

AN APPROACH TO PLETHON: THE DE VIRTUTIBUS REVISITED

JOSEPH A. MUNITIZ

*Honorary Research Fellow
Department of Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology
University of Birmingham, Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
jmunitiz@arrupe.demon.co.uk*

Abstract

Originating as an extended review of a critical edition of the *De virtutibus* of Gemistos Plethon, this article takes into account many recent works on Plethon; it attempts to show how the little work *On the virtues* may provide access to a view of Plethon not as a crypto-advocate of paganism but as a broad-minded Orthodox believer, attempting to widen the cultural horizon of his contemporaries to include what is of value in pre-Christian thinkers.

Metadata: Byzantine Philosophy, George Gemistos Plethon, Paganism, Christian Ethics

Resumen

Inicialmente la recensión de una edición crítica del *De virtutibus* de Gemisto Pletón, este artículo tiene en cuenta varios estudios recientes sobre Pletón; intenta mostrar cómo el tratado *Sobre las virtudes* puede devolvernos una imagen de Pletón no como un criptopagano sino como un ortodoxo de mentalidad abierta que intenta ampliar el horizonte cultural de sus coetáneos para incluir los valores de pensadores precristianos.

Metadata: Filosofía bizantina, Jorge Gemisto Pletón, Paganismo, Ética cristiana

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Some years ago, the first critical edition of Plethon's *Treatise on the Virtues* was published¹. The work exemplified the crying need for new editions of Byzantine texts, the only previous edition readily available (that of Canterus, 1575, reproduced in Migne²) being clearly inadequate. The little treatise, barely fifteen pages of printed text, had been diligently collated by the new editor in nearly fifty manuscripts, and the variant readings of the five most important included in the apparatus. In addition, a long Introduction situated the author and his work, placed the author in relation to his Platonic, Neo-Platonic and Stoic sources, and described the manuscripts along with some 100 pages of commentary, plus a full bibliography and indices of sources mentioned, proper names and (rather selective) Greek terms. Clearly the work merited careful attention as it is an indispensable aid to Plethon studies. The remarks that follow are largely critical, but are intended as a tribute to a major work.

There are two areas where one might criticize: one affects our appreciation of the *form* of the *Treatise* and the other the *matter*. However, even if they can be separated, both types of inadequacy spring from a common error of

¹ B. Tambrun-Krasker, Γεώργιος Γεμιστός Πλήθων, Περὶ ἀρετῶν, *Traité des vertus*, édition critique avec introduction, traduction et commentaire (Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi 3), Leiden – New York, E.J. Brill, 1987.

² PG, vol. 160, cols. 365-382; one example of its inadequacy, the virtue of εὐψυχία appeared as ἀψυχία.

approach. The editor tackles the work accepting current views, which raise barriers between her and the *Treatise*.

Editorial principles affecting the text

The *formal* inadequacies can be dealt with briefly. This work of Plethon is remarkable as an example of textual tradition in that we possess at least three copies made in the lifetime of the author: one (P = Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Par. gr. 2075) was copied on board ship by John Eugenikos³, an admirer of Plethon, as he returned from the Council of Florence in 1439; another (P₁₁ = Par. gr. 2005) was copied in Plethon's own city of Mistra in 1447; and the third (C = Cambridge, University Library, Dd.IV.16), perhaps the most valuable of them all, was placed by the Papal secretary, Nicholas of Saguntum, in Florence itself, 1441, at the start of a 315-page manuscript he had copied.

