ON TRANSLATION (III)

Why Aretê Does not Mean 'Excellence'
[work in progress]

In this paper I wish to examine our understanding of the term *aretê* as it used in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and the ways that we explain it to students of Ancient Philosophy, and the way we translate it in the primary texts and in secondary literature. This may seem to be a subject that has been so thoroughly discussed that there could not much more to say without repetition of facts that are already well known even to those who have only a very limited knowledge of philosophical Greek. But in this case I will not be supporting the standard view. I will be questioning it, and checking the evidence for it. Specifically, I wish to cast some doubt on the widespread view that *aretê* basically means something like 'excellence'. I will consider exactly what we mean by that claim, and exactly what the grounds are for making it, and what misunderstandings it typically leads to. I will also try to show that it is false.

In ancient philosophy, as in most of the humanities (as opposed to the sciences) there is a strong tendency for scholarly orthodoxies of this kind to arise, and it is important to be wary of them. By 'scholarly orthodoxy' I mean a claim or set of claims that is frequently made on the basis of the conclusions of other scholars, or with the vague implication that many other people have made the same claims and that they therefore must be credible. Our claims about *aretê* take that form. The majority of times that we say that it means 'excellence', we are just taking it for granted; or we present only scanty or contestable evidence for the claim. The reader is asked to accept that the fuller evidence is out there somewhere, since so many other people have previously made the same claim. Typically, this idea that *aretê* means 'excellence' appears in introductions to translations, introductions to Greek philosophy, commentaries on Greek texts, encyclopaedias of philosophy, vocabulary lists, and indirectly in the pervasive use of 'excellence' in much of the secondary literature — all of this without any significant rehearsal of the evidence, or at any rate without any serious questioning of how that evidence has been interpreted.

Orthodoxies of this kind are not a bad thing in themselves. Obviously it can be useful to be able to refer to the findings of other scholars without having to repeat all the details of their arguments. But we should remember that the standards of proof in the humanities are not nearly as high as in the sciences. We can't just casually assume that we have now 'discovered' that *aretê* means 'excellence', in the way that we discovered that malaria is transmitted by mosquitoes.

Scholarly ‘findings’ in Ancient Philosophy are much more prone to be subjective, or partisan, or eccentric, and to have strange and convoluted histories. Our theories are far more prone to fads and fashions, for one thing; and academics may continue from long habit to endorse a view that they originally absorbed uncritically, as students, before they were equipped to assess the evidence for themselves. (In this case, students are not equipped to assess the evidence until they can read Greek fluently, without the aid of a dictionary; until then, they are dependent on translations, lexicons and commentaries that may well simply assume the very thesis that they are trying to assess, and thus provide it with spurious confirmation.) The discipline as a whole can also have powerful biases towards one or other view. Suppose, for instance, that one interpretation of the term *aretê* has the direct consequence that Aristotle’s and Plato’s approach to ethics is unique, or at least profoundly different from our own, and contains rare and valuable perspectives that are simply not available to us if we do not study Plato and Aristotle; suppose that an alternative interpretation implies that their approach to ethics is more familiar and more commonplace. It is obvious that ancient philosophers will be strongly inclined to prefer the former interpretation, for reasons entirely unconnected to the merits of the competing views. Such subtle biases are unconscious and unavoidable, and there is not much point in worrying about them too much. No interpretation of Greek philosophy can be criticised on the grounds that it glorifies the discipline. We can only address the arguments themselves. Nevertheless, for all these reasons we must be at least be willing, out of intellectual humility, to check and re-check the evidence even for our most orthodox views, and, from time to time, *do our very best to refute them*. It is only when a theory is subjected to an enthusiastic and sincere attempt to cast doubt on it, and survives that test, that we can continue to claim that it is the most plausible theory that we have.

It is with that principle in view that I will attempt to argue here that *aretê* does not mean ‘excellence’. I will re-examine the usual evidence for that standard view, and bring to our attention to some of the contrary evidence. I would like to stress, however, that my aim is not to prove that the ‘excellence’ thesis is wrong (which I am quite sure would be impossible). Rather, I only aim to show that some of the arguments for it are weak, or contradictory, as they stand, and that if we wish to continue to hold the thesis we need to do a little more work to explain why we think it is true — especially since we so often report it as an established fact, just as one might report that a trireme is a kind of ship and that Socrates lived in Athens. I do in fact think that we should abandon the theory altogether; but not because I think we can prove that it is false, merely because there appears to be no good reason for thinking that it is true, or at the very least that there are more plausible alternatives.

Those who hold that *aretê* does, basically, mean ‘excellence’ should remember that it isn’t enough to show, in response to objections, that those objections do not conclusively disprove their claim. What they have to show is that the ‘excellence’ thesis is the most plausible of all imaginable explanations of the evidence, and that that term is obviously the most helpful and most accurate way of translating the original term out of all the possible translations that we have ever come up with. That is a far bolder claim, requiring much higher standards of proof, and it is the claim the ‘excellence’ thesis commits us to. After all, a thesis can be extremely implausible, and a very weak explanation of the evidence, and yet impossible to disprove. So to defend the ‘excellence’ thesis on the grounds that it has not been disproved gets us nowhere, and is a misconstrual of what is required.

