

PLATO'S THEORY OF UNIVERSAL *ARETĒ*

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0. Introduction

This paper is derived from a book I am completing entitled *Aretē and the Formation of Greek Ethical Theory*. The book has two parts. The first focuses on linguistic properties "*aretē*" as this nominal form occurs from Homer to the end of the fifth century BCE. The treatment of "*aretē*" in the fifth century excludes philosophical contexts. The second part focuses on "*aretē*" in philosophical contexts from the fifth century through Aristotle. The basic aim is to consider the meanings and uses of "*aretē*" prior to its employment in philosophy and then to consider its meanings and uses in philosophy in light of the former.

The present discussion mainly draws on material from the second part and, as the title indicates, the focal topic is *aretē* in Plato. As will become evident quickly, the following is a "big picture" discussion. But I am happy to try to address any fine points that you may have.

The discussion has eight sections. These are divisible into three sets:

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| PRELIMINARIES | — | [| 1. The Meaning and Use of " <i>Aretē</i> " |
| | | | 2. Goodness and Value |
| | | | 3. Value and Purposiveness |
| PLATO'S THEORY | — | [| 4. Plato's Theory of Universal <i>Aretē</i> |
| | | | 5. Plato's Stative Potentiality Restriction on <i>Aretē</i> |
| CONTEXTUAL TOPICS | — | [| 6. " <i>Aretē</i> " in Pre-Platonic Ethics |
| | | | 7. " <i>Aretē</i> " and " <i>Hexis</i> " |
| | | | 8. " <i>Aretē</i> " and " <i>To Agathon</i> " |

My principal aim is to explain what I am calling "Plato's theory of universal *aretē*." In order to do this and to clarify my use of the term "universal" in this context, I begin with some preliminary remarks (sections 1-3). These are mainly linguistic, but also value theoretic. They concern "*aretē*" of course, but also related English terms "goodness" and "value." Following the preliminaries, I explain Plato's theory of universal *aretē*, including what I call Plato's "stative potentiality restriction" on *aretē* (sections 4-5). Finally (sections 6-8), I discuss three topics pertaining to the philosophical context of Plato's theory: the use of "*aretē*" in pre-Platonic ethics, the way that Plato's theory influenced Aristotle's conception of *aretē* as a *hexis*, and the relation between the use of the expressions "*aretē*" and "*to agathon*."

1. The Meaning and Use of "*Aretē*"

I begin with some remarks on the semantics and pragmatics of "*aretē*." "*Aretē*" has often been translated as "virtue." Nowadays it is also often translated as "excellence." Whatever the most natural translation of "*aretē*" in a given context, I suggest that the lexical meaning of

"*aretē*," that is to say, the literal meaning of "*aretē*" – from Homer through at least the classical period and so in Plato and Aristotle – is goodness. Here, I offer three considerations supporting this semantic thesis. First – and admittedly, the following is just an appeal to authority – LSJ list "goodness" and "excellence" as the two principal meanings of "*aretē*." I return to the distinction between "goodness" and "excellence" below. Second, in many texts "*aretē*" and "*kakia*" or its variant "*kakotēs*" are treated as polar opposites.¹ In fact, Aristotle explicitly says that they are opposites.² There is no question that "*kakia*"/"*kakotēs*" means badness. So, "*aretē*" can't mean anything other than goodness. Third, if "*aretē*" did not mean goodness, then archaic and classical Greek would lack an ordinary common noun with that meaning. For example, "*agathosynē*" is rare and late.³ Likewise, "*esthlotēs*."⁴ "*Spoudaiotēs*" is also rare and has a narrower meaning.⁵ And similar dispositive things could be said about other not very plausible candidates such as "*chrēstotēs*."⁶

Assume then that the literal meaning of "*aretē*" is goodness. Now, consider the relation between goodness and virtue. Virtue is a kind of goodness, saliently a kind of human goodness. More precisely, virtue is goodness of the state of the soul. Perhaps virtue is even more specific than this. Perhaps, it is a state of a part of the soul, say, of character. But let's leave the point here.

¹ E.g., Hes. *Op.* 287-90; Thgn. 1.1059-62; Gorg. B11a.16; And. 1.56; Antisth., fr. 86 *SSR*; Lys. 2.65.

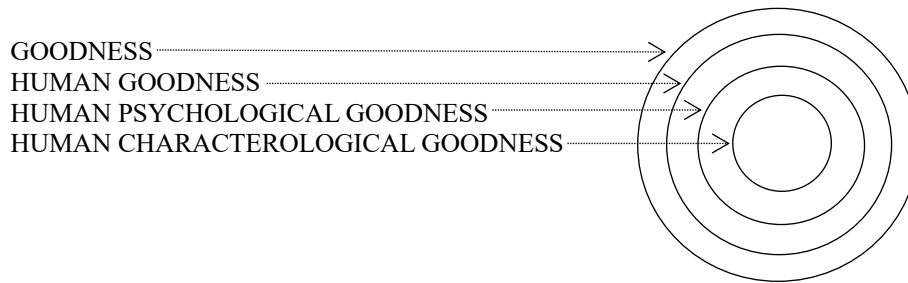
² "Opposition (*enantiotēs*) also exists among relatives; for example, *aretē* is opposed to *kakia*, each of them being a relative." (Aristot. *Cat.* 6b15-16; cp. *Cat.* 14a23)

³ "*Agathosynē*" first occurs in the first century CE, in Paul, 2 Th 1:11, Gal 5:22, Rom 15:14, Eph 5:9). Thereafter, it is restricted to ecclesiastical contexts; cp. N. Turner, *Christian Words*, Thomas, 1980, 89.