There is a careful description of the Cambridge manuscript by J. Wiesner in *Aristoteles graecus*⁴. The first quinion, made up of paper with a different watermark, was cut down to fit the size of the 31 gatherings added to it, and seems to me (as to Babington in the official catalogue of 1856) to be by a different hand, though Wiesner suggests the possibility that it is simply of a different date. Nicholas wrote out the body of the manuscript, and not simply the final few pages (ff. 326v-327v), which are in Latin. There is a colophon inserted at the foot of f. 323v. Like Wiesner I take this to read: ἐν τῇ πόλει φλωρεντίας μη(νὶ) ἰουν(ίου) κη' ἡμέρα δ' / ἔτει τῷ ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ

³ For more information on this scribe, it is a pleasure to refer to the article written by the honorand of this volume, A. Bravo García, "El *Matritensis* BN 4346 (N 115), ff. 109-119v del *Ión* platónico; un estudio codicológico, paleográfico y crítico II: Notas de Paleografía", *Revista del Colegio Universitario de Ciudad Real (Cuaderno de Filología)* 2 (1983) 33-78.

⁴ P. Moraux et alii, *Aristoteles graecus*, vol. 1, *Alexandrien – London* (Peripatoi 8) Berlin – New York, De Gruyter, 1976, 99-103. See now the Teuchos site for the online description.

κ(υρίου) γενήσεως ,αυμα', which he translates: "am Mittwoch, den 28.6.1441 in Florenz vollendet"⁵.

With such a wealth of contemporary witnesses, it is unfortunate that their evidence regarding paragraph divisions and above all their punctuation, has not been taken into account. The effect can be easily appreciated from the following sample. I have added to the published text the punctuation [in square brackets] found in the Cambridge manuscript (C) and also in two later London manuscripts, British Library Additional 10065 and 18775, along with some comments.

§ B 5 (9.7-17)

Μετὰ δὲ ἡδονὰς καὶ πόνους, ὀψιαίτερον μὲν [,] βιαότερον δ' ἴσως τυραννοῦσιν ἡμῶν δόξαι τε καὶ ἀδοξίαι, ἀνθρωπινώτερα ἤδη καὶ οὐ θηριώδη παθήματα [· upper stop better than comma] οὐδὲν μέντοι ἦττον καὶ περὶ αὐτὰ [,] ἐπιμελείας δεῖται ἡμῶν τινος ἢ ψυχῆ, ὡς δεόντως τε [no comma] καὶ οὐκ εἰκῆ πρὸς αὐτὰ προσφέροιτο· ἢ [no capital nor full stop] τε μετριότης ἐν αὐτοῖς, τὸ πρέπον τε καὶ ἀρμόττον σώζουσα ἐκάστοις, παιδεύει πρῶτον μὲν τῆς ἀξίας ὡς μάλιστα ἑαυτοῦς τιμᾶν, τῶν μὲν ταπεινῶν τε καὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ἀναξίων ὑπερφρονοῦντας, τὰ δὲ μείζω ἢ κατὰ τὴν ἀξίαν [,] διευλαβουμένους [· upper stop, not comma] ἔπειτα καὶ τῆς μὲν παρὰ τῶν καλῶν κάγαθῶν, καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς καλοῖς δόξης [,] μὴ πάνυ τοι ἀμελεῖν, τῇ δὲ τῶν φαύλων τε καὶ ἀφρόνων [,] καὶ ἐπὶ κενοῖς τισιν, οὐδὲ προσέχειν τὸν νοῦν.

Translation: "Apart from pleasures and pains, at a later stage [admittedly], but perhaps more violently, people's opinions of us and ill repute, which are human and not animal experiences, dominate us; [so] indeed no less does the soul need to take a certain precaution for ourselves about such things, so that it deals with them in a right way and not by chance; and moderation concern-

⁵ Prof. Gamillscheg names Sekundinos as the scribe, E. Gamillscheg – D. Harlfinger, *Repertorium der griechischen Kopisten*, vol. 1, *Handschriften aus Bibliotheken Grossbritannien*, Vienna 1981, 165, no. 316. For more information on Nicholas, cf. E. Trapp et al. (coord.), *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, Vienna 1976-96, 12 vols., no. 25016.

ing them, which preserves what is appropriate and harmonious with regard to each, teaches us in the first place to honour ourselves in what is of value, despising the petty and unworthy things of ourselves, but being respectful about what surpasses in value; then subsequently we should not neglect the opinion of those who are respected as good and in what concerns good things, and on the other hand not give the mind's attention to the opinion of those who are worthless and foolish and concerned with petty things⁶.”

