



How Virtue is Contingent Upon Human Development: Lessons from Plato

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Thinking about individual virtues we might say that each virtue is a competence in a particular type of life situation, which we might call virtue situation. Service might thus, for example, be the virtue that has to do with how one generally handles situations where someone needs one's assistance. And honesty could be the virtue that has to do with how well one does in situations when it is helpful to tell the truth.

As for being virtuous or not, we would usually say that there are degrees of being virtuous. Some, therefore, have more virtue than others. For example, we may say that most people are honest to some extent, but that only few are truly honest. In this context we could ask how we can account for the difference in virtue between people and the answers would vary, but most of us would still agree that we can all understand virtue situations. This seems to me to be the most common view.

The view, I am talking about, is that all of us have what it takes to be virtuous, that all of us have more or less an understanding of all types of virtue situations all the time. There may not be a person in need that I can be of service to at the moment, but if a virtue situation arises I could be of service. And if I do not recognize that there is such a situation at hand, someone could point it out to me and I would see it and could be of service, if I choose to do so. This means that all of us can always perceive the virtue situations in which the virtues can arise. Therefore, we can all for example see that a particular situation calls for service, at least if it is explained to us.

But what if this is not true? What if some of us do not have access to all types of virtue situations all the time? What if some virtue situations only become understandable to most of us late in life, if at all?

I do not claim that the common view is plain wrong, but in this paper I will attempt to give a better description of our capacity to be virtuous and that human development plays a significant role in our ability to understand virtue situations. I will not argue against the view that a person can have virtue to a varying degree, i.e. that we can all have some share in virtue. What I will argue against is the view that we can all have a real understanding of virtue situations, if they are simply explained to us.

I will maintain that as we develop, we gradually become aware of virtue situations that were previously more or less hidden to us and, furthermore, that we cannot be said to possess a virtue truly until we have perceived the appropriate virtue situation. I will discuss this view about the importance of human development for virtue in the context of the developmental model I have found in two of Plato's dialogues, the *Symposium* and the *Republic*. Furthermore, I will explain how, according to Plato, you can have a share in virtue, although you cannot be said to be truly virtuous. Here habituation plays a major role.

My reason for using Plato is that in the *Republic* we can find a model of human development and a discussion of virtues as well, that are connected to that model. By looking at how these virtues are placed in the developmental model we can understand how virtue is contingent upon human

development. According to my interpretation of Plato, he argues that a virtue, like courage, for example, is contingent upon having reached a certain stage of human development.

In the following, I will first summarize the model of human development I have found in Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*. Because of lack of space, I will not be able to argue fully for my interpretation of the texts, but a summary of the developmental model is necessary for the argument in the paper. Next, I will explain how for Plato it is necessary to have reached a certain stage of development before you can have certain virtues. Finally, I will say something about habituation and how one can, according to Plato, have some share in virtue without being fully virtuous.

Plato's developmental model

The argument for a stagelike developmental model in Plato begins with what I call the areas of life. An area of life is a cluster of objects that have something in common. One could say that they are the same kind of objects. I argue that in the *Symposium* and the *Republic* Plato presumes four areas of life (A1, A2, A3, and A4). In what follows I will not offer a definition of these four areas, but will try to describe them one by one.

Before turning our attention directly to the four areas of life, it is helpful to say a few words about human desire in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*. In both dialogues the objects of the areas of life can be desired by human beings. The descriptions of how they are desired differ between the dialogues, but in both of them it is the case that a person, at each point in time, has a stronger desire for one of the areas of life than the others. One could say that a person desires only one area of life at a time. It is, however, important to note that desire can shift from one area of life to another and we will see later that this is what human development consists in, i.e. if the desire moves in the right direction; otherwise we have a regression.

In the ascent passage in the *Symposium*, sometimes called the higher mysteries or the ladder of love, human desire takes the form of love, which moves from one object to the next until it ends by loving beauty itself. In this case it, therefore, seems that there is only one desire, which moves from object to object. In the *Republic*, on the other hand, where the soul has three parts, each of the parts has a desire of its own (580d). However, Plato seems to think, that only one part of the soul rules at a time, which means that the desire in one part of the soul is always stronger than in the other parts. Thus in this respect, at least, desire works, in effect, in the same way in these two dialogues. As human beings we can desire the areas of life, but at each point in time we have more desire for one area of life than the others.