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There are at least good grounds for suspicion about the claims we make about *aretê*. There are hints of circularity in those claims, which I will try to bring out, and also of gratuitous exoticising of Greek thought. Also, it seems clear that our claims about the alleged Greek idea of ‘excellence’ have failed to keep up with recent developments and discoveries in the field of evolutionary psychology. The ‘excellence’ thesis in its usual form commits us to rejecting or ignoring large parts of recent (and convincingly argued) Darwinian claims about the universality and stability of human nature, including human psychological and ethical nature, and we might wonder if perhaps it should be the other way around: perhaps we should accept the Darwinian view and dump the ‘excellence’ thesis. Connected with that, it seems that we may have forgotten where the ‘excellence’ thesis came from. Few scholars ever mention that its roots lie in the early nineteenth century, and that it was given its main impetus by Nietzsche’s proposal that human ethical attitudes underwent a recent and spectacular transformation. His theory is now widely regarded as implausible. According to some, it has been convincingly refuted. Yet we continue to treat the understanding of *aretê* that perpetuates and commits us to that theory as not merely plausible, but as established beyond reasonable doubt. I will try to examine, in turn, each of these legitimate worries that we might have about our ‘excellence’ thesis.

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I have been speaking as if there is a single ‘excellence thesis’ that may be clearly and easily stated. But this is not really the case. The claim that *aretê* means ‘excellence’ is vague, and is usually stated in terms that are ambiguous. That makes it hard to see what extra claims are implied by it, and also makes it very difficult to refute, or even contradict. It is important to remember that is a weakness, not a strength. Any thesis that cannot even in principle be refuted,

and which finds some way of accommodating any amount of contrary evidence, is a thesis that is not properly based on evidence in the first place — not a thesis at all, in fact, but a mere dogma.

We can all agree that the 'excellence' thesis is entirely to do with the debate over just how *ethical* the term *aretê* is. Indeed, we can also all agree that *the purpose of using the translation 'excellence' is to eliminate obvious ethical (or moral) connotations*. Incidentally, I see no interesting distinction to be made here between 'ethical' and 'moral' connotations, and will use the term 'ethical' throughout. The claim that *aretê* is not a *moral* term, as that is understood by speakers of standard English (e.g., the students to whom we make the claim) is exactly equivalent to the claim that it is not an *ethical* term, and defenders of the 'excellence' thesis must accept that they are committed to both claims. They cannot claim, for instance, that all they ever meant was that *aretê* has no implications of specifically *Kantian* morality, of any other much narrower or more technical sense of 'morality'. After all, the normal English term 'moral' likewise has no implication at all of specifically Kantian morality, and the 'excellence' thesis is always stated in normal English. So it is the more general claim that they are making, and that is the claim we will consider here, not any weaker version of it. In any case it is perfectly clear that 'excellence' does indeed very efficiently eliminate *ethical* connotations, or moral connotations in the very broadest sense.

This goal of making the translation of *aretê* basically non-ethical is frequently stated in just those terms by its defenders. But beyond that basic idea, there are quite different versions of the claim. On the one hand, there are some quite modest claims that I will not be arguing against. We can agree that *aretê* sometimes has a non-ethical sense in the texts of Plato and Aristotle, and that it standardly has a non-ethical sense in the Homeric poems, and in certain other dialects in later periods (in Herodotus, for example). It is also perfectly clear that in military contexts, even in classical Attic Greek, *aretê* often means something like 'courage' or 'valour', and that that use is at any rate not obviously ethical (although it is, in fact, essentially ethical — I will discuss this below). There can be no objection to any of these claims, as long as there are made with appropriate understanding of their limits. Facts about Homeric Greek, for example, must be treated as exactly that, and nothing more. They provide no solid basis for any claims about Plato's use of *aretê* four hundred years later. One might as well make claims about the *current* meaning of the words 'gay', 'cool', and 'awesome' on the basis of the way they are used by Shakespeare. And it is entirely unremarkable (and a feature of all languages) that a term should have a variety of senses at a given time, and specialised sense in specialised (e.g., military) contexts. The claim I am interested in, and the one that is usually associated with the translation 'excellence', is much stronger: it is the idea that *aretê*, specifically as used in the time and the philosophical texts of

Plato and Aristotle, is a *basically* and *invariably* non-ethical or ethically-neutral concept, and that any translation (or explication) of its meaning in any context *in those texts* that gives it a strongly ethical colouring is highly misleading. To put it more simply, I mean the claim that *aretê* in these texts *always* means 'excellence'. Usually, of course, that claim takes the form of a rejection of the traditional translation 'virtue', on the grounds that 'virtue' gives the term exactly the strongly ethical colouring that 'excellence' very carefully aims to remove. Often the further claim is that this ethical colouring implied by 'virtue' is anachronistic, and amounts to an imposition of a later ethical concept, and later ethical interests, onto a period when that concept and those interests did not yet exist, or did not exist in their eventual form. That is the aspect of the theory that, as we shall see, derives directly from Nietzsche, via the very influential work of the classicist Arthur Adkins.

So, I wish to examine this stronger claim, that *aretê* is an invariably non-ethical term in the texts of Plato and Aristotle and other texts of that period and dialect. I believe we can make quite a good case for the view that it is, in fact, ethical *in precisely the ways that this stronger 'excellence' thesis explicitly aims to deny*, and that it is not the translation 'virtue', but the 'excellence' thesis itself that is highly misleading. I think that we can show that the supposed evidence for this stronger 'excellence' thesis is weak, and muddled, and fails to support it. On the other hand, I have no particular wish to defend the translation 'virtue'. It is one of the weaknesses of the 'excellence' thesis that many of the quicker arguments in favour of it simply amount to pointing out the drawbacks of 'virtue'. That is not an acceptable defence or explanation of 'excellence'. There is no rule that we must be in favour of 'excellence' if we think that 'virtue' is not an ideal translation. And given that fact, it is important not to allow 'excellence' any unearned support. For my purposes, I wish to leave 'virtue' largely to one side, as an irrelevance, and concentrate solely on the supposed positive evidence in favour of 'excellence'.

