

**Comparative Assessment of Godlikeness of Man through the
Acquisition of Virtues from the Points of View
of Plotinus and Mulla Sadra**

Setayesh Karami ¹

(pp. 201 to 219)

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Zusammenfassung

The concept of becoming godlike, rooted in Plotinus' philosophical framework, has inspired discussions throughout history, resonating in the works of subsequent thinkers such as Mulla Sadra. Plotinus posits that humanity's ultimate purpose is in union with the one achieved through the emulation of divine virtues. However, this raises complex questions about the nature of virtues and their applicability to both humanity and divinity. While Plotinus grapples with these dilemmas, scholars like Mulla Sadra offer novel interpretations about the same concept but grounded in the principle of the Primacy of Existence. This work explores Plotinus' vision of a divine union and the challenges it poses to ethical and existential inquiry. Furthermore, it delves into the reception of Plotinus' ideas by Mulla Sadra, who offers novel insights into the concept of godlikeness. Through Sadra's lens, virtues are understood as dynamic manifestations of divine existence, leading to a deeper understanding of humanity's existential journey towards divine union.

Schlüsselwörter: Godlikeness, Plotinus, Mulla Sadra, Virtues, Primacy of Existence

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مقایسه تطبیقی خداگونگی انسان از طریق

کسب فضا یل در دیدگاه فلوطین و ملاصدرا

ستایش کرمی^۱

(صص 201 تا 219)

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چکیده

مفهوم خداگونه شدن انسان، که در چارچوب فلسفی فلوطین ریشه دارد، الهام بخش بحث بسیاری از فیلسوفان در طول تاریخ بوده است و در آثار متفکران بعد از او مانند ملاصدرا ادامه پیدا کرده است. فلوطین استدلال می کند که هدف نهایی بشریت در اتحاد با او و شبیه او شدن است و این امر از طریق تقلید انسان از فضیلت های الهی به دست می آید. با این حال، این مطلب سوالات پیچیده ای را در مورد ماهیت فضیلت و انتساب آن به ساحت بشری و الوهی ایجاد می کند. فلوطین تلاش می کند به این سوالات در نوشته های خود پاسخ دهد اما به نظر می رسد در پایان بحث همچنان ابهامات زیادی از مسئله خداگونگی انسان باقی می ماند. از طرف دیگر، پس از فلوطین ملاصدرا با الهام از آموزه های فلوطین، تفسیرهای جدیدی درباره خداگونگی انسان ارائه می دهد، که بر اساس اصل اصالت وجود است و بسیاری از سوالات و اشکالات نظریه پیشین را برطرف می کند. این مقاله پژوهشی به دیدگاه فلوطین درباره خداگونگی انسان و چالش هایی که برای تحقیقات اخلاقی و وجودی به همراه دارد، می پردازد. در ادامه، به مطالعه نگاه ملاصدرا به ایده های فلوطین اشاره می کند و توضیح می دهد که چگونه ملاصدرا با الهام از این ایده ها، دریافت جدیدی از مفهوم خداگونگی ارائه می دهد. دریافتی که به موجب آن، فضیلت ها به عنوان مظاهر وجود الهی تفسیر می شوند و به همین سبب سفر وجودی انسان به سوی یگانگی با خداوند به نحو عمیق تر و دقیق تری فهمیده می شود.

کلیدواژه ها

خداگونگی انسان، فلوطین، ملاصدرا، فضیلت، اصالت وجود

^۱ دانشگاه هومبولت برلین.

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Abstract

The concept of becoming godlike, rooted in Plotinus' philosophical framework, has inspired discussions throughout history, resonating in the works of subsequent thinkers such as Mulla Sadra. Plotinus posits that humanity's ultimate purpose is in union with the one achieved through the emulation of divine virtues. However, this raises complex questions about the nature of virtues and their applicability to both humanity and divinity. While Plotinus grapples with these dilemmas, scholars like Mulla Sadra offer novel interpretations about the same concept but grounded in the principle of the Primacy of Existence. This work explores Plotinus' vision of a divine union and the challenges it poses to ethical and existential inquiry. Furthermore, it delves into the reception of Plotinus' ideas by Mulla Sadra, who offers novel insights into the concept of godlikeness. Through Sadra's lens, virtues are understood as dynamic manifestations of divine existence, leading to a deeper understanding of humanity's existential journey towards divine union.