Now, turning to the four areas of life, in the *Symposium* there are three passages that are useful for a description of the areas of life. Most important of these is the famous aforementioned ascent passage (210a-212c), which refers to all four areas. Before the ascent passage we also have the so-called lesser mysteries (208c-209e), describing A1 and A2, and another useful passage (207d-208b), which refers to all four areas of life.

In the *Republic* there are a number of descriptions that help us understand the areas of life, although most of them only refer to two or three areas of life. The description of the creation of the just city (starting in Book 2), of the three parts of the soul (Book 4), and of the three primary kinds of people

(581c), all primarily refer to A1, A2, and A3. The regression of constitutions (Books 8 and 9) describes A1 and A2. The discussion of the philosopher in Books 5 and 6 helps us understand A3 and A4. Finally, the simile of the line and the allegory of the cave are useful for learning something about all four areas of life.

In accordance with a passage in the *Symposium* (207d-208b) the areas of life can be summarized as concerning (1) the body, (2) the soul, (3) knowledge, and (4) the divine. With this summary in mind I will now go through the areas of life and give a description of them, one by one.

Actually, there is not much said about A1 in the *Symposium*. We learn that it includes the body and that the body can be an object of desire (210a-b). It is discussed that people may want to have children to make themselves immortal (208e). Furthermore, the love of money can be connected to A1, but that is about it.

In the *Republic* we learn much more about A1. This area of life is made up of all kinds of physical things, including products that the body needs for its sustenance, like food, drink, shelter, and clothes. This is the world of the workers, the lowest class in the just city, that is being created in the *Republic*. The appetitive part of the soul desires the objects of A1 and wants them to experience pleasure, whether it is to satisfy hunger, thirst, lust for sex, or to defend the body against the pain of cold. The person who more than anything desires the objects of A1 is called a lover of profit or a lover of money. The reason is that if you have money, you can more or less buy all the objects of A1 (580e-581a).

As has been mentioned, A2 can be represented by the soul in the *Symposium*. Here it is important to understand that the soul is a the object of desire for the one who desires A2. Interestingly, A2 is also described by other things that may not seem related to the soul, like manners (τρόποι), opinions (δόξαι, 207e), love of honor (φιλοτιμία, 208c), fame (208e), and customs (ἐπιτηδεύματα, 211c). It may seem strange to say that A2 concerns the soul, which refers to the inner space of a person, and connect it at the same time with customs and manners, that refer to outer reality. Here it is helpful to note that opinions, fame, and honor, are words that refer to how the soul sees manners and customs. The object of desire is, therefore, not the body itself, as for the person who desires A1, but what the body does, what lies behind these manners and how they are valued by the soul. One could say that, what the one desires, who desires A2, is to understand another person's inner life and be recognized by it, hence the mention of fame and love of honor.

This is even clearer in the *Republic*, where those who desire the objects of A2 are described as honor-lovers and victory-lovers. Those who are victorious are recognized and honored by others and it is this recognition that is an object of A2. Furthermore, the honor-lovers are ruled by the spirited part of their souls and in the just city they are the fearless soldiers who love to make war. They love physical training, it seems not so much to enjoy the body as such, but to use it as a tool to gain victory. Furthermore, for Plato a close community is more important to them than to the workers. Thus we see that there is a strong social aspect to A2.

Rather little is said about A3 in the *Symposium*, other than it is concerned with knowledge, learning, and study (208a, 210d, 211c). In the *Republic* geometry, calculation, and the three other similar subjects, that are discussed in Books 6 and 7, are objects of A3. For our discussion later, it is important to mention that these subjects are in the line simile said to use objects at A2 to make abstractions from. It is then such abstractions or hypotheses that are the objects that make up A3.

What complicates things at this point in my description of the areas of life, is that the soul, as it is described in the *Republic*, only has three parts and it is not obvious, whether the rational part of the soul can be said to desire both A3 and A4. Before going into that, it is best to mention the objects of A4. In the *Symposium* A4 consists of the form of divine beauty itself, which is unchanging and everlasting. In the *Republic* the objects of A4 are said to be the form of the good (526d-e), the beautiful itself (476c), and the first principle (511b). Similarly to the description in the *Symposium* these objects are said to be always the same, have a rational order, and be divine.

