

## Demotic virtues in Plato's *Laws*

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**Abstract:** I argue that, in Plato's *Laws*, demotic virtues (δημόσια ἀρεταί, 968a2) are the virtues that non-divine beings can attain. I consider two related questions: what demotic virtues are and how they relate to divine virtue. According to my interpretation, demotic virtues are an attainable—but unreliable—type of virtue that non-divine beings can improve through knowledge. These virtues are not perfect; only divine beings possess perfect virtue. However, this does not mean that perfect virtue plays no part in the ethical lives of non-divine beings. It serves as a “regulative ideal” for everyone who is not a god.

**Keywords:** Plato, *Laws*, demotic, virtue, divine, paradigm

### 1. Introduction

In the final book of the *Laws*, the Athenian mentions a type of virtue that does not seem to come up in earlier books: demotic virtues (δημόσια ἀρεταί, 968a2). Amidst a discussion about the characteristics of a good ruler, the Athenian says that a ruler must know that soul is the oldest thing in the world, immortal, and in control of all physical bodies, and that reason (νοῦς, 967e1) controls the region of the stars. Knowledge of these matters had already been mentioned in *Laws* 10, where it was established that a good ruler should be well-versed in knowledge of the divine soul, reason, and the cosmos. But this is not the only thing he needs. In 968a1-3, the Athenian adds: “anyone who cannot acquire this knowledge, as well as the demotic virtues, will never, we can safely say, make a satisfactory ruler of a city.”<sup>1</sup> Not much else is said about these virtues, so scholars pay limited attention to this passage or set it aside. However, the passage is crucial for the project of the *Laws*; it summarizes the qualities a ruler must have. I take it, accordingly, that the passage deserves to be carefully analyzed in the context of the dialogue.

The claim that a good ruler needs “demotic virtues” may seem surprising: absent any elucidation of what δημόσιος means, one could think that only the δῆμος has demotic virtues—and that rulers possess virtue in some other, perhaps unqualified, sense. But Plato states that rulers *need* demotic virtues, so a literal interpretation, according to which δῆμος and its cognates refer to “the people” and what relates to them, does not seem plausible.

I start my argument with an analysis of δημόσιος, δημόδης, and δημοτικός, in order to draw attention to a nuance they all share and that has not been highlighted by previous scholars: δημόσιος, δημόδης, and δημοτικός are used in opposition to what is sacred or divine (Section 2). Next, I argue that demotic virtues are accessible for human beings, epistemically simple, and primarily associated with non-divine beings (Section 3). Finally, I turn to divine beings and show that only they are associated with perfect virtue in the *Laws*. This does not mean, however, that this virtue plays no part in organizing the lives of non-divine beings. As an ideal, perfect virtue works in a regulative way (Section 4).

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from Books 3-9 and 11-12 of the *Laws* follow Griffith (2016). Translations from *Laws* 1-2 follow Meyer (2015), while those from *Laws* 10 follow Mayhew (2008). I sometimes introduce minor modifications for the sake of consistency and clarity. The Greek follows Burnet (1907).

## 2. Δημόσιος, Δημόδης, And Δημοτικός As *Non-Divine*

Across his dialogues, Plato uses three different expressions that are relevant to the analysis of demotic virtues in the *Laws*: δημόσια ἀρετή (*Laws* 968a2), δημόδης [ἀρετή] (*Laws* 710a5; *Phaedo* 61a7), and δημοτική ἀρετή (*Phaedo* 82a12-b1; *Republic* 500d9).<sup>2</sup> Whether these expressions are equivalent is already a matter of debate among interpreters, so the literature contains a wide range of proposals. For present purposes, I focus on the interpretation of δημόσια ἀρετή in *Laws* 968a2 since it lies at the center of my argument. I also address the δημόδης [ἀρετή] of *Laws* 710a5, though not all scholars connect the latter with the former. I set aside passages where Plato mentions demotic virtues in dialogues other than the *Laws*, though I briefly attend to the δημόδης [ἀρετή] and δημοτική ἀρετή of *Phaedo* and *Republic* in the concluding section of this paper.<sup>3</sup>

I distinguish between three types of approaches to δημόσια ἀρετή. Some scholars offer *deflationary* accounts, others characterize δημόσια ἀρετή in *negative* terms, and yet others view it as an *incomplete* version of another type of virtue.

According to the *deflationary* account, δημόσια ἀρετή is a non-issue in the *Laws*: in 968a2 Plato is not referring to virtues in a meaningful way, but rather talking about generic good traits that someone must possess in order to function well in public or political life.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, since 968a2 is the only reference to δημόσια ἀρετή in the *Laws*, the notion may simply not seem important.<sup>5</sup> However, this proposal is not a good fit with the passage's context. As Prauscello (2014, 72, fn. 48) points out, just a few pages earlier (965d1-3) Plato explicitly mentions courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom. This suggests that he is, in one way or another, concerned with virtue, rather than some less important qualities. Moreover, if one takes δημόσιος, δημόδης, and δημοτικός as members of the same semantic field, the δημόσια ἀρετή of *Laws* 968a2 and the δημόδης [ἀρετή] of *Laws* 710a5 work together. There is enough evidence to connect the terms: the opposition between the adjectives δημόσιος, δημόδης, and δημοτικός on

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<sup>2</sup> I put δημόδης [ἀρετή] between square brackets since in *Laws* 710a5 the interlocutors discuss δημόδης *moderation* in particular and not δημόδης virtue in general. However, in the context of this discussion, the Athenian mentions moderation as accompanying “all the parts of virtue” (709e) and “the other goods” (710b), so the other virtues are implied in the context. I use the Greek δημόσια ἀρετή and δημόδης [ἀρετή] in my review of the literature for the sake of clarity.

<sup>3</sup> Another expression related to demotic virtues is πολιτική ἀρετή (*Apology* 20b; *Phaedo* 82a-b; *Protagoras* 323a, 323b, 324a), but here I narrow my attention to δημόσιος and δημόδης, and only briefly I speak about δημοτικός. For an analysis of “imperfect” or “non-philosophical” virtue in dialogues other than the *Laws*, see Klosko (1982), Kamtekar (1998), Keyt (2006), Vasiliou (2008, 2012), Petrucci (2017), Bossi (2018), and Reed (2020), among others.

<sup>4</sup> Bobonich (2002, 565). See also Griffith's (2016) translation of 968a. While Bobonich explicitly argues in favor of this interpretation, one could hypothesize that many of the scholars that do not find anything interesting in the δημόσια ἀρεταί of 968a2 would agree with him.

<sup>5</sup> Bobonich (2002, 563). I think this is a good argument against those who over-emphasize the role of philosophy in the *Laws*: φιλοσοφία is not mentioned once in the *Laws*, nor there is a reference to a φιλόσοφος. Plato only uses the verb φιλοσοφῶ twice (857d2, 967c7) and not in ways that bear on the question of whether there is a ruling philosopher in Magnesia: in 857d2 Plato compares a “free-born” doctor who uses arguments and engages with diseases “from their starting point” (ἐξ ἀρχῆς) to someone who philosophizes, and in 967c7 he uses “philosophizing” to refer to the activity of those who theorize about the cosmos.

the one hand, and ἱερός (“sacred” or “divine”) on the other is likely to have been familiar to the Athenian audience. The opposition was most commonly associated with Egypt, because Egyptians distinguished between demotic and sacred spheres—and scripts. In this context, the three adjectives were used interchangeably.<sup>6</sup> However, the opposition was also used in contexts that do not refer to Egypt: Solon, who is a central figure in the *Laws*, opposes δημόσιος to ἱερός in line 12 of his “eunomia” in order to distinguish between what belongs to the gods and what belongs to non-divine beings. In sum, the δημόσια ἀρετή of *Laws* 968a2 is neither a generic good trait nor an isolated concept that we can set aside: δημόσιος and δημόδης both stand in contrast to the divine. We have good reason to take references to divinity seriously. After all, Plato starts the *Laws* asking whether “a god or a human being” established the laws (624a1-2).