Keywords: Godlikeness, Plotinus, Mulla Sadra, Virtues, Primacy of Existence

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Introduction

Plotinus the Greek philosopher and mystic begins his discussion in first Ennead with pondering on virtue. According to Plotinus, man has become incarcerated in this material world which is full of evil, and he must struggle to deliver himself from this world in discipline to join the world of gods. The path to deliverance in his view is the assimilation of God (φυγή δὲ ὁμοίως θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν) that comes true through the acquisition of the social and personal virtues. (Plotinus, I.2.1-2) To corroborate his view, Plotinus refers to the following words by Plato:

“But it is impossible that evils should be done away with, Theodorus, for there must always be something opposed to the good; and they cannot have their place among the gods, but must inevitably hover about mortal nature and this earth. Therefore, we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can” (*Theaetetus*,176b)

Plotinus begins his discussion of the issue of the similarity between man and God as the ultimate virtue from the Plato's word. Sedley has said, that if you were to ask, “any moderately well-educated citizen of the Roman empire to name the official moral goal, or telos,” he would answer with Plato's words, that the telos is “Becoming like god as much as possible” (ὁμοίως θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν). (Sedley, 1999) In Ancient Philosophy in books of Plato and Plotinus, being godlike is considered as the ultimate virtue, which every human should try to attain it. This passage from Plato claims that the escape from this world to the divine realm with assimilation to God (homoiōsis theōi) is the telos (end) of the Platonic system. Though the idea of assimilation to God has been frequently mentioned in the works of Plotinus and Plato based on an argument, there are still several questions and challenges regarding its understanding.

The first premise implied in the ideas of human assimilation to God through virtues is that the man is imprisoned in the material world and his true happiness lies in the deliverance from this world. This idea has already been assayed in Plato and Plotinus and its assessment is beyond the scope of the current essay. The second premise involved is that human similarity with God is a kind of similarity that one finds between a lower object and a higher affair. And the last premise is that this assimilation becomes possible only via the acquisition of virtues and purification. Upon these premises, Plotinus

concludes that we should struggle to reach true happiness in discipline to acquire the personal and social virtues that make us similar to God and allow us to join the deity.

Although this saying by Plotinus seems to be clear at first sight, it has given rise to numerous questions and debates in the domain of moral philosophy. Among the outlined questions to some of which Plotinus has referred himself, two major questions are studied and assessed in this essay.

Given the second premise, it is asked in which ways a thing becomes assimilated to another thing and how does man get assimilated to God? Whether any assimilation can happen between the man and God while the deity is a pure spirit and man is combined of a spirit plus a body? On the other hand, many properties for man are considered being virtues, e.g., bravery and self-control, but none of these can be attributed to God. One cannot say that God is self-controlling and abstinent, or God is brave because he controls His fears. Then, this question is raised that how can man become assimilated to God through the acquisition of the virtues while these virtues cannot be attributed to God?

As to the third premise, it is asked that how does the acquisition of virtue existentially let the man to be assimilated to God? If one can doubt the very possibility of this assimilation? Using the allegory of the fire, Plotinus explains that the heated object becomes assimilated to the fire by being heated. By the same token, through the acquisition of virtue, man becomes assimilated to God. However, we know that heating would never make the object become existentially assimilated to the fire. No man of reason would ever claim that the heated object is like the fire rather, he says that the heated object is as hot as the fire. Absolute similarity differs from being similar because of a certain property. Now one should ask which kind of assimilation Plotinus finds between man and God.

The emergence of such questions and the points of obscurity in this theory have forced the philosophers and mystics to discuss the problem of human assimilation to God. Among these men of thought, one can refer to Mulla Sadra. Through the analysis of this theory and the modification of it and offering a new reading of it, he seeks to clarify the obscurities and the difficulties.

In this work, I delve into Plotinus's concept of the godlikeness of man through the acquisition of virtues, interrogate the attendant dilemmas, and engage with Mulla Sadra's insights to illuminate the path towards understanding this profound philosophical conundrum.

