soul (the mature soul that is already properly ordered) is *political* in nature—“the matter is the soul,” he says, “not the rational soul, but the tripartite soul, *for it resembles the division of the city* [italics added].”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Olympiodorus uses the tripartite soul as his subject because all of the corresponding elements in the soul,

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<sup>11</sup> Because the *Gorgias* is an earlier dialogue in the Neoplatonic curriculum, concerned with the proper ordering of the tripartite soul (as opposed to moving the ordered soul to a higher level of existence, the task of other Platonic dialogues later in the curriculum), it stands to reason that the material cause would be the tripartite soul. Yet Olympiodorus does not use this pedagogical reason but offers an explicitly political one.

especially spirit and passion, are essential to political life; the rational soul that has mastered spirit and obliterated passion is inadequate for political analysis. Yet, it seems that the rational soul is more appropriate, if in fact the best regime is monarchy. Beyond this use of the tripartite soul, at one point (27.3), Olympiodorus credits Socrates with an even more radical view, namely that theoretical science, including metaphysical speculation, is at the service of political action: “we should not stop at words but seek action too, seeing that we are actually adopting the theory with a view to good works” (27.3).

Since it is established that politics is a concern, possibly the chief concern, Olympiodorus’ articulation of the best regime, as a divinely-modeled monarchy, appears as an endorsement of the Byzantine Empire. Note the similarity in language between Olympiodorus’ account and two justifications of the regime composed during Justinian’s reign.<sup>12</sup> The first account is an address, entitled *An Exposition of Heads of Advice and Counsel* (530 CE), written to Justinian by Agapetus, deacon at the Hagia Sophia, the distinguished church at Constantinople. The text is divided into seventy-two brief “heads” (i.e., chapters), the first of which reads: “having a dignity, which is set above all other honors, Sire, you render honor above all to God, who gave you that dignity; inasmuch as He gave you the scepter of earthly power after the likeness of the heavenly kingdom.”<sup>13</sup> Beyond the appeal to a divinely-modeled monarchy, this account contains Platonic influence as the deacon compares Justinian’s rule to that of the philosopher-king: “There has been revealed in our age that time of felicity which one

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion on Byzantine political thought, see J.H. Burns, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350-c.1450* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background, vol. 2* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Agapetus, *An Exposition of Heads of Advice and Counsel*, in *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium: From Justinian I to the Last Palaeologus*, translated by Ernest Barker (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1957), 54-55.

of the writers of old prophesied as coming to pass when either philosophers were kings or kings were students of philosophy. Pursuing the study of philosophy, you were counted worthy of kingship; and holding the office of king, you did not desert the study of philosophy.”<sup>14</sup> The second account is taken from an anonymous dialogue, *On Political Science*, also composed sometime during Justinian’s reign. Though much of this dialogue is lost, a good portion of the chapter concerning kingship survives. Here, like the account by Agapetus, the author appeals to a divinely-modeled monarchy. He says that “a polity must have a government which is like that of God in dignity and in power . . . . kingship alone is such a government, and a king—so far as it is possible—is like, and is named by a name like, the heavenly King.”<sup>15</sup> This comparison between king and creator is even defined in terms of three divine traits—goodness, knowledge, and power—the very traits that Olympiodorus uses to discuss the creator (and the statesman) in his commentary.

Yet there is evidence that Olympiodorus does not intend to endorse the Byzantine Empire but rather critique it. In asserting the need to befriend the ruler, if one wishes not to suffer injustice, as posited in the *Gorgias* (512e-513c), Olympiodorus discusses the concept of assimilation (ὁμοιοῦσθαι), meaning that in order to befriend the ruler, one must be like the ruler, i.e., take on his moral character (39.2). The nature of assimilation goes beyond mere imitation (μιμεῖσθαι), the task of the statesman; it requires, as Socrates says, that one become essentially “like the regime” (πολιτεία). Concealed in this discussion is a critique of Byzantium, for after stating that one must assimilate to avoid injustice, Olympiodorus says that, in the process, such a person defiles their soul. To be sure, such a claim is ambiguous for it could be a generic

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<sup>14</sup> Agapetus, *An Exposition of Heads of Advice and Counsel*, 56-57.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, *De Scientia Politica*, in *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium*, 71.

statement, not describing assimilation to any particular regime, or in context, it could even describe assimilation to Plato's Athens. The latter is certainly a possibility, given the genre of the work as a commentary and Olympiodorus' negative outlook on democracy (mentioned above). However, in a closer reading of the text, it is in fact a critique of Byzantium. The critical nature of his remarks is established when Olympiodorus explicitly draws a distinction between "the kind of regime in which he is involved and the genuine one." He concludes that one should live in accord with the genuine regime, not the current empire.

Given this critique, Olympiodorus might believe that a divinely-modeled monarchy is in fact the best regime but, instead of endorsing the empire, he sees that Byzantium, in its current conception, falls short of such a model. Yet even this conclusion is misguided for, though monarchy is *explicitly* named the best regime, there is serious doubt that this surface teaching is taken seriously by Olympiodorus. In articulating the principles of political science, Olympiodorus states that the paradigmatic cause, or the "blueprint," is the cosmos (κόσμος) (0.5, 35.15). This cause insists on an essential distinction between the divine and the human, making the suggested imitation impossible. He discusses the nature of the paradigmatic cause by means of the myth at the end of the *Gorgias* (523a-527a). The myth describes the state of divine governance after the reign of Cronos, when Zeus, Poseidon, and Pluto divide sovereignty. During the time of Cronos, the law stated that the just and holy went to the Isle of the Blest, while the unjust went to Tartarus. But during the age of Zeus, Poseidon, and Pluto, judgments were amiss, because both the judges and those judged were clothed. The problem was that the judge's perspective was skewed, seeing people through their beauty or wealth and not their souls. Thus, a decree was given that both judges and those judged should remove all adornment, so as to insure proper sentence.

In order to ascertain with which part of the myth Olympiodorus is concerned, it is important to examine the purpose of the myth. He argues that it instructs the reader on the nature of universal rulers, who judge in the afterlife (46.9). Though the myth presents a transition from older “clothed” judges to newer “naked” judges, Olympiodorus offers an allegorical interpretation, removing the literal, historical elements from the story (48.1).<sup>16</sup> His interpretation identifies the older “clothed” judges with human beings and the new “naked” judges with the gods. Thus, human judgment is always rendered *imperfectly*, in contrast to divine judgment, which is always administered *without error*. As a matter of fact, perfection in divine governance is expressed to the point of absurdity in his commentary. In his discussion on being killed unjustly, Olympiodorus makes an interesting claim, namely that the person killed unjustly is really killed *justly* by divine retribution from an offense in a former life, even applying this principle to the death of Socrates (17.2). He says that “there is no disorder in the universe, but providence observes all, so that even if one is seemingly killed unjustly, the creator (δημιουργός) knows the point of it.” (It is important to note again that his discussion of the divine is based on poetry, in this case a mythical account of providence taken from the *Laws* [872e-873a].) Though there is some imitation between the divine and the human, Olympiodorus recognizes that it is incomplete and that a correspondence between the metaphysical and the political is never exact. As a matter of fact, this difference between divine rule and human rule is suggested in his discussion of divine character (discussed above). He defines human rule as “the power to commit injustice, without actually committing it” (26.4), but this understanding of power is rejected when discussing the divine: “it is possible to deny those who say that God had the power to produce evil (κακόν) but did not wish it,” he writes (11.2). Later, he again refuses to accept

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of Olympiodorus’ understanding of myth and allegorical interpretation, see chapter four.

this understanding of divine governance, saying God is altogether powerless to do evil (15.3). There is an essential difference then between the power of God and the power of the statesman, namely the latter has the power to commit injustice, even if the ability is not manifested. Thus, divinely-modeled monarchy is not possible, or at least not humanly possible.

### **The True Statesman**

If this surface teaching, portraying a divinely-modeled monarchy as the best regime, is not regarded as the true teaching, then why does Olympiodorus articulate the best regime in this manner? As stated above, Neoplatonism existed in a political context quite hostile to it, particularly in regards to the philosophers' paganism and republicanism. Thus, expressing a positive philosophical justification for Byzantium helped philosophy appear compatible with the regime. But if the best regime is described as a divinely-modeled monarchy, how is Olympiodorus' true teaching ascertained? Because it presents an ideal different from the one in power, he naturally hides his articulation of that regime in a rather lengthy discussion on statesmanship. This discussion revolves around the evaluation of four Athenians mentioned in the *Gorgias*—Themistocles, Pericles, Cimon, and Miltiades. These four appear in the dialogue as examples of rhetoricians (ῥητόρων) who bettered the Athenians (503b-c). They were suggested by Calicles because of a question regarding the nature of rhetoric, namely whether it is a noble act that aims to make citizens virtuous or an attempt to gratify citizens' desires. Socrates questions whether anyone, either in his age or in the past, used rhetoric in a noble manner. Calicles suggests these four. Later in the dialogue, Socrates returns to these Athenians and evaluates their purposed statesmanship (515c), the standard of which, he says, is “changing citizens from worse to better” (515d). Not only was their service to Athens absent of such betterment, Socrates argues that their service actually corrupted the citizens (515e). Thus, he

rejects these four men as statesmen. Much like Socrates, Olympiodorus points out that these four Athenians were not statesmen and accuses them of not moving the regime toward aristocracy (32.3-4). Using an illustration from the equestrian world, Olympiodorus argues that, when they saw that their citizens were wild, the four should have tamed them, much as a rider tames a wild horse (41.11), yet they were not tamed but became wilder. In other words, instead of making their citizens better, these four statesmen were demagogues (δημαγωγοί) (40.2), flatterers who were servants (μέντοι) to the people (42.1).

Olympiodorus focuses on the example of Pericles, whom Socrates argues made the Athenians idle (ἀργούς), cowardly (δειλούς), talkative (λάλους), and greedy (φιλαργύρους) (515e). However, Olympiodorus alters the text, saying that the four Athenians, and not the citizens, were of poor character (41.11). This alteration emphasizes the purported statesmen, the focus of the lecture. He illustrates these vices by focusing on idleness and cowardice in the face of warfare. (The focus on warfare seems out of place. To be sure, Socrates makes a passing comment about warfare, but he credits idleness and cowardice to the *system of public fees*, not military strategy as Olympiodorus does. There is no doubt Olympiodorus wants to emphasize military strategy, even to the point of altering Plato's text. The reason for this emphasis, an emphasis not found in the *Gorgias* itself, is discussed below.) According to Olympiodorus, after being attacked, the Athenians refused to fight on land with the Spartans and preferred a naval battle, a form of warfare that Olympiodorus argues is indicative of idle cowardice. Even though the choice to fight at sea was ultimately successful in preserving the city of Athens, Olympiodorus rejects it because "it did not improve their souls." As a matter of fact, he prefers Miltiades' tactics to the strategy of three other Athenians because he chose to fight on the ground, as opposed to the sea, at the battle of Marathon (42.9).

How is it that a battle on land is more effective in improving the soul than a naval battle? On this point, Olympiodorus invokes philosophy (Plato), poetry (Homer), and history (Herodotus) (41.11-12). As far as Plato is concerned, the soul, not victory, is the chief concern in warfare, as it is for Olympiodorus. Drawing from the *Laws* (829a-835c), he lists a hierarchy of military strategy, ranked in regards to its helpfulness to the soul—the most effective is hand-to-hand combat, then fighting with instruments such as the spear, followed by horseback, and finally ships, a strategy not mentioned in this particular portion of the dialogue (cf. *Laws* 706-707). The principle is that the best military tactic is the one that most closely involves the individual warrior. The rationale for such a principle is expressed by an appeal to Homer's conversation between Odysseus and Agamemnon (*Iliad* 2.165, 14.83). First, naval battles do not promote courage because warriors often do not fight with as much enthusiasm and too quickly resort to flight by boat. Second, an individual's character is mitigated by too many factors, such as wars, ships, or winds. Finally, it prohibits the statesman from justly honoring the proper warriors because it is difficult to determine exactly which warriors are due the credit. Olympiodorus is so committed to this principle—that the statesman should use land tactics—he concludes that it is better to imitate the three-hundred Spartans at Thermopylae, and face defeat, than win at sea like those at Salamis because the Spartans at Thermopylae, though they lost their lives, saved their souls through courage in battle. To emphasize this point, he resolves a tension in classical literature, an example of which is found in Herodotus (9.141-42), where the oracle suggests that the Athenians should fight by sea. Olympiodorus offers a rather strange resolution—he draws a contrast between “saved,” the suggestion of the oracle, and “saved well,” the goal of the statesman. Thus, the statesman should use tactics that save the citizens' souls,



even to the dismissal of divine will, a rather bold claim for one who said that the statesman should imitate the providential rule of God.

Besides Athenian vice, Olympiodorus argues, like Socrates, that the ungratefulness of their citizens further demonstrates their failure as statesmen, though such ungratefulness was not altogether equal (33.2). In the dialogue, Calicles begins with Themistocles and ends with Pericles. However, Socrates changes the order, beginning with Pericles and finishing with Miltiades (515c). According to Olympiodorus, the change in order is intentional, ordering the leaders according to the level of ungratefulness, the least being Pericles and the most Miltiades. Pericles was accused of embezzling public funds and reportedly had to pay a fine.<sup>17</sup> Olympiodorus elevates Pericles as much as possible, the reason of which is discussed below. This elevation is demonstrated by his interpretation of Socrates' change in order. Moreover, Olympiodorus makes light of Pericles' fault: he was accused of theft—"observe how unsubstantial the accusation was," he says.<sup>18</sup> Cimon, by contrast, was ostracized; Themistocles was questioned for complicity with the Persians and later went into exile. Finally, Miltiades was imprisoned. (Though on Olympiodorus' reading, Miltiades received the greatest amount of ungratefulness, such a reading does not negate Olympiodorus' praise of Miltiades concerning military tactics.) To this argument, Olympiodorus anticipates a critique, namely that Athenian ingratitude is not indicative of a statesman's failing, but the citizens' lack of knowledge (ἀνοίᾱς)

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<sup>17</sup> Plutarch, *Pericles*, in *Lives: Pericles and Fabius Maximus, Nicias and Crassus*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1916), 32.2-3.

<sup>18</sup> Beyond these two examples, Robin Jackson, et al, suggest another interesting illustration of Olympiodorus' elevation of Pericles, found in his commentary on *First Alcibiades* (see Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's 'Gorgias,'* 18-19). This illustration revolves around the accusation that, in order to divert attention away from a misuse of public funds, Pericles issued the Megarian Decree that helped initiate the Peloponnesian War. On Olympiodorus' telling, Pericles' diversion was more a suggestion of Alcibiades, than Pericles himself, thus shifting much of the blame from Pericles to Alcibiades. Olympiodorus, *In Alcibiadem*, edited by L.G. Westerink (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1982).

(43.1-2). Such a critique, he argues, fails to recognize the difference between external benefits, benefits to the body, and benefits to the soul. If someone is benefited with external goods, or benefited bodily, and is ungrateful, Olympiodorus argues that the beneficiary is blamed. However, if genuine benefit is given to the soul and that recipient is ungrateful, then that person was not truly benefited for an improved soul cannot commit injustice. Thus, if these four Athenians truly improved the souls of their citizens, they would have experienced praise, not ostracization.

Though these four are not considered statesmen, Olympiodorus nuances his account, allowing for a more positive interpretation of their efforts, and avoids an extreme dichotomous judgment: statesmen or tyrants. In his 32<sup>nd</sup> lecture (32.2), based on the *Gorgias* (499b4-501c8), Olympiodorus justifies this nuance from a discussion on art (τέχνην), particularly medicine. Yet in this portion of the dialogue, only act and habitude (ἐμπερίαν) are given as possibilities, which leads to the dichotomy. However, Olympiodorus argues that this misreads not only this dialogue, but Plato's overall political thought. In a later lecture (33.3), he points out that Socrates does not call these four Athenians flatterers (κόλακας): "if they were rhetoricians," Socrates says, "they employed neither true rhetoric, nor its flattering form" (517a). Thus, drawing again from the Neoplatonic tradition, Olympiodorus expands the topic of art by synthesizing it with a rather obscure reference from the *Republic* (425c-427a). Instead of contrasting the art of medicine with cooking as flattery, the contrast made in the *Gorgias*, Olympiodorus argues that there are not two, but three types—(1) false (ψευδώνυμος) medicine, which correlates to cooking, (2) intermediate (μέση) medicine, and (3) true (ἀληθής) medicine, the medicine referenced in the *Gorgias*. According to Olympiodorus, false medicine aims at flattery and amplifies the desire of the patient. In this case, the doctor says to the patient "yes

master, eat it,” even if the food causes harm. Intermediate medicine does not flatter but knows what is beneficial. Though it might mention what is beneficial on occasion, it often remains silent and panders to the patient, usually for some gain (e.g., money). By contrast, true medicine always prescribes the truth, regardless of the patient, even rulers (ἄρχοντας) or kings (βασιλεῖς). (Perhaps, this mention of rulers and kings is a subtle indication of how Olympiodorus views his own enterprise. After all, he says later that part of the statesman’s job is to criticize corrupt regimes [40.3].)

After offering an intermediate possibility, Olympiodorus concludes that the four Athenians are not statesmen, nor mere flatterers, but auxiliaries (στρατηγοί) of an intermediate nature, offering certain benefits to the regime (42.1). His definition of these four as auxiliaries is no doubt an allusion to the spirited auxiliary class in Plato’s *Republic* (discussed above). Thus, Olympiodorus views these four Athenians as fulfilling a similar political role as that intermediate class in Plato’s city-in-speech. Such a conclusion is supported by two other descriptions used to describe these four: (1) apothecaries, who stock medicine but do not know how to cure the patients, and (2) servants (διακονικοί) to their rulers, in this case the people (32.3-4, 33.7). Regarding these auxiliaries, Socrates acknowledges certain benefits that they provided Athens: “in providing ships and walls and arsenals . . . they were cleverer than our leaders” (517c), and Olympiodorus views these benefits in terms of protection of life, a benefit resembling the goal of modern political thought. Though these benefits fall short of improving the soul, they are benefits nonetheless, as well as *necessary* for political life: “just as weavers and cobblers claim to fulfill desires, not base desire, but desire that is necessary, yet nevertheless of the body and not of the soul,” Olympiodorus says, “so too these men saved the city in warfare and met the needs of bodily desire” (32.5).

If these auxiliaries, four of the most noted leaders of Athens, were not considered true statesmen, then perhaps one has never existed. After all, examining the actions of the four Athenians, Socrates reasserts his earlier conclusion—“we know of nobody who has shown himself a good statesman in our city, past or present” (517a). Yet Olympiodorus disagrees. He offers an interesting interpretation of Socrates’ assertion that allows for the existence of true statesmen (41.17). He focuses on Socrates’ phrase “we don’t know” (ἴσμεν), which for Olympiodorus leaves open the possibility that some statesman existed earlier, or even existed somewhere other than Athens, that was unknown both to Socrates and Callicles. As an example, Olympiodorus mentions Timaeus, the Pythagorean, who ruled in statesmanlike fashion (πολιτικῶς ἤρξεν) in Italy (41.17). However, Timaeus is not the only statesman mentioned by Olympiodorus in this commentary. There are four others—Socrates, Plato, Lycurgus, and Theseus (41.3-9; 44.1-45.1). Of these five, only three are rulers and thus are of chief importance in ascertaining Olympiodorus’ understanding of the best regime.

Let us first return to Timaeus, most likely Timaeus of Locri (c. 420-380 BCE). Little, if anything, is known of this figure. As a matter of fact, some scholars question whether or not he was even a historical figure. He is best known as the primary interlocutor in Plato’s dialogue, the *Timaeus*, though he is also referenced in other classical works (e.g., Cicero, *De Re publica* I.9.16). A philosophical work is even credited to Timaeus, which survives under the title, *On the World-Soul and on Nature*, yet some view this work as an abridged version of Plato’s dialogue bearing his name. Because so little is known of this figure, what is more important than his name is Olympiodorus’ identification of him as a Pythagorean, for later in his commentary, he argues that “aristocracy was at its height among the Pythagoreans in Italy, making their citizens

upright and perfecting their souls” (46.1).<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the four Athenians, whom Olympiodorus labels as idle, cowardly, talkative, and greedy, these Pythagorean statesmen perfected themselves by means of moderation. He describes such moderation as the process of habituating themselves by “sampling the passions with just the tip of their fingers.”

To be sure, these Pythagoreans provide an interesting case worthy of further consideration, yet for now, our attention is better served examining Lycurgus and Theseus. There is more information concerning their lives both in classical literature and in Olympiodorus’ commentary, even though their records are plagued with speculation and debate. Perhaps the best source to examine then is Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, which contains extensive analysis of both. This source was widely known in late antiquity, including the Neoplatonists, and was used by Olympiodorus as the major source for their records. As a matter of fact, it is the most cited source in the commentary after Plato, Aristotle, and Homer. Beyond the volume of material, Olympiodorus goes to great lengths to defend their statesmanship. The discussion of these two statesmen is virtually limited to the 44<sup>th</sup> lecture, one of the few digressions in the entire commentary. The lecture is advertised as a commentary on one line of the dialogue (521a2), where Socrates asks Calicles to which task in the city he is being invited to perform, an art or a habitude. However, this text is never addressed. Rather, he defends the lives of these two Greek leaders. There is no evidence as to why these two particular men are addressed; it seems Roman leaders would be more on the minds of those gathered, than these ancient Greeks. Moreover, it is unclear why the digression occurs here, though it does appear as a response to a question,

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of Pythagorean politics see Kurt von Fritz, *Pythagorean Politics in Southern Italy* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1940), Edwin L. Minar, *Early Pythagorean Politics in Practice and Theory* (Baltimore, Md: Waverly Press, 1942); W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy, vol. 1: The Early Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 174-76.

perhaps raised from the audience, based on the earlier discussion on statesmanship. The question reads: “the historians speak of them [Lycurgus and Theseus] as the victims of evil deaths, implying that they received the same ungratefulness received by the four Athenians” (44.1). Such an accusation is so important to Olympiodorus that he dedicates the entire lecture to it, more space than that dedicated to defending Socrates and Plato combined (41.3-9). Olympiodorus’ defense of their lives is two-fold: first, in regards to their own virtue, and then, in terms of making their city better (i.e., moving the regime toward aristocracy). His defense includes the statesman’s own virtue because as he says, a statesman “seeks first to make himself orderly and then to make others likewise” (40.5).

## **Lycurgus**

Olympiodorus begins his response with Lycurgus (c. 800-730 BCE), denying that such a negative accusation is even made: “we say this is false, for such things are not said of Lycurgus, but instead admirable things” (44.1). Perhaps, one of the most memorable aspects of Lycurgus’ story bears this out. After establishing the laws in Sparta, Lycurgus made the kings (βασιλέων), senators (γερόντων), and citizens (πολιτῶν) swear an oath that they would not change or alter those laws, until he returned to Sparta.<sup>20</sup> He then left Sparta, resolved never to release them from his laws, and committed suicide by abstaining from food. Such a death, Lycurgus considered a service to his city, a guardian (φύλακα) of the blessings he secured for Sparta. One account mentioned by Plutarch even records that his friends cremated his body and scattered the ashes into the sea at Lycurgus’ request, forever preventing his return to Sparta (31.5). Such a death is described by Plutarch as a virtuous deed.

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<sup>20</sup> Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, in *Lives: Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1914), 29.1-5.

Beyond this particular part of Lycurgus' life, briefly noted in the commentary (45.1), Olympiodorus focuses on two different episodes to demonstrate Lycurgus' virtuous nature. First, he mentions the Pythian oracle that addressed Lycurgus as a man of divine constitution (θείων πολιτικός) (44.1). The declaration, as recorded by Plutarch, reads: "beloved of the gods, and rather god than man" (5.3). As a matter of fact, Plutarch compares Lycurgus to the Platonic demiurge, a comparison reminiscent of Olympiodorus' metaphysical speculation (discussed above): "when his principal institutions were firmly fixed in the customs of the people, and his regime could support itself, Lycurgus was filled with joyful satisfaction in the magnitude and beauty of his system of laws, just as Plato says that the deity rejoiced to see the cosmos come into existence and make its first motion" (29.1).

The second episode concerns the offer of kingship to Lycurgus (44.1). Olympiodorus states that, after his nephew died, he was given an opportunity to rule Sparta by his nephew's pregnant wife, if he only allowed her to abort the child, who was rightful heir. Refusing to take power by such unjust means, Olympiodorus records that Lycurgus was very upset with the suggestion and urged her to set the child on the king's throne. However, there are a couple of differences between his account and Plutarch's record that are of consequence. First, and perhaps least consequential, Plutarch writes that it is his brother's wife who is pregnant, not his nephew's wife. It is unclear why Olympiodorus' account differs on this point. Perhaps, he relied on a different source than Plutarch for this episode. The second difference is Lycurgus' reaction to the pregnancy. According to Plutarch, the pregnant woman approaches Lycurgus about aborting the child and becoming king (3.2-3). However, in his account, she also requests that they get married. Though he also detested her character in Plutarch's account, Lycurgus pretends to approve her proposition but implores her not to use drugs in order to induce a

miscarriage, telling her that if a male is born, he would discard the child. To be sure, the result of the action, described by Olympiodorus as just, is the same in both accounts, namely Lycurgus did not permit the child's abortion in order to acquire power, but the means he employed to achieve this end is quite different. On Olympiodorus' account, Lycurgus was forthright, urging her to carry the fetus (ἔμβρυον) to term. Plutarch, by contrast, presents a more clever account, where Lycurgus deceives the woman into having the child. Perhaps, wanting to use this episode to appeal to a vastly Christian audience, Olympiodorus hid any deception involved that would offend Christians, even if inoffensive to Greeks.

Though there is much in Lycurgus' life to support his divine nature, a problem arises in Olympiodorus' rejection of the citizens' ungratefulness, for Plutarch clearly records that the wealthy citizens were incensed at him because of certain political innovations. They publicly denounced him and then pelted him with stones (11.1-2). Quoting the historian Dioscurides (44.2), Olympiodorus concedes that he received some ungratefulness on the part of the wealthy class and later was blinded. Yet Olympiodorus goes to great lengths to downplay this ingratitude by emphasizing the remorse found in both sources. For example, immediately after the violent act against Lycurgus, the people were grieved (ἀνιαθέντες). Besides this, Olympiodorus adopts a disputed element of the story, rejected by Plutarch, namely that Lycurgus was not permanently blinded, but built the temple to Optilitis as a thanks offering for the eye's healing (11.4).

## **Theseus**

After defending Lycurgus' divine character, he turns to the more difficult defense of Theseus' life. In his discussion of Theseus, unlike that of Lycurgus, Olympiodorus emphasizes the mythical elements in the account, though Lycurgus' record is equally filled with myth and



disagreement. As a matter of fact, Plutarch says, concerning the lives of rulers like Lycurgus and Theseus, that “what lies beyond humanly accessible periods of time is full of marvels and unreality, a land of poets and fabulists, of doubt and obscurity.”<sup>21</sup> Olympiodorus needs to emphasize the disputation and mythical nature of Theseus’ account in part because Theseus’ life (and death) is not as redeemable as Lycurgus’ story. Though Lycurgus suffered ungratefulness on the part of the wealthy, they quickly became sorrowful and ashamed. Moreover, he died an honorable death in service to his city. Theseus, on the other hand, suffered prolonged periods of ungratefulness, a point with which Olympiodorus is well aware for he admits of Theseus’ expulsion (44.7). Plutarch records that, after Theseus kidnapped the famous Helen of Troy, Menestheus stirred up ingratitude toward Theseus among both the nobles, who were long time critics, and the common people (32.1-2). Theseus, and his friend Peirithous, were imprisoned for attempting to kidnap another woman for marriage—this time for Peirithous (31.2-4). Heracles, however, persuaded the king to release Theseus, who upon his return, found it impossible to rule again due to contempt and faction (35.1-3). He then fled to Scypos, where he had ancestral estates, and asked king Lycomedes to restore that land to him. Plutarch records that Lycomedes threw him down a cliff, either because he feared Theseus, or perhaps as a favor to Menestheus (35.3-5). However, in fairness to Olympiodorus, the Pythian priestess required that the Athenians return Theseus’ bones to the city and provide him an honorable burial (36.1-2). He was buried near the gymnasium of Ptolemy, and his tomb became a sanctuary for runaway slaves and others of low estate. Nevertheless, this account of ungratefulness, overlooked by Olympiodorus, calls into question Theseus’ statesmanship on his own terms.

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<sup>21</sup> Plutarch, *Theseus*, in *Lives: Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1914), 1.1.