These comments may look initially rather pedantic, but it is thanks to the punctuation, that Plethon may well have known⁷, that we can recreate what his spoken word may have sounded like, with pauses for example after the initial μὲν, and after αὐτὰ and ἀξίαν. Also from the literary point of view, the insertion of a sentence break after προσφέροιτο (as in the edited text) breaks up the unity of the period, and one loses the aesthetic balance of the passage. The editor provides no comment on the literary aspects of

⁶ The editor's translation is the following:

“Après les plaisirs et les peines, plus tard et plus violemment peut-être, c'est notre bonne ou mauvaise réputation qui nous tyrannise. Ces affections sont plus humaines déjà, elles ne sont pas animales. Néanmoins, il faut que notre âme les surveille, afin de se comporter envers elles comme il faut et non au hasard.

En gardant ce qui est convenable et ce qui sied à chacun, la moderation dans ces affections apprend, en premier lieu, à nous donner à nous-mêmes le plus de valeur, à mépriser ce qui est vil et indigne de nous, et à respecter ce qui nous surpasse en dignité; en second lieu, à ne pas du tout négliger l'estime des hommes de bien, ni celle que procurent les bonnes choses, à ne pas prêter attention à l'estime des êtres vils et insensés, ni à celle que procurent les choses vaines.”

⁷ There is good evidence that Plethon was interested in the question of punctuation; cf. M. Scialuga, “Un'inedita grammatica greca alle soglie dell'età moderna: il Περὶ παιδείας di Giorgio Gemisto Pletone”, *Atti della Accademia della Scienze di Torino. Classe di scienze orali, storiche e filologiche* 129 (1995) 3-34: 18.3-5, where he distinguishes different types of punctuation marks (cf. B. Bydén, “Imprimatur? Unconventional Punctuation and Diacritics in Manuscripts of Medieval Greek Philosophical Works”, in A. Bucossi – E. Kihlman (eds.), *Ars Edendi: Lecture Series*, vol. 2, Stockholm University 2012, 155-167, the quotation is to be found on 163, n. 13).

the little *Treatise*, which won the approval of Renaissance scholars for its elegance⁸.

Similar failures to appreciate the evidence of the manuscripts leads to a false division of the long sentence in §A 1 (cutting off the ἐπεὶ clause from its main verb παραγίνεται in 10) and a premature start to §A 2 (which should start with Ὁ μὲν οὖν in 19). The positioning of a comma can of course affect the understanding of phrase: thus a comma before or after παντάπασιν (2.2) would indicate it is to be taken with the previous ἀνεπιδεᾶ (my own preference) rather than with the following ἀμήχανον (with the editor to judge from the translation). The comma before μάλιστα (5.17) is placed after this word in C, giving a better sense (it is in one's youth that pleasure are at their most tyrannical); the comma after ἡστινοσοῦν (11.20), missing in the Cambridge manuscript, misleads the translator into linking the following ἦν with the ἀπολαύσει, instead of with the words ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως. It should be stressed that Plethon's style is compact and intricate in structure, and not always easy to follow.

Problems of interpretation

However, with considerations of the *meaning* of the text, a different type of problem arises, and here a different starting point will be helpful. May one assume that in a treatise of this type, copied at different times during the author's lifetime, the concept of a *single* author's autograph holds good? The question is largely academic, as only a handful of readings, none very important, are problematic, but it may suggest that one's approach to this text calls for a certain flexibility. Basically everything turns on the status to be accorded to the witness of the Cambridge manuscript, C. The readings peculiar to

⁸ Thus the 1550 Basel edition by Occon has the title: *Georgij Gemisti Plethonis Elegans ac brevis quatuor virtutum explicatio*.

