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Review Article

Aidos: Nurturing Social Shame as a Moral Virtue from Plato's Perspective

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Abstract

Introduction: In his collected works on ethical inquiry, Plato presents two distinct approaches. The first approach denies that virtue (arete) can be taught, considering not everyone worthy of education, and emphasizes the exclusivity of moral training. The second approach, however, is more practical and inclusive, suggesting that all people are capable of acquiring virtues such as aidos (shame). The present study explores the concept of aidos and the nurture of social shame as a moral virtue in Plato's thought.

Material and Methods: The present study is a review article that works on social shame as a moral virtue. To achieve the goal, articles and books published in this domain were reviewed.

Conclusion: In the Socratic dialogue Charmides, Plato directly raises the question of whether aidos qualifies as a virtue. In Protagoras, he discusses the teachability of aidos, asserting that this virtue, unlike specialized skills, should be shared by all members of society, provided they can nurture it through learning.

Keywords: *Aidos, Plato, Social Shame, Moral Virtue*

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INTRODUCTION

The term aidos (αἰδώς) in Ancient Greek, used as a feminine noun, encompasses meanings such as shame, modesty, respect, and honor. Some theorists, including Ted, interpret aidos as a sense of shame mingled with fear and reverence. Several scholars find the twofold meaning—feeling shame and showing respect—most fitting for the term aidos [1]. Among the various meanings found in ancient Greek texts, the term that seems most appropriate and frequently associated with aidos is "shame," particularly social shame.

Therefore, it can be argued that shame must possess certain characteristics of arete (virtue). In ancient Greece, arete was often understood as an individual's ability to successfully fulfill their roles within the polis (city-state). Although Plato supports the idea that virtue is teachable and considers its transmission by true educators of virtue essential for the strength and prosperity of the polis, he also opposes the Sophists, who claimed to be teachers of virtue. Plato challenges their position by denying the multiplicity of virtues that the Sophists advocate and instead promotes a unified concept of virtue. Protagoras is the first Sophist whose ideas Plato critiques in two dialogues: Theaetetus and Protagoras. It is in the Protagoras dialogue that his views on aidos are presented. Protagoras considers aidos a virtue

not reserved for a select group, but one that all people possess. He emphasizes the inherently social nature of aidos and its vital role in maintaining civil order. According to Protagoras, by command of Zeus, all humans are endowed with aidos (shame) and dike (justice). These are not innate gifts, but qualities that can be acquired, and every individual must strive to obtain them [2]. In light of this, the present study explores the concept of aidos and the nurture of social shame as a moral virtue from Plato's perspective.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study is a review article that works on social shame as a moral virtue. To achieve the goal, articles and books published in this domain were reviewed.

DISCUSSION

Protagoras's Perspective

In the Protagoras dialogue, Plato raises the question: is arete teachable? Protagoras argues that political virtue is indeed teachable, but this leads to a deeper question: how can such a skill be taught, and what exactly is its virtue?

Scholars assert that Protagoras's response emphasizes the belief that all people share in justice, since Zeus distributed shame (aidos) and justice (dike) among all humans. These qualities, therefore, form part of the moral capacity embedded in the structure of society [3]. From Protagoras's viewpoint, humans are inherently equipped with a latent potential that makes virtue and justice necessary in their actions. Yet this potential does not manifest equally in everyone. Why is that? Because nature is imperfect; some individuals act wrongly and therefore are subject to punishment. Still, everyone has the God-given capacity, virtue, and ability to improve and be reformed. The gap between possessing this moral potential and its actualization can be bridged by society—through parents, local educators, Protagorean-style instruction, or, if necessary, the Athenian penal system—which plays a corrective and supplementary role, empowering individuals with virtue [4].

In reality, power is not distributed according to virtue. Due to their competitive nature, humans desire to act in complete freedom, which leads them into conflict over resources. Eventually, Zeus intervenes to prevent the destruction of humankind by sending Hermes to bestow the qualities of dike and aidos upon humanity. When Hermes asks Zeus how these qualities should be distributed among humans, Zeus instructs that they be shared equally among all people—because if only a few possess them, no city will endure.[4] According to Protagoras, aidos and dike are distributed evenly and universally, forming the dual pillars of civil society. Unlike technical skills that are reserved for a few, these moral qualities are given to all. As a result, everyone is equipped with a sense of respect and righteousness, empowered to act with goodwill and moral judgment, and made indispensable for democratic order.

