

## Julian's Letter to Themistius and the 4<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical debate

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Julian's *Letter to Themistius* is an extraordinary work that makes it possible to assess some interesting aspects of the philosophical debate during the fourth century. The chronology of the letter is disputed. In my view, it is a very likely hypothesis that the letter has to be dated to the early period of Julian's Caesarship (so around 355/356), whereas a later chronology is less plausible (here I agree with the recent study by Simon Swain). Be that as it may, my reading will be little concerned with chronological issues. In his letter, Julian reacts to an earlier letter by Themistius, which is unfortunately lost. We can, however, try to outline some features of Themistius' lost letter by drawing from Julian's response and from Themistius' discourses. There Themistius often speaks in favour of his choice to engage in political life: a choice that others probably criticized as unworthy of a true philosopher. Certainly Themistius had to face a number of opponents in the political and cultural environment at Constantinople. Some of his discourses composed around 355 (when Constantius II appointed him a senator) are extremely interesting from this point of view.

These discourses make it possible to outline the background of his discussion with the Julian. Themistius replies to his critics and does his best to show that his mode of life is genuinely philosophical. The issue at stake is, therefore, the definition of the philosophical life and the relation between philosophy and politics (here I rely on the recent masterly discussion by Susanna Elm). According to Themistius, there is no opposition between philosophy and politics: more precisely, politics is the natural completion of philosophy and philosophers should be engaged in politics: otherwise, they will merely be philosophers "in words" (cfr. *Or.* 20, 239 a-d). So Themistius repeatedly criticizes those philosophers who escape society and political life (cfr. *Or.*

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21, 253 c; *Or.* 22; Plato, *Resp.*, VI, 486 b). This view is connected to Themistius' doctrine of the philosopher king. He regards kingship as connected with philosophy and superior to laws: so the philosopher king is much more than a mere "guardian" of laws. Certainly Themistius drew this theory from earlier Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic sources (e.g. Dio Chrysostom and some pseudo-Pythagorean treatises), but he gave a distinctive emphasis to it. So according to Themistius the philanthropical king, such as Constantius, is animate law and ranks above laws (*Or.* 1, 15 b). The king is able to correct laws and can adapt them to concrete and particular situations. In so doing, the philosopher king is an image of divine rule over the world. Through his actions, he is able to imitate the ruling activity of God.

In his encomium of Constantius (*Or.* 2, 355), Themistius refers to his own adlection to the senate, and finishes by congratulating Constantius on appointing a philosopher as a Caesar: in doing so, Constantius demonstrates, according to Themistius, that he is a true philosopher himself. What Constantius and Julian have in common is, according to Themistius, not so much their *genos*, but the fact that they are close in virtue. In his recent monograph, Simon Swain has convincingly argued that Themistius' original letter to Julian was probably connected to this encomium: so in his letter Themistius probably intended "both to put forward a model of rulership to Julian and to congratulate him by telling how lucky he was" (Swain 2013: 58). In his letter, Themistius probably invited Julian to follow this philosopher-king model and compared his condition to that of Heracles and Dionysus, who were at the same time philosophers and kings (*Ad Them.* 253 c). As we can see from Julian's reply, Themistius was badly wrong. His encomium had everything to make Julian upset and indeed Julian's reply, his Letter to Themistius, was far from cordial. It has been argued that after Julian's attack Themistius replied with a letter which is now preserved in Arabic: there Themistius aimed to find some sort of appeasement with Julian. I will not go into this intricate issue: I will simply refer to the recent contributions by Simon Swain and John W. Watt. Certainly, the relations between Themistius and Julian were not close (let alone cordial) and this independently on whether Themistius withdrew from public life under Julian's rulership as Augustus.

That said, it is very interesting to delve into the exchange between Themistius and Julian, since it seems to me that their discussion reveals some key features of the

philosophical debate during the fourth century. The issues at stake are the relation between philosophy and political engagement and, in connection to this, the very idea of philosophy and its relation to the normative texts of the tradition. Themistius had spoken in favour of a philosopher king who is fully engaged in political life. Julian rejects this model and expresses a number of reservations about the idea of a philosopher king.