Plotinus on Human Assimilation to God

In Ennead I, Plotinus writes:

„Since it is here that evils are, and “they must necessarily haunt this region,” and the soul wants to escape from evils, we must escape from here. What, then, is this escape? “Being made like god,” Plato says. And we become godlike “if we become righteous and holy with the help of wisdom,” and are altogether in virtue. “(I.2.1.1-3)

Plotinus embarks on his exploration of virtue and humanity's journey towards assimilation with God by laying down a foundational premise. Drawing on Plato's teachings, he asserts that the root of evil lies in matter, which prompts the human soul to instinctively recoil from this malevolence. Thus, driven by its intrinsic nature, the soul strives to liberate itself from this evil. Plotinus extrapolates from this principle to posit that humanity aligns with goodness, or at the very least, the human soul possesses an innate inclination towards goodness (*Theaetetus*, 176b-178). Consequently, as individuals navigate the challenges of existence, the soul grapples with these adversities, endeavoring towards deliverance and eventual redemption. It is through this pursuit of freedom that the soul may ascend to eternal life within the divine realm.

In summary, the collaborative theory of Plotinus and Plato suggests that humanity inherently resides within a realm where both good and evil coexist. However, the human soul instinctively shuns evil and embarks on a transformative journey to transcend it. The path to liberation from this material world lies in assimilating with God, as the divine realm remains unblemished by evil. This assimilation is facilitated through the cultivation of moral virtues and the purification of the soul. These propositions give rise to a series of questions, some of which Plotinus himself contemplates:

- Who is the God towards whom humanity should strive for assimilation? Does this God embody all virtues, including those typically associated with humanity, such as self-control and bravery?

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- What form of similarity exists between humanity and God? Is it an ontological likeness, or a shared set of attributes?

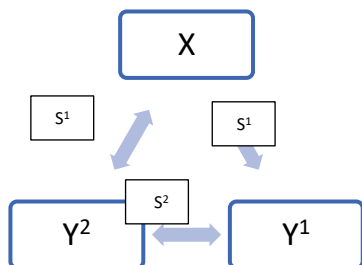
- What defines virtue, and which virtues facilitate assimilation with God? Is assimilation contingent solely upon specific virtues, even if they hold no relevance to God? Can individuals become assimilated to God through virtues that God does not possess? Does the assimilated individual retain an essential distinction from God, or do they ultimately merge into divine unity?

Addressing the first question, which concerns the nature of the God towards whom humanity should aspire for assimilation, necessitates a deep understanding of God's essence and the virtues attributed to Him. It is essential to comprehend the deity we seek to emulate and identify the commonalities shared between humanity and divinity, laying the groundwork for realizing this similarity. Plotinus's exploration delves into whether the God we strive to assimilate embodies all human virtues, such as justice and self-control, akin to those found in humans. To unravel this inquiry, we must delve into the essence and concept of virtue itself.

Virtue can be conceptualized in two distinct frameworks when ascribed to God. Initially, it may be viewed as an additional attribute appended to the divine essence. However, such an attribution contradicts the notion of divine oneness and purity, portraying virtue as an extraneous addition to the divine essence, a notion dismissed by Plotinus. Alternatively, moral virtues are considered inherent to God, akin to how heat is intrinsic to fire. While virtues are essential to God, He transcends them, existing beyond their confines. Just as fire is inseparable from its heat yet surpasses it, God is inseparable from virtues while standing superior to them. (I.2.1. 31-36) Plotinus elucidates that God is not synonymous with divine attributes; rather, He transcends them. However, the mechanics of how an entity possesses a property without being identical to it remain elusive. Through analogies such as fire and its heat, Plotinus illustrates how virtues emanate from God while He transcends them, akin to how heat emanates from fire without constituting its entirety.

As we address the second question regarding the nature of assimilation between man and God through the acquisition of virtues, we must first see what this similarity means, and which type of similarity is observed in this context. Plotinus employs the term "Ὁμοίωσις" to denote similarity. This Greek noun is derived from the verb "ὁμοιόω," which itself originates from the

adjective "ὅμοιος," signifying "like" or "resembling." It is constructed with the dative case, indicating the person or thing to which another is compared or deemed equal. (LSJ, 1224) Plotinus delineates two forms of similarity. Firstly, there's the similarity arising from a common origin or principle. Secondly, there's the similarity between entities where one is derived from the other (I.2.2. 5-11). To elucidate these concepts further, look at the following schema:



Y1 is similar to X. = similarity 1

Y2 is similar to X. = similarity 1

Y1 is similar to Y2 because of X. = similarity 2

The first type of similarity (S1) reflects the resemblance between an originated entity and its source. The source possesses a certain property (X), and the derived entity inherits this property through its relationship with the source. For instance, consider Mona Lisa (X) and two amateur paintings (Y1 and Y2) inspired by it. While both amateur works share a level of similarity with the original, their resemblance stems from deriving elements from the source rather than intrinsic qualities.