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It will be useful then, to get some sort of overview of the claims that are made in defence of 'excellence'. There are two quite distinct lines of argument in favour of the standard view. The following excerpts are typical, and the final two passages, which provide more detail, make use of both arguments (which seems to a standard practice), but it what follows we shall take care to treat them separately.

(1) Excellence, or *aretê* in Greek, is commonly translated virtue (through the Latin *virtus*), though its meaning is much broader than what we tend to understand by virtue. For us virtue often connotes the moral sphere, and such qualities as benevolence, generosity, or gratitude. While *aretê* may refer to moral virtue,

the sphere of application is formally much wider, and on Aristotle's formulation, for example, includes any stable state or disposition of a thing which makes that thing do its work well. [*Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*]

(2) There is indeed no special word, in ancient ethics, for virtue as opposed to other kinds of excellence, since the Greek *aretê* and the Latin *virtus* mean excellence of all kinds.

(3) 'Excellence' renders the word *aretê.* This word functions as the abstract noun from the adjective 'good'; anything which is a good X… *ipso facto* possesses the *aretê* of or appropriate to X's…Greek conceptions of what made a man an excellent or admirable man differed widely at different periods: thus in Homeric society *aretê* consisted primarily of prowess in warfare…The conventional rendering 'virtue', with its specifically moral connotations, is thus highly misleading; while fifth century Greeks did indeed count some moral virtues as prominent among qualities that make a man a good man, they recognised much else besides. The excellence which is immediately in question is that of a citizen, of which the paradigm example is a statesman such as Pericles, who was successful both in attaining personal power and in enlarging the power of the city. (C.C.W.Taylor, commentary on the *Protagoras*)

(5) This term [*aretê*] was used to denote 'excellence' of any kind in relation to any function… But when used without qualification it normally refers to the special excellence appropriate to a man — to the possession of those qualities which society values most highly. The variations in the conception of a man's *aretê* from Homeric times onwards have been well discussed by A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960). 'The noun *aretê,* with the adjective *agathos*, its synonym *esthlos* and *chrestos*, the comparative forms *ameinon* and *beltion* are…the most powerful words of commendation used of a man in Homer and in later Greek.' In Homer (when applied to a man) *aretê has no reference to 'quiet' moral virtues*, but denotes skill and success in war and in peace, together with wealth and social position; and despite isolated attempts to elevate the importance of 'quiet' moral virtues (e.g. Theog. 147 *sq*.), this traditional conception persisted into the fifth century B.C., and (with slight modifications) even later. (R. S. Bluck, commentary on the *Meno*; original italics.).

These extracts provide us with allusions to pretty much all of the arguments made in favour of 'excellence'. All the extracts are implicitly asserting the *strong* 'excellence' thesis. That is, they are all implying that *aretê* should not be given an explicit ethical flavour *in any context* in the texts of Plato and Aristotle. Bluck is trying to explain, for example, how the term should be understood in Plato's *Meno*; and Taylor is using almost identical arguments to explain its use in Plato's *Protagoras*. Both those works offer countless instances where we might well be tempted to give the term an ethical colouring. *Aretê* is certainly an ethical term there if it is ethical

anywhere at all. But these arguments are carefully and explicitly warning us against the temptation to treat it as ethical *in those dialogues*. The first two extracts are likewise intended as blanket claims about the term; the first is saying that *aretê* is a much more general term than 'virtue', and implying that it is therefore not, strictly speaking, an ethical term. The second is hinting at the theory of linguistic relativism: it implies that Greek vocabulary reveals the boundaries of the Greek mind, and that Greeks had no way at all of thinking about specifically ethical goodness, because they had no word for it. Beyond the common thread that *aretê* is not an ethical term, the two distinct lines of argument are as follows:

(1) First, it is argued that *aretê* cannot be an ethical term because it is sometimes used in what are obviously non-ethical ways, including contexts in which it is not even a *human* quality at all. Plato speaks of the *aretê* of a dog, for example, and the *aretê* of a sickle, and appears to define *aretê*, in general, as whatever makes *any* X a good X, or whatever it is that makes anything perform its particular function well. Aristotle treats *aretê* in virtually exactly the same way in his famous 'function argument' (which forms part of his account of happiness), and elsewhere in the *Ethics*. Besides those non-human cases of *aretê*, we also find such things as 'carpenter's *aretê'* (i.e., what makes a good carpenter a good carpenter, or the state of being a good carpenter), which is human but obviously non-ethical. Besides that, Aristotle frequently uses *aretai* (in the plural) to refer to particular *good qualities*, some of which are ethical ('virtues') but some of which are clearly non-ethical, being either physical qualities, or non-ethical mental qualities. All of this provides abundant evidence that *aretê* is, in itself, a non-ethical term — it basically means something like 'state of efficient functioning' — and so we have good reason to use the very general, neutral term 'excellence' to translate it, and that is how we should understand it even in the human cases, and even when Socrates, or Aristotle, or whoever, is claiming that human efficiency, or human excellence, does indeed involve (some) ethical qualities, or that some human excellences are indeed ethical excellences.

