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Antiochus of Ascalon's 'Platonic' Ethics

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Abstract: This article focuses on the Platonic version of the doctrine of *oikeiosis* set forth by Piso in Cicero's *De finibus*, Book V. The article aims to show that: 1) Cicero's account, while clearly having Stoic features, is also consistent with the eudaimonistic character of Socrates' and Plato's ethics; 2) the replacement of *oikeiosis* with "assimilation to god", attested in a passage of the Anonymous Commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*, derives from the intent to remove Epicurean egoistic connotations from Plato's ethics; according to the Anonymous, the Stoic *oikeiosis* alone would not suffice to attain this purpose.

Keywords: Antiochus of Ascalon, ethics, Cicero, Platonism, Stoicism

1 Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism

The aim of this paper is to elucidate some points in which Antiochus's ethical thought, as it can be reconstructed from book V of Cicero's *De finibus*, is more or less in agreement with Plato's philosophy. As is well known, according to Antiochus there was a compact group or *philosophi antiqui* or *veteres*, including Plato himself and his Academic pupils Aristotle, Speusippus, Xenocrates and Polemo, who roughly shared the same philosophical framework. Polemo, in particular, was Zeno's teacher and – as Cicero plainly states in *De finibus* V – to Antiochus it was far from clear why Zeno decided to change his mind and found a new school: according to Cicero's Antiochus, Zeno's philosophy (and ethics in particular) often employed a different language to express what were essentially the same principles. However, while it true that in *De finibus* V Plato, Speusippus, Xenocrates and Polemo are at times quoted by name, scholars generally agree that the basic framework of the ethical theory expounded by them is Aristotelian, even though it may be mixed with doctrines borrowed from the Stoics.¹

1 Cf. Barnes (1989) part. 86–9; Annas (1993) 419: "Antiochus [...] produced an ethical theory which synthesized Stoic and Aristotelian ideas, and which, he claimed, represented the true Academic tradition, shared by Academics, Peripatetics and Stoics (though the Stoics perversely altered the

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The thesis I would like to present:

- 1) the foundations of Antiochus' ethical theory are actually to be found in some relevant Platonic texts, and (more in general) a Platonic background is at work behind it;
- 2) the hypothesis that the ethics of Antiochus is based on unplatonic assumptions derives in great part from the fact that it is compared with the interpretation of Plato developed from Middle Platonism up to Neoplatonism;²
- 3) while Antiochus' ethics can be interpreted as a development of Socratic-Platonic ethics,³ which is both eudaemonistic and naturalistic, with the advent of Middle Platonism the foundation of Platonic ethics became 'theological';

terminology"); Irwin (2012) 151; and above all the recent and accurate work Tsouni (2019) devoted entirely to this topics: "We are thus invited [sc. from the way in which Cicero organizes the dialogue and arranges the parts between the characters] to take the claim of Antiochean authority at face value and assume that Piso's account presents accurately the Antiochean positions which, in the case."

2 From a general point of view, I therefore agree with Prost (2001) 245 that as far as ethics is concerned "les Stoïciens et les Péripatéticiens (proprement dits) sont critiqués dès qu'ils s'écartent de la vérité héritée (selon Antiochus) de Platon", and that "l'éthique d'Antiochus, considérée en elle-même, n'est pas alignée sur le stoïcisme". However, behind this general agreement, significant nuances are to be found. According to Prost, Antiochus strove to assimilate his own opinion to those of Plato, but he met serious problems, since it is very difficult "d'appliquer à une pensée antérieure un cadre conceptuel qui n'est pas le sien" (253). What I would like to show, instead, is that Antiochus did not strive to conform (*a posteriori*) his thought with that of Plato, but simply found the main grounds of his own ethical theory in Plato's texts – which, with Barnes (1989) 78, I assume he had access to.

3 By Socratic-Platonic ethics I mean the ethics endorsed by Socrates in Plato's dialogues of Plato. This ethics is characterized by eudaemonism (its goal is the agent's happiness) and by intellectualism (knowledge is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the implementation of virtue), from which derive the paradoxical claims that vice is ignorance and that no one does evil voluntarily. I have repeatedly tried to show – see e.g. Trabattoni (1996, 2004, 2014, 2021) – that this ethics – no matter to what extent it can be traced back to the historical Socrates – was entirely incorporated into Plato's ethics, and maintained by him until the end of his philosophical career (as shown by *Tim.* 86b and *Leg.* 731c, which confirm the Socratic principle that no one does evil voluntarily). I have also argued that although the tripartition of the soul present in the dialogues, starting from the *Republic*, even if it could definitely be proven to be non-Socratic, can easily be integrated into the ethical framework just described. The result of this analysis is that there exists in Plato a Socratic-Platonic ethics in which the contributions made by each of the philosophers are indistinguishable, and in which an essential role is played neither by the theory of Forms (the notion that virtue coincides with knowledge is compatible with the view that the Ideas are not the object of this knowledge) nor by assimilation to the divine (as demonstrated for example by the *Euthyphro* and the first books of the *Republic*, according to Plato it is moral value that determines the nature of the divine and not the other way around).

- 4) this transition from the early interpretation of Plato's ethics to the later one is highlighted in the *Anonymous Commentary on the Theaetetus*, where the author affirms the need to replace the Antiochean οἰκείωσις with ὁμοίωσις θεῶ.