According to the *negative* account, δημόσια ἀρετή is a pseudo-virtue formed by “the many,” without any guidance from philosophy and without knowledge of the good. Scholars who defend this view argue that Plato treats this virtue “with unmixed contempt.”<sup>7</sup> However, the *negative* account is incompatible with the fact that Plato associates both δημόσια ἀρετή and δημόδης [ἀρετή] with the political leaders of Magnesia: the rulers of the city must possess δημόσια ἀρετή in addition to knowledge, and the young monarch of Book 4 needs δημόδης [ἀρετή] in addition to other good traits (710a5-b2). Thus, these virtues cannot be a mere *façade* of virtue.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, according to the *incomplete* account, δημόσια ἀρετή is not inherently negative. It is an inchoate version of a better type of virtue that needs to be developed.<sup>9</sup> In this interpretation, δημόσια ἀρετή is on the same spectrum as higher virtues, say, “philosophical” or “perfect” virtues. However, this account is at odds with the fact that, in the *Laws*, Plato repeatedly questions humans’ ability to be fully virtuous: the “weakness of human nature” (ἡ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως ἀσθένεια, 853d10-4a1) is a source of constant concern.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there is no clear mention of a “higher” type of human virtue in the *Laws*, and Plato does not open the possibility of a progression from demotic virtue to a higher type either. On the contrary, in Book 12 the Athenian presents δημόσια ἀρετή as distinctively different from theoretical knowledge of

<sup>6</sup> See Herodotus’ *Histories* II.36 for the opposition between δημοτικός and ἱερός in Egypt. The same contrast comes up in the Isis aretology, known as the “aretology of Kyme-Memphis” (IK 41) 6-7—second or first century BCE. However, δημόσιος—and not δημοτικός—is used there. A few years later, Diodorus Siculus refers to the Egyptian demotic and sacred scripts in his *Historical Library* III.3.5; he uses the adjective δημόδης.

<sup>7</sup> Archer-Hind (1883, 186). Archer-Hind says this about the δημόδης [ἀρετή] of *Laws* 710a5, but he does not mention δημόσια ἀρετή of *Laws* 968a1-2. However, England (1921, vol. 2, 635) adopts Archer-Hind’s interpretation and connects it to the δημόσια ἀρετή of *Laws* 968a1-2. See also Görgemanns (1960, 133), North (1966, 196), and Guthrie (1978, 371). Stalley (1983, 56) does not mention 968a1-2, but he interprets negatively the δημόδης [ἀρετή] of 710a5 and the natural courage of 963e1-8 that I analyze in the following section. Centrone (2021, 276, fn. 6) identifies an overlap between natural virtue and δημόσια ἀρετή, and then argues that natural virtues tend to exclude each other, so I take him as agreeing with the *negative* account.

<sup>8</sup> Both Bobonich (2002, 565) and Kraut (2010, 66) notice this. Nevertheless, they elaborate different arguments to solve the tension: Bobonich deflates δημόσια ἀρετή, while Kraut—as I show in the following paragraph—embraces it.

<sup>9</sup> See Irwin (1995, 347-8), Kraut (2010), Schöpsdau (2011, 601) Prauscello (2014, 72, fn. 48), and Annas (2017, 149-161).

<sup>10</sup> See also 713c-d, 713e, 732e, and 875b-c.

the divine soul, reason, and the cosmos. Theoretical and theological knowledge of this sort is how the ruler *surpasses* the citizens and the assistants to the rulers (968a). Insights in cosmology and theology are difficult to attain (892e-3a) and go beyond human ethics—though they are not entirely disconnected, as I show in Section 4.

Some scholars defend combinations of the *incomplete* and the *negative* accounts of δημόσια ἀρετή. They interpret the δημόδης [ἀρετή] of *Laws* 710a5 as a virtue that Plato views in a negative light, and argue that Plato has at least two tiers of non-philosophical virtue in mind: natural virtue (δημόδης) and demotic virtue (δημόσιος).<sup>11</sup> However, it is unclear why Plato would use two adjectives from the same semantic field to name different tiers of non-philosophical virtue.

One insight of the *incomplete* account is that, contra the *negative* account, δημόσια ἀρετή is an asset. As Kraut (2010, 65) points out, the citizens of Magnesia—unlike the citizens of the *Republic*—select their rulers. Hence, they must be “able to recognize which among their fellow citizens have extraordinary skills of political leadership.”<sup>12</sup> They must possess some sort of virtue that allows them to effectively recognize virtue in others. However, this virtue cannot exclusively pertain to “good citizens”: in 710a5-b2 Plato claims that both children and wild animals can possess versions of δημόδης [ἀρετή]. This leads us to my proposal.

According to my reading of the *Laws*, what characterizes “demotic virtues”—my preferred translation of δημόσια ἀρετή and δημόδης [ἀρετή]—is that they are *non-divine*. I take the Egyptian opposition between demotic and divine as a key point of reference for the *Laws*. If my account is correct, we have yet another reason to believe that Plato’s Magnesia was deeply inspired by the Egyptian tradition of viewing gods as the authors of laws, and by the Egyptian custom of “doing things by the book,” which was alien to the Greeks of his time.<sup>13</sup> In the following section, I argue that demotic virtues are epistemically simple and accessible for human beings. They are, inherently, the virtues of non-divine beings.

### 3. Demotic Virtues: What Is Up to Non-Divine Beings

In the final book of the *Laws*, the Athenian summarizes the range of skills that Magnesia’s ruler should have. As I mentioned before, he must have theoretical knowledge of soul and reason (967d-e). But this is not all that a ruler needs:

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<sup>11</sup> See Schöpsdau (2003, 164; 2011, 601) and Prauscello (2014, 67) for the two tiers of non-philosophical virtue in the context of the *Laws* and Adam (1902, vol. 1, 231) for the *Republic*. Centrone (2021, 275-9) distinguishes three tiers (natural, doxastic, and slavish virtue).

<sup>12</sup> See also Annas’ defense of Platonic optimism (2017, 158-161).

<sup>13</sup> This has been argued by Nightingale (1999). Plato praises Egypt several times in the *Laws* (656d-b, 660b, 799a-b, 819b-d). In addition, in *Isis and Osiris* 371a Plutarch claims that in *Laws* 10 Plato tried “to reconcile the religious beliefs of the Egyptians” with his philosophy. This could also be connected to Proclus’ commentary to *Timaeus* 20d, where he reports that Crantor of Soli, the “first interpreter of Plato,” said “that Plato was derided by those of his time, as not being the inventor of the *Republic*, but transcribing what the Egyptians had written on this subject.” The translation is by Taylor (1998). On Plato’s knowledge of Egypt, see Davis (1979), Brisson (1987), Samb (1995), and Vasunia (2001, 207-47).

[T1] He must also have a grasp of the studies preliminary to these [*i.e.* preliminary to the knowledge of soul and reason], and must observe those elements of music which have some connection with them, applying them, with due harmony, to the practices and institutions that pertain to character; also, where things have a rational explanation, he should be capable of giving that explanation. Anyone who cannot acquire this knowledge, as well as the demotic virtues, will never, we can safely say, make a satisfactory ruler of a city as a whole — merely an assistant to others who are rulers.