(2) Second, it is argued that *aretê* in fact most often, and *when used without qualification*, refers to human *aretê*; i.e., to what it is that makes a good man a good man, or to the state of *being a good man* (or person); but it is argued that the Greek conception of the good man is very different from our own. We think of the 'good man' as the ethically good man; but for the Greeks the notion of being a good man originally had no strong ethical connotations. That claim divides into two further claims: (a) that *aretê* had a different, clearly non-ethical sense in earlier dialects of Greek, and in military contexts, and (b) that even in the time of Plato and Aristotle the 'good man' still seemed to mean something like the 'socially successful' or 'powerful' or 'politically

effective' man — none of which is particularly ethical, and which we quite nicely capture with the term 'excellence', with its implications of strength, social superiority, success, and its appropriate echoes of the 'valour' and 'prowess' of the Homeric heroes which the term still gently recalls to the Greek ear. (A man who succeeds socially, and in 'attaining personal power' is a man who rises above other men, and thus *excels*, and so has *excellence*.) It may well be (the argument goes) that around this time the term was beginning to become more ethical; or rather, that people like Socrates were arguing that ethical qualities were more important than previously believed, and thus attempting to *ethicise* the conception of human 'excellence' — actively increasing people's respect for the 'soft, moral virtues', by proposing that perhaps ethical qualities make a man rise above other men, and attain excellence. We are witnessing that very process in these texts. What we have here is a dramatic transformation in human attitudes to ethical qualities; we have a debate over the precise content of human excellence, itself an ethically neutral concept, and that debate often takes the form of arguing over how important or desirable or admirable the specifically ethical qualities are. It is therefore very important not to treat *aretê* as *itself* an ethical term, since that would be to ignore that historical and cultural context, and to erase that important detail from the texts.

Those are the two arguments, as I understand them. I have tried to state them fully and fairly, and it should be clear that the (entirely typical) extracts that I cited do indeed match or allude to precisely these claims. I will now try to show that both arguments ultimately fail to give us any reason at all to accept their conclusion. For that, I will consider each in turn, assuming that each is supposed to have at least some force *taken on its own*. But before that, we should carefully note that the two arguments also contradict each other. Notice that the first asserts that *aretê* is ethically neutral because it is a very general term that does not, in itself, even denote a specifically *human* quality; but the second depends fully on the claim that *aretê* does denote a specifically human quality, namely, the quality of being a 'socially successful' *man*. But that is a contradiction. If we accept that *aretê* sometimes (indeed, 'normally') denotes a specifically human quality (e.g., 'prowess', or 'valor', or perhaps the state of being a 'successful' or powerful man), then clearly we are assuming that Aristotle's function argument and Plato's canine *aretê* must be irrelevant to our understanding *of those instances of the term*. If on the other hand we insist strictly on the first, very broad 'functional' reading of *aretê*, then we must simply give up the second argument. That is, we cannot then claim that *aretê* sometimes refers, on its own, and without any qualification, to the state of 'being socially successful'. After all, it makes no sense whatsoever to speak of the political power of a sickle, or the wealth and social position of a dog,

any more than it does to speak of their ethical goodness. We can see this contradiction quite clearly if we set out the first argument in its most simple form, alongside an exactly equivalent argument (with a slightly different conclusion), and then the main claim of the second argument. Recall that the first argument arrives at a *general* claim about *aretê* on the basis of the obviously non-ethical uses (it is not a claim about what *aretê* means merely in those evidently non-ethical contexts):

(1) [First argument]: Expressions like 'the *aretê* of a sickle' and 'the *aretê* of a dog' prove that *aretê* does not refer (i.e., does not *ever* refer) specifically to the state of being an *ethically* good *man*.

(2) [First argument*]: Expressions like 'the *aretê* of a sickle' and 'the *aretê* of a dog' prove that *aretê* does not refer (i.e., does not *ever* refer) specifically to the state of being a *socially successful man.*

(3) [Second argument]: *Aretê* refers to the state of being a *socially successful man*.

Clearly then, if the appeal to the generic 'functional' use of *aretê* works against the ethical reading of *aretê*, it must also work just as well against the whole thrust of the second argument. What's more, if the idea is supposed to be that the term *sometimes* means 'generic functional excellence' or 'general proficiency' and *sometimes* means 'human prowess' or 'social success', then quite clearly there can be no objection, in principle, to the claim that it might also *sometimes* mean 'being an *ethically* good man', since we would then be allowing that the sense of the term is, in principle, sufficiently flexible for such a variety of senses. Thus, the fact that the two arguments appeal to two entirely different concepts removes any objection to the claim that *aretê* might (for all the first argument shows us) sometimes also be thoroughly ethical. Indeed, if the uses of *aretê* were as varied as the two arguments (taken together) imply, then we should probably just dismiss the entire attempt to find a single 'basic' sense, and accept that different contexts will give it quite different senses. If on the other hand we try to rescue the 'excellence' thesis by insisting that *aretê* must after all have one basic sense — which is assumed in both lines of argument — then we had better choose *one or other* of these two senses, and not help ourselves to both, just because both (for contradictory reasons) happen to suit the 'excellence' thesis, vaguely understood. That is, we had better decide, and state unambiguously, *which* 'excellence' we want to argue for, and what it is that we are asserting.

So, right from the start, it seems that there should only ever have been half as much evidence for the thesis as we thought there was, since really we should only ever have been appealing to one or other of these lines of argument, not both.

The First Argument for 'Excellence'

But let's examine each of the arguments separately. I'll start with the first argument: that human *aretê* must be non-ethical because there are so many non-human or otherwise obviously non-ethical uses of *aretê*. I take it that this argument gets most of its force from Aristotle, (who frequently uses *aretê* in non-ethical applications), as well as from a few very famous passages in Plato, and we will examine some of the data from both authors carefully. But before that, we should note that the argument on the face of it seems to require at least one key premise that is not remotely plausible, namely, *that the term must have one fixed sense*. The easiest way to bring out how implausible this is is to construct an exactly equivalent argument about the English term 'good'. Remember that *aretê*, by universal agreement, is used by Plato and Aristotle as the noun form of the adjective *agathos* ('good'). *Aretê* is to *agathos*, as *sophia* is to *sophos*, as *dikaiosune* is to *dikaios*, and so on. We must not be distracted by the fact that the two words, *aretê* and *agathos*, have different roots. That does not stop Classical Greek authors using it, by *strict lexical connection*, as the noun form of that adjective, just as in English (for example) 'I went' is strictly the past tense of 'I go', even though there too the words have different roots. So all claims about the meaning of *aretê* (in the Classical period) are also claims about its adjective *agathos* (as the two longer passages cited above make perfectly clear). That means that a similar argument about the English word 'good' must be exactly equivalent to the claims about the Greek term *aretê*, and as long as the parallel argument avoids any culturally dependent premises (which my version below does) then it must be just as cogent. The difference introduced merely by our using a different part of speech is trivial. So, the parallel argument would go like this:

> How are we to understand the (English) notion of *being a good person*? It would be misleading to treat this as having specifically ethical connotations. The English term 'good' is used in a very wide variety of contexts, and formally denotes something like 'efficiency' or 'functional *excellence*'. English writers may speak of a *good dog*, or even a *good sickle*; they also speak of *good carpenters*, and *good sailors*; also of having a *good memory* and a *good sense of humour*, and of having *good eyes*, and *good ears*. In each case 'good' means something like 'well suited to performing its designated function or role'. This makes it clear that the state of *being good* is not an ethical state, and that *being a good person* must mean 'being a functionally efficient person' or perhaps 'a person who is generally proficient', or who *possesses excellence*.

The conclusion of this argument is, as it seems to me, ludicrous. Yet the argument takes the same form, and uses the same premises, as the first argument above for 'excellence' as an explanation

of *aretê*. We ought to be consistent here. If we think that the argument as applied to the English term 'good' produces an absurd result, then we must accept that the equivalent conclusion about *aretê* may well be (and if the analogy is a fair one, probably is) equally absurd, and at the very least that the argument is invalid. Alternatively, if we insist on that argument's validity, then — since all the premises are the same — we must also accept that, in English, 'being a good man' is not an ethical concept either, and that a 'good man', in English, means a 'functionally proficient man'. But that would be a desperate piece of theory-saving. It would also be, in any case, unacceptable to the advocates of the 'excellence' thesis, who very much also mean to assert that *aretê* is importantly different from, and *much less ethical* than our idea of 'being a good person' — indeed, that is the whole point of their thesis, and two of the extracts above explicitly assert it. If they had to retreat to the claim that *aretê* (in these texts) is *just as ethical* as our notion of 'being a good man', and that all these discussions about *aretê* could be presented (in English) as being to do with the notion of the good man (as *we* understand that notion) then they would have abandoned their whole project. Clearly, the term 'excellence' would be hopelessly ill-adapted to the discussion of that concept and the philosophical questions that relate to it, and there would be no need to use it (ever, as far as I can see) in translating or discussing any part of either Plato or Aristotle.

It's clear that something in the first argument for 'excellence' has gone badly wrong. The error comes from assuming that if *aretê* has a non-ethical sense in one context, then in must in general be non-ethical or ethically-neutral. Likewise, the parallel argument, applied to English, assumes that if 'good' *ever* has a non-ethical sense then it must *always* have a non-ethical or ethically neutral sense. But that this is simply not the case[1], and there is no reason to expect it to be the case in Greek, still less to assume that it must be the case. Therefore the first argument for 'excellence', understood as a blanket claim about how we should understand the term, collapses, since it relies heavily on that dubious assumption.

Perhaps that criticism of the argument is not convincing. Well, there is more. The next problem is that its treatment of the evidence is glaringly inconsistent. It starts from the reasonable idea that our understanding of the meaning of the term *aretê* should be based on our best efforts to make sense of the way that it is used, and to make the claims and arguments that employ it in the original Greek *as intelligible as possible*. Thus, the claim is that when Plato talks about the *aretê* of a dog, or carpenter's *aretê*, or when Aristotle speaks of intellectual *aretê*, we cannot

[1] Note that the exponents of the excellence thesis are themselves quite committed to view that the *English* term 'good' in the common expression 'good man' is indeed ethical, since that forms a key assumption in their second argument, as outlined above.

make sense of these claims if we treat *aretê* as an ethical term. That's quite right, and the method that it presupposes — an aspect of the wider principle of philosophical charity — is a fair and intuitive criterion of good translation. It is undoubtedly the right one to use. Arguably, it is the only objective criterion for good translation that we have. But having arrived at the conclusion that *aretê* means 'excellence', on the basis of those non-human uses of the term, the argument then ignores the countless contexts in which we cannot make sense of the text if we do *not* treat *aretê* as an ethical term, and in which the translation 'excellence' conspicuously fails to maximise the sense of the text. What's more, those contexts (where 'excellence' fails to make any sense) outnumber the other kind, cited by the argument, by a factor of many thousands to one. That's to say, the few passages that favour the theory have been given a vastly inflated importance; then the huge number of instances that count against it, *according to exactly the same criterion*, have been ignored or dismissed. This is a very unfair application of the argument's own method.

Now, it might be objected here that there really are no such contexts. Plenty of translators are happy to use 'excellence' even when it produces many pages of strange, fuzzy claims and barely intelligible arguments. They do not see this as a problem. The assumption here appears be that even if 'excellence' produces claims that are unusual, or obscure (which cannot be denied) that is because we are dealing with an *unfamiliar concept*; a uniquely Greek, or at least pre-modern concept, which seems strange to the modern ear. Indeed, the fact that it sounds so strange should reassure us; otherwise we should worry that we could be imposing anachronistic, 'Judaeo-Christian' assumptions (or some such). The problem with that response is that, *even if true*, it means giving up the whole basis of the argument. Perhaps it even means giving up on the whole project of translation altogether. The argument started from the idea that our translations *must make sense*; that is, make sense to us, now, even with our 'anachronistic' perspective. When we say that 'the ethical goodness of a dog' *does not make sense*, we mean precisely that it does not make sense to us, now. But in that case, we have no right to abandon that principle in other contexts, and brush aside the fact that 'excellence' likewise produces very large amounts of apparent nonsense. What's more, if we once open the door to strange and obscure translation, then it hard to see how we could ever argue against *any* proposed translation of *any* term.

