

Chapter Title: Introduction

Chapter Author(s): Ryan M. Brown and Jay R. Elliott

Book Title: Arete in Plato and Aristotle

Book Subtitle: Selected Essays from the 6th Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Hellenic Heritage of Sicily and Southern Italy

Book Editor(s): Ryan M. Brown, Jay R. Elliott

Published by: Parnassos Press — Fonte Aretusa. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2w8kbjt.5>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Parnassos Press — Fonte Aretusa is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Arete in Plato and Aristotle*

Ryan M. Brown & Jay R. Elliott

Introduction

This collection brings together essays presented at Fonte Aretusa's Sixth Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Hellenic Heritage of Sicily and Southern Italy. Due to ongoing restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, some papers were presented virtually during June 2021, and others were presented in person in Siracusa the following month. In both cases, the papers benefitted from discussion at the conference and subsequent revisions in consultation with the editors. The focus of the symposium was *aretē* (pl. *aretai*), a central, yet elusive notion in ancient Greek culture. Traditionally associated with the strength and skill of heroes, warriors, and athletes, *aretē* evolved over the course of ancient Greek history to become a primary focus of ethical and political reflection and debate. For ancient Greek philosophy, *aretē* (traditionally translated as "virtue") was the essential object of human admiration and striving, even the key to happiness. Despite this shared conception, deep disagreements persisted among ancient thinkers about what exactly *aretē* is, who has it, how it is acquired, and why it is so valuable.

The proceedings are divided into two volumes, with the present volume focusing on Plato and Aristotle. The importance of these two thinkers in the history of *aretē* warrants assigning them their own collection. At the same time, this collection should be read alongside its companion, *Ageless Aretē* (the title of which comes from a fragment of Euripides). That volume affords the reader a broad overview of the place of *aretē* in ancient Greek and Roman culture, and includes essays devoted to *aretē* in poetry and rhetoric, as well as in philosophy, from the Presocratic Xenophanes to the Imperial Neoplatonists. Plato and Aristotle have often been read without this wider context; it is not the intention of the present volume to encourage this practice. Instead, we urge the reader to read these two volumes together, and to consider how Plato and Aristotle belong to the wider culture of *aretē* in ancient Greece, as well as how they are distinctive within that culture.

Because this volume is devoted to Plato and Aristotle, this introduction focuses on the ways these two philosophers are distinct from the wider culture within which they lived. We can begin with the way Plato and Aristotle shift the paradigmatic bearer of *aretē* away from the heroic figures of the Archaic period and toward the philosopher and the statesman. This process begins already with the Presocratics and the Sophists, many of whom reject the ethical ideals of the heroic tradition and elevate the figure of the deliberative and cooperative citizen. Through this process, the value previously placed on physical strength and bravery is diminished in favor of skill in argumentation and deliberation. A key step in this process is the elevation of the virtue of *sōphrosunē*. Often translated as “temperance” or “moderation,” this term also carries connotations of sobriety, self-discipline, and sound-mindedness. In Heraclitus, *sōphrosunē* is “the greatest virtue” (DK 112), and for Protagoras it was, alongside justice, an essential prerequisite for citizenship. Plato and Aristotle’s primary paradigm of *aretē* likewise tends to be the politically engaged citizen of the classical Greek *polis*. They will also develop the figure of the philosopher as a paradigm of virtue and will engage in extensive debate as to whether the philosopher and the statesman are two sides of a single paradigm or two distinct paradigms.

A related focus of interest for Plato and Aristotle is the task of listing, collecting, and defining the *aretai*. These thinkers inherit a tradition in which there are many different *aretai* that might make a person distinctive and admirable, including not only courage, self-discipline, wisdom, and justice, but also piety, generosity, and friendliness, among others. With their keen interest in definition, Plato and Aristotle tend to ask, first of all, what exactly each of these virtues consists in, and secondly, how they relate to each other. Are all of these qualities equally *aretai*? Are some of them more important or valuable than others? Can they be classified in some way, e.g., are some more a matter of intellect, and others more a matter of desire or of the emotions? Can a person excel with respect to one and not the others? Or are they all somehow connected? Indeed, might they be merely parts or manifestations of a single underlying *aretē*? The

question of what the *aretai* are and how they relate to each other is at the center of the systematic enterprise of moral philosophy as Plato and Aristotle undertake it.