First, Julian carefully separates his own condition from that of a philosopher king. In this letter as elsewhere, Julian claims that his philosophical training is not over yet: he loves philosophy, but does not possess it fully and completely (*Ad Them.* 254 b). We will return to this issue later on. However, Julian raises further objections to Themistius' views about philosopher kings. His criticism includes a very interesting parallel between Socrates and Alexander the Great, a parallel that Julian develops by arguing in favour of the superiority of Socrates. True, Socrates was not anybody's master, but his works rank over those of Alexander, for Socrates saved many lives through philosophy (*Ad Them.* 264 cd). Furthermore, Julian refers to Plato's *Laws* and argues in favour of the primacy of the laws: the ruler is a guardian of the laws and remains subordinated to them (*Ad Them.* 257 d-259 b, also, see 261 ad). Then, Julian argues that Aristotle does not claim that philosophy and political life should be unified; rather, according to Julian Aristotle regards philosophy as superior to the political life (*Ad Them.* 263 bd). Themistius was an authoritative exegete of Aristotle: it is very interesting that Julian basically claims that Themistius' reading of Aristotle is wrong.

Here I cannot focus on Julian's arguments in details. I will limit myself to some remarks. As noted earlier, the letter includes a profession of modesty. Julian distinguishes his condition from that of a true philosopher. So he claims that his own nature is not special at all: he loves philosophy, but practical vicissitudes have prevented that love from being fulfilled (*Ad Them.* 254 b). So Julian cannot be a true philosopher king, for the very simple fact that he is no accomplished philosopher. This is not an isolated passage: often in his works Julian distinguishes his own condition from that of an accomplished philosopher. As a matter of fact, however, these professions of modesty have a complex meaning and should probably not be taken at face value, or at least not without further qualifications. As to the Letter to Themistius, it is very important to notice that Julian actually does his best to show that he knows

philosophy very well. The letter includes allusions to the whole Greek philosophical tradition. As noted by Jean Bouffartigue, “La Lettre est une sorte de lieu de rendez-vous pour tout ce qui compte en philosophie dans la Grèce du VI<sup>e</sup> au III<sup>e</sup> siècles de notre ère. Y sont convoqués [...] Platon, Aristote, Chrysippe et le stoïcisme, mais aussi Épicure, ainsi que des présocratiques comme Pythagore, Anaxagore et Démocrite, et encore Socrate et un certain nombre de Socratiques, dont Antisthène, et enfin Diogène”. What is more, Julian does his best to show that he knows Plato and Aristotle better than Themistius does. The Letter, then, has both an overt and an implicit message. According to its overt and *prima facie* content, Julian cannot be a philosopher king because he is not an accomplished philosopher. According to its implicit content, Julian is attempting to show that he is actually a much better philosopher than Themistius and that is the reason why he rejects Themistius’ view about the relation between philosophy and rulership. As we shall see, in so doing Julian discreetly suggests that Themistius’ views about philosophy and politics are actually based on a wrong conception of philosophy.

It is also interesting to note that Julian and Themistius agree on some very important issues. For example, both of them reject Epicurus’ idea of “living unnoticed”. In his discourses, Themistius often criticizes Epicurus’ precept and contrasts it with the naturally social character of human beings (*Ad Them.* 255 b; 259 b). Julian shares this view insofar as he carefully distinguishes his own position from the Epicurean one: he claims not to be suggesting that one should pursue a contemplative life that eschews political engagement. That said, politics is not for everyone and Julian refers to Socrates’ efforts to keep Glaucon and Alcibiades apart from politics (*Ad Them.* 255 c). As noted earlier, Socrates is Julian’s positive hero in his Letter to Themistius, and Socrates’ negative counterpart is Alexander the Great.

