Eustratius of Nicaea as a source for the Neoplatonist notion of levels of virtue in the Early Latin commentators on the Nicomachean Ethics

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Abstract
The chapter analyses the influence of the Byzantine commentator Eustratius of Nicaea on the later Latin reception of Aristotle's ethics. It argues that Eustratius's commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics, Books 1 and 6, composed around 1118, introduced the important Neoplatonist conception of levels of virtue, i.e., in short, the conception that the four cardinal virtues can be acquired on subsequently higher levels, aiming at the Platonic ideal of assimilation to the divine. Traditionally, Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's Dream of Scipio is considered the only source for medieval occurrences of this Neoplatonist conception of the virtues, but the chapter argues that Eustratius, commenting directly on Aristotle's ethics, is an important alternative channel for such influence.

Keywords: Eustratius of Nicaea (c.1050-c.1120), Macrobius (early fifth century), Nicomachean Ethics, cardinal virtues, Neoplatonism

This chapter builds on two well-established facts that to my knowledge have not been systematically discussed together in the previous literature on the early Latin reception of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (hereafter, EN, Ethica Nicomachea).

The first fact regards the composite Byzantine Greek commentary on EN. The commentary included parts of very early commentaries, such as the extant parts of Aspasius's second-century commentary, as well as fairly recent commentaries, notably commentary by Eustratius of Nicaea...
on Books 1 and 6 and Michael of Ephesus on Books 5, 9, and 10. It is quite well established that since the Latin translation of the entire composite Greek commentary by Grosseteste, which accompanied his influential early Latin translation of the *EN* text itself (1246/48), the commentary by Eustratius has constituted an especially important authority for the early Latin commentators on Grosseteste’s Latin translation of the *EN* text.

The second fact regards the influence of the Plotinian or Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue, i.e., in short, the conception that the four cardinal virtues can be acquired on different levels. This implies that the moral goal of acquiring them on subsequently higher levels ultimately aims at the Platonic ideal of ‘becoming like god’, or assimilation to the divine, as far as possible. It is quite well-established that this Neoplatonist theory, in its Latin version given by Macrobius in the *Commentary on Cicero’s Dream of Scipio*, was highly influential in the reception of Aristotle’s ethics throughout the Middle Ages.

The specific point of discussing these two themes together is that it might enable us to discern if, and in what way, Eustratius’s commentary was already influenced by the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue. If this is the case, we will have identified an additional possible channel of Neoplatonist influence on the early Latin commentaries regarding the conception of the division of the virtues, i.e. in addition to the Latin commentators’ well-known knowledge of Macrobius and other Latin sources. Notably, even in light of the *auctoritas* of Macrobius on a range of philosophical and scientific subjects, what makes the case of Eustratius unique is that his commentary would constitute a source that specifically brings the Neoplatonist theory into a commentary on *EN*. The issue at stake in what follows then is this: did Eustratius contribute to the influence of the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue on the Latin commentaries?

**Macrobius’s Commentary as the single medieval source for the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue**

The importance of Macrobius as a source of general Neoplatonist influence on the medieval commentators is long since well-established. In his

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1 The only suggestion along these lines in recent scholarship is to my knowledge Bejczy, *Study*, 217, who states that ‘[l]ike the Platonic scheme of the cardinal virtues, Macrobius’ Neoplatonic classification of them was occasionally imposed on Aristotle’s *Ethics* (again, the commentary of Eustratius of Nicea set a precedent in this respect)’, referring to Eustratius, *In EN*.1.17, in Mercken, *Greek Commentaries*, vol. I, p. 176.
systematic 1926 study, van Lieshout specifically established a number of cases where the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtues visibly influenced scholastic accounts of the virtues. Their only possible source for this theory would, according to van Lieshout, be Macrobius’s *Commentary on Cicero’s Dream of Scipio*:

Among the philosophical ideas that the Middle Ages receives from Macrobius, there is also the Plotinian theory of virtue. This theory does not appear in scholasticism as it had originally been established by Plotinus. The Scholastics knew it only from Macrobius. As the works of Plotinus were unknown, none of them could realize that there were certain differences between Plotinus and Macrobius. They all had to believe that Macrobius in his commentary had reproduced the authentic doctrine of his master, and even more so as he makes it seem as if he is literally copying. This explains the fact that the scholastic doctors, who in their works use the Plotinian theory, sometimes attribute it to Macrobius, and sometimes to Plotinus.²

This understanding of Macrobius’s *Commentary* as the single channel for transmitting the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue to the medieval commentators remains the received view even in recent scholarship.³ To begin with, then, it might thus be useful to take a brief look at Macrobius’s version of the theory.

The account of the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue in Macrobius

Macrobius’s commentary, written c.430 (but distributed some 50 years later),⁴ mainly deals with Cicero’s account of the dream of Scipio in Book

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² All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated. Van Lieshout, *La théorie plotinienne*, pp. 124-25: ‘Parmi les idées philosophiques que le moyen âge reçoit de Macrobe, se trouve aussi la théorie plotinienne de la vertu. Cette théorie n’apparaît pas dans la Scolastique, comme elle avait été établie originellement par Plotin; les Scolastiques la connaissent uniquement par Macrobe. Les oeuvres de Plotin étant inconnues, aucun d’eux ne pouvait se rendre compte du fait qu’entre Plotin et Macrobe il y avait certaines nuances. Tous devaient croire que Macrobe avait reproduit dans son Commentaire la doctrine authentique de son maître, d’autant plus qu’il fait semblant de copier littéralement. Ainsi, le fait s’explique que les docteurs scolastiques, qui utilisent dans leurs ouvrages la théorie plotinienne, l’attribuent tantôt à Macrobe, tantôt à Plotin.’