⁴ "*Esthlotēs*" does not occur in the archaic or classical periods. It occurs once in the Hellenistic period, seemingly as a technical philosophical term used by Chrysippus (*SVF* 3.60.8 = Plu. *virt. mor.* 441a). Plutarch, who provides the Chrysippus quotation, does not himself use the term elsewhere; and it appears again first only in Suda's tenth century *Lexicon* (Suid. 247.2, *s.v.* *Hyperboreōn*.)

⁵ The earliest instance of "*spoudaiotēs*" is either [Pl.] *Def.* 412e7 (cited in n.9) or Epicur. fr. 134.22. The term occurs once in D.S. 1.92.2.3 and then not until Late Antiquity, remaining there very rare.

⁶ "*Chrēstotēs*" first occurs in E. *Supp.* 872 (c. 420); and thereafter to the end of the fourth century just three or four times: Lys. 50.106.64; Is. *Meneclē* 7.4, *Dicaeogene* 30.2. The fourth instance – quoted below – occurs in the pseudo-Platonic *Definitions* (assuming a late fourth century date for the text). Moreover, while the adjective "*chrēstos*" has a broad meaning, closely akin to "useful," the meaning of "*chrēstotēs*" is much narrower than "*aretē*," given the thin evaluative meaning of the latter. In the classical period, "*chrēstotēs*" is only applied to persons, specifically to their characters or intentions. Notably, in the pseudo-Platonic *Definitions* "*chrēstotēs*" is defined (in language reminiscent of the Peripatos) as follows: *ēthous aplastia met' eulogistias; ēthous spoudaiotēs (sincerity of character with prudence; earnestness of character)* (412e6). The same point applies to the 15 or so instances of "*chrēstotēs*" in the fourth century. Most of these occur in comedy.



Assuming that "*aretē*" means goodness and that virtue is a kind of goodness, "*aretē*" cannot literally mean virtue.⁷ Rather, in late classical Greek ethical philosophy, that is, from the fourth century "*aretē*" is frequently used to denote virtue. Let me emphasize this: "*aretē*" is used to denote virtue; it does not itself mean virtue, i.e., it does not itself denote virtue, at least not down through Plato and even Aristotle. These claims turn on the distinction between meaning and use, that is, on the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. They are easy to misunderstand. So, let me clarify.

Here again, it will be helpful to first consider an English example. The English adjective "good" provides one. Consider the following sentence:

1a. This pizza is good.

The adjectival predicate in (1a) means good. That is, "good" means good. What else could it mean? But (1a) is naturally interpreted to convey:

1b. This pizza is tasty/delicious.

Yet "good" does not literally mean tasty or delicious. So, how does (1a) manage to convey that? Here's how. It is a Gricean maxim of communication that when speaking, one should be informative. "Good" has a very general meaning. So, it would be obtuse to intend or to interpret (1a) to convey merely that the pizza is good simpliciter. Granted this, the salient way for pizza to be good is for pizza to be tasty. So, in effect, the predicate in (1a) gets pragmatically enriched in something like the following way:

1c. This pizza is good in the salient way that pizza is good.

1d. This pizza is pizza-wise good.

That is, something like the underlined content in (1c) or (1d) is implicit in the natural context of use of (1a).

Observe further that, syntactically speaking, the underlined expressions in (1c) and (1d) are adverbials; they modify the adjective "good." Through adverbial modification, whether implicit or explicit, the complex predicate, namely, "good" + adverbial, denotes a kind of goodness. Crucially then, by itself "good" does not denote and indeed cannot denote a kind of

⁷ And, to be clear, while kind-denoting count nominal "*aretē*" denotes a kind of *aretē*, kind-denoting "*aretē*" does not mean virtue. So, virtue is a kind of *aretē*, but no sense of "*aretē*" is virtue.

goodness. Rather, "good" + some implicit, if not explicit adverbial modifier does. This is how "good" is used in a context to denote a kind of goodness, for example, tastiness.

Let's now apply this point to "*aretē*." "*Aretē*" is a noun, not an adjective. What modifies a noun to denote a kind of the entity that the noun denotes is an adjective or adjectival expression; for example, "human *aretē*," "psychological *aretē*," "*aretē* of the soul," "*aretē* of character." Such adjectival modification can, but need not be explicit; it can be implicit in a context of use. This is how "*aretē*" is used to denote a kind of *aretē*.

I am now in a position to explain what I mean by the expression "universal *aretē*" in my title. The natural reading of the expression "Plato's theory of *aretē*" is Plato's theory of virtue. But that's not my topic here. My topic is Plato's theory of *aretē* simpliciter. Compare a theory of goodness simpliciter with a theory of moral goodness. A theory of moral goodness is a theory of a kind of goodness. Likewise, a theory of virtue is a theory of a kind of *aretē*. Again, what I'm interested in here is Plato's theory of *aretē* simpliciter, which is to say, Plato's theory of goodness. And to underscore and clarify that this is my topic, I have inserted the adjective "universal." So, the phrase "universal *aretē*" is intended to convey "*aretē*" unmodified and so semantically unrestricted.

My title now clarified, you might wonder whether Plato has a theory of universal *aretē* or goodness, rather than a theory of that salient kind of goodness that he and his philosophical heirs associate with the human soul, namely, virtue. He does. The best presentation of the theory occurs in a passage in *Republic* 1. But before we turn to that passage, I want to make a few more preliminary points.