The 'Platonists' aversion to the doctrine of οἰκείωσις has been carefully scrutinized by George Boys-Stones in an article published a few years ago⁴ (to which we will later return). Boys-Stones does not include Antiochus among the Platonists for both chronological and terminological reasons, which it is unnecessary to investigate here.⁵ It is enough for us to stress that the Academy was Plato's school, and that Antiochus – regardless of whether or not he can be defined as an Academic – is usually acknowledged to be the philosopher who restored the dogmatic interpretation of Plato. Instead, we cannot avoid addressing (if only briefly) the *vexatissima quaestio* of the relationship between Antiochus and Stoicism. As is well known, scholars are divided “tra due opposte interpretazioni generalissime e inconciliabili, quella che vede in Antioco essenzialmente uno stoico [...] e quella che cerca di dar conto anche di una persistenza in lui di un platonismo che ingloba e subordina a sé nozioni e dottrine stoiche.”⁶ From a general point of view, I prefer the latter hypothesis, also in consideration of the simple fact that Antiochus, as D. Sedley wrote, “emphatically did not consider himself a Stoic.”⁷ But I do not need to further discuss this point here, because the consonances between Antiochus and the Stoics concern above all logic and physics,⁸ while as regards ethics his opposition to Stoicism is evident and widely recognized.⁹

As far as references to the Platonic texts are concerned, obviously they too have already been detected. According to Tsouni, for example, while “the explicit Peripatetic character of *De finibus* V strongly suggests that the Peripatos had for Antiochus a special authority, at least in the domain of ethics”, this is “compatible with the use of occasional ‘Socratic’ elements in Plato's ethical account, which

4 Boys-Stones (2014).

5 “It is [...] misleading to refer to Philo, Antiochus or Eudorus as ‘Platonists’ because *their* use of Plato [...] was contained in a context that was self-consciously Academic, and always referred to as such in antiquity”, Boys-Stones (2001) 101.

6 Donini (2012) 147. For a general overview on this debate Sedley (2012), *Introduction*, and Prost (2001).

7 Sedley (2012) 3.

8 Prost (2001) 245.

9 The assumption according to which “Antiochus is a ‘Stoic’ in *all* areas of philosophy [...] does not fit with the obvious anti-Stoic staging of the Antiochean account in Cicero, when I comes to the domain of ethics; in *On Ends* the Antiochean speech is offered as an *alternative* to Stoicism and as a representative of a different school of thought, namely that of the Platonic-Peripatetic camp of the Old Academy” (Tsouni 2019, 6).

seem to derive from the Platonic aporetic dialogues.”¹⁰ I believe, however, that the Platonic background of Antiochus’ ethics goes further than the occasional consonances with some aporetic dialogues. As I will try to demonstrate below, Antiochus was able to see broad similarities between Plato’s ethics and the Peripatetic one, because he grasped (in my opinion correctly) the naturalistic and eudaemonistic character of Socratic-Platonic ethics, before Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism downplayed it in favour of an ascetic and contemplative perspective.¹¹ In other words, the Aristotelian garb in which Antiochus presents the ethics introduced by Socrates and Plato is not the result of the confusing of two different points of view, but an interpretation of Platonic ethics that still deserves to be taken into consideration. Moreover, Antiochus has a special interest in endorsing Peripatetic reformulations of Plato’s ethics, inasmuch as this choice allows him to oppose Stoic ethics without thereby compromising his Platonic approach. Whenever an Aristotelian point of view strikes Antiochus to be in contrast with Plato (as is the case with Theophrastus, as pointed out by Prost), he criticizes and rejects it.

2 The οἰκείωσις Theory and Its Origin

One of the most important points of Piso’s exposition is the οἰκείωσις theory, which is also the first (and most prominent) topic I am going to deal with. Since Piso, in introducing it at V 23, explicitly says that the Stoics inherited it from the *veteres*, a large debate has arisen among scholars on the issue of whether it was really anticipated by some previous thinkers. The main candidates to have been suggested here are the Peripatetics, either Aristotle himself or his pupil Theophrastus. According to both Carlos Lévy and François Prost,¹² however, this interpretation has proven unconvincing. Let us read some lines from Lévy’s book *Cicero Academicus*: “L’on trouve chez différents philosophes antérieurs aux Stoïciens des éléments qui sont comme des indices annonciateurs de la théorie de l’οἰκείωσις et qui n’ont cependant la cohérence systématique de celle-ci.”¹³

¹⁰ Tsouni (2019) 8–9. Among these dialogues Tsouni quotes *Apology* (*ibid.* 42), *Meno* (106) and *Alcibiades* (120).

¹¹ “Ever since ancient Platonists such as Eudorus, Philo and Alcinous, Plato’s notion of ‘becoming like god’ (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ) or ‘following god’ (ἀκόλουθος θεῷ) has been understood to be a flight from this world to a higher one” (Armstrong 2004, 172). According to Armstrong, however, not only in *Timaeus*, *Philebus* and *Laws*, “rather than fleeing from the sensible world, becoming like this god commits one to improving it” (171); but it is also true that “these images of flight and purification do not properly capture Plato’s evaluation of the earth and the human body even in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*.”

¹² Lévy (1992) and Prost (2001).

¹³ Lévy (1992) 383.

In particular, the Peripatetic hypothesis, put forward many years ago by von Arnim and more recently endorsed by Giuseppina Magnaldi,¹⁴ has not won most scholar's approval, so that the Stoic origin of the theory "est aujourd'hui la plus communément acceptée."¹⁵

But, one could ask, what about Plato? Can we really be sure that it is impossible to detect in the dialogues any elements of a theory that anticipate Stoic οἰκείωσις in a way that goes beyond "des indices annocateurs de la theorie?"¹⁶ Let us begin with the *Anonymous Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus*.¹⁷ In a well-known passage of this work¹⁸ the author ascribes the οἰκείωσις theory to both Socrates and the sophists introduced by Plato in his dialogues (VII 20–30). This information is included in a very interesting section of the *Commentary*, devoted to a general survey of the οἰκείωσις theory, whose main purpose lies in criticizing both Epicurean and Stoic ethical doctrines. More in particular, the *Anonymous* aims to show that Plato did not derive his concept of justice from οἰκείωσις, but from ὁμοίωσις θεῷ (VII 15). The *Anonymous* appears to be aware that the Stoics admitted two types of οἰκείωσις: οἰκείωσις in its proper meaning, which refers to the well-being of the agent, and an οἰκείωσις of second order, directed towards the well-being of one's neighbours.¹⁹ Such a distinction was especially common in so-called Middle Stoicism, and clear references to it are also present in the *De finibus* (though the two kinds of οἰκείωσις are expounded by Cicero in separate sections: III 16–19 and III 62–68). But the *Anonymous* maintains that the two types of οἰκείωσις do not have the same degree of intensity, as is plainly shown by the case of shipwrecked persons who, faced with an unavoidable choice between saving their neighbours or themselves, normally pursue their own good (V 20–VI 25). Indeed, the self-

¹⁴ Magnaldi (1991).