Now, given that the soul in the *Republic* only has three parts and that its two lowest parts desire A1 and A2, how can it be explained that the rational part of the soul desire both A3 and A4? We may note that this is not a problem in the *Symposium*. Love simply shifts its attention from the objects of A3 to the objects of A4. In the *Republic* the solution to the problem lies in the fact that Plato describes the philosopher, who is ruled by the rational part of his soul, in two different ways. In the description of the just city the philosopher is the ruler (Books 3 and 4), but later (Books 5, 6, and 7) the philosopher is the one who strives “to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything” (511b).¹

In the description of the just city the guardians are first distinguished from the workers. Then it becomes clear that the guardians are either soldiers or rulers. The rulers are then distinguished from the soldiers. The most important characteristic of the rulers is that they care for the city (412c-e) and believe that they must do what is best for it. Furthermore, it is said that the rulers’ knowledge has to do with the city as a whole (428c-d). It is significant that the rulers care for the city as a whole and not just parts of it or objects within it, because this must entail some kind of abstraction from the things in the city. This is similar to what is said about geometry and the other subjects, that belong to A3. They too use the objects of A2 to make abstractions from. It is, therefore, logical to see the rulers as desiring A3.

In Books 5, 6, and 7 we learn about another side to the philosopher. Here he is the one who grasps “what is always the same in all respects” (484b) and “the form of each thing that is” (486d). And it is stated that the philosophic nature is “really divine” (497c). This description of the philosopher is quite different from the description of the ruler, for his desire is now clearly turned towards A4. Thus we have seen that these two different descriptions of the philosopher, who is ruled by the rational part of the soul, show that he can both desire the objects of A3 and of A4.

Now that I have given a summary of the four areas of life and explained how all of them can be desired by human being, it may be reiterated that only one area of life is the main object of desire for a person at any point in time. Furthermore, we can may note that the world looks very different to a person depending on which area of life he desires. As desire shifts from one area of life to another, the perspective on the world becomes very different. One can even say that the person becomes aware of things that he could not perceive before.

I argue that development for Plato consists in this shift of perspective from one area of life to another. The question is then how this happens. Where does a person start and how does he move from desiring the objects of one areas of life to another? To answer these questions it is important to consider how the areas of life are evaluated by Plato, whether, he thinks, that one area is more valuable than another area. To cut a long story short it is quite clear in Plato that A4 has the highest value. This is clear in the *Symposium*, where beauty itself is said to be the goal which is wonderfully beautiful in its nature (210e-

¹ All direct quotations of Plato’s works are taken from Cooper’s edition (Plato, 1997).

211a), and also in the *Republic*, where the good is the last thing to be seen (517b). A3 has the next highest value, then A2, and A1 has the least value. This is for example clear from how the three classes in the just city are described and from the discussion of the three parts of the soul.

Now that we know that a person desires the objects of one area of life at a time and the hierarchical value ordering of the areas of life, all we need to do to establish that there is a stagelike developmental model in Plato is to show that the desire moves in a particular order from one area to another. That a developing person starts by desiring A1, then shift his desire to A2, next to A3, and, finally, desires A4, can best be shown by considering the ascent passage in the *Symposium* and the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*.

The ascent passage in the *Symposium* is saturated with linguistic markers that indicate compulsion and necessity. The word δεῖ (must, ought, should) runs through most of the text, describing what one must do to climb higher, and words meaning next (ἔπειτα, αὖ) and after (μετά) are also used to indicate a distinct order of steps. Furthermore, it is clear that the road travelled has a beginning (πρῶτον) and an end (τέλος) and that it must be travelled in the right way (ὀρθῶς). In other words: a person starts at stage 1 (S1) by desiring the objects of A1 and then moves on to A2, A3, and, finally, A4, developing to stage 2 (S2), to stage 3 (S3), and, finally, to stage 4 (S4) in the correct order.