2. Goodness and Value

I said that LSJ lists both goodness and excellence as principal meanings of "*aretē*." "Goodness" and "excellence" have slightly different meanings. That there is a difference is evident from the following sentences which consist of the cognate adjectives:

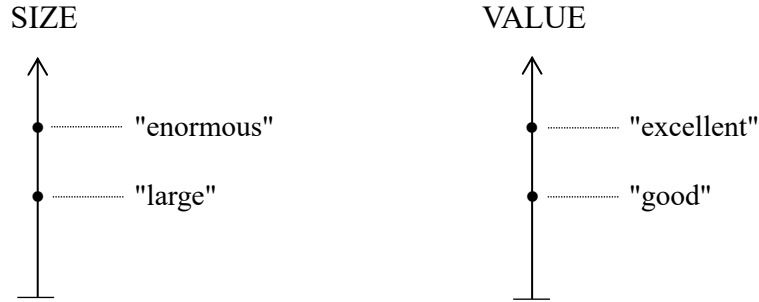
- 2a. This article isn't just good, it's excellent.
- 2b. This proposal is good, but it's not excellent.

But what does the difference amount to? Consider an analogous pair of adjectives: "large" and "enormous":

- 3a. This department store isn't just large, it's enormous.
- 3b. This house is large, but it's not enormous.

Both "large" and "enormous" denote measures of size, that is, quantities, degrees, or amounts of size. But "large" denotes a significant amount of size, whereas "enormous" denotes a very significant amount of size. Likewise, "goodness" and "excellence" both denote measures, in this case, measures of value. But "goodness" denotes a significant amount of value, whereas "excellence" denotes a very significant amount of value:⁸

⁸ Note that neither "goodness" nor "excellence" denotes a superlative amount of value. So, neither is synonymous with "optimality" or what "best-ness" would mean if it existed. Having just said, I must unfortunately say that the Greek philosophers tend to conflate *aretē*, that is,



So, this is the semantic distinction between "goodness" and "excellence." I've drawn attention to it for two reasons. A minor reason is to comment on LSJ's lexical entry. Contra LSJ, I don't think that "*aretē*" is two-ways polysemous between goodness and excellence. "*Aretē*" just means goodness. The main reason I've drawn attention to the distinction between "excellence" and "goodness" is to clarify the relation between goodness, *aretē*, and value.

Since *aretē* is goodness, *aretē* is a measure of value; precisely, *aretē* is significant value. So, to understand *aretē* – or any value-laden entity for that matter – we need to understand what value is. (In the case of *aretē*, we also need to understand what significance is. To save time, I will not discuss the property of significance. But we can discuss it, if you want, in the Q & A.⁹)

3. Value and Purposiveness

So, what is value? Elsewhere, I have argued that value is purposiveness.¹⁰ "Purposiveness" is an obscure word. It has at least two meanings, owing to the ambiguity of the count noun "purpose" on the basis of which it is constructed. In one sense, count nominal "purpose" denotes a motivational state akin to "goal," "intention," or "aim"; for example:

- 4a. Adam has been working overtime; his purpose is to save enough money to buy a summer house.

Compare:

- 4b. Adam has been working overtime; his goal/intention/aim is to save enough money to buy a summer house.

"Purposiveness" in this motivational sense is synonymous with "purposefulness."

In another sense, count nominal "purpose" is akin to "function," "role," or "use"; for example:

- 5a. The purpose of a clock is to keep time.
5b. What is the purpose of the Golgi apparatus?

goodness with optimality. (E.g., cp. *EE*. 2.2, 1218b37-1219a1, cited below; *MM* 1.11, 1182b7-8.) But that shouldn't trouble us here. The quantity of value that "*aretē*" denotes will not be so important in the following discussion.

⁹ I have discussed this in D. Wolfsdorf, *On Goodness*, Oxford University Press, 2019, 45-88.

¹⁰ Wolfsdorf (2019) 89-137.

Clocks and Golgi apparatuses don't have minds. So, they don't have motivational purposes. They have functional purposes.

In claiming that value is purposiveness, I intend "purposiveness" according to the functional sense of "purpose." According to this sense, "purposiveness" denotes the property of serving a purpose. So, in short, my claim is that value is the property of serving a purpose; in a single awkward hyphenated word, value is purpose-serving-ness. (I acknowledge that I have not provided any evidence to support this thesis. Again, I've argued for it elsewhere. If you're interested, I'm happy to address this in the Q & A.)

Now, value is a gradable property. Things that have value can in principle have more or less value. This point was already implicit in the claims that "goodness" and "excellence" denote measures of value. Likewise, some functional purposes (hereafter simply, purposes) are gradable. So, things that serve those purposes can in principle serve those purposes to a lesser or greater extent or degree. That which serves a purpose to a significant extent is good. In other words, it has significant value. So, *aretē*, which is to say, goodness is significant value, and this is significant purposiveness.

Finally, let me connect the thesis that value is purposiveness with the fact that there are kinds of value and likewise kinds of goodness. This connection is explained by the fact that there are kinds of purposes. For example, there are moral purposes, aesthetic purposes, economic purposes, technological purposes, etc. Moreover, within any of these broad kinds of purposes, there are various subkinds. For example, among technological purposes, there are purposes relating to hammers, refrigerators, microwaves, etc. So, determination of kind of *aretē* or of kind of value or of goodness correlates with determination of kind of purpose being served. For example, something that is aesthetically good serves an aesthetic purpose to a significant degree.