¹⁵ Lévy (1992) 382; see also Prost (2001) 248. According to Tsouni (2019) 94 Piso "starts his exposition of Aristotelian/Peripatetic ethics with an *oikeiōsis* argument" in which "Antiochus adapts the Stoic argument in order to offer a different model of how the telos is grounded in natural appropriation." But this does not mean, of course, that this doctrine has an Aristotelian origin; it shows, on the contrary, that it has been borrowed from the Stoics, and then reshaped according to the Peripatetic background.

¹⁶ I admit that *the elements* of a theory are not *the whole of the theory*, and that therefore both Stoic *oikeiosis* and the version of it accepted by Antiochus present several aspects one cannot find in Plato. But what I intend to show is much more limited, namely: Socratic-Platonic ethics traces a path according to which good and happiness can be achieved through the development of the natural tendencies of human beings; the latter can be oriented towards virtue through a correct identification of the good as what naturally belongs to man.

¹⁷ There is no agreement among scholars on the dating of this text. In general, I agree that the author's interest in Hellenistic philosophy suggests the first century BC as the likely period of its composition (cf. Boys-Stones 2014, 146–7 n. 30).

¹⁸ See *ibid.* 309–11.

¹⁹ On the double οἰκείωσις see Alesse (1994) 130, and the bibliography quoted in n. 211.

oriented οἰκείωσις is “natural and not rational” (φυσική ἐστὶν καὶ ἄλογος), while the neighbour-oriented one is “natural but not without reason” (φυσική μὲν καὶ αὐτή, οὐ μέντοι ἄνευ λόγου). But, according to the *Anonymous*, such a ‘non-rational’ inclination is clearly incapable of turning into virtue, no matter how long or careful its process of development may be.

The Stoics, instead, argue that justice arises from οἰκείωσις, saying that οἰκείωσις directed towards the well being of the last of the Misians is equally powerful as the οἰκείωσις directed towards one’s own well being (V 30). But, as we have just shown, this idea is clearly disproven by the evidence. In so far as human actions are ruled only by οἰκείωσις, in critical situations right and virtuous behaviour cannot be taken for granted. The Epicureans, in their turn, simply deny that there is a neighbour-oriented οἰκείωσις. Then, the result will be identical: justice, or virtue, can’t originate from οἰκείωσις, inasmuch as it is impossible for the natural sphere of self-oriented needs and desires, which is not matter of choice (VII 25), to turn into virtue, which clearly is not an egoistic end. In order to attain virtue, therefore, a different source of action is required, this time not stemming from below (namely from the sphere of needs and desires which is the substance of οἰκείωσις), but attracting man from above: i.e. the striving to imitate god.

So, we can easily understand the exact purpose of the *Anonymous* in describing Socrates as a holder of οἰκείωσις. Immediately before quoting Socrates and the sophists, he qualifies οἰκείωσις with the adjective πολυθρύλητον (i.e. “something which is often spoken of”), and this suggests that the attempt to associate οἰκείωσις with Socrates was very common. But he takes care to specify that “it has been introduced not only by Socrates, but also by the sophists present in the Platonic text” (VII 20–25). Having stated in the previous lines that the οἰκείωσις theory is not enough to generate justice, or virtue, now the *Anonymous* goes on to explain that such a theory is not peculiar to Socrates or Plato, but is also common among the sophists. He can show, therefore, that the inadequacy of οἰκείωσις to ensure a fully virtuous attitude in human beings is not a feature inherent to Socratic-Platonic ethics, but rather a basic and lower degree of it, whose existence was possibly acknowledged both by Socrates and the sophists. Plato’s ethics, instead, also has at its disposal a higher and stronger cause of action, namely ὁμοίωσις θεῷ; and it is precisely this cause that allows men to attain a full degree of justice and virtue, and to rid themselves of the self-oriented behaviour inevitably connected with the notion of οἰκείωσις.

3 Eudaimonistic Background

We will check in a moment whether this picture of Plato's ethics is reliable or not. Now it is more important for us to investigate the possible reasons that might have led the *Anonymous* to ascribe the οἰκείωσις theory to Socrates. As rightly pointed out by Lévy, a few quotations of οἰκείον and οἰκείωσις taken from the *Charmides* and the *Republic* are not enough to explain the *Anonymous*' information.²⁰ But we can perhaps make some progress by focussing our attention on the sophists. Our task might seem even more difficult in this case. But it actually is not. The most likely reason why the *Anonymous* has coupled Socrates and the Sophists as holders of the οἰκείωσις theory is that both posited happiness as the beginning of every ethical theory. Take into consideration, for instance, the Socrates *versus* Callicles dialogue in the *Gorgias*: no matter how fierce the struggle between the two might be, both start from the identical vantage point, namely the view that the correct and rightful end of human ethical actions consists in pursuing the well-being of the agent. Their disagreement concerns the way by which to reach such an end, not the end itself. We can find one sense, then, in which an οἰκείωσις-like position must indeed be attributed to Socrates, inasmuch as his ethics is clearly founded on the eudaimonistic principle: a principle that is plainly confirmed at the beginning of one of the two protreptic interludes of the *Eutydemus* (278e3), where Socrates opens his dialogue with the young Cleinias stating that "we men are all striving for happiness."

