"Eudaimonia" and "Aretē" among the Sophists

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1. Introduction

From the first half of the fourth century BCE through late antiquity, Greek ethical philosophy is prevailingly eudaimonistic in the following strict semantic sense: the majority of late classical philosophers and their successors maintain that what they call "eudaimonia" is the goal of human life. Accordingly, their aims are to clarify what eudaimonia is and how to achieve it. Furthermore, the majority maintain that possession of what they call "aretē," which they use to refer to an optimal condition of psychē, is crucial for the achievement of eudaimonia. So, here again, the philosophers' aims are to clarify what aretē is and how possession of it contributes to the realization of eudaimonia.

My aim in this chapter is to consider these two features of Greek ethical theory in relation to our extant sophistic texts and pertinent testimonies. Precisely, my governing question is what roles, if any, the terms "eudaimonia" and "aretē" play in sophistic ethics. My answer to the governing question is this. The extant evidence suggests that sophistic ethics is not eudaimonistic, in the strict semantic sense that it is not explicitly characterized in terms of the pursuit of "eudaimonia." On the other hand, a significant number of sophistic ethical works were composed explicitly in terms of the pursuit of "aretē." Remarkably, however, in these cases pursuit of aretē is not conceived as pursuit of an optimal condition of the psychē. Rather, it is conceived as pursuit of an optimal form of life. As such, in a significant body of sophistic ethics, "aretē" plays a role akin to that of "eudaimonia" in philosophical ethics of the fourth century and thereafter.

2. "The Sophists"

Some scholars, myself among them, have recently questioned the propriety and utility of the phrase "the sophists." But I now think that such questions may themselves be questioned. It is true that Plato's biased treatment of those he calls "sophistai" ought to be resisted. Likewise, it is true that the term "sophistēs" was sometimes used in the fifth century, with respect and admiration, to refer to various figures who cannot properly be categorized among Plato's sophists. Nonetheless, I think that the phrase "the sophists" can be resuscitated in the following way.

The noun "sophistēs" first occurs in the early fifth century. I assume that its meaning conforms to its etymology, namely "an agent or practitioner (-tēs) of sophia."

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In its earliest occurrences in the eighth and seventh centuries, the word "sophia" itself means "skill" but limited to a narrow range of manual domains such as carpentry, navigation, and charioteering. In the sixth century, the domains of "sophia" expand to include poetry as well as personal and social skills. By the early fifth century, instances of "sophia," particularly in philosophical contexts, are used to refer to a master skill of life management. In such contexts as well as in sixth century contexts where it is used to denote personal and social skills, "sophia" is reasonably rendered as "wisdom." Through the influence of such usage, particularly among philosophers, a distinct sub-sense of "sophia" as "wisdom" is ultimately established, perhaps by the mid fourth century.

In light of this, one way that the extension of "sophistēs" may vary depends on the type of "sophia" in question. For example, in Prometheus Bound, the characterization of Prometheus as a "sophistēs" seems due to his technical skills. In Pindar's fifth Isthmian ode (c. 468), "sophistēs" refers to poets. And an instance of "sophistēs" in Herodotus refers to a practitioner of wisdom and saliently includes Solon in its extension.

In the latter fifth century, a distinct sense of "sophistēs" emerges, meaning "a professional practitioner or agent of sophia." For convenience, I will call this the "professional" sense of "sophistēs." The semantic development coincides with the emergence of a trend of professional activity whose participants are philosophically

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3 More precisely, these early instances are of "sophiē," i.e. in the Ionian dialect. But here and later in the discussion of "aretē" I gloss over dialectical variations for convenience.
4 H. I. 15.410-13; Archilochos, fr. 211 West; Alcman, fr. 2A.3-4 Snell.
5 Solon, fr. 13.49-52; Sappho, fr. 60 Snell; Pindar O. 1.115-17; Theogn. 1.120, 502.
6 Solon, fr. 27.16; Simonides, fr. 37.1; Xenophanes B2.11-22; Heraclitus B112 (ep. B32, 41); Empedocles B3.6-13.
8 "For even in the heroic time, brave warriors of Aegina were accustomed to win fame, and they are praised on the lyre and on the manifold music of the flute for uncounted time; and, through the will of Zeus, their divine honors have given a new theme to wise poets (sophistai)." (5.28) Cp. Edmunds (2006) 418: "Curiously all the occurrences of sophistai in the fragments of Old Comedy have to do with music or poetry, and likewise some fragments of tragedy."
9 "When all these nations had been added to the Lydian empire, and Sardis was at the height of her wealth and prosperity, all the sophistai of Greece of that time paid visits to the capital. Much the most distinguished of them was Solon the Athenian, the man who at the request of his countrymen made a code of laws for Athens." (1.29.4; cp. 4.95.2, where Pythagoras is so called.) Cp. the instances in the Hippocratic On Ancient Medicine, 20.1,7—arguably contemporaneous with Hedorotus' Histories—which appear to refer to philosophers such as Empedocles in contrast to physicians (hiatroi).
10 Cp. Dissoi Logoi 6.7, where the sophistai are described as teaching sophia and aretē, but distinguished from the Pythagoreans and Anaxagoreans who also teach these things.
engaged with the broad subjects of human and civic life (although by no means only with these domains). They examine the topics of language and various forms of rhetoric; the nature of government, law, and justice; the origins of human society, culture, and its most prized artifacts; social relations and values; as well as the nature of human agency and responsibility. This chapter is concerned with the texts of the sophistai in the professional sense of this term.