I have described these relations between value and goodness and between value and purposiveness because, as I am going to show you, Plato's theory of universal *aretē* involves some recognition of the relation between value and purposiveness. As such, Plato's theory tracks the truth. I turn now to some of the details of the theory.

4. Plato's Theory of Universal *Aretē*

Aristotle's function argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7 is well known. Aristotle begins that argument by suggesting that we think of the goodness of a thing with respect to its *ergon*:

"For the goodness (*to agathon*) or well faring (*to eu*) of a flute-player or sculptor or craftsman of any sort, and on the whole whatever has some function/purpose (*ergon*) or activity (*pragma*), seems to lie in that function/purpose (*ergon*). And so, it would seem in the case of a human being, if in fact there is some function/purpose of a human being."¹¹

Compare the following claim of Aristotle's in *Eudemian Ethics* 2.2:

"Concerning *aretē*, let it be assumed that it is the best condition (*diathesis*), *hexis*, or power (*dynamis*) of each of the things that has a use (*chrēsis*) or purpose/function (*ergon*)."¹²

¹¹ *EN* 1.7, 1097b25-28.

¹² *EE* 2.2, 1218b37-1291a1.

Here, "*ergon*" is standardly translated, as I have translated it, as "function" or "purpose" in the functional sense. Aristotle's function arguments derive from Plato's function argument, which occurs at the end of *Republic* 1.¹³ It is there that Plato most explicitly articulates his theory of universal *aretē*. The aim of Plato's function argument, presented by the character Socrates, is to defend the thesis that the just person is *eudaimōn*. Here is the gist of the argument:

- i. For any type of thing *T* that has an *ergon* (purpose/function), the *ergon* of *T* is:
 - i. what *T* alone can do or
 - ii. what *T* can do most effectively in comparison to any other type of thing.¹⁴
- ii. For an *ergon*-possessing *T* to perform its *ergon* effectively, that *T* must have the relevant *aretē*.
 - iiia. E.g., a pruning knife has an *ergon*, namely, to play a particular role in pruning vines; so, for a pruning knife to perform its *ergon* effectively, it must have the relevant *aretē*, namely, a sharp blade, durability, etc.
 - iiib. E.g., the eye has an *ergon*, namely, to see; so, for an eye to perform its *ergon* effectively, it must have the relevant *aretē*.
 - iiic. There is an *ergon* of the *psychē* (soul), namely, living a certain kind of life.
 - iiid. In the case of the human *psychē*, this *ergon* involves practical reasoning, inter alia.
 - iiie. The human *psychē* requires the relevant *aretē* to perform its *ergon*.
 - iiif. The *aretē* of the human *psychē* is justness (*dikaiosynē*).
 - iiig. So, justness, this *aretē*, enables the human *psychē* to perform its *ergon* effectively.
 - iiih. Effective performance of the *ergon* of the human *psychē* is *eudaimonia*.
 - iiix. Therefore, the just (*dikaios*) person is *eudaimōn*.

This argument invites scrutiny of many things. I think it is more or less valid. A number of its premises are unsound though and require refinement or replacement. For example, the definition of an *ergon* is inadequate, and justness cannot be identical to the *aretē* of the soul. However, only a few points in the argument are relevant to what I want to convey here.

First, observe the breadth of the set of entities that are suggested to bear *aretē* and to have an *ergon*. Clearly, virtue, that is, a property of a state of the soul, is just one kind of *aretē*. This is the reason I speak of Plato's theory of *aretē* here as "universal."

Second, evidently Plato introduces and recognizes an important connection between *aretē* and *ergon*. *Aretē* is here treated as in principle, possibly a property of any *ergon*-possessing entity *T*. Assume, as I already have, that *ergon* here is reasonably translated as "function" or "purpose." Then, Plato introduces and recognizes an important connection between *aretē* and function or purpose. Since *aretē* is goodness, Plato recognizes an important connection between goodness and function or purpose, namely, the following one:

For a good *T*, the goodness of that *T* is that property of *T* that enables it to perform its function or purpose effectively.

¹³ R. 352d8-354a5.

¹⁴ The term I've rendered as "most effecticely" is "*kallista*" (most finely). I have taken the liberty of replacing this with a non-evaluative term to avoid circularity and to simplify my discussion.

Given what I've claimed about value and goodness and purposiveness, as I say I think that Plato is here tracking the truth. So, when in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7 Aristotle appropriates Plato's idea, he is right to do so.

5. Plato's Stative Potentiality Restriction on *Aretē*

Now, I don't say that in the function argument Plato gets the nature of *aretē* exactly right. He doesn't, for several reasons. One problem with Plato's conception that I want to focus on is that he doesn't identify *aretē* with purposiveness, but rather with something more specific, namely, a state that empowers its possessor to serve its purpose effectively. As such, Plato restricts *aretē* statively and in terms of potentiality. In other words, Plato identifies *aretē* not with purposiveness simpliciter, but with stative potential purposiveness. Let me spell out this point and explain why the stative and potential restrictions on *aretē* are illicit in this context.

Regarding potentiality, as a matter of fact, goodness can be either potential or, as I will call it, effective. To illustrate this distinction, consider first a hammer sitting on a shelf unused. The following sentence can be true of the unused hammer:

6. That hammer is good.

This sentence basically conveys that the hammer is able to serve its purpose effectively. Contrast the potential goodness of the hammer with the following kind of goodness. You are receiving a massage and you say to the masseuse:

7. That feels good.

The goodness of, say, the motion that the masseuse is making along with the goodness of the feeling that the motion is producing is not potential goodness; it is, as I will call it, effective goodness. The masseuse's motion and the feeling that it is producing are not merely able to relieve your stress or pain; they are relieving your stress or pain.

