

Arete and Gender-Differentiation in Socrates/Plato and Aristotle

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El artículo discute la cuestión de si Platón creía que, en el asunto de la *areté*, la *psyché* femenina tenía una inclinación natural a la inmoralidad en un sentido que no tenía la *psyché* masculina, y que por ende era significativamente distinta a la *psyché* masculina. Se arguye que el *Timeo* (y en menor grado, las *Leyes*) sugiere fuertemente que sí lo creyó, aunque afortunadamente las consecuencias políticas que infirió de ello (en las *Leyes*) resultan positivas en lugar de negativas. Se arguye, por el contrario, que Aristóteles —aun cuando sigue manteniendo la teoría lamentable de la inferioridad de las mujeres— habla de diferentes *quanta* de (una y la misma) *areté* en las almas masculinas y femeninas, en lugar de una diferencia en su misma *areté*.

The article grapples with the question whether Plato believed that, in the matter of *arete*, the female *psyche* had a built-in inclination to immorality in a way that the male *psyche* did not, and was therefore as such significantly different from the male *psyche*. It is argued that the evidence of the *Timaeus* (and, to some lesser degree, of the *Laws*) suggests very strongly that he did, though fortunately the political consequences he drew from this (in the *Laws*) turn out to be positive rather than negative. Aristotle, by contrast, it is argued, while still holding to the lamentable theory of the inferiority of woman, talks of differing *quanta* of (one and the same) *arete* in male and female souls, rather than a difference in their very *arete*.

To those first reading the dialogues of Plato one of a number of puzzling usages is that of the word 'virtue' (*arete*). Tending to equate it with something like 'morality' (a translation of the term in fact favoured by Waterfield in his recent translation of the *Republic*, Oxford, 1993), they are puzzled, and understandably so, to find Socrates talking about the 'virtue' of a pruning knife in terms of its ability to trim vines¹, and so forth. Once the initial surprise is over, one soon realizes that the word *arete* is being used as basically a word of 'efficiency', and that Socrates is arguing that a person can be 'efficient/inefficient' in the performance of a task in the area of conduct in the way a pruning knife can be efficient/inefficient in the performance of its task in the area of trimming vines.

While this notion takes some digesting, it does at least shed a little light on the so-called Socratic paradox that 'virtue is knowledge'. Once this is seen to mean something like 'efficiency (in the sphere of conduct) is know-how (in the sphere of conduct)' a large part of the supposed paradox falls away, though we are still left to face a series of problems raised by one major remaining presupposition on Socrates's part, and that is his unabashedly functionalist psychology. As well as all artefacts, all living creatures including ourselves, says Socrates, have a function, definable in terms of what each thing does uniquely or best². So, since what a knife does best if not uniquely is cut, cutting must be its goal or function. In similar fashion, since what a human being is able to do both uniquely and best is think rationally and exercise moral responsibility for action, these must be a human being's function.

Within the framework of this very intellectualist-looking ethical system four major types of virtue (drawn from Pindar) are, along with the functionalist psychology, set out and espoused without argument: knowledge (*phronesis*), bravery (*andreia*), self-control or balance

¹ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 353a 1-5

² Cf. *ibid.*, 352e 3

(*sophrosyne*), and justice (*dikaiosyne*)³. Each, when applied to a society or a soul (each of these in turn being deemed by Socrates to be tripartite), turns out to be the most efficient functioning of either one part of the soul/society or of all three parts in combination.

As has frequently been pointed out (most recently by Waterfield), this striking set of ideas fails, unfortunately, in a very significant way to deal with Thrasymachus's claim that *arete* is not necessarily good. What it appears to demonstrate, if it demonstrates anything, is that an efficient society might reasonably be described in terms of the sound functioning of its component parts, and that, *pari passu*, a human being operating at a level of optimal efficiency might reasonably be described in terms of the sound functioning of 'parts' of his/her *psyche*. But nothing has been said by Socrates to demonstrate that moral goodness (where in his grammar of goodness 'goodness for' and 'goodness at' are clearly pivotal senses of the term) and 'moral efficiency' (*arete*) are one and the same. What Thrasymachus is attacking is the notion that *arete* is *intrinsically* good, not simply good in the sense of efficient at achieving certain specified goals in the intellectual/moral sphere.