Plato, *Laws* 12 967e1-968a4

T1 contains the only instance of δημόσια ἀρεταί in the *Laws*. The passage does not offer much information about what demotic virtues are, so I will focus for a moment on what they are not— theoretical knowledge of soul and reason.<sup>14</sup> “Knowledge of soul” is a direct reference to the metaphysico-theological discussion that takes place in *Laws* 10. The divine soul “drives all things in the heavens and on earth and in the sea through its own motions” (897a), and a good ruler must study this well.<sup>15</sup>

The formulation “knowledge of reason” is not immediately clear. What does one know when one knows reason? Plato uses νοῦς in a colloquial and a non-colloquial sense in the *Laws*. In its colloquial sense, νοῦς is equivalent to “sense” or “mind.” A human can “develop sense,” “turn their mind” towards a problem, or be “in their right mind” when she makes a decision.<sup>16</sup> In a non-colloquial sense, Plato talks about νοῦς in three different ways. Metaphysically speaking, reason is the ruler and organizer of the cosmos (875c-d, 897b, 897c, 966e, 967b, 967e) and moves in a circular, perfect way (897e, 898a, 898b). Thus, νοῦς is associated with the divine in general and with the divine soul in particular (713a, 897b, 897c). This metaphysical aspect has an ethical correlation: reason is the leader of the divine goods (631d) and virtues in general (632c, 644a, 687e, 688b, 963a), a component of divine moderation (631c), and characteristic of virtue (900d). In addition, reason has a role in politics: it is the source of the law (714a, 890d, 957c) and, as such, the aim of the legislator and his laws (701d, 963a). The metaphysical, ethical, and political aspects of reason are related, although their precise interaction has puzzled

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<sup>14</sup> This theory-practice division mirrors, I think, the two ways in which the nocturnal council preserves the city: the council must know the aim (σκοπός, 962a9, b2, b6) of statesmanship and how to participate (μετέχω, 962b8) in that aim.

<sup>15</sup> The argument in *Laws* 10 is so important that the Athenian claims that it should work as the “finest and best prelude on behalf of all the laws” (887b-c).

<sup>16</sup> For examples of “having sense,” see 672c, 783e, 834b, 892b, 961d, 969b; of “turning one’s mind,” see 628b-c, 702d, 801a, 809e, 858d, 925b; of being “in a right mind,” see 674b, 686e, 737b, 776e, 905d, 931e.

scholars.<sup>17</sup> However, what is important for my purposes—and accepted by most scholars—is that reason is deeply tied to the divine. *Human* reason is only invoked in the colloquial sense.

The metaphysical distance between reason and humans operates in both the ethical and political domain: not even the most experienced officers in the city—the most virtuous—have access to reason. This is stated a few lines before T1. In this context, the Athenian claims that since reason rules the cosmos, leads the divine goods, and is the source of the law, a good ruler must be able to correctly aim at it. The ruler must possess an education that is “more precise” (ἀκριβέστερος, 965b1) than the education of a common citizen. This education consists in a “precise” (ἀκριβῶς, 965c10) examination of the virtues and in “mastering every proof that there is relating to the gods” (966c). In effect, the ruler gains deep ethical and theological knowledge. However, the Athenian immediately recognizes that this educational program is quite ambitious. He adds that the officials must inquire into these matters “to whatever extent a human being can know these things” (εἰς ὅσον δυνατόν ἐστὶν ταῦτ’ ἄνθρωπον γινώσκειν, 966c3-4). Our nature limits our access to reason, and no amount of education can fix this. This is repeated at the end of *Laws* 10, after the long metaphysico-theological discussion; the Athenian says that nobody should act “as if with mortal eyes we could ever see reason and know it sufficiently” (897d).

To sum up, T1 does not mention two qualities that *only* Magnesia’s ruler has. Rather, there is one such quality: knowledge of soul and reason—or whatever approximation of this knowledge is in reach for humans. By attempting to possess knowledge of soul and divine reason, the ruler *surpasses* the rest of the citizens. The other quality that T1 mentions is not specifically one of the ruler. Rather, demotic virtues are shared by rulers, assistants to the rulers, and the citizenship overall.

But what are demotic virtues, beyond being attainable virtues that have little to do with the more precise knowledge that rulers have? Nothing more is said about them after T1 and two Stephanus pages later the *Laws* comes to an abrupt end. Thus, in order to elucidate what demotic virtues are, we have to work backwards. The adjective δημόσιος is paired with ἀρετή only in T1. However, if we broaden the scope and work with other adjectives in the same semantic field, we can analyze δημόσια ἀρετή and δημόδης [ἀρετή] together.

In *Laws* 4, the Athenian, Megillus, and Clinias begin to design the future state of Magnesia. After reminding his interlocutors that good legislation aims at all of virtue and not merely at a part of it (705e-6a), the Athenian lists the characteristics that a monarch must have.<sup>18</sup> He must be young, a fast learner, courageous, and moderate, and he also must possess a retentive memory and a natural nobility of character (709e-10a). This set of characteristics is almost identical to the set that a philosophical nature possesses according to *Republic* 494a-b.<sup>19</sup> Socrates

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<sup>17</sup> “Whether Plato’s God, then, is to be thought of as impersonal Reason, or as a soul in which reason operates with a supremacy impossible to any created soul, is a question that we cannot answer with certainty,” claims Morrow (1960, 484). However, several scholars try to provide an answer. Menn (1995, 18) famously argues that νοῦς is “a virtue in which souls participate.” More recently, Bordt (2013, 234-6) argues that νοῦς is a god for both humans and gods, and Van Riel (2013, 103) that νοῦς is what perfect divine souls possess.

<sup>18</sup> I follow Bury (1926, 273) in my translation of τύραννος, since the word generally has a positive nuance in the *Laws*.

<sup>19</sup> See also *Republic* 487a, 490c, 503c, and *Theaetetus* 144a-b. In all these cases, the list of characteristics is quite similar to the one in *Laws* 4.

even adds that these characteristics can be present in young children (ἐν παισίν, 494b4), so the resonance between the two passages is strong. It seems unlikely, then, that this passage is a “deliberate irony,” as Schofield (1999, 235) claims. The young monarch is a good candidate for the ruling position in Magnesia.<sup>20</sup>

Plato adds a further note about the young monarch’s moderation:

[T2] Yes, Clinias, [he has to be moderate] but in the demotic sense, rather than the grandiose sense in which you might say that being moderate was wisdom. No, the simple kind which is a natural flowering in children and wild animals, and which in some cases stops them being powerless in the face of pleasure, and in other cases gives them power over it. In isolation from the other goods we were talking about, we said, it was of no importance.<sup>21</sup>

Plato, *Laws* 4 710a5-b2

Just like in T1, in T2 the interlocutors discuss the characteristics of a satisfactory ruler. In both instances, it is stressed that they must possess a “demotic type” of virtue—δημώδης in this particular passage. What is more, demotic moderation shares the features that are ascribed to the demotic virtues of Book 12: it is attainable, it does not require much precision, and it is not related to the divine. We learn about its attainability through the comparison with “grandiose” (σεμνόνων, 710a5) moderation. Plato uses σεμνόνων in two main ways: either he uses the term literally, to talk about something or someone divine or highly respected,<sup>22</sup> or he uses it ironically, to refer to things or beings that try to *seem* divine or highly respected.<sup>23</sup> In both senses, “grandiose” marks something that is not within normal human reach or that is “properly of gods.”<sup>24</sup> This helps explain why the young monarch should pursue demotic moderation and not moderation in the grandiose sense—he can attain the former, but not the latter. In T2, the Athenian also presents demotic moderation as epistemically simple: it does not require much

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<sup>20</sup> Kamtekar (1999, 248) argues that the “young ruler” in this passage is inspired by an actual politician, and adds that Cyrus (*Laws* 3 649a-b, 695a) or Darius (695c-d) might be hidden behind the reference. The use of the Egypt-reminiscing “demotic” may be a further point in favor of her interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> The “other goods we were talking about” seems to point back to 696b-7a, where the interlocutors agree that neither courage without moderation (696b8-10), nor justice without moderation (696c5-6), nor the wise man alone (696c8-10) deserves to be honored in the city. Moderation has to be present in order to receive civic honors (696e). If T2 refers back to 696b-7a, then demotic moderation is what everyone should have.