Now, as I say, in his function argument in *Republic* 1 Plato restricts *aretē* to potential goodness. Potential goodness is a kind of goodness. So, a potentiality restriction on *aretē* is compatible with the semantics of "*aretē*" and therefore pragmatically licit. There are many kinds of goodness and so many kinds of *aretē*. However, in the context of presenting a theory of universal *aretē*, a potentiality restriction is illicit. For example, consider the *ergon* of human psychological *aretē*, namely, *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* has value. It is at least good. But insofar as *eudaimonia* is good, it must possess some sort of goodness and therefore possess some sort of *aretē*. But *eudaimonia* does not empower its bearer to serve any purpose effectively. *Eudaimonia* is effectively, not potentially, good. So, again, in principle a potentiality restriction on *aretē* is licit, as various specifications of "*aretē*" are. But these are indeed specifications of "*aretē*." What is illicit is the conjunction of a potentiality restriction on *aretē*, on the one hand, and, on the other, a presentation of this as a theory of universal *aretē*.

In addition to the potentiality restriction on *aretē* in the function argument in *Republic* 1, Plato restricts *aretē* statively. That is, he restricts *aretē* to a property of a state. This stative restriction is more implicit in this context than the potentiality restriction. However, I take it, it accompanies the contrast that Plato draws between *aretē* and *ergon*. The stative restriction on *aretē* is again licit in principle, but it is illicit here insofar as Plato is presenting a theory of universal *aretē*. *Aretē* may be a

property of ontological kinds other than states. Indeed, I just said that *eudaimonia* is good; but *eudaimonia* is an *ergon* not a state.

To conclude this section, since I've claimed that potential goodness and effective goodness are kinds of goodness, let me take the opportunity to note that there are several superordinate classes of kinds of goodness (and so of value). Earlier, I mentioned kinds such as moral, aesthetic, and economic goodness. These constitute a distinct superordinate class of kinds of goodness. There are also kinds of goodness such as intrinsic, extrinsic, instrumental, and conditional, various members of which crop up in the philosophical tradition, including within Plato and Aristotle, but which I have not discussed here. These constitute yet another superordinate class of kinds of goodness. For convenience, I call the three classes "modal," "relational," and "domainal":

THREE SUPERORDINATE CLASSES OF GOODNESS (or VALUE)

MODAL CLASS	potential, effective, etc.
RELATIONAL CLASS	intrinsic, instrumental, conditional, etc.
DOMAINAL CLASS	moral, aesthetic, economic, technological, etc.

Earlier I said that, in terms of the thesis that value is purposiveness, kinds belonging to the domainal class are explained by determinations of purposes: moral, aesthetic, etc. Here, I add that kinds belonging to the modal and relational classes are explained by determinations of service, albeit each in a distinct way. I note this point, which I have discussed elsewhere, but will not pursue it here. At any rate, I take the way the thesis that value is purposiveness can neatly explain these superordinate classes to be one consideration in its favor. I also note that modal class kinds are explicitly recognized by Aristotle and the Peripatetics.¹⁵ It is surprising that this class is not more widely recognized in value theory or metaethics today.

6. "*Aretē*" in Pre-Platonic Ethics

Returning now to Plato's stative potentiality restriction on *aretē*, I want to discuss this topic further, in two respects: one, in terms of the use of "*aretē*" in pre-Platonic ethics; the other, in terms of post-Platonic ethics, specifically in Aristotle. I'll discuss the former topic in this section and the latter in the following section.

As we've seen, in the function argument in *Republic* 1 the *ergon* of the human soul is identified with *eudaimonia*, and *aretē* is conceived as a property of the state of the soul that empowers its bearer to achieve *eudaimonia*. Observe that we have here the basic framework of Greek ethical theory as both virtue ethical and eudaimonistic. To be sure, elements of this framework and the framework as a whole occur elsewhere in Plato, but – according to a standard chronology of the dialogues – I believe it is here in *Republic* 1 that they are first presented together and clearly. For example – just one example – it is remarkable that in Plato's *Protagoras*, one of his most important early dialogues, whose central topic is *aretē*, it is never stated that *aretē* enables its possessor to achieve *eudaimonia*, let alone that *aretē* enables its possessor to perform its *ergon* or that *eudaimonia* is that *ergon*.

Anyway, whether the function argument in *Republic* 1 is the seminal site for the presentation of the framework of Greek ethical theory as virtue ethical and eudaimonistic, as far as I am aware

¹⁵ E.g., *EE* 2.2-5, 1219a5-18; *MM* 2.2, 1183b27-28.

the framework does not occur prior to Plato. This raises at least the following two questions: In pre-Platonic ethics, how, if at all, was "*aretē*" treated? Likewise, how, if at all, was "*eudaimonia*" treated? Here I will address the former question.

I have already said that the term "*aretē*," like its English synonym "goodness," admits, but does not entail potentiality. In fact, there are passages in Plato where he treats "*aretē*" effectively and as denoting a property of an action rather than of a state. For example, early in *Apology* Socrates says to the jury: "the *aretē* of a public speaker is to tell the truth, and the *aretē* of a juror is make just judgments."¹⁶ So, oratorical *aretē* is speaking truthfully, and juridical *aretē* is judging justly. Clearly, both are properties of *erga* and in this respect constitute effective rather than potential goodness.