³ See e.g. Kent, ‘Virtue Theory’, p. 495.

6 of *De re publica*. In addition to being often cited as the source of the fourfold classification of the virtues in the Middle Ages, it is also given as a source for other related Neoplatonist themes, such as the descent of the soul into bodies, the nature of the soul in general, and specific issues such as the application of the scale of virtues in attempts to spell out the notion of heroic virtue of *EN* 7.1. The work was largely read and discussed by philosophers and commentators, both Pagan and Christian, in late antiquity, through the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Macrobius, at *In somniun scipionis* 1.8 first describes Cicero’s view that traditional ‘political’ virtues, that is, those of men that are ‘governors and protectors’ (*rectores et servatores*) of states, namely the four cardinal virtues which are implied but not explicitly mentioned here, actually suffice to produce or guarantee happiness or blessedness after death (§§ 1-2). This traditional view is then opposed to the understanding of ‘others’ (§§ 3-4), that is, what seems to be partly the analysis of a straw man and partly an intentionally one-sided understanding of the Neoplatonist position. That position holds that no one but philosophers, who practice the four cardinal virtues in a different contemplative sense, can be happy or blessed. This latter view implies that the traditional Ciceronian account would be false, that is, significantly, that the ‘rulers of the state are unable to be happy’ (*rerum publicarum rectores beati esse non possint*).

The solution, according to Macrobius, then comes from Plotinus’s treatise *On Virtues*, to which Macrobius explicitly refers, which is a rare phenomenon in the work. Plotinus is here said to have proposed a scale of virtues, composed of four levels with four virtues on each level (§ 5 et seq.).

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5 Cicero’s account is focused on the more long-lasting rewards of virtue, naturally in a way similar to the Myth of Er at the end of Plato’s *Republic* 10, as the *Dream* is intended to have a similar role in his *Republic*, as the afterlife vision of Er, in Plato’s. On the separation of the *Dream of Scipio* from the *De re publica*, see Caldini Montanari, *Tradizione medievale*, pp. 370-74.

6 There is no possibility here of discussing the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue in detail, but see e.g. Catapano, *Plotino: Sulle virtù*, introd.; Dillon, ‘Plotinus, Philo and Origen on the Grades of Virtue’, *passim*; Finamore, ‘Iamblichus on the Grades of Virtue’, *passim*; with O’Meara, *Platonopolis, passim*, and for the Platonic background, Baltzly, ‘Becoming like God’, *passim*.


9 There is no consensus whether this position is taken by Macrobius to really represent the view of any historical or contemporary philosopher. One suggestion, if we are to identify any such real candidate at all, would be the sort of ethical dualism that we find in e.g. Alcinous’s Middle Platonist handbook *Didascalicus*, where ch. 2 appears to attribute to Plato the view that only the contemplative life is choice-worthy in itself, while the practical or political life is not, and thus only something forced upon the wise. See Eliasson, ‘The Myth of Er’, pp. 66-73, and Whittaker and Louis, *Alcinoos, notes ad loc.*
These levels, identical to the ones Porphyry distinguishes in his Sentences 32, attributed here to Plotinus himself, are thus the political virtues, the purifying virtues, the virtues of the purified soul, and the exemplary virtues” (virtutes ‘politicae […] purgatoriae […] animi iam purgati […] exemplares’).\textsuperscript{10}

Macrobius then defines the prudentia, fortitudo, temperantia, and iustitia of the political man (§ 7), the virtues through which the vir bonus may govern himself and thus the state (§ 8), where the term vir bonus obviously acquires Porphyry’s sense of the person possessing this level of virtue.\textsuperscript{11}

He continues with the ‘purificatory’ virtues (§ 8), already defined (in § 4), and furthermore adds that these are virtues of men who decided to purify themselves from the contamination of the body and ‘as it were escape from human affairs to blend with divine things alone’ (quam humanorum fuga solis se inserere divinis). However, he then asserts that these are the virtues of men of leisure who withdraw from political action (Hae sunt otiosorum qui a rerum publicarum actibus se sequestrant), thus emphasizing that he is still talking of a state of the soul to be reached in this life.

Thus, regardless of the last remark, Macrobius, like Porphyry, explicitly makes the point that the political level and its virtues strictly speaking constitute the realm of human affairs, whereas the higher levels relate to intellect and the divine and thus the gradual assimilation to the divine,\textsuperscript{12} rather than the human, and this in a sense constitutes superhuman levels of virtue.

He then defines the four virtues on the level of already purified souls, where, for example, justice consists in forming a perpetual connection with the divine mind (divina mens) by imitating it, thus closely following Porphyry’s definitions (§ 9). In accounting for the exemplary virtues (§ 10), which reside in the divine mind itself, Macrobius even refers to the divine mind by the Greek term νοῦς, intellect. Again following Porphyry, he ends by asserting (§ 11) that the four levels distinguish themselves in how they relate to the passions: the first level consists in tempering (molliunt) them, the second in suppressing them, the third in forgetting them, and on the fourth level it is even impious (nefas est) to mention them.