In Plotinus's discourse, the similarity between man and God aligns with the first type. Here, God represents the source of justice (X), and individuals possess justice (Y) by virtue of deriving it from God. However, despite embodying justice, individuals remain distinct from it, serving as manifestations of divine justice rather than its embodiment. Conversely, the similarity between individuals (e.g., David and James) represents the second type, where both share common attributes derived from a shared source. In

this scenario, both individuals possess justice, derived from Divine Justice, yet maintain their individual identities.

Plotinus's allegory of fire further elucidates this concept. The similarity between man and God doesn't equate to the likeness between two hot objects; instead, it mirrors the relationship between a heated thing and fire. The thing, devoid of inherent heat, attains warmth in proximity to fire, akin to individuals acquiring virtues through their relationship with God. However, this doesn't render them identical to God; rather, they depend on divine virtues for their manifestation.

Similarly, in the allegory of the spring and the river, the similarity between two individuals resembles the relationship between two rivers originating from the same source. Yet, human assimilation to God mirrors the likeness between a river and the spring. Virtues, like water, flow from the divine source through individuals, establishing a connection akin to the river's relationship with the spring. While the spring isn't identical to the river, it serves as the source of its virtues, illustrating the transcendent nature of divine essence.

Now, let's delve into the third question. Here, I aim to elucidate the meaning of virtue within this context and identify which virtues facilitate the purported assimilation to God. What constitutes this virtue and how does its acquisition purportedly align us with the divine? The ancient Romans coined the term "virtus" from "vir," their word for man, encompassing all esteemed qualities, including physical prowess, valorous conduct, and moral uprightness. (Webster, 1991)

According to Plotinus, virtue is a state of the human soul, characterized by a disposition (diathesis) that transcends bodily influences. In this context, he advocates for the mindful care of our earthly existence. However, in the opening of his work "On Virtues," Plotinus asserts the imperative of aligning ourselves with the divine through virtue. His theory of virtues does not center on analyzing specific moral actions, but is instead deeply integrated into his metaphysical framework. Plotinus examines virtues from the perspective of the soul's dynamic inclination toward the divine. It is clear that, for him, the exploration of virtue is intricately linked to the transition from the realm of the senses to that of the intellect. (Reid H. L., & Serrati, 2022) So, according to Plotinus, virtue exists as an external attribute for humanity, distinct from intellect and the divine realm (I.2.1. 39-41). This portrayal suggests that virtue,

for Plotinus, is not inherent to the human soul but a quality akin to other accidental properties. It's not an inherent aspect awaiting mere recollection, as posited by Plato. Instead, Plotinus emphasizes the need for acquisition; individuals aren't inherently akin to God but must strive to embody virtues that foster such likeness.

Plotinus categorizes virtues into individual and social types, with social virtues characterized by specific attributes: arrangement, discipline, emotional and instinctual restraint, liberation from erroneous beliefs, and essence restriction (1.2.2. 10-21). He also alludes to another virtue relevant to human assimilation to God, referencing Plato's insights:

„While we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join with it more than we must, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god frees us...It is only those who practice philosophy in the right way who want to free the soul.“ (*Phaedo*, 67a)

For Plato, assimilation to God entails acquiring social virtues and undergoing purification. As long as individuals reside in the physical realm, comprising body and spirit, Plato contends that the body serves as a source of impurity and passion. Human existence entails inherent incompleteness and mutability, leading to encounters with bodily needs and sensations. Upon departing the body, the soul sheds these physical influences, attaining virtues such as diligence and contentment. (Frede, 1993)

Plotinus further contemplates the essence of virtue, drawing upon a Platonic theory of forms. In *Ennead I*, he discusses the concept of an intelligible form of virtue, positing one overarching idea or form of virtue in the intelligible realm:

„What, then, is each particular virtue when a man is in this state? Wisdom, theoretical and practical, consists in the contemplation of that which intellect contains; but intellect has it by immediate contact. There are two kinds of wisdom, one in intellect, one in soul. That which is There [in intellect] is not virtue, that in the soul is virtue.“ (1.2.6. 11-14)

This proposition posits the existence of a singular idea or primary form of virtue within the intelligible realm. Interestingly, this form cannot itself be categorized as virtue in the conventional sense. Plotinus suggests that this

essence of virtue, present in the divine, is not synonymous with virtue but is intrinsic to God's essence.