So, Plato's stative potential conception and treatment of *aretē* was not required or inevitable. Likewise, its influence on subsequent Greek ethics. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, this is a special development in the history of ancient Greek ethical theory. In ethical philosophy prior to Plato, "*aretē*" is generally not used to denote a stative potentiality of the soul.¹⁷ More commonly, it is used to denote a property of an action, a pattern of action, or achievement or success. One passage that provides a clear illustration of this is the opening line of Gorgias' *Encomium to Helen*:

"The adornment (*kosmos*) of a city is manly valor, of a body beauty, of a soul wisdom, of an action (*pragma*) goodness (*aretē*)."¹⁸

As a property of an action or a pattern of action or an achievement or success, "*aretē*" tends to be used in pre-Platonic ethics to denote, more precisely, the civic beneficence of an action or simply civic beneficence.¹⁹ As such, in pre-Platonic ethics *aretē* plays a role akin to the role that *eudaimonia* plays in Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic ethics. In fact, "*eudaimonia*" is largely absent from pre-Platonic ethics.

In light of this, it is questionable how and why *aretē* gets, so to speak, potentialized as well as stativized and psychologized in Plato. I think there are two quite different reasons: each relating to a distinct facet of early Greek ethics that Plato engages. One is eschatological and cosmological. This has to do with Plato's occasional Pythagoreanism, with his views that the human being is essentially identifiable with his soul, that this soul persists after what we ordinarily call "death," and that the condition of the soul is crucial for the kind of post-mortem existence it has. The other reason is political and pedagogical; it concerns the cultivation and education of citizens. The idea here is that the condition of a person's soul is crucial for the sort of citizen they will be and so for the sort of civic contribution they will make. Consequently, if one wants to build a polis of a certain quality, one has to cultivate in one's citizens souls of a certain quality. To be sure, patterns of good civic conduct remain crucial here, for Plato as for his predecessors. However, Plato is especially concerned with the etiology of good civic conduct, precisely, with its potential psychological basis. Therefore – I presume, following the historical Socrates' influence – Plato focuses on cultivation of conditions of the soul that are good. In a word, he focuses on virtue.

¹⁶ *Ap.* 18a3-6.

¹⁷ Once instance where it clearly is so used is *Gorg.* B8. Another possible instance is *Democr.* B248.

¹⁸ *Gorg.* B11.1.1.

¹⁹ Cp. D. Wolfsdorf, "Civic and Anti-Civic Ethics," in J. Billings and C. Moore, eds., *Cambridge Companion to the Sophists*, Cambridge, 2023, 306-33, at 313-22.

In short, considered in terms of the lexical meaning of "aretē" as goodness, Plato's stative, potential psychologization of *aretē* involves a very specific determination of *aretē*, again: potential goodness of the state of the soul. And considered in terms of the use of "aretē" in ethics prior to Plato, Plato's stative, potential psychologization of *aretē* involves a shift in focus from what, retrospectively, would be viewed as the exercise and external manifestation of *aretē*, again as a property of action as or a form of action, to its potential psychological basis.

7. "Aretē" and "Hexis"

So much for "aretē" in pre-Platonic ethics. I turn now to the influence of Plato's stative potential restriction on *aretē*, precisely, to its reception in Aristotle. Here, I want to discuss one aspect of the way that Plato's argument influenced Aristotle, namely, the way that Plato's stative potential restriction on *aretē* informed Aristotle's conceptualization of *aretē* as a *hexis*.

Consider the following question: Given Plato's stative potential restriction on it, to what ontological category does *aretē* belong? The answer I've already given to this question is that *aretē* belongs to the category of potentiality. The term that Plato favors for the ontological category of *aretē* – at least in the early and most of the middle dialogues – is just this: "*dynamis*," that is, power.²⁰ I'll assume this is uncontroversial and won't argue for it.

Granted this, consider the term "*hexis*" that Aristotle subsequently favors. For example, in pursuing a definition of *aretē per genus et differentiam* in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.5, Aristotle raises the question: What is the genus of *aretē*? He canvases three options: *pathos*, *dynamis*, and *hexis*; and he argues for *hexis*. One question we can raise here is why Aristotle opts for *hexis* over *dynamis*. I will not pursue that question here, at least not directly. A different question we might raise is whether Plato himself ever considers the possibility that *aretē* is a *hexis* – for it is clear that in the *Republic* 1 argument he does not. The answer is that elsewhere in his corpus he does.

Assuming again a standard chronology of the dialogues, it is in *Gorgias* that Plato first speaks of the soul as having a *hexis*,²¹ and in *Cratylus* that he first characterizes the *aretē* of the soul as a *hexis*.²² Plato's use of "*hexis*" is a development of the medical use of "*hexis*," first instanced in the Hippocratic corpus of the late fifth century.

There are 12 instances of "*hexis*" in Hippocratic works of the fifth to early fourth century.²³ Notably, "*hexis*" does not occur in Herodotus or Thucydides; nor does "*hexis*" occur in any forensic or oratorical work until the second half of the fourth century.²⁴ "*Hexis*" occurs twice in Xenophon, both instances in Socratic works and in contexts consistent with the medical pedigree of the term.²⁵ Outside of the Hippocratic corpus and prior to Aristotle, the only other

²⁰ On this point, cp. D. Wolfsdorf, "Δύναμις in *Laches*," *Phoenix* 59 (2005) 324-47.

²¹ *Grg.* 524b4-c1.

²² *Cra.* 415d4-6. Burnet brackets the text "*isōs ... hairesōtatēs*" at *Cra.* 415d4-5, which includes the instance of "*hexis*." But other editors do not, and I see no good reason to.