\textsuperscript{10} Porphyry thus in Sentences 32, in Lamberz, Porphyrii Sententiae, pp. 22-35, gave a fuller, technical account of Plotinus’s distinctions in Enneads 1.2, making additions and significantly introducing clear distinctions of four levels of virtues (Τέτταρα […] ἄρετῶν γένη), namely (1) political (πολιτικαί), (2) purificatory (καθαρτικαί), (3) theoretical (θεωρητικαί), and (4) paradigmatic (παραδειγματικαί) virtues.

\textsuperscript{11} Porphyry, Sentences 32, in Lamberz, Porphyrii Sententiae, p. 31.4-8.

\textsuperscript{12} O’Meara, Platonopolis, p. 45, with Porphyry, Sentences, in Lamberz, Porphyrii Sententiae, pp. 22.1-23.3; 25.6-9.
The account ends (§ 12) with the general conclusion that the ‘political’ virtues also make us happy (*et politicis efficiuntur beati*) and that Cicero was thus right in the passage where the dream of Scipio is commented upon.\(^{13}\) This is not a very convincing conclusion, however, as the ‘political’ virtues in the Neoplatonist scale of virtues merely prepare for the higher levels of virtue that alone can provide the divinization of the soul and its happiness, and the ‘political’ virtues are thus instrumental, or provide merely the means for attaining happiness. On the other hand, it has been suggested that this might be all Macrobius is intending or claiming here, as he refers to ‘political’ virtues and actions as preparing their way to heaven.\(^{14}\) This does not seem very likely either, however, since these references are merely recapitulations of the traditional positions of the Ciceronian text being commented on: that good rulers and other benefactors of the state receive rewards in the afterlife, and they are thus not the conclusions that follow from the confrontation of these values with the Neoplatonist scale of virtues. Rather, the weakness of Macrobius’s conclusions arguably emphasize the radical and, in some contexts, problematic content of the Neoplatonist theory of the virtues.

So, in addition to being somewhat self-contradictory, Macrobius’s account or version of the Neoplatonist theory must generally be regarded as somewhat simplified and mundane, but perhaps for that very reason all the more accessible to a larger audience.\(^{15}\)

**The medieval impact of Macrobius’s *Commentary***

The impact of Macrobius’s treatise on medieval philosophers is rather well established.\(^{16}\) As indicated above, Macrobius’s *Commentary* is often cited

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\(^{13}\) For Armisen-Marchetti, *Macrobe, ad loc.*, far from merely gathering well-known stock rhetorical points, Macrobius here attempts a substantial reconciliation of the Neoplatonists scale of virtues theory and Cicero’s defence of traditional Roman values. I share this impression, though I see the attempt as a failure, particularly given that Macrobius fails to address the crucial point that the Neoplatonist scale of virtues, already in Plotinus’s sketchy account in *Enneads* 1.2, involves the idea that the lower levels of virtue cannot produce or guarantee happiness, as they do not yet imply that the soul is turned away from the aspects following its incarnation in a body, notably the emotions and their moderation.

\(^{14}\) O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, pp. 81-82.

\(^{15}\) For a detailed analysis and suggestions regarding Macrobius’s sources, see Gersh, *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism*, pp. 493-596. For a comparison with the other Neoplatonist sources for the theory, see Eliasson, ‘Heroic Virtue’, *passim*.

\(^{16}\) On the impact of Macrobius’s *Commentary* in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see Ramelli, *Commento*, pp. 128-32 and 162, n. 284; Armisen-Marchetti, *Macrobe*, pp. lxvi-lxxii; Hüttig, *Macrobius*,
as the only source for the fourfold classification of the virtues in the Middle Ages (and its application to e.g. the notion of heroic virtue specifically).\(^\text{17}\) In particular, this work was largely read and discussed by philosophers and commentators, both pagan and Christian, in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, from Macrobius’s relative Boethius in the early sixth century, and his contemporary Cassiodorus, to Isidore of Seville even earlier at the end of the fifth century. While there was a temporarily diminished interest in the Commentary in the tenth and eleventh centuries, examples exist of people using it significantly to conciliate ancient philosophy with Christianity.\(^\text{18}\) This important reception of the work gained new force with Peter of Abelard (1079-1142) in the twelfth century. Abelard adopted the theory of the four levels of virtue and its relation to the immortality of the soul. The commentary was substantially received by the School of Chartres, with people like William of Conches (1080-1154) adopting its Neoplatonism and using it in his notes on the Timaeus. John of Salisbury (1115-1180), pupil of Abelard and William of Conches, also quotes the commentary extensively.\(^\text{19}\) In the thirteenth century Vincent of Beauvais (1184?-1264?) draws on the commentary for his account of the immortality of the soul. It was used by the Dominican Albert the Great (1193-1280),\(^\text{20}\) who discusses among other things Macrobius’s account of the nature of the soul, and Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), who cites him extensively in his Summa Theologica, along with his pupil the Franciscan Bonaventure (1221-1274), who specifically focuses on Macrobius’s account of the virtues and the decent of the soul.\(^\text{21}\) This reception continued throughout the later Middle Ages and Renaissance.\(^\text{22}\) Despite the massive influence of Macrobius in conveying Neoplatonist material to the medieval commentators, it appears exaggerated to single him out as the one possible source for their knowledge of the Neoplatonist levels-of-virtue theory. One proof against that view is Eustathius and his commentary on EN, to which we shall now turn.