That this is also the case in the *Republic* is fairly obvious in the allegory of the cave, which is meant to show “the effect of education and the lack of it on our nature” (514a). Firstly, it is clear that the person in the cave begins at the lowest level (S1). There seems to be no starting point except the bottom of the cave, because the people, who are fettered there, have been there since childhood (ἐκ παιδῶν, 514a). Furthermore, when a prisoner is freed and turns around, he does not recognize any of the things he sees (objects of A2). Thus it does not seem that he has been there before. Secondly, the person, who is freed, seems incapable of jumping over stages in the cave: it would seem inconceivable that a prisoner at S1 would all of a sudden show up at S4, with the form of the good (517b), without having gone through the intermediate stages. The allegory simply does not allow for such arbitrary movement between the stages. Rather the freed person stops at each stage before moving on until he reaches the highest one.

Now we have the summary of the developmental model. A developing person starts at S1 by desiring the objects of A1, next he desires the objects of A2 at S2, then the objects of A3 at S3, and, finally, the objects of A4 at S4.

Virtue is contingent upon human development

Now that I have described the developmental model in Plato, I will discuss how virtue is contingent upon human development. Until now I have not discussed virtue in Plato. It is, however, well known that in the *Republic* there is a discussion of four main virtues, moderation, courage, wisdom, and justice. Here I will have something to say about all of them, except justice. Furthermore, it seems clear that moderation is connected to A1, courage to A2, and, finally, wisdom to A3 and A4. The reason for this is that moderation is concerned with keeping the desires of the appetitive part of the soul in check. Courage is the virtue of the spirited part that wants to fight and be victorious. And the best condition of the rational part of the soul creates wisdom.

In accordance with this, we learn in the *Republic* that everyone in the just city is moderate, that the soldiers are responsible for courage, and that wisdom is possessed by the rulers. Here we should remember that the workers desire A1 and only have moderation. They are at S1. The soldiers have both moderation and courage, because they have both desired A1 and A2. They are now at S2, but according to the developmental model they must have been previously at S1. The rulers have all three virtues, moderation, courage, and wisdom. They are now at S3, but must have been at S1 and S2 before they reached S3. According to this it is clear that these virtues are contingent upon human development. The only way to have courage is to develop to S2 and the only way to have wisdom is to develop to S3. In the following I will try to explain better why this must be the case for Plato.

As we have seen, at the lowest stage of development, at S1, a person desires food, drink, shelter, sex and such things. Now, there seem to be two reasons for claiming that without the desire for these things you could not be moderate. Firstly, because moderation is concerned with finding the right way to treat this particular kind of desire, without it there would be no need for moderation. Thus a hypothetical person who had never had any desire for the objects of A1 would not need moderation. Secondly, having this desire makes one capable of understanding, not only the need for moderation, but also how the desire works and how it is best to treat it in order to be moderate. It is good to keep this latter point in mind a little later, when we discuss how a person may have a share in virtue without being truly virtuous. So the experience of having a desire for the objects of A1 is a prerequisite for understanding that desire and being able to be truly moderate.

Similarly, we can say that a person who has not developed beyond S1 and cannot see the objects of A2 clearly cannot be courageous. Here the objects are the inner space, represented by the soul in the *Symposium*, and the judgements that people make about our behavior. The object that a person longs for who desires the objects of A2 is the recognition of another person, in the form of fame, or honor. In the *Republic* the emphasis is on fighting an competing, but in the *Symposium* poets and lawmakers are also at this stage of development (209d-e), probably because they want to affect others, influence society, and receive honor and fame for their efforts.

In comparison to a person at S1 the person at S2 is much more interested in what others think, instead of being mainly interested in getting what he wants. A person at S2 understands that another person has an inner life and is more likely to be able to put himself in another person's shoes, see the world from another person's point of view. Apparently, for Plato, without this understanding you cannot have true courage. He seems to link courage to this understanding of the other and the desire for another person's recognition.

A similar argument concerning wisdom, could be made, but that does not seem to be necessary. It seems clear enough, that, for Plato, virtue is contingent upon human development and why that is. Instead I will next discuss the possible objection that, if a person at S1 cannot be courageous, how can we explain that there seem to be degrees of virtue. How can someone who is at S1 appear to have some share in courage?