The extension of the professional sense of "sophistēs" depends on the time to which the term is indexed. For example, the people to whom Aristotle explicitly appends the phrase "ho sophistēs"—presumably using the noun in the professional sense—are limited to Polydias, Lycophron, and Bryson. This chapter targets the later fifth and early fourth centuries. According to this temporal index, the extension of "sophistēs" saliently includes figures such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, Antiphon, and the authors of the Dissoi Logoi and Anonymus Iamblichī— in short, precisely those whom one would expect.

Granted this, let me add two final points on the professional sophists. First, I regard all of the professional sophists just identified as philosophers. Second, some of the Socratics seem to have taught for pay. Aristippus is the signal example. It follows that he is a sophist. Granting this, we have no secure fragments, let alone texts, of Aristippus.'

3. "Eudaim-" through the Fifth Century

Between its first extant occurrences in the seventh century and the end of the fifth century BCE, three senses of the noun "eudaimonia" and adjective "eudaimōn" appear to be distinguishable:

ETYMOLOGICAL: the condition of being favored by (a) divinity.
THEODOTIC: wellbeing due divine favor.
FELICITOUS: wellbeing.16

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11 Cp. C. Joachim Classen, "Aristotle's Picture of the Sophists," in The Sophists and their Legacy, G.B. Kerferd, ed., Franz Steiner, 1981, 7-24, at 7. Granted this, Aristotle also mentions Aristippus of Cyrene among the sophists (Metaph. 996a32-33, noted below), presumably using the professional sense of the term. And there is a testimony that in some lost work, presumably Sophist, Aristotle referred to the seven sophoi as "sophistai" (Etymolog. M. 722, 16)
13 Cp. DL 2.65.
14 Cp. footnote 11. Aeschines of Sphettus may have taught for pay. At any rate, Lysias calls him a sophist (fr. 1 = Athenaeus 612F).
15 In particular here, it is unfortunate that nothing from Aristippus' work On Aretē (DL 2.85) survives.
16 Cp. LSJ, whose senses 1 and 2 are similar to my etymological and felicitous senses. In contrast, the fundamental problem with the principal literature on the semantics of "eudaim-" is a failure to distinguish sense and reference. E.g. this defect mars C. de Heer,
Note that the polysemous sense alternations here turn on the relation of cause and effect. Such polysemy occurs widely through the world's lexica. For example, consider the following examples of cause-effect, including producer-product, sense alternations in the English words "sad," "abstract," and "newspaper":

"The sad film made the audience sad."

"These abstract paintings were created by Richard Diebenkorn, who in his early years was an abstract painter."

"The headline in today's newspaper is that the newspaper is going out of business."

The earliest extant instance of the adjective "eudaimôn" occurs at the end of Hesiod's *Works and Days*:

"Eudaimôn and prosperous (olbios) on these days is he who, knowing all these things, does his work without offending the deathless [gods], discerning the omens of birds and avoiding transgression."17

Compare the following instance from the Theognidea (6th c.):

"May I be eudaimôn and dear (philos) to the gods, Cyrnus. That is the only aretē I desire."18

In both cases, arguably we have the etymological sense. Compare M.L. West's comment on the instance of "eudaimôn" in Hesiod:

"Both here and in its next appearance at Thgn. 653 … the basic sense [of 'eudaimôn'] of 'being in God's good books' is palpable, as often later."19

Independent support for the existence of an etymological sense of "eudaim-" derives from Aristotle, who makes the following remark in book 2 of the *Topics*:

"Another method of attack is to refer a term back to its original meaning on the ground that it is more fitting to take it in this sense than in the sense that is now established … [Aristotle proceeds to offer several examples, including the following one.] Similarly, eudaimôn can apply to one who has a daimôn that is good (spoudaios), just as Xenocrates says: he who has a soul that is good is

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17 *WD* 826-8.
18 Theogn. 653-4.
eudaimōn, for this [namely, the soul] is [according to Xenocrates] the daimōn of each person."\(^{20}\)

Contrast what I am suggesting are etymological instances of "eudaim-" in Hesiod and Theognis with the following theodotic sense of the noun, which concludes one of the Homeric hymns to Athena (c. 7-6\(^{th}\) c.):

"Hail, goddess; give me fortune (tuchēn) and eudaimoniē."\(^{21}\)

Compare the concluding verses of the Homeric hymns to Heracles and Hephaestus:

"Hail, lord, son of Zeus; give me aretē and prosperity (olbon)."\(^{22}\)

"So, be gracious, Hephaestus; and give me aretē and prosperity."\(^{23}\)

Likewise, consider the theodotic sense of the adjective "eudaimōn" in the following verses from Bacchylides' fifth ode (c. 475):

"Prosperous (olbios) is he to whom god (theos) gives a fated share (moiran) of fine things and, together with enviable fortune, a wealthy life to live. For no mortal on earth has been eudaimōn in everything."\(^{24}\)

Observe the conjunction of "eudaimōn" and "olbios" in Hesiod and also the proximity of these terms in Bacchylides. The conjunction occurs in two other early instances of "eudaimōn": a fragment of Eumelus and another verse of the Theognidea.\(^{25}\)

The conjunction encourages the thought that the theodotic sense of "eudaim-" more precisely entails a particular kind of wellbeing, namely possession of wealth, that is, material prosperity. However, I resist this inference.