C are rejected by the editor (LIX): they are four in number and can either be defended or excused:

- (i) 7.13: ἀπεργαζόμεναι for ἐργαζόμεναι;
- (ii) 14.5: the addition of τελέως suggests a slight emphasis later added to the text;
- (iii) 8.19: the plural would be brought in because of the surrounding plurals, but it is indicative that the editor herself in the commentary slips into the more idiomatic singular (see p. 94 last line);
- (iv) 11.10 (cave the apparatus criticus where the line is numbered 11): the less likely dative in C may stem from an author's error.

The editor would be the first to acknowledge the importance of C: “Cette copie... est sans doute très proche de l'autographe” (LIX), but could more have been drawn from this manuscript?

As already mentioned, both C and P link Plethon's *Treatise* to the Council of Florence. The editor rightly rejects F. Masai's suggestion that it was written after 1439⁹. But Masai was surely correct when he read the words of Plethon's *Reply to Scholarios* (PG 160, 999A1-4) as indicating that the *De virtutibus* and the *De differentiis* may be chronologically connected. The passage mentioned reads: Ἐπιδέδεικται μὲν οὖν ἡμῖν καὶ ἄλλοθι διὰ πλειόνων τὸ τοιοῦτο, οὐδὲν μέντοι ἦττον καὶ ἐν τῷ προτέρῳ ἡμῶν συγγράμματι, ὃ νῦν σὺ ἀντιλέγεις... where the *De differentiis* attacked by Scholarios is said to be “later” than the other work dealing with pleasure and perfection, presumably the *De virtutibus*. Plethon clearly expected Scholarios to have known of the *De virtutibus*¹⁰. We know that the latter was written in 1439 actually in

⁹ See Tambrun-Krasker, *Traité des vertus*, XXIX; the point had been made already by C.M. Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, 179 and can be deduced simply from the date of P.

¹⁰ F. Masai, *Pléthon et le Platonisme de Mistra*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1956, 402.

Florence. My suggestion would be that the former was written in preparation for the Council, and thus at some time between 1434 and 1437, when Plethon was in his early eighties, although the editor prefers an earlier date¹¹. The distinctive elaborate style of the treatise, quite different from most of his other prose works, suggests to me a scholar's "offprint", a "visiting-card" type of essay, that could be easily copied and distributed. The masterly tone, sensitively picked up by Masai, is that of a mature mind, displaying extraordinary analytic and synthetic powers, politely condescending to adopt the Aristotelian format dear to his hosts, but ingeniously investing this outward shell with teaching distilled from the Platonic dialogues, though with strong borrowings from the Stoic tradition.

This "conventional" treatise, as C.M. Woodhouse called it, then acquires quite a new interest. It is Plethon the man who is presenting himself in these lines, and sketching in the distinctive virtues that were for him of primary importance. And the picture that emerges is one of great appeal: the man who is politely self-controlled, noble when wronged, strong-minded in natural adversity, moderate in his needs and liberal with his possessions, gentle with contrary opinion, kind yet shrewd, with a practical grasp of reality and a readiness to play his part in civic life, holy in his way of life and with a deep religiosity. The twelve virtues – *seemliness, nobility, strong spirit, moderation, liberality, gentleness, goodness, shrewdness, scientific knowledge, citizenship, holiness, piety*¹² – are a personal choice, not derived from any previous list

¹¹ Tambrun-Krasker, *Traité des vertus*, XXIX, argues that Plethon's theory of the virtues was "l'un des piliers de la pensée de Pléthon" and so "elle a peut-être été élaborée très tôt".