In Protagoras's view, logos is a fundamental precondition for the city's existence, and all citizens must partake in it if a city is to thrive.[5] This is the very essence of virtue, which consists of three elements: justice, self-restraint, and piety [6]. Virtue, which includes aidos and dike, is something that everyone must possess. When Protagoras refers to virtues in his myth, he mentions shame, justice, and self-restraint; and when speaking of their opposites, he refers only to injustice and impiety [4].

Aidos in Plato's Thought

In several instances across Plato's works, aidos appears in relation to the absence of respect for parents and elders, disregard for oaths, self-righteousness, and the lack of esteem for others' beliefs. This indicates that aidos encompasses a broad and inclusive domain [5]. Alongside the term aidos, Plato also employs the word aischune.

In the Republic, aidos is associated with fear [6]. In Book V of the Republic, aidos is presented as respect for elders, traditions, and as a foundation for promoting cohesion and solidarity within the polis. Here, aidos is distinguished from the fear of external punishment. Fear arises from witnessing the power of a superior force, while aidos stems from an internal recognition of that superior force, aligning one's desires with it in a way that readies individuals to obey laws—essentially a fear of the stronger [7]. Describing the tyrannical individual, Plato says that if such a person finds people around him who remain loyal to order, law, and shame, he kills some, exiles others, and thereby purges the soul of any self-restraint that might control desires, replacing it with folly [8]. However, in Book III of the Laws, aidos is portrayed as an internal fear of external laws and serves as a crucial motivator for courage—leading to endurance in battle and victory over enemies [9]. Plato considers disregard for laws as a form of fearlessness that ultimately results in shamelessness. He highlights the importance of fear when combined with aidos to limit excessive freedom and prevent lawlessness, which otherwise leads to widespread disorder. As a result of this shamelessness, individuals come to reject guidance from those wiser than themselves—and even from the laws [9].

Overall, in the Laws, aidos is connected to punishment and external discipline, involving a form of deterrent fear and fear of disgrace and dishonor. It is linked to aischune, which is dependent on others' opinions. Many of the laws are designed to cultivate respect and dignity, focusing on the outward expression of behavior and encouraging conformity with legal obligations. Nevertheless, the Laws also place considerable emphasis on education and habituation to inner values such as respect, shame, and personal commitment to ethical principles [5].

The nurture of social shame as a moral virtue in Plato's thought

In Book V of the Republic, Plato addresses the importance of social shame, moral modesty, and the method of teaching it through legislation. He asserts: "What must be left to the children is not silver or gold, but social shame and moral modesty. Yet we go astray in this matter, for we assume that when the youth commit immoral acts, we must scold them. But scolding and advice are of no use. Therefore, the wise lawgiver must make the elders aware not to forget shame in the presence of the young, nor to utter improper words. Rather, they must behave in such a way that no one would rebuke them in front of the youth. Where the old lack modesty and shame, no good morals can be expected from the young" [6].

In Book VIII, Plato regards shame as a force to control lust, stating that the lawgiver must attend to this point: "According to law, every effort shall be made to weaken sexual desires as far as possible, and to redirect bodily energy through rigorous physical training. In cities where the suppression of lust is not accompanied by shamelessness, the implementation of this law will be easier—for those who do not cross the bounds of shame will have fewer opportunities to indulge in lust" [7].

In the dialogue Gorgias, Plato explores the theme of shame through three general forms: flattering shame, Socratic shame (elenchus), and Platonic shame. Flattering shame applies to those who, out of fear of criticism, resort to flattery and excessive praise of others. For them, shame functions more as a desire to avoid disapproval rather than a pursuit of truth, reducing identity to a need for mutual recognition [10]. Socratic shame, as seen in the method of elenchus, arises through questions about justice, virtue, and the experience of moral embarrassment in the audience [11]. Some scholars, such as Kaufman, have noted Socrates' failure to persuade his interlocutors of his position. Kaufman argues that Socrates' lack

of success stems in part from the harsh and uncomfortable nature of elenchus, which can have reverse effects—as seen in Gorgias, where Polus and Gorgias are embarrassed, while Callicles, who shows no capacity for shame, becomes angry [12].