A third distinctive feature arises from the preoccupation we find in Plato and Aristotle with questions of truth and reality. As in other areas, here too their philosophical temper involves a certain mistrust of appearances, as well as a concern to separate the genuine article from mere look-alikes. In the case of *aretē*, this leads them to draw fine distinctions between actions that merely appear to be virtuous and those that truly are. For example, in Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon and Adeimantus challenge Socrates's praise of justice by insisting that he distinguish between merely just behavior (doing what is just out of fear of punishment, for example) and genuine justice. According to Glaucon and Adeimantus, only a praise of the latter, sharply distinguished from the former, will count as a proper praise of justice.

A closely related fourth development is a tendency to internalize *aretē*, that is, to identify it with an internal ordering or disposition rather than any external performance. Both Plato and Aristotle make extensive use of a distinction between *aretē* and *ergon*, the "work" or "function" in which *aretē* is manifested. In Plato and Aristotle, the referent of *aretē* subtly shifts from an admirable action or performance to a presumed underlying quality, thought of as belonging to the soul and associated with a certain set of beliefs and desires. By the time we get to Aristotle, the process of internalizing *aretē* is so far advanced that, after identifying happiness with a life of *aretē*, he feels the need to clarify that he means a life of action in accordance with *aretē*, not one in which a person merely possesses *aretē* while remaining inactive or asleep. Locating *aretē* within the soul does crucial work in distinguishing true virtue from look-alikes: while a virtuous and a non-virtuous person may appear identical in outward behavior, only the virtuous person has *aretē* in his soul and performs the virtuous action *virtuously*. This internalization will also come to play a crucial role in the project of classifying the *aretai*, since one major method of classification Plato and Aristotle adopted was to map the *aretai* onto the various parts or capacities of the soul.

Finally, this demanding conception of *aretē* will lead Plato and Aristotle to a recurring preoccupation with the question of how *aretē* can be acquired. Several Platonic dialogues address the question of whether *aretē* can be taught, and if so, how. For Plato, this theme is often deployed in order to critique Sophistic methods that presume to teach *aretē* through technical training in speech and debate. But it can equally be used, as it is in the *Republic*, to critique a traditional Greek education based on the study of heroic models found in myth and poetry. For Plato and Aristotle alike, these questions are pedagogical, but also civic: they assume that the education of young people is the central task of a wise ruler and, similarly, that a proper upbringing in virtue is the key to any society's success. The internalization of *aretē* makes it especially difficult to acquire (and to know whether it has been acquired). At the same time, it provides fodder for pedagogical theories, especially theories that associate certain types of *aretai*, certain parts of soul, and certain methods of education.

* * *

Lidia Palumbo opens our collection by exploring an often-overlooked Platonic image of *aretē*, that of the bee (Chapter 1). Drawing on Orphic myth, Palumbo argues that Plato deploys the bee—particularly in the *Meno*—as a potent symbol of certain virtues, including purity, chastity, industriousness, and social harmony. For Palumbo, Plato's use of the bee is representative of a broader strategy she finds in his dialogues, in which images and symbols complement and support the work of rational argument. While she sees Plato's bee as drawing on pre-existing cultural associations, she also emphasizes that Plato uses the bee to do original ethical and philosophical work. In particular, she sees Plato's bee imagery as an essential part of his attempt to shift the paradigm of *aretē* away from the heroic warrior and toward the cooperative citizen.

Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides and Ryan M. Brown (Chapters 2 and 3, respectively) contribute a pair of essays in which each reflects on the same puzzling aspect of Plato's *Phaedrus*: why does Socrates in that dialogue associate the usually sober virtue of *sōphrosunē* with *mania*, madness? They employ different methods to answer this