²³ *Hp. Acut.* 35 Jones (= 9.59 Littré), 43 Jones (= 11.69 Littré); *Epid.* 1.9 Jones (= 1.2.4.108 Littré); *Off.* 3.33, 15.10; *Art.* 12.16; *Moch.* 40.37; *Vict.* 32.2, 81.22, 82.19, 89.4; *Mul.* 230.68. In addition, there are four instances from later Hippocratic treatises: *Aph.* 2.34.2; *Coac.* 435.2; *Alim.* 34.3; *Praec.* 2.5. (My dating of the Hippocratic treatises is based on appendix 3 in J. Jouanna, *Hippocrates*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 373-416.)

²⁴ *Isoc.* 1.90.1 (355 BCE); *Aeschin.* 1.189.8 (345 BCE); *Isoc.* 12.32.8 (342 BCE).

²⁵ *X. Mem.* 1.2.4.4, *Oec.* 7.2.7.

instances of "*hexis*" are once in Democritus²⁶ and 56 times in Plato.²⁷ With the exception of the one instance in *Gorgias*, all Platonic instances are in the middle and, predominantly, late dialogues.²⁸ (I also note but will not discuss the fact that the distribution of the cognate noun "*euexia*" largely conforms to that of "*hexis*.")

"*Hexis*" is a nominalization derived from the verbal stem "(h)ech-" as in "*exō*" (I have). As the authors of the *Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek* note, "-*sis*" is one of "the most productive" nominalizing suffixes in Greek: "it could be added to virtually any verbal root, especially in the formation of technical or scientific vocabulary."²⁹ The Hippocratics appear to have coined the term to denote the condition of a patient and so precisely a condition of the body. Compare the use of "*exō*" with an adverb meaning to be in such-and-such condition. Plato then extends the application from body to soul – and indeed by conscious analogy with the medical pedigree.

In the Hippocratic texts, a *hexis* needn't be stable or perduring. But in Plato – at least by the late dialogues – the term "*hexis*" appears to be used with this restriction. Aristotle adopts this perdurance restriction. Furthermore, whether or not it was strictly a part of the semantics of the term when the Hippocratics coined it, *hexeis* are saliently value-laden conditions. The patient is either well or ill. Likewise, in Plato, the soul is either in good or bad condition. I believe that Aristotle treats *hexis* as essentially value-laden. So, in Aristotle, being perduring and being value-laden are essential to being a *hexis*. In addition, in the Hippocratics, Plato, and Aristotle, "*hexis*" entails stativity, i.e., being a property of a state. In short, for Aristotle, the genus of *aretē* is a stative, perduring, value-laden property that empowers its possessor to perform well or ill.

One common translation of "*hexis*" in Aristotle is "disposition." Several scholars have criticized this translation on the grounds that in post-Rylean philosophy of mind "disposition" has a misleading analytic behaviorist sense.³⁰ For Aristotle, a *hexis* does not just dispose its bearer to some action (or passion), a *hexis* – to borrow language from the contemporary disposition literature – also consists of a categorical base, in this case, a way that the (relevant portion of the) soul is organized so that it has the power it does. Given this, "stative power" would convey Aristotle's conception better. But perduring, value-laden stative power would do so even better. Unfortunately, we have no single word for this. At any rate, much of Aristotle's conception of *hexis* can be traced back to Plato's stative potentiality restriction on *aretē*, notably – though not only – in the *Republic* 1 argument.

²⁶ Democr. B184

²⁷ Pl. *Grg.* 524b5; *Cra.* 414b9, 415d5; *R.* 404a1, 433e10, 435b7, 443e6, 509a5, 511d4, 533e1, 585b1, 4, 591b4, c5, 592a3, 618c8; *Prm.* 162b10, 163b1; *Th.* 153b5, 9, 167a4 (*bis*), 197b1; *Phdr.* 239c3, 241c4, 268e5; *Phlb.* 11d4, 32e3, 40d5, 41c6, 48c2, 6, 49e3; *Sph.* 230d5; *Plt.* 273c1; *Ti.* 19e8, 42d2, 47e1, 65e2, 74a7, 86b2, d4, e1; *Lg.* 625c8, 631c7, 645e5, 650b7, 666a7, 728e3, 778e7, 790e9, 791b1, 792d4, 870c5, 893e7, 894a7, 966b3. Cp. [Pl.] *Thg.* 130e3; *Epin.* 973a4.

²⁸ It is also noteworthy that in the pseudo-Platonic *Definitions*, "*hexis*" occurs 35 times.

²⁹ E. Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, §23.27. E.g., P. Chantraine, *La formation des noms en grec ancien*, Librairie ancienne Honoré Champion, 1933, 282, records well over five thousand "-*sis*" nouns.

³⁰ Cp. D.S. Hutchinson, "What a *Hexis* Is," in *The Virtues of Aristotle*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, 8-38, at 10.

8. "Aretē" and "To Agathon"

I'd like to conclude this discussion of Plato's theory of universal *aretē* by returning to Plato himself and by broaching one further topic within his value theory: the relation between the terms "*aretē*" and "*to agathon*." Regarding this relation, I want to make two points.

First, earlier I said that if "*aretē*" doesn't mean goodness, then ancient Greek lacks an ordinary common noun with that meaning. But what about the locution "*to agathon*," which is to say, the good? While Greek, at least in the classical period, can freely form so-called abstract nouns by combining the neuter article with the neuter adjective, there is no evidence that the expression "*to agathon*" was commonly used in classical Greek to mean goodness. Yet it does occur in Plato and elsewhere in Greek ethics with something like this meaning, among others. Given this, it is a question how the semantics and pragmatics of the expressions "*aretē*" and "*to agathon*" developed in Greek ethics from the classical period onward.