\(^\text{18}\) Hüttig, *Macrobius*, pp. 57-74 discusses several relevant examples.
\(^\text{19}\) Armisen-Marchetti, *Macrobe*, pp. lxix.
\(^\text{20}\) Significantly, Robert Grosseteste, the translator of EN, himself frequently draws on the Commentary, see Stahl, *Commentary*, p. 45.
\(^\text{21}\) Armisen-Marchetti, *Macrobe*, pp. lxx.
\(^\text{22}\) Flamant, *Macrobe*, p. 140; 688ff., 475. In the fourteenth century, e.g. Petrarcha (1304-1374) and Ficino both drew on Macrobius’s account of the virtues specifically, see Zintzen, *Bemerkungen*, pp. 421-31.
Eustratius's Greek EN commentary and its Latin reception

Eustratius of Nicaea's (c.1050-c.1120) partial commentary on EN, covering Books 1 and 6, was probably composed between 1117 and c.1120. Later during the twelfth century someone combined Eustratius's material together with other commentaries to form a composite commentary including one commentary on each of the ten books of EN, and during this period the so-called corpus ethicum was formed, i.e. with the EN text divided into sections immediately followed by the commentary on each section. This corpus was translated by Robert Grosseteste in his complete Latin version of the EN text (1246/48). Quite soon, Eustratius was considered 'the commentator' on EN.

The complete EN translation showed the commentators, who had been reading only the first, rather general parts of EN, that Aristotle's theory centred around a large number of quite specific ethical and intellectual virtues. This was a very significant discovery, and this naturally called for discussions of the appropriateness of his divisions of the virtues, given that the commentators until then had elaborated with a different kind of division of the virtues, mainly in terms of the four cardinal ones, filtered through the Christian tradition.

It is striking then that Eustratius's commentary has received rather little attention in light of its status as an early key factor in forming the medieval reception of the first complete Latin version of the EN text. One may distinguish between two aspects of its reception here. Firstly, cases where Eustratius

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23 Cacouros, 'Eustrate', p. 382.
24 Cacouros, 'Eustrate', pp. 385-86. Cacouros claims that (a) the composite commentary was probably made towards the end of the twelfth century (p. 385), and that (b) the corpus ethicum was probably composed in Eustratius's generation or (c) the following (p. 386). To me (a) and (b) seem to contradict each other. On the composite commentary see Mercken, Greek Commentaries, vol. III, pp. 3-33; and for its Latin translation and reception pp. 34-52.
25 For references on Eustratius's influence on the Aristotle commentaries in the west see Benakis, 'Aristotelian Ethics', p. 65, and n. 10. Cacouros, 'Eustrate', p. 385, gives 1240-43 as the date of the translation. On some suggestions as to how Grosseteste came in contact with the mss., see also Brams, 'Traductions et traducteurs latins', pp. 102-3, and Dionisotti, 'Greek Studies of Robert Grosseteste', passim.
26 De Libera, La philosophie médiévale, pp. 32-33.
27 See e.g. Bejczy, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3.
has been influential on and used by the Latin commentators and others *tout court* – here we find Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Gerald Odo, Walter Burley, and John Buridan.\(^{29}\) Secondly, cases where he obviously incorporates Neoplatonist material into his commentary, which as such provides a source for Neoplatonist conceptions for the Latin commentators. I will mention the former cases only in passing and focus on the latter.

**Some aspects of Eustratius’s influence on the conceptions of virtue in the early Latin *EN* commentaries in recent scholarship**

Eustratius’s general influence on Albert the Great, Aquinas, and Bonaventure is often mentioned.\(^{30}\) Among the specific issues pointed out in recent scholarship, where Eustratius seems to have influenced the commentators, are those most relevant to the theory and division of the virtues concerning the status of prudence.

In *EN*, Aristotle presented prudence not as a moral virtue but as an intellectual virtue, though the moral virtues could not exist without it. This somewhat mixed status of prudence gave rise to several different interpretations in the early Latin commentators. The Dominican Robert Kilwardby (d. 1279) thus placed prudence as an intellectual, but also a moral, virtue, as it is responsible for setting the deliberations governing moral agency.\(^{31}\) A similar view was taken by Grosseteste in his *notule* to the Latin *EN* version, and by Albert the Great in his commentaries on *EN*,\(^{32}\) who argued for prudence as occupying a middle ground between moral and intellectual virtues, seemingly following Eustratius’s *Commentary*.\(^{33}\) While Aquinas opted for a similar view in his theological work, in his commentary on *EN* he on the contrary associates prudence with the moral virtues.

