"ΑΙΔΩΣ": A Moral and Political Virtue in Ancient Spartan Education

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RÉSUMÉ

La notion de αίδως 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 œuvres 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 αίδως 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 Spar tiates.

ABSTRACT

The notion of αίδως 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, αίδως was the foundation of their education and their consequent loyalty to societal life.

C. Erffa was perhaps the first who studied the concept of αίδως in ancient Greek philosophy. He researched the use of the term αίδως, 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 αίδως occurs quite often in these two great poets.

In Homer, αίδως has different meanings: a) reverence to Gods b) conscience c) sense of social responsibility d) respect to elders and equals e) social honour f) bashfulness or cowardice.

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

We find that the word αἰδώς is often used in Plato's Dialogues, particularly in Protagoras. The Sophist Protagoras, 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 Democritus. We have proved elsewhere that, in Democritus, αἰδώς and αἰδείσθαι εὐωτὸν function as ethical conscience.

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.

Xenophon says that αἰδώς, in ancient Sparta, was adored as goddess while Pausanias 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: "πολεμικοὶ τε καὶ εύβουλοι διὰ το ἑυκοσμόν γιγνόμεθα, το μὲν στὶ αἰδῶς σωφροσύνη μετέχει, αἰσχύνης δὲ εὐμυχία, εὐβουλοὶ δὲ αμαθέστερ οὖν τῶν νόμων τῆς ὑπεροψίας παιδευόμενοι...".

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). Plutarch comments that: "ἡ δὲ παίδεια τὴν αυτοῖς προς τὸ ἄρχεσθαι καλῶς καὶ καρτερέιν πονοῦντα καὶ μαχόμενον νικᾶν ἡ 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 άρχουσι 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: “καὶ τοὺς νέους δὲ οὐ μόνον τοὺς ἰδίους αἰδεῖσθαι πατέρας καὶ υπηκόους τούτοις εἶναι, ἀλλὰ πάντας τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους εντρέπεσθαι καὶ ὀδὸν ὑποχωροῦντας καὶ καθέδρας υπεξισταμένους καὶ 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 ἡθος (moris) had, as Plutarch says, all these characteristics: “ευπειθεία πάλιν αὐ καὶ πραότητι τοιούτος ἤν, οἷος φόβῳ μηδὲν, αἰσχύνῃ διε πάντα ποιεῖν τα προστατόμενα, καὶ τοῖς μόνοις αλγύνεσθαι μᾶλλον ἡ τοὺς 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) “ἐξ ὁποτέρας δ’ αὐτῶν εὐπειθέστεροι καὶ αἰδημονέστεροι καὶ ὧν δει εγκρατέστεροι ἀνδρεῖς, αποτελοῦνται” 20. b)”τούτο δε ποιήσας διέπραξε καὶ αἰδημονέστεροι εἶναι τους παίδας ουδέν γαρ οὕτως αἰδοῦνται οὕτε παίδες οὕτε ἀνδρεῖς ως τους ἀρχοντες”. 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 morality and the City-State took care of the moral progress of the citizens to be ἀγαθοὶ 23 (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: “τοια πολιτῶν ὁς ἀν μη ὑπομείνῃ τὴν τὼν παιδῶν αἰγυγῆν οὐ μετείχε 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: “η 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 “το τα αυτού πράττειν” 27, while in other Platonic dialogues σωφροσύνη is a complex Greek virtue 28. It is the “γιγνώσκειν 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 σαυτόν”, 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 αἰδεία. Xenophon said: “προς δὲ τούτοις το αἰδεία τοια ἱσχυρός εμφασίσασαι” 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: “εκείνων γουν ἦπτον μὲν αν φωνήν ακούσας ἢ των λιθίνων, ἦπτον δ’ αν όμματα μετατρέψασις ἢ των 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: "οἱ δοκοὶ σωφροσύνη εἶναι το κοσμίως πάντα πράττειν καὶ ησυχῇ εν τε ταῖς οὖδοις βαδίζει καὶ διαλέγεσθαι, καὶ τα ἄλλα πάντα ωσαύτως ποιεῖν". Isocrates as well as Aristophanes 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**


2. Verdenius, W., "ΑΙΔΩΣ Bei Homer", *Mnemos*, Ser Ill, 12, 1945, p. 49.

3. Ibid., p. 52. See *IlIiad*, XV, 656-7.


13. Symposium 8, 35: Θεόν γαρ ου την αναίδειαν αλλά την αιδώ νομιζουσι (for the goddess they worship is not Imprudence but Modesty).


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 in self-respect, and respect of self, in turn, is the chief element in courage; and wise in counsel, because we are educated too rudely…”


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...”. Thucydidas does not make a distinction between αἰδώς and αἰσχύνη. He considers the words synonymous.

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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 11ο3b3-4: "οἱ γὰρ νομοθέται οὐς πολίτας εθίζοντες ποιοῦσιν αγαθούς" (by getting them accustomed, the legislators make the citizens good).

24. See Xenophon, **R.L. VIII**, 1: "...ότι μεν εν Σπάρτῃ μάλιστα πείθονται ταῖς αρχαίς τε καὶ τοῖς νόμοις, ἰσμὲν ἀπαντεῖς" (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".


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 ".


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


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 quitly walking in the streets, talking, and doing everything else of that kind."

35. Areop. 48: "ώστε εἰ καὶ ποτὲ διελθεῖν αναγκασθείν, μετὰ πολλῆς αδούς καὶ σωφροσύνης εφαίνοντο 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").