question, and they return quite different answers, each of which sheds its own novel light on this challenging dialogue. Anagnostou-Laoutides looks for the answer in Plato's past. She argues that we should see this aspect of the *Phaedrus* as indebted to Heraclitus, for whom *sōphrosunē* requires overcoming the characteristic ignorance of human nature and approaching the outlook of the divine intellect. Thus *sōphrosunē*, because it surpasses the merely human mind, will look like *mania* from a human point of view. By contrast, Brown looks for an answer in Plato's future, specifically in distinctions that are usually regarded as Aristotelian innovations. According to Brown, the key to understanding the *Phaedrus* is to see that Socrates contrasts true *sōphrosunē*, as represented by the divinely-inspired lover, with a mere look-alike, the crafty rationality of the non-lover. Thus, Brown finds in the *Phaedrus* a version of the Aristotelian distinction between *sōphrosunē* and *enkrateia* (self-restraint), albeit drawn on somewhat different grounds: while the enkratic non-lover pursues his appetitive desires with clever reasoning, the *sōphrōn* lover is governed by his vision of divine truth.

Puzzles about *sōphrosunē* show up not only in the *Phaedrus*, but also in the *Republic*, where they form the focus of essays by Jay R. Elliott and Guilherme Domingues da Motta (Chapters 4 and 5). As with the previous pair of contributors, Elliott and Motta take up a shared problem. In *Republic* IV, Socrates describes the ideal city as *sōphrōn* and credits its lower classes with an essential role in this virtue. This claim is surprising, because Socrates also presents the lower classes as lacking the rational self-rule that he elsewhere describes as necessary for this virtue. Like our previous two contributors, Elliott and Motta pursue different strategies for answering their question. Elliott looks to the overall argumentative structure of the *Republic* and argues that, while Socrates assumes an analogy between the virtues of the city and those of the soul, he does not explain the virtues of the city by ascribing virtues to its citizens. Motta takes the opposite approach, arguing that we can see the lower classes in the city as possessing a version of *sōphrosunē*, albeit one that falls short of the more authoritative version possessed by the guardians.

The guardians of the *Republic* in their own right are the focus of the next two essays, by Federico Casella and Jonathan A. Buttaci (Chapters 6 and 7). Casella sees Plato's elevation of the guardians as representative of the shift noted above in the paradigms of *aretē*, away from the hero and toward the statesman and philosopher. Casella gives a distinctive account of the role that Plato's reception of Presocratic thinkers such as Empedocles and Pythagoras played in this process. These earlier thinkers claimed a special authority to teach mankind on the basis of their superior wisdom. According to Casella, Plato adopted this stance as a model for his guardians and refashioned it according to his own standards, in particular the expectation that true philosophers will attain the intellectual virtue of *epistēmē*, scientific knowledge. For Casella, Plato's adoption of the Presocratic model of authority brings with it a tacit rejection of Socrates as a model of *aretē*, insofar as Socrates spent his life questioning but never arrived at *epistēmē*. Buttaci focuses on the question of how this Platonic *epistēmē* is acquired. In a well-known passage from *Republic* VII, Plato's Socrates claims that the education that will eventually culminate in this *epistēmē* is "not like putting sight into blind eyes." Socrates insists that something needs to be present in the soul before this education takes place. But what? Buttaci argues that Socrates's point is best understood by focusing on the contrast he draws in the passage between intellectual development and habituation. While the latter can operate simply on the basis of the student's unformed potential to acquire it, intellectual development must proceed on the basis of knowledge that the student actually possesses. Aristotle inherited this contrast from Plato, and, in a way comparable to Brown, Buttaci uses Aristotle's version of a Platonic concept to shed a retrospective light on the earlier thinker.

Two essays on Plato's *Laws*, by George Harvey and Mark Ralkowski (Chapters 8 and 9), show us how Plato continued to refine his thinking about the precise relation between *aretē* and civic life in his last dialogue. As Harvey notes, the Athenian Stranger—the principal speaker of the dialogue—imagines a pre-political phase of human life that follows a civilizational collapse. Harvey argues that

the human beings who inhabit this phase can exhibit genuine virtue, even if not the complete virtue that can be attained only in the *polis*. Harvey recognizes that this claim is surprising, given that the Stranger's pre-political humans lack rational self-determination. (This problem resembles somewhat the one explored by Elliott and Motta in the context of the *Republic*). Harvey's solution is to argue that the pre-political humans are, in fact, ruled by reason, only not their own, but rather the divine reason that orders the cosmos. From this point of view, he suggests, their virtue might even be superior to that attained in political communities. While Harvey looks at the possibilities of life before the *polis*, Ralkowski is concerned with the causes of civic decline. He argues that a key cause identified in the *Laws* is maritime trade, with its associated development of naval power and overseas colonies. As Ralkowski shows, Plato's treatment of this theme belongs to a wider genre of reflection in the fourth century BCE about the causes of Athenian decline and in fact bears some striking similarities to diagnoses found in his contemporary and rival Isocrates. At the same time, Plato's critique of sea power is distinguished by being rooted in his underlying conception of *πλεονεξία* (grasping for more), which gives his diagnosis of Athenian failure a psychological dimension that Isocrates's lacks.