Beyond ungratefulness, Theseus' character is in question. To be sure, Plutarch presents Theseus as a man of courage, the virtue highlighted in his account. For example, Theseus traveled to Athens by land, a more dangerous journey than by sea, intentionally modeling himself after the courageous Heracles (6.2-3). Though Olympiodorus had several stories, such as this, from which to choose, he all but limits his discussion to the Minotaur (44.5-6). Naturally, such a mythic figure has various interpretations, several of which are mentioned by both Plutarch and Olympiodorus. For example, one such interpretation says that the Minotaur was half-man, half-bull; another, that the Minotaur was Tauros, the general of Minos. Olympiodorus takes the first, more mythical account and allegorizes it. On his reading, the Minotaur signifies the bestial passions (θηριώδη πάθη) within Theseus, and the statesman, following the thread (i.e., the divine power in him), made his way through the Labyrinth, or the crooked nature of life, overcoming those passions and becoming a man of virtue. However, Olympiodorus overlooks a serious character flaw in Plutarch's record, namely Theseus' rape of numerous women, a flaw certainly repulsive to his audience. As a matter of fact, even Plutarch deems his actions as transgressions (ἡμαρτημένα).<sup>22</sup> Though it was his kidnapping (and rape) of Helen of Troy that eventually led to his imprisonment and Athenian ungratefulness, Helen was not the only victim, even if her rape was perhaps the most repulsive, for Plutarch says she was a child (νηπίαν), not yet ripened (οὐκ ἀκμάζουσσαν). Plutarch records three other victims—Ariande, Antiope, and Anaxo of Troezen.

It seems Theseus falls short of the ordered and arranged soul of the statesman. Nevertheless, in an attempt to redeem him, Olympiodorus responds that, if the statesman did

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<sup>22</sup> Plutarch, *Theseus and Romulus*, in *Lives: Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1914), 6.1.

what the myths record, then he was shameful (αἰσχρὸς), but if he was a hero (ἥρωας), then other things are symbolically conveyed by them (44.8). Assuming he was a hero, perhaps the ungratefulness and lustful wantonness, as Plutarch describes it, is not meant as historical fact but rather as allegory, imparting some other truth, like his interpretation of the Minotaur. It is not exactly clear how an allegorical interpretation of rape absolves Theseus of vice. Yet it seems that, even if an allegorical interpretation is legitimate, other less controversial statesmen could have been suggested. Even if these two figures were not suggested by Olympiodorus, it is curious why he does not provide a more honest evaluation. It seems that, by altering the sources and selectively choosing episodes from their lives, Olympiodorus wanted to defend these figures at all costs. The reason for such a desire is that these statesmen provide the best illustration for Olympiodorus' republican commitments, and by consequence, his critique of Byzantium.

### **The Best Regime**

Though Olympiodorus mentions six statesmen, only three were politicians, and these three all were intricately involved in republics. Yet he only explicitly discusses the Spartan republic constituted by Lycurgus (44.2), later calling it the best regime (ἀρίστη πολιτεία), though with certain unnamed qualifications (45.1). Thus, by leaving out Italy and Athens, it appears that he is interested in elevating the Spartan regime in particular, above these other republics.

Olympiodorus begins his account by crediting the survival of Sparta to Lycurgus' institutional framework, in contrast to those regimes constituted roughly the same time in Messene and Argos (44.2). This institutional framework is identified as a regime established "according to Plato's laws (νόμῳ)." Besides an anachronism, the claim is vague. To which laws was Olympiodorus referring? He offers one clue, stating Plato's recommendation that "not everyone in the city should be slaves (δούλος), since this leads to hatred of the rulers, but neither should everyone be

free (ἐλευθέρους), since they do not respect rulers.” Accordingly, a mixture of both slave and free is suggested. The recommendation is still unclear. In the *Laws*, Plato introduces the slave class, a class consisting even of Greeks, who were exempted from the possibility of slave status in the *Republic* (496b-c). This introduction suggests that the *Laws* were in mind. However, it is not certain that slavery was completely eradicated in the *Republic*. For though Socrates forbids the enslavement of Greeks, this statement does not remove the possibility of enslaving barbarians. Moreover, there is even a passing mention of a slave class (433c-d).

Rather than interpreting Plato’s recommendation in terms of the institution of slavery, it is better viewed as a recommendation to moderate two classes—slaves and free, as Plato does in the *Laws*. The Athenian Stranger says that there are two mothers (μητέρες) of regimes—monarchy and democracy, then recommends that it is necessary for a regime to share in both forms.<sup>23</sup> Though the language used here is different from Olympiodorus’ use of slave and free, it is not foreign to Plato’s prescription of a “mixed” regime. As a matter of fact, the Athenian Stranger uses almost identical language when concluding his discussion: “when we took a moderate example of each, of despotic rule on the one hand, and liberty (ἐλευθερίασαι) on the other, we observed that they enjoyed prosperity in the highest degree, but when they advanced, the one to the extreme of slavery (δουλείας), the other to the extreme of liberty, then there was no gain to either the one or the other” (701e).<sup>24</sup> Such an interpretation is confirmed by Olympiodorus, who interprets the recommendation of mixing slave and free, as the reason Lycurgus established the rule of the twenty-eight elders (γερόντων) (44.2). According to

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<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Laws: Books I-VI*, translated by R.G. Bury (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1926), 693d-e.

<sup>24</sup> The Athenian Stranger uses this same language earlier in his discussion, applauding the Persians under Cyrus for keeping the proper balance between slavery (δουλείας) and freedom (ἐλευθερίας) before later falling to the extremes of despotism (694a-b).

Olympiodorus, the role of these elders was to rebuke the rulers, if they acted improperly toward their citizens, as well as rebuke the people if they acted disorderly. The recommendation then did not concern the institution of slavery at all. Rather, it is a praise of the moderate “mixed” regime, a mixture that was lacking in the absolutist monarchy that was the Byzantine Empire.

Though the Spartan regime is a “mixed” regime, allowing each class to have some share in political power, the aristocratic element is no doubt the dominant class. Plutarch records the city’s deliberative proceedings, which illustrates this dominance (6.1-5). When the city assembles, only the elders (γερόντων) and kings (βασιλέων) are able to make motions, which are then accepted or rejected by the people (δῆμος). The people can amend motions. However, if it is decided that the people distorted a motion prior to accepting it, the elders and kings can prohibit the ratification and adjourn the session altogether, because the motion was changed contrary to the best interest of the state, as known and interpreted by the aristocracy. More than a century after Lycurgus, Plutarch says the Spartans imposed a curb on this aristocratic power by giving powers to the ephors (ἐφόρων), literally “ones who oversee” (7.1-2). Theopompus, the king who instituted these powers, believed that this lessening of aristocratic power provided longevity to the regime.

Strangely, however, Olympiodorus alters the meaning of this obscure passage. Instead of discussing it in terms of a curb on aristocratic power, Olympiodorus says that the city was made “smaller, and because of this, more secure.” It is difficult to know exactly why he does not interpret this in regards to distribution of power and alters its meaning to geographical retraction. Perhaps, in contrast to Plutarch, he believes this move a misstep for republicanism. More likely, however, the discussion of Sparta becoming “smaller and thus more secure” is an important alteration, indicative of republicanism, and in contrast to empire, which emphasizes expansion.

Even here, in a discussion concerning Spartan institutionalism, Olympiodorus introduces an out-of-place comment on foreign policy, highlighting again his emphasis on warfare.

Having examined Lycurgus' transformation of a monarchy into an aristocratic republic, the reason for the somewhat forced use of Lycurgus and Theseus is better understood. It is no accident that, of all the great rulers discussed, both Greek and Roman, in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, these two are the only ones who actually give up their kingship to establish a republic. Plutarch records that Lycurgus resigned (παράδοσις) a kingdom, making himself a "private person though he was a king," and setting "righteousness about a kingdom" (*Lycurgus and Numa*, 1.1-2). Regarding Theseus, Plutarch writes that he deviated from the character of kingly rule toward democracy (*Theseus and Romulus*, 2.1). Perhaps, like the great statesmen of the past, who laid aside their monarchic power to constitute republics, Olympiodorus is provocatively suggesting that the emperor lay aside his prerogatives and move the regime toward aristocracy, that is to say republicanism. At least, Olympiodorus is advising his students, perhaps future statesmen themselves to move the regime toward republicanism. There is no question that he argues that a statesman is needed to accomplish this political development. In his discussion of the "good tyrant" found in the *Laws* (709e-712a), Olympiodorus defines tyranny (τυραννίς) as an overturning of laws (17.7). Yet he admits of two types—an evil type that overturns well-established laws and a good tyranny that overturns badly established laws. Thus, he appears to advise the emperor, or some future statesman, to overturn the laws of empire and, like Lycurgus, constitute a new republican regime.

Yet beyond a general commitment to the moderating effect of the "mixed" regime, why did Olympiodorus critique Byzantium in particular? The reason lies in the expansionist military policies of Justinian, a reason which comes as no surprise given that these policies are some of

the best-known aspects of Justinian's rule.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, his desire to expand is rooted in the very essence of empire itself. As suggested in the introduction, territorial expansion is one of the key points of contention between classical political philosophy and the politics of empire. Classical political philosophy favored republicanism, and at the core of this republican theory is a commitment to like-mindedness (ὁμόνοιά).<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, Xenophon writes that "it (like-mindedness) is considered by the cities to be the greatest good."<sup>27</sup> One of the chief reasons for the lack of like-mindedness (and the introduction of faction) is the desire for luxury and by consequence the inequality of possessions. Thus, many cities sought to limit that desire. For example, Olympiodorus mentions two such innovations by Lycurgus, the first of which is the requirement that citizens, regardless of class, share common tables. The political benefit of this institution, according to both Plutarch and Olympiodorus, was the sentiment of friendship and a loss of the desire for wealth, for they could not enjoy their luxury at a common table. Another

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<sup>25</sup> It is not clear that this criticism was composed after the attempts at expansion. The two major expeditions took place between 533 and 554 CE, and Neoplatonist scholars generally date the authorship of this commentary as early as 525 CE (Westerink, 76, 211). However, as suggested by Jackson, et al, such an early date is merely guesswork. It is likely that the commentary was written later. First, in all possibility, Olympiodorus just took over the headship of the Alexandrian academy shortly before 529 CE, which makes such an early date unlikely. Moreover, his other commentaries were composed years later, such as *On Meteorologica* (565 CE), and more importantly, *On Alcibiades*, composed just before 560 CE, a commentary on the dialogue that was studied just prior to the *Gorgias*. Even if the commentary on the *Gorgias* was composed prior to Justinian's major military expeditions, Olympiodorus' republican critique of empire and expansionism remains, and he appears more as a prophet foretelling the destructive tendencies of imperialism.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of republicanism, see Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 1984); Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1988); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Paul A. Rahe, *Republics, Ancient and Modern: The Ancient Regime in Classical Greece* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2002). There is a fundamental disagreement in this literature however. Some (e.g., Appleby, Pocock, Skinner) see the differences between classical republicanism and more modern incarnations as minimal, whereas others (e.g., Pangle, Rahe) see these differences as fundamental.

<sup>27</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 4.4.16. See also Plato, *Laws*, 739c.

innovation mentioned by Olympiodorus continues this equalizing measure. Lycurgus banned gold and silver as material for coinage, allowing only bronze. Plutarch tells of this same innovation, yet instead of bronze coins, he says that iron was used (9.1). The consequence of this change was not only the immediate loss of the metal's value but it made foreign trade something of a difficulty, since the new currency was not usually accepted in foreign cities. In order to achieve such like-mindedness, classical political philosophy recognized that certain measures like this were necessary. Another such measure was territorial limits. In the *Politics* (1326a-1327a), Aristotle writes, "Law is a form of order, and good law must necessarily mean good order, but an excessively large number cannot participate in order." The city then should be large enough to ensure self-sufficiency (e.g., tools, crops), yet small enough that it can be easily surveyed (i.e., taken in on one view), which according to Aristotle, makes it easy to defend. By contrast, empire conveys the general notion of monarchic rule in an expansive territory, and for the Romans, this territory was defined as universal.<sup>28</sup> According to David Armitage, at its height, the Roman Empire encompassed the Mediterranean *oikoumene*, defined by Greek geographers as the extent of the terrestrial universe.<sup>29</sup> This connection between empire and Roman expansion is evidence by Polybius (c. 203-120 BCE).<sup>30</sup> Unlike the republican notion of greatness (i.e., like-mindedness), Polybius defines the greatness of empire in terms of territory

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<sup>28</sup> Though *imperium* was essentially tied to territory at least by the reign of Julius Caesar, J.S. Richardson warns that this strong connection between *imperium* and territory was not always the case. The term originally concerned authority given to the magistrate on behalf of the citizens, whether domestic (*imperium domi*) or foreign (*imperium militia*). "Imperium Romanum: Empire and the Language of Power," in *Theories of Empire, 1450-1800*, edited by David Armitage (Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998), 1-9.

<sup>29</sup> "Introduction," in *Theories of Empire, 1450-1800*, xv. For another excellent analysis of empire and its relation to universal territory, see Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*, edited by Michael Franz (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> *Histories*, translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (New York, N.Y.: Bloomington, 1962). Tacitus provides a very similar understanding of the Roman Empire in his *Annals*, translated by A.J. Woodman (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004).



(1.2). In contrast to previous empires, such as the Persians, who could not venture beyond the bounds of Asia, Rome was able to conquer virtually the whole inhabited world (πᾶσαν οἰκουμένην), thus demonstrating their preeminence (ὑπεροχήν).

This essential connection between empire and universal territory played an important role in Justinian's reign. He took over an empire that had been divided and, over the course of its history, lost much of its territory. Believing he was under divine commission to restore the empire to its ancient boundaries, Justinian engaged in several military expeditions, regaining much of the lost territory. He inherited continuing hostilities with the bordering Sassanid Empire (Persia), but roughly five years into his reign, he achieved an "eternal peace" (532 CE) with that empire, which ironically lasted less than a decade. Having secured relations with the only real threat to his empire, Justinian looked to expand by conquering the weaker regimes to west. He conquered the Vandals in North Africa (533-34 CE) and engaged in a struggle with the Goths in Italy (535-554 CE), a struggle that lasted roughly eighteen years, and even though Justinian was ultimately victorious, most scholars conclude that it cost the empire in many ways.<sup>31</sup> Such expansionism is criticized, not only by modern historians, but also by contemporaries of Olympiodorus. Perhaps, the most noted critic of the expansion was a historian employed by Justinian himself, who followed his chief general (Belisarius) on military exploits. In his *History of the Wars*, Procopius writes, "since he [Justinian] is by nature a meddler and a lover of those things which in no way belong to him, and is not able to abide by the settled order of things, he

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<sup>31</sup>For a discussion and analysis of Justinian's military exploits, see A.D. Lee, "The Empire at War," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, edited by Michael Maas (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 113-133; Charles Pazdernik, "Justinianic Ideology and the Power of the Past," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, 185-214; J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius to the Death of Justinian*, vols. 1-2 (New York, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1958); J.A.S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1996).

has conceived the desire of seizing upon the whole earth, and become eager to acquire for himself each and every kingdom.”<sup>32</sup>

Much like his republican commitments, Olympiodorus hides his critique of the Byzantine Empire, but this time not in his discussion of statesmanship. It is in his criticism of Athenian imperialism. In evaluating the four Athenians (40.2), he compares the Athenian regime to a band of robbers, who, though observing justice toward each other, commit injustice abroad for their own self-interest. Gleaning again from Plato’s *Republic* (351c), Olympiodorus concludes that, for injustice to exist, justice itself must exist, in this case in the form of mutual protection. However, he takes the analogy further than Plato and thus gives greater insight into the nature of “Athenian” injustice (and by implication Byzantium). Olympiodorus says that robbers evaluate the strength of their potential victim and only prey on the weak, fearing that a strong victim might kill them. Likewise, he says, the four Athenians evaluated their potential victims and only assaulted the weaker. It is not clear exactly which “weaker” regimes Olympiodorus has in mind, but such a sentiment is nowhere clearer recorded than the “Melian Dialogue” in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, even though none of these four Athenians had any direct part in the massacre on the small island of Melos.<sup>33</sup> Echoing the language used by Olympiodorus, the Athenian ambassadors to Melos claim that the standard of justice depends on the “equality of power to compel” and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept. Thus, the Athenians reject justice as a mediating concept, for the Athenians are superior, not equal to the Melians, and thus defend their expansion on the basis

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<sup>32</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars: Books I and II*, translated by H.B. Dewing (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1914), 2.2.6.

<sup>33</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War: Books 5-6*, translated by C.F. Smith (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1921), 5.89.

of self-interest. Perhaps, like Athens preying on the weak Melians, Olympiodorus accuses Justinian of preying on the Vandals and the Goths.

Critical of this expansionism, Olympiodorus reintroduces Pericles to buttress his criticism. (The reason for his elevation of Pericles, discussed above, is now clear.) In an earlier lecture (38.4), Olympiodorus mentions an exception to this general Athenian imperialistic attitude, namely his objection to a Sicilian expedition. From whence does Pericles' objection come? It is not found in the more famous Sicilian expedition that immediately follows the "Melian Dialogue" for by then Pericles was dead and only Nicias opposed the war (6.1-24). Rather, it comes years earlier, recorded by Plutarch (*Pericles*, 20.2-3) and implicitly referenced by Thucydides (1.144). Plutarch claims that Pericles often followed the whims of the citizens. However, on occasion, he writes, Pericles did not comply with their "passion for foreign conquest," including their desire for Sicily. Such an objection might be interpreted as a sign that Pericles (and the Athenians) looked to justice as a guide for foreign affairs. Yet again Olympiodorus interprets this objection, not in terms of justice, but self-interest for, he writes, "the objection was not given because it wronged the Sicilians but rather the Athenians." In other words, Pericles objected to the conquering of Sicily, because it was in their best interest, not because it was unjust. In contrast to expansion, Plutarch describes Pericles' policies in terms of *consolidation*: "he unsparingly pruned and cut down their ever burning fancies for a multitude of undertakings; and directed their power for the most part to securing and consolidating what they already had, supposing it is enough to keep the Spartans in check" (*Pericles*, 21.1). Plutarch then demonstrates the prudence of such restraint. In 446 BCE, the Euboeans revolted; the Megarians defected to the Spartans soon after; and under the leadership of their king, the Spartans sent an army to Attica (22.1). All three of these aggressions against Athens regarded immediate military

action. To be sure, these actions were costly to Athens, but they were able to restore order and maintain the regime because resources had not been exhausted by the aggressive expansion desired earlier by the Athenian citizens. Such self-interest receives praise (ἐπαινοῦμεν) by Olympiodorus for achieving a necessary, intermediate good, namely saving the body, even if Pericles did not save their souls. Olympiodorus elevated Pericles for his prudence, even if he ultimately does not see him as a statesman, much as he elevated Miltiades for fighting on land and not sea (see above).

It seems Olympiodorus found Byzantium in a similarly volatile situation. Even though Justinian acquired a peace treaty with their bordering enemy, his confidence was misplaced, for they were back at war with the Sassanid Empire in less than a decade. Even after acquiring those western provinces (and virtually depleting the empire's resources), they did not remain under imperial rule very long. As a matter of fact, much of Italy was lost only three years after Justinian's death. Moreover, Constantinople suffered several barbarian revolts after Justinian's expansion. Consistent with his republican commitments, Olympiodorus believed that Byzantium, instead of expanding its borders, should have made the empire "smaller, and thus, more secure," imitating the statesmanship of Lycurgus. Thus, he favored the military strategy of Sparta, described by Thucydides as "slow and without innovation," as opposed to the expansionist military attitude of Athens (8.96). It is clearer then why Olympiodorus elevates Sparta above Italy and especially Athens.

However, this conclusion does not necessitate that Olympiodorus forgot the virtue of courage or favored Spartan strategy *in all circumstances*. To the contrary, he credits Lycurgus for instituting various contests (ἀγῶνας) and gymnastic events (γυμνάσια) (44.2). Of course, Sparta is well-known for producing great warriors. As a matter of fact, this production was the

city's very purpose, as described in the *Laws*, and to this end, Lycurgus made citizen education (or training) of chief importance. From birth to adulthood, their training, according to Plutarch, was calculated to make them obey commands, endure hardships, and conquer in battle (16.6). Part of this training included these various athletic contests and gymnastic events. Such an end was so important to Lycurgus that he even required women to engage in athletic events (e.g., wrestling, discus, and javelin) in order that, as Plutarch says, "the fruit of their wombs might have a vigorous root in vigorous bodies" (14.1-2). Olympiodorus' admiration for these Spartan warriors was established earlier during his discussion of Athenian military strategy, where he offered the Spartan three-hundred as the quintessential example of the courageous soul. Yet as stated earlier, Olympiodorus qualified his praise for the Spartan regime and was not oblivious to Plato's critique of it in the *Laws*. Olympiodorus uses the Athenian Statesman's critique of Sparta as his primary example. The chief criticism of the regime was that it viewed victory over its enemies as the supreme good (40.3). This is no doubt the unnamed qualification Olympiodorus had concerning Sparta, which he called the best regime (ἀρίστη πολιτεία).

Just as his critique of Byzantine expansionism is not a rejection of the need for a vigorous military; it is also not an outright, absolute rejection of expansion. Though he elevates the Spartan regime and its slow military demeanor, he also invokes the wisdom of Pericles, who was perhaps chiefly responsible for the Athenian imperial attitude, even if he prudentially recommended not expanding while at war with Sparta. Thus, Olympiodorus is not necessarily forbidding expansionism in all situations, but rather in *this* circumstance, with the potential enemy to the east and the constant threat of revolt, expansionism to the west was ill-advised, requiring Byzantium to possess the temperament of Sparta, not Athens.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSTITUTING THE BEST REGIME: MYTH

After reconstructing Olympiodorus' understanding of the best regime, it is important to ascertain exactly how this regime is implemented. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Olympiodorus offers two models of aristocracy. The first is a divinely-modeled monarchy, governed by a philosopher-king; the second is an aristocratic republic. In both instances, the statesman, who moves the regime toward aristocracy, must reconstitute the regime, that is to say, he must radically transform the very nature of governance. The means by which the statesman accomplishes this transformation is through the consent of those governed. In other words, the statesman does not coerce the citizens, but rather persuades them to establish an aristocracy, whether a divinely-modeled monarchy or an aristocratic republic. How is consent garnered by the statesman? According to Olympiodorus (0.5), it is garnered through the instrumental cause of political happiness, namely education (*παιδεία*) and habit (*ἥθη*), which serve as tools in constructing the best regime. These terms are ambiguous still—what type of education is required? Who is educated? What types of habits are inculcated? And what is further frustrating is that nowhere in the commentary does he elaborate on the instrumental cause. As a matter of fact, much like the material cause (discussed in the previous chapter), the instrumental cause is not incorporated into the overall structure of the dialogue; these are the only two causes of political happiness that are strangely excluded from the structure of his commentary.<sup>1</sup> It seems Olympiodorus hid both causes because of their tension with the two essential characteristics of Byzantium (discussed in the introduction). Olympiodorus' preference for

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<sup>1</sup> The creative cause is discussed in the first portion of the commentary; the formal cause, in lectures 15-24. The final cause, as well as the paradigmatic cause, is discussed in the last half of the commentary.

republicanism conflicts with empire, and as will be shown, his understanding of the instrumental cause conflicts with the claims of Christianity.

### **The Instrumental Cause**

What specifically are the means of education and habituation? It is clear that, for Olympiodorus, philosophy cannot be the means of educating, or habituating, the citizens to aristocracy in part because philosophy is the creative cause (*ποιητικὸν αἴτιον*). To be sure, the creative cause is closely connected to the Aristotelian “efficient cause,” which makes it seem as though it is instrumental. Yet Olympiodorus separates Aristotle’s efficient cause into two distinct causes, the creative and the instrumental. To get a better understanding of their relationship, he provides a helpful illustration—the construction of a building. Here, the creative cause is the builder, and the instrumental cause is a “saw or axe,” literally the instruments used by the builder to construct the building. The statesman, the “builder” of the best regime, uses the tools of habit and education, not philosophy, in the construction of the city.

This conclusion seems somewhat strange, especially given the fact that philosophy provides insight into the best regime and Olympiodorus prefers philosophy. In short, philosophy is not the instrument because the city is not the place for philosophy (discussed further in chapter six). The reason is because not all can philosophize, Olympiodorus argues. He defines philosophy in terms of demonstration (*ἀποδεικτικῆ*) with a focus on universals, but says only few are capable of this level of thought. At one point (6.2), Olympiodorus criticizes Gorgias for not demonstrating his claims and for not using universals in his speech (a critique discussed in chapter five). Yet the commentator concludes he was unable to do these things because he

constantly composed his speeches for the many, who are incapable of being engaged in this manner.

How then can the statesman engage the many, if not philosophy? In an interesting passage (20.2), Olympiodorus comments on Socrates' engaging the many (πλήθει), an event found in the *Cleitophon*. Here, Cleitophon recounts the experience of hearing Socrates' lecture, wherein he rebuked those present for pursuing wealth and not virtue (407a-e). According to Cleitophon, Socrates sounded like a "god on a tragic stage." What does Cleitophon mean by this description? Olympiodorus provides a hint. Immediately following his discussion of this passage, he focuses on Socrates' response to Polus' fantastical story in the *Gorgias*: "you were trying to make my flesh creep," Socrates says (473d). Olympiodorus interprets this phrase to mean: "you frighten me like a child and decline to examine me," that is, seek to demonstrate my error. At this point in the dialogue, Polus attempts to refute Socrates' claim that the person who escapes punishment for injustice is more wretched than the person who is punished. He uses a fantastical story, describing in explicit terms, one who is given extreme torture. This story preys on emotion to persuade as opposed to intelligent demonstration. Olympiodorus then declares that reason divine sayings (θεῖοι λόγοι) and powerful charms (ἐπωδαὶ δυνάμεναι) are handed down is to put our passions to sleep so we "remain undisturbed in our bed"<sup>2</sup> (20.3).<sup>3</sup> Just like

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<sup>2</sup> This last line is an allusion to Euripides' *Orestes* (258), where Orestes is frightened at seeing the furies, and Electra calms him, saying "remain undisturbed for you only imagine them." See also *Phaedo* 77e-78a. In this passage, Socrates responds to a "childish fear" concerning the immortality of the soul. Cebes agrees, saying "assume that we have that fear, Socrates, and try to convince us; or rather, do not assume that we are afraid, but perhaps there is a child within us, who has such fears. Let us try to persuade him not to fear death as if it were a hobgoblin." Referring to music (or myth), Socrates responds, "you must sing charms to him every day until you charm away his fear."

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that this declaration is found earlier in the Greek text (20.2). The translators moved this declaration from its earlier location and placed it with his comment on Socrates' claim, "you frighten me like a child." The line certainly makes sense here but illuminates the use of myth, if left in its original position. In the



Polus' use of story, parents rely on divine sayings and charms to persuade their children, instead of examining them like mature adults. Thus, Socrates was compared to a "god on a tragic stage" for he was not employing philosophical demonstration but myth to charm the passions of the many.<sup>4</sup> It is possible then for the philosopher to dialogue (διαλεχθῆναι) with the many, but not in a demonstrative way for they are "unable to listen to demonstration," Olympiodorus says. This reference to the *Cleitophon* suggests tragedy, or myth, as a means to educate the citizenry.

Beyond this passing suggestion in the *Cleitophon*, Olympiodorus turns to the *Republic* to find the tools of the statesman (41.2). He writes, "Plato urges us to achieve this [an aristocratic regime] by means of music (μουσικῆς) and gymnastics (γυμναστικῆς)." This reference is to an early passage in that dialogue. Thus, after bringing luxury into the "city of pigs," Socrates argues that guardians, later deemed as auxiliaries, must be reared in order to expand the borders and acquire this luxury (as well as defend the city) (*Republic* 372d-374e). Socrates then turns to their education, in order to ensure that they are "gentle to their own and cruel to their enemies." He defines this education in terms of gymnastics for the body and music for the soul (376e). He determines that music is the first element of education, particularly myths (μύθοις). To be sure, music has a much broader scope than myth, but Olympiodorus limits his discussion of music to myth. By the means of myth, he says, Plato brought people little by little toward the best regime. It is unclear exactly why he limits his discussion to myth, but if he is concerned with the political circumstances of his day (as suggested in chapter four), this limitation is perhaps because myth, that is to say, religion, is one of the critical issues of his day. Moreover, it is curious as to why

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Greek text, his comment reads as follows: "For we should not construct demonstrative arguments and not [argue] by appeal to the many. That's why divine sayings and powerful charms are handed down." Cf. 5.3.

<sup>4</sup> Olympiodorus also argues that philosophy charms the passions as well, but this type of charm is not for the many, but the few (39.8). Thus, something besides philosophy is needed to persuade the many to move toward aristocracy.

he never references gymnastics again. Granted, it might be because of his emphasis on the soul as opposed to the body, but again, it is just as likely that he ignores it because of the circumstances of Byzantium. After all, gymnastics is essential to his regime, especially given his focus on and praise of the Spartan virtue—courage, discussed in the previous chapter.