Suppose that someone proposed translating *aretê* as 'sex appeal'. We would claim that that was absurd; but on what grounds? Presumably on the grounds that 'sex appeal' makes nonsense of the claims and arguments that use the term. But what if the advocate of 'sex appeal' then argues that the arguments only *seem* strange *to us* because of our particular anachronistic assumptions. How could he be refuted, assuming that any attempt to argue against his proposal must, at some point, involve appealing to *our* standards of what does and does not count as

nonsense? If he simply rejects those standards outright, then we have no further way of arguing against his hypothesis, *or any other hypothesis*, however ridiculous. The same would follow if, in defence of the 'excellence' thesis, we claim that strange translations simply don't matter. On the contrary, they absolutely do matter, and *we must accept that they are a sign that something is wrong*; otherwise we should just abandon the entire project of translation.

Let's have an example of what I mean. Consider the following claims from Plato's *Protagoras*: all claims about *aretê*, or that use the term *aretê*, and all made without any qualification of the term. Let's adopt the standard method and assume that the best translation is the one that makes as much sense as possible. That would be to apply exactly the method that the first 'excellence' argument relies on. So, first let's use 'excellence' as our translation; then we will treat *aretê* as an ethical term, meaning something like 'ethical goodness', or as referring to the state of *being a good man* (i.e., an ethically good man).

(a) Excellence is connected with feelings of shame and a sense of right; it arose because human beings need to find a way of co-existing in societies, and if they constantly treated one another unethically, they would be unable to co-exist.

(b) Parents instil excellence by teaching their children about right and wrong.

(c) Societies promote excellence by punishing people who behave unethically.

(d) Parents take enormous care over their children's excellence. If children do not acquire any excellence, they will commit crimes, and even risk execution.

(e) We all benefit from each other's excellence.

(f) If society is to exist at all, every one of us has to be a kind of expert at excellence.

(g) Doing what's right, being brave, and being moderate are key parts of excellence.

(1) Ethical goodness is connected with feelings of shame and a sense of right; it arose because human beings need to find a way of co-existing in societies, and if they constantly treated one another unethically, they would be unable to co-exist.

(2) Parents make their children good — ethically good — by teaching from early childhood about right and wrong.

(3) Society encourages people to act more ethically by punishing people who act unethically.

(4) Parents take enormous care over their children's ethical development. If children fail to become good people —i.e., ethically good — they will commit crimes, and even risk execution.

(5) We all benefit from being good to one another; i.e., from treating each other ethically.

(6) If society is to exist at all, every one of us has to be a kind of expert at being good, ethically.

(7) Doing what's right, being brave, and being moderate are key parts of being a good man.

It seems perfectly obvious that the claims make far more sense when *aretê* is taken as a thoroughly ethical term, as in the second set of claims — that is, given that the term is in all cases *unqualified*, as being an ethical term in itself, not merely something of which one might assert or deny that it had ethical elements. The first set of claims is, by any standard, completely baffling. Remember that 'excellence' here must be taken in its normal English sense. The whole point about the 'excellence' thesis is that it is a claim about which *English* word best captures the Greek term. Therefore we must treat this as *our* word 'excellence', and not allow ourselves to read it as standing in for *aretê* (which we would then be free to interpret in some other, more plausible way). In which case, these claims are unclear, and in so far as they mean anything, they are false. Excellence is *not* connected with feelings of shame; excellence did *not* arise so as to prevent people from treating each other unethically; lessons about right and wrong do *not* make children excel; excellence it is *not* promoted by legal punishments; there are no laws against failing to excel; doing what's right and being moderate do not cause us to excel; societies do *not* execute people for not excelling; societies do *not* depend on excellence for their very existence. At least, all of that is the case if we take 'excellence' to refer, as in standard English, to the state or fact of excelling (at something) or of being (in some way) excellent. The main problem here is that these claims are just hopelessly obscure. Excellent in what respect? Excel at what? Relative to whom? But they would make even less sense if we adopted any of the more detailed elucidations of 'excellence' suggested above — for example, try substituting 'excellence' here with 'the attainment of personal power', or 'wealth and social-position'. The claims would only become ever more profoundly bizarre or more obviously false. By contrast, the second set of claims are intelligible, philosophically interesting, and in each case perfectly reasonable. So, by the criteria that the first argument for 'excellence' takes for granted — namely, that we must strive to maximise the sense of the claims that we are translating — the ethical reading of *aretê*, here, is far superior. The 'excellence' thesis, by contrast, applied here, amounts to a striking *lack* of philosophical charity. It gratuitously attributes to Plato a series of claims that are clumsily expressed, as well as false, implausible, or meaningless.

I am not claiming, by any means, that this consideration alone defeats the 'excellence' thesis. If we were sure that *aretê* meant 'excellence' for other reasons (perhaps the ones outlined in the *second* argument given above), then we might just have to accept that the Plato and Aristotle do indeed make literally thousands of (to us) bizarre-sounding claims. We might have to abandon the charitable aim of always doing our best to make their philosophy intelligible and reasonable. But so far I am leaving the second argument (and all other arguments for 'excellence') to one side. My point is that the problem I have just outlined certainly overturns the

first argument considered on its own. The first argument, as explained, depends fully on the principle that we should strive to produce intelligible translations. So the argument must be circular, as follows: it asks us to accept that *aretê* means 'excellence' on the basis of a few non-ethical uses, and then waves away the resulting strangeness in the countless apparently ethical uses of the same term, on the grounds that we have *already established* that *aretê* means 'excellence'. In that case, we are using our conclusion to interpret the evidence, and to dismiss the strong evidence against that very conclusion. If we did not assume our conclusion, then that evidence, treated more even-handedly, would show us that in countless contexts *aretê* cannot possibly mean 'excellence', strictly according to the argument's own method.