Equally disconcerting is the stress of *arete* as being a state of balance within the organism (be that organism a society or a *psyche*). While it can be, and has been argued that Socrates is talking here only of an indispensable condition for *arete*, leaving it open for us to assume that, like everyone else, he thinks of *arete* as being in fact intrinsically relational, it remains true that the overall impression left by a reading of the work is that it is for him dominantly if not exclusively a word indicating balance within an organism. If this is true, he risks being accused of winning his case by the invention of a language private unto himself.

On the positive side of the ledger is the well known and remarkable view that, given appropriate genetic background and education, women will be just as able as men to manage his Just Society. Since nothing is said on the matter either way, it is natural to infer from this that, for the Socrates/Plato of the *Republic*, the *arete* evinced by male and female guardians in such a society will be the same species of

³ Cf. *ibid.*, 4

arete, in that what each of them, male and female, achieves is one and the same goal or *telos*. And for all we know that is precisely what the Socrates/Plato of the *Republic* thought. However this may be, in the *Timaeus* we appear to be looking at a view of *arete* in which gender differentiation rather than any putative gender sameness is paramount, and here we may be entering upon unfamiliar terrain. And since this part of the *Timaeus* remains little read, even by those otherwise well-read in Plato, the point is worth some investigation. (For purposes of the following discussion I shall assume that the position being put forward by Timaeus is, in broad outline at least, that of Plato at the time of writing of the dialogue).

In the closing pages of this dialogue Timaeus puts forward a view of re-incarnation which adds a crucial new component to the one usually proffered by him (or by others), and that is that there is a descent within humans themselves, from males to females. According to his account, the first generation of humans created by the Demiurge seems to have consisted of (ungendered) males. Those who lived morally good lives returned to life again as males, this time with sexual apparatus. Those who had lived *immoral* lives returned as (gendered) females; and those who had lived *unintelligent* lives returned as animals, those that had abused *nous* coming back as birds, those that had relied simply on *thymos* coming back as land animals, and those who had been guided only by their *epithymetikon* coming back as creeping creatures, fish and shellfish.

It is a startling vision of the world, in which living things, ranging from female humans to molluscs, are apparently seen by Plato as appropriate punishment-receptacles for male human souls that have manifested either immorality or stupidity. What is specifically startling as far as the issue of *arete* is concerned could be summed up as follows:

1. The apparent conflation of virtuous activity and knowledge often attributed to Socrates is conspicuous by its absence, possibly because this part of the *Timaeus*, like so much else, may well be drawing upon Pythagorean sources, especially the lost works of Philolaus.

2. The original, and apparently the 'basic' human soul is, for Timaeus, male; a female human soul is a punished version of a male one.

3. The natural tendency of female humans is to various forms of moral fault, specifically 'cowardice' and more generally 'immorality' (*adikia*) as a whole.

4. The natural conclusion of Timaeus's argument is that the struggle back to male status for a soul undergoing punishment by being re-incarnated as a female will be a grievous one, given that the punishment-prison that is a female is no neutral jail-house of bricks and mortar but a living entity instinct with a tendency to immorality.