Conversely, this idea of virtue manifests a semblance or shadow in the material world, which Plotinus terms the "image of virtue." It is through the acquisition of this image that individuals draw closer to the intelligible form of virtue, thus aligning themselves with the divine. For instance, consider discipline as an intelligible form of virtue, transcending material limitations. This discipline, reflected in actions attributed to God, such as the creation of the world with precision and order, mirrors the essence of virtue. In the material world, discipline manifests as virtues, such as setting things in their proper place and maintaining symmetry.

Plotinus illustrates this concept through the allegory of intelligible and sensible houses. The sensible house represents human existence, akin to the tangible world, while the intelligible house symbolizes God, embodying virtues but not being identical to them. The intelligible house, the epitome of perfection, encompasses discipline, beauty, and moderation in all aspects. When striving to construct a sensible house based on the model of the intelligible one, the closer the resemblance, the greater its share of perfection. However, inherent limitations prevent the sensible house from achieving the same level of perfection as the intelligible one. Similarly, virtues are likened to features of the intelligible house, existing in an intelligible form. When applied to the human domain, these virtues are perceived as attributes of the sensible house. Therefore, according to Plotinus, individuals should endeavor to acquire these images of virtues, such as self-control and discipline, in order to attain assimilation to God and ultimately achieve ultimate perfection.

Objections and Challenges of Plotinus' Theory

There are several obscure points as to the theory offered by Plotinus to which I turn in this part of the work. Plotinus argues that the ultimate goal of human growth and perfection is the union with God, which becomes realized through assimilation to divinity through the acquisition of virtues. It is important to say that, according to Plotinus, the goal of human virtue is to become immortal and divine and not just to be to be sinless. But the question is if the man who has acquired the virtues as some accidental features can make himself existentially God-like so as to join Him? Whether essential union with

the virtues which are themselves acquired is possible? If we formulate this objection as an argument, the following would be achieved.

1. The ultimate aim of humanity is to achieve union with God.
 2. This union is attained through the process of assimilation.
 3. Human godlikeness is realized through the acquisition of virtues.
 4. God possesses virtues but is distinct from them.
 5. Conversely, humans acquire virtues incidentally, as additional attributes.
- Therefore, human godlikeness is achieved through something that neither constitutes an essential aspect of human nature nor is essential for God.

This formulation of his argument prompts a crucial question: Can such a similarity between humans and God elevate humanity to a state where it can unite with the divine? Plotinus leaves this ambiguity unresolved. In his allegory of the heated object and the fire, he illustrates how the heated object may resemble the fire but cannot merge with it, as heat is an incidental property for the object. Similarly, one may inquire: How does humanity attain godlikeness and unity with the divine through the acquisition of virtues? Furthermore, one may question Plotinus directly: How is it feasible for humans to achieve godlikeness through virtues that are not inherently part of their essence? Is this acquisition of virtues akin to applying a superficial color to an object, merely altering its appearance, or does it signify a profound transformation, akin to rust corroding iron and changing its nature?

Plotinus attempts to elucidate human godlikeness in a more precise manner. He writes:

„That which is altogether unmeasured is matter, and so altogether unlike: but in so far as it participates in form it becomes like that Good, which is formless. Things which are near participate more. Soul is nearer and more akin to it than body; so it participates more, to the point of deceiving us into imagining that it is a god and that all divinity is comprised in this likeness. This is how those possessed of political virtue are made like.“ (1.2.2. 19-22)

This proposition appears contradictory to some aspects of his theory. If human godlikeness is considered from an existential standpoint, one would contend that humans are finite beings living in a material world with a defined form, while God is immaterial, infinite, and formless. Therefore, for humans to

achieve godlikeness, they must liberate themselves from the confines of the material world through the acquisition of moral virtues.