<sup>22</sup> See especially *Philebus* 28b-c, where divine reason is the “grandiose” thing that Socrates refers to. Similarly, in *Epinomis* 977a the Athenian uses “grandiose” to talk about Uranus.

<sup>23</sup> See for example *Republic* 558b and Shorey (1930-1935, 289, fn. i): “σεμνόνωντες here has an ironical or colloquial tone — ‘high-brow,’ ‘lofty.’” See also *Phaedrus* 243a, where σεμνόνων describes rhetoricians, *Statesman* 263d, where σεμνόνων describes the attitude that cranes would have if they thought of themselves as superior to animals, and *Theaetetus* 175a, where it describes common men that trace their descent back to Heracles.

<sup>24</sup> See the entry for σεμνός in Liddell & Scott (1996, 1591). The divine quality of grandiose moderation had already been noted by Meyer (2019, 371); according to her reading, grandiose moderation is the second divine good of 631b-d.

precision, nor significant cognitive work. Demotic moderation consists solely of moderation. On the contrary, grandiose moderation is more complex; it can be identified with wisdom. The ability to identify one virtue with another is only available to those who are “most precisely” educated; only a good legislator realizes that aiming at moderation and wisdom is the same thing (ὁ σκοπὸς οὐχ ἕτερος ἀλλ’ ὁ αὐτός, 693c3-4). For everyone else, and especially for someone young, there is no urgency to possess this specialized knowledge. However, this does not mean that demotic moderation is useless: it gives us the power to overcome basic—but important—temptations, and this can be further exercised through state-directed practices as drinking-parties (645c-50b). Lastly, in T2 demotic moderation is tied to non-divine natures. In addition to being opposed to the “grandiose” virtue that is properly predicated of gods, demotic virtue is a “natural flowering” (σύμφυτος, 710a8) in adults, children, and animals. Notice that the emphasis is not placed on *human* nature: even animals are able to participate in some sort of demotic moderation. What adults, children, and animals have in common is that they are neither immortal nor divine.<sup>25</sup> In sum, the demotic moderation of T2 and the demotic virtues of T1 share several characteristics. Like demotic virtues, demotic moderation can be attained by human beings, is epistemically simple, and is associated with non-divine beings. Individuals as important as young monarchs should possess it, so this virtue is neither negative nor unimportant.

Prauscello (2014, 65-67) and Meyer (2019, 369) also interpret demotic moderation in a positive light.<sup>26</sup> However, the traditional interpretation has usually been negative. These scholars tend to avoid extended argumentation on this topic, with the exception of Bobonich (2002, 564, fn. 93). He presents two arguments in favor of his negative interpretation of demotic moderation. First, since Plato “expects that the virtue of ordinary citizens will be directed to the right ends,” unstable demotic moderation does not seem good enough for the citizens. However, Plato does not say that demotic moderation is good enough. Rather, he talks about a *young* monarch that has much to learn. What he has to learn is what distinguishes a good ruler according to T1, “knowledge of soul and reason.” This will give him access to the right ends and the right paradigms—as I show in the next section. Bobonich’s second argument is that, since demotic virtue is “contrasted by Plato himself with having one’s moderation directed by true belief” in 689a1-e2, demotic moderation cannot be valuable. But in 689a1-e2 Plato does not mention *demotic* virtues; the Athenian just explains that the biggest kind of ignorance is the dissonance between pains/pleasures and rational opinion. He does mention the δῆμος, but only to make a comparison about size—the part of the soul that feels pains/pleasures is to the whole soul “what the common people and population at large are to the city” (ὅπερ δῆμός τε καὶ πλῆθος πόλεώς ἐστίν, 689b-2). In addition, in this passage he invites his interlocutors to think about moderation

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<sup>25</sup> Pangle (1980, 441) also interprets σύμφυτος as “opposed to divine or lucky.” It is the best shot at virtue that non-divine beings can have. In T2, “natural” should not be understood as “unaided” or “involuntary” since to be ἀφροσύνη is a real possibility in the *Laws*, and something that we should avoid (906a).

<sup>26</sup> Prauscello in particular argues that the demotic moderation of 710a5-b2 is the same moderation that resident aliens must possess if they want to live in Magnesia (850a6-b4). I agree with her on this, although I do not think that demotic moderation “does not feature in the landscape of the civic virtues per se” (67). The young monarch has to possess it. She also distinguishes demotic moderation from the demotic virtues of Book 12 by claiming that “habituated moderation through education is different from mere instinctive moderation but does require it nevertheless” (67, fn. 33). However, in the context of the *Laws* it is not stated that demotic virtues are the result of habit. The difference between the two, then, remains unclear.

as an accessible virtue for human beings: people that “can’t read a word, can’t swim a stroke” may possess it, while “intellectuals” (λογιστικοί, 689c9) may lack it. In short, 689a1-e2 sets the stage for a favorable reading of the demotic moderation of 710a5-b2.

T2 is not the only instance where the Athenian mentions virtues that are “naturally suited” to non-divine beings. A few paragraphs before T1, while discussing the education of a good guardian (as in T1 and T2), the same distinction is introduced with regard to courage:

[T3] You have to ask me why exactly, despite saying that the two of them were a single thing — virtue — we then went back to giving them two names, one of them being courage, the other one wisdom. Then I shall tell you the explanation, which is that one of them has to do with fear — this is the one, courage, which even wild animals have a share of — and it is the character of very young children, since a soul can be naturally courageous without the help of calculation; whereas without the help of calculation no soul ever has been, ever is, or ever will be in the future, wise or have reason; it would be something different.

Plato, *Laws* 12 963e1-8

Just like demotic moderation, natural courage is accessible for human beings, epistemically simple, and non-divine. The accessibility of natural courage is parallel to the accessibility of demotic moderation in T2: even “very young children” can be naturally courageous. T3 is not the first time that children’s courage is discussed: already in *Laws* 7 the Athenian holds that courage can be trained from earliest childhood through movement. In order to counteract the disturbed movement that fear provokes in the soul, mothers and nurses must rock babies in a circular motion to exercise the courage in them (790c-1c).<sup>27</sup> The Athenian even recommends “using the sanction of the law” (νόμῳ ζημιούντες, 789e4) to make sure that babies are brought up in a courageous manner: seeding this courage is a matter of state, and rocking babies a state-directed practice to instill natural courage. This leads to the second characteristic of natural courage: it is epistemically simple. This type of courage is better understood as “the capacity to resist immediate fears for the sake of some longer-term goal,” as Stalley (1983, 56) says. T3 also alludes to a different type of courage that—exactly like the grandiose moderation of T2—blends itself with wisdom. However, natural courage is simple; it does not require the help of calculation (ἄνευ λόγου, 963e5). It is suited for agents that are neither “intellectual” nor intensively trained.<sup>28</sup> Finally, natural courage is non-divine because of its connection not only

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Aristotle’s *Politics* 7.16 1335b12-16.

<sup>28</sup> See 647c-d for a “perfect courage” that can only flourish in us after we “defeat” cowardice. However, as Meyer (2018) argues, this conflict-based model for virtue is inferior to the model based on harmony, and should not be taken as definitive.

with adults, but also with children and wild animals. Much like in T2, in T3 human nature is not singled out.<sup>29</sup> In closing, natural courage fits the description of a demotic courage.

Justice also has a demotic version: non-strict justice. Amidst a discussion about the best practices for the election of officials, the Athenian discusses which form of “what is just” (τὸ δίκαιον, 757d4) is more useful for statesmanship.<sup>30</sup> He presents two versions:

[T4] But the truest and best equality is not easy to see for everyone. It leaves the decision to Zeus, and its effect on human kind is always the same: it helps them but rarely, though whenever it does help either cities or individuals, it is the cause of all things good, since it allocates more to what is greater and less to what is lesser (...). However, it is unavoidable that the city as a whole should sometimes also use these terms in a less precise sense, in an effort to avoid a certain degree of civil unrest, since what is reasonable and forgiving, in defiance of strict justice, is an infringement, when it occurs, of what is perfect and exact.