In a short section devoted to the Stoics, Julian criticizes Chrysippus for neglecting the importance of “fortune and luck and other such factors that fall in the way of men of action outside of their control” (*Ad Them.* 255 d, trad. Swain). These aspects make the pursuit of politics uncertain. I shall come back later to this section. Now I will briefly outline Julian’s discussion of Plato and Aristotle. Two passages from Plato’s *Laws* (IV, 709 b e IV, 713 c-714 a) show, according to Julian, the impact of fortune and accidental events on human vicissitudes. Therefore, rulership over this

world has some intrinsic limits that cannot be abolished. Only a divine king such as Cronus could stop this situation: he was aware of the weaknesses of human beings and therefore he appointed as the rulers of cities creatures superior to human beings, i.e. demons. Where the rulers are instead mortal beings, the only solution to escape evil is to imitate the way of life of Cronus' times, so as to rely on "the element of immortality within us, terming this distribution of reason 'law'" (*Ad Them.* 258 cd, trad. Swain). In short: the only way to rectify our present condition, at least as far as this is possible, resides in relying on the law, that is a sort of ruling principle. As noted by Dominic O'Meara, in his Letter to Themistius Julian does not follow Plato's political model in the Republic, but rather that in the Laws. So Julian regards rulership based on laws as the best possible approximation to an ideal government, as far as this can be realized in our imperfect world, where hazard and fortune cannot be abolished and make human activity uncertain. So the best ruler is no philosopher king à la Themistius, but a mere guardian of the laws.

Julian's "respectful animosity" (Vanderspoel) fully emerges in the section on Aristotle. As noted earlier, in this part of the Letter Julian engages in a true competition with Themistius, whose authority as an exegete of Aristotle Julian overtly recognizes just before showing that Themistius' reading of Aristotle's Politics is wrong (*Ad Them.* 260 cd). Drawing on *Pol.* III, 16, 1286 b 22-1287 a 29, Julian rejects the idea that dynastic monarchy is the best kind of government and repeats his view that the ruler is nothing but a guardian of the laws. Furthermore, Julian criticizes the reading of *Pol.* VII, 3, 1325 b 21-22 probably developed by Themistius in his previous letter. Against Themistius, Julian reads Aristotle's passage as showing that the contemplative life ranks over the active life. Hence the "architects of noble actions" mentioned by Aristotle are not kings, as suggested by Themistius, but lawgivers and political philosophers, i.e. "anybody who acts by virtue of their intellect and reason, not those who physically undertake and execute the business of politics" (*Ad Them.* 263 d).

I would conclude my survey by focusing on Julian's treatment of Socrates. Socrates is a crucial figure for both Themistius and Julian, but they regard Socrates' model in different ways. According to Themistius, Socrates' figure shows that philosophy and political engagement must be unified. According to Julian, instead, Socrates shows the superiority of the contemplative life. Therefore Socrates is superior

to Alexander, who did not manage to make anybody wiser though his enterprises:

But all those who are now being saved through philosophy are being saved through Socrates. It is not I alone who think this. Aristotle seems to have thought of saying it first, when he noted that he had a right to be no less proud of his work on theology [ἐπὶ τῇ θεολογικῇ συγγραφῇ] than the man who destroyed the Persian Empire (*Ad Them.* 264 d-265 a).

Here I will end my survey of Julian's letter and try to read this work against the wider background of fourth-century philosophical debate.

It is worth noting that Julian and Themistius have much in common, and this despite their disagreement. In particular, they both share a canon of normative texts and develop their thought by interpreting their authorities. What separates Julian and Themistius is not their canon of authorities, but rather the way in which they rely on the same normative texts. It is extremely interesting to focus on Themistius' speech 20, the epitaphium for his father Eugenius. There Themistius describes his father's attitude to philosophy in a way that actually adumbrates Themistius' own attitude to philosophy (this epitaphium has aptly been described as a kind of self-advertisement):

To be sure, the visage and shape impressed upon these sacred mysteries were almost entirely those of Aristotle. Nevertheless, my father helped to open up all the shrines of the sages. He was one of those who were fully initiated in the sacred knowledge that Pythagoras of Samos brought back to Greece from Egypt and in what Zeno of Citium later taught in the Painted Stoa. He always displayed the works of the great Plato right at the door and in the very temple precinct. When passing to the Academy from the Lyceum, he did not change his clothes; he would often first make a sacrifice to Aristotle and then end by worshipping Plato (*Or.* 20, 235 c, trad. Penella with some alterations).