If we are (unaccountably) determined to find one universal sense for *aretê*, why shouldn't the first argument work exactly the other way round? Why shouldn't the ethical uses determine our interpretation of apparently non-ethical ones? Consider how we might turn the argument on its head, and arrive at the exact opposite conclusion by precisely the same method:

> *Aretê*, when used without qualification, and in the huge majority (i.e., about ninety percent) of cases, explicitly refers to the state of *being a good man*; i.e., an *ethically* good man. That proves that it is an essentially ethical term. Plato and Aristotle, and many other Greek writers, also frequently and explicitly connect the common, unqualified sense of *aretê* with *dikaiosune* ('righteousness'). So, when we find phrases such as 'the *aretê* of a dog' or 'the *aretê* of a sickle' or the '*aretê* of the eyes' we should not treat them as non-ethical, merely because it might seem *to us* that a dog and a sickle and the eyes cannot have ethical goodness. There is indeed no word, in ancient Greek, for general excellence as opposed to specifically ethical goodness. When Plato speaks of the *aretê* of a sickle, he is conceiving of the 'good sickle' as being an *ethically* good sickle. Indeed, he explains carefully that anything can be ethically good (i.e., can have *aretê*) if it has some function that it performs well, in the way that it ought. The view that a good sickle has no qualities comparable to, or conceivable as, ethical qualities is a purely modern, more narrow, Judaeo-Christian view. It is a misleading anachronism to impose that view on these texts. For the Greeks, the world is populated by ethically good and bad inanimate objects. '*Aretê* of a sickle' must be left in its authentic Greek form, and translated 'sickle's (ethical) goodness'.

Now, this argument is silly and its conclusion is absurd. But I cannot see how it differs from the first argument for 'excellence', or how that argument's conclusion is any less absurd. *Of course* Plato does not think (e.g.) that a sickle has ethical goodness. But equally, *of course* Greeks did not think or claim (e.g.) that societies execute people for failing to excel, or that excelling prevents us from treating each other unethically, or that a good man is a 'proficient' man.

I am fully aware that the use of ‘excellence’ in these (apparently) ethical contexts is not considered absurd at all. That may be, mostly, because in practice people unconsciously ignore the thesis and simply read ‘excellence’ as standing for *aretê* — a viable way of reading the texts, equivalent to leaving *aretê* in the original Greek (and an enormous inconvenience to students). It is also sometimes excused on the grounds that, after all, it can always be understood as meaning ‘*ethical* excellence’ (i.e., ethical goodness, or virtue). But those who defend it in that way would do far better to simply reject the thesis altogether. In fact, they *are* rejecting the thesis. The ‘excellence’ thesis asserts that ‘excellence’ *in its unqualified sense*, is the most accurate and clearest English word to use as our translation of unqualified *aretê*; but ‘excellence’, the English word, does *not* refer, on its own, unqualified, to ‘ethical excellence’, or ethical anything. Of course we can qualify the term, so as to make it mean something else. But that is just the point. If we need to make ‘excellence’ mean something else to get it to work, then obviously we have conceded that as it stands (unqualified) *it doesn’t mean the right thing*. We might just as easily claim that it’s fine to use ‘virtue’ in the non-ethical contexts, as long as it’s understood, there, to mean ‘non-ethical virtue’.

Aretê, in fact, works in exactly the opposite way to ‘excellence’ in this regard. ‘Excellence’ in English is always non-ethical, sometimes aggressively so (because of its association with self-assertion and supremacy), unless carefully qualified in such a way as to force it to have an ethical sense (i.e.., in ‘*ethical* excellence’ or ‘*moral* excellence’ or perhaps ‘excellence *of character*’, or ‘the excellence *of good people*’). Even then these forced ethical uses of it are vanishingly rare in real English; they are clumsy and strange, and most speakers and authors would strictly avoid them altogether. *Aretê* in Classical Greek, by contrast, is always ethical, unless qualified in such a way as to force it to have a non-ethical sense; the ethical uses of it are very common, and totally natural; the *non*-ethical uses of it are rare, clumsy, and unusual (as we shall see) and many authors strictly avoid them altogether. These striking lexical mismatches are powerful evidence that we have the wrong word. (I will discuss this further below).

So, again, we have to figure out what we are saying here. Are we saying that *aretê*, on its own, in ethical contexts *means* ‘ethical excellence’? In that case, we have abandoned the original strong thesis that *aretê* is a non-ethical term. (We would have abandoned, for instance, all objections to translating the term as ‘virtue’ or ‘[moral] goodness’ *in those contexts*.) Or are we saying that it strictly means ‘excellence’? Then we must concede that it leads to numerous bizarre and obscure claims in the texts, and that the first argument set out above provides no basis for it whatsoever, for the reasons just given: namely, that the argument illegitimately ignores or disqualifies all the evidence that does not support its conclusion.

For these reasons, the first argument for ‘excellence’ fails entirely to give us any reason whatsoever for adopting it. It must be that all the support for excellence is coming purely from the *second* argument, which we shall shortly consider more carefully.