Plato, *Laws* 6 757b5-e2

In T4 the Athenian lays out two ways in which one can be just: strictly or non-strictly. On the one hand, we have strict justice, which is metaphysically superior: it is the “best” (ἄριστος, 757b6) virtue and “perfect” (τέλειος, 757e1) by itself. It is also ethically superior—it is “the most just” (τὸ δικαιοτάτον, 757e6) type of justice. Finally, strict justice is epistemically superior: it is the “truest” (ἀληθέστατος, 757b6) justice one can obey and the “exact” (ἀκριβής, 757e2) one. These characteristics make strict justice fit for divine beings more than for humans: while not everyone—not every human—may appreciate strict justice, Zeus does. This divine association is further reinforced by the Athenian’s claim that strict justice is “cause of all things good”: this is what metaphysically characterizes the divine in *Laws* 10 898c-9b. On the other hand, we have non-strict justice. Some scholars have interpreted non-strict justice as a “flawed” justice.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, as we have seen in T1-T3, virtues can be both imperfect and valuable. This is the case with non-strict justice too: it is inclusive, epistemically simpler than perfect justice, and fit for non-divine beings. Non-strict justice is inclusive because it gives everyone the opportunity to feel involved in the city’s decisions. The city “as a whole” (ἅπας, 757d6-7) embraces it, since it

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<sup>29</sup> This is consistent with *Laches* 196c-197c, where animal courage is discussed. Nicias argues that neither animals nor children can be courageous, because they lack sense (ὑπὸ ἀνοίας, 197a7). Laches disagrees. However, this is at odds with *Republic* 4 429a-c, where Socrates accepts that the courage that animals and slaves have—correct opinion not inculcated by education about what should be feared—should not be called “courage” at all. In the *Laws*, it seems, Plato makes “courage” more accessible for everyone.

<sup>30</sup> I agree with Bartels (2017, 33-36) when she argues that δικαιοσύνη is used in a “much more rhetorical way” in the *Laws*; this might be the reason behind circumlocutions as “what is just” or “the best equality.”

<sup>31</sup> Ritter (1985, 163) writes that “a meaning of ἀναγκαῖος and ἀνάγκη comes into play here, which isn’t rare in Plato, and which comes with the thought of a necessity-born-from-emergency, which resonates with the deficient and the flawed.” England (1921, vol. 1, 562) follows him and interprets ἀναγκαῖος as “the best that we can do.” But “the best that we can do” is not bad if the best is out of reach for non-divine beings, as I show in the next section.

promotes “the principle of friendship through consequential harmony in the city.”<sup>32</sup> This inclusivity comes in hand with an epistemic simplicity. While Plato presents strict justice as difficult to understand and hard to access—probably because of how precise it is—, non-strict justice does not present these hurdles. What is more, its imprecision is useful; it makes it “forgiving” (συγγνώμων, 757e1) with regard to human mistakes. We need the flexibility that strict rules cannot provide. This ties to one of Plato’s main concerns in the *Laws*: the pragmatic one. How much can we ask from human beings who are “deficient and flawed”?<sup>33</sup> The imperfection of non-strict justice is valuable in a second way: it is effective against civil unrest—“the harshest of all wars” according to 629d. A good legislator must know how to blend non-strict justice with whatever (if any) humans can attain of strict justice for the sake of peace. Finally, non-strict justice has nothing to do with the divine. This is clear, first and foremost, through the mention of Zeus. However, T4 is not the only *locus* where the Athenian distinguishes between two types of justice and presents one as divine. In *Laws* 1, amidst the discussion about Tyrtaeus’ and Theognis’ portrayal of virtue, the Athenian defines “perfect justice” (δικαιοσύνη τελέα, 630c6) as “a blend of justice, moderation, and wisdom along with courage” (630a-b). Put differently, perfect justice could be partially identified with, or given the name of, wisdom—like grandiose moderation or non-natural courage. In addition, a few lines later the Athenian lists this same blend as a “divine” (θεῖος, 631b7) good; the combination of a virtue with wisdom seems to place it on a higher level. In sum, non-strict justice is a virtue within non-divine reach that is in touch with human limitations, ethically and epistemically speaking—a demotic virtue.<sup>34</sup>

So far I have argued that demotic moderation, natural courage, and non-strict justice fit the description of demotic virtues in *Laws* 12. We are missing the last of the four so-called “cardinal” virtues—wisdom. Nevertheless, wisdom has been present in the discussion all along. In T2, demotic moderation is explicitly distinguished from it, and so is natural courage in T3. In T4, non-strict justice is distinguished from perfect justice, which is partially identified with wisdom in *Laws* 1. So how does wisdom fit in the picture of demotic virtues? It cannot fit in the same way that other virtues do, since wisdom inherently requires extensive study and precise knowledge. In addition, “wisdom” and “reason” are used interchangeably a few times in the *Laws*, and wisdom is even identified as a leading *divine* good in 631c.<sup>35</sup> Thus, if there is a wisdom-like virtue among demotic virtues, it has to be some sort of human-scale wisdom.

The *Laws* seems to envisage a type of wisdom that is demotic. In *Laws* 1, the Athenian preliminarily introduces the guardians of the laws:

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<sup>32</sup> Schofield in Griffith (2016, 207, fn. 22).

<sup>33</sup> Ritter (1985, 163). Human weakness, as I said before, is a recurring concern in the *Laws*. Cf. footnote 10.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.89: in the context of the so-called “Melian Dialogue,” the Athenians argue that perfect justice should not be expected while discussing human matters (ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπειῳ λόγῳ) among parties with unequal power.

<sup>35</sup> Meyer (2015, 112) notes that Plato seems to use “reason” and “wisdom” interchangeably and adds that this marks an important “terminological difference” from the *Republic*. This identification between reason and wisdom, I think, explains why wisdom—and not reason—is identified as a “leading divine good” in 631c and a “leading virtue” in 688b. Unlike the remaining virtues, wisdom is naturally associated with the divine.

[T5] Then the lawgiver will review his laws, and appoint guardians to watch over all these things; some of these guardians will be guided by wisdom, others by true opinion, so that reason can knit all these arrangements together and make it clear that they follow moderation and justice, not wealth or ambition.

Plato, *Laws* I 632c4-d1

T5 presents wisdom and true opinion working in tandem; some guardians have access to the former and some to the latter. One could dismiss the possibility of an internal hierarchy between these two guiding elements since reason, wisdom, and opinion are all identified as “leading” virtues in 688b1-2. However, this identification does not last. A few lines later, when the Athenian explains lack of moderation as a dissonance between pains/pleasures and “rational opinion” (δόξα κατὰ λόγον, 689a8), he implies that *opinion* by itself is not necessarily good and that even *rational* opinion can lose against pains/pleasures. This could never—and does never—happen to wisdom. Moreover, after 688b1-2 the Athenian never repeats that opinion is a leading virtue, while he does so with wisdom (631c6) and with reason (631d5, 963a8).<sup>36</sup> In addition, while there are instances of good and bad opinions in the *Laws* (632c, 896c-d, 897a), there are not instances of good and bad reason or wisdom. Thus, the identification between reason, wisdom, and opinion of 688b1-2 should not be taken at face value: Plato is setting up the discussion of moderation, and in order to do so he first distinguishes between cognitive (φρόνησις, νοῦς, δόξα) and affective aspects of our soul (ἔρωζ, ἐπιθυμία). The hierarchy between φρόνησις and δόξα in T5 has three important upshots. First, there are different levels of expertise even among the most important magistrates of Magnesia—the guardians. Second, the higher and lesser levels can work in unison, alongside each other. Guardians with these differential achievements still perform their roles properly, because true opinion is still valuable regardless of its inferiority. Third, we can see a new pattern between T5 and the “divine puppet analogy” that the Athenian introduces a few lines later. According to the analogy, opinions are valuable as long as they are effectively controlled by “calculation” (λογισμός, 644d2). The better we control them, says Laks (2022, 69), the more humans “become what they are (tame animals) by engaging in a process of divinization.”<sup>37</sup> Gods supervise—and enjoy—the control that human calculation has over our opinions. In T5, reason—which is here presented as a *separate* element—ties the products of true opinion and wisdom together, even though these are partly at the level of φρόνησις and partly at the level of δόξα. Reason seems to work on a higher level, possessing a “grandiose” grasp of what wisdom, moderation, and justice share. With this in mind, it is not

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<sup>36</sup> In 631c6 and 631d5, wisdom and reason are identified as “leading” only seven lines apart from each other, which shows how deliberate the association is.