### Myth

Myth then is used by the statesman to move a regime toward aristocracy. It persuades as well as inculcates virtuous habits in the citizenry. But before examining this instrumental role, it is important to examine Olympiodorus' understanding of the nature of myth. In the 46<sup>th</sup> lecture (46.3), he defines myth simply as “a false statement imaging truth” (λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν), a similar definition to the *Republic* (377d), where myth is described as false (ψευδεις) and a lie (ψευδηται). The verb “imaging” has two referents—nature and soul. Myths provide concrete images that educate the student in invisible, or unseen, divinities, as well as inhabitants of Hades, heroes, and other such men of the past. Olympiodorus makes an interesting parallel between the visible in nature and the images of myth. He argues that it is from the visible things in nature that the invisible is inferred. For example, given the orderliness of our bodies, he says, philosophy demonstrates that an incorporeal power governs them, as likewise a “moving power” (δύναμις κινητική) controls the heavenly bodies. Images of myth, in similar fashion, point toward higher realities. However, unlike the natural world where the *order* of the corporeal leads to the incorporeal, it is the *absurdity* of the mythic images that lead to the invisible. Olympiodorus provides numerous examples of such absurdities, such as Zeus' desire to procreate with Hera on the ground without retiring to the bedchamber and Achilles' insolence toward Agamemnon (both used in the *Republic* [389e-390b]). Olympiodorus (and the Neoplatonists in general) denies that these myths should be taken literally or on their surface

level. Rather, evidenced by their absurdity, myths point to a concealed teaching. Olympiodorus describes this concealment in religious language (46.6): “for just as in temples (ἱεροῖς), sacred instruments (ἱερατικὰ ὄργανα) and mysteries (μυστήρια) are behind curtains (παραπέτασμα), in order that the unworthy (ἀνάξιοι) do not seem them indiscriminately, so here too myths are curtains (προκαλύμματά) for doctrines (δόγματα), in order that they are not uncovered or accessible to anyone.”<sup>5</sup> Again, this emphasis on the concealing nature of myth seems to come directly from the *Republic* (378d-e), where Socrates describes some myths as having a hidden sense (ὑπονοιας). For Olympiodorus, myths are symbolic (συμβολική) and thus in need of an allegorical interpretation to obtain the concealed meaning.<sup>6</sup>

This symbolic nature is evidenced in the mythic conception of time. In the myth of the afterlife (*Gorgias*), Pluto reports to Zeus that judgments are being misappropriated because judges and those judged are clothed. Zeus then issues a decree that both parties appear naked. Though this myth expresses a movement forward in time from imperfection to perfection, Olympiodorus argues that this elapse should not be taken literally and that there are always proper and improper judgments in every age. The time of judgment prior to Zeus’ decree corresponds to earthly judges, who often make improper judgments, either out of emotional involvement or outright deceit; the period after the decree is illustrative of divine judges, who are incorporeal and judge properly. Thus, the true meaning is hidden behind the literal reading of the myth and must be uncovered through allegorical interpretation.

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<sup>5</sup> For virtually an identical claim, see Proclus, *In Remp*, I.74.

<sup>6</sup> See Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

His discussion of myth as a “false statement imaging truth” points to the very tension with Byzantium for he asserts the superiority of philosophy over myth. In terms of cognition, myth is not knowledge, nor is it belief, but imagination, the lowest level of cognition (12.3). These levels of cognition are derived from the *Republic* (509c-511e). There, Socrates lists four cognitive activities of the soul: intellect (νόησιν), thinking (διάνοιαν), belief (πίστιν), and imagination (εἰκασίαν). In the figure, the lowest level of clarity is the realm of images, illustrated as shadows of objects, which corresponds to imagination. The next level still concerns the realm of images. However, instead of the shadows of objects, this level is illustrated by the objects themselves. This level of cognition is belief. The third level is mathematical shapes, projecting mathematical hypotheses, which corresponds to thinking. The fourth, and final, level concerns the ideas themselves, which corresponds to intellect. Thus, myth simply is the image of the higher truth of the intellect, acquired through philosophic demonstration. The tension with Byzantium arises because Olympiodorus understands myths specifically in religious terms. Thus, the constant references to the divine are no accident but demonstrate that, for him, myth is essentially related to religion (as it is in Plato).

Olympiodorus’ understanding of philosophy as superior is evidenced not only by his relegation of myth to the realm of imagination but his ironic description of philosophy. It is philosophy, the hidden truth behind the myth, which is “sacred.” This description helps explain his conclusion that “we must not linger over myth, but instead turn our attention to the best regime . . . for there is nothing greater than this” (44.7). Thus, the highest form of cognition is philosophy, not religion, in this case, the Christian religion.

This understanding of myth points to the deep tension between philosophy and religion.<sup>7</sup> As illustrated in the introduction, there was a tension between Neoplatonic theurgic religion and Christianity, but it might seem that the tension between philosophy and Christianity is reconcilable. After all, Christians frequently attended the Neoplatonist academies, and some of the most influential Christian theologians in the early church were students of Platonism (e.g., Augustine). Yet the tension is fundamental. Christianity elevates faith above reason, whereas philosophy maintains the superiority of reason over faith. To be sure, reason was incorporated into Christian theology in its earliest phases. It was used to expand on the revelation given by Christ and his apostles and used to articulate that revelation in doctrinal creeds. But these doctrines originated from private revelation, which can be expounded by reason but not demonstratively proven. Ultimately, Christians assent to this private revelation by belief or faith. Reason then is an *instrument* of faith, which in many ways is the opposite conclusion of philosophy. Philosophy refused to accept convention, or traditional wisdom. No belief was held sacred. The philosopher is the questioner, who inquires about all things in search of the truth. This superiority of reason was maintained by the Neoplatonist tradition and was even applied to philosophic tradition. Olympiodorus writes that, “if someone asks a man of understanding if the soul is immortal, he is not swept along by external forces so as to say, ‘Yes, immortal, that’s

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<sup>7</sup> Though this tension between philosophy and religion is acknowledged from the beginnings of philosophy (as discussed in the introduction), some recent thinkers argue that this tension is, at best, overstated and, at worse, non-existent. For example, Eric Voegelin is critical of this distinction between philosophy and religion. He sees these two expressions of truth as essentially the same. Both philosophy and religion (improper terms to Voegelin) are “theophanic” events, where an individual experiences the whole of reality, including the divine. Though he argues they are essentially the same, he does admit that these two modes of expression possess different emphases. Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, edited by Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 139-76; “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Published Essays, 1966-1985*, vol. 12, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 315-375.

what Plato and Aristotle think.’ Instead, he tries on his own initiative to put forward demonstrations of his own” (6.1). If these philosophical claims could not be demonstrated, then they were rejected.

Yet beyond this foundational tension, there are at least three specific points that are irreconcilable, which are recognized even by those who attempt to harmonize philosophy and Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, the best source to introduce these points is a letter written by Synesius of Cyrene (the student of Hypatia) on his consecration as bishop of Ptolemais in 410 CE. In this letter, addressed to his brother, Synesius expresses humility in being called to this priestly office but expresses an unworthiness of character, but in the middle of the letter, he gets to the most important difficulty, namely his philosophical education. He acknowledges three irreconcilable points. First, he says, “I can never persuade myself that the soul is of more recent origin than the body.” Second, “never would I admit,” he says, “that the world and the parts which make it must perish.” And finally, “This resurrection, which is an object of common belief, is nothing for me but a sacred and mysterious allegory.” Though he acknowledges that these doctrines are part of the Christian religion, he says that he will not accept the position, if he is required to assent to these doctrines, for he says, “it is difficult, if not quite impossible, that convictions should be shaken, which have entered the soul through knowledge to the point of demonstration.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Though there are a few exceptions to this generality in the history of Christian theology. For example, Origen was heavily influenced by Platonism, most likely the Middle Platonist, Numenius. Origen held several philosophical concepts that were controversial and later rejected by the Church, concepts such as pre-existence of souls, transmigration of souls, as well as the denial of eternal punishment. See Origen, *On First Principles* (New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1966); “Commentary on Matthew,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 9*, edited by Allan Menzies (Peabody, Ma: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> It is worth pointing out the similarities between Synesius’ understanding of the relationship between philosophy and religion with Olympiodorus’ understanding. Synesius explicitly declares that philosophy is for the few who are capable of demonstration, whereas religion is for the “common people.” He writes, “What can there be in common between the ordinary man and philosophy? Divine truth should remain hidden, but the vulgar need a

## The Question of Theurgy

Olympiodorus maintains the tension between philosophy and religion, as well as the superiority of philosophy, though not all Neoplatonists appear to do so. Iamblichus acknowledges his exception to the larger Platonic tradition: “Plotinus, on the other hand, and most Platonists, consider the most perfect purification to be a divestment of the emotions and of the knowledge that makes use of images, a disdain for all opinion, a dissociation from thought involved with matter . . . and an assimilation of the thinking subject with the object of its thought.”<sup>10</sup> This larger Platonic position is best summarized by Porphyry, who in responding to the theurgic call to sacrifice to the gods, writes, “The best offering to the gods is a pure intellect and a soul unaffected by passion.”<sup>11</sup> A similar elevation is evidence by Proclus, who writes that it is faith, not intellect, which unites us with the gods. At least two influential Neoplatonists (Iamblichus and Proclus) argue that there is a “faith” higher than philosophy—theurgy.<sup>12</sup>

Iamblichus writes, “It is not any concept which joins theurgists to the gods, for what would

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different system. I shall never cease repeating that I think the wise man, to the extent that necessity allows, should not force his opinions upon others, nor allow others to force theirs upon him.” Though he deems philosophy superior to religion, he acknowledges the need for religion, just as Olympiodorus does. Synesius writes, “The philosophic mind, albeit the discernor of truth, admits the employment of falsehood, for the light is to truth what the eye is to the mind. Just as the eye would be injured by an excess of light, and just as darkness is more helpful to those of weak eyesight, even so do I consider that the false may be beneficial to the populace, and the truth injurious to those not strong enough to gaze steadfastly on the radiance of the real being.” “Letter 105: On Becoming a Bishop,” in *Letters of Synesius of Cyrene*, translated by A. Fitzgerald (London, 1926).

<sup>10</sup> Iamblichus, *de Anima* (Stobaeum 1,454,10-22), quoted in Richard Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200-600 AD: A Sourcebook*, vol. 1 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 381.

<sup>11</sup> Porphyry, *Abstinence*, 2.61, quoted in Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200-600 AD*, 373.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of Neoplatonic theurgy, see Polymnia Athanassiadi, “The Chaldaean Oracles: Theology and Theurgy,” in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, edited by Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1999); H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (Paris, 1978); Gregory Shaw, “Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus,” *Traditio* 41 (1985): 1-28; *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1995); Anne Sheppard, “Proclus’ Attitude toward Theurgy,” *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 212-24.

prevent those who engage in contemplative philosophy from having theurgic union with the gods? . . . . [T]he fulfillment of ineffable actions which act by divine means, surpassing all intellection . . . establish theurgic union.”<sup>13</sup> For if philosophy joined theurgists with the gods, he says, then philosophy would unite philosophers with the gods. However, only theurgy unites with the gods, divine works that are not performed through the intellect, but surpass the intellect. At its core, theurgy is religious ritual, hence its name, which literally means *theion ergon* “the work of the gods.” This divine activity is in contrast to theology— *theos logos* “a discourse about the gods.”

However, recent scholars, such as Anne Sheppard, argue that these theurgic Neoplatonists maintained two forms of theurgy. The “higher” form is a mystical union with the divine that is the summation of dialectic contemplation. The “lower” form is religious ritual that seeks to unify those, who engage in these pious activities, with the divine. These rituals sought to bring about the divine in a material object or a human being. Thus, in terms of matter, the divine was made apparent in objects such as stones, plants, statues, and animals. The divine was also manifest in human beings through the act of divination.<sup>14</sup> These two forms are evidenced in Proclus’ discussion of faith.<sup>15</sup> There, he distinguishes between two types of faith. The first type

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<sup>13</sup> Iamblichus, *de Mysteriis*, 2.11, quoted in Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200-600 AD*, 381.

<sup>14</sup> Like other elements of Neoplatonism, this lower form of theurgy influenced some Christian Neoplatonists in terms of a theology of the sacraments. For example, pseudo-Dionysius writes, “And in fact not even with regard to the sacramental rites of the holiest mysteries, do those initiated in holy things, the priests of our tradition or of the tradition under the law, refrain from symbols which are appropriate to the divine. . . . [A]lso we see . . . Jesus himself speaking about God in parables, handing down the theurgic mysteries by means of the symbolic furnishing of a table.” Letter 9.1, quoted in Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200-600 AD*, 390.

<sup>15</sup> *Platonic Theology*, 1.25, quoted in John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists* (London: Kyle Cathie Limited, 1991), 238-39.



is similar to that found in the *Republic*, that is to say it is about sensible things and lower than knowledge; the second type is higher than knowledge itself. He concludes then that all things are saved through either amatory mania, divine philosophy, or theurgic power, which is more excellent than all human wisdom. These few Neoplatonists argued minimally that philosophy was insufficient in and of itself to achieve purification, or more strongly, that theurgy was superior to philosophy. If this interpretation is correct, then the superiority of philosophy is not compromised, even if some Neoplatonists' use religious language to describe the state achieved after philosophic contemplation. As far as religious ritual is concerned, it maintains its lower state to philosophy, even in the philosophy of Iamblichus and Proclus.

It should not be overlooked that Olympiodorus mentions theurgy, even if just once. In his hierarchy of virtues (*Commentary on the Phaedo*, 8.2), he places paradigmatic virtues, which consists of theurgy, higher than theoretical virtue. He makes this elevation clear by claiming that the object of philosophy is to make us intelligent, whereas theurgy unites us with the intellectual principle and conforms our activity to the ideals. However, this virtue is the higher form of theurgy, not its lower, religious counterpart.

As far as the emphasis on theurgy by Iamblichus and Proclus, the political circumstances of their age should not be overlooked. The emphasis on faith might be their prudential response to the emergence of Christianity and the corresponding withering of pagan religion. Prior to Iamblichus, Plotinus and Porphyry critiqued religion and gave clear preference for philosophy. It is only with Iamblichus and Proclus that an emphasis on theurgy was made. As pagan religion was increasingly removed from the public and replaced by Christianity's "atheistic" religion, Neoplatonists saw the instrumental means of a healthy regime fading. As a matter of fact, after the statue of Athena was removed from the Parthenon (482-484 CE), Proclus claims that the

goddess appeared to him in a dream, asking him to prepare his house for her (*Life of Proclus*, 30). Pagan religion served as the empire's civil religion for decades but was being replaced by a religion unfit for this public task (discussed below).

It also should not be overlooked that Iamblichus used a pseudonym to compose his famous treatise on theurgy. Iamblichus writes, not in his own name, not even as a philosopher, but as an Egyptian priest—Abammon, the supposed teacher of Anebo, to whom Porphyry's letter was addressed. Written as a priest, the distinction between philosophy and religion would certainly be expected, as well as the claim that theurgy alone unites people to the gods. Thus, the supposed superiority of theurgy to philosophy is expressed, not by Iamblichus, the philosopher, but by Abammon, the priest. Perhaps, Iamblichus composed this response as an attempt to have the double effect of emboldening the religious and offering a public religion more aligned with philosophy. It must also be stated that Julian, a one-time student at the Iamblichian academy in Apamea, engaged in a rigorous campaign to reinvigorate Rome with pagan religion, during his time as emperor (355-363 CE), which earned him the name "Julian the Apostate" by the Church.

### **Myth as Persuasion**

Myth is a vital tool of persuasion. Yet as stated above, it is persuasive not in terms of knowledge, but opinion. Throughout his commentary, myth is said to persuade children. For example, in a comment on Socrates' passing mention of the Thessalian women (39.2), Olympiodorus remarks that we should not trust in childish myths about these women drawing down the moon; it was just an eclipse, but the majority is deceived by it, he says. It might seem then that myth is a tool to persuade children to live virtuous lives, but adults are not in need of such persuasion. But Olympiodorus does not limit childishness to the young but includes adults

as well. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> lecture (23.3), Olympiodorus is in the midst of discussing Socrates' dialogue with Polus concerning ethics, particularly that it is better to suffer punishment for one's injustice than to escape that punishment. Olympiodorus mentions some who employ three instruments to deter citizens from unjust action: (1) public ill-repute (ἀδοξεῖν), (2) legal punishment, and (3) punishment in the afterlife, expressed through myth. Though Olympiodorus curiously says Plato never used these means, but rather proved (πιστοῦται) his ethical claim via the unnaturalness of an unjust soul,<sup>16</sup> the commentator nevertheless asserts that sometimes these instruments are necessary for persuading people to pursue virtue, especially children and men of childish intelligence (παιδαριώδη νοῦν), defined as those who lack intelligence because of a lack of "reasoning ability," that is to say those without education (14.3).<sup>17</sup> He draws an analogy here between an ill child, who refuses to get proper treatment, and those with childish intelligence. To that child, a threat is given to encourage the child to take the treatment such as, "if you are not prepared to undergo surgery (χειρουργηθῆναι), you will die." Here, Olympiodorus is comparing the threat of death to a child in need of surgery to the threat of punishment in the afterlife expressed through myth. Again, the many are unable to reason in a demonstrative way, thus other measures must be used to persuade them to engage in activity for their own benefit.

Though myth is an instrument to bring about the best regime, not every myth is sufficient for such an endeavor. Olympiodorus states that myths should be "true ones, not false." Yet as mentioned above, he defines myth essentially as a "falsehood." It seems contradictory to say that the statesman should use "true falsehoods." To understand this puzzle, it is important to

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting that, after contrasting Plato's demonstrative approach with myth, he follows Plato's approach in demonstrating the natural state of the virtuous soul, by imagining that there is no underworld, no legal punishments, or no ill-repute for injustice, but then also spends extensive time propagating the *Gorgias* myth.

<sup>17</sup> Olympiodorus credits this definition to Aristotle. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a2-13 and *Eudamonian Ethics* 1214b28-15a4.

discuss Olympiodorus' distinction between poetic myth and philosophic myth. To each, he ascribes one advantage and one disadvantage. The advantage of the poetic myth is in its content—it is so absurd that no one remains at the surface or literal meaning but proceeds to the concealed teaching. However, the disadvantage is that, if by chance one remains at the literal level, it provides a harmful education, promoting a rather licentious lifestyle. (In a rare comment concerning Olympiodorus's own regime, he suggests that the people are of such a degenerate nature that they accept only what is literal.) This disadvantage, however, is overcome by the philosophic myth, which is not harmful on the surface level (e.g., God is good). The disadvantage is that often people stay at the surface level because it is not harmful.<sup>18</sup> An example of a philosophic myth is Socrates' own telling (or alteration) of the myth at the end of the *Gorgias*. In contrast to Hesiod's violent telling of the successive reigns of the gods, Socrates tells a different story. Olympiodorus writes, "Because Plato is not constructing<sup>19</sup> a poetic myth but a philosophic myth, he does not say, as the poets do, that they took the kingdom violently, but says 'they apportioned it'" (47.4).

Olympiodorus is clear that certain regimes, including his own, are so degenerate that the citizens are unable to go beyond the surface level. Thus, the statesman should use philosophic myth in persuading the citizenry and avoid poetic myth for the latter is harmful to the construction of the best regime in part because it promotes vice. For Olympiodorus, the essential point of difference then between poetic myth and philosophic myth is not in the truthfulness of the account *per se*, for both poetic and philosophic myth are acknowledged as "false statements."

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting that he suggests it is a *disadvantage* that only a few will go beyond the surface level, given his positive assertion that myth conceals the hidden truths from the many.

<sup>19</sup> Notice that Plato is being suggested as a statesman, who crafts philosophic myths. For a discussion of the philosopher as statesman, see chapter six.

The main concern is not the literal accuracy of the account but rather the moral effect that the surface meaning conveys. Olympiodorus argues that the true statesman, in moving the city toward aristocracy, should take great care in propagating philosophic myths, which are “true ones, not false,” in the sense that on the surface they direct citizens toward virtue.

Though myth is used to persuade the citizens, the statesman does not address every opinion but is concerned only with the soul. Olympiodorus divides myth into two types: those concerned with the soul and those concerned with nature. According to Olympiodorus, Plato composed only three *neukiai* (myths concerning the soul), the myths in the *Republic*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Phaedo*. Though each myth discusses the soul, they each have different aims. The *Phaedo* discusses the place of correction in the afterlife. In the *Republic*, the emphasis is on those judged, whereas the *Gorgias* is concerned with the judges. It is noteworthy that these myths do not discuss the essence of the soul *per se*. As a matter of fact, they do not concern the essence of the soul at all (theoretical science); rather, they focus on judgment in the afterlife and are concerned about moving the soul toward virtue (practical science). Besides these three myths, he also mentions four other myths that are not *neukiai*, namely the myths in the *Statesman*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, and the *Timaeus*. These myths are no doubt mentioned because of their inclusion in the Neoplatonic curriculum. It is important to note the correspondence between the subject of the myth and the dialogue’s place within the curriculum. The three *neukiai* regard practical science; the four other myths concern theoretical science; two of them, physics; the other two, theology. That the *neukiai* myths are concerned about judgment in the underworld and are identified as practical science highlights their persuasive, political nature.

## Myth as Habituation

Myth not only persuades but also gives rise to religious rituals that help inculcate virtuous habits in citizens. In the 35<sup>th</sup> lecture (35.1-2), where Olympiodorus discusses Socrates' claim that the virtuous life is the best life, the commentator manipulates the four cardinal virtues to make the virtuous man necessarily pious and thus emphasize the need for religion. On Socrates' telling, the moderate man does what is fitting (προσήκοντα) regarding both gods and men. He describes action regarding men as just and action regarding the gods as pious (ῥοσια). Thus, it appears that there might be some distinction between actions fitting toward gods and actions fitting toward men. Olympiodorus removes any ambiguity. Unlike Socrates, who separates justice and piety into two categories, Olympiodorus conflates them—justice includes piety, he says. The truly just person is pious, and the truly pious person is just. His position highlights a difficulty with this conflation, a difficulty he acknowledges. He states it as follows: “if virtue is sufficient for happiness, then those who are virtuous need not pray (εὔχεσθαι) or petition (δεῖσθαι) God because they have already satisfied God with their virtue.” Olympiodorus replies that, to the contrary, prayer (an act of piety) is a sign of knowing (γίνεται) the better and summoning it. Because the virtuous and the pious are so closely connected, religious ritual is a necessary means toward happiness.

As a matter of fact, Olympiodorus compares the pious way of life with the virtuous way of life: (1) one conducts himself in an ignoble (ἀσέμνωσ) manner, but later converts (ἐπιστρέψοι) and practices a divinely constituted life (θείαν πολιτείαν) and (2) the other lives a well constituted life (εὖ πολιτεύσῃται). Both livelihoods, he says, possess happiness, though the latter has it to a greater degree. A further comparison is made between the pious and the virtuous in the 22<sup>nd</sup> lecture, concerning just punishment (*Gorgias* 476a-477a). Socrates gets Gorgias to

admit that, in all cases, the patient receives an effect of the same kind as the agent's action (e.g., if one burns, then something is burnt). Olympiodorus finds this claim absurd and provides two counter examples, both of which are considered virtuous. The first person of virtue is that of the mature man (σπουδαῖον), who is insulted. However, though the agent insulted the mature man, the insult is inoperative for the insult was false. The second is a religious figure. In this instance, a person, who has since converted, is insulted because of his former life but does not suffer because he regretted (μεταμελεία) those actions.<sup>20</sup> Here, there is seeming equality between the mature man and the pious man in terms of virtue, similar to the comparison mentioned above between the one who has lived a well-constituted life and the one who converts.

Beyond prayer, Olympiodorus mentions another religious ritual found within Christianity, namely penance. It certainly appears that he has Christianity in mind for, as far as I know, pagan theurgy did not incorporate acts of penance, particularly the type discussed below. Though the sacrament of penance developed in the earliest centuries of the Church, it was an instituted practice at least by the middle of the third century, well before Olympiodorus' time. According to one church father, if a Christian engaged in a grave sin, the sin had to be confessed to the bishop in private, though sometimes public confession was used. The sinner was excommunicated and could no longer engage in the sacramental practices of the Church, until absolution was given after long periods (sometimes several years) of penance.<sup>21</sup> In discussing the existence of punishment in the underworld, Olympiodorus says that the penalty of injustice

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<sup>20</sup> This use, however, is not as clearly a reference to Christian repentance. This Greek word is not used in the New Testament for repentance, but rather regret or a changing of one's mind (cf. Matthew 21.30, 2 Corinthians 7.8). In the New Testament, the sense of repentance is generally expressed by the term μετανοέω.

<sup>21</sup> Cyprian, "The Letters of Cyprian," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 5: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

can be paid by offering (παρέχομεν) a small amount of money to those in need. Such penance stands as an atonement (ἀφοσίωσις) for one's injustice, and the penitent will suffer (πάσχομεν) from God no longer. It is important that Olympiodorus includes himself here, speaking in the third person, and not merely suggesting it as a practice to his largely Christian audience. Such a claim is evidence that even the philosopher must be pious, if he is to be virtuous, a conclusion supported above. (This piety makes the philosopher appear compatible with the city, in Olympiodorus' case, Byzantium.)

### **Christianity as Philosophic Myth**

Even though philosophy was viewed as superior to religion, religion was still important for Neoplatonists, as demonstrated above. For example, Plotinus is very critical of various religious practices identified with Gnosticism (*Enneads* II.9.14), particularly various spells, appeasements, and evocations that are said to manipulate the gods. Moreover, Plotinus avoided most religious practices for, when Amelius (c. 250-300 CE) asked him to join observing various holy days, Plotinus responded that "it is for them [the gods] to come to me, not for me to go to them" (*Life of Plotinus*, 10). Though he critiqued religion and did not engage in religious observance himself, he acknowledged the benefits of popular religion (II.9.9), even if it is not the highest means of life. Only the philosopher can become a god among men (I.2.7). Plotinus' successor, Porphyry, had a similar attitude toward religion and the philosophical life. Instead of critiquing Gnosticism, like Plotinus, Porphyry turned his attention toward Christianity, especially in his work, *Against the Christians*, as well as pagan religion in his "Letter of Porphyry to Anebo," the letter that is the focus of Iamblichus' *Mysteria*. (Unfortunately, much like his critique of Christianity, this work, like much of his other writing on religion, is lost. Yet some is preserved in Augustine's *City of God*.) Even with his criticism, Porphyry recognized benefit to



religion. Augustine was perplexed over the fact that philosophers, such as Plotinus and Porphyry, who recognized the One, still held that religious rituals should be performed in honor of the gods (VIII.12. Cf. X.26).<sup>22</sup> According to Augustine (X.9), Porphyry argues that theurgy purifies the spiritual part of the soul that receives the images of corporeal things, yet the higher parts of the soul, the intellectual part, receives no such purification, a view strikingly similar to Olympiodorus' claim that myth is for the imaginative part of the soul. Theurgy is not at all necessary, and is actually useless, for philosophers, who use philosophy to purify their souls. It is necessary, however, for the multitude of mankind, who are incapable of philosophy, to purify their souls through the means of religious ritual (X.27).

For virtually all Neoplatonists, the religion of choice was pagan religion, most evident in the theurgy of Iamblichus and Proclus. This “lower” form of polytheistic theurgy was understood as necessary for the health of the city. Moreover, Christianity was viewed as inappropriate and destabilizing to the regime in part because of its recent nature. In *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus writes that the Hellenes had abandoned their religious heritage for the latest trend (i.e., Christianity): “At the present time I think this is the reason why everything has fallen into a state of decay—both in our words and prayers—it is because they are continually being changed by the endless innovations and lawlessness of the Hellenes. For the Hellenes are by nature followers of the latest trends and are eager to be carried off in any direction, possessing no stability in themselves” (259.5-14). By contrast, he praises the tradition in Egypt: “The barbarians, since they are fixed in their manners, firmly continue to employ the same words. Thus, they are beloved to the gods and offer invocations pleasing to them. To no man is it

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<sup>22</sup> For Augustine's discussion of civil theology, see *The City of God against the Pagans*, edited by R.W. Dyson (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), books 6-8.

permitted to change these prayers in any way” (259.14-19). Thus, much like the laws, religion should be fixed and slow to change. Both law and religion, which often served as the preamble to law, became an established part of a regime’s custom, and sudden alterations to these customs unsettled the regime. It might also be suggested that, if these particular Neoplatonists regarded republicanism as the best regime, then these pagan religious traditions encouraged particularity and plurality (polytheism), much more than the universal, exclusive, and monotheistic, Christian religion. Regardless of the reason, Neoplatonists continued to reject, or even outright attack, Christianity and affirm the benefits of pagan, theurgic ritual, which culminated in Emperor Julian’s attempt to re-paganize the empire.