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Before that, let’s examine a passage in the *Republic* that uses the generic, ‘functional’ *aretê*, as well as Aristotle’s function argument. These passages are often cited without any detailed discussion, as if they offer strong and incontestable evidence for the ‘excellence’ thesis. In fact it can be quite easily shown that they do no such thing. First let’s consider the passages from Plato:

There is an argument between Socrates and Polemarchus in which Socrates mentions, and makes use of, the idea of a dog’s *aretê*, and a horse’s *aretê*. Here is how this argument may be understood. Socrates is making the claim that when a dog is harmed, it must become a *worse* dog; and when a horse is harmed, it must become a *worse* horse. But worse in what respect? Well, evidently, in the case of the dog, worse relative to whatever constitutes being a good dog (i.e., according to *dog’s aretê*); and in the case of a horse, worse relative to whatever constitutes being a good horse (i.e., according to *horse’s aretê*). These uses of *aretê* are certainly non-ethical (unless we think that being a good dog or horse involves ethical qualities). But what follows from that? What bearing does this have on the ‘excellence’ thesis? Plato, as I see it, feels it is fine to speak of horse’s *aretê* because it is clearly fine to speak of a *good* horse. A good man has goodness (*aretê* in its standard, unqualified sense) which is both human goodness and explicitly *ethical* goodness; but why shouldn’t a horse have a corresponding horse’s ‘goodness’? If it’s a *good* horse, then obviously it must have horse’s good*ness*. (In Greek, as in English, this will be an unusual, but still perfectly intelligible use of the term, as long as there is sufficient guidance from the context, as here.) Horse goodness will be made up of whatever makes good horses good, just as human goodness is made up of whatever makes good people good. Nothing in this gives us any reason at all to think that some neutral, ‘functional’ sense of *aretê* is the basic or ‘essential’ sense of the term *even in the human case*, or that Plato is starting with a generic non-ethical sense of *aretê*, and applying that to the human case. It seems far more plausible to assume that the argument works exactly the other way around: the human, ethical case (the unqualified sense of the term) is the basic one, and Plato is imaginatively extending it to the horse and dog cases, just as I did a moment ago with our term ‘goodness’. At any rate that is certainly a possible reading, which is all I need to show. That is, nothing so far commits us to the ‘excellence’ thesis: nothing here suggests that human *aretê* — human goodness — is not explicitly *ethical* goodness. Indeed, what immediately follows provides clear and unequivocal evidence against the ‘excellence’ thesis. Plato makes the analogous claim about *people* being harmed:

‘What about *people*, my friend? Shouldn’t we say that when people are harmed they must become worse people, relative to [whatever constitutes] *being a good person*.’ ‘Of course.’ ‘And being a good person means being an *ethical* person?’ ‘That also must be right.’ ‘So that means that people who are harmed must also thereby become *more unethical*.’

There are two minor things to note here before the main point. First: I have used ‘ethical’ here as a translation of *dikaios*. This is not the traditional translation; it is in accordance with modern English usage. The man who is *dikaios* is righteous, or just, or as we now say, an ethical man, or someone who always does the right thing. Nothing whatsoever hangs on this. I have no objection, other than an aesthetic one, to using either ‘just’ or ‘righteous’ and cannot see that it makes the slightest difference. Obviously both of the older terms are as fully ethical in the required sense as the modern one. *Dikaiosune*, the noun, refers to the *state of being an ethical person*; righteousness, in older English; *iustitia* in Latin (hence the traditional translation, ‘justice’). Second, we must note that Plato’s argument here is deliberately paradoxical: we are supposed to be taken aback by the strange and counterintuitive conclusion that *harming someone must make them more unethical*. Hiding behind this paradoxical claim is Plato’s idea that the only *true* form of harm is to lose one’s (ethical) goodness, and we can see here traces of the later Stoic paradoxes of which this is a direct ancestor. But none of this matters for our question. What does matter is the premise that sits right there at the heart of the argument: that *aretê* in the human case — or the state of being a good *person* — obviously and unquestionably means *being an ethical (or righteous) person*. Socrates introduces it without argument, as obviously true. Polemarchus likewise accepts it without question. He instantly agrees that it *must* be right. Nor should there be any mystery about this; to understand how this could be taken for granted, we need look no further than our *own* concept of the good person: a good person is, obviously, an *ethically* good person. That familiar thought appears to be Plato’s premise here. And what would be remotely surprising about such a simple and unobjectionable claim? But obviously this is very powerful evidence *against* the ‘excellence’ thesis. In fact, it is an exact contradiction of the ‘excellence’ thesis. Unqualified *aretê* always refers to *human* aretê (as noted by Bluck, above); and human *aretê*, Plato tells us here, in very plain terms, is the same as righteousness, or specifically *ethical* goodness. Thus, *aretê* (unqualified) is an ethical term through and through, according to this passage.

At any rate, that is what Socrates says here. We do not have to believe him, and after all this is only one passage. If we were already strongly committed to the excellence thesis, on the basis

of other evidence, we could perhaps find some explanation for what Plato's apparent contradiction of the thesis here. For example, we might accept the second argument for 'excellence' (which we shall shortly examine) and say that Socrates' claim here is part of the ongoing debate over the content of human excellence: perhaps Socrates' claim here is *not* the standard view. He appears to take it for granted that being a good man means being an ethically good man; but perhaps that is in fact a highly controversial, even revolutionary idea. A defence of the 'excellence' thesis along those lines is certainly possible, but simply misses the point. The point is that *this* passage, in itself, fails to provide the reported evidence for the 'excellence' thesis. In reality, it provides good evidence *against* the thesis. True, we might easily find some way of saving the thesis *in spite of* this passage. We might produce all sorts of other evidence for the thesis from *other* passages. But wasn't this passage supposed to be providing some of the very best evidence? Isn't it a serious problem that the alleged best evidence for the thesis turns out to be an illusion?