Semantically, neither the theodotic nor, I suggest, the felicitous sense of "eudaim-" entails a specific form of wellbeing. Rather, possession of wealth is an especially common conception of wellbeing; and this is why the association is so common. A fragment from Democritus, which I will cite below, provides some textual support for this claim. Presently, note that in the context of Greek vase painting of the late fifth century, the goddess Eudaimonia is consistently associated with maternity and

\(^{20}\) Top. 112a32-38.
\(^{22}\) H. Hymn 15.9.
\(^{23}\) H. Hymn 20.8.
\(^{24}\) Bacchylides 5.50-55.
\(^{25}\) Eumelus, fr. 8.1; Theogn. 1013.
familial prosperity. In short, distinct conceptions of wellbeing are salient in distinct contexts.

The etymological and theodotic senses of "eudaim-" seem to coexist in the archaic period. The felicitous sense first appears in the late fifth century. Perhaps the clearest example occurs in the following passage of Herodotus:

"I will proceed with my history, telling the story as I go along of small cities of men no less than of great. For most of those which were great once are small today; and those which used to be small were great in my own time. Knowing, therefore, that human (anthrōpēiēn) eudaimoniē never abides (menousan) in the same place, I shall pay attention to both alike."  

The phrase "human eudaimoniē" indicates that eudaimonia need not be an attribute of humans. I presume the alternative to human eudaimonia that Herodotus assumes is divine eudaimonia, which is precisely eudaimonia that does abide. But in that case, the eudaimonia of a divinity cannot itself be due to a divinity.  

I presume that the following instance of "eudaimōn" in Thucydides also has a felicitous sense:

"Consequently, the kingdom [of the Odrysians] attained a great degree of power. For all of the kingdoms in Europe between the Ionian Gulf and the Euxine Sea, it was the greatest in revenue (chrēmatōn prosodōi) and the rest of eudaimonia (tēi allēi eudaimoniai)."

Likewise, Thucydides sometimes uses the adjective to denote the upper-class in a polis. This usage also occurs in pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of the Athenians*, for example:

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27 Hdt. 1.5.
28 Herodotus, among others, sometimes attributes eudaimonia to entities other than humans or divinities, for example, to poleis and geographical locations: Corinth (Hdt. 3.52.13), Naxos (5.28.4), Euboia (5.31.12), Sparta (7.220.9); cp. Andocides, *On the Mysteries* on Athens at 109.8. But in these cases, the place is so described in terms of the resources it provides for its inhabitants' wellbeing.
29 Other attributions of eudaimonia to divinities occur in Plato (*Symp.* 202c6, *Tim.* 34b8) and Aristotle (*EE* 1217a23, *EN* 1101b23). Consider also Aristotle's phrase at *EN* 1099b12: "theodotan eudaimonian." The felicitous sense must also be the one that occurs in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1, where Aristotle asks how eudaimonia is attained and whether it is due to divine dispensation. If Aristotle were using "eudaimonia" in the theodotic sense, the question would be question begging. Note also that Theophrastus composed a work in one book entitled *On Divine Eudaimonia* (DL 6.49).
30 Thuc. 2.97.5.
31 Thuc. 1.6.3.3, 2.53.1.4.
"The people (dēmos) have built many wrestling grounds, dressing rooms, and public baths for their own use. And the mob (ochlos) enjoys these things more than the few (oligoi) and the eudaimones (well to do/well off)."  

As the example from Herodotus has already suggested, neither the theodotic nor felicitous sense of "eudaim-" entails that the wellbeing is stable or complete. Other instances that illustrate this point in the case of the felicitous sense include the following one from Thucydides, where he is describing the radical social transformations that occurred during the plague:

"For where men hitherto practiced concealment, that they were not acting purely after their pleasure, they now showed a more careless daring. They saw how sudden was the change of fortune in the case both of those who were eudaimōn (eudaimonōn) and suddenly died, and of those who before had nothing but in a moment were in possession of the property of others."  

Consider also the following example from Antiphon's first tetralogy:

"His contributions to the treasury and his provision of choruses may be satisfactory indication of his eudaimonia; but they are anything but an indication of his innocence. It was precisely his fear of losing his eudaimonia that drove him to commit the murder."  

Instances of the theodotic sense that illustrate that stability or completeness of wellbeing is not entailed include the following two from Pindar:

"They say that for a man eudaimonia that endures in bloom (parmoniman thalloisan) brings some [good] things and some [bad] ones."  

"Each of us differs in the life we have been allotted. One man possesses some things, and others possess others. And it is impossible for anyone to attain all (hapasan) eudaimonia. I cannot speak of any whom Fate has given this secure fulfillment (telos empedon). But to you, Theariôn, she has given a fitting season (kairos) of prosperity."  

4. "Eudaim-" among Philosophers through the Early Fourth Century

Ignoring Socrates and the Socratics, through the fifth and early fourth centuries the term "eudaim-" is rare among philosophers and so among sophists. It occurs just six

32 [Xen.] Ath. Pol. 2.10.
33 Thuc. 2.53.1.
34 Antiphon 1.3.8.
35 P. 7.20-21.
36 N. 7.80-84.
times: once in Gorgias; once in the Dissoi Logoi; and, somewhat exceptionally, four times among the ethical fragments of Democritus. The adjective "eudaimôn" occurs in a fragment of Gorgias' Encomium for the Eleans:

"Elis is a eudaimôn city-state."  