Habituation is responsible for a person's incomplete share in virtue

In Books 2 and 3 the early education of the guardians in the just city, the προπαιδεία (cf. 536d), is discussed. As is clear from Book 7, this is not the total education, that the guardians receive, but only the education they get as children. To begin with, it is clearly stated that first there is education in music and poetry (μουσική) and then in physical training (γυμναστική) (376e-377a). The education begins when the children are really young, because then it is easiest to mould them. It is then that they must be told stories that support everything that they will be told later, although at this early stage they cannot reveal the whole truth (377a-c).

Later in the discussion about μουσική this process of habituation is explained. We learn that the future guardians are on the basis of these stories to imitate good things, because “imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought” (395d). It is thus that the proper message permeates “the inner part of the soul” while the young person is still “unable to grasp the reason, but, having been educated in this way, he will welcome the reason when it comes and recognize it easily because of its kinship with himself.” (401d-402a)

Then concerning the content of the μουσική education, the first thing that is mentioned are stories about the gods (A4 and A3), which we need not go into here. After talking about stories about the gods it is explained that the future guardians must be told stories that make them least afraid of death (A2), because that will make them courageous (386a). And it is also discussed how people can be made moderate (A1) through stories (389d-e). It is interesting to note that this earliest education, gives children a kind of overview of all the four areas of life and tells them something about each of them. The μουσική education then clearly is meant to prepare for the whole of the education that comes afterwards.

The aim of this habituating education is clearly not that the children will truly understand what it means to be courageous. They are rather to imitate the “gesture, voice, and thought” of a courageous person, while they are too young to understand why the courageous person really behaves the way he does. Therefore, Plato does not expect the children to be able to really understand the virtue situations where courage can arise. A young person educated in this way can thus be said to have some share in courage, even though he is not truly courageous.

What can we learn from Plato?

I do not want to argue that the model of human development that we find in Plato is the best description of human development we have. But I maintain that it has the same basic features as modern stagelike models of human development. This means that even though we would not take the content of the model seriously we may have to take the point seriously that human development influences how we see the world, the perspectives we are able to take, and, therefore, our capacity to understand virtue situations.

One way of describing human development is to say that it is the capacity to see things in a new way or from a new perspective. According to Plato's description development is also like discovering new worlds that were previously hidden. A person, who has been engaging with shadows at the bottom of the cave all his life, is suddenly freed, and made to turn towards the light that comes from the opening

above him, is looking at something he has never seen before. If Plato is right in this respect, which I think he is, at least some virtues are impossible attain without human development.

For a person, who is still living at the bottom of the cave (at S1), to be truly courageous, it would not be enough to explain a virtue situation about courage to him. He would have to develop to S2. Going back to the example I took at the beginning about service, according to this argument, it would not be enough to explain a virtue situation to a person of low human development, for him to understand it as such and be able to be of service. Something more than that would be needed.

An example of an eight year old boy might help to clarify this. His father tells him to help his mother with the groceries, but he does not seem interested. Then his father explains to him that his mother really could need some help, because she recently had surgery, but the boy tells his father he would rather like to go play the piano. The father then tells the boy that if he does not help his mother now he will not get any sweets later. In the end the boy may help his mother, but the boy does not seem to understand the virtue situation.

The reason for the boy's lack of understanding may be that he is not good at looking at the world from a different perspective than his own and further explanations might not be all that helpful. In such a case it would not even be enough for the person, who does not understand, to want to be virtuous. A person with psychopathic tendencies, for example, may simply not be able to understand the common ethical reality that others are able to sense. Such a person may not really care about ethics, but may learn that it is better for him to try to behave in accordance with how others behave. To such a person behaving morally is, therefore, like playing a game where you do not understand the rules, but have to try to imitate the other players. Although you try, you simply do not understand what is going on.

This conclusion is important for the education of virtue, because if, as I maintain, true virtue can only be attained given a certain human development, it must be important to try to develop. General human development, however it may be defined, is, therefore, something we must consider when we think about virtue. This does not mean that we have to neglect virtue until students have reach a certain developmental stage, because as Plato maintains habituation is an important part in the development of virtue. Furthermore, it seems that such habituation could be one of the things that cause people to develop generally. We must, however, take human development into account and not expect students to reach perfection in virtue in isolation from it.

Reference

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