Socrates' emphasis on the happiness-motive has something in common with the primary role ascribed to *physis* (in contrast to *nomos*) by a considerable part of the sophistic movement. And it is precisely such acknowledgement of the unavoidable constraints of nature that is at the core of the οἰκείωσις exposition provided both by the *Anonymous* and by Cicero's Piso. The former, as we have seen, says that the self-oriented οἰκείωσις is natural and not rational, while the latter underlines the natural tendency of every animal, from the very beginning of its life, to love and preserve itself in the best condition allowed by its natural constitution (V 8, 24). Moreover, in *De fin.* V 29, 86–87 Piso not only says, quoting Theophrastus, that *omnis auctoritas philosophiae [...] consistit in vita beata*, but also adds that *beate enim vivendi cupiditate incensi omnes sumus*. And such a statement seems very close to a literal translation of the *Euthydemus*' sentence quoted above: ἀρά γε πάντες ἄνθρωποι βουλόμεθα εὖ πράττειν [...] (or, even better, of the sentence we read at 282a1–2: ἐπειδὴ εὐδαίμονες μὲν εἶναι προθυμούμεθα πάντες). So, the eudaimonism of Cicero's Piso is plainly close to that of Plato's Socrates.²¹

²⁰ Lévy (1992) 383.

²¹ I cannot agree, therefore, with Karamanolis' supposition (2006, 13), that Antiochus borrowed the notion of a close connection between philosophy and happiness from the Stoics: for he could well have inherited it directly from Socrates, Plato, or the latter's Academic successors.

4 The ‘Platonic’ οἰκείωσις

The problem now is to check whether Socrates’ eudaimonism is able to develop into Platonic virtue. This is the crucial point of the οἰκείωσις theory, the only one that enables a transition from “des indices annonciateurs de la théorie de l’οἰκείωσις” to a full development of it. As rightly observed, once again, by Lévy, this is the very point on which the Stoic οἰκείωσις was more often ridiculed by the Platonics, since Stoicism “semble avoir eu quelque mal à faire admettre le passage de la tendance naturelle égoïste [...] à l’instinct social.”²² But, as far as the Antiochian οἰκείωσις theory expounded by Piso in *De finibus* book V is concerned, it seems that the evidence from Plato’s texts might provide some interesting support.

In the dialogues we can find more than one instance in which Plato retraces the path that leads from *eudaimonia* to virtue. Take, for example, the development of the *Republic* from book 2 to book 10: the assumption that Socrates intends to prove at the beginning of book 2 (in order to disprove the defence of Trasimachus’ thesis just put forward by Adeimantus and Glaucon), and which will have been fully proven by the end of the dialogue (its closing words being εὖ πράττωμεν), is that the natural human desire for happiness can be satisfied if, and only if, it turns into the practice of virtue and justice. And this means, in Hellenistic terms, that virtue is the result of the right development of the natural οἰκείωσις.

But what is even clearer is Diotima’s argument in the *Symposium*. Let us sum up the points established by her, beginning from 204d:

- The object of love is the beautiful.
- He who loves the beautiful desires to be in possession of it.
- The beautiful and the good are the same.
- The result of the possession of the good is the happiness of the holder.
- Once happiness has been reached, the inquiry has come to an end, since men have no higher aim than happiness itself.

Later on in the dialogue, Diotima explains that the natural love inherent to mortal nature can and must be brought up from its initial interest in sensible beauty to the contemplation of the beautiful itself, namely the Form of beauty. But contemplation is not the end of the story. The one who succeeds in seeing the perfect Idea of beauty will be able to generate true virtue, instead of mere semblances of it (212a).

The line of reasoning just sketched involves the main distinctive features of the οἰκείωσις theory. The first impulse is a natural wish to be in possession of beauty, goodness and happiness, and of preserving them as long as possible. This impulse

²² Lévy (1992) 386.

is directed at first towards the most simply and easily available good things, namely sensible goods. But, through proper education, such an impulse can turn into virtue, understood both in the Socratic sense of wisdom (the contemplation of the ideas) and according to its more common meaning as virtuous behaviour within one's community (the generation in the beautiful, 206e).

In this way Socrates/Diotima has succeeded in showing that men's natural inclination, following their prime impulses and desires, shifts without interruption from those goods we may call – adopting Hellenistic terminology – the *πρώτα κατὰ φύσιν* to virtue, which is to say the full possession and practice of the real good. Is true that, properly speaking, such a process is never called *οἰκείωσις*. But the similarity is striking.²³ Moreover, there is a passage in which Diotima deals explicitly with the *οἰκεῖον*. With an implicit polemical reference to Aristophanes' speech, Diotima argues that people don't love the *οἰκεῖον qua οἰκεῖον*, but the *οἰκεῖον qua good*. This statement amounts to saying that the identification between the good and the *οἰκεῖον* may be correct, provided that the *οἰκεῖον* is grasped on the grounds of the good and not vice-versa. But such a condition is also at work in the *οἰκείωσις* theory, where the real good don't coincide with what seems *οἰκεῖον* or good at first sight: only after a long process of development and education can men realize that their wish for their own *οἰκεῖον* cannot be fulfilled by a blanket use of what appears *πρώτα κατὰ φύσιν* at first sight, but only by virtue.

