

“ΑΙΔΩΣ”: A Moral and Political Virtue in Ancient Spartan Education

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RÉSUMÉ

La notion de αἰδῶς a été considérée comme une vertu morale et politique fondamentale par toutes les sociétés de l'antiquité grecque. Tous les poètes et les philosophes anciens l'ont traitée dans leurs oeuvres et on peut trouver aujourd'hui une série d'études importantes qui traitent de cette notion chez les poètes et les philosophes, surtout chez Homère et Hésiode. Le présent article, malgré sa brièveté, a l'intention d'étudier la notion et la fonction de *aidôs* dans l'éducation des jeunes de la société de Sparte, étude qui n'a pas été faite jusqu'ici, car cette notion s'avère avoir été la fondation du système éducatif et de la loyauté à la vie sociale des Spartiates.

ABSTRACT

The notion of αἰδῶς had been considered a fundamental moral and political virtue in all ancient Greek societies. This notion was treated by all ancient Greek poets and philosophers and has been researched today in most of them, especially in Homer and Hesiod. This brief article intends to explore the notion and its function in ancient Spartan education, a study which has not been done so far. For the Spartans, *aidôs* was the foundation of their education and their consequent loyalty to societal life.

C. Erffa¹ was perhaps the first who studied the concept of αἰδῶς in ancient Greek philosophy. He researched the use of the term αἰδῶς, in general, from Homer to Democritus. Some other scholars, after him, did specific studies in the works of each ancient Greek philosopher or poet.

The interest of scientific research deals mainly with Homer and Hesiod, since the concept of αἰδῶς occurs quite often in these two great poets.

In Homer, αἰδῶς has different meanings: a) reverence to Gods b) conscience² c) sense of social responsibility³ d) respect to elders and equals⁴ e) social honour⁵ f) bashfulness or cowardice.⁶

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The interpretations which dominate in Hesiod⁷ are: a) αἰδώς as one of the essential conditions of social life and b) αἰδώς as compassion, a regard for others or moral "conscience"⁸.

We find that the word αἰδώς⁹ is often used in Plato's Dialogues, particularly in *Protagoras*. The Sophist Protagoras¹⁰, in his theory of the origins of civilization, said that αἰδώς could be attributed to every human being as a part of right and wrong.

However, the concept of αἰδώς has a special meaning in the moral philosophy of Democritus¹¹. We have proved elsewhere that, in Democritus, αἰδώς and αἰδεῖσθαι εἰωτόν function as ethical conscience¹².

Generally, the idea of αἰδώς -with the various meanings of respect, conscience, reverence and dignity- has always affected the societies of ancient Greeks and it has been a basic element for the values of their moral culture.

With the above interpretations in mind, our intention in this article is to use the ancient sources to study the function of αἰδώς in ancient Spartan education. As far as we know, there has been no discussion on this problem.

Xenophon¹³ says that αἰδώς, in ancient Sparta, was adored as goddess while Pausanias¹⁴ describes her statue standing there. For the Spartan State, αἰδώς was the foundation of education (*agôgê*) because it was through αἰδώς that the young men were led to: a) the obedience of the laws (*eupeitheia*) and the respect of their fellow-citizens; b) good behaviour, the climax of which is the military virtue, the foundation of Spartan society. So, αἰδώς, improved with education, leads to both the political and the military virtue.

The Spartan general Archidamus confirms our view when he says: "πολεμικοί τε και εὐβουλοὶ δια το εὐκοσμον γιγνόμεθα, το μεν οτι αἰδώς σωφροσύνη μετέχει, αισχύνης δε ευιμυχία, εὐβουλοὶ δε αμαθέστερον των νόμων της υπεροψίας παιδευόμενοι..."¹⁵.

Consequently, a young man respects his fellow-citizens, remains constant in his important debt which is the defence of his own country indeed and this is certainly the basic aim of Spartan education (*agôgê*). Plutarch¹⁶ comments that: "η δε παιδεία ην αυτοίς προς το ἀρχεσθαι καλώς και καρτερεῖν πονούντα και μαχόμενον νικάν η αποθνήσκειν".