Our series of chapters on Aristotle begins with two essays (Chapters 10 and 11) that focus on the relation between *aretē* and *prohairesis* (choice). In the first of these essays, Gary S. Beck takes up an impasse arising from Aristotle's claim that virtuous agents choose virtuous actions for their own sakes. Beck's argument begins from Aristotle's distinction between performing a virtuous action and acting virtuously. According to Aristotle, the former can be done by anyone, and from any number of motives, while the latter can be done only by a virtuous person. This distinction, central as it is, raises a difficulty because we expect that a virtuous action performed without virtue—such as a “charitable” donation performed by a self-serving politician—lacks intrinsic value. How then could a virtuous person choose it for its own sake? According to Beck, the key to solving this problem is to see that the action performed by a self-serving politician and that performed by a virtuous person are

different *qua* actions, not simply on account of their motives. Since for Aristotle the ends at which the agent aims are themselves constitutive of the actions, the actions themselves are different, and the virtuous person chooses for its own sake only the virtuous action done virtuously. Paula Gottlieb continues the discussion of *aretē* and choice by comparing the different treatments of virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*. She argues that this comparison sheds a clarifying light on certain long-disputed questions about the *NE*. In particular, Gottlieb notes that Aristotle differs in the two works regarding his attitude toward three traits: friendliness, truthfulness, and wit. While he includes them as virtues in the *NE*, he regards them as mere look-alikes in the *EE*. Keeping in mind that virtue requires choosing virtuous actions for their own sakes, Gottlieb argues that Aristotle must have had a more capacious notion of choice in the *NE*, which allowed him to regard these traits as genuine virtues.

Like Plato, Aristotle was deeply interested in the development of *aretē*, from both a political and a pedagogical perspective. This topic is the focus of essays by Giulio Di Basilio and Audrey L. Anton (Chapters 12 and 13). Di Basilio's argument concerns Aristotle's notoriously obscure notion of "natural virtue." While Aristotle's treatment of natural virtue has often been seen through the lens of his concern to distinguish true virtue from look-alikes, Di Basilio argues that it should also be seen as an important contribution to his theory of ethical development. In particular, Di Basilio argues that scholars have been wrong to assume that, for Aristotle, virtue requires the externally-directed process of habituation described in *NE* Book II. Anton is similarly concerned with the concept of habituation in Aristotle's theory of *aretē*, and she puts this concept to work in a novel way in connection with the distinction between *sōphrosunē* and *enkrateia* (mentioned above in connection with Brown's essay). Anton begins from a well-known puzzle about Aristotle's account of *akrasia* (lack of self-restraint): Aristotle claims that the akratic agent fails to act on moral knowledge he possesses. How is this possible? For Anton, the key to answering this question is to distinguish between degrees of moral understanding. Although

the virtuous, the enkratic, and the akratic all assent to the same moral principle, they grasp this principle to different degrees. Anton argues that this difference in understanding is itself to be explained in terms of habituation: because the enkratic and akratic are less accustomed to acting well, they lack the habituation that Aristotle regards as the essential source of moral knowledge.

We bring the collection to a fitting close with an essay by Elena Bartolini dedicated to Aristotle's theory of friendship (Chapter 14). On Bartolini's reading of Aristotle, friendship is not merely a virtue, but the essential context in which virtue expresses itself. She argues that this deep connection between virtue and friendship explains some of the key features of virtue described elsewhere in the volume, including the connection of virtue with knowledge. As much as *aretē* has traditionally been invoked to distinguish the virtuous agent from others, Bartolini reminds us that virtue also can bring us together: it brought together Plato and Aristotle in ancient Athens, and more than two thousand years later, it brings together the authors of these varied essays.