5 Antiochus: The Unity of 'Ancient' Ethics

Our reasoning, if correct, allows us to shed some light on Antiochus' interpretation of the *antiqua philosophia*, including the possible role which Plato himself could have played in it. As is well known, Antiochus takes the definition of the *telos* from the Academic Polemo. See for instance *De fin.* II 11, 34: *Polemoni et iam ante Aristoteli ea prima visa sunt, quae paulo ante dixi. ergo nata est sententia veterum Academicorum et Peripateticorum, ut fine bonorum dicerent secundum naturam vivere, idest virtute adhibita frui primi a natura datis*. Moreover, Polemo is quoted, in the *De finibus*, almost only as the holder of the *telos* formula which Antiochos ascribes both to the Academic and the Peripateticians (*cum enim superiores, e quibus planissime Polemo, secundum naturam vivere summum bonum dixissent [...] IV 6, 14*), while Zeno is charged with having borrowed it from the Academics: *mihi autem*

²³ I am well aware, even here, that the analogies do not suppress the differences; but the analogies that I intend to emphasize are limited to what I have already observed in note 16.

aequius videbatur Zenonem cum Polemone disceptantem, a quo quae essent principia naturae acceperat [...] (IV 16, 45).

As we have seen in the first passage just quoted, according to Antiochus Polemo did not come up with the *telos* formula himself, but claimed that it was a doctrine shared by both Platonic and Peripatetic philosophy, understood as a single tradition. So, since the definition of the *telos* as *frui primi a natura datis* shows a close connection with the οἰκείωσις theory, Antiochus feels compelled to argue that such a theory is not a Stoic particularity, and has no qualms about using it as a milestone of both Academic and Peripatetic ethics. Indeed, Antiochus could have drawn a reasonable link between Socrates's eudaimonism and Plato's theory of eros on the one side, and the οἰκείωσις on the other. If we read Pison's exposition of Antiochus' doctrine of οἰκείωσις in *De finibus* V we can find a lot of allusions both to the self-love inherent to every animal by nature (see for instance the very beginning, 9, 24: *omne animal se ipsum diligit*) and to an *appetitus animi* (9, 24, 26) that sounds very much like a rough translation of the love of the beautiful and the good with which Diotima deals in the *Symposium*. As far as the *telos* formula is concerned, Antiochus could instead have based it on Plato's Socrates' authority, which in the *Euthydemus* defines virtue as the correct use of goods, including material and external goods such as wealth and health.

Let us now focus our attention on the general picture of ethics that can be inferred from the conjunction between Antiochus' οἰκείωσις theory and his *telos* formula. Antiochus clearly supports a strongly eudaimonistic ethics, in which virtue is not the product of a generous attitude towards one's neighbours, but the result of human striving for the *vita beata* (which, in the absence of *bona corporis*, is not *beatissima* however: see *De fin.* V 24, 71). According to him, such a picture is accepted by all Academic and Peripatetic philosophers up to Polemo, and the modifications introduced by the Stoics, when they do not simply amount to terminological differences, really achieve no other result than making it worse. We can easily understand, therefore, why Polemo is the most important character of the story for Antiochus (while for modern scholars he is a rather colourless figure). Polemo was not only heir to the best Academic and Peripatetic ethical tradition, but was also the philosopher who transmitted this tradition to the Stoics (*via* Zeno); and Antiochus was ready to admit that the Stoic arrangement of this ethical tradition, and in particular the translation of it in terms of the οἰκείωσις theory, was far from useless. It was a pity, however, that the Stoics did not acknowledge that they were only expounding the ethics of the *antiqui* in a different way, but strongly insisted that they had worked out a new theory, sensibly different from the *veteres'* one. And it was exactly in elucidating and stressing such a difference that the Stoics had gone wrong.

But maybe the Polemo-Zeno succession is not the whole of the story. At the end of the *De finibus*, when relating an anecdote concerning Arcesilaus, Piso refers to him as *noster*, as he was pupil of Polemo (V 31, 94). Now, it is possible to show that also Arcesilaus had some acquaintance with the same eudaimonistic ethical theory which Antiochus ascribed to the ancient Academicians and Peripateticians. In a well-known passage of Plutarch (*Adv. Col.* 1121B–1122D) we read that the philosophers who suspend judgement can nevertheless act, because no judgement is required for acting, but only an impulse directed towards the “apparent οἰκεῖον.” This does not mean, as I have attempted to show elsewhere,²⁴ that the ephectic philosopher cannot make any use of reason at all. Based on a testimony of Sextus Empiricus (*Adv. Math.* VII 158) it can be shown, moreover, that reason has the task of providing men with what is the end of life, namely happiness. So, we can suppose that also Arcesilaus admitted a kind of ethical development that leads from the *πρώτα κατὰ φύσιν* to virtue, entirely within an eudaimonistic framework.

The οἰκείωσις theory, however, does not exhaust Antiochus' ethical thought. Starting from a passage of *De finibus* V which clearly marks a turn in the line of reasoning adopted until now (V 17, 46: *nunc autem aliud iam argumentandi sequamur genus*), Piso introduces the Aristotelian idea that “each part of our nature, both mental and bodily, possesses its own peculiar faculty” (*ibid.*). This amounts to saying that there is a perfection, concerning both body and soul and each of their individual faculties, which directs actions towards ends desirable for their own sake, and not for the sake of happiness (see *Eth. Nic.* I 7.1097b1–3). The final outcome of such a reasoning is that “morality [...] is an object of our desire, not only because of our love of self, but also intrinsically and for its own sake” (V 22, 61).

With this, the picture of Antiochean ethics is roughly complete. Its more apparent feature is a combination of Socrates' and Plato's eudaimonism, according to which virtue is the result of the human natural striving for happiness (if properly understood), and Aristotle's naturalism, according to which virtue is the result of human beings' spontaneous tendency to put their own potentialities into action. Antiochus could reasonably hold that the definition of *telos* which he claims to have borrowed from Polemo, and in which the notion of ‘nature’ plays a central role, covers both sides of this picture. What Antiochus intends to stress in relation to both the Academic and Aristotelian line of reasoning is the idea that not only virtue arises directly from a careful development of the first natural desires (a principle on which he agrees with the Stoics), but also that such natural desires, inasmuch as they are natural, can never lose their status of goods. So, in

24 Trabatttoni (2005).

opposition to the Stoics, there is no stage of ethical development in which the *πρώτα κατὰ φύσιν* become indifferent, nor can it be granted that they are insignificant for the definition of happiness.