This attitude changed with Olympiodorus, who was the first pagan philosopher to accept (with certain exceptions) Christianity as an appropriate religion to educate and habituate citizens to virtue. As discussed above, Olympiodorus argues that religious rituals inculcates virtue and leads to happiness. But more specifically, he includes a uniquely Christian ritual, known as the sacrament of penance. Even more, he goes to great lengths to demonstrate the amenability between pagan myth and Christianity. As a matter of fact, he is so convincing that some scholars wrongly view him as a Christian.<sup>23</sup> Granted, he possibly attempted this harmonization in order to make his pagan tradition appear compatible with religious empire. Nowhere is the political reason stated more clearly than in his commentary on *Alcibiades* (22.14-23.4), concerning Socrates’ *daimonion*. The word δαίμων was even more offensive to Christianity than to Socrates’ Athens because of its newfound demonic connotations. Thus, Olympiodorus says, he must give an interpretation that is reconciled (συμβιβαστικῶς) with the prevailing times for

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<sup>23</sup> Tannery, “Sur la periode finale de la philosophie grecque,” *Revue philosophique* 42 (1986); K. Praechter, *Richtungen und Schulen im Neuplatonismus* (Berlin, 1910).

Socrates was condemned for propagating strange deities (δαίμονια) to the youth and believing in unconventional gods that were not recognized by the city. Because of this, he says, the guardian spirit (εὐληχῶς δαίμων) must be described as conscience (συνειδὸς). But beyond this attempt at compatibility, his account also unveils the first pagan who comes to terms with Christianity as a civil religion.

Why would Olympiodorus make such a radical change in attitude? Earlier, when Christianity was still in its infancy, it was more of a nuisance to both Neoplatonism and the Roman Empire, which in some ways had more in common with Neoplatonism, especially in regards to its pagan roots. Yet when Christianity became the official religion of the empire, pagan religion began to wane and even actively purged. It seems that Iamblichus and Proclus provided the intellectual foundation for a pagan renewal in part because they understood that religion was essential to the health of a regime and that Christianity was inadequate. Emperor Julian then attempted to implement this pagan theurgy. His attempt failed; Christianity won the “soul” of the empire. Pagan religion was ineffective as a civil religion, and even if Olympiodorus believed it more appropriate, he accepted the reality that the religious myth of the day was Christianity. In Alexandria, this reality became clear just a few decades before his appointment in the academy. In 486 CE, a student named Paralius began to doubt his paganism, after encountering Stephen, a Christian orator, who questioned the story about the divine birth of a child by the goddess, Isis. After converting, this student began mocking pagan philosophers and comparing Isis to a prostitute. Some pagan students physically attacked Paralius in defense of their teachers and their faith, perhaps the last public defense of paganism. A group of Christians, including the new convert, took their case to the patriarch of the city, who in turn took the case to the court of the prefect. In the meantime, many of the pagan philosophers fled

Alexandria, perhaps fearing the same fate as Hypatia. After this episode, it is reported that Christians publicly ridiculed pagan philosophers in the city, as well as raided and destroyed pagan temples, including the shrine to Isis.

Thus, Olympiodorus engaged Christianity, attempting to show the amenability between pagan myth and the religion of the empire. The most important difference between Christianity and the pagan myth regards the doctrine of God. It is important to emphasize that, here, Olympiodorus is not concerned with philosophy but myth. In regards to philosophy, there is little, if any, disagreement between Platonic philosophy and Christianity, especially in terms of monotheism.<sup>24</sup> The concern is over the conflict between a monotheistic myth and a polytheistic myth. His first discussion occurs early in the commentary (4.3), concerning an oath Socrates makes to Gorgias (449d) praising him for his brevity, wherein Socrates says, “by Hera.” He even mentions her description in a poem by Empedocles—“Hera’s feet bound to an anvil.” Olympiodorus declares that Hera is not to be understood on the surface, that is to say literally, but in the allegorical way, indicated by Socrates. In an attempt to remove the physical nature of the gods, Olympiodorus provides the definition of Hera given by Socrates in the *Cratylus*, namely that the goddess is “pure air,” and to ease concern about polytheism, he says that there is one first cause (πρῶτον αἴτιον), and thus, one God, not many causes. This divine cause is also ineffable and nameless for names signify particulars. He then concludes this discussion by quoting an early Christian hymn (ὕμνον) to God, composed either by Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330-389) or Pseudo-Dionysius:

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<sup>24</sup> It is curious that Olympiodorus does not include himself among the philosophers but rather describes this as an outsider—“philosophers think there is a first cause,” he says.

O, wholly-beyond (πάντων ἐπέκεινα)—for who greater can I celebrate (μέλω) you?  
How shall I sing praises (ὑμνοπολεύσω) to you, you who exceed all things?  
What account (λογῶ) will celebrate (μέλωμαι) you who are not graspable (περίληπτόν)  
by intellect (νόω)?

This same hymn is quoted again, with the exception of the first line, in his discussion of myth (47.2), where he asserts that there is a first cause (ἀρχήν). Yet he denies that the cosmos was produced in an unmediated manner, as in Christianity. By contrast, he posits other greater powers (μείζονας δυνάμεις), which, produced by the first cause, subsequently produced the lower things. The existence of such powers originates in the poets’s “golden chain” (a reference to Homer). Olympiodorus describes two such powers; first, the intellective, and then the life-generating, healing power. Yet he does not appear to give an exhaustive list, again showing a desire to tone down the evidence of polytheism. Moreover, he cautions his students not to be disturbed by the names of the gods, such as Cronos and Zeus, but concentrate on the things themselves, which are simply signified here symbolically (συμβολικῶς). For example, taken from the *Cratylus*, Olympiodorus defines Cronos as *koros-nous*, literally “pure intellect,” that is to say the mediatory power of intellect, and in emphasizing monotheism, he says, if you wish, think that these powers (the intellective and life-giving) do not have individual essences and thus are not distinct from one another. Instead, he says, place these powers within the first cause.

After addressing the concern over polytheism, Olympiodorus turns to the issue of idolatry, a concern that had a long history in Alexandria (illustrated above). Philosophers do not honor idols (εἶδωλα) as deities, he says (47.5). The presence of pagan temples and statues in Alexandria has been established. Part of pagan religion, including theurgy, involved venerating these images of pagan deities. However, Olympiodorus denies that they are idols. It is because we live in a sensory world and are unable to reach the immaterial power that we devise idols

(εἰδωλα)<sup>25</sup> as reminders (ἐπιενόηται) of those things, so that by seeing and kneeling (προσκυνοῦντες) to them we might arrive at a notion of bodiless and immaterial powers. Olympiodorus' defense of these pagan statues as "icons" would certainly resonate with his Christian audience. Icons were familiar to Christians, who themselves venerated statues and icons of Christ, Mary, and other saints.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that Olympiodorus avoids Proclus' standard explanation of these pagan statues, which was still offensive to Christianity. In *On the Sacred Art*, Proclus argues that just as a piece of paper will burst into flames, when placed near a fire without touching it, so too some simple substances possess enough divine property to call down that particular divine power, and thus by composing a statue from these elements, priests call down the divine. Thus, instead of serving as a reminder of the figure, Proclus argued that these statues actually participated in the divine and thus was its embodiment.

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<sup>25</sup> Olympiodorus' choice of word was unfortunate, as it might have solidified Christian suspicion of pagan idolatry. However, aside from the word itself, his explanation of their veneration should have curtailed suspicion.

<sup>26</sup> The presence of paintings, icons, and statues grew in early churches, especially after Christianity was tolerated in the empire. Augustine, for example, acknowledges the presence of these religious items and even records that some people venerate them ("On the Morals of the Catholic Church," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4: Augustin: The Writings against the Manichaens and Against the Donatists*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 61-62). Though the presence of statues and icons were commonplace, especially by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, their presence was not without some controversy. After some transformed the practice of veneration to worship, a movement arose in protest of the very presence of icons and statues, which gave rise to what is known as the "Iconoclast Controversy." This debate came to a conclusion in the Second Nicean Council (787 CE), where the council declared the following: "We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honourable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honourable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented."

Though he goes to great lengths to demonstrate the amenability between pagan myth and Christianity, there are certain points concerning the soul in which he is critical of Christianity.<sup>27</sup> One of the most crucial differences between pagan myth and Christianity is their respective understandings of the soul, especially regarding its immortality. For Christianity, the immortality of the soul means that each individual soul exists forever, *after* its creation at a specific point in time, whereas for pagan myth, birth is not the creation of a new soul but simply the transmigration (μετεμψυχωσις) of a soul from one body to another. This belief led to the common Neoplatonic teaching, known as the “fall of the soul,” where the soul “falls” from its higher existence to the corporeal realm. Olympiodorus only makes a few references to this teaching in his commentary. The major reference is his allegorical interpretation (ἐξήγησιν) of the Prometheus myth (48.6). Olympiodorus argues that Prometheus is representative of the power that oversees the descent of souls (i.e., fire) for just as fire naturally tends upwards, so too the soul naturally pursues higher things. Yet Prometheus steals the fire, removing it from its natural sphere, and places it in a foreign one. This theft is expressive of the fall of the soul from its higher existence to the lower, corporeal realm, and the fennel that encases the fire is the body. Though Prometheus steals the fire, Olympiodorus says that such an act is simply part of the myth and is not taken literally. Otherwise, divine power is engaged in immorality. This divine power, he says, does not desire for the soul to fall. (Though he offers the allegorical meaning, it is still unclear why he presents a poetic myth, which is harmful to society. It is poetic because, on its surface level, it suggests an injustice—namely Prometheus, representative of the divine, steals.) Thus, he does not hedge on his commitment to the transmigration of the soul but goes out of his

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<sup>27</sup> One other subject includes the providence of God. Olympiodorus rejects a rather common Christian theodicy that argues God had the power to do evil but did not desire to. In contrast, he argues that God lacks the power to do evil and is complete goodness (cf. 11.2, 15.3).

way to find this position in an ancient Greek myth. It is important again to emphasize that this position is expressed mythically, not philosophically (i.e., there is not philosophic demonstration of the soul's immortality).

Another issue in which Olympiodorus does not hedge is punishment in the afterlife (50.2-3). The pagan belief in the transmigration of the soul conflicts with the Christian belief in the eternal punishment of an unjust soul. Christianity teaches that, at the resurrection, the unjust soul receives a resurrected body and then is subsequently condemned to eternal punishment. For example, in his *First Apology* (12), Justin Martyr (103-165 CE) writes that "it is alike impossible for the wicked, the covetous, the conspirator, and for the virtuous to escape the notice of God, and that each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions. For if all men knew this, no one would choose wickedness even for a little, knowing that he goes to the eternal punishment of fire; but would by all means restrain himself, and adorn himself with virtue."<sup>28</sup> In his *Catechetical Lectures* (18.19), Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313-386) writes, "We shall be raised therefore, all with our bodies eternal, but not all with bodies alike: for if a man is righteous, he will receive a heavenly body, that he may be able worthily to hold converse with Angels; but if a man is a sinner, he shall receive an eternal body, fitted to endure the penalties of sins, that he may burn eternally in fire, nor ever be consumed."<sup>29</sup> It must be stated that the myth presented in the *Gorgias* actually appears to harmonize with this Christian

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<sup>28</sup> Justin Martyr, "The First Apology," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 166.

<sup>29</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catechetical Lectures," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 7: Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 139.



belief, for Socrates says that those who commit grave injustice are sent straight to Tartarus and punished forever (τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον).

Olympiodorus adamantly denies that eternal punishment is Socrates' meaning. (Curiously however, he accepted the position of eternal punishment earlier in the commentary [23.12], claiming that Archelaus will suffer eternally as it is suggested in the *Laws* [904a-5c].) Instead, in interpreting the *Gorgias*, he says that the word "forever" means one rotation of the celestial bodies (e.g., the sun, the moon, and the stars). Though certain bodies rotate rather swiftly, such as the moon's rotation of thirty days, according to Olympiodorus, other bodies take significantly longer. All of the bodies, except the fixed stars, complete one rotation simultaneously every sixty years, and it is *this* period of time that Socrates has in mind, when saying that these great wrongdoers are punished forever. However, even in this interpretation, Olympiodorus is not consistent for he later says that, if the restoration of a soul takes one thousand years, then the rotation takes one thousand years. Thus, it is not the specific amount of time about which Olympiodorus is really concerned. Rather, it is the concept of *eternal* punishment. This position is unacceptable because punishment is meant for benefit, that is to say the restoration of the soul to its natural state, or as he says, converted (ἐπιστραφῆναι) by pain. Thus, if the soul is punished forever, in the literal sense, then the punishment has no restoring effect. Olympiodorus is so adamant about this position that he claims, if we are punished forever, then it would be better if the soul was mortal. Though Olympiodorus' position is consistent with transmigration of the soul, it is the opposite interpretation given by Socrates (*Gorgias* 525c), who says the reason these souls are punished forever is they are incurable (ἀνίατοι), and the benefit of such punishment being is the example it gives to others, as opposed to the restoration of that soul.

If Olympiodorus intends to demonstrate amenability between pagan myth and Christianity, it is curious why he does not do so completely. It might be easy to conclude that he is critical of these two points because he rejects them as philosophically untenable. In other words, he rejects eternal punishment, for example, on philosophical grounds. This might be the case, however, Olympiodorus does not engage these issues philosophically, that is provide demonstrative proof of the transmigration of the soul, nor does he demonstrate the soul's punishment in the afterlife. Rather, he discusses these issues on the level of myth, whether that myth is the Socratic myth in the *Gorgias*, the Prometheus myth, or the Christian myth. Thus, his discussion of Christianity must be understood on these terms. He views the Christian doctrines concerning the soul and eternal punishment in terms of "false statements imaging the truth," and as such, he is concerned with their political effect in educating and habituating a regime. He is not attempting to enter into theological debate as a theologian in order to establish a religious tradition. His alteration of those specific doctrines, then, must be viewed as a philosopher, seeking to provide a philosophic myth that is not harmful to the city on the surface. This alteration is similar to Socrates' alteration of the successive reigns of the gods mentioned above.

Given this intention, why would the doctrine of eternal punishment, for example, be harmful to a regime? Moreover, why would his changes improve the myth? It must first be stated that the doctrine of eternal punishment is capable of persuading citizens to live virtuous lives. Such capability is even affirmed by Christian theologians. For example, Justin Martyr, quoted above, suggests that, if people were aware of eternal punishment, then all people, without exception, would be persuaded to live virtuously. This doctrine does not disqualify Christianity as an instrument for the statesman. Thus, Olympiodorus' alteration is not for this purpose. Other reasons must be given. First, eternal punishment, along with the rejection of restoration,

emphasizes the punitive nature of law and, in this instance, denies the law's positive, formative function, espoused by classical political philosophy. But perhaps more importantly, eternal punishment only helped fuel the Christian emphasis on salvation and its universal missionary zeal, a zeal about which Olympiodorus was well aware. This missionary emphasis led to religious intolerance, which provided political unrest. Olympiodorus' alteration of the nature of punishment, as well as his attempt to demonstrate amenability between pagan myth and Christianity, sought to foster a spirit of toleration. Moreover, his emphasis on the restorative function of punishment helped emphasize the formative nature of law, as well as religion, which was intricately attached to the law.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONSTITUTING THE BEST REGIME: RHETORIC

Besides myth, Olympiodorus argues that another instrument is needed to bring about the best regime, and that instrument is rhetoric. To be sure, his discussion of rhetoric is mostly negative, as is Socrates' general tone in the *Gorgias*. Olympiodorus chief intention is to demonstrate that philosophy, not rhetoric, is the creative cause of political happiness. Yet rhetoric plays an important *positive*, instructive (διδασκαλική) role in Olympiodorus' political philosophy. He argues that the statesman needs an orator to persuade the citizens to institute the necessary reforms that will bring about the best regime. Thus, the statesman needs the tools of both rhetoric and myth, if he is to bring about aristocracy. Rhetoric is a tool to persuade used by an orator, distinct from the statesman. By contrast, myth is a tool that persuades, as well as inculcates habit, and is formulated by the statesman himself. It must be said that these two tools are not an exhaustive list (e.g., gymnastics), but tools that are of unique importance to Olympiodorus, given his political circumstance in Byzantium.

Yet a question naturally arises, if myth persuades the citizens to live virtuous lives, as well as inculcate proper habits, then why is rhetoric necessary? After all, rhetoric merely persuades. It does not habituate. The answer is that these two instruments persuade different parts of the soul. Toward the end of the commentary (46.6), Olympiodorus connects the various activities of statesmanship to these levels of cognition. The intellect is benefited through demonstration (i.e., philosophy); belief, by sound opinion given by the true orator, and imagination is stimulated by myth. Naturally, philosophy benefits the best in man (or the best man), followed by the persuasive abilities of rhetoric. Finally, the imaginative faculty is

concerned with myth for it looks to various images and shapes, and it is this imaginative faculty upon which children exclusively rely, demonstrating the need for myth in education. Thus, rhetoric persuades the part of the soul concerned with belief, and myth stimulates the lowest faculty of our being—the imaginative faculty. (Such a conclusion is strange, given that myth often portrays what is considered the highest things, e.g., the gods.) Because the soul possesses all three activities, all three are needed. It might seem easy to correlate these three activities with the tripartite soul, and politically, to the three classes of people. In this case, intellect correlates to reason, the philosopher. Belief, the middle activity, correlates to spirit, or the auxiliary class, and imagination correlates to the passions, or the working class. Though it makes sense of the intellect, the correlation breaks down when examining the auxiliary class. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is myth, or the “noble lie,” that is used to persuade this class, not rhetoric.

In the *Republic*, rhetoric has a different purpose. After explaining the need for a philosopher-king, Socrates presents the unfortunate news that the citizens are unwilling to accept the rule of the philosopher for, as Adeimantus says, most philosophers are quite queer, completely vicious, and altogether useless to the city (*Republic* 487b-d). Having responded to these charges, Socrates argues that the citizens could be persuaded to accept this rule: “let us not say that they are less angry, but that they have become in every way gentle and have been persuaded, so that from shame, if nothing else, they will agree” (501e-502a). It is no coincidence that, during this discussion, Socrates announces that Thrasymachus has become his friend, indicating that Socrates needs the persuasive abilities of the orator to convince the citizens of the philosopher’s rule. Thus, rhetoric is essential to persuade the citizens to found the regime, a function no doubt myth shares (i.e., preamble to laws). But myth appears to possess a more foundational role in preserving the regime once established through the education of the young.

Olympiodorus suggests this temporal nature of rhetoric in the fifteenth lecture (15.3). He focuses on a passage in the *Gorgias* (466a-b), where Socrates declares that good orators are considered worthless in the city. Given Olympiodorus' seeming elevation of rhetoric, how is Socrates' negative assessment understood? Olympiodorus concludes that Socrates is saying that orators are worthless in the best regime, the one that is well-ordered (εὐτάκτοις). Socrates is not saying orators are worthless in degenerate regimes, governed by the mob (ὀχλοπολιτείας) or that contain rebelliousness (στασιοποιίας) and discord (διαφωνία), for in these cities, they possess great power, especially the ability to persuade and thereby control certain factions within the regime. Yet in a city of harmony, persuasion carries no such power. As a matter of fact, Olympiodorus says they are not even recognized. Thus, it seems that rhetoric is necessary in moving a regime, which is necessarily in discord, toward aristocracy (i.e., a city in harmony). Though it is unclear whether rhetoric is needed once such a regime is established. Perhaps, in a divinely-modeled monarchy, rhetoric is not needed, after the unified, harmonious regime is established. Only myth is required to perpetuate the regime. In an aristocratic republic, however, rhetoric still seems to have a place. Though it has harmony like a divinely-modeled monarchy, this harmony is only approximate as different classes (e.g., rich, middle class, poor) maintain their particular claims to justice and the right to rule. Regardless of the continued need for rhetoric in an aristocracy, it is an essential instrument in moving the regime toward aristocracy. Before investigating how it operates, the nature of rhetoric must be examined.

### **Rhetoric**

Though the *Gorgias* is often interpreted as the most scathing critique of rhetoric in the Platonic corpus, Olympiodorus finds justification for a more positive understanding of rhetoric in the dialogue itself. Regarding the four Athenians suggested by Callicles (discussed in chapter

three), Socrates responds that, if they were orators, they used neither true rhetoric (ἀληθινῆ ῥητορικῆ), nor the flattering kind (517a). It is this passing reference to a true rhetoric that catches Olympiodorus' attention. At its core, rhetoric is a tool of persuasion concerning belief, yet not all rhetoric is the same. There are two basic types of rhetoric, according to Olympiodorus—true rhetoric (ἀλθῆς ῥητορικῆ) and false rhetoric (ψευδώνομος ῥητορικῆ) (1.13). True rhetoric molds belief (πίστις) through teaching (διδασκαλικῆ), genuinely seeking truth and aiming toward the good; false rhetoric molds belief merely by persuasion (πεῖσαι) on the basis of ignorance (ἄγνοίας), regardless of its end—good or bad (3.9, 5.12), and because true rhetoric knows what is genuinely good, it provides benefit and friendship to those persuaded, whereas false rhetoric is abrasive and only aims at victory.<sup>1</sup>

Olympiodorus provides a criterion (κανόνα) by which to contrast true rhetoric from false rhetoric, or flattery. He finds this criterion in a rather odd place—a comment on Callicles' attempt to rebuke Socrates for philosophizing at his age (482c-486d). Socrates is delighted that Callicles challenged him in this way for such a challenge calls into question his very way of life. Socrates asserts that Callicles' rebuke demonstrates a friendly attitude and a genuine desire to benefit him, traits of the true orator. Socrates is confident in his ability to test him for he believes Callicles possesses three necessary traits for advising him in this manner: knowledge (ἐπιστήμην), goodwill (ἔυνοίαν), and frankness (παρρησίαν) (486d-487a). Olympiodorus argues that these three traits are characteristic of an advisor (συμβούλου). This activity of advising is one specific task of rhetoric. In the *Gorgias* (455a-d), Socrates wants to understand the exact nature of rhetoric and asks Gorgias on what matters will his students be able to advise

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<sup>1</sup> This conclusion helps explain Socrates' rather bizarre conclusion that the orator should stand in judgment of his friends, and if they have committed injustice, prosecute them so that they might be healed, whereas one's enemies should not be judged and thus remain in their injustice (*Gorgias* 480b-c). See Olympiodorus' discussion in 24.1.

(συμβουλευσαι) the city? All three traits are necessary, he says, for if the advisor possesses knowledge but not goodwill, then he does not give proper advice, like a doctor, who knows how to heal a patient, but refuses out of malice. Yet if the advisor possesses knowledge and goodwill without frankness, then he refuses because he is timid. (Concerning frankness, Olympiodorus gives a glimpse into his understanding of this imperial age and the need for a true orator. He says the absence of this trait is surely why people do not give advice to kings (βασιλεῦσιν), because they cannot summon the courage.)<sup>2</sup>

The advisor is in stark contrast with the flatterer, who, according to Socrates, possesses the following traits: shrewdness (στοχαστικόν), cleverness (δεινόν), and courage (ἀνδρεῖον), taken from Socrates' discussion of rhetoric as flattery (463b). Olympiodorus elaborates on their use by the flatterer (13.1). The flatterer needs shrewdness in order to estimate (στοχάζηται) the nature of the person (i.e. what exactly pleases them); cleverness, to know the means by which to flatter them; and courage, to stand firm and not give ground after flattering them. This final trait as characterized by Olympiodorus (and Socrates for that matter) is strange, for it seems that little, if any, courage is needed to flatter someone. Thus, it seems the advisor and the flatterer share one trait, at least in name, courage. Yet the differences are more profound. Instead of being clever and devious, the advisor has nothing but goodwill toward the advisee; the advisor has knowledge, in contrast to the shrewdness of the flatterer, who can only estimate the nature of the

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to compare Olympiodorus' discussion of the advisor to Aristotle's discussion, which Olympiodorus seems simply to paraphrase. In *Rhetoric* (1378a), he writes, "There things responsible for making the speakers themselves be believed, because that is how many things there are, apart from demonstrative arguments, on account of which we feel trust. These are judgment, virtue, and goodwill. For people go wrong in the things they speak of or give advice about by reason of all these or of any one of them, since they either have incorrect opinions on account of a lack of judgment, or while having correct opinions do not say what seems true to them on account of vice, or, if they are of good judgment and decent but not good-willed, it is possible for that very reason for them to fail to give the best advice they know how to give; besides these there are none. It is a necessity, therefore, that anyone who seems to have all these attributes will be trusted by his hearers." Translated by Joe Sachs (Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Publishing, 2009).



person. This last difference points to the root issue, namely knowledge (or lack thereof) and demonstrates the reason why rhetoric, as defended by Gorgias, cannot be the creative cause of political happiness. True rhetoric is used by the one possessing knowledge, whereas false rhetoric is characterized by ignorance. Thus, false rhetoric is externally motivated, that is to say it must rely on claims made by others. The orator then is unable to know whether or not his argument is good or bad, true or false (6.1-2, 12.2). Olympiodorus compares the false orator to a blind man. If the blind man provides an argument based on another that is good, then it is like the blind being led by one who sees. Yet if the blind man provides an argument that is bad, then it is like the blind leading the blind.

This contrast between the advisor and the flatterer is similar to the distinction between art (τέχνη) and experience (ἐμπειρία), discussed by Socrates in the *Gorgias* (462e-466a). In this discussion, Socrates contrasts four arts with four corresponding pseudo-arts, or experiences. He first divides these arts into two groups: those dealing with the body and those dealing with the soul. Those acts dealing with the body are gymnastics (γυμναστικήν) and medicine (ιατρικήν), and those that deal with the soul are the legislative art (νομοθετικήν) and the judicial art (δικαιοσύνην). The corresponding pseudo-arts are cosmetics (κομμωτική), cooking (ὄψοποιική), sophistry (σοφιστική), and rhetoric (ῥητορική). Unlike gymnastics, which actually makes the body healthy, cosmetics only makes the body *appear* healthy. Similarly, cooking *appears* to know what foods are best for the body, but the doctor actually knows what is best for the body. The two ‘political’ arts of the soul likewise know what is beneficial as opposed to their corresponding pseudo-arts—sophistry and rhetoric. It is perhaps a counter-intuitive notion that art is linked with knowledge, for cosmetics and cooking seems more naturally called art, than

gymnastics and medicine.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the key difference, Olympiodorus says, is that an art can supply causes (αἰτία). Thus, the true orator possesses knowledge that the false rhetoric lacks, and this is the reason that false rhetoric cannot be the creative cause: it lacks the essential knowledge to lead citizens toward the good and toward political happiness. The orator then cannot “create,” or found, the best regime for he does not know what it is. However, if the true orator possesses knowledge, then why is he not capable of founding the best regime? To answer this question, the exact nature of the orator’s knowledge must be discussed.

### **Knowledge and the True Orator**

In the *Phaedrus*, it is asked how the true rhetorical art is acquired. In response to the conventional claim that the orator does not need to know about the subject to persuade the many, Socrates demonstrates the consequences of such ignorance (260b-c). If, he says, I urged you to buy a donkey, believing it to be a horse, and told you to take it to battle, the result would be tragic. Likewise, the results are equally tragic when the orator, who does not know good and evil, persuades a city, equally ignorant, to engage in evil, thinking it good. Socrates concludes that, unless proper attention is given to philosophy (φιλοσοφία), the orator can never speak properly (261a). The true orator must obtain knowledge. Socrates responds that such an accomplishment depends for the most part on chance, but he says, if you are naturally rhetorical (φύσει ῥητορικῶ), you can become a notable orator, if you add knowledge (ἐπιστήμην) and practice (μελέτην) (269d). In both medicine and rhetoric, he says, one must analyze nature

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<sup>3</sup> Olympiodorus is aware of this more common understanding of art and offers this definition, taken from Cleanthes and Chrysippus: rhetoric is “a method proceeding with system and order together with imagination (φαντασίας)” (12.1). According to this definition, cooking and cosmetics are considered art. Not anyone is a cook, he says, only the one “who is experienced and proceeds with a certain system (recipe) and can adapt to the tastes of his patrons,” that is to say flatter his patrons. Yet Olympiodorus rejects this definition for both true and false rhetoric classify as art according to it. He takes another definition from Zeno that permits only true rhetoric to be considered art: rhetoric is “a systematic set of cognitive acts coordinated with a view to some useful goal in life” (2.2).

(φύσιν), if one is engaged in art (τέχνη), and not merely practice (τριβῆ) or experience (ἐμπειρία). Thus, the true orator is compared to the doctor, who analyzes nature, whereas the empirical doctor does not study nature but merely practices medicine.<sup>4</sup> This same distinction is made in Plato's *Laws* (720a-b). There, he distinguishes between doctors and doctor's assistants that learn by observation and practice, not by the study of nature. According to Olympiodorus, the doctor can provide a rational account (λόγον), whereas the empirical practitioner (e.g., apothecary), who can perform the same activities of the doctor, cannot supply the causes (12.2). For example, he says, the rational doctor knows that a wet diet helps those with fever. The empirical doctor likewise knows this prescription, yet does not know the causes behind this prescription (2.3).<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, Olympiodorus asserts that the true orator knows the "faculties of the soul" (3.9), an allusion to the *Phaedrus* (271a-b), where after demonstrating that the orator must study nature, Socrates defines this knowledge in terms of the soul, necessary to acquire the art of rhetoric. Socrates is very specific about the aspects of knowledge that is required. First, he says, the true orator must know whether the soul is simple or composite, and second, how it acts and is acted upon. Finally, the true orator must be able to classify various types of souls, if any exist, as well as classify the types of speeches (λόγων) that persuade each soul.