In order to defend the native land, every young man must have three qualities: a) will b) shame and c) obedience to the authorities. The Spartan general Vrasidas says: “τρία είναι το καλώς πολεμείν, το εθέλειν και το αισχύνεσθαι και το τοις ἄρχουσι πείθεσθαι”¹⁷. Military virtue is, consequently, connected with αἰδώς, which appears as obedience to authorities and laws. Hence the Spartans improved this innate moral emotion to young men starting with their every day behaviour. Plutarch says: “και τους νέους δε ου μόνον τους ιδίους αιδεῖσθαι πατέρας και υπηκόους τούτοις είναι, αλλά πάντας τους πρεσβυτέρους εντρέπεσθαι και οδων υποχωρώντας και καθέδρας υπεξισταμένους και παρόντων ησυχάζοντας”¹⁸.”

However, the function of αἰδώς was, first of all, political, social and ethical; and was to be expressed subsequently, as military virtue. Young men were taught to avoid doing anything bad, not on fear of punishment, but on fear of shame and blame by others in case they were wrong in their behaviour or in applying the moral standards of their society. The Spartan king, Agesilaus, who was the personification of the ideal citizen in Sparta and a real model of ἦθος (*moris*) had, as Plutarch says, all these characteristics: “ευπειθεία πάλιν αυ και πραότητι τοιούτος ην, οἰος φόβω μηδέν, αισχύνη διε πάντα ποιείν τα προσταπτόμενα, και τοις ἰβόγοις αλγύνεσθαι μάλλον η τους πόνους βαρύνεσθαι”¹⁹.

According to Plutarch, the primary aim of education in ancient Sparta was indeed completed with the acquisition of αἰδώς. So states also Xenophon, in two parts of his work *Republica Lacedaemoniorum*: a) “ἔξ οποτέρας δ' αυτών ευπειθέστεροι και αιδημονέστεροι και ων δει εγκρατέστεροι άνδρες, αποτελούνται”²⁰. b) “τούτο δε ποιήσας διέπραξε και αιδημονέστερους είναι τους παίδας ουδέν γαρ ούτως αιδούνται ούτε παίδες ούτε άνδρες ως τους ἄρχοντες”²¹. Thus, he confirms, once more, that the function of αἰδώς, as a political virtue, was expressed: a) as obedience of young men to laws and authorities, so that they would be able to acquire moral behaviour, since the laws meant social morality²² and the City-State took care of the moral progress of the citizens to be αγαθοί²³ (*boni*); b) as discipline to rules of common life.

So, by means of αἰδώς, the legislator Lycourgos succeeded in the institution of obedience to the the laws²⁴ and respect for the regime by all Spartans. As a result, the regime remained constant

and immutable for five centuries. This constancy was actually the real aim of education, while αἰδώς was its basic content. Plutarch describes it as: “των πολιτῶν οὐκ ἂν μὴ υπομείνῃ τὴν τῶν παιδῶν ἀγωγὴν οὐ μετέχει τῶν τῆς πόλεως δικαίων”²⁵.

However, αἰδώς was a fundamental virtue, as well as a basic aim of education, for another reason. It is connected directly with σωφροσύνη. This connection is emphasized by Archidamus: “ἡ αἰδώς μετέχει σωφροσύνης”. As we have quoted, we believe that σωφροσύνη is a virtue which characterizes the Spartan conception of society as well as the organizational aims of the State, for σωφροσύνη is also defined as knowledge of oneself and of one’s own shortcomings, rational control of desires, temperance and awareness of one’s specific duties, limited as they may be. So, since αἰδώς leads to σωφροσύνη, the Spartans emphasized αἰδώς for the education of young men.

The aspect that αἰδώς is not only part of σωφροσύνη, but that both these virtues (i.e. αἰδώς and σωφροσύνη) are equal is expressed in the Platonic dialogue *Charmides*²⁶ where σωφροσύνη is “τοῦ αὐτοῦ πράττειν”²⁷, while in other Platonic dialogues σωφροσύνη is a complex Greek virtue²⁸. It is the “γινώσκειν εαυτόν”²⁹. Thus σωφροσύνη is connected with “γνώθι σαυτόν”³⁰. This self-knowledge became the basis of moral life for all ancient Greeks.