Furthermore, it is crucial to elucidate the concept of finitude and how social virtues impose limitations on humanity. Do these constraints confine individuals within the material realm, or do they imbue humanity with a new essence? Take courage, for example. Plotinus posits that courage instils discipline in human actions. A courageous person, unswayed by fear, pursues their objectives with steadfast determination, thereby demonstrating discipline in their conduct. Courage, in this sense, delineates the boundaries of human fears and regulates them. However, can we assert that courage alone transforms an individual into a godlike being? Is it coherent to attribute courage, rooted in overcoming fear, to a deity devoid of lack or desire, such as God? This raises questions about the compatibility of virtues with the divine realm. Gods, devoid of lack or desire, do not experience pleasure as humans do. Consequently, attributing human virtues, like courage, to God may lack coherence, as it imposes human limitations on the divine. (Obdrzalek, 2012)

Indeed, the question lingers: How can humanity attain godlikeness through the cultivation of social virtues? Plotinus introduces another virtue, derived from Plato's work, which may offer a more nuanced exploration of this dilemma. He writes:

„ But, since Plato indicates that likeness is different as belonging to the greater virtue, we must speak about that different likeness. ... Plato, when he speaks of “likeness” as a “flight to God” from existence here below, and does not call the virtues which come into play in civic life just “virtues,” but adds the qualification “civic,” and elsewhere calls all the virtues “purifications,” ... Since the soul is evil when it is thoroughly mixed with the body and shares its experiences and has all the same opinions, it will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone this is intelligence and wisdom and does not share the body’s experiences -this is self-control-and is not afraid of departing from the body this is courage and is ruled by reason and intellect, without opposition and this is justice.” (1.2.3. 1-19)

I shall argue that this second aspect of virtue is not a new category of virtue but a distinct perspective on virtue articulated by Plato, referenced by Plotinus. When considering the notion of purity alongside its various manifestations, we arrive at the social virtues discussed by Plotinus. Therefore, it would be

inaccurate to categorize it as a separate type of virtue. Purging oneself of fears and desires equates to self-discipline and courage. The same applies to other social virtues. This alternative definition of virtue aligns more closely with the concept of godlikeness. Here, we can posit that God transcends all material phenomena and remains untainted by vice, whereas humans grapple with both good and evil within themselves. To ascend to the Divine Essence, individuals must cleanse themselves of bodily vices, thus achieving purification through the acquisition of virtues. These virtues serve to purify the soul from evil and its entanglement with the physical body.

Mulla Sadra on Human Godlikeness

In the previous part, I tried to explain Plotinus' viewpoints of virtue and human godlikeness and to clarify its problems and obscurities. Later, Neoplatonists like Porphyry, Iamblichus, Macrobius, and Olympiodorus adopted Plotinus' virtue ethics. In Neoplatonic commentaries on Aristotelian ethics and in ethical theories of Arabic Neoplatonists, Plotinus' treatment of virtues is also evident. (O'Meara, 2003)

Among these figures, Muslim philosophers have paid a special attention to Plotinus because of the similarity of Plotinus works to the religious texts and Islamic mysticism. (Zomorodi, 2010) One of these philosophers is Mulla Sadra Al-Shirazi. Sadr al-Din Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Yahya Qawami Shirazi (ca. 1571–1636) is arguably the most significant Islamic philosopher after Avicenna. Best known as Mulla Sadra, he was later given the title of Sadr al-Muta'allihin (Master of the theosists) for his approach to philosophy that combined an interest in theology and drew upon insights from mystical intuition. He considered philosophy to be a set of spiritual exercises and a process of theosis, a pursuit of wisdom whose goal was to acquire wisdom and become a sage, and hence become godlike. He supported a radical philosophical method that attempted to transcend the simple dichotomy between a discursive, ratiocinative mode of reasoning and knowing, and a more intuitive, poetic and non-propositional mode of knowledge. He became famous as the thinker who revolutionized the doctrine of existence in Islamic metaphysics. (Rizvi, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2021 Edition)

Correction 2: "Theologia Aristotelis," translated by Ibn Naemah Hamasi, is one of the seminal works that profoundly influenced Mulla Sadra's philosophy and writings, and it is, in fact, a philosophical work by Plotinus. It's crucial to

note that attributing this book to Aristotle was a historical error. Mulla Sadra mistakenly believed it to be an Aristotelian text, attributing ideas from it to Aristotle rather than Plotinus, its actual author. This misattribution likely stemmed from Aristotle's reputation as a theosophist during that era. (Adamson, 2002)

In his engagement with "*Theologia Aristotelis*," Mulla Sadra sought to validate and expound upon his own philosophical concepts, drawing from Plotinus's ideas as if they were Aristotle's. Despite the initial confusion, Mulla Sadra is credited with offering profound insights into the text, delving into its core principles and rules with remarkable depth and providing rational arguments to elucidate its comprehensive philosophical framework. Through his meticulous analysis, Mulla Sadra paid homage to the essence of Plotinus's work, uncovering its profound truths and integrating them into his philosophical discourse. (Karbasizadeh, 2017)