In the Gorgias dialogue, the concepts of shame and persuasion are frequently employed. Plato uses terms such as aidos, aischune, aischron ("shame"), and aischunesthia ("to feel shame"). Here, aidos is portrayed as a feeling that educates noble desires, fostering a good and beautiful life. The concept of aidos is used both in the conventional sense—awareness of conflict between personal beliefs and social norms—and as a form of moral shame experienced when inner desires clash with natural inclinations toward goodness. Socrates redefines conventional shame, which he sees as hypocritical and sophistical, into a kind of moral shame meant to promote self-knowledge [13]. In his dialogues with Polus, Gorgias, and Callicles, Socrates investigates the ethical effects of shame. With Polus, he first attempts to reach agreement through reasoned argument. However, Polus, while analyzing aischune, seeks to reject the claim that committing injustice is worse and more shameful than suffering it. Thus, his expression of aischune reflects a belief that committing a wrong is more disgraceful than enduring one. Shame acts as a moral sentiment that motivates behavior. Polus acknowledges the ethical function of shame in relation to the good, but it remains unclear whether shame itself convinces him that committing injustice is worse than suffering it [14]. Socrates' analysis of aischune is based on his moral evaluation of shame. Polus's view—that injustice is more shameful than justice—is grounded in the assumption that injustice is worse. In Moss's interpretation, Socrates' analysis of aischune in the Gorgias shows that Polus's judgment about the shamelessness of injustice depends on his prior understanding of kakos (evil/harm) relative to lupe (pain) [14,15]. Polus and Gorgias both attempt to escape this pain through extended debate. Socrates reminds Callicles: "I have encountered many people, but none has truly tested my soul. They were either not wise like you, or, if wise, they did not speak plainly—because they did not wish me well. Gorgias and Polus are both highly intelligent and kindly disposed toward me, but they cannot speak frankly, as they are more ashamed than they should be. Their shame is such that it forces them into contradictions during debate. But you possess all the necessary qualities… If you agree with me on something, its truth will be confirmed—not because of ignorance, nor because of shame, nor because you wish to deceive me. For I am certain, as you said, that you wish me well [11].

CONCLUSION

In Plato's works, we encounter a conception of aidos that is broad and far-reaching. He uses both terms; aidos and aischune. For Plato, aischune serves as a motivational force in democratic deliberation and philosophical discussion, and like Aristotle, he places it within the rational part of the soul. Plato's dialogues rarely provide clear examples of aidos leading to successful moral transformation in the interlocutor, largely due to how the audience perceives shame. The experience of shame can serve either as a means for self-transformation or as a social mask used to preserve one's public standing. Often, shame remains hidden for social reasons, and the interlocutor's identity is primarily linked to social recognition—that is, their assigned role—making it difficult for them to abandon this position of safety and openly acknowledge their faults. The clearest evidence for the internalization of shame appears in Plato's theory of the tripartite soul, articulated in the Republic and Phaedrus. Yet, in neither dialogue is the nature of aidos specifically detailed. The Platonic placement of aidos is

within the spirited part of the soul (thumos), which mediates between reason (nous) and desire (epithumia), and acts as an ally to reason. This part of the soul reacts by internalizing authentic standards of dignity and shame, acquired through habituation. In thumos, aidos is more concerned with the fear of external punishment. In Euthyphro, Socrates resists the idea that aidos is merely fear of disgrace and instead considers fear to be a general category of which aidos is a part, aligning it more closely with aischune. In the Charmides dialogue, Socrates suggests that aidos can sometimes be good and sometimes bad, whereas self-control (sōphrosynē) is always good—thus sōphrosynē cannot be identical to shame. The beauty of Charmides' aidos, from Socrates' point of view, is explained through a kind of deconstruction of shame. Plato and Aristotle both define shame as fear for one's reputation, but Charmides' aidos goes further—not only is he afraid of others' criticism, but his aidos reflects an acceptance of standards that go beyond his subjective perspective and measure his beliefs and actions. This dialogue is the only text in which the direct question is raised: Is aidos a virtue? Plato ultimately shows that aidos is not a true virtue. However, in the Protagoras, Plato (through the character of Protagoras) presents aidos and dike (justice) as virtues that are not limited to a particular class of people but are equally distributed among all. Political virtue, in this view, is something that everyone must possess—and it necessarily includes both aidos and dike.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical issues (such as plagiarism, conscious satisfaction, misleading, making and or forging data, publishing or sending to two places, redundancy and etc.) have been fully considered by the writers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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