I don't have too much to say about this question now, but I want to flag it. What I can say is that I don't think that "*to agathon*" was subjected to the same potentiality restriction as "*aretē*." Moreover, while "*aretē*" was very often used to denote virtue, this is not true of "*to agathon*." Some evidence in support of these claims derives from the following definitions of *aretē* and *agathon* in the pseudo-Platonic definitions:

"*aretē*: the best condition (*diathesis*); a *hexis* of a mortal animal according to which it is praiseworthy. A *hexis* according to which that which possesses it is said to be good (*agathon*). A condition (*diathesis*), according to which that which possesses it is perfectly disposed (*diakeimenon teleiōs*) and said to be morally good (*spoudaion*); a *hexis* productive (*poiētikē*) of lawfulness."³¹

"*agathon*: that which exists for the sake of itself (*to hautou eneka*)."³²

In short, in light of my preceding discussion as a whole, I think it would be worthwhile to trace the post-Platonic theoretical fortunes of "*to agathon*" in relation to "*aretē*."

I turn to my second point about the relation between "*aretē*" and "*to agathon*." Once again, given his stative potentiality restriction on *aretē*, *aretē* emerges in Plato as a property of a state that enables its possessor to perform its function or purpose effectively. I myself don't take stative potential goodness to be anything more than this. However, Plato at least seems to think that there is more to *aretē* than this. Precisely, Plato seems to think that there is a more specific property of the state that an entity has that makes that state good and indeed is constitutive of its goodness. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates says the following to Callicles:

³¹ [Pl.] *Def.* 411d1-4. On the distinction between *hexis* and *diathesis* in Aristotle, cp. *Cat.* 8b26-28: "Let it be said that *hexis* and *diathesis* constitute one kind of quality (*poiotēs*). The difference is that a *hexis* is more stable and perduring than a *diathesis*." (I suspect that this distinction ultimately derives from intramural discussion of Pl. *Phlb.* 11d4-6.) And cp. *Metaph.* 4.20, 1022b10-14.

³² [Pl.] *Def.* 413a3.

"Now, both we ourselves and everything else are good (*agathon*) because of some goodness (*aretē*) that is present to us (*paragenomenēs*)."³³

A nice expression of universal *aretē*, by the way, though – as context makes clear here – again restricted statively and potentially. Granted this, subsequently Socrates suggests that the *aretē* of a thing is its proper order or arrangement:

"But the goodness (*aretē*) of each thing – be it a piece of equipment, a body, a soul, or any animal – is most beautifully present to that thing not by accident (*tōi eikēi*), but because of some order (*taxei*) or correctness (*orthotēti*) or craft (*technēi*) that is allotted to each ... So then, the goodness (*aretē*) of each thing is its being organized (*tetagmenon*) and arranged (*kekosmēmenon*) according to some order (*taxei*) ... So, it is a certain appropriate arrangement (*kosmos*) present in each thing that makes each thing good (*agathon*)."³⁴

Compare this view of goodness as order or arrangement with the following views that Aristotle attributes to Plato in *Eudemian Ethics* and *Metaphysics*:

"It is from things not agreed to possess the good that [Plato and his adherents] argue for the things agreed to be good. For example, they argue from numbers that justice and health are good, on the grounds that justice and health are orders (*taxeis*) and numbers – and assuming that goodness belongs to numbers and units because unity (*to hen*) is the good itself (*auto to agathon*)."³⁵

"[According to the Platonists,] unity itself (*auto to hen*) is the good itself (*to agathon auto*)."³⁶

I don't take the *Gorgias* thesis about goodness as order or arrangement to be incompatible with these Aristotelian attributions, for I take it that order and arrangement are forms of unity. However, it is one thing to think that stative potential goodness is what enables its possessor to perform its function effectively; it is another thing to think that things are good in virtue of their unity or order. First, unity or order needn't be potential or stative. For example, conduct can be orderly. So, unity or order and potential purposiveness are distinct. Second, take three random objects and assemble them into a set. So, they constitute a unity of a kind. Has goodness been

³³ Pl. *Grg.* 506d2-4.

³⁴ *Grg.* 506d5-e4.

³⁵ *EE* 1.8, 1218a16-21.

³⁶ *Metaph.* 14.4, 1091b14. Cp. Aristox., *Harm.* 2.30-31: "As Aristotle was accustomed to report, this is what happened to the majority of the people who heard Plato's lecture on the good. Each person came expecting to learn something about the things that are generally agreed to be good for human beings, for example wealth, health, physical strength, and in a word a kind of wonderful happiness. But when the mathematical demonstrations came, including numbers and geometrical figures, and finally the statement that the good (*to agathon*) is unity (*to hen*), it all seemed to them, I imagine, utterly unexpected and strange; and so some belittled the matter and others dismissed it."

produced? Surely not. Likewise, take three random objects and array them into some kind of order, for example, line them up equidistant from one another. Has goodness been produced? Again, surely not. Third and finally, unity and order are either not gradable or not gradable in the way that goodness is. The term "goodness" denotes a significant amount of value. But the terms "unity" and "order," if they denote gradable quantities at all, denote maximal quantities on their relevant scales.

In short, between Plato's view of goodness as order or unity and his view of goodness as stative potential purposiveness, the latter is a closer approximation to the truth.