<sup>37</sup> In the next section of the paper I argue that, by definition, this process of divinization that Laks (2022) talks about can never be completed.

surprising that the Athenian does not mention which state official possesses this reason.<sup>38</sup> In closing, since true opinion is attainable, requires less effort than wisdom, and it is distinguished from divine and perfect capacities, it is the best candidate for demotic wisdom. In words of Meyer (2006, 381), “stable true belief amounts to wisdom for human beings.”

Let us take stock. In *Laws* 12, the Athenian mentions demotic virtues for the first time. But he is not opening a new topic for discussion: he is closing an argument that has been developed in the previous books. Demotic virtues are accessible for human beings, epistemically simple, related to non-divine beings, and they can be improved through state-directed practices like drinking parties and baby-rocking regulations. As Kraut (2010, 65) points out, “political institutions create an elite whose power rests on superior understanding,” and *superior* does not equal *perfect*. Demotic virtues are neither unimportant nor bad: demotic moderation, natural courage, non-strict justice, and true opinion are just *not the best*. However, as we will see in Section 4, perfection pertains exclusively to divine beings. As it is stated in the address to the first colonists of Magnesia, humans have to attain “the virtue appropriate to a human being” (ἡ ἀνθρώπων προσήκουσα ἀρετή, 770d1-2).

#### 4. Perfect Virtue: What Is Up to the Divine

Demotic virtues and state-directed practices are good enough for an important part of the citizenship of Magnesia. However, according to T1, those who aspire to be a “satisfactory ruler” (ἄρχων ἰκανός, 968a2-3)—and not merely an “assistant” (ὕπηρέτης, 968a3)—need to also acquire knowledge of soul and divine reason.<sup>39</sup> This does not mean that they will display virtue in some unqualified sense; they also have demotic virtues, and what distinguishes them is the additional theoretical knowledge. So who has unqualified virtue, according to the *Laws*? In this section, I argue that only the gods can possess unqualified virtue and work as a “regulative ideal” for non-divine beings.<sup>40</sup>

Gods are presented as perfect role models right from the address to the first colonists of Magnesia. This address presents the core ethical values of the city. The interlocutors agree that humans should focus only on one kind of activity, the “proportioned” (ἔμμετρος, 716c4) activity, and gods are presented as the “measure” (μέτρον, 716c4) of this proportion:

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<sup>38</sup> At the moment of discussing the functions of the nocturnal council, Morrow (1960, 502) takes T5 to mean that “some of its officials be equipped with philosophical and juristic intelligence to preserve, expound, and apply the principles on which the laws are based. It is the same requirement that is laid down in the *Republic*.” Similarly, Klosko (1988, 77) and Brisson (2001, 161) argue that “reason” in T5 is a hidden reference to the nocturnal council. But why would Plato associate guardians with wisdom and true opinion, and present reason as a separate entity? This separation, I think, puts the reason in T5 closer to the divine reason of *Laws* 10 than to the nocturnal council of *Laws* 12.

<sup>39</sup> Note that being an “assistant” is not inherently bad: Plato uses ὕπηρέτης in a positive way in the *Laws*. For example, calculation needs assistants to guide properly (645a), rulers are assistants of the law (715c), and new citizens are assistants to the god (774a).

<sup>40</sup> When I talk about “regulative ideal,” I mean an action-guiding point of reference that is unreachable to human beings. While this is originally a Kantian concept, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Doctrine of Elements, Pt. II, Div. II. Book I. First Section) Kant identifies Plato’s perfect virtue as a regulative ideal that “lies at the ground of every approach to moral perfection, even though the obstacles in human nature, as yet to be determined as to their degree, may hold us at a distance from it.” Translation by Guyer and Wood (1998, 396).

[T6] Now, in our eyes it will be god who is the measure of pretty well all things (don't let anybody try to tell you it is "man"). And for the person who is going to be dear to such a being, it is essential that he himself, to the best of his ability, become as like god as he can. And what our argument suggests is that he among us who is moderate is dear to god — because he is like him — whereas he who is not moderate is unlike him and at odds with him, as the unjust person. And so on with the rest, following the same line of argument.

Plato, *Laws* 4 716c4-d4

T6 starts with a play on words: contrary to Protagoras' famous proposal, god—and not man—should be the measure of all things.<sup>41</sup> More specifically, god is the measure of virtue in general: in the passage there are two references to moderation, one to justice, and I take "the rest" (τὰ ἄλλ', 716d3) to stand for courage and wisdom. According to the address, the divine constitutes the criterion that citizens should follow when they aim at virtue and the proportioned life. They must become "like" (ὅμοιος, 716d2) a god.<sup>42</sup> Now, becoming like a god (ὁμοίωσις θεῶ) can be understood in at least two ways. On one view, call it "On Par Likeness," humans can become like a god to the extent that they are *on par* with divinity.<sup>43</sup> On another view, call it "Emulation Likeness," humans can *strive* to be like a god, but cannot be on par with divinity—not only because they are humans rather than gods, but also because gods' perfection is not attainable for them. Plato defends a version of the second line of thought in T6. That is, divine perfection is presented as unattainable and humans can only aim to be virtuous "to the best of their abilities" (εἰς δύναμιν ὅτι μάλιστα, 716c6-7). However, this limitation has to be compatible with a *certain* type of virtue, since in T6 the Athenian talks about a "moderate" and a "just" non-divine being. This type of "limited" virtue is different from divine perfect virtue. To sum up, in the address to the first colonists of Magnesia non-divine virtue—demotic virtue—is understood as it compares to, is measured by, and falls short of divine virtue. This explains why justice, moderation, wisdom, and courage are called the four *divine* goods in *Laws* 1: in their best versions, they are possessed by gods, and human goods merely "depend" (ἀρτάω, 631b7) on them. Divine virtue is the unattainable human paradigm.

In addition to being the measure for virtuous individuals, gods are perfect models for political communities. This is discussed in *Laws* 5, where Plato sketches Magnesia's division of lands and the general organization of the state. There, he introduces a famous distinction:

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<sup>41</sup> For other instances of this phrase in the Platonic *corpus*, see *Cratylus* 385e and *Theaetetus* 152a.

<sup>42</sup> Here I follow Sedley (1999, 312), when he claims that "although the primary focus here is on god's approval, not his example, as the correct moral measure, it is directly coupled with an identification between those of whom god approves and those who come to resemble him." Approval is given to those who attempt to follow the divine model.