¹² The Greek names are: κοσμιότης, γενναιότης, εὐψυχία, μετριότης, ἐλευθεριότης, πραότητα, χρηστότης, εὐβουλία, φυσική, πολιτεία, ὀσιότης, θεοσεβεία; the English names given are obviously open to dispute; some alternatives are given in the table provided by V. Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*, Farnham – Burlington, Ashgate, 2014, 153; the French names are: *décence, noblesse, force d'âme, modération, libéralité, mansuétude, honnêteté, bon conseil, compréhension de la nature, civisme, piété, religion* (see Tambrun-Krasker, *Traité des vertus*, 28).

and venturing to include what are almost neologisms in this context (like γενναιότης and εὐψυχία) though with strong Platonic roots. All are ingeniously derived from the traditional “cardinal” virtues (*prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance*¹³) as *anthropos* pursues the goal of goodness, either in himself or in relation to other beings, whether outside himself or as the voluntary and involuntary drives within himself.

Of this possible autobiographical aspect, and alternatively of the public relations role of such a pamphlet on behalf of the Greeks at Florence, no mention is to be found in this edition. Instead the thesis is assumed (admittedly current at the time when the editor was writing) that Plethon is a polytheist anti-Christian propagandist, intent on propounding views diametrically opposed to Orthodoxy, monasticism, and Hesychasm¹⁴. The anti-Christian purpose of the *Treatise* is mentioned repeatedly¹⁵, although one is left wondering what type of Christianity the editor has in mind, as when she remarks: “Le bonheur n’est pas réservé à la vie de l’au-delà; cette thèse qui contredit le christianisme...”¹⁶.

In this context it is worth quoting Woodhouse’s account of the reactions to the *Treatise* of some of Plethon’s contemporaries:

¹³ These derive to some extent from both Plato and Aristotle, though accepted by most Christian moral theologians.

¹⁴ This interpretation had been strongly presented by Masai, *Pléthon* (cit. n. 10) and by Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon* (cit. n. 9). It is still defended by N. Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon*, Cambridge 2011, although contrary opinions have now appeared: e.g. the review of Siniossoglou by Borje Bydén in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 17/1 (2013) 151-159; an excellent study by M. Mavroudi, “Pletho as Subversive and His Reception in the Islamic World”, in D. Angelov – M. Saxby (eds.), *Power and Subversion in Byzantium*, Farnham, Surrey (UK), Ashgate, 2013, 179-181; and Hladký, *The Philosophy* (cit. n. 12).

¹⁵ See Tambrun-Krasker, *Traité des vertus*, XXXVI, XXXIX, 43, 50, 64, 80, 93, 94, 100, 103.

¹⁶ Tambrun-Krasker, *Traité des vertus*, 109-110.

“John Eugenikos... evidently found no fault with it. The reaction of Matthew Kamariotes, a pupil of Scholarios, was more remarkable. He was a strict devotee of Orthodoxy, a teacher of theology, and later Grand Rhetor of the Church. When he received a copy of the essay *On Virtues* from Gemistos’ friend and disciple, Demetrios Raoul Kabakes, he read it with enthusiastic approval¹⁷.”

Is one to suppose that they were hoodwinked? And yet the second sentence in the *Treatise* looks like a reverential nod to the Gospels¹⁸, and later in the *Treatise* there is the bold affirmation that each of us is first and foremost an ἔργον, *handiwork*, of God, and not just “a parcel of flesh and warm blood” (7.25-8.1, § B. 4, a phrase plucked apparently from Synesius). The debt may be to the *Timaeus*, but it would be hard to find a closer parallel than Athanasius’ ringing τὸ ἔργον τοῦ Θεοῦ, τουτέστιν ὁ ἄνθρωπος¹⁹. Given the dearth of adequate studies on the ethical systems in the early and middle Byzantine periods, one cannot reproach the editor, but one suspects that the elaborations of Evagrius and later Maximus, would repay study, if only to provide contrast²⁰. More to the point here is that a Christian “reading” of the *De virtutibus* is distinctly possible, indeed seems to have been deliberately desired by Plethon. The editor is advancing beyond the evidence when she claims that the first two characteristics of the first chapter are:

“1. Un rationalisme strict s’opposant à tous les systèmes de pensée qui envisagent un au-delà de la raison (néoplatoniciens, hésychastes, thomistes);

¹⁷ Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon* (cit. n. 9), 180.