It is tempting to dismiss this discouraging scenario, with its clear implication that for Plato there is not a level playing field for males and females in the quest for *arete*, as a view espoused in a 'mythical' dialogue only, and/or as a view placed carefully in the mouth of a Pythagoreanizing speaker, possibly invented for the occasion, and hence a view in no way to be attributed to Plato. But this would be premature. The dialogue is said on several occasions to be a likely account (*eikos logos*) of the way things began, and on one occasion the 'particularly likely' (*malista eikos*) account. At no point is it called 'merely' likely, as some translators seem to think, forgetting that, according to the metaphysics both of the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, the physical universe, being an *eikon* ('likeness') of the form universe, operates at the level of 'likely' (*eikos*) description. Of these likely descriptions those with maximum verisimilitude will qualify as 'true opinions', and this is a point beyond which God himself cannot go in describing the physically real, the necessary condition of a stable intentional object not having been fulfilled. Even when, after the demythologisation they think necessary has been performed, and the Demiurge reduced to a symbol or possibly done away with, reductionists are always still left with world soul as the God of the *Timaeus*, and here there is no doubt that true opinion (*i.e.*, the highest form of likelihood), not knowledge, is, in accord with basic Platonic metaphysics and epistemology, the maximum it achieves.

As for the view that the view is that of a Pythagorean, not Plato, this would have some plausibility were it not for the fact that in a later dialogue, the *Laws*, where there is no suggestion of a 'mythological' and/or 'Pythagorean' context, Plato returns to the topic. As far as women are concerned, in Book 6⁴ the Athenian, *nemine contradicente*,

⁴ Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 781a-b

repeats popular prejudices already apparent in the *Republic* and *Timaeus* when he says that ‘half of the human race —the female sex— is generally predisposed by its weakness to undue secrecy and craft’; and that ‘woman —left without chastening restraint— is not, as you might fancy, merely half the problem, she is in fact a two-fold and more than a two-fold problem, in proportion as her native disposition (*physis*) is inferior (*cheiron*) to man’s’. If there were any doubt that by ‘inferior’ here we are meant to understand ‘morally inferior’, the matter is settled in Book 12⁵, in a passage where the Athenian is discussing the appropriate punishment for the coward who flees the battle and throws away his shield the faster to do so. Quite the most appropriate punishment, he says, were it possible, would be the transformation of such a man into a woman!

On the face of it, then, Platonic (though not necessarily, of course, Socratic) theory, in the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, is one of the differential *arete* of males and females. And as I have put it elsewhere⁶, it would be natural to infer from it that “in the *Laws* the role and status of women would remain at best that which it had been immemorally in Greek society. But Plato surprises us with a remarkable statement, going far beyond anything ever envisaged in the *Republic*, that a good society will, as far as possible, educate every man and woman within it equally, if only on the grounds that to do otherwise would be a gross mismanagement by society of the totality of its human resources (804d - 805b), and that ‘it is pure folly that men and women do not unite to follow the same pursuits with all their energies’ (805a). Whatever the drift of the gender-differentiation theory as a piece of abstract reasoning, Plato the practical politician of the *Laws* is prepared to back away from it if pressed by the more realistic demands of day to day politics”.

While it is gratifying that, in the end, Plato did not allow what is ultimately a very discouraging view of gender-differentiation to get in the way of good sense, it does seem to have been part of his philosophy of *arete* to the end, and I turn now to see how his pupil Aristotle dealt with the matter. I deal first with the question of the ‘intellectualist’ cast of Socratic ethics.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 944d

⁶ Robinson, Thomas M., “Gender Differentiation and Platonic Political Theory”, in: *Oikumene* (in press).

Famously, Aristotle defined *arete* as 'a state of character (*hexis*) concerned with choice, lying in a mean, *i.e.*, a mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which a man of practical wisdom would determine it'⁷. In so arguing, he takes direct issue with the Socrates of the dialogues, claiming that he is in his own view of *arete* partly right and partly wrong: 'in thinking that all the virtues were forms of practical wisdom he was wrong, but in saying they implied practical wisdom he was right'⁸. The result, he then goes on to argue, is that Socrates can never deal satisfactorily with the phenomenon of incontinence (*akrasia*)⁹. On the other hand, to the discomfiture of many commentators, he seems to conclude his discussion by affirming that Socrates, if correctly understood, has in fact got things right, since, in the matter of the practical syllogism, the incontinent person never in fact *has* 'scientific' knowledge to start with¹⁰; the minor premiss of the syllogism is not for such a person a universal judgement in the way it has to be. So Socrates is right in his surmise that there never *is* a case of anyone having *genuine* knowledge on a moral issue and then having it supposedly 'mastered by something else and dragged about like a slave'¹¹.