<sup>43</sup> This need not mean that a human being can transcend mortality and become a god. But it means that a perfectly virtuous human being is, as far as this virtue is concerned, on par with a god. This is, for example, how the Stoics will conceive of sages: "Zeus does not exceed Dion in virtue, and Zeus and Dion, given that they are wise, are benefitted alike by each other whenever one encounters a movement of the other" (Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions* 1076A = LS 61J). See also Vogt (2008, 113-18).

according to their levels of virtue, cities can be ranked as first-best, second-best, or third-best. Even though it might seem “counter-intuitive” (ἀήθης, 739a2) to his interlocutors, the second-best city is the one that the legislators must care about the most, since the first-best cannot be inhabited by non-divine beings:

[T7] If you have laws so far as you can which make the city as much of a unity as it reasonably can be, then as far as preeminent virtue is concerned, no one is ever going to lay down a more correct or a better standard of law than that. A city of that kind — I don’t know if its inhabitants are gods or a number of sons of gods, but if that is how they pass their days, then they live lives of great happiness. In our search for a political system, we need look no further than this for a model; we should keep a firm hold of it, and do everything we can to find one as like it as possible.

Plato, *Laws* 5 739d3-e3

Just as Plato presents the ideal virtuous individual in T6 (*i.e.* the god), in T7 he introduces the ideal virtue and the ideal virtuous city. The former is “preeminent virtue” (ὑπερβολή πρὸς ἀρετήν, 739d4) and the latter is the city inhabited by gods.<sup>44</sup> Preeminent virtue is superlative, beyond (ὑπερ) what humans can attain, and so is the divine city. However, it is explicitly said that they both work both as a “standard” of law and political “model”; ὄρος in 739d5 and παράδειγμα in 739e1 work in tandem to highlight the regulative aspect of divinity. It is important to note here that while T6 presented gods as a paradigm for everyone, T7 presents them as a paradigm for the legislators of Magnesia: even the most educated individuals must look up to gods and “look no further” at the moment of creating laws.<sup>45</sup> Locating perfect models on the divine domain has the interesting consequence of unifying non-divine beings—common and highly educated citizens in this case, humans and animals in the case of demotic virtues.

Besides being inhabited by gods, the best city of T7 is unattainable for non-divine beings in a second respect: we are unable to develop the unity it requires. When the Athenian says that a good city must be a “unity” (μία, 739d3), he is referring to the immediately preceding discussion. There, he explains that the ideal unity is “that wives are common, that children are common, that all property is common” (739c4-5).<sup>46</sup> Thus, “unity” in T7 means community, and ideally it includes the eradication of the private sphere. However, the Athenian quickly adds that this kind of unity is humanly unachievable—it is “asking too much of the birth, upbringing, and education we can take for granted” (740a1-2). Neither our nature, nor the way we are raised, nor our formal education can give us the tools to attain and sustain ideal unity. As a result, the first laws of

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 7 1145a24, where preeminence in virtue is also attributed to the divine.

<sup>45</sup> Following Laks (2000, 272) and Bobonich (2002, 11-12), I do not interpret the city in T7 as the one of the *Republic*; it is a model internal to the *Laws*.

<sup>46</sup> The resemblance with the proposals in *Republic* 5 is clear. However, this resemblance does not mean that the city of the *Laws* is the one of the *Republic*: the community of property and families is restricted to the first two classes of citizens in the *Republic*, while here it is presented as widespread. I follow Laks (2001, 108-109) and Bobonich (2002, 11) here, contra Barker (1918, 340-1, fn. 2).

Magnesia regulate private property, and the following ones limit wealth. While Magnesia gets “close to immortality” (πῶς ἀθανασία, 739e4), its unity is always second-best (ἡ μία δευτέρως, 739e4): the city can strive to be a divine city, but it will never be On Par. Plato displays this metaphysical limitation—Emulation Likeness—four times in T7. Twice he says that humans must try “so far as they can” (ὅτι μάλιστα, 739d3, 739e2) to form a unity, and twice he claims that we must try to resemble gods “as much as possible” (κατὰ δύναμιν, 739d3, 739e3).<sup>47</sup> In sum, a city of gods—and not of humans—embodies legal and political perfection the *Laws*, and works as a paradigm for even the most educated and powerful humans in the *Laws*—the legislators of Magnesia.<sup>48</sup>

Something that I did not mention in my analysis of T7 is the connection between divinity and those who live in “great happiness” (εὐφραϊνόμενοι, 739d7). Divine beings possess the perfect affective state, and we should take them as models on that respect too. This comes up more clearly during the discussion about the education of the soul in *Laws* 7. To describe how a good life looks like, the Athenian refers to the ideal “state of mind” (διάθεσις, 792d2-3):

[T8] My own view is that the correct life must neither pursue pleasure nor, conversely, wholly avoid pain. No, the middle course is what it should content itself with, what I characterized a moment ago as ‘contentment’ — which, based on some oracular utterance or other, is the best guess we can any of us make about the state of mind of a god as well. What I am saying is that this is the state which any of us who wants to be like god must be pursuing.

Plato, *Laws* 7 792c8-d5

The ideal state of mind is the state of mind of the gods. This “contentment” (ἴλεως, 792d2) is a middle ground between the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain; according to Liddell & Scott (1996, 827), ἴλεως stands for a state of divine graciousness that comes after all needs have been fulfilled or “atoned for.” It represents a balance of needs. This is consistent with the uses of ἴλεως in the *Laws*: it is associated with divine beings or divine blessings.<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, when Plato describes the characteristic human state of mind in the *Laws*, this state is always represented as naturally lacking stability: pains and pleasures “tug at us” (644d-5c), humans “dangle” from pains, pleasures, and desires (732e), and our “mortal nature” makes us “run away from pain, and chase after pleasure” (875b). Presented back to back, divine and non-divine states

<sup>47</sup> England (1921, vol. 1, 516) interprets T7 in a similar way when he says that “we are meant to infer that *superhuman* conditions may be necessary for the realization of the perfect polity.” Emphasis is in the original.

<sup>48</sup> To be clear, in defending this view I argue against those who take the second-best city (*i.e.* Magnesia) to be an ideal city in a relevant sense. Laks (2001, 108) for example claims that Magnesia is an ideal because it not only functions as a model for other legislations, but also is the best city for humans: “the best and the second best cities represent two orders that are in principle as radically different as men and gods.” However, as I have shown, the examples of ideally virtuous agents and political organizations come exclusively from the divine domain. Of course there could be cases where Magnesia works as a model for other cities, but this is not an ideal in a philosophically relevant sense.

<sup>49</sup> See for example 664c, 712b, 747e, 803e, and 910b.

of mind—and natures—could not be more different. Consider again the difference between On Par Likeness and Emulation Likeness. According to the former, humans cannot turn into gods, simply because they are human; but their mental states can be on par with perfect divine states. According to the latter, the very fact that humans cannot turn into gods comes with further implications, namely, related to human psychology. Our human psychology prevents us from being able to attain balanced mental states that are on par with divine mental states, because we cannot *but* pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Hence, the Athenian claims at the end of T8, humans can merely aim to “pursue” (διώκειν, 792d4) this state of being like a god, rather than acquire it. We must run after it. The correct affective state and the correct life—the ones we must look up to—are but a tantalizing promise.

So far I have argued that divine beings work as ethical standards, political models, and affective ideals in Plato’s *Laws*. In all of these respects, divine paradigms are described more or less explicitly as unattainable. But does this mean that there are no *human* paradigms of perfection in the *Laws*? I think it does; our non-divine nature is what keeps humans from attaining any sort of perfection. This is especially clear in two instances where gods are presented as paradigms of art.

The first example comes from *Laws* 4. While discussing good and bad constitutions, the Athenian evokes the myth about the rule of Cronos.<sup>50</sup> According to this myth, when the father of Zeus governed the cosmos, he appointed divine spirits as rulers of the human world. The Athenian explains the reason behind this choice by saying:

[T9] There is a truth in this story, even today. Where a city has a mortal, not a god, for its ruler, its inhabitants can find no relief from evil and hardship. And what we have to do is model ourselves, by any means we can, on what we are told of life in the age of Cronos.