Relying on the identification “αἰδώς-σωφροσύνη-γνώθι σεαυτόν”, we can justify the Spartan persistence in teaching the young men αἰδώς when in the prime of their age. The Spartans started from their outward appearance. Young men had to be decent. It is, perhaps, these details which made the children be accustomed to αἰδεῖσθαι. Xenophon said: “πρὸς δὲ τοῦτοις τοῦ αἰδεῖσθαι ἰσχυρῶς ἐμρυσίωσαι”³¹. All these good habits took roots in the conscience of the young men and became second nature, “δευτέρα φύσις”³². Xenophon says about the behaviour of the young men in Sparta: “ἐκείνων γοῦν ἤττον μὲν ἂν φωνὴν ἀκούσαις ἢ τῶν λιθίνων, ἤττον δ’ ἂν ὄμματα μετατρέψαις ἢ τῶν χαλκῶν”³³.

Perhaps all these rules about behaviour were oppressive and thus could be considered a disadvantage of Spartan education. However, these same rules were in force in Athens, too: although Athens had a more progressive and liberal socio-political

organization. Plato, in *Charmides*, said: "οι δοκοι σωφροσύνη είναι το κοσμίως πάντα πράττειν και ησυχή εν τε ταις οδοίς βαδίζει και διαλέγεσθαι, και τα άλλα πάντα ωσαύτως ποιείν"³⁴. Isocrates³⁵ as well as Aristophanes³⁶ defended this strict education.

In conclusion we can say that the aim of Spartan education was both hard physical exercise and improvement of αιδώς which was the foundation of moral and political education expressed as: a) self-respect and self-knowledge, b) respect to others, c) self-restriction d) obedience to laws and authorities and e) leading to the military virtue.

NOTES

1. Erffa, C. E., **ΑΙΔΩΣ und Verwandte Begriffe in ihrer Entwicnkung von Homer bis Demokrit** (philol. Suppl. xxx, 2), Leipzig, 1937.
2. Verdenius, W., "ΑΙΔΩΣ Bei Homer", **Mnemos**, Ser III, 12, 1945, p. 49.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 52. See **Iliad**, XV, 656-7.
4. **Iliad.**, X, 238. **Odyssey**, III, 24, 96.
5. See Jaeger, W., **Paideia**, de Gruyter, 1973, pp. 29, 32.
6. Snell, B., **Die Entdeckung des Geistes**, Gottingen, 1975, p. 162. Cf. Adkins, A., **Merit and Responsibility**, Chicago, 1960/rep. 1975, p.43. Clauss, D.B., "Aidos in the Language of Achilles", **Tapha**, 105, 1975, pp.13-28.
7. Hesiod, **Works and Days**, 317-32 and *passim*.
8. Sinclair, I.A., **Hesiod, Works and Days**, London, 1932, p. 35. The problem in Hesiod is also discussed by a) Hoekstra, A., "Hésiode, les travaux et les jours", **Mnemos**, 5.4, III, 1950, pp. 99-106; b) McKay, K., Ambivalent ΑΙΔΩΣ in Hesiod , **Ajph**, 84, 1963, pp. 17-29 (McKay gives a social economical interpretation in the word ΑΙΔΩΣ by Hesiod); c) Livrea Enrico, Applicazioni della Begriffsspaltung negli Erga (αιδώς, θάρσος, νέμεσις, ζήλος), **Helikon**, 7, 1967, 81-100.
9. See Astius, F., **Lexikon Platonicum**, Bonn, 1956 (Lipsiae 1835), vol. 1, p.50.