In his magnum opus "*ikmat Al Muta'alyah fi-l-asfar al-'aqliyya al-arba'a*" [The Transcendent Philosophy of the Four Journeys of the Intellect], Mulla Sadra extensively draws upon the doctrines of Plotinus. Like Plotinus, Mulla Sadra posits that the human soul is entrapped in the material realm and must transcend it to reunite with the realm of meaning and God. The journey towards this union entails striving for godlikeness, with the acquisition of virtue serving as the pathway to assimilation. However, Mulla Sadra diverges from Plotinus by presenting an alternative perspective on the theory of human likeness to God, offering insights that address many of the previous ambiguities and challenges.

Central to Mulla Sadra's philosophical framework is the principle of the "Primacy of Existence." He asserts that existence is the fundamental reality of the world, and the essence of beings is contingent upon this existence. Mulla Sadra's analysis of existence begins with the ontological differentiation between the Necessary (God) and the contingent. God embodies pure existence devoid of any essence, quality, or attribute subject to change or motion. This doctrine finds its roots in Avicenna's concept of radical contingency, which posits that the distinction between the Necessary and the contingent arises from the simplicity of God's existence, giving rise to the complexity of existence and essence in contingent beings. Contingent beings are understood as composed of existence and essence, forming a conceptual

dyad. As God imparts existence to contingents, existence takes precedence over essence in ontology. (Rizvi, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2021 Edition)

Mulla Sadra's theory of the primacy of existence (alternatively rendered as "Fundamental Reality of Existence or Principality of Existence") requires the understanding and the endorsement of a number of propositions that help us to fathom the concept of the similarity between man and God in Mulla Sadra. Accordingly, all creatures are one in their existentiatio and being existent and this is indeed an existential and internal similarity among all humans and creatures. Thus, existence is the only thing that is in the world and man and all beings and even God are this very existence, though their existential spectrum and degree are different. This is in fact similar to thinking of a spectrum of light that emits from the sun as the chief source and this spectrum, in every of its degree is considered to be a being. (Nasr, 2017)

According to this allegory, every creature takes advantage of the bounty of existence in proportion to his own existential degree. The larger a being's share of existence, the further is its similarity to God, precisely similar to a ray of light that is brighter and more luminous when it is closer to the Sun. The debate of the primacy of existence in Mulla Sadra provides a ground for an alternative understanding of the similarity between and God and the acquisition of virtues and its role in Godlikeness. Accordingly, as long as the man is imprisoned in the material world and is in the early stages of his spiritual and moral development, he is like a beam of light that is in distant from God. (Nasr, 1978)

As mentioned by Plotinus, Mulla Sadra also insists that the telos of human development is the union with God. Now this man is incarcerated in the material world and is encircled with the darkness. He must make himself similar to God in order to enjoy a higher degree of existence and be able to join God. Following Plotinus, Mulla Sadra states that the path to Godlikeness and the path to the redemption from the material world is the acquisition of moral virtues and knowledge. But he explains differently how the acquisition of knowledge and moral virtues puts the man on the path of becoming Godlike.

According to Mulla Sadra, not only the substances but the qualities either have a share of existence. Mulla Sadra explains moral virtues serve as the

qualities the possession of which allow a man to reach a higher level of existence.

Comparison of the Ideas of Plotinus and Mulla Sadra on the Problem of Assimilation to God

Mulla Sadra's reinterpretation sheds light on the obscure points of Plotinus' theory. Previously, I questioned whether individuals, having acquired virtues as incidental additions, could truly become existentially similar to God and unite with Him. Moreover, given that Plotinus posits God as not identical with virtue, despite possessing it, it remains unclear how humanity's relation with God and its godlikeness through virtue acquisition can be understood.

In Mulla Sadra's framework, the relationship between man and God transcends mere identities. Man is viewed as a manifestation of Divine Existence, entirely dependent on God for his own being. According to the Primacy of Existence, everything in the world derives its existence from the same source, including virtue, which is thus considered a quality of existence.

Therefore, since God, humanity, and moral qualities share the same existence, their similarity takes on a different form. While Plotinus likened the relation between man and God to that of a heated object and fire, Mulla Sadra compares it to a heated spark and its source of fire. As the spark draws closer to the source, it absorbs more heat and light, resembling fire.