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<sup>4</sup> Socrates suggests orators, such as Lysias and Thrasymachus, as those who fall short of such art, yet strangely enough he says that Pericles is the most perfect orator in existence (269d-e). According to Socrates, Pericles acquired such knowledge from Anaxagoras. Such a conclusion concerning Pericles is curious given that, in the *Gorgias*, Pericles is among the four Athenians, whom Socrates concludes did not practice true rhetoric (517a).

<sup>5</sup> Though Olympiodorus separates rhetoric into two basic forms (true, false), he makes an important distinction between flattery and experience that allows for an intermediate type of rhetoric, similar to his intermediate statesmanship (discussed in chapter 3). Flattery and experience are not the same thing and must be treated differently, he says. Every experience is not flattery. For example, an empirical doctor uses both incisions and burns in order to help his patients. Moreover, not every flatterer is a person who possesses experience, which explains why some who flatters are expelled out of disgust. Then, in his 32<sup>nd</sup> lecture, he expands the types of rhetoric from two (true, false) to three (true, intermediate, false).

What is striking about Olympiodorus' discussion of the true orator is the level of knowledge required. The orator must not have a vague notion about the soul's nature, but as Socrates says, must describe the soul with strict accuracy (ἀκριβεία). This requirement is so demanding, absurd even, that earlier in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates concludes that such knowledge is impossible. In discussing the composite nature of the soul (one aspect of knowledge required), he says the following: "To tell what it really is would be a matter for utterly superhuman and long discourse (μακρᾶς διηγήσεως), but it is within human power to describe it briefly in resemblance (ἔοικεν)" (246a). If this knowledge is impossible, then so is the true orator. But why would Olympiodorus incorporate the need for a true orator in his political philosophy, if such a person is impossible? Perhaps, this is a legitimate question for Plato, but not Olympiodorus, for he alters the nature of knowledge required of the orator.

The true orator need only know be concerned with practical science, not theoretical science, in particular physics, which is necessary to know to obtain the type of knowledge Socrates suggests. Olympiodorus discusses this difference during his lecture on Socrates' distinction between art and experience (12.3). Yet he alters this distinction. Besides art and flattery, there is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), he says. "Knowledge" differs from art in regards to its subject. The former is concerned with eternal and unfailing things (e.g., physics), whereas the latter is concerned with things in flux. In this way, craft and experience are the same, that is both are concerned with things in flux, except that craft can supply the causes of those things (cf. 13.1). Thus, the true orator, who possesses the art of rhetoric, knows only things in flux (practical science), not theoretical science.

Moreover, the orator is only concerned with *particular* claims about things in flux, in contrast to universal claims of the sophists. According to Olympiodorus, sophistry is concerned

with the particular, as rhetoric is concerned with the universal. Recall that, in Socrates' discussion of art, not only do the arts correspond with experiences, but there is also a correlation between the bodily arts and the soulish arts, as well as the experiences of body and soul. Gymnastics is concerned with the universal, seeking to preserve the body, and medicine is concerned with the particular, seeking to restore the body. The bodily experiences (cooking and cosmetics) concern themselves with the same tasks. Likewise, the legislative art is concerned with the universal, seeking to preserve the soul (or the city), and the judicial art is concerned with the particular, seeking to restore the soul (or the city). The soulish experiences (sophistry and rhetoric) concern themselves with the same tasks. Thus, the legislative art crafts laws that are general, whereas the judicial art determines the adherence of a law in a particular circumstance. Rhetoric is only concerned with particular claims concerning things in flux.

After altering the requirements of the true orator, the emergence of such a figure becomes possible, even if unlikely. Yet about what exactly does a particular claim concerning the soul in flux consist? It is certain that Olympiodorus does not believe the true orator can articulate the nature of the soul, as it is in itself, a task Socrates thinks impossible. Recall the purpose of rhetoric in Olympiodorus' philosophy, namely an instrument used by the statesman to move a city toward aristocracy, or to state it differently, persuade citizens to live virtuous lives. Thus, the orator knows how to persuade, or move, the soul without *knowing* its nature.

Having understood the nature of rhetoric, it is clear as to why the true orator cannot articulate the creative cause of political happiness. To be sure, the orator knows the difference between good and bad in particular circumstances and thus is able to aid the statesman in leading citizens toward the good. However, the orator does not know the paradigmatic cause, or the "blueprint," of political happiness because it requires an unchanging, universal knowledge,

knowledge possessed by the philosopher. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> lecture (2.4), Olympiodorus says that both the statesman and the orator know causes (αἰτίας). The statesman has intelligence (γνώσιν) within him and knows with certainty, Olympiodorus says. This intelligence is an ability to make judgments about things that remain the same, in contrast to things that change. The realm of the universal is not the realm of the orator, but the statesman, who instructs the orator in universal matters. This statesman of “philosophical character” is described as possessing rapidity of learning, a good memory, and a focus on universals (13.10), traits possessed by the philosopher-king in the *Republic* (486c-d).

### **Rhetoric as Persuasion**

Having expressed the nature of rhetoric, we can now turn to how rhetoric is used by the statesman to move the regime toward aristocracy. In the first lecture (1.13), Olympiodorus provides a helpful classification of its use, showing the correspondence between the soul, the regime, and types of rhetoric. Having established the tripartite soul as the material cause of the commentary (see chapter three), he reasserts that the soul has three parts: reason, spirit, and the passions. These parts correspond to five different types of regimes, depending on which part of the soul governs. If reason rules, then there is aristocracy; if spirit rules, then timocracy. The other three regimes correspond to different kinds of passion. He breaks the passions into two categories: money-loving and pleasure-loving. If money-loving passion rules, then oligarchy emerges. He then further breaks down pleasure-loving passion to lawful passion (democracy) and unlawful passion (tyranny).

There are also five types of rhetoric that correspond to those five regime types. True rhetoric corresponds to aristocracy, Olympiodorus says. He then mentions pleasure-loving

rhetoric and deems it the worst type of rhetoric, since it corresponds to either democracy or tyranny. He then says that honor-loving (φιλότιμον) rhetoric, concerned with saving (σώζειν) the city, is superior to pleasure-loving (φιλήδονον) rhetoric, as timocracy and oligarchy are superior to democracy and tyranny. Such rhetorical art was used by Pericles and Themistocles. It appears strange that Pericles and others are noted as those whose rhetoric corresponds to timocracy and oligarchy for they lived in a democracy. Such an example clarifies that these orators are not necessarily limited to a particular type of regime. Pericles' honor-loving rhetoric was found in a democratic regime. Such a claim is crucial, for the true statesman who wants to use rhetoric, true rhetoric, to move a regime toward aristocracy must be in a non-aristocratic regime. Thus, the true orator, who employs the highest form of rhetoric, persuades in corrupt regimes in hopes of moving it toward aristocracy, just as Pericles and Themistocles used honor-loving rhetoric in a democracy, in hopes of moving it toward timocracy.

Thus, Olympiodorus says that the true orator serves the statesman by way of recommending counsel he commands. For example, if the statesman knows the city is in need of a doctor or that comedy needs to be removed from the city, then the orator persuades the city to take these steps. The notion that the orator is a servant is not limited to the true orator but is essential to the role itself. This explains why he calls the four Athenians “servants” for they were subservient to their rulers—the many. Olympiodorus is adamant about maintaining the purity of the roles, similar to Socrates' insistence on “each minding their own business.” Later (6.11), Olympiodorus says again that the statesman commands (κελεύει) that there should be a doctor and the doctor should be a worker “for cutting out arrows and applying remedies” (quoting Homer's *Iliad* 11.515). The orator merely persuades, and like a doctor who uses different remedies for different sufferings, the orator persuades in a variety of ways to suit the

individual, an ability made possible because of the knowledge of the soul. Yet after persuading the city, the orator should say nothing further concerning medical advice—only the doctor should speak (contra Gorgias). He provides the example of Demosthenes, who went too far by insisting that they should fight Macedonia, which is the task of the general, not the orator.

Regarding the instrumental cause, myth is the more important point of contention, though rhetoric was a source of tension as well. Near the end of the fifth century, various poets, grammarians, and soothsayers were recruited by Illus and Leontius, two generals, to persuade citizens to support a rebellion against the then emperor, Zeno. In response to this rebellion, Zeno cracked down on various educators in Alexandria, including philosophers. Thus, Olympiodorus found it important to make philosophy seem as compatible with the regime as possible. This step was all the more important, for many Neoplatonists taught rhetoric. By using his model of monarchy, a model understood by his hearers as describing Byzantium itself, he presents the orator as a servant to the statesman, that is to say the emperor, and the orator persuades the citizens according to instruction given by the statesman.

But more specifically, within these regimes, rhetoric occurs in three locations, directed toward three specific subjects: the just, the good, and the noble. In the fifth lecture (5.1), he elaborates on Gorgias' claim that the subject (ᾧπαρὸν) of rhetoric is the greatest and best of human affairs (451d). This brief definition is not adequate to Socrates, so Gorgias expounds, saying that rhetoric is about “persuading in court and in assemblies” (454b). Olympiodorus manipulates the text and adds a third location. On Olympiodorus' telling, Gorgias says rhetoric is persuading jurymen in court, advisees in council, and citizens in assembly (5.6). Accordingly, these three locations concern three different subjects: the material of courtroom (δικανικόν) rhetoric is justice (δίκαιον) and advantage (συμφέρον); advising (συμβουλευτικόν), the good



(ἀγαθόν) and the bad (κακόν); and public address (πανγυρικόν), the noble (καλόν) and base (αἰσχρόν) (4.4). (Yet in the fifth lecture (5.6), Olympiodorus argues that Gorgias alters the subject of advising from the good to the advantageous.) It is unclear exactly what source Olympiodorus is drawing from, though his discussion of rhetoric in general, and here in particular, is strikingly similar to Aristotle's discussion in the *Rhetoric*. Though Olympiodorus' familiarity with this text is unknown, the similarities between them cannot be mere coincidence,<sup>6</sup> and given that Olympiodorus' comments on rhetoric are sparse, Aristotle's more systematic reflection can provide insight into Olympiodorus' intentions.

Like Olympiodorus, Aristotle argues that rhetoric is essentially a tool for persuasion in regards to opinion (1354a-1358a; 1403b-1404a). Moreover, he says there are three kinds of rhetoric because there are three kinds of hearers, and since rhetoric is essentially concerned with persuading hearers, the type of hearer determines the end of rhetoric (1358a-1359a). The hearer is either a judge about what will happen, a judge about what has happened, or a spectator of what is happening. Accordingly, there are three kinds of rhetoric, the same three mentioned by Olympiodorus: advisory, courtroom, and public address. These three kinds are further broken down by Aristotle: advice is either exhortation or warning; courtroom rhetoric, accusation or defense; and public address, praise or blame. Each of these three kinds is to different ends, again the same ends as in Olympiodorus' discussion. Advisory (συμβουλευέω) rhetoric exhorts to what

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<sup>6</sup> Though it cannot be proven that he was aware of this text, he appears to quote from it in his discussion on the orator's power in a disorganized city (15.3). He writes that "even in disorderly [cities], the more exacting place of audience, the Areopagus, was free of such rhetoric. For no prologues were delivered there, nor was there any other clever stuff." This appears to be a paraphrase of a brief discussion of the use of rhetoric in trials. Aristotle writes, "So if all trials were conducted the way they are now in some cities, especially those with good laws, these writers would have nothing whatever they could say; for while all people believe the laws ought to make this pronouncement, some put it into effect as well and prohibit speaking outside the matter at hand, as in the Areopagus." *Rhetoric*, 1354a.

is advantageous (συμφέρον) and warns to what is harmful (βλαβερός). Courtroom (δικαζομένω) rhetoric accuses what is unjust (ἄδικον) and defends what is just (δίκαιον). The public address (ἐπιδεικτικῶ) praises the noble (καλόν) and blames the shameful (αἰσχρός). Thus, like Olympiodorus, the good (or advantageous), the just, and the noble are the ends of rhetoric. Yet in each kind, only one end is in focus. Even if the other two are in play, they are subservient to the main end of that particular kind of rhetoric.

Of these three kinds, the most important for Olympiodorus appears to be advisory rhetoric, especially since it is the only one on which he elaborates (see above). Thus, it is helpful to focus on Aristotle's analysis of this kind of rhetoric. He discusses what sort of good, or advantage, the orator speaks about (1359a-1360b). The advisor does not speak about things that happen out of necessity, things that are incapable of happening, or even about those things which occur by nature or chance. Aristotle writes, "advice is concerned with everything there is deliberation about, namely, all the things that are of such a nature as to be traceable back to us, and of which the source of their coming into being is up to us."

According to Aristotle, there are five such subjects that are most important: finances, war and peace, guarding a territory, imports and exports, and lawmaking. It is important to note that Aristotle emphasizes the imprecise, practical nature of these subjects, as well as the knowledge required to persuade, which is in agreement with Olympiodorus' conclusion discussed above. Concerning these subjects, he writes, "it is not required on the present occasion to seek to enumerate each of these particulars with precision . . . to divide [them] up into specific kinds . . . and . . . to make definitions about them . . . because that does not belong to the rhetorical art but to one more amenable to knowledge and truth." Thus, both Aristotle and Olympiodorus argue that rhetoric is concerned with "things in flux," persuading judges to act on what is

advantageous, or to use Olympiodorus' language, moving a regime toward aristocracy. To this end, when advising the regime, the true orator seeks to persuade the city to act to its own advantage concerning these five subjects. What kind of knowledge is required to persuade? Only practical knowledge, concerning particulars, is required. His list of these subjects arises then from popular opinion, as opposed to theoretical analysis. For example, in terms of war and peace, the orator should know the city's military power (both actual and potential), the city's history of warfare, as well as the neighboring cities' military power and history of warfare. For lawmaking, the orator must know the specific forms of government, what is advantageous to each form, and what is harmful. Such knowledge is gained, not by looking to something theoretical (e.g., the nature of the soul), or even to scientific classification, but by looking to past events, as well as forms of government currently in existence around the world.

In terms of advising, Aristotle argues that it is this last bit of knowledge, knowledge of the forms of government, that allows the orator to truly succeed. Such knowledge is advantageous because it allows the orator to know the character of the citizens, as well as their customs. Thus, he writes, "for everyone is persuaded by what is advantageous, and what is advantageous is what preserves the form of government" (1365b). He lists four forms of government: democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, and monarchy, either limited kingship or absolute tyranny.<sup>7</sup> The orator must be aware of the relative ends sought by each form. Democracy seeks friendship; oligarchy, riches; aristocracy, education and custom; and finally, tyranny, self-preservation. (Recall Olympiodorus' emphasis on self-preservation in his discussion of regime [see chapter three]. In critiquing Byzantine imperialism, Olympiodorus

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this list of four types is different than his scientific account in the *Politics* (1279a-b). There, he offers three types—rule by one, by few, and the many. To be sure, he offers a fourth model, the mixed regime, but nevertheless, his account of regimes in the *Politics* is different than his account in the *Rhetoric*. His account in the latter is based on opinion, as opposed to his science of politics.

appeals to the advantages of self-preservation, a genuine good, even if not the highest good. The implications of this are discussed in the following chapter. )

Beyond this knowledge, Aristotle argues that it is important to know different kinds of people, particularly in regards to such things as passions, character, age, and fortune (1377b-1403b). Aristotle catalogues nine such passions (pain) and their counterparts (pleasure). For example, anger is a desire for revenge based on a “perceived belittling of oneself or anything of one’s own, when that belittling is not appropriate” (1378a). This feeling of anger can become pleasure through imaging revenge, but by producing calmness, revenge can be replaced with leniency. Another example is the pain of anger. This pain is produced by an “imagining of an impending evil of a painful or destructive sort.” By contrast, confidence is inspired by persuading the hearer that there is little to be feared. Another example is the consideration of the hearer’s age. For Aristotle, the young are dominated by desire and excess, and they are quick to anger. Positively, they love honor, particularly the honor that comes from competition. Moreover, they prefer noble deeds to advantageous ones. The old are less certain about things and assume the worst about other people. They also tend toward stinginess, cowardice, and a lack of shame. In contrast to the young, they prefer the advantageous to the noble. Those, who are in the prime of life, are more moderate on all accounts as they tend to balance the excesses of the young and the old. All of these examples serve to illustrate the benefit that such knowledge provides the orator, who is attempting to persuade citizens toward aristocracy. Aristotle’s argument is strikingly similar to the last of the three types of knowledge required of the true orator in the *Phaedrus* (271c-272b), particularly knowledge of the types of the soul and the types of speeches that persuade each soul. Yet unlike the *Phaedrus*, where this knowledge appears theoretical in nature, for Aristotle (as well as Olympiodorus), it is practical.

## Common Notions

Though Olympiodorus argues that rhetoric and myth are tools used by the statesman to move the regime toward aristocracy, he also integrates a concept into his thought that makes the need for such persuasion seem unnecessary. He introduces the Stoic concept—common notions (κοινῶν ἐννοιῶν).<sup>8</sup> (In many ways, it is similar to the Epicurean concept of preconception [*prolepsis*].<sup>9</sup> In his *Discourses* [1.22.1-3], Epictetus writes, “Preconception is common to all men, and one preconception does not conflict with another. For which of us does not assume that the good is expedient and choiceworthy and that in every circumstance we should go after it and pursue it?”) The concept conveys that there are certain truths held in common by every human being. They are immediate, non-demonstrative truths that are rejected only to one’s absurdity, and though there is some debate as to how these notions are known, the general understanding is that they are known innately, whether as ideas or as primitive drives. Common notions serve as an essential part of the epistemological foundation for the Stoic theory of natural law, summarized in Cicero’s *On the Commonwealth*:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of this Stoic concept, see John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 2006); F.H. Sandbach, “Ennoia and Prolepsis in the Stoic Theory of Knowledge,” *Classical Quarterly* 24 (1930): 44-51; Robert B. Todd, “The Stoic Common Notions: A Re-examination and Reinterpretation,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 48 (1973): 47-75.

<sup>9</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius, Chrysippus equated the two. In his discussion of Zeno (7.54), Diogenes writes, “Chrysippus in the first book of his *Exposition of Doctrine* contradicts himself and declares that sensation and preconception are the only standards [of truth], preconception being a common notion which comes by the gift of nature” (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, translated by R.D. Hicks [New York, N.Y.: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1925]). Though it is generally agreed that these Stoic and Epicurean concepts are related in many ways, Todd disputes the equivalence made between them. See “The Stoic Common Notions,” 51-54.

<sup>10</sup> Though this passage is the most cited text on Stoic natural law, it is unclear if this doctrine can be attributed to Cicero. First, Cicero’s thought is not simply Stoic but is eclectic in nature, drawing from not only the Stoics but Plato and Aristotle as well. Second, he gives indication that this teaching is a political teaching, not necessarily theoretically tenable. Perhaps, the most important evidence to this claim is Cicero’s rejection of divine providence, a doctrine essential to this expression of natural law. See Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*; Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 5.9.

True law is right reason, consonant with nature, spread through all people. It is constant and eternal; it summons to duty by its orders, it deters from crime by its prohibitions. Its orders and prohibitions to good people are never given in vain, but it does not move the wicked by these orders and prohibitions. It is wrong to pass laws obviating this law; it is not permitted to abrogate any of it; it cannot be totally repealed. We cannot be released from this law by the senate or the people, and it needs no exegete or interpreter like Sextus Aelius. There will not be one law at Rome and another at Athens, one now and another later; but all nations at all times will be bound by this one eternal and unchangeable law, and the god will be the one common master and general of all people. He is the author, expounder, and mover of this law; and the person who does not obey it will be in exile from himself. Insofar as he scorns his nature as a human being, by this very fact he will pay the greatest penalty, even if he escapes all the other things that are generally recognized as punishments.<sup>11</sup>

The phrase, “spread through all people,” is illustrative of “common” part of “common notions.” Because these notions are immediate, non-demonstrative truths, they are universal in the sense that they are known by everyone and provide the basis for universal consensus. Essential to this universality is the harmony between these common notions, reason, and nature. This harmony in nature is insured by a “bond,” in which all the parts of the cosmos interacted with “sympathy” and interconnectivity, under divine providence, and since human beings participate in one, universal human nature, there is one, universal law that governs all—“there will not be one law at Rome and another at Athens . . . but all nations at all times will be bound by this one eternal and unchangeable law.”

It is curious as to why Olympiodorus seems to adopt this Stoic concept in his commentary, in part because it seems to conflict with his Platonic natural right (discussed in chapter three), at least in three respects. First, natural right is a political right, which originates with the opinion (*doxa*) or custom (*nomos*) of a particular people, whereas natural law precedes the political in that it does not begin with a particular custom but with the immediate inclinations

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<sup>11</sup> Edited by James E.G. Zetzel (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.33. See also Lactantius, *Institutes*, 6.8.6-9.

of universal human nature. This difference could be stated differently. Natural right begins with the empirical, that is to say, it begins with the common opinions of a city, whereas natural law starts with something innate in human nature. Second, natural right is not known by everyone, but only the few who transcend the customs of the city. By contrast, according to the theory of natural law, everyone is cognizant of this law, which is possible because of an universal awareness of the common notions. Finally, the contrast between nature (*physis*) and custom (*nomos*) in natural right is, at best, blurred or, at worst, rejected outright in natural law (*nomon physikon*). Granted, natural law recognizes a distinction between itself, as pre-political, and particular incarnations of law, the validity of which are measured against the natural law. For example, in his *Institutes* (1.3), Gaius writes, “Every people, which is governed by statutes and customs, use partly its own law and partly the common law of mankind. The law, which each people has established for itself, is peculiar to it and is called civil law (*ius civilie*) . . . . But the law, which natural reason has established among all mankind, is observed by all peoples and is called the law of nations (*ius gentium*).” Nevertheless, this distinction, illustrated by Gaius, is not sufficient to maintain the distinction between nature and custom.

What is even more puzzling is that Olympiodorus attributes this Stoic concept to Plato himself (which might indicate his playfulness in seemingly adopting this concept).<sup>12</sup> He points to Socrates’ claim in the *Gorgias* (474b) that he, Callicles, and the rest of humanity, believe that doing wrong is worse than suffering it and escaping punishment is worse than incurring it. Olympiodorus then concludes all of mankind pursues the good in accordance with the common notions. Similar to true rhetoric, these common notions themselves produce a type of

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<sup>12</sup> For another Platonist’s analysis of Stoic “common notions,” see Plutarch, “Against the Stoics on Common Conceptions,” in *Moralia*, (1033a-1086b), vol. 13, translated by Harold Cherniss (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1976).

persuasion—faith (πίστιω) (6.5).<sup>13</sup> In terms of their subject matter, common notions include things pertaining to theoretical science.<sup>14</sup> For example, Olympiodorus lists the first two “common notions” in Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry* (1.1.1): “things equal to the same thing are themselves equal, and if equal numbers are added to equal numbers, the sums are equal.”<sup>15</sup> Yet as suggested above, common notions also pertain to practical science. On numerous occasions (7.1, 38.3, 39.6), Olympiodorus asserts that God (θεοῦ) gave mankind these common notions in order that we might pursue the good and choose the good life over mere life. These notions allow man to judge actions in accordance with these notions. If mankind possesses these common notions, which promote virtuous living, then there seems little need for rhetoric or myth as instruments to persuade citizens to pursue aristocracy.

As a matter of fact, the very insights given by common notions are the subject matter of rhetoric and myth. In the 21<sup>st</sup> lecture (21.1-2), Olympiodorus claims that it is a common notion that the good, the just, and the noble are to be pursued and correspond to one another in regards to action. Recall, it is the good, the just, and the noble that make up the subject of rhetoric.

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<sup>13</sup> It is quite curious that Olympiodorus says that this type of persuasion is superior to demonstration. Though he does not clarify exactly how it is superior to demonstration, it is strange nonetheless, especially since the product of this persuasion (faith) is lower than knowledge gained from demonstration.

<sup>14</sup> The admission of common notions in the realm of theoretical science might possibly be a difference between the Stoic concept and the Epicurean precondition, which seems to include only practical science. In his *Discourses* (2.11.2-3), Epictetus says that “we do not come into being with a natural concept of a right angled triangle, or a half-tone musical interval, but are taught each one of these by some technical or systematic instruction . . . . Who, on the other hand, has not come into being with an inborn concept (ἐμφυτον εννοιαν) of good and evil, find and base . . .?”

<sup>15</sup> In the opening lines of his *Elements*, Euclid distinguishes between definitions, postulates, and common notions. He begins with 23 definitions. For example, a point is that which has no part; a line is a breadth-less length. Then, he lists five postulates. (1) To draw a straight line from any point to any point. (2) To produce a finite straight line continuously in a straight line. (3) To describe a circle with any center and radius. (4) That all right angles equal one another. (5) That, if a straight line falling on two straight lines makes the interior angles on the same side less than two right angles, the two straight lines, if produced indefinitely, meet on that side on which are the angles less than the two right angles. He concludes with five common notions, the first two of which are mentioned above. The others are as follows: If equals be subtracted from equals, the remainders are equal; things which coincide with one another are equal to one another; and the whole is greater than the part.



Olympiodorus compares each of Socrates' interlocutors to these common notions. Gorgias is the closest to following the common notions. He says that the orator knows justice because he draws on the common notion, which says that each art knows its own subject matter (11.2). That is why, even after Socrates has refuted Gorgias, he is unable to say that the orator does not know (25.1). Though Polus says what Gorgias is unable to say, he still agrees that just action is noble, showing awareness of the common notions. However, Callicles is the most removed from the common notions because he doubts that the just is noble and the noble is good (21.2).<sup>16</sup> In regards to myth, the subject matter is also the same. In the 41<sup>st</sup> lecture (41.2), where Olympiodorus mentions Plato's recommendation to use myth to move a regime toward aristocracy, the topic of common notions is raised, regarding the myths conveying the notions that God is good<sup>17</sup> and honor your parents. Olympiodorus writes, "if someone says, 'these are not myths but common notions,' reply that Plato urged us to learn these things not in a direct manner but in a symbolic way, even though his concealed messages are consistent with the common notions."

The answer as to why rhetoric and myth are needed possibly lies in Olympiodorus' conclusion that persons, such as Callicles, are capable of profound evils, even with some

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<sup>16</sup> Olympiodorus argues that Callicles questions the validity of common notions. Interestingly, the commentator equates common notions with convention (νομος). In the dialogue, Callicles contrasts this convention of the weak with nature (φύσις). According to Olympiodorus, Socrates argues that good convention coincides with nature and is not opposed to nature as Callicles claims. Both convention and nature come from God (θεόθεν). Moreover, he says that intelligence (νοῦς) is law (νόμος). (26.3)

<sup>17</sup> For a reference in regards to God and the common notions, see Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* (I.16-17), where he records Epicurus' account of our concept of the gods: "[F]or he alone first founded the idea of the existence of the Gods on the impression which nature herself hath made on the minds of all men. For what nation, what people are there, who have not, without any learning, a natural idea, or prenotion, of a Deity? . . . [F]or since it is the constant and universal opinion of mankind, independent of education, custom, or law, that there are Gods, it must necessarily follow that this knowledge is implanted in our minds, or, rather, innate in us. That opinion respecting which there is a general agreement in universal nature must infallibly be true; therefore it must be allowed that there are Gods; for in this we have the concurrence, not only of almost all philosophers, but likewise of the ignorant and illiterate." Translated by C.D. Yonge (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Brothers, 1877).

awareness of the common notions. Thus, these notions are insufficient to establish the best regime in part because their influence on the soul can be minimal and in part because of their vagueness. Thus, something is needed beyond these notions, particularly the threat of punishment in the afterlife, the inculcation of virtuous habits, and the persuasion of an orator. These instruments of the statesman serve to support the common notions. According to Olympiodorus, the trajectory of the *Gorgias* is one of increasing degeneration away from the common notions. Gorgias is closest to the common notions, then Polus, and finally Callicles, who is almost completely removed from them. This degeneration corresponds to the three parts of the soul: Gorgias has misguided opinion (διάστροφον δόξαν), Polus is ruled by spirit (θυμὸν), and Callicles is possessed by appetite (ἐπιθυμίαν) (27.2). Though Callicles seems to reject these notions, Olympiodorus argues that he still is aware of them (31.6). The commentator mentions Socrates' response to Callicles' claim that the pleasant and the good are the same—I don't believe Callicles will grant this claim when he has rightly considered himself, Socrates says (495e).