The traditional interpretation of Themistius as an Aristotelian and anti-Platonic philosopher has not much to commend itself (see e.g. Sorabji's work on this issue) and this passage aptly shows that Themistius actually shares a crucial idea of Neoplatonic philosophers, i.e. the harmony between Plato and Aristotle, where Plato's philosophy is seen as crowning the philosophical curriculum. Pythagoras is also included in the canon of normative authors and so are the Stoics. Finally, Themistius makes use of a vocabulary pertaining to the celebration of "Mysteries" in order to express the agreement of Plato and Aristotle: celebrating the Aristotelian mysteries is seen as propaedeutic to the celebration of the Platonic mysteries. All this is well-known

material to those who are familiar with the Neoplatonic exegesis. And, from this perspective, Themistius' canon of authorities could well be shared by a disciple of Iamblichus such as Julian was (to be more precise, Julian was an indirect disciple of Iamblichus, since his philosophical training came from the so-called school of Pergamon established by Aedesius, who had in turn been a student of Iamblichus). And, indeed, scholars have aptly remarked that Themistius' canon of philosophical authorities is more or less that same as Julian's canon of authorities, as this emerges, e.g., from his letter 89b to Theodorus.

That said, some further remarks are called for. The fact that Julian and Themistius share a canon of normative texts and argue in favour of a harmonising reading of Plato and Aristotle does not entail that their positions are identical. It seems to me a crucial aspect of early Neoplatonic philosophical debate that the same canon of authorities could be interpreted in very different ways. As for Themistius' passage, two remarks are important in my view. First, Themistius' vocabulary of the mysteries does not point to any special religious reading of the philosophical tradition and, after all, it is nothing but a well-known Platonic reminiscence (*Symp.* 210 a-211 b). Secondly, while Pythagoras is included in Themistius' canon of normative philosophers, he has certainly no eminent position and Themistius does not argue in favour of a Pythagorising reading of the Greek philosophical tradition. I will come back to this issue in a moment. Finally, Themistius does not mention the Chaldaean Oracles and theurgy at all. In sum: his harmonising reading of Greek philosophy leaves aside two crucial features of Iamblichus' distinctive exegetical method, i.e. the Pythagorean reading of Plato and Aristotle and the role played by theurgy and Chaldaean Oracles. In a way, Themistius' position is closer to Porphyry than to Iamblichus, although further research is needed to prove a distinctive Porphyrean inspiration in Themistius' philosophical works.

For the time being, it is sufficient to note that Themistius' philosophical stance does not prove to be "Aristotelian" rather than Platonic or Neoplatonic. Rather, Themistius offers a peculiar harmonising reading of the Greek philosophical tradition that shares many features with that of Iamblichus, but differs from it in some respects. This conclusion is further confirmed by two very interesting pieces of evidence. The first is well known: as Boethius reports, Themistius regarded Archytas' treatise on the categories as spurious and argued that the author was not Pythagorean at all, but "but

some Peripatetic Archytas, who found authority for a new work on the basis of an ancient name” (tr. Swain). This is a crucial piece of evidence and I think we should be well aware of its anti-Iamblichean implications. By regarding Archytas’ work as spurious, Themistius actually removes the main support to Iamblichus’ Pythagorean and metaphysical reading of Aristotle’s *Categories*. Famously, Iamblichus held that Aristotle had derived his theory from Archytas. Therefore, Themistius’ remark seems to be inspired not by any philological scruple, but rather by philosophical polemics. And a very interesting passage from Themistius’ speech n. 23 confirms his hostile attitude to Iamblichus. There Themistius reports that a man from Sicyon had originally been “a disciple of the man of Chalcis [i.e., Iamblichus] when the latter was elderly”. He was, however, “not a devotee of the new song [i.e. of the new kind of theurgical philosophy established by Iamblichus], but of the ancestral and ancient song of the Academy and the Lyceum” (trad. Penella). When this man discovered Themistius’ works he completely changed his allegiance: so he and his students moved to Constantinople and became disciples of Themistius. With his usual taste for self-advertisement, Themistius compares the philosophical conversion of this man from Sicyon to the philosophical conversions of Zeno and Axiothea. Again, it is very interesting that Themistius describes his own philosophical method as “the ancestral and ancient song of the Academy and the Lyceum”. So basically Themistius presents himself as the genuine follower of the old tradition established by Plato and Aristotle, while Iamblichus is criticised for his innovations.