The disparity in Plotinus' and Mulla Sadra's interpretations lies in their understanding of the relationship between man, God, and virtue. Plotinus views them as distinct entities, leading to difficulties in explaining their similarity. He offers separate explanations to delineate virtue's relation with God and elucidate how humanity becomes godlike through virtue acquisition. In contrast, Mulla Sadra presents a unified perspective, resolving these issues through a different articulation of the problem.

The more precise allegory offered by Mulla Sadra himself for an explanation of the problem of assimilation is that of sun and light. Thus, human relation with God is portrayed in this interpretation in terms of the relation one finds between the sun and the light beam emitted from it. The similarity between man and God should be deemed as the similarity one finds between two lights. The beam of light emitted from the sun is nothing but the sun itself and its share of light is indeed nothing as compared to the sun as the source of the

light. (Khademzadeh, 2016) The farther is the beam of light from the sun as it enters the material world and earth, the lesser becomes its degree of luminosity and is less similar to the sun. This is exactly the man whom Plotinus conceives as plagued by darkness because of his residence in the material world and at the same time, he is essentially craving for the union with the sun because of his original appearance from the sun and struggles to deliver himself from the darkness on earth.

In line with Plotinus, Mulla Sadra asserts that the path to reuniting with God involves acquiring social and intellectual virtues, which serve as tools for elevating man's existential level. As man ascends in his existential status, he becomes increasingly similar to God. These virtues act as instruments that enhance man's existential light and elevate his existential state, thereby explaining how man achieves godlikeness through virtue acquisition.

Plotinus grappled with the question of how to attribute these virtues to God, especially considering that many of them have significance only in human experience. He delineated two levels of virtue: the intelligible and the meaningful to man. Mulla Sadra, following Plotinus, understands virtue to be of a graded essence, similar to other realities. Courage, for example, may refer to Divine Omnipotence at the divine level, while on the terrestrial level, it pertains to the mastery over human fears. Despite these differences in expression, the essence of virtue remains the same across different existential levels.

This analogy is akin to the varying intensity of light, and heat emitted by the sun. The closer a planet is to the sun, the more intense its heat and light. Similarly, virtue manifests differently depending on the existential level, with divine virtue being free from material ties, fear, and human desires, while earthly virtue is influenced by material constraints.

Mulla Sadra's interpretation clarifies the obscure points and difficulties encountered in Plotinus' theory. Although he refrains from critiquing Plotinus out of respect, his reinterpretation offers a clearer understanding of Plotinus' theory of godlikeness, resolving paradoxes and challenges inherent in the original theory.

Conclusion

In the vast landscape of philosophical inquiry, Plotinus stands as a towering figure whose insights into humanity's ultimate purpose continue to resonate through the ages. Central to Plotinus' vision is the notion that humanity's destiny lies in union with the divine, achieved through the emulation of divine qualities.

Plotinus articulates the path of this divine union as the cultivation of intellectual and social virtues, alongside self-purification and discipline. Yet, this path is not without its challenges. Plotinus grapples with the dilemma of attributing virtues to both man and God. While virtues such as self-discipline hold significance for humanity, their applicability to God poses philosophical conundrums. Furthermore, the question of how humanity can achieve existential similarity to God remains unanswered in Plotinus' discourse.

In the wake of Plotinus' legacy, scholars like Mulla Sadra have sought to elucidate and interpret his teachings. Mulla Sadra's philosophical framework, rooted in the principle of the Primacy of Existence, offers a novel perspective on the relationship between man and God. In Sadra's schema, existence forms the basis of all reality, placing humanity and divinity within a shared existential spectrum.

According to Sadra, virtues are not static attributes but dynamic manifestations of divine existence, echoing Plotinus' notion of virtues as emanations of the divine. Through this lens, the existential similarity between man and God emerges not as a distant aspiration, but as an intrinsic aspect of existence itself. Just as a spark is inseparable from the fire, so too is humanity inherently linked to the divine.

By embracing Sadra's reading of Plotinus, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between humanity, virtue, and divinity. In this paradigm, the acquisition of virtues becomes not merely a moral endeavor but a profound existential journey towards a divine union. Through the lens of the Primacy of Existence, Plotinus' theory of godlikeness finds new clarity, shedding light on age-old philosophical quandaries and paving the way for deeper philosophical inquiry.

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