10. Plato, **Protag.** 322a-b. See analysis of Kerfed, G., **JHS** 73 (1953), 42-45 and Miller, C.L., "The Prometheus Story in Plato's Protagoras", **Journal of Political Philosophy**, 7.2, 1978, 22-32.
11. Democritus, Frgs B179, B264.
12. Dellis, J., **The Problem of Ethical Conscience in Democritus**, Doct. Dissert. (In modern Greek with Summary in English), pp. 108-123.
13. **Symposium** 8, 35: Θεάν γαρ ου την αναίδειαν αλλά την αιδώς νομίζουσι (for the goddess they worship is not Imprudence but Modesty).
14. 3, 20, 10: το δε άγαλμα της αιδούς ... (the statue of Modesty, some thirty stades distant...) See Soph. **O.K.** 1267 and 1381: αλλά έστι γαρ και Ζηνί σύνθακος θρόνων αιδώς επ' έργοις πάσιν.
15. Thucyd. I, 84, 3: "Indeed, it is because of our orderly temper that we are brave in war and wise in counsel, brave in war, because self-control is chief element is self-respect, and respect of self, in turn, is the chief element in courage; and wise in counsel, because we are educated too rudely..."
16. **Moralia: Ancient customs of the Spartans**, 4, vol. III, p . 428 (ed. Loeb, transl. F. Babbitt): "All their education was directed toward prompt obedience to authority, stout endurance of hardship, and victory of death in battle". Cf. Plut. **Life of Lycurgus**, ch. XVI.
17. Thucyd., V, 9, 9: "...and bear in mind that the three virtues of a good soldier are real, sense of honour, and obedience to his leaders".
18. *Op. cit.*, p. 430: "Moreover, the young men were required not only to respect their own fathers and to obedient to them, but to have regard for all the older men, to make room for them on the streets, to give up their seats to them, and to keep quiet in their presence". Cf. **Diog. Laert.**, V, Plato **Rep.**, 465a-b.
19. **Life of Agesilaus**, 2: "... that he did whatever was enjoined upon him not at all from a sense of fear, but always from a sense of honour, and was more distressed by censure that he was oppressed by hardships...". Thucydides does not make a distinction between αιδώς and αισχύνη. He considers the words synonymous.

20. **R.L.** II, 14: "...which system turns out men obedient, more respectful, and more strictly temperate...."

21. **R.L.** II, 14: "This had the effect of making the boys more respectful; in fact boys and men respect their rulers above everything".

22. For this E. Barker (**Greek Political Theory**, London, Methuen, 1970, p.40) writes: "...that the Greek state was regarded by the philosophers as an ethical society; and if we push that point of view further, we shall see that the state is necessarily a community in a common spiritual substance, and that the activity of its organs is necessity and activity of education... society is an educational institution..." .

23. Arist., **E. N.**, B1 1103b3-4: "οι γαρ νομοθέται ους πολίτας εθίζοντες ποιούσιν αγαθούς" (by getting them accustomed, the legislators make the citizens good).

24. See Xenophon, **R.L.** VIII, 1: "...ότι μεν εν Σπάρτη μάλιστα πείθονται ταις αρχαίς τε και τοις νόμοις, ίσμεν άπαντες" (everyone knows that in Sparta the citizens obey the authority and the laws).

25. **Moralia**, *op. cit.*, p. 438: "Whosoever of the citizens would not submit to the discipline (*agôgê*) to which the boys were subjected has no participation in civic rights".

26. See Plato, **Charm.** 161b.

27. **Charm.** 161d.: "...temperance is doing one's own business".

28. See Plato's **Rep.** 389d-e and **Laws** 696b-e.

29. Plato **Charm.** 164d: "...for I would almost say that this very thing, self-knowledge, is temperance".

30. Plato's **Tim.** 72a. See Eliza Gr. Wilkins, **Know Thyself in Greek and Latin Literature**, Chicago, 1917 repr. 1979 ed. L. Taran, Garl. Publ. London, pp. 33-40.

31. **R.L.** III, 4: "Moreover, wishing modesty to be firmly rooted in them..." .

32. Lenz, F. W., "ΕΘΟΣ ΔΕΥΤΕΡΗΣ ΦΥΣΙΣ", **Tapha**, 73, 1942, 214-231.

33. **R.L.** III, 5: "At any rate you would expect a stone image to utter a sound sooner than those lads; you would sooner attract the attention of a bronze figure".

34. 159b: "...but presently he said that, to his mind, temperance was doing everything orderly and quietly walking in the streets, talking, and doing everything else of that kind".

35. **Areop.** 48: "ώστε ει και ποτε διελθειν αναγκασθειεν, μετά πολλής αδούς και σωφροσύνης εφαινοντο ποιούντες" ("and so strictly did they avoid the market-place that even when they were at times compelled to pass through it, they were seen to do this great modesty and sobriety of manner".)

36. **Nub.**, 961-964, 993-994.