Whether or not Socrates would have recognized (and/or accepted) Aristotle's interpretation of his stance (and that interpretation has itself been greatly disputed) in terms of what one might call mitigated rather than extreme intellectualism, it seems clear that Aristotle's own discussion of what he calls 'moral' virtues continues in the Socratic/Platonic tradition of intellectualism, though it is now undoubtedly intellectualism of a significantly mitigated nature. Does this mean that he would have found Timaeus's/Plato's critical distinction between immorality and ignorance something unsocratic, in the way he would have undoubtedly found that dialogue's gender-based morality unsocratic¹²? It is hard to be sure. The ignorance in question is clearly ignorance of facts, like the ignorance of those who have lost the

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b 36 - 1107a 2

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1144b 18-21

⁹ *Cf. ibid.*, 1145b 21ff.

¹⁰ *Cf. ibid.*, 1147b 13-19

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1145b 22-24

¹² *Cf. Plato, Politics*, 1260a 13ff.

knowledge of the need to pay attention to what goes on in the sky¹³, and in general the ignorance of those who have apparently abandoned the knowledge that the best guide to virtue and happiness is *nous*, not the *thymos* or, still worse, the *epithymetikon*¹⁴. But as such it is also of course culpable ignorance, since the facts in question are facts a knowledge of which is integral to the moral life; so their descent is consequently to the lowest rungs of the scale of lives.

Does this mean that for Timaeus immorality (*adikia*) is, by contrast, a disposition or state of soul wholly divorced from thought? This seems very unlikely. Much more probable, it seems to me, is the possibility that Timaeus/Plato thought the difference between the two states to be as follows. In the case of immorality *nous* has not been abandoned; the woman that an erstwhile immoral man becomes simply possesses such *nous* to a lower degree, her soul being that of a man *manque*. So, whatever her faults, she has not done that which is utterly damaging to her interests. Ignorant men, by contrast, no longer make use of their greatest protection, 'the circuits in the head', but follow rather 'those parts of the soul that are in the breast', with the result that they 'never have any use for philosophy and pay no heed to the heavens'¹⁵.

If all this means what it appears to mean, 'ignorance', as understood by Timaeus, is particularly destructive because it manifests the worst form of wilfulness, that of active abandonment, apparently, of what is known, at any rate initially, to be the right path. I say 'apparently', because Timaeus uses a locution — 'no longer make use of the circuits in the head' — that is sufficiently general to admit of the possibility of extenuating circumstances, like bad upbringing and a defective physical constitution¹⁶. But they are never so extenuating, it seems, as to free anyone from the obligation to 'make every possible effort to flee from badness, whether with the help of one's upbringing, or the pursuits or studies one undertakes, and to seize its opposite'¹⁷,

¹³ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 91e 1-6

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91e 2-6

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 87b

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

at the peril, it seems, of the consequences just described for failure to do so.

Would Socrates have recognized this version of intellectualist ethics as his own, or rejected it as an overstatement? Many would say the latter, and ascribe the whole theory to some Pythagorean, possibly Philolaus. But before accepting this conclusion we should pause awhile to look at an earlier dialogue, the *Republic*, in which a statement made in the closing pages is worth consideration. In a little-discussed passage of the Myth of Er Plato tells how those souls who have practised 'popular' (as distinct from 'philosophical') *arete* in their previous life¹⁸, and who have indeed been appropriately rewarded for this during their recent discarnate existence, are in particular danger of making a choice detrimental to their best interests when, by the banks of the River of Forgetfulness, they make their choice of a new life from the sample lives presented to them. Their specific mistake, it seems, is to make an error over the 'taxis of the soul', which seems to mean something like 'the soul's disposition to good or evil', that goes with various lives. (Waterfield's translation 'temperament' misses the mark). As an example Er mentions how the first soul whose turn it was to choose a new life immediately went for 'the most powerful dictatorship available', oblivious of the fact that the life in question had attached to it a fearful ending (the 'eating of his children and other horrible crimes'), but much more importantly, unaware of the *danger to his well-being* of the taxis to evil involved in that life—a critical item which, unlike the description of the dreadful ending of the life in question, calculatedly receives *no mention* here or in any other sample of a possible future life¹⁹.