6 Replacing *οἰκείωσις* with *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ*

But let us leave the Aristotelian commitments of Antiochus' ethics aside, and go back to the notion of *οἰκείωσις*. As is well known, at a certain point Platonic and/or Academic philosophers diverged from the Socrates-Plato-Polemo-(Arcesilaus)-Antiochus line, and introduced a definition of *telos* grounded no longer on the desire to accomplish one's natural *οἰκεῖον*, but on the striving to become similar to God. Indeed, among so-called Middle Platonist philosophers there is a striking agreement in identifying the *telos* formula as *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ*.

Until a few decades ago, the prevalent hypothesis was that such a formula was introduced for the first time by Eudorus of Alexandria. Carlos Lévy has shown that this is a far from compelling hypothesis. Lévy has also pointed out that we have traces of the idea of *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* in the Academic tradition as it emerges from Cicero's writings. But, according to him, *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* did not become the standard formulation of Plato's *telos* because "attribuer explicitement à Platon une formule précise du souverain bien [...] pouvait sembler en faire un dogmatique."²⁵ This explanation, however, does not help explain the silence of Antiochus (who never refers to the idea of *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ*), since he was the main philosopher responsible for the dogmatic turn of the Platonic-Academic tradition. So, Lévy supposes that Antiochus avoided mentioning *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* because of the great influence exerted on him by Stoicism, and his intention "de le ramener dans le giron du platonisme."²⁶ But if the connections we have attempted to draw between the ethical theory expounded by Piso in *De finibus* V and some eudaimonistic lines of reasoning present in Plato's dialogues are justified, the true answer might lie elsewhere: Antiochus may simply not have favoured an interpretation of Plato's ethics that could be summed up by the *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* formula. Besides, he already had a formula for the *telos* that was clearly Platonic to his eyes, namely the one he claims to have borrowed from Polemo. Indeed, Antiochus was firmly convinced of the basic unity of the Academic tradition, and therefore was strongly interested in showing that the all Platonic philosophers converged on the same definition of *telos*. Polemo's formula had the double advantage that its proponent had been the last heir to Academic tradition and that it suited Peripatetics as well. So we may

²⁵ Lévy (1990) 61.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 64.

conclude that even if Academics from Arcesilaus to Carneades may have been familiar with the ὁμοίωσις θεῷ formula, they did not give it the same meaning as Middle Platonist philosophers, while in all likelihood Antiochus did not accept the formula at all. The real problem, then, is not to find out who replaced the original *telos* formula with the new one, but to uncover the reasons for such a shift, because it is very likely that this decision was related to the overall interpretation of the Platonic tradition.

The main testimony on this subject, no matter the source of the doctrines it presents, is the above-mentioned *Anonymous Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus*. As we have seen, according to the *Anonymous* the notion of οἰκεῖον leads to a dead end, inasmuch it does not succeed in preserving the non-egoistical features required by the 'Platonic' notion of justice (or virtue). It is worth noting that the *Anonymous* (or his source) tried to show that the οἰκείωσις theory involves a complete obliteration of the differences between Stoic and Epicurean ethics. In short, the *Anonymous* can by no means admit that an egoistical drive to pursue one's own happiness could ultimately develop into virtue, understood in its full and proper meaning.

The boundary line separating Antiochus and Arcesilaus (and the tradition they intend to follow) from Middle Platonist philosophers therefore seems to reflect a very influential interpretation of Plato's ethical theory, which in turn mirrors a broader picture of his philosophy as a whole. According to this interpretation, metaphysical principles must govern man's life from above and prescribe a line of thought and action that does not take into account the real data of human experience – indeed, they may even be opposed to them. But this way of reading Plato is far from obvious. According to a different, and in my opinion much more plausible, perspective,²⁷ Plato's metaphysical principles are an attempt to fulfil human beings' natural desire to understand the world in which they live and to attain happiness within it, as far as this is possible.

Let us test this hypothesis against the problem of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ. According to Julia Annas, "becoming like God, or assimilating oneself to Good, is not meant as an alternative to the idea that virtue is sufficient for happiness; it is just a specification of what happiness is. Moreover, the idea is also not intended as an alternative to the idea that virtue is sufficient for happiness: for it is explicated, in many of the passages in which it occurs, by the thought that becoming like God is what becoming virtuous is." However, as Annas points out immediately afterwards, with ὁμοίωσις θεῷ "we seem here to have the idea that virtue turns a

²⁷ This is a key point of my overall interpretation of Plato, that I have outlined in many papers and books. See for instance my last synthetic exposition in Trabattoni (2020).

human life into something different in kind.”²⁸ Indeed, from a Platonic point of view one could hardly say that the model of God provides any independent information about virtue or goodness. Let us consider, for instance, the well-known discussion between Socrates and Euthyphron about the sacred: it is possible to affirm that the sacred is what the gods like if, and only if, its meaning is inferred in an independent way; and the gods like the sacred precisely because it is sacred (and thus good) by its own nature. Moreover, it is not enough to say that becoming like God is the same as becoming virtuous: we must go on to say that virtue is identical to goodness, and goodness to happiness. But if such qualifications are actually needed to make sense of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, then this formula risks turning into an indifferent verbal expression, whose real meaning is “what enables men to fulfil their desire for happiness.” In other words, if the οἰκειώσις theory can directly and easily be understood as a proper description of Socratic/Platonic eudaimonism (as I have tried to show), and if we can only make sense of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ by finding an indirect way to ensure that this latter formula has the same meaning as the former, then there can be little doubt as to what should be preferable to one who endorses the eudaimonistic character of Academic ethics, as Antiochus indeed does.