To be sure, this is not a philosophical text, although it was composed by a sophist. At any rate, given the civic encomiastic context, I presume this instance has a theodotic sense. The verb "eudaimonizein" occurs once in the following passage of the Dissoi Logoi:

"Come now and answer me the following: if good and bad are really the same, is it not the case that you are pitying beggars because they suffer many bad things, and at the same time counting them eudaimôn (eudaimonizeis) because they enjoy many good things?"

The implied contrast with the condition of beggars indicates that the wellbeing here referred to consists of possession of wealth. Likewise, in most of the Democritean instances, the association of eudaimonia with wealth is explicit; for example, in the following political fragment:

"Poverty (peniê) in a democracy is as preferable to so-called (kaleomenês) eudaimoniê among dictators as freedom is to slavery."

But observe that the expression "so-called" here corroborates my claim above that "eudaimonia" does not entail, but rather is commonly associated with possession of wealth. In the following fragment, Democritus' explicit reference to a daimôn suggests that he is employing the theodotic sense:

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37 I note here an instance of the noun "eudaimonia" in the Pythagorean acusmata: "What is best (ti ariston)? Eudaimonia." (Iambl. VP 18.82.17. Cp. also the doxa at DL 8.32 that humans are eudaimones when they have a good soul.) I assume that the Pythagorean text, which Iamblichus derives from Aristotle's work On the Pythagoreans, was originally composed in the early fifth century. (I am here also assuming that Aristotle composed just one work on the topic; cp. W. Burkert, Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism, Harvard University Press, 1972, 166-69.) I assume that the sense of "eudaimonia" here is etymological, an assumption encouraged by a salient view among the acusmata that human life should consist of service to the divine. But I regard Pythagoras as a proto-philosopher and the acusmata as proto-philosophical.

38 Gorgias B10.


40 Democritus B251.
"Eudaimoniē does not dwell in herds or in gold; the soul (psychē) is the dwelling place of the divine (daimonos)."\(^{41}\)

While the number of instances of "eudaim-" among fifth and early fourth century philosophical and so sophistic authors is small—again ignoring the Socratics—I see no reason to doubt that if we had more texts, we would find more instances of "eudaim-" within them. For example, possibly, the word occurred in Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles*. At least, it occurs three times in Xenophon's paraphrase of that work.\(^{42}\) Granted this, the main thesis I want to suggest here is that there is no evidence to support the view that among fifth and early fourth century philosophers and so among sophists— and again ignoring Socrates and the Socratics—ethical theory was generally conceived explicitly in terms of the goal of "eudaimonia," which is to say, as it came to be conceived in the late classical period and thereafter.

The fact that the word "eudaimonia" occurs several times in Democritus might encourage the thought that Democritean ethics or at least one of Democritus' ethical works is also eudaimonistic in this strict semantic sense. But based on doxographical reports, I am disinclined to accept that view. For example, consider following testimony from Arius Didymus:

"Democritus and Plato both place eudaimonia in the psychē. For [Democritus] writes: [here two fragments (B170 and B171) in which eudaimonia is associated with the psychē follow.] And he calls it [that is, eudaimonia] contentment (euthumia) and wellbeing (euestō) and harmony, and both proportion and tranquility."\(^{43}\)

This testimony indicates that Democritus did not characterize the human value on which he focused saliently in terms of "eudaimonia," but rather in terms of "euthumia" and other terms such as "euestō."

5. The Pursuit of Aretē

There is good reason to believe that a significant number of sophistic ethical texts endorsed the pursuit of aretē. The *Dissoi Logoi* provides the clearest evidence for this claim. Section 6 of the text is devoted to the question whether aretē and wisdom (sophia) can be taught and learned. One consideration cited in favor of the thesis that they cannot be taught is that there are no demonstrated teachers of these things. However, the author subsequently criticizes this view:

\(^{41}\) Democritus B171.
\(^{42}\) *Mem.* 2.1.26.3, 29.4, 34.1.
\(^{43}\) Democritus A167. Cp. "The telos for Democritus is euthumia, but he also calls it euestō and uses other names" (DL 9.45); and Clement of Alexandria: "The Abderites also teach that there is a goal (telos). Democritus, in his book *On the Goal*, says that it is contentment (euthumia), which he also calls wellbeing (euestō)." (B4)
"Against [this] proof, that there are not demonstrated teachers [of aretē and wisdom], what else do the sophists (sophistai) teach if not wisdom and aretē?"  

One sophistic text that explicitly endorses the pursuit of aretē is Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles*. The original, which was also known as *Seasons* (Hōrai)—presumably referring to the stages of a man's life—does not survive. However, on the basis of Xenophon's paraphrase of the work, in addition to various testimonies, we can infer that Prodicus represented the hero Heracles at a crossroads poised to choose between two courses of life. These two courses were represented by two figures. In Xenophon, they are named "Aretē" and "Kakia." Compare the following testimony from a scholiast to Aristophanes' *Clouds*:

"There is a book by Prodicus entitled *Seasons*, in which he has Heracles encounter Aretē and Kakia, each calling him to her ways. And Heracles turns to Aretē and chooses her exertions (hidrōtas) over the transient pleasures of Kakia."  