Like the true orator, Socrates attempts to persuade them with different arguments in order that, as Olympiodorus says, complete faith (πιστεύσωμεν) may be placed in the truth and that they may come as close to the common notions as possible. Living in a regime less ordered than an aristocracy, the statesman encounters citizens who possess disordered souls that lack complete awareness of the common notions. This reality is in part because citizens imitate the character of their regime and the regime, consisting of citizens, reflects the character of its people. Olympiodorus says, because Callicles has been in the company of the herd of men (democracy) since childhood, he does not want to purge his passions (39.6). However, Socrates (and the statesman) can be confident that their endeavor might have success for, Olympiodorus says,

regardless of how submerged in evil people are, they can never lose complete awareness of the common notions (28.4, cf. also 25.2-3). It must be said again, however, that this restoration of the common notions is in regards to restoring orthodoxy, literally right belief. The common notions, like rhetoric and myth, concern opinion, not knowledge. The cognitive realm of the city then is opinion, not knowledge—rhetoric and myth, not philosophy.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE STATESMAN'S RETREAT IN A CORRUPT REGIME

As demonstrated in previous chapters, Olympiodorus argues that the statesman is to move the city toward aristocracy and use the tools of myth and rhetoric to persuade the citizens to live a virtuous life. Yet such a result is rare. It is difficult to convince the many to moderate their lives and pursue justice, but even rarer is the existence of a statesman, who pursues political power and at the same time lives a life of virtue. This rarity is evidenced by Socrates' questioning whether such a statesman ever existed (*Gorgias* 517a). Thus, the typical political landscape is one of two types. First, a statesman exists, but due to the corrupt nature of the citizens, they refuse to listen to his calls for moderation, or second, there is no statesman to move the city toward aristocracy. Olympiodorus does not address the second possibility, for in this instance, one can only hope for the rise of a statesman, but he does have much to say about a statesman living in a corrupt and hardened regime. The tactic taken by the statesman in this circumstance is that of retreat (*ἀπαναχωρεῖν*): "if a statesman lacks the power to moderate the citizens," Olympiodorus writes, "he<sup>1</sup> must retreat and not remain with them" (32.4). Such a tactic seems strange, even defeatist, rather than courageous, one of the divine traits of statesmanship. It is important then to understand the nature of Olympiodorus' call for retreat, which upon inspection is far from defeatist. To the contrary, this retreat is a necessary move that does not reject politics but attempts to influence the political in a less visible fashion. This

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<sup>1</sup> I address the philosopher-statesman in the masculine simply because all of the examples provided by Olympiodorus of such a person are male. This fact however does not preclude the possibility of a female philosopher-statesman. Echoing Socrates' conclusion in the *Republic*, Olympiodorus says that men and women do not differ at all except in terms of child-birth. As a matter of fact, he says, a woman might often be better constituted than a man, demonstrating "manly courage" (*ἀνδρίσασθαι*) and a willingness to die, perhaps an allusion to his predecessor, Hypatia (18.9).

approach gives insight into the philosopher as statesman, especially Neoplatonists, whose retreat is generally interpreted by scholars as apolitical, not that of statesmen in a corrupt regime.

### **The Philosopher-Statesman**

Olympiodorus defines the statesman's retreat by looking exclusively at the retreat of the philosopher-statesman. Of the five statesmen mentioned in Olympiodorus' commentary, only two are philosophers: Socrates and Plato. (The other three statesmen—Timaeus, Lycurgus, and Theseus—are discussed at length in chapter three.) It is somewhat awkward to view philosophers as statesmen. Philosophers do not govern; more importantly, they do not want to govern. As a matter of fact, in the *Republic*, Socrates concludes that the philosopher must be coerced to rule. If they are involved in public affairs at all, they make a mockery of it. For example, when Socrates served on the council that wanted to judge the generals who fought at Arginusae (406 BCE), he was laughed at for not knowing how to put a question to vote, demonstrating that he is not, as he himself says, one of the Athenian statesmen (πολιτικῶν) (*Gorgias* 473e-474a). Thus, Olympiodorus' decision to call philosophers statesmen is curious. Yet beyond the lack of desire to rule and an aloofness concerning public affairs, Olympiodorus is aware of a rather striking claim made by Socrates, a claim in seeming contradiction with these previous conclusions: "I am one of the few who practice the true art of statesmanship (ἀληθῶς πολιτικῆ τέχνη)" (521d). The commentator then has some need to reconcile this seeming contradiction and to define exactly how the philosopher is a statesman. These tasks must first be examined before Olympiodorus' discussion of the statesman's retreat is intelligible.

## Socrates and Plato

Olympiodorus reconciles this seeming contradiction by concluding, first, that Socrates is indeed not a statesman in the ordinary sense of that word (i.e., one holding public office), and second, he is a unique type of statesman, as are all “Socratic” philosophers (20.2). A similar contrast is made later in the commentary (41.3). Here, Olympiodorus makes a distinction between a teacher (διδάσκαλον) and a statesman (πολιτικόν), indicating that Socrates is the former.<sup>2</sup> On the surface, this distinction rejects the claim that Socrates is a statesman, a rejection that makes little sense of the commentary and contradicts explicit claims by Olympiodorus to the contrary (e.g., 41.5). Socrates then is a statesman, yet not in the ordinary sense of that term. He is a teacher. Thus, Olympiodorus, much like Socrates, uses the term “statesman” in two different ways: statesman in the sense of one holding public office and statesman in the philosophic sense.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction requires Olympiodorus to comment on Socrates’ role as a juror (ἐδίκαζε) on that council for it appears as though he did serve as one holding public office. First, Olympiodorus curiously denies the certainty that Socrates even served in this capacity. This is curious because it is not only mentioned by Socrates in the *Gorgias* but in the *Apology* as well. Moreover, it is discussed in other ancient sources, most notably Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (a text on which Olympiodorus relies for his defense of Socrates). Yet, even if he served in this

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<sup>2</sup> This notion of Socrates as a teacher is quite strange and will be discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> If you combine this distinction with his discussion of Lycurgus and Theseus, Olympiodorus uses the term “statesman” in three ways. First, he uses statesmen in the ordinary sense of the word—one holding public office. These statesmen include those Socrates denies are true statesmen, such as Pericles, as well as those who Olympiodorus considers true statesmen—Lycurgus and Theseus. However, it does not include philosophers such as Socrates and Plato. Second, he uses the term to define true statesmen who held public office. Third, he uses the term for Socratic philosophers, who are considered statesmen though they never held public office. This last definition excludes true statesmen, such as Lycurgus and Theseus.

capacity, Olympiodorus says, it was as a citizen (πολίτης), not as a statesman (πολιτικός) (41.4). He downplays Socrates' official role in the council, even though he says, it was “unavoidable to a certain degree for he lacked the power to avoid some involvement with his fellow-citizens” (41.3). (This lack of power to avoid involvement is a pivotal theme to understand the philosopher-statesman, one that is addressed below.) Thus, even if Socrates served the city in official capacity at one time, he is not to be viewed as one who held public office, but rather as a different kind of statesman—a teacher.

Though Olympiodorus views Socrates as a statesman, not every philosopher is a statesman. To be sure, as seen below, every philosopher lacks a desire to rule and has an aloofness of public affairs. However, only Socrates (and those who follow Socrates) possesses the qualities of a statesman. Perhaps, the most insightful discussion of philosophy comes near the middle of the commentary in the 26<sup>th</sup> lecture. Toward the end of that lecture (26.18), Olympiodorus comments on Callicles' rather pejorative assessment of philosophy (484c-486d), particularly its ascetic nature (485d): “the philosopher is bound to become uncourageous (ἀνανδρῶ),” Callicles says, “by retreating (φεύγοντι) from the city center (μεσά τῆς πόλεως) and the marketplace (ἀγοράς);<sup>4</sup> the philosopher must cower down (καταδεδυκότι) in a corner with three or four boys.” Such a life is contrasted by Callicles with one who puts aside childish philosophy, enters the public realm, and obtains distinction (ἀριπρεπεῖς), a line echoing Homer (*Iliad*, 9.441). Olympiodorus critiques Callicles' apolitical understanding of philosophy. The philosopher, Olympiodorus says, “retreats (φεύγει) and does not retreat (οὐ φεύγει).” That is to say, “the theoretical philosopher always retreats toward the divine, but the statesman, if he has

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that Callicles includes the marketplace as a “public” place where the philosopher avoids, for as Plato certainly knew, the marketplace was the main venue for Socratic philosophy.

worthy citizens, remains and shapes them. If they are unworthy, he retreats (ἀναχωρεῖ), builds a wall (τειχίον), and cowers in retreat (φεύγων) from the disorderliness of the city.” This passage is difficult to interpret. Is Olympiodorus offering three types of philosophers: (1) the philosopher focused on metaphysics; (2) the one, who rules (i.e., philosopher-king); and (3) the one who imitates Socrates? Or is he offering three aspects of *the* philosophical way of life? To be sure, he says there is a sense in which the philosopher *always* retreats, if engaged in metaphysical speculation. Perhaps, this type of retreat is a reference to the rather comical image of Thales, the philosopher who looks up at the stars and falls into a pit. No doubt Olympiodorus has Thales in mind, for immediately prior to this discussion, he mentions Thales in a comment on Callicles’ remark that philosophers prove themselves ridiculous (*Gorgias* 484e). Thales is described in the *Theaetetus* (173d-175b) as a laughing-stock for his ignorance in public affairs, including the marketplace, the courts, the senate, and the assembly. Moreover, Socrates even describes metaphysical speculation as a retreat (φεύγειν) from the earth to the heavens, the place of the gods (176a-b). Yet the philosopher, as statesman, does not retreat, if he has worthy citizens, rather he remains and moves the city toward aristocracy. This demand seems to hold out the possibility that the philosopher will rule or the ruler will become a philosopher (a possibility discussed below). However, if the citizens are unworthy, a third possibility emerges—another type of retreat different from metaphysical speculation.

At this point, exactly how the philosopher is a statesman and how he retreats is still unclear. Yet what is clear is that the natural philosopher, or the philosophy focused solely on metaphysical speculation, is inadequate from Olympiodorus’ point of view, regardless of whether theoretical contemplation is considered one aspect of the philosopher’s life or one type of philosopher. A concern for the city is *essential* to philosophy properly understood. After



stating that the statesman should retreat if amongst unworthy citizens, Olympiodorus suggests the lives of Socrates and Plato as exemplars of the statesman's retreat. Thus, if Olympiodorus is suggesting three types of philosophers, then he clearly prefers the third—the statesman who retreats (and presumably the second, given the right circumstances) over and against the Thalean metaphysical philosopher. If Olympiodorus is suggesting different aspects of *the* philosophical way of life, then again a focus on the city is *essential*. This passage alone, as articulated by Olympiodorus, is sufficient to challenge the traditional interpretation of Neoplatonists as philosophers focused solely on metaphysical speculation.

In order to understand the philosopher as statesman, as well as his retreat, it is important to turn to Olympiodorus' discussion of their statesmanship. This discussion occurs within his defense of Socrates and Plato. His defense is similar to that of his discussion of Lycurgus and Theseus (cf. 44.1-8). Much like his discussion of these two statesmen, Olympiodorus addresses two important aspects of statesmanship that have been questioned in the lives of these philosophers. The first aspect is the inability to improve the souls of their citizens, and the second is the ingratitude given by citizens. In regards to the first aspect, Socrates was unable to moderate Alcibiades and Critias, and in Plato's case, he was unpersuasive to either Dionysius the Elder or Dionysius the Younger. Olympiodorus even documents the accusation that Plato did not have a lasting effect on his student, Aristotle, who supposedly disagreed with Plato and began another school in order to teach those new doctrines. In terms of the second aspect, Socrates received the ultimate form of ungratefulness from the Athenians—a death sentence. It is worth mentioning that this ungratefulness was more severe than any of the ungratefulness received by the four Athenians, whom Olympiodorus deemed unworthy as statesmen. Plato also

received ingratitude. Both Dionysius the Elder and his son despised Plato and plotted against him, and Aristotle's establishment of a new school is interpreted as an act of ingratitude.

First, Olympiodorus demonstrates that these philosophers did in fact make men virtuous, as well as receive gratitude as a result of such improvement. To Socrates' credit, Olympiodorus claims that he made many people fine (καλοῦς) and good (ἀγαθοῦς), mentioning explicitly Cebes, Plato, and Aristotle. Little is known of Cebes outside of the Platonic corpus, and even then, he only appears in two of those dialogues, the *Phaedo* and the *Crito*. The *Phaedo* takes place on the last day of Socrates' life in prison. The conversation is not given first-hand but told by the eye-witness, Phaedo, to Echecrates. It appears that making Cebes "fine and good" relates to Socrates improving his opinion concerning the immortality of the soul. Socrates suggests that the philosopher is eager to die, because he will be surrounded by an even greater god and better human beings than in the present life. His hope is grounded in a confidence concerning the separation of the soul from the body and its continued existence after separation, for if the soul does not outlast the body in death, the philosopher has no such hope. Throughout the rest of the dialogue, Socrates attempts to demonstrate the immortality of the soul. According to the interlocutors, the most convincing argument is that the soul knows all ideas prior to birth and that learning is simply a remembrance of forgotten ideas. Yet Cebes is not completely convinced. He counters that, even though the soul outlasts the body, in time, it will perish (87a-88b). Socrates responds, convincing Cebes. His opinion was changed, and he was grateful to Socrates for this change as he was among those willing to pay a large sum of money to help Socrates escape from prison (*Crito* 45b-c). (The allusion to a character so closely identified with the death of Socrates is no accident. Olympiodorus wants his readers to have the death of this statesman on their minds in order to express the tragic nature of the philosopher-statesman.)

Though Socrates' influence on Plato goes without saying, Olympiodorus provides insight into this relationship. According to the commentator, Plato was benefited from Socrates only in ethical matters (41.6).<sup>5</sup> This limited benefit was not based on any deficiency in Socratic philosophy but rather on the youthfulness of Plato, for Olympiodorus says that "Plato was young when Socrates died and was unable to grasp the deeper points of Socrates' arguments." Olympiodorus illustrates Plato's youthfulness from his public defense of Socrates. When he took to the podium, Plato begins by saying, "though I am the youngest to speak here." He was then interrupted and forbidden to speak for the crowds began to chant—"get down."<sup>6</sup> The crowds did not want to hear from one of such a young age. Besides illustrating his youth, it also highlights the gratefulness Plato felt toward Socrates, confirming the benefit Socrates provided him. Olympiodorus' suggestion of Aristotle, as one who benefited from Socrates, is curious simply for the fact that he was born (b. 387 BCE) roughly 12 years after Socrates' death (d. 399 BCE). Yet the commentary reads as if Aristotle, like Cebes and Plato, was directly influenced by Socrates. It is not as if Olympiodorus had to force Aristotle to fit in order to provide an example. He could have listed a number of direct influences, besides Cebes and Plato. As a matter of fact, Socrates provides his own list of influences in Plato's *Apology* (33d-34a). Olympiodorus adamantly wanted to connect Aristotle to Socratic statesmanship.

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<sup>5</sup> Olympiodorus credits the source of this deeper teaching to the Pythagoreans, with whom Plato studied in Sicily. Perhaps, more interestingly, Olympiodorus credits Plato's pursuit of the Pythagoreans to a statement made by Socrates while in prison, a statement that Plato was not present to hear (*Phaedo*, 59b). In that dialogue, Socrates' interlocutors asked him whom they should look to after Socrates' death, and Socrates assures them that Greece is full of charmers (77d-78a), who calm the passions with various myths. It is curious that Olympiodorus applies the term "charmers" to the Pythagorean philosophers, who supposedly taught Plato deeper, metaphysical things. Perhaps, this provides commentary on Olympiodorus' understanding on the relationship between myth and metaphysics.

<sup>6</sup> The origin of this reported defense is unknown but is also recorded in another late Neoplatonic work—*Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 3.21-25.

However, Olympiodorus did not overlook the influence of Plato on Aristotle. He emphatically asserts such influence. As discussed in chapter two, the Neoplatonists, including Olympiodorus, argue that Aristotle does not differ from his teacher Plato in any significant way. Nevertheless, Olympiodorus says, “even if he did disagree, Plato still benefitted him.” The commentator argues that, even if Aristotle developed new doctrines, the reason for this development was due to Plato’s original influence. Plato encouraged students not to accept truth simply on the basis of authority but to know on the basis of personal inquiry and demonstration (cf. *Alcibiades* 114e, *Phaedo* 91c). Olympiodorus also illustrates this benefit by pointing to Aristotle’s own praise of his teacher. According to the commentator, Aristotle wrote an entire work, documenting and praising Plato’s life, as well as composed an elegy of Plato addressed to Eudemis. The elegy is as follows:

Coming to the fair plain of Cecropia  
He piously founded an altar of holy friendship  
To a man whom it is not right for the wicked even to praise.  
He alone or first of mortals clearly showed  
From his own life and the manner of his arguments  
That a man becomes good and happy at the same time.  
But now no one is able any longer to grasp these things.

Beyond providing evidence that Socrates and Plato made men “fine and good,” Olympiodorus addresses those whom they were unable to reform, ultimately arguing that the inability to reform (and the subsequent ingratitude) stemmed from a deficiency in the interlocutor, not the philosopher. He begins with two of Socrates’ acquaintances. The first is Alcibiades. Olympiodorus does not deny that Socrates was unable to moderate him. The reason given for the failure is that Alcibiades did not remain with Socrates long enough for Socrates to impact him in any sustained way. To emphasize the brevity of their encounter, Olympiodorus cites Isocrates, who records in his *Busiris* (11.5) that “no one even saw Socrates teaching

Alcibiades.” Of course, Socrates did interact with Alcibiades and, while with him, Alcibiades was a man of good character, a point Olympiodorus acknowledges. Yet Alcibiades possessed a type of political ambition that proved fatal to Socrates’ influence. Olympiodorus cites the end of *First Alcibiades* (132a), where Socrates predicted that Alcibiades, as a “lover of the people,” would be deformed by those very people. His prediction came true. Regardless of this, Alcibiades still offered gratitude toward Socrates, “holding him in high regard and praising him,” Olympiodorus says. Though Olympiodorus does not provide textual support, no doubt, he was thinking of Alcibiades rather lengthy praise of Socrates in the *Symposium* 215a-222b.

After addressing Socrates’ influence on Alcibiades, he turns to Critias, one of the Thirty Tyrants, who ruled Athens from 404-403 BCE (41.4). According to Olympiodorus, Socrates “constantly rebuked the thirty,” attempting to “moderate their rule.” (This notion of constantly rebuking them is a reminder of the statesman’s task, the practitioner of true medicine, as opposed to the four Athenians [Themistocles, Pericles, Cimon, Miltiades], who practice an intermediate form of medicine.) Like Alcibiades, Critias did not ultimately follow Socrates’ advice. However, the reasons were somewhat different. Alcibiades genuinely seemed to “love” Socrates and was truly influenced by him, but his love of the people ultimately led him astray. Critias, on the other hand, never seemed to care for Socrates or his call for moderation. According to Olympiodorus, the Thirty Tyrants brought a charge against Socrates and sentenced him to death because of Socrates’ constant agitation.

The ungratefulness is clear, yet the claim concerning the Thirty is not, for the Thirty were overthrown prior to Socrates’ trial, and as we know from the *Apology*, the accusations were brought chiefly by Meletus, as well as Lyco and Anytus, who helped overthrow them. Olympiodorus offers evidence that explains this rather bizarre assertion. He refers to the law

crafted by Charicles and Critias that, according to Xenophon, made it illegal to teach the art of words (λόγων τέχνην) (*Memorabilia* 1.2.29-38). Xenophon, Olympiodorus' most likely source, claims that the law originated because of a "grudge born by Critias against Socrates for rebuking his uncontrolled obsession with Euthydemus." This law was conveyed personally to Socrates by its authors, where he was forbidden to "dialogue (διαλεγέσθαι) with the young." It is this particular part of Xenophon's account that Olympiodorus emphasizes, even exaggerating it to read, "do not be caught (εὐρίσκου) with the young" (41.4). This law was understood by Xenophon as the source of confusion between Socratic philosophy and the practice constantly attributed to him—sophistry. Olympiodorus then understands the death of Socrates, not so much in light of the immediate charge brought by Meleteus, but the threat of confusing him with sophistry. As a matter of fact, in the *Apology* (18c), Socrates makes this very distinction and actually credits the charge of sophistry as the greater threat. This discussion is meant to convey the tragedy of Socratic statesmanship as much as it is to provide an apology for his action. To be sure, Socrates received ungratefulness on the part of the Thirty, yet as Olympiodorus claims, the ungratefulness came ultimately from a deficiency in the Thirty and not a deficiency in Socrates. (This is in contrast to the four Athenians, who received ungratefulness due to their own deficiency [see chapter 3].) It is this tragic nature of Socratic statesmanship that served as a catalyst for a drastic change in Platonic statesmanship (discussed below).

Olympiodorus' defense of Plato revolves around his encounter with Dionysius the Elder and Dionysius the Younger, both rulers of Syracuse (41.7-8). His encounter with these two rulers ultimately occurred because of a friendship with a native Sicilian named Dion, who, according to Olympiodorus, was a "true lover of philosophy and one that honored Plato's divine character." Dion's sister, Aristomache, was the wife of the tyrant (τύραννος) Dionysius the

Elder. Dion urged Plato to meet Dionysius in hopes that he would convince him to develop a “moderate regime (σωφρόνως πολιτεύσασθαι) and thus save entire cities from tyranny.” On account of their friendship, Plato went to Dionysius and argued that the life of the moderate statesman is superior to that of the tyrant. Olympiodorus provides a portion of that conversation, the source of which is unknown.<sup>7</sup> Dionysius asked Plato to name a happy man, fully expecting that the philosopher would name Dionysius. However, Plato named Socrates. Dionysius also wanted Plato to praise “judging” as the greatest good, since Dionysius had a reputation for judging fairly. Plato rather compared the judge to a seamstress, who corrects damaged clothing, in contrast to the designer who makes clothing, no doubt a reference to the lawgiver. (It is hard here not to think of Olympiodorus’ discussion of statesmen, especially the lawgiver Lycurgus.) Thus, much like making clothes, the greatest good is producing men without offense as opposed to repairing those who have offended. Finally, Dionysius wanted Plato to call Heracles happy, but “if the myths are accurate, he was certainly unhappy,” Plato responded; only the virtuous man is happy.<sup>8</sup> Though Plato, as a statesman, attempted to make Dionysius virtuous, Dionysius became enraged. Becoming aware of the tyrant’s rage, Dion had Plato removed from Sicily (41.8).

After Dionysius the Elder died, one of his sons, Dionysius the Younger, assumed the throne. Dion approached this tyrant (τύραννος) and said, if you want to rule “in an orderly manner,” send for Plato (41.8). After receiving Dionysius’ request, Plato decided to return to

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<sup>7</sup> The only other source that provides any recollection of the conversation between Plato and Dionysius the Elder is Diogenes Laertius. Though they convey Plato’s advice similarly, the specific conversation is quite different. Diogenes said that Plato argued the interest of the ruler alone was not the best end, unless he also was preeminent in virtue. (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 3.1.18)

<sup>8</sup> This is a rather curious reference to Heracles. The reason for Olympiodorus’ allusion to this Greek figure is unknown.

Sicily to “put his accounts (λόγους) into practice (ἔργων).” Plato began instructing Dionysius in subjects, including math. The education was so rigorous that Olympiodorus says that “ash and dirt were in the palace, not from his feet but his geometry.” Yet certain flatterers warned Dionysius, saying Dion was scheming to weaken Dionysius with Plato’s teaching and assume power. Dionysius succumbed to these rumors and later despised Plato’s teachings. Thus, much like Socrates, Olympiodorus suggests that Plato’s failures (and subsequent ingratitude) were due to a deficiency in the tyrants, not in Plato.

### **Philosopher-Advisor**

Having examined Olympiodorus’ defense of this statesmanship, it is important to clarify its nature, which was already illustrated somewhat by his defense. Though Olympiodorus describes the philosopher in terms of teacher, it is important to describe the exact nature of that teaching. He describes it in a way that was already discussed in chapter five, that is, he describes the philosopher as an “advisor.” For example, in his defense of Plato (41.8), he writes that the philosopher did not spare his feelings but offered Dionysius good advice (κάλλιστα συνεβούλευεν). “Offering advice” is not a phrase that Olympiodorus uses lightly. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, offering advice is one of the three kinds of rhetoric. (The other two are courtroom rhetoric and public address.) Thus, it seems that Olympiodorus understands the philosopher-statesman in this distinct role.

To be sure, the philosopher does not engage in flattery but offers “good advice,” consistent with the art of true rhetoric. Thus, the philosopher-statesman possesses the three necessary traits to offer such advice: knowledge (ἐπιστήμην), goodwill (ἔννοιαν), and frankness (παρρησίαν) (27.2), and much like the true orator, the philosopher-statesman has knowledge of



the human soul. In the 40<sup>th</sup> lecture (40.4), Olympiodorus writes, “It is possible to acquire very great goodness [virtue] and to please God [piety] just by living well. But it is impossible without knowledge (ἐπιστήμης) to become a statesman.” He then writes, “For the statesman seeks to understand the men who are his subject-matter, if so, he seeks to understand also what is the essence of man,” i.e., the soul. What is crucial however is the reason for seeking this knowledge. According to Olympiodorus, the search is not for its own sake, but like the true orator, the philosopher-statesman seeks to practice knowledge (ἐπιστήμην ἄσκειν).

If the true orator and the philosopher-statesman both offer good advice that benefits the souls of those persuaded, then what distinguishes them, if anything? As discussed in chapter five, orators are “servants” to those who governed. For example, Olympiodorus calls the four Athenians servants to the demos. The true orator is a servant to the philosopher-king, who knows (γινῶσιν) the universal, paradigmatic cause of political happiness. By contrast, the philosopher-statesman is not the servant of those who govern, persuading citizens to adopt the ruler’s command. Rather, he attempts to moderate those in power and even those with political ambition. Thus, he is more of a critic than a servant.

Even though the philosopher-statesman advises rulers or those with political ambition, he does not ignore the many, though Olympiodorus says the philosopher must address them differently. Initially, he says, the philosopher should “construct demonstrative arguments and not appeal to the many, like ordinary politicians who appeal to the many through flattery.” Yet he offers two episodes when Socrates interacted with the many (20.2). The first is his appointment to the council that was determined to condemn the ten generals (discussed above). After being elected as a member of the council, Socrates said that he put a question to vote but did not understand the procedure. Olympiodorus takes liberty here and says that he counted the

number of votes, yet he cared so little about the vote, he did not know exactly how many votes were cast. He was laughed at, Olympiodorus says, because he did not want to dialogue (διαλεγεσθαι) with the many.

However, Olympiodorus contrasts this passage in the *Gorgias* with another example from the *Cleitophon*, where Socrates did dialogue (διαλέγεται) with the many. Though this portion of Olympiodorus' commentary was addressed earlier (chapter four), it is worth repeating here. In the dialogue, Cleitophon recounts an experience of hearing Socrates' discourse, where he chanted (ῥυμνεῖς) words that made him sound like a "god on a tragic stage," rebuking those present for pursuing wealth and not virtue (407a-e). Thus, Olympiodorus concludes that it is possible to dialogue (διαλεχθῆναι) in the manner of an advisor (παραινετικῶς), but not demonstratively, for the many are unable to listen to demonstration (20.2). Exactly then how did Socrates dialogue with them? Immediately following this portion of the lecture, Olympiodorus comments on Socrates' response to Polus' fantastical story—"you were trying to make my flesh creep" (473d). Olympiodorus interprets this phrase to mean: "you frighten me like a child and decline to examine me," that is, seek to demonstrate my error. He then says this is the reason why divine sayings (θεῖοι λόγοι) and powerful charms (ἐπωδαὶ δυνάμεναι) are handed down, to put our passions to sleep and "remain undisturbed in your bed." This helps explain why Socrates was compared to a "god on a tragic stage" in the *Cleitophon*, for he was not employing philosophy but poetry to ease the passions of the many. It seems that concerning the many, Socrates employed a different approach than when advising potential statesmen. To the many, Socrates employed myth and poetry, i.e., religious education, in contrast to the philosophic, or liberal, education of the aristocrat. In other words, both a philosophic education and a religious education have the same goal—virtue—but these two types of education are necessary to civic

life because of the difference between the few and the many. This confirms the conclusion regarding the statesman's use of myth discussed in chapter four.

### **The Nature of Retreat**

Having reconstructed Olympiodorus' understanding of the philosopher-statesman, it is important to address the nature of the statesman's retreat. On three occasions in the commentary (26.18, 32.4, 45.2), Olympiodorus advises the statesman, who lives in a corrupt regime, to retreat. Yet it is unclear exactly what he means by "retreat." Beyond the assertion, little, if any, extrapolation is given as to its nature. Does he mean for the statesman to leave the city? Let go of any political ambitions? Or remove oneself from public life altogether? The commentator discusses two types of retreats: (1) a necessary retreat from the "public" to the "private," and (2) a circumstantial retreat from advising a particular person. As stated earlier, the discussion of the statesman's retreat first occurs in a commentary on Callicles' pejorative assessment of philosophy (26.18). Callicles concludes that the philosopher cowardly "retreats (φεύγοντι) from the city center (μέσα τῆς πόλεως) and the marketplace (ἀγοράς) to a corner," in order to whisper with young boys (484c-486d). This portion of the *Gorgias* is not the most obvious passage to begin a discussion on statesmanship, let alone on the statesman's retreat. Nevertheless, because Olympiodorus views the Socratic philosopher as a true statesman, it is a crucial passage for understanding the nature of that statesmanship (discussed above), as well as the nature of the retreat, particularly the first type. Unlike his misunderstanding of the philosophic way of life, Callicles expresses well the philosophers' retreat from the "public" (i.e., the city center) to the "private" (i.e., remote corners).