Thus, Eustratius’s commentary influenced both Albert and Aquinas specifically on the understanding of the status of the virtue of prudence.\(^{34}\) This

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29 For a brief overview, see Mercken, *Greek Commentaries*, vol. III, pp. 45-52, with references given there.
30 Mercken, ‘Greek Commentators of Aristotle’s *Ethics*’, pp. 441-43. Aquinas may have been influenced reading Albert though, as Gauthier suggested in his Leonine edition of Aquinas.
33 Bejczy, *Study*, p. 164 with n. 117.
influence is both shown in the passages where he is quoted but rejected, as is the case with Albert the Great’s treatment of Aristotle’s distinction between prudence and political knowledge, which stands in contrast to Aquinas’ later acceptance of Eustratius’s view on the same matter. Further influence on this matter is seen regarding the Augustinian friar Henry of Freimar’s Sententia on EN, which agrees that prudence exists on different levels of perfection.

It has been suggested that Eustratius’s commentaries both on EN 1 and EN 6 were significant sources of Neoplatonist views, and particularly that Proclus was an important source for Eustratius’s own commentaries.

As is often noted, the early commentators on the Latin EN version, given the predominance of the four cardinal virtues in moral philosophy before the Latin translation and the resulting increased focus on Aristotle’s ethics in the thirteenth century, sometimes forced upon the EN text previous conceptions of ethics in terms of the four cardinal virtues. In recent literature on this reception, the picture is given that this was all that Eustratius’s influence amounted to.

Thus, to begin with, Eustratius’s Commentary seemed to suggest that the four cardinal virtues somehow comprise Aristotle’s remaining virtues. This, as it were, reductionist idea is alluded to by Grosseteste in his notule on EN, and while the idea was refuted by Aquinas, Walter Burley, who largely drew on Grosseteste’s notule in his own Expositio super libros Ethicorum, holds that the four cardinal virtues are as such not qua particular virtues, but qua genera comprising the other virtues as species.

To illustrate a different aspect of this impact, we may take the fact that John Buridan (d. after 1358) cites Eustratius as saying that the four main moral virtues (quattuor principales virtutes morales, scilicet prudentia, temperantia, fortitudo et iustitia) correspond to four bodily qualities. However, Eustratius instead speaks of four general virtues or general qualities.

35 Lambertini, ‘Political Prudence’, p. 228.
37 Lambertini, ‘Political Prudence’, p. 238, with the concluding remarks at p. 246.
38 Trizio, ‘Source Material’, pp. 71f.; 86-89. De Libera, La philosophie médiévale, pp. 32-33, states that Eustratius’s account draws more on Simplicius and Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite than on Aristotle and points out a number of Neoplatonist elements (some of which are present in the Arabic tradition from Al-Farabi and Avicenna too), but does not mention anything regarding the virtues.
39 Bejczy, ‘Cardinal Virtues’, pp. 201-2, who also notes that Grosseteste’s notule on the EN text contains a similar suggestion.
40 Bejczy, Study, pp. 172-73, nn.145 and 146.
In addition, Eustratius seems to suggest that for Aristotle, temperance and the other virtues have both a general and a specific sense. As Albert the Great pointed out, this interpretation went beyond the *EN* text, as Aristotle merely distinguished a general and particular form of justice specifically. Still, Albert, Aquinas, and many other commentators repeat a similar distinction. One may note then, that Eustratius, while to some extent misread, here attempts to force upon the *EN* text an account with four general virtues which can then be given more specific definitions, while such a structure is absent in *EN*.

Now, these observations in previous scholarship may seem rather vague, and thus as simply reflecting the commentators’ various ways of misreading Eustratius (and *EN*) in light of their previous conceptions of the four cardinal virtues; but there are other more substantial cases, which make it clear that what Eustratius does in the passages already mentioned, and elsewhere more explicitly, is bring in the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue.

**Eustratius’s Neoplatonist conception of levels of virtue in the *EN* commentaries**

The general Neoplatonist framework in which Eustratius attempts to read *EN* is clearly already shown in the introduction to his commentary on *EN*, Book 1, where Aristotle had identified the end or goal of human life as happiness (*eudaimonia*). Eustratius here defines what this end actually involves, and in doing so he brings in the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue and the goal of divinization:

In the first book, he investigates the issue of the end towards which the virtues successfully lead, which is called happiness among the ancients. And this is also the end of human life, for which reason the human being passes through this world. And this is from the beginning moderation of the passions [...] but in the end it arrives at absence of passion, which we call blessedness. For it is necessary that the one who searches for perfection strive for the final death of the irrational capacities (so that only reason is

τέτταρα. ‘For, as in the soul there are four general virtues, prudence, courage, temperance, justice, so in the body there are the following four [...]’.

active in him, no longer troubled by irrationality), from which once established by the constant and uninterrupted activity of reason, the human soul approaches Intellect and becomes like Intellect, or indeed Intellect through participation, and then even godlike as it has united with god through the one within itself, which the Great Dionysios called ‘bloom of the Intellect’.43

Following the Neoplatonist theory, the account of ethical development, as depicted in EN, is thus said to be divided into *four stages*, which in turn involve (i) the moderation of the passions, (ii) the extirpation of the passions, ending in *apatheia*, (iii) the participation in the Intellect, and (iv) the union with God, the primary good, which according to Eustratius is identical to ‘the good at which everything aims’ that Aristotle mentions at EN1094a13.44

Thus, as Mercken correctly notes:

Eustratius sees the life of the passions, that is the life of enjoyment or pleasure, as the natural life of the child, but one becomes practised in the moral virtues in order to leave that life behind for one of civic virtue, a middle stage between the life of the passions and that of contemplation. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is, for Eustratius, an exploration of the virtues of this middle sort of life, the life of the political man. To the following stages belong the ‘purgative or purifying’ life and the life of contemplation.45

Commenting on Aristotle's distinction of the three lives (EN1.3), Eustratius rather bluntly forces upon this tripartition his own Neoplatonist divisions of the virtues:

43 Eustratius, *In EN 1*, in Heylbut, *Eustratii*, p. 4.25-38: ἐν δὲ τῷ πρώτῳ βιβλίῳ τῆς πραγματείας περὶ τοῦ τέλους ζητεῖ πρὸς δ' αἱ ἀρεται φέρουσι κατορθουμέναι, ὅπερ εὐδαιμονία παρὰ τοῖς πάλαι σοφοῖς ἀνομαζεται. τούτῳ δὲ έστι καὶ τό τέλος τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ζωῆς, οὔ ἔνεκα ο ánθρωπος ἐν τῷ παρόντι κόσμῳ παράγεται. ἔστι δὲ τότε έξ ἀρχῆς μέν μετριοπάθεια [...] τελευταίον δὲ καταντᾷ εἰς ἀπάθειαν, ὅπερ μακαριώτερης μαρτυρίας ἡμῖν λέγεται. δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ζητοῦντα τό τέλειον μέχρι τῆς τελευταίας στέσισαι νεκρώσεως τῶν ἀλόγων δυνάμεων, ὡς μόνον τὸν λόγον ἐνεργεῖν ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπὸ τῆς ἀλογίας μηδαμῇ ἐνοχλουμένον, οὔ γεναμένου ή τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆς διὰ τῆς συνεχοῦς καὶ ἀδιακόπου ἐνεργείας του λόγου εἰς νοῦν άνείπω τώρα καὶ νοοειδῆς γίνεται ἤτοι νοῦς κατὰ μέθεξιν, εἴτε έστι καὶ θεοειδῆς ὡς θεοι ἐνοθειά ἐκάτο τό ἐν αὐτῇ ἐγκείμενον ἐν, ὁπερ γὰρ τοῦ τούτου καὶ τῶν μέγας ὄνομας Διονύσιος.

44 See Mercken ‘Greek Commentators of Aristotle’s *Ethics*’, p. 416. Eustratius, *In EN 1*, in Heylbut, *Eustratii*, p. 6.5-8: ἔστι μὲν γὰρ κοινὸν ψυχῆς, οὐ πάντα ἐφείται καὶ δ’ ο πάντα ἐστὶν ὁμοίοι, τά τε ταπεινότερα τά τε υψηλότερο. άλλ’ δ’ ο πάντα ἐστὶν ἐγχειροτόμοι εἰκόνες, δ’ εἰκόνες τάς ἀπόλλων γέγονε κάθεινον ἁμέσως ἀπολαῦσεν· τότε δὲ έστιν ἃ θεός, ἐξ οὐ τά πάντα καὶ δ’ έκαί εἰς.

And the third kind he says, and the most prominent, is the theoretical, the unaffected, which generally denies any irrational activity. For he does not there say that the theoretical kind is that of natural philosophy, or the mathematical, or the theological, but the one who through purification from the stain of passions is pressing on towards intellection, who breaking through the matter and the flesh, this cloud and veil, through unaffectedness converses with God and the gods.46

Evidently, both the language used and the picture Eustratius gives here reflects the Neoplatonist goal of divinization through subsequent purifications, where absence of passions (apatheia) is a prerequisite for reaching the goal, a conception absent from EN.

Commenting again on the same issue (EN 1096a4, ‘the third kind is the theoretical’), Eustratius summarizes his understanding of Aristotle in light of his Neoplatonist terminology:

Having enumerated before the foremost lives at hand and saying that they are three, the one of enjoyment, the political one and the theoretical one, or indeed the passionate one, the one of moderate passion, and the one without passions, he then conceded to two of them to appear good.47

The same conception is found further along, again in connection to the distinction between the political life and the contemplative, which Eustratius sees as referring to his Neoplatonist conception:

But the puzzle is solved from the difference between the two lives, the political and the purificatory, or indeed theoretical. For as the virtues apply differently to each of these, the former involving moderation of passion, but the latter absence of passion, so the notions of happy and blessed apply differently to the political type, and differently to the theoretical type, since the former is moderation of passion [...] But the purificatory and theoretical [sc. life] when it has altogether rejected the average occupations

46 Eustratius, In EN 1, in Heylbut, Eustratii, p. 34,23-28: τρίτον δέ φησι καὶ κορυφαιότατον τὸν θεωρητικὸν, τὸν ἀπαθὴ καὶ καθόλου πάσαν ἄλογον ἀπηρνημένον ἐνέργειαν. οὐ γάρ τὸν φυσιολογικὸν ἐνταῦθα φησί θεωρητικὸν ἢ τὸν μαθηματικὸν ἢ θεολογικὸν ἀλλὰ τὸν διὰ καθάρσεως τῆς τῶν παθῶν κηλίδος πρὸς θεωρίαν κατεπειγόμενον, διότι διακόπτων τὴν ὕλην καὶ τὸ σαρκικὸν τοῦτο νέφος καὶ προκάλυμμα δεξί καὶ τοῖς θείοις δι’ ἀπάθειαν συγγίνεται.