Besides, Annas’ interpretation of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ is open to the two following objections. It should be noted, firstly, that this interpretation is hardly consistent with the way in which the *Anonymous* justifies the replacement of Polemo’ and Antiochus’ *telos* with ὁμοίωσις θεῷ: the new formula seems have been intentionally worked out in order to counter the eudaimonistic/egoistical character of the old one. Secondly, even if we concede that ὁμοίωσις θεῷ has been introduced as the only real means to fulfil the human desire for happiness, the happiness it involves still has a strong otherworldly character, such as to confirm Annas’ supposition that “virtue turns a human life into something different in kind.” In this way, however, Plato’s intention to find a virtue or good that gives rise to a kind of happiness fulfilling the desire of men as they are in their present natural condition (as far as such an end is attainable to mortal beings), would be lost.

We can say, then, that the replacement of a *telos* grounded on the notions of οἰκεῖον and φῦσις with a *telos* grounded on the notion of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ reveals a shift from a Platonism interested in the achievement of a good ethical and political life to a Platonism strongly marked by an ascetic, non-political or even frankly otherworldly inspiration. It is true that in Plato’s writing we can easily find some evidence in favour of such tendencies, such as for example the *Phaedo*; and it is certainly no coincidence that the ὁμοίωσις θεῷ formula is taken from a text, the

²⁸ Annas (1999) 53.

Theaetetus' digression on the philosopher's nature, in which the ascetic side of Plato's thought is much more evident than elsewhere. But it is equally true that an ethical and political commitment is much more prominent in Plato's philosophy, as can easily be grasped by considering the key role it plays in long dialogues such as the *Republic* and *Laws*. So, especially if we look at Antiochus' 'Platonism' in the light of the further developments which ultimately led to the Neoplatonic systematization of the philosopher's thought, his insistence in upholding a picture of Plato's ethics not only closely dependent on notions such as *οἰκεῖον* and *φύσις*, but also strongly committed to a nuanced appreciation of bodily needs, provides further arguments in support of the idea that the ascetic interpretation of Plato's thought is by no means the most reliable one.

A very different reconstruction of the problem discussed here can be found in the above-quoted article by George Boys-Stones. In his view, the preference assigned to *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* over *οἰκείωσις* by Platonists such as Alcinous and Apuleius is inevitable, insofar as *οἰκείωσις* is intended to establish ethics on an empirical basis; but, despite what Plotinus (I 2) argues, it does not entail "a substitution of the 'contemplative' [life] for the practical": according to these philosophers, "through assimilation to god, we *supplement* and *perfect* our activity." Certainly, the active life and the contemplative are not alternative options for Alcinous, but are rather complementary – indeed, the same holds true for Plato. However, they are not complementary in the sense that the contemplative life supplements the active life; rather, they are complementary because contemplation enables man to acquire that knowledge of the good that allows him to act well (i.e. virtuously). Boys-Stones himself alludes to this function of contemplation at the end of his essay, where he identifies assimilation to God with the contemplation of the Idea of the Good, which in turn gives virtue that solid foundation which the empirical perspective adopted by both the Stoics and the Peripatetics is incapable of guaranteeing. But these two explanations are incompatible. For it is one thing to say that assimilation to God perfects *the practice* of virtue, quite another to say that it coincides with *knowledge*, which is the condition for the practice of virtue, and therefore anterior to such a practice.²⁹

²⁹ The same ambiguity can be found in Alcinous. In chap. 2 (153, 2–9) he argues that assimilation to God consists in acquiring the same kind of knowledge as the divine intellect has (which is to say knowledge of the Forms, since the latter are god's thoughts according to the Middle Platonists). In chap. 28 (181, 19–182, 14), instead, *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* is identified as the practice and acquisition of different kind of virtues (in accordance with several Platonic texts). But the two statements are inconsistent, and reflect a tendency to detect an allusion to the contemplative life in the *Theaetetus* passage. However, this is an incorrect interpretation, because in the passage just quoted *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* is the practice of virtue, not a kind of knowledge. Of course, as I have just said, some

Be that as it may, the *Theaetetus* passage supports neither the first nor the second interpretation. In this passage, assimilation to God coincides neither with the *perfecting of virtue* nor with *knowledge of the good*: it simply coincides with the *practice of virtue*, which according to Plato means assimilation to God, since in his view the divine, while not serving as a norm for virtue, paradigmatically possesses (*pace* Plotinus) those virtues that man must strive to practice as far as possible. If we leave this passage aside, however, it is certainly true that according to the Platonists virtue finds its metaphysical foundation in the Idea of the good, a concept foreign to both the Stoics and the Peripatetics. But this foundation does not at all contradict the ‘Platonic’ version of οἰκείωσις outlined in the previous pages, since the need for a metaphysical justification does not rule out the fact that the elements to be justified have an empirical nature, as in the case of human beings’ natural inclinations or tendency to pursue the kind of happiness which coincides with the promotion and development of such elements. In other words, from a Platonic perspective the doctrine of οἰκείωσις still holds, insofar as it prescribes that knowledge of the good brings out that goodness which is *proper* to man, and which coincides with his happiness. This is the goodness which is crucial to make things good, as described in the *Republic* (VI 484c-d); the human goodness that is the focus of the *Philebus*, etc.; it is not a divine goodness that leads man to a condition or happiness other than the human one (of course, as long as the soul is bound to the body). By specifying, in the *Theaetetus*, that assimilation to God coincides with the practice of virtue, Plato prevents the possible ascetic turn that the idea of assimilation to God might suggest, showing that assimilation to God is the only way to assimilate oneself to one’s own nature, to enable genuinely human goodness to flourish. Therefore, assimilation to God does not amount to the negation of human impulses and desires, or their replacement with divine ones; rather, it is the only way in which human nature can regain what belongs to it. For a Platonist, then, opposition to οἰκείωσις is not something necessary to preserve the consistency of Plato’s system: it is, instead, the first step along a path that, with Neoplatonism,³⁰ will lead to the creation of a non-Platonic rift between human life and divine life, between the active life and the contemplative, between the ethical ideal and the ascetic one. If the telos is οἰκείωσις, the knowledge of the good is also

knowledge of the Forms is a condition for the possibility of acting virtuously. But Plato does not identify this knowledge with ὁμολωσις θεῶν: this identification depends on the thesis according to which the forms are the thoughts of God, which is nowhere to be found in Plato.