Socrates and Plato both retreat to the “private,” yet in different ways. Socrates retreats to the marketplace, whereas Plato retreats to the academy. It is curious that Callicles lists the marketplace as an area abandoned by the philosopher for it was one of the favorite places for Socrates to practice his art. Perhaps, Plato wants Callicles to misspeak, or maybe Plato is hinting to the fact that Socrates’ retreat was not radical enough to avoid the tragedy of the philosopher and the city. Moreover, Socrates never “whispered,” but spoke aloud so that passersby could hear. Again, Plato may be alluding to shifts in his own philosophy, where the philosopher speaks a little softer, using the art of esotericism. After all, this entire discussion by Callicles concerns the philosophers’ inability to defend himself in court. Regardless of Plato’s intention with Callicles, there is little question that Plato’s “retreat” was of a more radical nature than Socrates’, and its radical-ness might just be accounted for by the lessons learned from Socrates’ death. Plato’s academy is no doubt viewed as a retreat, for in the 41<sup>st</sup> lecture (41.3), Olympiodorus calls Aristotle’s Lyceum a “wall,” in reference to Socrates’ discussion of retreat in the *Republic* (discussed below).<sup>9</sup> (Here, a hint of his understanding of his own academy is seen.)

To the first type of retreat (i.e., the necessary retreat from the “public” to the “private”), Callicles’ remark that the philosopher whispers *with boys* provides insight into the reason for this *necessary* abandonment of the public. It highlights the unceasing need for interlocutors. After hearing the divine claim of the Delphic oracle, that there is none wiser than Socrates, he began testing this claim by questioning the wisdom of others. Such an exercise so consumed him that he says, he lacked the “leisure to pursue public affairs” (*Apology* 23b-c). Public affairs certainly distract the philosopher’s search for truth, which leads Glaucon to question the notion of the

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<sup>9</sup> Though nowhere in the commentary does Olympiodorus explicitly mention Aristotle as a statesman, it is almost certain that he viewed him this way, in part because of this reference to the philosopher’s need to retreat, as well as his connection of Aristotle with Socratic philosophy.

philosopher-king, who must be forced to sacrifice his happiness to govern. As a matter of fact, if we contrast the philosopher-king with the philosopher-advisor in terms of knowledge, the philosopher can never rule because he is always in search of knowledge, in contrast to the philosopher-king, who possesses this knowledge. Concerning the philosopher-king, in the 32<sup>nd</sup> lecture (32.4), Olympiodorus describes Plato's aristocracy (ἀριστοκρατία), as laid out in the *Republic*. The rulers, Olympiodorus says, are educated in "literature, gymnastics, and mathematics," ensuring that they govern without personal interest. He also says that the ruled are called "sustainers" for they, as money-makers, provide sustenance for the ruled, who are called "preservers" for preserving the city (cf. *Republic* 463a-b). Because of their education and ability to preserve, Olympiodorus concludes that they imitate (ἐμιμοῦντο) God. Recall from the fourth chapter that God possesses three traits: goodness, knowledge, and power (11.2). Thus, the philosopher-king governs, not out of self-interest, but for the common good, but more importantly, he can govern in this capacity because he has *knowledge*, and like god, he has power over all. "Though they are godlike," Olympiodorus writes, "they descend to the affairs of the city in order to repay the city for their upbringing."

The Socratic advisor possesses strikingly different qualities. As a matter of fact, the only consistent characteristic is that of goodness, where Socrates is committed to the principle that "it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it." In terms of power, the philosopher-king governs the regime. However, the Socratic advisor possesses power of a different sort—frankness. Commenting on Socrates' ability to refute Gorgias and Polus, Olympiodorus marvels at his power (δύναμιν), which destroys all forms of injustice with his words (26.7). Thus, the power of Socrates is not as ruler but as gadfly. To be sure, both possess knowledge. However, the type of knowledge is different. The philosopher-king has knowledge (γνώσις), a knowledge the advisor

does not possess. In commenting on Socrates' conversation with Callicles (504c), Olympiodorus makes much of Socrates asking Callicles to confirm his words if accurate and refute them if incorrect (34.3). According to the commentator, Socrates then says, "I do not speak with knowledge (γνῶσις)." However, this saying is not found in the dialogue, though it is perhaps an allusion to Socrates' famous midwife analogy in the *Theaetetus*, again emphasizing the need for interlocutors. Here (150b-c), Socrates says:

All that is true of their [women's] art of midwifery is true also of mine, but mine differs from theirs in being practiced upon men, not women, and in tending their souls in labor, not their bodies. But the greatest thing about my art is this, that I can test in every way whether the mind of the young man is bringing forth a mere image, an imposture, or a real and genuine offspring. For I have this in common with midwives: I am sterile in point of wisdom, and the reproach which has often been brought against me, that I question others but make no reply myself about anything, because I have no wisdom in me, is a true reproach; and the reason of it is this: the god compels me to act as midwife, but has never allowed me to bring forth.

According to Olympiodorus, what exactly is Socrates ignorant of? He first asserts that Socrates teaches moderate habits (μέτριον ἦθος) and that we should not praise (ἐπαυεῖν) ourselves.

Notice that this knowledge is at the level of practical science, exactly the type of knowledge that Olympiodorus says Plato learned from his teacher. Then, he mentions three levels of knowledge: imagination (αἴσθησις), opinion (δόξαν), and intelligence (νοεῖν), defined as divine knowledge (γνῶσις θεία).<sup>10</sup> According to Olympiodorus, it is this last type of knowledge of which Socrates is ignorant (ἀγνοεῖ). It is not just Socrates who is ignorant but every mortal. Olympiodorus says such divine knowledge is impossible: "for who," he says, "possesses knowledge in the way Intellect itself does?" In pursuit of truth, then, Socrates always sought out interlocutors and

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<sup>10</sup> These three levels of knowledge are similar to the four levels of cognition discussed in the *Republic*, excluding Olympiodorus' exclusion of mathematical knowledge. However, the more likely source is the *Sophist* (263d-264b), where the Athenian Stranger defines the cognitive abilities in three categories: knowledge (διάνοια), opinion (δόξα), imagination (φανασία).

whispered with young boys, never having the leisure to rule. Thus, the philosopher-advisor possesses the same wisdom of Socrates—human wisdom (*Apology* 20d) and must constantly search for the higher, divine knowledge acquired by the philosopher-king. Such a conclusion makes sense of Olympiodorus' later claim (mentioned at the end of chapter two) regarding disagreement concerning myth and theoretical science: one should not linger over myth but turn attention to the “best regime” of which “there is nothing greater” (44.7).

Besides the impossibility of this knowledge, the Socratic philosopher must remain in the “private” realm out of divine compulsion. Olympiodorus addresses this compulsion in his first lecture of the commentary (1.6), a commentary on the opening lines of the dialogue (447a). The dialogue opens with Calicles informing Socrates and Chaerephon that they are too late to hear Gorgias' speech. Socrates blames their tardiness on Chaerephon, who, Socrates says, “forced (*ἀναγκάσας*) him to spend time in the marketplace.” For Olympiodorus, it is important that Socrates was not allowed to leave the market sooner, nor was he even persuaded, but rather *forced*. There are two kinds of force, he says, material and divine. Material force is when a doctor must operate to save a life; whereas divine force, he says, is when “God benefits (*εὐεργετεῖν*) the world out of necessity.” Olympiodorus concludes that Socrates was compelled by divine force, a force altogether different from the imitation of the demiurge by the philosopher-king. In this instance, divine force is equated with Chaerephon, who forced him to spend time in the marketplace.

This equivocation is strange, yet Olympiodorus insists on it. He says that Socrates “hunts” the youth through Chaerephon, who associates with the youth because of his own age and familiarity with them. However, this elaboration does not explain how Chaerephon is Socrates' divine force. For this, one must return to his opening proem (0.6-8), where he

discusses the characters of the dialogue. Here, Olympiodorus says that Socrates corresponds to the intelligent (νοερῶ) and knowledgeable (ἐπιστημονικῶ), whereas Chaerephon corresponds to right opinion (ὀρθοδοξαστικῶ). In more metaphysical terms, Olympiodorus compares Socrates to the One for he looks to the One, who is simple and undivided. Chaerephon also imitates (μιμεῖται) the One, but he resembles the enmattered (ἔνυλον) One, whereas Socrates resembles the One separated from matter.<sup>11</sup> According to Olympiodorus, because the inferior (i.e., matter) does not proceed directly to the superior (i.e., the One), nor the superior to the inferior, the enmattered One, in this case Chaerephon, serves as an intermediary, or a bridge, between them. One of the examples of Chaerephon serving in this mediating role is from the *Gorgias* itself. After these opening remarks, Chaerephon initially engages Gorgias at the request of Socrates (447b1-6; 1.7-10), but perhaps the most notable example is his solicitation and conveyance of the Delphic oracle to Socrates (*Apology* 21a).

This mediating role is strikingly similar to Plato's description of Socrates' *daimonion* in the *Symposium* (202d-203a). After agreeing that Eros is not a god, Diotima, a pagan priestess, suggests that Eros is between a mortal and an immortal for this *daimonion* is in between divine and mortal. Among its powers are interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to men. This is the very function Chaerephon plays in regards to the Delphic oracle; he transports a divine thing to Socrates. This *daimonion* often kept him from interacting with certain young men, yet sometimes it allowed him to engage. Socrates' interaction with Alcibiades demonstrates both aspects of this influence. In *First Alcibiades* (103a), Socrates says that this *daimonion* kept him from approaching Alcibiades until his other lovers deserted him,

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<sup>11</sup> Notice the contradiction from the account above. In the opening proem, Socrates has knowledge (νοερῶ καὶ ἐπιστημονικῶ) and imitates the One. In this opening lecture, Olympiodorus portrays Socrates, not as the advisor—the role being played by the philosopher, Chaerephon, but as the philosopher-king.



but now since he is less physically attractive (and all other lovers have left), it permits him to engage. The result of which is the rest of that dialogue.

More importantly, in both the *Apology* (31c-d) and the *Republic* (396c), Socrates claims that his *daimonion* kept him out of politics, as well as the “public.” This divine influence is similar to that of Chaerephon’s keeping Socrates in the marketplace. This aversion to politics is no doubt why Olympiodorus emphasizes that Socrates’ service on the court was as a citizen, not as a statesman. Such a statement echoes Socrates’ conclusion in the *Apology*: “a man who fights for justice, if he wants to preserve his life, even for a little while, must be a private citizen, not a public man” (32a). Though not described the same way, Plato’s engagement with the “public” appears limited to his encounters with Dionysius the Elder and his son. Yet these travels were not self-initiated but came as a result of Dion’s request. Plato agreed, but only reluctantly.

Thus, it appears that Olympiodorus interprets Chaerephon’s role as a deeper, more divine compulsion in Socrates’ life. If this is the case, then why does Olympiodorus avoid mentioning this divine element explicitly? First, in a Christian empire zealously committed to religious orthodoxy, introducing new gods to the city would have been as tragic as Socrates’ apparent introduction. The word δαίμων was even more offensive in this Christian age than Socrates’ Athens because of its newfound demonic connotations. Olympiodorus learned the tragic lesson of Socrates. In his commentary on *First Alcibiades* (22.14-23), concerning the *daimonion*, he says that he must give “an interpretation, adapted to the prevailing circumstances, for Socrates too was condemned for propagating new deities among the youth.” He interprets it then as “conscience.” Second, there is a strong connection between his *daimonion* and eros, so much so that one could say that they are the same thing. Thus, discussing Socrates’ engagement with the youth of the city in erotic terms would have been just as offensive to the largely Christian

audience. Instead, Olympiodorus describes Socrates' compulsion in terms of the youthful Chaerephon and as "God benefitting the world," language more amenable to Byzantium.

Having discussed the first type of retreat (i.e., the philosopher's necessary retreat from the public to the private), the second retreat, a circumstantial disengagement, is addressed. During his defense of Socrates and Plato, Olympiodorus provides an instance in which both retreated circumstantially through a parallel account of their statesmanship: both engage a potential statesman (Alcibiades, Dionysius the Elder), who for different reasons abandon the philosopher, then they engage another potential statesman (Critias, Dionysius the Younger). After initial interaction with this second set, the philosophers retreat, that is to say stop associating with those potential statesmen. Concerning Socrates, Olympiodorus uses his encounters with Critias and the Thirty Tyrants (41.4). After rebuking them for their tyrannical ways and refusing to participate in their injustice, Olympiodorus says that Socrates retreated (*ἀπανεχώρει*). And Plato retreated (*ἀναχωρεῖ*), after getting word that Dionysius the Younger succumbed to the flatterers and rejected his teaching (41.8).

This type of retreat could be interpreted as a forfeiture of any future political influence. Perhaps, after failing to alter the political situation in Athens and Syracuse, Socrates and Plato turned to less political matters, letting go of this advising role. To be sure, Socrates viewed his interaction with Critias and the Thirty Tyrants as "public," after which he never engaged in another "public" act, except for his final apology in the Athenian court (*Apology* 32e-33a). After three attempts to influence the two tyrants, Plato remained in Athens and established the Academy. However, the nature of this retreat is not a permanent withdrawal from political influence so much as it is a retreat from a particular instance of influence. In other words, the Socratic philosopher retreats, when that particular instance fails, but nevertheless remains a

statesman, seeking other avenues by which to influence the city. It must not be overlooked that neither Socrates nor Plato altered their philosophic practice, after these failings. After viewing natural philosophy as deficient, Socrates' method never changed. The way in which he engaged Alcibiades and Critias, as well as the subject matter investigated, remained the same until his death. Whether he was speaking publicly or privately, Socrates never altered his philosophical method (*Apology* 17c-18a). The same could be said of Plato. Perhaps, W.K.C. Guthrie said it best: "the primary aim of education for statesmanship never left [Plato's] thoughts. It was certainly his intention that many of his pupils should leave the Academy for politics, not as power-seekers themselves but to legislate or advise those in power, and we have the names of a number who did so."<sup>12</sup> It must be said however that, despite Guthrie's conclusion, there is debate about the exact nature of his academy.<sup>13</sup> Yet regardless of this debate among modern scholars, it is important that Olympiodorus himself viewed the academy as political (demonstrated below). The education given to Dionysius the Younger (mentioned above) was a similar curriculum to that used in Plato's Academy. Thus, Olympiodorus views this retreat as circumstantial in both instances, for both advise an earlier candidate (Alcibiades and Dionysius the Elder) and only disengage because the advisee withdraws, as opposed to their second encounter when the philosopher retreats.

Even though the philosophers' retreat is from the "public" to the "private," it is still political, and though the philosopher-advisor seeks to influence those in power, sometimes he must retreat, but is the retreat cowardly? After all, in these examples, the philosopher retreats

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<sup>12</sup> *A History of Greek Philosophy, vol. 4: Plato, the Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 23.

<sup>13</sup> For the classic counterargument to Guthrie, see P.A. Brunt, *Studies in Greek History and Thought* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1993), 282-331.

simply to save his life, a practice which Olympiodorus critiqued. In the same lecture discussing these retreats (41.12), he ridicules the Athenians for fighting by sea, a cowardly military tactic, in part because fighting by boat makes retreat (φεύγουσι) too easy. Moreover, such retreats are in contrast to Olympiodorus' earlier praise of Spartan courage—the Three Hundred standing firm in the face of Persian invasion, only to lose their lives. On two occasions, Olympiodorus says that the philosopher must retreat because, if he remains, he will suffer a fate similar to those who “cast themselves in the midst of wild animals and try to tame them.” (Notice the contrast here with the four Athenians, who Olympiodorus said found themselves among wild animals and instead of retreating, or trying to tame them, *flattered* them [41.11].) The most obvious reading of this statement is that the philosopher, if he constantly rebukes and does not retreat from the hardened interlocutor, will be killed. No doubt, Olympiodorus has this in mind for he alludes to the *Republic* (496c-e), where the philosopher realizes the madness (μανίαν) of the many, and much like one who has fallen in with wild beasts, perishes. Thus, Socrates says, “the philosopher keeps quiet (ἡσυχίαν) and minds his own business, as a man in a storm hides under a wall (τειχίον).” This act certainly appears cowardly (i.e., hiding to save your own life). In this passage from the *Republic* however, Socrates provides justification for the retreat: if he dies, he no longer profits (ὀνῆσαι) himself, his friends, or his *city*. Thus, it is not completely out of self-interest that the philosopher retreats, but rather it is a calculated retreat with a view to help his friends and his city.

It is unfortunate that Olympiodorus does not reference the *Seventh Letter* on this point, for Plato offers similar advice in the form of an analogy to Dion's friends (330c-331d). He asserts that a doctor ought to advise a sick person to change his unhealthy lifestyle, advice similar to the practice of true medicine discussed earlier by Olympiodorus. Yet if the patient is

not willing to take heed of the counsel, then Plato says, “I esteem him both courageous (ἄνδρα) and a true doctor, if he retreats (φεύγοντα) from advising (ξυμβουλή) the patient.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, more striking, is Plato’s next claim that a doctor is uncourageous (ἄναδρόν) if he continues to advise such a patient.<sup>15</sup> To apply this analogy, Plato argues that it is courageous to withhold advice to rulers who refuse to listen and threaten the advisor (ξυμβούλω) to leave the regime alone or face death. (Notice that Plato implores Dion’s friends to play the role of advisor to those in power.) Again, as in the *Republic*, this retreat is political. In the *Seventh Letter* (331d), Plato says that, when such persuasion fails, “he ought to not apply violence” (i.e., revolution), but rather “keep quiet (ἡσυχίαν) and pray (εὔχεσθαι) for the good of himself and *the city* [italics added].”

Thus, the philosopher-statesman has three options in such a situation. First, he can remain with the wild animals and attempt to survive. Yet to do this, according to Plato, the philosopher must engage in injustice and assimilate to the regime, the very advice that Callicles gives to Socrates in the *Gorgias*. However, as Socrates responds, “it is better to suffer injustice than to commit injustice.” Besides, the philosopher, who knows justice, cannot commit injustice. In other words, Socrates chooses death at the hands of his fellow-citizens, rather than engage in injustice or persuade (i.e., use rhetoric) the citizens to forego his punishment. Second, the philosopher could continue to rebuke the injustice of his city, even to the point of death, apparently the position of Socrates. But in fact, this position is not Socratic, for even Socrates admits of his retreat in the *Apology*. He argues that he did retreat from the “public” in order to save his life. Yet his retreat was ultimately unsuccessful, leading those like Plato and Aristotle to

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<sup>14</sup> For a similar conclusion regarding the philosopher as advisor, see Plato, *Fifth Letter* (322b).

<sup>15</sup> See *Republic* 425e-ff. and *Laws* 720a-ff. for a discussion on medicine.

take more extreme measures. Third, the philosopher could retreat from his current engagement with a particular person, or city, in order to save his life, with the knowledge that this act would ultimately help the city itself. The political aspect of the Socratic philosopher is essential to the courageous nature of the retreat, for if he retreats to merely satisfy a desire for metaphysical speculation, then such self-interest would be interpreted as cowardly, but the Socratic philosopher retreats in order to “fight another day” as it were for the city. It is this final option that Olympiodorus chooses.

### **Neoplatonic Statesmanship**

Having examined Olympiodorus’ understanding of the philosopher-statesman and his retreat, it is important to turn to Neoplatonism itself. With utmost clarity, Olympiodorus compares his academic teaching to Socrates’ conversation in the marketplace. In the lecture following his defense of Lycurgus and Theseus (45), Olympiodorus comments on the passage originally intended for that earlier lecture (*Gorgias* 521a). Here, Socrates asks Calicles to which type of public administration he is being invited, that of one who struggles to make his citizens as good as possible or as one who satisfies their every want. In other words, is Calicles inviting him to be a statesman or a flatterer? Calicles responds that he is inviting Socrates to “serve” them as a flatterer. Socrates responds to this invitation by responding to Calicles’ earlier charge that anyone can put the philosopher to death for he does not know how to defend himself in court. Socrates seems unmoved by this threat and claims that, if anyone were to convict him, they would do so as an unjust man for no just person would prosecute someone who was innocent. Yet Socrates seems confident that, if a trial was ever brought against him, he would be put to death for not flattering them but urging them to live virtuously. He compares this trial to the trial of a doctor, convicted by children, who are not allowed to gorge themselves on various

treats but are required to fast and moderate themselves. In this context, Olympiodorus declares a most revealing statement. He writes, “so too if they accuse me, asking why I am teaching the youth, will they ever be persuaded that I do this in their interest, in order that they become men of true quality? Under such a regime,” he says, “one must create a wall for oneself and live quietly within it all the time” (45.2). From this assessment of his own philosophical activity, there are three conclusions one can draw.

First, Olympiodorus views his philosophical teaching as the activity of a statesman. Much like his discussion of Aristotle, Olympiodorus does not trace his philosophical influence back to Plato but goes further—back to Socrates—in order to avoid confusion. Olympiodorus’ activity is the *same* as Socrates’ activity. And as understood by Olympiodorus, Socrates’ activity is the attempt to moderate tyrants and those with political ambition. One might assume that Socrates, because he taught openly in the marketplace, maintained a different understanding of philosophy, than Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists, who taught in academies. Olympiodorus removes this ambiguity. Beyond connecting his statesmanship to Socratic statesmanship, Olympiodorus defines the very purpose of his philosophy—“in order that the students may become virtuous.” Not only Olympiodorus, but Neoplatonists from Plotinus to the last of their kind exhorted students to live virtuously. The most obvious example of this concern is the inclusion of “political virtue” in the Neoplatonic curriculum (see chapter two).

In regards to Plotinus’ “academy,” many of his devoted students were politically influential in Rome. Porphyry calls these students “zealous students, really devoted to philosophy” in contrast to others who were part of an outside circle. Of the fourteen committed students mentioned, five were involved in politics in some capacity—Zethos, Castricius Firmus, and three senators—Marcellus Orontius, Sabinillus, and Rogatianus. In his school in Apama

(Syria), Iamblichus, perhaps the next great Neoplatonist, taught two influential political figures—Sopartos and Eustathius. Sopartos was a part of Constantine's court (306-07). During his tenure, Eunapius says that he sought to tyrannize (τυρραννήσων) and convert (μεταστήσων) Constantine's purpose and impulsiveness (462). Impressed by the philosopher, Constantine made Sopartos his advisor (σύμβουλον). However, the courtiers were enraged with jealousy and plotted against Sopartos, ultimately swaying Constantine to cut off the head of the philosopher (similar to Plato in Sicily). Eunapius compares this tragic event to the trial and death of Socrates. Another student of Iamblichus, Eustathius, traveled to Persia and became an ambassador for Constantius II (337-61), the son of Constantine. Perhaps, the most notable influence of Iamblichus on political power was the influence of his own pupils on Emperor Julian (361-63). The most important advice was the suggestion to overthrow the Christian influence and restore the empire to its pagan roots. In Alexandria, Hypatia's student—Synesius was an ambassador to the imperial court (397-400) obtaining tax relief for the city.

But perhaps with Olympiodorus' commentary itself, we can see best the activity of the philosopher-statesman. The philosopher-statesman as advisor ought to offer good advice to rulers or those with political ambition, and as suggested above, sometimes this advice is critical in nature (cf. 40.3). Beyond the knowledge required for such critical advice, the philosopher-statesman needs a type of courage, described by Olympiodorus as frankness (παρρησίαν). Recall that Olympiodorus immediately writes after this: "Surely this [the lack of frankness] is why people do not give advice to kings (βασιλεῦσιν), because they cannot summon the courage" (27.2). Olympiodorus summoned the courage. Within his analysis of Athenian imperialism, he offers the good advice of the philosopher-statesman, criticizing the expansionist policies of an empire seeking, at all costs, to restore universal dominion. (Granted, this critique of imperialism



was hidden, which makes it appear somewhat cowardly, but it is the soft whisper of a statesman, whose philosophic enterprise is in jeopardy.) It is no accident that the subject of war was the centerpiece of his advice. No doubt, the issue of military expansionism was one of the central elements of Justinian's reign, but it should not be overlooked that war is one of the five subjects of advisory rhetoric listed by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (see chapter five).

Olympiodorus did not just offer critical advice but also provided positive counsel on how to move the regime toward aristocracy, that is to say, republicanism. In contrast to the absolutist monarchy of Byzantium, Olympiodorus attempts to moderate monarchy by distributing the power to other classes within the regime, as suggested in Plato's *Laws* (693d-e). Besides institutional reforms such as this, Olympiodorus also attempted to reform the political myth that provided the education and habits of the regime's citizens. This reform was conducted in hopes that the philosophical myth would provide increased stability and order to the already fragile empire.

Though Olympiodorus understood his philosophic activity as that of a Socratic statesman, there is one point in which the harmony seems to disappear, namely the issue of student fees. Perhaps the only Neoplatonist to do so, Olympiodorus goes to great lengths to defend the practice of accepting fees from students. Why does he go to such lengths? After all, the payment of fees to academic institutions is commonplace in modern society. In short, it questions his statesmanship. Thus, like the other statesmen in his commentary, Olympiodorus seeks to offer a defense of his statesmanship. In this case, the statesman just happens to be himself. In the *Apology* (19a-20a), Socrates tells of being confused with sophists, such as Gorgias, Protagoras, and Hippias. He adamantly rejects this accusation, saying that he never taught (*παιδεύειν*) nor made money (*χρήματα πράττομαι*). However, as noted above,

Olympiodorus describes Socrates as a “teacher” (41.3) and earlier goes so far as to claim that Socrates “took fees” (40.7), arguing that “he wished to receive money, even if not a great amount.” This bizarre justification comes from Olympiodorus’ interpretation of a passage from the *Gorgias* (514a), where, after a lengthy speech, Socrates concludes that the statesman ought to make his citizens as good as possible. Other services, such a military protection, are useless, he says, unless the intention of those with wealth and power is “good and honorable” (καλὴ κἀγαθὴ). Thus, on Olympiodorus’ reading, there is no necessary conflict with those, who benefit others, receiving some wealth or power in return. Part of the reason there is no conflict is that the person, who benefits another, is just himself and thus would not misuse money or power. As a matter of fact, given the nature of the philosopher, Olympiodorus assures his hearers that Socrates would not desire wealth but only take “what was necessary for modest living.”<sup>16</sup>

Does this discussion of fees not transform the nature of statesmanship? Though it appears that Olympiodorus looks no different than the sophists on this point, it is reconcilable with Socratic statesmanship. First, Olympiodorus does not require fees, nor solicit them. At one point, he says that a teacher “should not talk about fees” (43.5). However, three times in that same lecture, Olympiodorus’ claims that, if the teacher benefited the student, then that student, out of his own initiative, would support the teacher, out of gratitude (43.2, 43.5, 43.8). To illustrate this point, Olympiodorus references Alcibiades’ claim that, once Socrates was his lover, whereas now he was the lover, expressing his gratitude for Socrates (cf., *Symposium* 222b, *Alcibiades* 135d-e). No doubt this discussion points to the importance of the fees, that is, it

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<sup>16</sup> He interestingly claims here that the statesman would redistribute wealth equally. This radical redistribution seems reminiscent of the communal living of the auxiliaries in the *Republic*, or perhaps a suggestion that the Byzantine Empire ought to provide funds for his school.

correlates to gratitude—one of the marks of a true statesman. Thus, the philosopher, unlike the sophist, does not require or solicit fees but rather receives them out of students' generosity.

Why is this discussion so crucial for Olympiodorus? Recall that part of the defense of Socrates was his exemption from any responsibility concerning the unjust conduct of his "students." In the *Apology*, he was exempt from such responsibility because he was no one's teacher, in contrast to the sophists, who, like Gorgias, are criticized by Socrates for not being responsible for their students. Olympiodorus seems to negate this very defense by claiming Socrates was a teacher. How then is Olympiodorus (and Socrates) not responsible for their students' actions, if they practice injustice? It is that, unlike the sophists, they did not *charge* fees but only *received* them if given out of the gratitude of their students.

Not only does Olympiodorus' earlier statement present his philosophy as Socratic statesmanship, it secondly harkens back to the *necessary* retreat of the philosopher-statesman, not the *circumstantial* retreat from a particular person. "One must create a wall for oneself," he says, "and live quietly within it at all times." However, the wall of the Neoplatonists—the academy—is more remote and "private" than the Socratic marketplace. Though in the *Apology*, Socrates describes his activity as "private," there is no question that it had a more public face than the late philosophical academy which took on a more secluded, ascetic nature. For example, Xenophon writes, "Socrates lived ever in the open; for early in the morning he went to the public promenades and training-grounds; in the forenoon he was seen in the market; and the rest of the day he passed just where most people were to be met: he was generally talking, and anyone might listen" (*Memorabilia*, I.1.10). By contrast, Plotinus taught students in a private home (the home of Gemina), as did Iamblichus (cf. Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 1.12). Plotinus' student, Porphyry, recognized the value of the secluded academy. In *On Abstinence*

from *Eating Food from Animals* (I.36.1), he praises those, such as the Pythagoreans, who retreated (ἀναχώρησις) to the most deserted places (ἐρημότατα χωρία), as well as those who dwelt in sacred groves within the city, removed from the disturbances of the city.