Building on these conclusions, we can now come back to Julian. His difference from Themistius is clear and resides in Julian’s peculiar support to some distinctive aspects of Iamblichean Platonism, in particular his attitude to theurgy and Chaldaean Oracles. A passage from Julian’s discourse *To the mother of the gods* is particularly telling from this point of view. Julian is there criticizing the position of the Peripatetic philosopher Xenarchus and, in connection to this criticism, he describes his own attitude to the philosophical tradition:

Now whether what he [Xenarchus] says is correct or not, let us leave to the extreme Peripatetics to refine upon. But that his view is not agreeable to me is, I think, clear to everyone. For I hold that the theories of Aristotle himself are incomplete unless they are brought into harmony with those of Plato, or rather we must make these also agree with



the oracles that have been vouchsafed to us by the gods (*Ad Matrem deorum* 162 cd, trad. Wright).

In a few words, this is Iamblichus' philosophical programme. This programme does not remove the study of Aristotle at all: quite the contrary. We know that Julian was well familiar with Aristotle and he was the arbiter in a dispute that opposed Themistius and Maximus of Ephesus concerning Aristotle's syllogistic. These aspects of Julian's philosophical method should in no way be underestimated. Still, according to Julian Aristotle is clearly subordinated to Plato and both of them are subordinated to the supernatural teaching of the Chaldaean Oracles. According to Themistius, teaching philosophy is no elitist practice, for everybody can benefit from philosophy independently of his training and social provenance (see *Or.* 20, 240 b; *Or.* 22, 265ad; *Or.* 26, 313d, 324b-325a; *Or.* 28, 341 d). Julian, instead, emphasizes that philosophy is not for everybody and, according to the tradition of Pythagoras and Iamblichus, he sees the most profound teachings of philosophy as reserved for the highest natures (cf. *Ad Heraclium cynicum* 221 cd; *Ad Matrem deorum* 172 d). As noted earlier, it would certainly be wrong to simply oppose Julian and Themistius: much of their philosophical programme is identical and is based on an interpretation of the normative texts of the Greek philosophical tradition. Unlike Themistius, Julian holds that philosophical exegesis is incomplete unless it is supplemented by the superior revelation granted by the Chaldean Oracles.

Julian is here a follower of Iamblichus or, rather, a follower of a certain current within Iamblichus' school, that represented by Maximus of Ephesus, Julian's venerated master of philosophy and theurgy. As a matter of fact, however, not all Iamblicean philosophers shared Maximus' and Julian's enthusiasm for theurgy. We know from Eunapius that Eusebius, one of Aedesius' students, did not share Maximus' enthusiasm for theurgy at all. And Julian's Letter 12 Bidez to the philosopher Priscus shows that there were followers of Theodorus of Asine in Athens who discredited Iamblichus. Note that Theodorus had probably been a student of Iamblichus, but -- again -- he did not share some of his views about the soul and its purification through theurgy. So Themistius was definitely not alone in his anti-theurgical approach and apparently Iamblichus' innovations were, at least initially, not received with unanimous approval, even by those philosophers who were connected to Iamblichus and his school. I would

suggest that it is deeply mistaken to assess Iamblichus' immediate posterity by drawing on what happened in Athens' Neoplatonic school one century later. Apparently, at the beginning Iamblichus' Pythagorean and theurgical reading of the philosophical tradition was not accepted unanimously. So Julian should not only be seen as a disciple of Iamblichus; rather, he chooses to follow a well-defined line of Iamblichus' legacy, i.e. that of theurgical philosophy represented by Maximus. I would suggest that some work has still to be done in order to assess the philosophical debates around Iamblichus and before the fourth century. The situation is more complex than scholars sometimes assume.