The scholiast's reference to a book of Prodicus rather than to Xenophon's paraphrase of it encourages the view that the scholiast's description, which is in fact consistent with Xenophon's paraphrase, accurately describes general features of Prodicus' work. There is good reason to believe that in presenting a choice between the paths of life of Aretē and Kakia, Prodicus was adapting the theme of two paths of life in Hesiod's *Works and Days*:

"Badness (kakotēta) can be attained easily and in abundance; the path to her is smooth, and she lives very near to us. But between us and aretē, the immortal gods have placed exertion (hidrōta). Long and steep is the path that leads to her; and it is rough at first ...."

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44 *Dissoi Logoi* 6.7. In addition to providing evidence that a significant number of sophistic texts were concerned with the pursuit and teaching of aretē, section 6 of the *Dissoi Logoi* shows that the very question of the teachability of aretē was a topic of philosophical debate at the time. On my reading of the *Dissoi Logoi* as a whole, this very text is designed as a protreptic to the pursuit of sophia, and thereby, I would here add, to aretē of a kind. (See D. Wolfsdorf, "On the Unity of the *Dissoi Logoi*," in *Early Greek Ethics*, D. Wolfsdorf, ed., Oxford University Press, forthcoming.)

45 Cp. the instance of "hōras" so used at DL 8.10.

46 Prodicus B1.

47 The literal meaning of the word "hidrōs" is "sweat." Observe its occurrence in the plural in the scholiast's testimony above.

48 Hes. *WD* 287-91. Cp. West: "kakotēs and aretē are not 'vice' and 'virtue' but inferior and superior standing in society, determined principally by material prosperity ... The two roads in Hesiod represent alternative ways of life to choose between." (1978, 229)
In fact, Xenophon cites this passage in the context of his paraphrase of Prodicus. Hesiod himself uses the term "kakotēς," a variant of "kakia," for "badness." Moreover, the contrast between "aretē" and "kakia" or "kakotēς" occurs in several other texts of the late fifth century; for example:

"For honors come from aretē, not from kakotēς."

"How will one become a benefactor of men … and achieve this, not with kakia, but with aretē?"

"I was motivated by concern for my relatives and friends, and by concern for the whole city, with aretē and not with kakia."

In sum, there is good reason to believe that in his original text, Prodicus championed aretē, using that term. And so, we can conclude that Prodicus' Choice of Heracles was an educational exhortation to aretē.

As we will see, the Anonymus Iamblichi provides another example of a sophistic ethical text whose governing theme is the pursuit of aretē. But before turning to this text, and in light of my comments on both the Dissoi Logoi passage and Choice of Heracles, I want to pause over the term "aretē."

In philosophical ethics of at least the mid fourth century and later, pursuit of aretē is understood to mean pursuit of a certain condition of the psychē, which is in turn crucially responsible for eudaimonia. Although, as we have seen, "eudaimonia" does not feature in the sophistic ethical context as it came to in later Greek ethical philosophy, it may still be wondered whether the sophists viewed the pursuit of aretē as the pursuit of a state of the psychē crucially responsible for a good life. In the following, I am going to suggest that the teaching and pursuit of aretē in the sophistic ethical texts was not what

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49 Mem. 2.1.20.
50 Gorgias, Palamedes 16.
51 Anon. Iambl. 3.5.
52 Andocides, On the Mysteries 56. Cp. also e.g. Antisthenes, fr. 86; Lysias, Funeral Oration 2.9, 65.2.
53 Therefore, Prodicus is also committed to the view that aretē is in some manner teachable.
54 Another, more speculative possibility, is that Hippias of Elis' Trojan Dialogue also endorsed the pursuit of aretē. In the following passage of Plato's Hippias Major, the character Hippias describes the work as follows: "And by God, Socrates, just recently I've gained a good reputation [in Sparta], concerning fine (kala) pursuits, by giving an explanation of the practices which young men must pursue. I have a thoroughly fine speech composed on these matters ... This is the layout and the beginning of the speech: I recount how, when Troy had been captured, Neoptolemus asked Nestor what type of fine pursuits could give the one who practices them a fine reputation, even if he is young. And, in response, Nestor laid out for him a whole collection of very fine customs." (HMaj. 286A-B) Cp. K. Morgan, Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 109-11.
we find in Plato and his successors. In the sophistic texts, "aretē" is saliently used not to denote a property of the psychē, but a property of action and more broadly a form of life. In advancing this point, it will be helpful to discuss the meaning of "aretē."

6. The Meaning of "Arete"

"Arete" is a nominalization of the superlative adjective "aristos," which means "best" or "optimal." Accordingly, "aretē" means what the English word "best-ness" would mean if it existed. In other words, "aretē" means "optimality," that is, "an optimal condition." From Homer through at least the fifth century BCE, this is the only meaning of "aretē."

Since the word "optimality" is odd and the plural "optimalities" very odd outside of select technical discourses, "aretē" is, understandably, never translated in this way. More often, "aretē" is translated as "excellence" or as "virtue." "Optimality" and "excellence" both denote measures of value. But "optimality" denotes a supreme or superlative measure of value, whereas "excellence" denotes a measure of extreme value. For instance, assume 500 candidates have applied for an ethics position, and the search committee has short-listed five. A member of the committee may felicitously say:

"These five are all excellent, but among them so-and-so is optimal/the best."