Plato, *Laws* 4 713e3-7

Bad rulers are not presented as lacking political skills, nor as possessing a poorer version of them; their flaws are associated with their non-divine nature. Cronos, knowing well our natural limitations, determined that it was the best for us to be ruled by “a more divine and superior order” (γένος θεϊότερον τε καὶ ἄμεινον, 713d1-2)—this is, gods. Only they can give “peace, respect, law and order, justice which knows no bounds,” and harmony to our non-divine world (713e).<sup>51</sup> However, we no longer inhabit the age of Cronos. Thus, what humans must do is to take this theocracy as a “blueprint” (μίμημα, 713b3) and to “model ourselves” (μιμέομαι, 713e6) based on this first-best option. The age of Cronos works as an unattainable divine paradigm in the same way that the city of gods did in T7. In sum, the *perfect* ruler for Magnesia is divine, and

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<sup>50</sup> See Hesiod’s *Theogony* 109-126 and 161-210, and Plato’s *Statesman* 269c-74e for two slightly different versions of the myth.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. T5, where reason has to “knit all these arrangements together and make it clear that they follow moderation and justice, not wealth or ambition.” The “justice that knows no bounds” (ἀφθονία δίκης, 713e2) could very well refer to the perfect virtue discussed in Section 3.

the best that a *good* human ruler can do is to try to imitate the divine. This explains why good rulers must possess, in addition to demotic virtues, knowledge of soul and divine reason (T1). This is how a human ruler surpasses the rest of the human citizens, although this still does not make him the ideal role-model of political art.

The second example of divine artistry comes from *Laws* 4. In the context of a discussion about how habits influence our character, the Athenian questions the technique that contemporary poets use. According to him, poets include too many depictions of bad characters in their works, which ends up being extremely harmful for the city.<sup>52</sup> Just like with bad rulers, the Athenian presents these mistakes as typical of “human poets” (ποιηταὶ ἀνθρώπινοι, 669d2-3). Plato neither connects the harmful practice with a lack in skills, nor with skills of a lower quality.<sup>53</sup> He associates it with human beings in general. Muses are introduced by way of contrast: they constitute the correct model for good poetry, since they “would never get things so wrong” as humans do (669c). In sum, the gulf between the divine and the non-divine domain takes place also in the arts. This does not render useless the distinction between good and bad skills among human beings. However, the distinction is better understood as less and more deficient versions of divine paradigms.<sup>54</sup>

In closing, the *Laws* lays out perfect models of virtue, political organization, psychic states, political art, and poetic skills. But all of these models feature divine beings. This explains why the citizens of Magnesia should aim to be as godlike *as humanly possible* and the ruler of Magnesia should aim to know *as much as he can* about divine reason.

## 5. Conclusion

The *Laws* famously starts with the question “is it a god or a human being, Strangers, who gets the credit for establishing your laws?” In this paper, I hope to have shown why this dichotomy opens up the discussion: it is the most important dichotomy of the dialogue.

In the *Laws*, the interlocutors discuss how laws, legislation, practices, and institutions shape human beings into virtuous—or vicious—versions of themselves. This discussion examines humans as they are (*i.e.* from a descriptive point of view) and humans as they should be (*i.e.* from a normative point of view). In Section 3, I argued that humans can attain demotic virtues; these are attainable virtues that are epistemically simple and apt for non-divine beings. These virtues are not perfect, but they can be improved by knowledge of the soul and divine reason. The rationale behind this became clear in Section 4: the normative ideal of a human being is *not human*; divine beings—and not men—are the measure of all things. Our second-best

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<sup>52</sup> For an analysis of the different mistakes that composers make, see Meyer (2015, 311-12).

<sup>53</sup> Versions of these two alternatives can be found in the *Ion* and in *Republic* 10 respectively, I think.

<sup>54</sup> This is, I believe, what lies underneath Aristotle’s worry in *Politics* 2.6 1265b18-21: “omitted in these *Laws* are matters concerning the rulers and how they will differ from the ruled. For he says that just as warp and woof come from distinct sorts of wool, so should ruler stand in relation to ruled.” In 734e-735a, through a weaving metaphor, the Athenian says that high-standing officers are threads “more stable” than the “less educated” threads. However, he never claims that they are fully stable. Rules and ruled differ by having certain properties to lesser or greater degrees. This even worries scholars like Morrow (1960, 208), who ends up saying about the guardians: “considering the importance of these officers, one finds it surprising that Plato does not formulate any conditions of eligibility other than age.”

aim is to become “as godlike as possible,” which I explicated in terms of Emulation Likeness. Laws, legislation, practices, and institutions act as bridges between humans and gods.

On the reading I defended, Plato’s *Laws* is at odds with three famous remarks by Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that “virtue is something that lasts” (ἡ δ’ ἀρετὴ μόνιμον, 1156b12), that activities in accordance with virtue possess eminent “stability” (βεβαιότης, 1100b12), and that virtuous actions proceed “from a firm and unchanging” disposition (καὶ βεβαίως καὶ ἀμετακινήτως, 1105a33).<sup>55</sup> In the *Laws*, neither demotic virtues nor non-divine agents are characterized by stability and reliability.<sup>56</sup> What is more, non-divine beings could never be paradigms of virtue. Only divine beings have stable cities, balanced states of mind, and unerring skills. However, this lack of stability brings something positive for human beings. Plato’s proposal in the *Laws* reconciles us with our inherent imperfection.<sup>57</sup> To my mind, this is one of the most interesting ethical upshots of the *Laws*. The only examples of excellence available are the gods, and only the ethical effort to “emulate a god” will make us better. Put like this, Plato develops an exemplarist virtue theory—deriving normativity from examples—that foreshadows contemporary proposals in ethics.<sup>58</sup>

But what about the rest of the Platonic *corpus*? At the beginning of Section 2, I pointed out that, outside the *Laws*, Plato uses two expressions that are relevant to the analysis of demotic virtues: δημόδης [ἀρετῆ] in *Phaedo* 61a7 and δημοτικὴ ἀρετὴ in *Phaedo* 82a12-b1 and *Republic* 500d9. While these dialogues were not the focus of this paper, it is important to point out that in these three *loci* δημόδης and δημοτικός are also contrasted with the sacred and divine. In *Phaedo* 61a7, demotic art is opposed to philosophy, the highest kind of art, and in 82a12-b1 demotic virtue is described as virtue “without philosophy and reason” (ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας τε καὶ νοῦ, 82b2-3). The practice of philosophy is, in the *Phaedo*, presented as *condicio sine qua non* to join the “race of gods” (θεῶν γένος, 82b10) after death. Here too, δημόδης and δημοτικός have the connotation of unsacred or non-divine. Similarly, in *Republic* 500d9 the demotic virtue of “the many” is contrasted with the virtue of the philosopher, who in this context is presented as “divine” (θεῖος, 500d2). Though much more would need to be said about the specific proposals in other dialogues, my interpretation of the demotic virtues in the *Laws* is consistent with these ideas in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.

One could wonder whether Plato *really* believed that only divine beings possess unqualified virtue. I do not think we have a reliable answer to that question. However, what we

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<sup>55</sup> This understanding of virtue as a “relatively long-term stable disposition to act in distinctive way” is what lies at the core of the globalist objection to virtue ethics. See Harman (1999, 317) and Doris (2002).

<sup>56</sup> Robinson (2001, 118) hints at this instability when he claims that “the society of the *Laws* envisages crime and rebelliousness as ongoing features of the system, not an indication that the system has in fact collapsed.”

<sup>57</sup> Though Annas does not defend this view based on an analysis of demotic virtues, she captures this dimension of the *Laws* (2017, 159): “a reduction in the level of virtue that one supposes that humans are capable of will go with an increased confidence that they can actually achieve it.”

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Zagzebski (2017).

can say is that, in the *Laws*, Plato theorizes perfection in theological terms and presents it as regulative for our human striving for virtue.<sup>59</sup>

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