47 Eustratius, In EN 1, in Heylbut, Eustratii, p. 38,5-7: Ἀπαριθμησάμενος ἐν τοίς ἔμπροσθεν τοὺς μᾶλιστα τῶν βίων προόχοντας καὶ τρεῖς εἶναι τούτους εἰπών, τὸν ἀπολαυστικὸν τὸν πολιτικὸν τὸν θεωρητικὸν, ἦτοι τὸν ἐμπαθὴ τὸν μετριοπαθὴ τὸν ἀπαθὴ, τοῖς μὲν δοῦλοι τὸ δοκοῦν ἄγαδὸν οἰκεῖως ἀπέδωκε.
and has chosen the superhuman form of life, and has separated itself from the body, and furnished the intellect with wings, in order to rise above the higher things, and is letting go of all things that depend on time and the first movement, and is ascending and raising itself to God.\textsuperscript{48}

Commenting on \textit{EN} 1102a13, Eustratius makes an excursus revealing his conception of the division of the virtues, which is the Neoplatonist levels-of-virtue theory in its post-lamblichian form. His aim here appears to be to provide the reader with an overall picture of the division of the virtues, in which we are to situate what Aristotle says explicitly:

The ancients ‘introduced’ many kinds of virtue, political, purificatory, intellectual, and the paradigmatical, also [called] the theurgic. They divided each one of these into four, the primary, prudence, courage, temperance, justice, and in different ways defined each of them differently, namely in a manner appropriate to the kinds of each one.\textsuperscript{49}

He goes on to point out that for present purposes, two kinds of virtue are particularly relevant, the \textit{political} and the \textit{purificatory} kinds or types of virtue:

But now the following two kinds concern us most, the political and the purificatory, the former, when the soul is cooperating with the body, the latter when the soul has separated itself from it, and is being unaffected in relation to it. For the former is moderation of passion, which simply checks the excesses of the passions and, as far as is necessary watches over this activity, while the latter either leads towards the absence of passions by further purifying the soul, or, even having already removed [it], by having already both purified [the soul] and made it free from bodily passion.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} Eustratius, \textit{In EN} 1, in Heylbut, \textit{Eustratii}, p. 59,19-34:\textsuperscript{59} λύεται δὲ ἡ ἀπορία ἐκ τῆς τῶν βίων διαφορὰς τοῦ πολιτικοῦ καὶ καθαρτικοῦ, ἢτοι θεωρητικοῦ. ὡς γὰρ αἱ ἀρεταὶ ἄλλως καὶ ἄλλως ἐκκέντρωσαν τῶν ἔφαρμόζοντων, ὡς εἶναι τὰς μὲν μετριοπαθείας, τὰς δὲ ἀπαθείας, οὕτω καὶ τὸ ἐθισμὸν καὶ μακάριον ἄλλως μὲν τῷ πολιτικῷ, ἄλλως δὲ τῷ θεωρητικῷ ἔφαρμόζοντο, ὡς εἶναι τῷ μὲν μετριοπάθειαν [...] δὲ τοὺς καθαρτικοὺς καὶ θεωρητικοὺς, ἐπεὶ πάντες τὰς ἔν μέσῳ διατριβὰς ἀπενήγαγαν καὶ τὴν ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἔλετο βίωσιν, καὶ κατὰ προάρεσιν κεχώρισεται τοῦ σώματος, καὶ τὸν νοῦν περιεῖ ὡς τῶν κάτω παντελῶς ὑπεραίρεσθαι καὶ πάντ᾽ ἐὰν διὰ ὑπὸ χρόνον καὶ πρῶτη λίγον, καὶ πρὸς θεὸν ἀναγεννήσεται καὶ ἀναιρεσθαι.


\textsuperscript{50} Eustratius, \textit{In EN} 1, in Heylbut, \textit{Eustratii}, p. 109,23-29: ἀλλὰ νῦν ἡμῖν τὰ δύο ταῦτα συνενεγκόμεται γενέθλιος, ἡ πολιτικὴ καὶ ἡ καθαρτικὴ, ἡ μὲν τῆς ψυχῆς συμπρακτούσης τῆς σώματος, ἡ δὲ χειρομοίης
What the initial statement thus conveys is that in Eustratius’s Neoplatonist conception of levels of virtue, Aristotle’s account is by no means an alternative or conflicting conception of the division of the virtues. On the contrary, he seems to identify the focus of the *EN* account as lying foremost on two of the central levels, as if Aristotle would elsewhere grant the rest of the Neoplatonist levels-of-virtue scheme.

He then states, following the tradition from Porphyry onwards, that the political level is the human one properly speaking:

Now, he [sc. Aristotle] says that the political kind of virtue is the proper human one, since the purificatory kind, and the remaining ones are above the human being in the sense of the union [sc. of soul and body], since also by nature Man is civilized and gregarious and sociable. And in that [it] denies the unity with one’s own body, this account was set above the human, denying all material activity, in what is inattentive to the things inferior to soul, and in pure intellect, bringing us towards higher things and sailing off towards the divine illumination.51

This account thus clearly draws on the Neoplatonist one, as given by Plotinus and clarified by Porphyry. In that account the *political virtues* involve the practice of reason in ordering the soul, and as has been pointed out,52 the ‘political’ virtues are thus in this conception the first really *human* virtues since they correspond to Plato’s definition of man as a ‘rational soul using body as an instrument’ in the *Alcibiades* (129e-30c). As emphasized by later Neoplatonists,53 it is in fact only at this political level that man uses the body as an instrument.

αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔχοντις ἰσμήποδός πρὸς αὐτό, ὡς εἶναι τὴν μὲν μετριοπάθειαν, μὸνον κολάζουσαν τὰς ὑπερβολὰς τῶν παθῶν καὶ μέχρι τοῦ ἀναγκαίου συντηροῦσαν τὴν κατὰ ταῦτα ἐνέργειαν, τὴν δὲ ἐς ἄπάθειαν ἄγουσαν ἐν τῷ ἐν τῇ καθαίρεσθαι τὴν ψυχήν, ὡς καὶ ἤδη ἀπαγαγοῦσαν ὅτι ἤδη καὶ κεκάθαρται καὶ ἀπροσπαθής πρὸς τὸ σῶμα γεγένηται.


This account goes far beyond the EN text. For in Book 10 (chs. 7-8), where Aristotle addresses the key question of the work – what constitutes happiness – the answer is (perhaps contradicting the rest of the work) a life of contemplation, which is made distinct from the life of moral virtue and action, considered a happy life only in a secondary sense. His argument here centres on contemplation as the activity of the gods and therefore the most divine of the virtues, and the view that humans are happy to the extent that they have some likeness to this activity.\(^{54}\)

However this is of course very far from the Neoplatonist theory of ethical development as divinization. For Plotinus and his successors, this theory was based in Plato’s notion of virtue as assimilation to god (\textit{homoiōsis theō}), to the extent that this is possible, from the \textit{Theaetetus} 176b1 (and, for example, \textit{Republic} 500c1 \textit{et seq.}), and Plato’s definition in the \textit{Phaedo} 67b of virtue as purification. The Neoplatonists thus developed a theory of the scale of virtues, attempting to reconcile the rather different Platonic accounts of virtue.

Eustratius moreover insists that the life of contemplation that he finds in \textit{EN} can be identified with the monastic life of the Christian hermit, who aims precisely at unity with God in solitude, far away from the life of political action.\(^{55}\) Along these lines his commentary on Aristotle’s \textit{EN} actually amounts to a Neoplatonist account of a Christian ideal.

\section*{Conclusions}

As we stated initially, the received view has for a long time been that it was Macrobius and Macrobius alone who furnished the Latin commentators with the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue, which was then applied widely and sometimes taken for granted, sometimes understood as a tool,\(^{54}\) Aristotle, \textit{EN} 10, states that happiness must be ‘lacking nothing’ (σύνενδος ἐνδεής) and self-sufficient (ἀὐτάρκης) (1176b5-6), and is an activity in accordance with the strongest or highest virtue, which is the activity of the best and most divine part of us; it is the activity of contemplation (ἡ ἐνέργεια [... δεώρηττη ἑνη 1177a16-18, cf. σοφία being the highest virtue in \textit{EN} 6), which possesses the highest degree of self-sufficiency (ἀὐτάρκεια [...] μάλιστ’ 1177a26-27), and is not in need of or directed towards something else, but is the only activity which is its own end and does not aim at something else (1177b1-4). The contemplative life transcends the human level, and is achieved not through our humanity but through what is divine in us (1177b26-28), whereas the life of moral virtue, whose activities are human, is only happiness in a secondary sense (1178a9-10). Contemplation is the activity of the gods, who thus enjoy supreme blessedness and happiness, and humans are blessed in so far as they have some likeness (ἀμοιμαχή τι) to such an activity (1178b7f).

\(^{55}\) Mercken, Greek Commentators, p. 416, with Eustratius, \textit{In EN} I, in Heylbut, \textit{Eustratius}, p. 35-33-37; p. 7,9-12; and p. 34,23-28, for references to the Christian martyrs and hermits.
and sometimes considered a mere distinction in various discussions of the virtues. As we have seen though, even in the light of an increasing amount of recent literature on Eustratius’s commentaries on *EN*, it is widely neglected that his commentary on *EN*, in its Latin translation by Grosseteste, which accompanied the influential Latin translation of *EN* itself, not only constituted an authority for Grosseteste’s *notule* on the text, for Albert the Great’s two early commentaries, the *Super Ethica* and the *Ethica* paraphrase, and thereby for Aquinas’ *Sententiae libri Ethicorum*, but significantly provided a preparation for interpreting the account of virtue in *EN*, as well as its overall program, in the light of the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue, and of virtue as divinization of the individual.

Thus, while many medieval authors on Aristotle’s account of the virtues did refer to Macrobius as their source for the theory, Eustratius – pupil of John Italus, successor of Psellus, whom we know still discussed the Neoplatonist theory of levels of virtue as the head of the school of Constantinople – still constitutes a separate and more direct possible influence on the early Latin commentaries in this respect. Hence Eustratius’s commentary, for this reason and many others, appears to be worthy of further study.

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