It should also be clear that neither "optimality" nor "excellence" has the same meaning as "goodness." For instance, as the felicity of the following sentence shows, something that is excellent has more value than something that is merely good:

"It was a good performance, but not an excellent one."

The preceding points pertaining to the meanings of "aretē," "optimality," "excellence," and "goodness" all relate to the fact that value is a gradable property. Granted the importance of this point, more important for our purposes is the following. "Optimality," "excellence," "goodness" and likewise "aretē" may be attributed to most any kind of thing. This includes non-people as well as people. For example, the author of the Hippocratic Regimen in Acute Diseases says that one aretē of gruel is its lubricant nature, and that boiled hydromel has the same aretē as unboiled hydromel. Herodotus speaks of the aretē of Darius's horse; and Thucydides speaks of the aretē of land, referring to its fertility.

In the case of people, "aretē" may be attributed to ethical psychological traits; but it may also be attributed to non-ethical psychological traits; and it may be attributed to actions, ethical and non-ethical, as well as to people in ways that are not wholly reducible.

55 The following semantic remarks on evaluative terms are based on D. Wolfsdorf, On Goodness, Oxford University Press, 2019.
56 Diet. in Morbis 5.3 Littré.
57 Diet. in Morbis 15.44 Littré.
58 Hdt. 3.88.
59 Thuc. 1.2.4.
to psychological attributes or actions. For example, in the following verses from the Theognidea, "aretē" is used to denote optimality of character:

"It is hard even for a discerning (sophos) man, Timagoras, to know the temperament (orgēn) of many if he sees them from afar; for some keep badness (kakotēta) hidden by wealth, and others aretē hidden by baleful poverty."\(^{60}\)

In contrast, in the following verses from Solon, "aretē" is used to denote a property of actions, speech making and the exercise of wisdom, presumably in contexts of political leadership:

"In seven sevens [= at the age of 49], a man is best (aristos) in mind (noun) and tongue (glōssa) ... And in the ninth seven [= age 63], his tongue (glōssa) and wisdom (sophiē), albeit weaker, are both still capable (dunatai) of great aretē."\(^{61}\)

Likewise, in the following fragment from Melanthus, "aretē," here in the plural, appears to be used to denote an attribute of actions:

"For it was at his own expense that he adorned the temples of the gods and the Cecropian market place with the aretai of the demigods."\(^{62}\)

That is, I take it that the man here referred to financed the creation of statues or metopes of heroes represented as accomplishing deeds of supreme value.

Recall now the following verses from the Theognidea:

"May I be eudaimōn and dear to the gods, Cyrnus. That is the only aretē I desire."\(^{63}\)

In this case, the bearer of the desired aretē is a person. Presumably, this aretē depends on the character and way of life of the person. But, strictly speaking, since the aretē is simply a condition of being favored by the divine—recall that the suggested sense here is etymological—it is an extrinsic property of the person. Likewise, in another example from the Theognidea, the bearer of aretē is again a person; and the aretē is again an extrinsic property of a person, albeit an entirely different one:

"To the multitude of men there is this one aretē: to be rich (ploutein). All else, it seems, is useless ..."\(^{64}\)

Two semantic features of the evaluative terms "optimality," "excellence," "goodness," and "aretē" explain why these terms can be attributed to various kinds of

\(^{60}\) Theogn. 1062.
\(^{61}\) fr. 27.13-16.
\(^{62}\) fr. 1.
\(^{63}\) Theogn. 653-4.
\(^{64}\) Theogn. 699.
things. One is that an entity may bear value in various ways, for instance, instrumentally or non-instrumentally. Another is that value is specifiable by kind; for instance, there are ethical and non-ethical kinds of value.

In felicitous instances of the evaluative term, context—be it linguistic or otherwise—typically clarifies the kind of value and may clarify the way in which value is borne. For example, on a battlefield, the claim that some soldier is aristos or exhibits aretē is naturally understood to mean that he is optimal or exhibits optimality in battle. But it is important here to appreciate that the meaning of the evaluative term, say, "optimality" or "aretē" does not thereby shift from context to context. Rather, supplementary content is implicitly or explicitly provided to specify the kind of value in question. "Optimality (in battle)," whether "in battle" is explicit or implicit, is a case in point.65

For example, Tyrtaeus begins an elegy in praise of martial aretē with these words:

"I would neither call a man to mind nor put him in my speech for aretē of running or wrestling (oute podōn ... oute palaimosunēs), not even if he had the stature and strength of a Cyclops, nor if, in racing, he would win over the Thracian Northwind."66

In this case, the accompanying genitives "podōn" and "palaimosunēs" specify the type of value. Compare Homer's description of the son of Eurystheus as:

"better than his father in every sort of aretē (pantoias aretas), whether in running or in battle (êmen podas êde machesthai)."67

Here, "every sort of aretē" ranges over the domain of supremely valued activities performed by men.