30 According to Baltzly (2004) 299, Annas (1993) is right in observing that there is in Plotinus (but already among Middle Platonists) “a tension between the ethical and spiritual ideals implicit in the ‘assimilation to god’ formula.” But he thinks (*ibid.*) that Proclus “concepts of humans and gods is sufficiently different from that of Plotinus to effect some amelioration of the tension” just quoted.

required; but, at the same time, the primacy of goodness over the divine is affirmed. If, on the contrary, the *telos* simply coincides with assimilation to God, the opposite occurs.

7 Different Meanings of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ

The topic of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ enables us to look at the history of early Platonism from a wider point of view. It is worth noting that our sources sometimes connect this formula with Pythagoras' saying ἔπου θεῷ: this is the case, for instance, with Stobaeus II 7, 49, 16–18 and Alcinous' *Didaskalikos* 181, 36–37 (but the Pythagorean saying is even echoed by Cato's presentation of Stoic ethics in *De fin.* III 22, 73: *sequi deum*). Moreover, according to Stobaeus' testimony (no matter whether it may be traced back to Eudorus, Arius Didymus or others), ὁμοίωσις θεῷ "is the *telos* not only for Plato but also for Socrates and Pythagoras; Plato has, however, made the formula more precise (διήρθωσε) by adding the words κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν."³¹ Stobaeus' source then goes on to explain that the addition κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν does not mean "as far as possible for a mere mortal" (that is what Plato obviously wanted to mean), but "according to that part of us which is capable of this, namely the intellect, and its particular virtue, wisdom."³² So, the reason why Stobaeus' source chose to adopt the ὁμοίωσις θεῷ formula becomes quite clear. The portrayal of Pythagoras as the forerunner of the Platonic tradition is intended to affirm its strongly dogmatic and religious character, while the specious interpretation of κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν has the purpose of ruling out the possibility of lending Plato's philosophy even the slightest sceptical veneer. This is precisely the strategy that, according to Lévy, was adopted by Academic philosophers, who in all likelihood combined the ὁμοίωσις θεῷ formula with a clear awareness of the fact that there is an insurmountable distance between human beings and gods.³³ Such a distance, in its turn, has the double consequence of viewing human knowledge from a more or less markedly sceptical perspective, and of keeping human concerns within the boundaries of the present world, as it is impossible for men to achieve perfect and enduring wisdom in their lifetimes. We should also add that the inclusion of Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism within the Platonic tradition was used as a powerful means of turning it into a strictly dogmatic and other-worldly system throughout almost the whole history of ancient Platonism, from the early Middle Platonists up to the last Neoplatonists.

³¹ I am quoting Göransson (1995) 190.

³² See Dillon (1996) 123.

³³ Lévy (1990) 60–2.

As far as Antiochus is concerned, obviously one cannot argue that he was in some way attracted to scepticism. But it is worth noting that he neither counts Pythagoras among the Platonic authorities nor adopts the ὁμοίως θεῷ formula. This shows that Antiochus' Platonism was far removed from the ascetic trend launched by the Middle Platonists and then carried on by the Neoplatonists. But it also shows that his commitment to the present world and the goals that philosophy can attain within it has nothing to do with the pious attitude which, according to Lévy, was possibly endorsed by the Academics (Lévy points out that our sources ascribe to Arcesilaus the saying that only the gods, and not men, are wise). Finally, and most significantly, we can also exclude that Stoicism exerted any crucial influence on Antiochus' commitment to an ethical theory grounded on the pair of notions οἰκεῖον/οἰκείωσις, on the proper use of natural goods, and more in general on the close linking of happiness and virtue. It is undeniable that Antiochus' ethical vocabulary has Stoic overtones; and it is most likely that this reflects a conscious choice on his part. But the reason for this attitude does not lie in his supposed philosophical allegiance to Stoicism. It lies, rather, in his polemical aim of showing, against the Stoics, on the one hand that the Academic tradition already contained all that was required to promote virtue as the natural result of the pursuit of happiness understood as the οἰκεῖον good; and, on the other hand, that the Stoic theory of οἰκείωσις had only made things worse, by introducing the awkward difference between a self-serving and altruistic οἰκείωσις, by stressing that natural goods are not really good and so on. Antiochus' ethical theory, in fact, is exactly as one would expect it to be: it offers a syncretistic image of the Academic tradition (from Socrates onwards) which Antiochus endorsed, where Aristotelian indifference to eschatological perspectives is incorporated within a common eudaimonistic (and Socratic) background. Within this framework, moreover, there is also room for a kind of ὁμοίως θεῷ deprived of any ascetic or otherworldly commitment: one that simply coincides, according to a well-known passage of the *Nichomachean Ethics* (X 7.1178a2–8), with human striving for knowledge and contemplation: *vitae autem degendae ratio maxime quidem illis [sc. the Peripateticians] placuit quieti, in contemplatione et cognitione posita rerum, quae quia deorum erat vitae simillima, sapiente visa est dignissima* (*De fin.* V 4, 11). The happiness which philosophy can really grant is, once again, limited to one's present life.

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