As in the case of the closing pages of the *Timaeus*, it is easy to dismiss all this as 'just a myth' and hence of little philosophical import. But this would, I think, be premature. Though the *Republic* account does not make the gender distinction drawn in the *Timaeus* account, or the distinction between ignorance and immorality, they are united on the critical point of the self-inflicted damage to the soul that can stem from espousing forms of *arete* other than 'philosophical'. In

¹⁸ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 619c 7 - d 1

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 619b, 618b

this regard nothing seems to have changed since the first appearance of the doctrine in dialogues as early as the *Meno*. So while Socrates may indeed not have recognized various features of the *Timaeus* account, there is some reason to believe that, on the assumption, *argumenti causa*, that the distinction between popular and philosophical *arete* is of Socratic rather than simply Platonic origin, Socrates would have been not unsympathetic to its general drift.

Be this as it may, the position of Aristotle on the question of *arete* and gender distinction shows an important move away from at any rate the Platonic position. In a well known passage in the *Politics*²⁰, Aristotle claims that, in the realm of 'intellectual' virtues, women are distinguishable from men in possessing the power of determination, just like men, but 'unauthoritatively (*akyron*)', while children possess it in an incomplete fashion. As far as the moral virtues are concerned, women and children in similar fashion possess only 'that amount (*hoson*) (of moral *arete*) which goes with their station. Whence it is evident that, although moral virtue is common to all those we have spoken of, the temperance of a man and a woman are not the same, nor their courage nor their justice, though Socrates thought otherwise; for the courage of the man consists in commanding, the woman's in obeying', etc.

The latter point is pivotal in pinpointing the new approach. Driven by the same functionalist psychology that drove Plato if not Socrates²¹, Aristotle now argues that the 'inferiority' of women (1254b 14, *cheiron*) is a function of the role they play, in the home and in any well-ordered society, by obeying the commands of husbands/rulers. For Socrates/(the early?)Plato the distinction of importance was between popular and philosophical *arete*, without reference to gender distinction; for *Timaeus*/(the later?)Plato the distinction between popular and philosophical *arete* still obtains, but grafted on to it there is now a further gender-distinction of major import; while for Aristotle the distinction is straightforwardly gender-bound, but now in terms of a distribution of *quanta* of *one and the same* (intellectual or moral) *arete* appropriate to the ruling/obedience roles played by males and females in the family and in society, not in terms of a distribution

²⁰ Cf. Plato, *Politics*, 1260a 13ff.

²¹ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 352d 8ff.

across humankind of two quite different types of *arete*, of which the first —driven largely by *nous*— is of its nature male, and greatly superior to the other. In view of this, one can say that, despite the chagrin with which Aristotle's views on women are usually, and with no small justification, received, they are, ironically, views which constitute significant progress over what had gone before, thanks not least to his sounder appreciation of *arete* in the human situation. Whatever the inadequacy and unacceptability, in its turn, of his own new doctrine of gender-differentiation by reference to supposedly differential *quanta* (or 'amounts') of *arete*, its great virtue (to use the word) is the fact that it offers an opportunity for questions of gender-differentiation and its supposed implications to be discussed in an atmosphere devoid of a pre-judgement about some putatively female inclination to depravity. And that, it seems to me, is a matter of moment in the history of philosophy, whether or not it has been appreciated as such.