7. "Aretē" among the Sophists

Turning now to the sophists—the following text from Gorgias' Olympic Oration contains a clear example of "aretē," in this case in the plural, denoting psychological traits:

"Our stuggle requires two aretai: boldness (tolmēs) and wisdom (sophias); boldness to face the risk (to kindunon hupomeinai), wisdom to understand the riddle (to aínigma gnōnai). For reason (logos), like the Olympic summons, calls the willing, but it crowns only the able."68

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65 The same point holds for expressions such as "instrumentally good/excellent/ best."
67 l. 15.641-2.
68 Gorgias B8.
The infinitival phrases following "boldness" and "wisdom"—"to face the risk" and "to understand the riddle"—clearly indicate that boldness and wisdom are here conceived as psychological traits.

 Granted this example, it is in fact—as far as I can judge—the only clear case of "aretē" used to denote a psychological condition among texts authored by philosophers of the fifth century.

 In Gorgias' Helen, "aretē" is used to denote the exemplary distinguishing attribute of action, and precisely not of the body or of the soul:

 "The adornment (kosmos) of a city is manly valor (euandria), of a body beauty, of a soul (psychē) wisdom (sophia), of an action (pragma) aretē." 69

 Compare the following fragment from Democritus, where again "aretē" is clearly used to denote a property of action:

 "It is necessary to strive for deeds (erga) and actions (prēksias), not words, of aretē." 70

 In light of this, recall here the path of Aretē to which Heracles is exhorted in Prodicus' Choice of Heracles. Surely, Heracles' pursuit of aretē is not to be understood as the pursuit of a certain psychological trait, even though the sort of optimal life that he is to pursue requires cultivation of optimal psychological capacities. Rather, the bearer of aretē that Prodicus' Choice of Heracles is concerned with is a human life and a person in virtue of the optimal condition of his life.

 Consider now the Anonymus Iamblichi, whose governing topic is how a young man can achieve aretē to the greatest extent. Fragment 1 begins with the following statement:

 "Whatever one wants to achieve to the greatest extent (exergasasthai eis telos to beltiston), whether [it be] wisdom or courage or eloquence or aretē, either in its entirety or in some part (ē tēn sumpasan ē meros ti autēs), it is possible to accomplish (katergasasthai) this in the following way." 71

 I take it that the instance of "aretē" here is in apposition to the precedingly enumerated items: wisdom, courage, and eloquence. Accordingly, the meaning of the claim is that bringing any of these to full realization would constitute a kind of aretē.

 Consider the disjunction: "wisdom, courage, or eloquence." Since all of these are naturally understood as psychological capacities, it would in turn be natural to think that, if, as I suggest, "aretē" is in apposition to them, "aretē" must be used here to denote a

69 Gorgias, Helen 1.1.
70 Democritus B55. Cp. the following instance of "aretē" from Alcidamas' Odysseus: "The aretē of a man is to heed his commanders and do what is ordered and to be pleasing in all respects to the general public, and to see to it that he is in all respects a good man, doing good to his friends and harm to his enemies." (28)
71 Anon. Iambl. 1.1.
psychological capacity or set of such capacities. However, this inference should be resisted in light of what the author takes the achievement of these things to the greatest extent to consist in.

Elsewhere in fragment 1, the author speaks of "practicing" (askein) aretē. Furthermore, in fragment 2 he says:

"If one starts late or [pursues it] for a short time, it is not possible to bring aretē, which is made up of many deeds (ex ergôn pollôn sunistatai), to fulfillment (epi telos)."

So, the author maintains that aretē can only result from many actions, again diligently practiced over a long period of time.

One might wonder whether the author's view here is proto-Aristotelian; that is, whether the author is suggesting that in order to acquire an optimal psychological trait, one must repeatedly do the sort of things that those who have the trait do. But that this is not the author's point can be seen from fragment 3. In one part of fragment 3, the author says:

"We must consider on the basis of what speech (logou) or action (ergou) one who desires aretē in its entirety (aretēs ... tēs sumpasēs) would become best (aristos)."

The author's response here is: by "being beneficial to the most people" (pleistoi ophelimos ōn). The implication then is that achieving a part of aretē consists in benefiting a relatively small number of people. Accordingly, the distinction between achieving aretē in part versus achieving aretē in its entirety is not Plato's distinction in Protagoras between acquiring one optimal psychological trait versus all of them. Moreover, achieving aretē in part or in its entirety is not merely a matter of acquiring psychological traits. Rather, it is a matter of performing actions. Furthermore, different types of aretē are distinguished by the exercise of different types of capacities, be they wisdom, courage, or eloquence. Still further, and crucially, aretē is not the mere exercise of a capacity in a single instance. In other words, aretē is not a property of a single action, but rather of a pattern of activity over a significant span of life.

The account of aretē as a property of a pattern of activity in the Anonymus Iamblichi is additionally notable in that the optimality of such activity is taken to depend on public approbation of that activity. Given the importance of this point, it is worth elaborating in general terms. Generally speaking, the aretē or optimality of a thing might be regarded as owing to intrinsic features of that thing; however, it need not. Certain actions and events are a case in point. Hippocleas of Thessaly may be an outstanding

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72 In fact, I doubt that "sophia," "andreia," and "euglōssia" are used here merely to refer to psychological capacities; but I will not argue for that view.
73 2.4; cp. "... whatever one practices (askēi) becomes unsurpassable." (1.3)
74 Anon. Iambl. 2.7.
75 3.3.
76 3.3.
runner. And his optimality in running may then owe to his speed compared to that of his peers. But if Hippocleas wins the boys' double-stadium foot race, the value of his victory may owe, among other things, to the prestige of the event. Accordingly, the value of the victory may, among other things, owe to the acclaim that the victor and his victory receives. Likewise, the value of a political career may owe to the civic benefits that the politician provides, but it may also owe to the appreciation that the politician receives from the citizens for those benefits. Note further that a politician's ability to remain in office and thereby continue his political career may depend precisely on the citizens' recognition of the civic benefits of his contribution.