These remarks can shed some light on a difficult passage from Julian's Letter to Themistius. As noted earlier, Julian criticizes the Stoics because they do not consider how *tyché* affects human agency. So happiness can hardly be sure and stable, if it depends on fortune. Some difficult lines follow these remarks (*Ad Them.* 256 c):

Ἦμιστὰ δὲ φιλεῖ τῆς εὐδαιμονίας ἢ βεβαιότης τῆ Τύχῃ πιστεύειν, καὶ τοὺς ἐν πολιτεία ζῶντας οὐκ ἔνεστιν ἄνευ ταύτης ἀναπνεῖν τὸ δὴ λεγόμενον, πλὴν εἴ τις τὸν βασιλέα καὶ στρατηγὸν λέγοι<sup>2</sup>, καθάπερ οἱ τὰς ιδέας εἴτε ἀληθῶς θεωροῦντες εἴτε καὶ ψευδῶς ξυντιθέντες ἐν τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις καὶ νοητοῖς, ἰδρῶσθαι πού τῶν τυχαίων ὑπεράνω πάντων.

This how Simon Swain translates this passage in his recent work on the Letter:

The assurance of happiness is very unlikely to depend on fortune. Yet men who live a public life cannot breathe without her, as the saying goes, unless one is going to assert, like people who study the Forms truthfully or who place them falsely among things incorporeal and intelligible, that the king and commander is located far above all matters of chance<sup>3</sup>.

At first sight, this is a somewhat disconcerting passage, since Julian mentions the view that Forms are incorporeal and intelligible and says that this view is false. Or, rather, Julian apparently opposes those who truthfully study the Forms and those who wrongly place the Forms among incorporeal and intelligible things. This is a current translation

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<sup>2</sup> On the text, see BIDEZ 1901. After βασιλέα Ms. V has a passage from Julians' Letter to Theodorus (*Ep.* 89 b, pp. 155-174 Bidez = 288 a-305 d), which ends before the words καὶ στρατηγόν.

<sup>3</sup> SWAIN 2013, p. 165.

and one that obviously raises some problems. This how Augusto Rostagni explains this passage in his old but still valuable work on Julian:

Pare che questo inciso non sia stato fin qui compreso dai traduttori. È evidente che l’A., nello scrivere a Temistio, seguace di Aristotele, non vuole dare senz’altro come vera la dottrina platonica secondo cui le idee appartengono al mondo incorporeo ed intelligibile, ma ammette anche la possibilità della critica aristotelica, secondo la quale l’idea non esiste che nella cosa<sup>4</sup>.

So Julian would be making some concession to Themistius, a Peripatetic philosopher, and thus granting that the Forms are not separate but immanent in things. This hypothesis is clearly implausible. First, it is not clear at all that Themistius rejected Plato’s Ideas and, as noted earlier, it is simply wrong to regard him as an anti-Platonist Aristotelian. Secondly, it is simply unthinkable that Julian would make such a concession in his Letter. It is possible, however, that these lines have a different meaning. It is interesting to note the use of the participle *ξυντιθέντες*. This verb can hardly mean “to place / to situate”, as usually suggested. As a matter of fact, *xyntithêmi* usually denotes the act of composing, a synthesis, rather than the act of placing or locating something. And it is a common term in the philosophical vocabulary, where it denotes the dialectical procedures through which thought composes and combines its contents so as to draw inferences. See e.g. Plot. I, 3 [20] 5, 1-4: Ἡ νοῦς δίδωσιν ἐναργεῖς ἀρχάς, εἴ τις λαβεῖν δύναιτο ψυχῆ· εἶτα τὰ ἐξῆς καὶ συντίθησι καὶ συμπλέκει καὶ διαιρεῖ, ἕως εἰς τέλος νοῦν ἤκη.