Though there is a sense in which the academy is more hidden than the marketplace, the academy was *public* in a way that the Socratic “wall” of the marketplace never was—some of the philosophers and their academies received public funding. Though much of the financial situation of the Neoplatonist schools is unknown, there are a few examples that survive. By all accounts, the Athenian academy enjoyed the greatest financial security, allowing it, on Olympiodorus’ own telling, “to waive tuition for its students” (*Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, 140-41). As a matter of fact, Proclus, one-time head of the Athenian academy, appointed an influential aristocrat, Archiades, to obtain financial support from various sources, including official support. Archiades was so successful that the school was able to employ teaching assistants as well as provide scholarships to qualified pagan students.<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, in his *Philosophical History* (102), Damascius records that the revenue of the academy had reached one thousand coins by the time of Proclus, in contrast to only around three coins during Plato’s time. It also seems that some philosophers, including Damascius, received an official salary. But this financial security was lost after Justinian’s reforms in 529 CE and 531 CE (see introduction).

In Alexandria, the school received official support in part because the city recognized the civic service the school offered through its liberal education. Though it is debated whether or not some of the earliest Neoplatonists in Alexandria received a public salary, there is no question

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<sup>17</sup> Edward J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 2006), 107-08.

that some, such as Hermeias, were publicly funded. As a matter of fact, his wife, Aedesia, secured that same funding for their son, Ammonius, who taught Olympiodorus. This salary however was not without consequence, namely the oversight of religious empire. This oversight ultimately led to scrutiny from Christian political leaders and a compromise on the part of Ammonius. Though it is difficult to reconstruct exactly what type of compromise he made, Edward J. Watts suggests that, due to the pressure being largely religious, the philosopher most likely had to remove elements from his teaching that conflicted with Christian orthodoxy (222).<sup>18</sup> Olympiodorus took control of the school in Alexandria around the time of Justinian's reforms in Athens. It is likely that the financial situation in Alexandria was more dire than in Athens in part because the Alexandrian academy did not possess the endowment of its counterpart.

Even though most Neoplatonists, especially late Neoplatonists, preferred this "private" existence, others did not retreat to the most remote places but were more public with their statesmanship, perhaps due to somewhat better circumstances or even to the fading memory of Socrates' tragic death. Plotinus is indicative of this openness. He joined the army under Emperor Gordian, who campaigned against Persia. Porphyry suggests that Plotinus took this trip because he wanted to investigate Persian philosophy (3.15-17). Though Porphyry is unclear exactly what role Plotinus had in Gordian's army, Rawson suggests that he formed part of a Roman imperial entourage.<sup>19</sup> Later in life, he approached emperor Gallienus and his wife about reviving a "city of philosophers" in Campania. Moreover, he asked the emperor to grant land surrounding Campania in order that he might found a city named "Platonopolis," according to

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<sup>18</sup> R. Sorabji, "Divine Names and Sordid Deals in Ammonius' Alexandria," in *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity*, edited by Andrew Smith (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> E. Rawson, "Roman Rulers and the Philosophic Advisor," in *Philosophia Togata I: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, edited by M. Griffin and J. Barnes (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1989), 233-57.

Plato's *Laws*.<sup>20</sup> Plotinus believed this request might be granted, for according to Porphyry, the emperor and his wife venerated (ἔσεφθησαν) the philosopher. The request was denied in part because of a jealous and spiteful court. Another important Neoplatonist, Proclus, reportedly took part in many public debates on political issues. In his *Life of Proclus* (15), Marinus records that the philosopher appeared in these debates and offered “shrewd advice.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he conferred with rulers about matters of justice, and according to Marinus, he not only exhorted them on such matters, but because of his frankness, all but forced them to give each his due. Such engagement is said to demonstrate Proclus' courage, which Marinus calls Herculean for the political environment was quite volatile at the time. (Here, the role of the philosopher as advisor comes to mind.)

However, unlike Plotinus and Proclus, Hypatia lived in Alexandria, where Christianity had gained a strong foothold, and her death perhaps demonstrates that the philosopher became too “public.” In his *Philosophical History* (43), Damascius records that, wrapped in a philosopher's cloak, Hypatia walked through the town, “publicly” interpreting the works of Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers to anyone who would listen, an approach to statesmanship similar to Socrates. Her death comes as a surprise given that, according to

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<sup>20</sup> The exact nature of this city is debated. Reading the traditional interpretation of Neoplatonism back into Plotinus' intention, Mark Edwards believes this city was to be a sort of pagan monastic community engaged in metaphysical speculation (“Plotinus and Emperors,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 69 (1994): 137-47). Yet even among those who take the political nature of this city seriously, there is disagreement. For those who see this city as an attempt to realize the city-in-speech of the *Republic*, see James Schall, “Plotinus and Political Philosophy.” For those who see this city as an attempt to realize the republic of the *Laws*, see L. Jerphagnon, “Platonopolis ou Plotin entre le siècle et le reve,” *Cahiers de Fontenay* 19-22 (Melanges Trouillard, 1981), 215-29.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting here that Marinus does not credit knowledge to the philosopher but limits his advice to mere shrewdness, which was the trait given to the flatterer by Olympiodorus. It appears, however, that Marinus credits Proclus with the other two traits—goodness and frankness.

Damascius, “the entire city loved her and held her in exceptional esteem.” Perhaps, this philosopher underestimated her threat to the political establishment.

Having examined the conclusions that the philosopher is a statesman (i.e., advisor), who must hide behind a “wall,” it is important to turn to the third, and final, conclusion drawn from Olympiodorus’ statement. Perhaps with Hypatia’s death on his mind, Olympiodorus realizes that this tension is an essential one, requiring the philosopher to *always* retreat. Thus, he says that the philosopher lives quietly behind the wall *all the time*. Yet is it unclear if Olympiodorus means within the context of Athenian democracy or the Byzantine Empire. He writes, “if they accuse me, asking why am I teaching the youth, will they ever be persuaded that I do this in their interest?” It seems Olympiodorus has Athenian democracy in mind. Thus, Olympiodorus appears to say, if I was in Athens, I would need to retreat for the Athenians would convict me, just as they did Socrates. Yet, as discussed in chapter three, Olympiodorus views his own regime as corrupt. Thus, it does not matter, whether in Athenian democracy or Byzantium, the philosopher must necessarily retreat. With varying degrees of remoteness, this retreat is necessary. Because the philosopher always retreats, he is relegated to the role of advisor, never able (or willing) to acquire political power himself.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION: THE TENSION REVISITED

Having provided a close reading of Olympiodorus' *Commentary on Plato's 'Gorgias,'* we find that, far from abandoning Plato's political philosophy, Olympiodorus maintained his predecessor's political thought. In many ways, the central claim of this dissertation is that there is such a thing as a Neoplatonic political philosophy. Yet this claim raises an interesting question. What is *Neo* about his Neoplatonic political philosophy? As stated in the introduction, Neoplatonists did not consider themselves Neoplatonists, or as fundamentally altering Plato's philosophy. They considered themselves Platonists, faithfully interpreting his dialogues. Thus, from his perspective, Olympiodorus' political philosophy is simply a restatement of his predecessor's own thought. No doubt, this perception can be challenged. Yet it would take a full analysis of Plato's own political philosophy. It must be said, however, that Olympiodorus' reading of Plato's political philosophy is similar to the interpretation made by "medieval rationalists," such as al-Farabi and Maimonides. Thus, at least from this tradition's perspective, Olympiodorus' political philosophy is a faithful restatement of his predecessor's thought. But instead of focusing on the substance of his philosophy, one thing that is certainly new is its context: a radically new age unknown by his predecessor—the age of religious empire. And it is a focus on this circumstantial aspect that provides some interesting conclusions. Though consistent with classic political philosophy, Olympiodorus' commitment to a small regime is in contrast with empire, as well as modern republicanism. Concerning religion, his attempt to validate Christianity as a civic religion (the first such attempt) influenced successive generations. Moreover, Olympiodorus argues that a Platonic political philosophy is a philosophy of statesmanship. This philosophy provides perspective on the foundations of political science, as



well as the political role of the philosopher. Finally, Plato's political philosophy is not relegated to the history of ideas, nor limited to the Greek *polis*, but is capable of offering a universal political science, relevant for any political order in any age.

### **Athens and Byzantium**

First, we turn to the conflict between Athens and Byzantium. In terms of the first, and more fundamental, tension of the metaphor—the tension between republicanism and empire, Olympiodorus argues for the superiority of a republic over and against that of empire, a conclusion in harmony with classical political philosophy. Though the nature of his commentary prevents the argument from being an exhaustive, systematic account, it seems that the primary reason for his preference was a disagreement concerning the optimal territory for a healthy regime. A republic requires a small territory in order to insure an active citizenry and a strong sense of harmony. Empire, by contrast, thrives on expansive territory, at least in practice, if not in theory. As discussed above, Olympiodorus' focus on territory was not driven by the dialogue as much as it was driven by the political circumstances of the day.

Though he was committed to republicanism, there is a sense in which he maintained the tension by providing a public justification of empire (divinely-modeled monarchy), as well as offering prudential advice to preserve the regime in which he lived. There is no question that Olympiodorus offered this justification of Byzantium to protect the academy (i.e., philosophy), however, he also provided it to protect the city as well. By defending the conventions of the day, he confirmed and deepened the political allegiances of his students, especially those casual attendees or those just beginning their philosophic education. Moreover, though he educated future statesmen in hopes of establishing republican rule, Olympiodorus offered more realistic

political advice, knowing that constituting the best regime is rare. To be sure, he argued that the purpose of the best regime is the good life (a point he made several times), but in his focus on the tyrannical expansionism of the Byzantine Empire, he was more concerned about *life*, as opposed to the *good* life. (This helps explain his effort to elevate the four Athenian statesmen to a level that is less than obvious when reading the Platonic dialogue.) Out of a desire for acquisition, Emperor Justinian brought the empire to a point of unsustainability. In this instance, Olympiodorus was not trying to bring about the best regime but merely peace and order, prerequisites as it were for the good life. Though critical of expansionism, he avoided utopianism, all the while acknowledging that some genuine good comes from even a corrupt regime, even if that good is not the highest good.

Though Olympiodorus was still defending republicanism well into the 6<sup>th</sup> century, empire was the dominant form of regime, until Marsilius of Padua (c. 1275-1342)<sup>1</sup> and Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)<sup>2</sup> recovered republican thought. Machiavelli, however, argued for a different type of republicanism, which in many ways had more in common with empire than with the type of republicanism defended in Olympiodorus' commentary, particularly on the issue of territory.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the cities-in-speech of classic political philosophy, Machiavelli set out to

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<sup>1</sup> *The Defender of the Peace*, translated by Annabel Brett (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Discourses on Livy*, translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> This modern focus on expansive territory was also central in the debates during the American founding. Though Anti-Federalists invoked the more classic principle of small territory, the Federalists argued that an *extensive* republic served as a “republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government” (*Federalist* 10, 14). Stated more clearly in *Federalist* 9, Publius writes, “to this catalogue of circumstances that tend to amelioration of popular systems of civil government, I shall venture . . . to add one more—the ENLARGEMENT of the ORBIT within which such systems are to revolve.” It is perhaps no accident then that, during this period, some called the new republic, “the seat of freedom and the nurse of empire.” American statesmen were even praised for “forming and defending a free and extensive empire.” Hezekiah Niles, ed., *Principles and Acts of the Revolution*

institute an effective political science, bringing “new modes and orders . . . [which] will bring common benefit to everyone.”<sup>4</sup> If a regime is to maintain power, he argues, it must expand: “[S]ince all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall . . . . Therefore, . . . in ordering a republic there is need to think of the more honorable part and to order it so that if indeed necessity brings it to expand, it can conserve what it has seized.”<sup>5</sup>

In terms of the second part of this metaphor—the tension between philosophy and religion, Olympiodorus maintains the tension because of the city’s need for both philosophy and religion. For him, philosophy is necessary because it provides the “blueprint” of the best regime, and religion is necessary for it inculcates virtue in the citizenry, including philosophers, whom Olympiodorus says must also be pious. A city of philosophy is absurd for not all are philosophers. A city of piety is equally absurd for a universal political science must be rooted in reason (universal demonstration), not a particular revelation given to one exclusive sect. This is true, even if this political science is later given divine support (e.g., preamble to laws).

Though Olympiodorus’ maintenance of the tension between philosophy and religion is not altogether new, his attempt to validate Christianity as a civil religion is. (Presumably, his attempt was driven by recent persecution and a realization of the powerful influence of Christianity, as well as the waning influence of paganism.) Though Neoplatonism is credited with influencing much of medieval philosophy, especially in regards to metaphysics, it is this initial attempt that greatly influenced later philosophers in religious empire, whether Christian or

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*in America* (New York, 1971 [orig. publ. Baltimore, 1822]), 49-52 quoted in Norbert Kilian, “New Wine in Old Skins? American Definitions of Empire and the Emergence of a New Concept,” in *Theories of Empire, 1450-1800*, edited by David Armitage (Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), 319.

<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.pr. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.7.4. See also II.4.1-2, 19.1-2.

Islamic. The Christian influence is evidenced by Olympiodorus' immediate followers. For example, John Philoponus continued to compose commentaries on classical texts, especially those of Aristotle, yet he openly professed Christianity. His commitment to Christianity even influenced his writing for one of his commentaries challenges the Neoplatonic teaching on the eternity of the world.<sup>6</sup> He also composed a treatise entitled *On the Creation of the World*. His commitment to Christianity, however, is subject to interpretation. The earliest assessment, written by al-Farabi, reads: "One may suspect that his intention from what he does in refuting Aristotle is either to defend the opinions laid down in his own religion about the world, or to remove from himself [the suspicion] that he disagrees with the position held by the people of his religion and approved by their rulers, so as to not suffer the same fate as Socrates."<sup>7</sup> Thus, John Philoponus, much like Synesius (in chapter four), was pious in order to protect philosophy as well as the city. The Islamic influence comes somewhat later with Islamic philosophers, who acknowledge a debt to Neoplatonism. This is no accident since Alexandria was sacked by Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, linking the Islamic world to Neoplatonic thought in Alexandria.

However, Olympiodorus' attempt underestimated the radical nature of Christianity, particularly its universality, and the political ramifications of this claim. Initially, Christianity appeared less problematic than other religions, particularly Islam and Judaism, in that Christianity does not have the character of law but allows the temporal realm to order itself. Yet as the Church ultimately expressed its authority, Christianity claimed a power unknown to the classical world, known as the "papal plenitude of power (*plenitudo potestatis*)."<sup>8</sup> Marsilius of

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<sup>6</sup> *On Physics*, 54.8-55.26, 191.9-192.2, 428.23-430.10, 445.17-458.31, 467.1-468.4, 762.2-9.

<sup>7</sup> This translation of *Against John the Grammarian* is found in M. Mahdi, "al-Farabi against Philoponus," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26 (1967): 256-57. See *De aet.* 331.17-332.23.

Padua was among the last of the medieval philosophers to view Christianity in terms similar to Olympiodorus. However, like Olympiodorus, Marsilius underestimated the radical nature of Christianity, which ultimately necessitated an independent clergy (at least in the West). Not long after Marsilius, Machiavelli saw the need for a new religion in order to sustain republican governance, which according to him, was in crisis because of Christianity's weaknesses. The religion was too radical for empire and even the republicanism defended by Olympiodorus. The "theologico-political problem" was resolved by a third form of regime—national monarchy, as Pierre Manent so persuasively demonstrates.<sup>8</sup>

### **Statesmanship and Political Philosophy**

Beyond Olympiodorus maintaining political philosophy in an age of empire, he offers a compelling interpretation of Plato's political philosophy as a philosophy of statesmanship. Often, discussions of Plato revolve around the relationship between metaphysics and politics, regime types, or his city-in-speech. These topics are important to Olympiodorus, even if not the focal point of his political philosophy. The preeminence of statesmanship is first suggested in the very selection of the dialogue. For much of contemporary scholarship on Plato, his own philosophy is found in the "middle" or "late" dialogues, and in terms of Plato's political philosophy, the *Republic* and the *Laws*, two late dialogues, become the most important. But for Neoplatonists, Plato's philosophy, including his political philosophy, is preserved in his entire corpus, not merely the "middle" or "late" dialogues identified by developmentalist scholars. If there were developments, or shifts, in Plato's philosophy, they were minimal, so that tensions or contradictions between dialogues are synthesized into an unitive account. Thus, to capture his

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<sup>8</sup> *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, translated by Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3-9.

thought, the interpreter of Plato must account for the entire corpus. Even if they took this unitive approach, it is still surprising that the *Republic* and the *Laws* were not the focus of their analysis at all, for they appear to be the most political. To be sure, Olympiodorus frequently referenced them in developing Plato's political philosophy, as he should have, given his hermeneutic. Yet the Neoplatonists made a conscious decision to exclude these dialogues from the curriculum and use the *Gorgias* as the key text to teach political virtue or, as Olympiodorus says, "principles of political science."

By contrast, in terms of contemporary analysis of the *Gorgias*, the literature is limited in part because of the supposed transitional nature of the dialogue. It is said to reflect a "personal crisis" concerning politics, similar to that expressed in the *Seventh Letter*.<sup>9</sup> E.R. Dodds writes that the *Gorgias* illustrates "Plato's decision to forgo the political career towards which both family tradition and his own inclinations had urged him, and instead to open a school of philosophy."<sup>10</sup> Even when the dialogue receives attention, it is generally in terms of the defense of Socratic morality against alternative moral (or immoral) visions, especially that of Callicles.<sup>11</sup> (One of the few exceptions to this dominant reading is Devin Stauffer's *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias*, where he argues the unifying theme is rhetoric coupled with the defense of Socrates'

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<sup>9</sup> W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy, vol. 4: Plato, the Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 296.

<sup>10</sup> E.R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>11</sup> See Terence Irwin, *Plato: Gorgias* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1979); Charles Kahn, "On the Relative Date of the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1988): 69-102; idem., "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983): 75-121; A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (New York, N.Y.: Methuen, 1926).

way of life.<sup>12</sup>) Though there are acknowledgements of the political themes of the dialogue, such acknowledgements are rare, and when they are mentioned, they almost inevitably are interpreted in developmental, historical terms, illustrated by the dialogue's "passionate and outspoken criticism of Athenian politics and politicians from the Persian Wars to the disaster of 404 [BCE] and the execution of Socrates five years later."<sup>13</sup>

Given this contrast in interpretation, why did the Neoplatonists, particularly Olympiodorus, use the *Gorgias* as the quintessential text for political thought? A justification is never provided. Olympiodorus argues that the dialogue's aim is "political virtue" and thus the dialogue of choice, but this can hardly be considered a justification. Other dialogues discuss political themes, if not more so than the *Gorgias*. O'Meara speculates that the length of the *Republic* and the *Laws* gave the more manageable *Gorgias* preference, but philosophers, whose pedagogy was so carefully devised, would not be deterred by such practical considerations, if they saw these two dialogues as more foundational. A more substantive concern seems in order. The *Gorgias* appears to be the dialogue of choice for its focus on *statesmanship*, the really unique political emphasis of the dialogue. Other dialogues mention statesmanship but focus on other matters, especially institutions. The *Laws*, for example, describe the need for a great political actor, actually a tyrant, but its focus concerns the legislative task and civic education. The obvious exception to this generalization is the *Statesman*, the title of which is the very subject matter in question. Though an answer would involve a detailed analysis of the entire dialogue, a couple insights from the structure of the Neoplatonic curriculum provide a reason for its exclusion. Neoplatonists considered the dialogue to be one of theoretical science, describing

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<sup>12</sup> *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias: Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy, vol. 4: Plato, the Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period*, 294.

the creative works of the demiurge. They also understood political science as practical science, not relying on the metaphysical speculation of theoretical science, a distinction more familiar in Aristotle's philosophy, though credited to Plato by Olympiodorus. Thus, even if statesmanship was an element of that dialogue, the *Gorgias* was more appropriate for teaching political science for it avoids explicit references to theoretical science. The unique focus on statesmanship is evidenced further by the fact that other elements of political philosophy (e.g., regime types, education) are necessarily developed from other Platonic dialogues simply because these elements are not found in the *Gorgias* itself. Olympiodorus had to look elsewhere. Yet even if this speculation on the *Gorgias* is misplaced, statesmanship is still the centerpiece of Olympiodorus' political philosophy for it is the statesman who acts. No doubt, Olympiodorus is concerned with the best regime, determining the best institutional arrangement to maximize human potential. Civic education was also a concern. But in the end, the best regime is brought about by the statesman, and civic education is devised by him as well. Moreover, while the best regime is dependent on circumstance, statesmanship must act in any and every circumstance, adjusting the good to what is possible.

Olympiodorus' political philosophy is a philosophy of statesmanship. Yet this philosophy is not limited to those who govern but extends to philosophers as well. He offers a rather provocative understanding of the philosophical way of life, which is essentially political. Just as he could not imagine a discussion of the best regime without a practical political concern, philosophy without a concern for the city is equally unimaginable. Hence, his rejection of the Thalean model of philosophy for the Socratic model. The relationship between the philosopher and the city is illustrated extensively in classical political philosophy, notably the trial and death of Socrates. In this way, Olympiodorus does not provide anything new. Yet a full understanding



of Socratic statesmanship is lacking in the literature on Plato. Generally, Socrates is viewed as citizen *par excellence*, not a political advisor.<sup>14</sup> In Olympiodorus' commentary, we find a coherent, fully developed notion of the philosopher-advisor, advisor to those in power and those with aspirations of power.

Not only does his philosophy give insight into the Socratic way of life, it also helps explain the *raison d'être* of Plato's Academy as well as the Neoplatonic academies (at least from Olympiodorus' perspective). The academies provided liberal education, to be sure, but they also served as a venue for advising statesmen. It is no accident that many of the students were either current politicians or had inclinations toward public life. This self-understanding is in stark contrast with the traditional interpretation of Neoplatonism as an ascetic school that focused almost exclusively on metaphysical speculation.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation views Neoplatonism closer to the Thalean model of philosophy, a model deemed inadequate by Olympiodorus. Though their seclusion from the public realm is a fact, it must be interpreted, and unfortunately, the traditional interpretation is a misunderstanding of *intention*. It assumes that they retreated from the public realm because they were apathetic about the outside world, including politics. However, it seems that the Neoplatonic retreat was not out of apathy but out of a statesman's concern for the city, who, like Socrates and Plato before them, retreated from the public realm in order to benefit the city.

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<sup>14</sup> See David D. Corey, "Socratic Citizenship: Delphic Oracle and Divine Sign," *The Review of Politics* 67 (2005): 201-228, A.G. Gunderson, *The Socratic Citizen: A Theory of Deliberative Democracy* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2000), Dana R. Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), J. Wallach, "Socratic Citizenship," *History of Political Thought* 9 (1988): 393-413.

<sup>15</sup> For articulations of Neoplatonism as an ascetic philosophical school see Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, Wi.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), and Garth Fowden, "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 33-59.

This political philosophy of statesmanship bears on his own teaching in the academy. Already, it is established that Olympiodorus' teaching was not simply a history of ideas, or philosophy for philosophy's sake, but a rather education for the city. It might now be said that it was training for potential statesmen, who would implement his political philosophy. Even if Olympiodorus described the idea of the best regime and civic education, these concepts remained abstract and theoretical, unless statesmen were developed. It is the political *actor* who takes these ideas and puts them into practice. Indicative of his own statesmanship, Olympiodorus' pedagogy is characteristic of his political science (mentioned above). In reading his commentary, not only does a concern for politics in general emerge, there is also a rich political science that does not "fiddle while Rome burns" but speaks out against corrupt regimes, even in the most dangerous of circumstances, as well as provide prudential advice. To be sure, he asserts that republicanism is the best possible regime, a normative claim that transcends time and circumstance, yet his elevation of the Spartan regime as the best model to curb Byzantine expansion shows a willingness to hold up a regime that, in another set of circumstances, is not ideal. As a matter of fact, Olympiodorus' science is so focused on the political problems of his age that he shows no hesitation in altering texts, including the Platonic dialogues, to support his cause. Such alterations are clearly seen in his defense of Lycurgus and Theseus. Thus, his commentary on a classic text was not exegesis for exegesis' sake. To the contrary, he used philosophy, poetry, and history as *tools* in an attempt to persuade his audience of the most prudential political path. Such an enterprise sounds reminiscent of his advice in the 27<sup>th</sup> lecture: "we should not stop at words but seek action too, seeing that we are actually adopting the theory with a view to good works" (27.3).

In order for philosophers to advise statesmen on the best way of life and the best regime, they need a certain independence from political power for in most cases the *best* conflicts with the *actual*. This independence was threatened in the Neoplatonic academies of the Roman Empire. These academies became integral to religious empire as centers for liberal education. Thus, in many instances, those academies received official subsidies and charged tuition for their service; several philosophers were even paid public salaries. These practices led to imperial oversight, which culminated in a philosopher's compromise in Alexandria and ultimately the closure of the school in Athens. By the time Olympiodorus took control of the Alexandrian academy, these subsidies were removed, and the academy faced economic hardship. Olympiodorus addressed the specific issue of fees. He concluded that, though charging tuition is an unwise practice, the philosopher could accept a fee, if given out of gratitude. The claims of Socrates, who did not charge fees, and Olympiodorus, who only accepted a voluntary offering, might seem strange to the ears of professors in the modern academy.

### **A Universal Political Science**

Like other Neoplatonists, Olympiodorus did not believe that Plato's political thought was somehow outdated or irrelevant, simply because he lived in a different age and in a different political context. Rather, he argued that Plato's thought was normative for all persons in all ages and in all circumstances. Though Neoplatonists are often accused of moving beyond Plato's own thought, he saw himself as a faithful interpreter of that "divine philosopher," who was greater than those who came after him, including Aristotle. Olympiodorus' normative use of Plato strikes the modern political scientist as odd, even political theorists who refer to the core texts of Western civilization. Granted, political theorists usually present Plato in the context of a history of political thought, but this presentation seems inadequate from Olympiodorus'

perspective, given his emphasis on statesmanship. There are few theorists who return to Plato as an authoritative voice for political theory. Two of the more notable figures who do so are Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, and even they disagree about the normative use of Plato, particularly the sole adequacy of classical political philosophy. Its (in)adequacy centers around the issue of universality. For Voegelin, classical political philosophy is inadequate, in and of itself, to develop a modern political science because it is not a universal science. He writes, “the Platonic-Aristotelian man is the man of the polis and is, even for Aristotle, tied to the *omphalos* [bellybutton] of Delphi; precisely from the Hellenic position, a universal political science is radically impossible.”<sup>16</sup> Steps are made toward the universal political science with the rise of Christianity and historical consciousness, Voegelin argues.

An example of this inadequacy is the rise of Caesarism. According to Voegelin, classical political philosophy is inadequate, in and of itself, to account for a post-republican constitutional order. “Modern tyranny,” he says, “must remain unintelligible unless we have proper regard for the fact that it is a phenomenon in Western, not in Hellenic, society,” in part because of the West’s universality, illustrated by Voegelin’s analysis of the ecumenic age.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Strauss affirms the universality of classical political philosophy, a position Voegelin argues had its origins in the Renaissance: “a classicist’s misunderstanding,” Voegelin says, “that is possible only in the atmosphere of the universality of man achieved by Christianity.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Letter Four [Dec. 9, 1942],” in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, translated by Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Voegelin, “Appendix to Letter 20 [Jan. 14, 1949],” in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Voegelin, “Letter Four [Dec. 9, 1942],” in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 9.

On this point, Olympiodorus' interpretation of Plato's political philosophy is invaluable for it is one of the earliest interpretations (and applications) of this philosophy, which incidentally occurred during the age of Caesarism. Beyond invoking Plato as an authoritative source (an invocation with which both Strauss and Voegelin agree), Olympiodorus uses it to develop a universal political science. Its universality is implicit in his analysis and critique of the Byzantine Empire and is explicitly universal elsewhere (20.6, 50.13). Voegelin could respond, much as he did to the Renaissance, that Olympiodorus understands Plato in these universal terms only because of the "atmosphere of universality" achieved by Christianity. Yet Olympiodorus does not ground this universality in Christianity, or Stoicism for that matter, but in Plato's own political philosophy. For example, nearing the end of the *Gorgias*, Socrates says that he is convinced (πέπεισμαι) of the need to possess a healthy soul (526d-527a), and at one point, he invites all other men (ἄλλους πάντας ἀνθρώπους) to this way of life. Olympiodorus interprets this invitation, as an invitation to all (πάντας) for Socrates wants everyone (ἕκαστον) to be well constituted (εὖ πολιτεύεσθαι) (50.13).

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## VITA

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