¹⁸ Ἀγαθὸς μὲν δὴ τῷ ὄντι ὁ Θεός... These words seem to recall Mark 10:18 (Luke 18:19) οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ ὁ Θεός.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, 2, 66 (PG 26, 288B); and cf. G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexikon*, Oxford 1961, 546, s.v. ἔργον A 4a.ii.

²⁰ Although very sketchy, an account of the division and genealogy of the virtues in Byzantine teaching is to be found in T. Spidlik, *La Spiritualité de l’Orient Chrétien* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 206), Rome 1978, 283-286.

2. L'altruisme qui récuse l'interprétation 'individualiste' des vertus (celle du monachisme Chrétien, du néo-platonisme hellénique et byzantin [50])."

It may be possible to reconstruct a hidden "anti-Christian" teaching from the writings of Plethon, but the *De virtutibus* should raise the question of a broader-minded interpretation, where Christianity is not so much denied as subsumed in an imaginative quest for a Christianity freed from narrow intolerance.

Again, the thesis, "Pléthon a pour projet fondamental une réforme sociale et économique" (39), may sound very attractive, but the concrete evidence is difficult to find. On one of the rare occasions when the editor claims to have found a hint at the historical background²¹, the phrase in question turns on a correction to the text proposed by Occon²². But this involves translating both *πρὸς* and *ἀπὸ* as if they meant "à l'égard de". A more likely interpretation of the compact phrase is that Plethon, while conceding that humans differ from the divine in having to move *towards* the good, is urging them to be immovable, not moving *away* from what is good when once in possession. It would be gratuitous to see a reference to a specific historical situation in what is a general remark on human nature.

The running commentary is, as one would expect in this series, the *pièce de résistance* of this edition, but only a few points need be mentioned here.

- (i) There is never any attempt to call in question Plethon's distinctions: the self/others; the soul/the body; the necessary/the voluntary, which lead him to undervalue the corporeal and to overvalue *νόησις*²³.

²¹ Tambrun-Krasker, *Traité des vertus*, 56: "Derrière cette remarque, on entrevoit les préoccupations militaires et politiques de Pléthon".

²² At 2.16 reading *κακῶν* instead of the *καλῶν* given by all the manuscripts.

²³ Cf. 6.17-18, 7.25-8.2.

- (ii) Also lacking is fuller clarification of Plethon's oscillation between speaking of virtue (with its parts) and of virtues (as if distinct)²⁴.
- (iii) The mysterious ὀλέθρου τινὸς τάξιν (11.2) is inadequately discussed (102-103) with a reference to "l'individualisme" supposedly that of "le monachisme byzantin";
- (iv) the reference by Plethon to the beauty "connatural" to material things (9.23-10.1) might suggest that he is rejecting the artificiality of costly works of art²⁵.

In conclusion to what may seem excessively carping comments, the new edition does seem to labour from some defects, particularly in the lines of interpretation suggested. It would be a pity, however, if the attention I have given to these were to obscure the positive contribution of the editors' work. At long last we have a serious edition of a fascinating little masterpiece.

²⁴ There is a useful list of references to μόριον in the Index.

²⁵ Very illuminating on this point is the essay, S. Mariev, "Proklos and Plethon on Beauty", in S. Mariev – W.-M. Stocks (eds.), *Aesthetics and Theurgy in Byzantium* (Byzantinisches Archiv 25), Boston – Berlin, De Gruyter, 2013, 57-74: 67-72. Among other points he makes is his dismissal of the picture of Plethon presented by Papadiamanti (mentioned in this edition, 99).