If this is correct, I would suggest that Julian is actually opposing those who truthfully contemplate the Forms and those who falsely “compose” Forms by making discursive judgments on them and hence jeopardizing their perfect simplicity. In short: in these lines Julian contrasts two ways of grasping the Ideas. According to the true and higher method, Ideas are a pure object of contemplation. According to the lower method, Forms are expressed through discursive judgements. This inferior way of grasping the Forms is false if compared to the first one. However, even (see Julian’s use of *καί*) those who grasp the Forms in this inferior way are above fortune. Those who, instead, do not grasp separate Forms at all (either truly or discursively) are subject to fortune and hazard. If this is correct, I would suggest that this sentence should be

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<sup>4</sup> ROSTAGNI 1920, p. 124 n. 1.

construed in a way different from that usually proposed. The words ἐν τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις καὶ νοητοῖς have to be connected to both participles, i.e. to both θεωροῦντες and ξυντιθέντες; the accusative τὰς ἰδέας is the object of both verbs. So the correct translation is “like people who in intelligible and incorporeal things either truthfully study the Forms or even (*kai*, which the traditional interpretation leaves unexplained) falsely compose them”. I should add that Asmus had already correctly construed these lines in his German translation of Julian, although his rendering of *xynthentes* is inadequate: “[...] welche die Ideen im Reiche des Unkörperlichen und Intelligibeln entweder wahrhaft schauen oder auch nur fälschlich erdichten”.

In a recent monograph, Michael Schramm develops an interesting interpretation of this passage and connects Julian’s statement with the Neoplatonic theory of levels of virtue (see the distinction between cathartic and contemplative virtues) as well as with the distinction between discursive thinking and pure contemplative thought. So what Julian is describing here is a genuine Platonic ruler who either grasps the pure contemplative life of Intellect or, even if he cannot attain pure contemplation, is at least able to approach this goal by composing the Forms in discursive judgements through his reason. Such a ruler would possess either the contemplative or the cathartic virtues and would therefore be free from the external aversions caused by Fortune. As noted by Schramm, Julian thus accepts the Stoic view that the wise man is happy insofar as he has virtue, while at the same time transposing this view into his Platonic ideal of life, which culminates in the contemplation of intelligible beings. Practical life cannot attain this perfect happiness

I would also remark, however, that in his Letter to Themistius Julian does not regard this favourable situation as attainable in reality. If such a perfectly virtuous ruler existed, he would be such as “the man Diogenes says is ‘without a city, without a home, bereft of his homeland [Ἄπολιν, ἄοικον, πατρίδος ἐστερημένον]”” (*Ad Them.* 256 cd). So basically in his Letter Julian distinguishes between those who can attain the superior knowledge of intelligible beings, but are thus foreign to politics, and those who are engaged in practical life and are thus subject to Fortune and hazard. This is the well-known general view of Julian’s Letter that opposes contemplative and active life and argues in favour of the first one.

I would end my paper with some supplementary remarks on this issue. Asmus has interestingly observed that Julian's subsequent works, and in particular his Discourse 7 where he sets out a complex autobiographical myth, can be seen as a "positives Gegenstück zum Brief an Themistios". It is a well-known fact that Julian's hesitations are much less prominent in the discourses composed during his rulership as Augustus: there Julian appears to be fully aware that he is a ruler chosen by the Gods. Whereas in the Letter to Themistius he distinguishes his own condition from that of philosopher kings such as Heracles or Dionysus, this distinction is much less evident in his later works. That said, there is no need to see a contradiction between the Letter to Themistius and Julian's discourses as Augustus. I would rather suggest that the Letter is the *pars destruens* of Julian's project, whereas his later discourses represent the *pars construens* of his overall view. In the Letter, Julian aims to show that a certain view of the relation between philosophy and politics, i.e. that of Themistius, is wrong: for Themistius fails to grasp the genuinely divine character of philosophy that is grounded on the contemplation of superior beings. Themistius downplays philosophy and thus makes it part of human praxis. Julian clearly argues that contemplation ranks over this sort of philosophy: so, theoretic philosophy should be chosen instead of politics. I would gloss Julian's view in this way: if we stick to Themistius' account of philosophy and politics, then genuine philosophy should be set apart from politics. This is the sense of his polemics in the Letter. But this is only half of Julian's view: for he also thinks that a genuine philosophy inspired by the Gods is what can ground an effective political activity. As is shown by Julian's later works, he actually aims to unify philosophy and political activity, but in a way that is inverse to that proposed by Themistius.

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