The preceding considerations are important for understanding the use of "aretē" in various texts because often the Greeks, as we do, regard the value of achievements such as actions as at least in part dependent on public esteem of those achievements. Accordingly, the relation between aretē and honor (timē), glory (kleos), or renown (doxa) is in fact intimate in many contexts. The account of aretē in the Anonymus Iamblichus is a case in point.

Fragment 2 of the text begins with the following line:

"From the time that someone wishes to acquire renown (doxa) among people and to appear (before them) such as he is, one must begin at once when one is young and apply oneself consistently and without wavering."79

Here, the term "doxa" occupies the position that "aretē" does in the opening line of fragment 1. The point of this passage is that the achievement of the sort of supreme value sought consists of public esteem. As the author proceeds to explain, however, considerable care is required if one is to succeed in gaining public esteem for one's actions and contributions to society. Crucial to achieving this, one must gain the trust (pistis) of one's fellow citizens; and this is hard to do. The following passage encapsulates the problem and the author's proposed response to it:

"For it is not pleasant for people to honor another person, since they think that they are being deprived of something. But if they are won over by necessity itself [i.e. by the clear evidence of one's civic beneficence] and have been moved to it gradually over a long time, they praise [a man], albeit even then unwillingly. At the same time, they are not in doubt that the person is such as he appears [i.e. that the person is genuinely motivated to benefit the community]; and [they are not suspicious] that he is setting a trap and hunting for reputation by means of deceit; or that what he does, he makes seem admirable (kallōpizetai), though he is actually misleading people. In this way, which I previously mentioned, aretē, being practiced (askēeisa), engenders trust (pistis) for itself and fair fame (eukleia)."80

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77 This is the victory, of 498 BCE, praised in Pindar P. 10.
78 Thuc. 6.11.7; Homer I. 9.498; Theogn. 1.30; Pindar O. 6.75; Hdt. 9.28.12; Theogn. 1.867; Homer O. 14.402.
79 Anon. Iambl. 2.1.
80 Anon. Iambl. 2.3-4.
In sum, the pursuit of *aretē* in the *Anonymus Iamblichi* is not conceived simply as the pursuit of a psychological trait of the pursuer. Rather, "*aretē*" is used to refer to a property of a pattern of action, in fact of a form of civic life. Moreover, the supreme value of such a life is understood not merely in terms of the properties intrinsic to the person whose life it is, nor even properties intrinsic to the actions constitutive of that life; it includes public esteem of that person and his actions.

8. Conclusion

In sum, I suggest that within the sophistic milieu, at least on the basis of the limited surviving evidence, we have reason to believe that the pursuit of *aretē* was not viewed, as it came to be viewed in the course of fourth century ethical philosophy, as the pursuit of certain psychological traits, let alone as the pursuit of such traits as crucial for the achievement of eudaimonia. Rather, the pursuit of *aretē* was conceived as the pursuit of an optimal life. Moreover, as in the *Anonymus Iamblichi*, the optimality of the life was typically viewed as a function of its civic beneficence as well as the esteem that the agent received therefrom.81

Given this, we may now seek to know why, in philosophical ethics of the fourth century and thereafter, "*aretē*" came to be prevailingly used in ethical philosophy to denote a psychological condition. In addition, we may seek to know why, in philosophical ethics of the fourth century and thereafter, "*eudaimonia*" came to be used to denote the goal of life. Space constraints do not permit me to answer these questions here, save to state briefly the answers that I have offered elsewhere.

"*Eudaimonia*" came to be used to denote the overarching goal of ethical philosophy through the influence of Socrates and the Socratics, above all Plato. Crucial to this development were three factors: one, Socrates' *daimōn* and the conception of Socrates' philosophical activity as divine service; two, Socrates' and some of the Socratics' critical attitude toward wealth and the wealth-based conceptions of eudaimonia dominant among their Athenian contemporaries;82 and three, the Socratics' various discussions of Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles* and the Encomium to Work in Hesiod's *Works and Days* on which Prodicus' text is modeled.83

The philosophical use of "*aretē*" to refer to an optimal condition of the psyche and the idea that such an optimal condition is crucial for eudaimonia specifically owes to Plato and his influence on Aristotle, although the philosophical attention of Socrates and thereby all of the Socratics to the psyche and its cultivation were instrumental to Plato's contribution.84

84 I argue for this position in D. Wolfsdorf, "The Emergence and Establishment of Psychology 'Aretē'," in progress.
Finally, let me note that not all of the extant sophistic ethical texts endorse the pursuit of *aretē* (in the sense of an optimal life of civic beneficence). For example, Antiphon's *On Truth* is counter-aretaic; and Gorgias' *Helen* and *Palamedes* are simply concerned with other philosophical matters, namely the nature of agential responsibility. These points are important for appreciating the diversity and heterogeneity of sophistic ethical contributions and are supplementary to the central claims about "*eudaimonia*" and "*aretē*" among the sophists for which I have argued in this chapter.  

85

Bibliography


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