The Relation Between Vulnerability and Virtue in Plato's *Phaedo*

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I. Introduction

Though the notion of vulnerability is considered traditionally to have negative connotations,[1] several scholars in the last couple of decades have offered important reassessments of it, arguing that it plays a crucial role to live a virtuous life in many respects. For instance, MacIntyre (5) contends that our vulnerabilities *qua* human beings to different types of afflictions (e.g., hunger, thirst, illness, bodily or mental injury, etc.) are intimately connected to human flourishing when he writes that 'the virtues that we need if we are to develop from our initial animal condition into independent rational agents, and the virtues that we need, if we are to confront and respond to vulnerability and disability both in ourselves and in others, belong to one and the same set of virtues.' In addition, McCoy (ix) argues that, because vulnerability "strengthens interpersonal bonds within a community," it is therefore a "necessary component of living a rich and authentic human life in community."

The general goal of my paper is, echoing the views put forth by MacIntyre and McCoy, to offer a defense of the notion of vulnerability as a crucial element needed to live a virtuous human life for Plato.[2] My strategy to do this consists in examining a passage from Plato's *Phaedo* (89d1-91c3) where Socrates accepts his vulnerability to misology and to other threats (in particular, to error and, if he is indeed mistaken, to death). This passage, which is often overlooked because commentators tend to focus on other parts of the dialogue (for instance, those that present Socrates' arguments for the immortality of the soul), is nonetheless important because it casts light on an important challenge to the practice of

elenchus, which has for Socrates a crucial moral dimension since the *elenchus* is the main tool that allows us to attain moral excellence in the care of our souls. Indeed, in this passage, Socrates acknowledges that, given the specific circumstances in which he finds himself (with Simmias and Cebes having voiced strong objections to the thesis that the soul is immortal as his execution approaches), he is "in danger of not having a philosophical attitude" and of becoming a misologue.

The thesis that I defend in my paper is that it is precisely Socrates' awareness of his vulnerability vis-à-vis the threat of misology (and vis-à-vis the other threats) and his realization of the limitations of the e*lenchus* that make possible, in spite of the fact that his life might be about to end, the cultivation of certain *human* virtues.[3] The paper proceeds in the following way. In section 2, I present a characterization of misology in Plato's writings and I offer a brief discussion of the nature of the condition as Socrates describes it, the conditions under which it arises in persons and the dangers that it poses to them. In particular, I argue in this section that the circumstances in which misology may arise involve the realization that human beings are subject to a form of epistemic vulnerability. This form, which has been highlighted by Jacquette and which I call *elenctic vulnerability*, consists in one's being susceptible to overestimate the power of the elenchus, forgetting that even if the *elenchus* is a very useful tool that enables us to detect error in many cases and to convince others, it is nonetheless limited in some respects. In section 3, I show how this vulnerability does not necessarily have to lead people to misology, as the case of Socrates makes clear. In particular, to make this case, I rehearse an argument given by Socrates (89d1-91b4) that shows how he channels his elecentic vulnerability and the other types of vulnerability that he is susceptible to (in particular, his epistemic vulnerability to error and his physical vulnerability to death) to develop some important virtues. Finally, in section 4, I provide a brief conclusion.

II. The Nature of Misology and its Connection to Vulnerability

Plato discusses the nature of misology (i.e., the hatred of argumentation) in the *Phaedo* by referring to misanthropy. Indeed, just as the misanthropist hates all men, the misologue hates all rational discourse. In addition, both conditions are not only structurally similar, but they also emerge because of the same type of circumstances as Plato points out:

> There is no greater evil that one can suffer than to hate all reasonable discourse. Misology and misanthropy arise in the same way. Misanthropy comes when a man without knowledge or skill has placed great trust in someone and believes him altogether to be truthful, sound and trustworthy; then a short time afterwards he finds him to be wicked and unreliable, and

> then this happens in another case; when one has frequently had that experience, especially with those whom one believed to be one's closest friends, then, in the end after many such blows, one comes to hate all men and to believe that no one is sound in any way at all. (*Phaedo* 89d-e)

Subsequently, Plato draws the parallel between both conditions more clearly by contending that misology arises "when one that is unskilled in argumentation puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false— sometimes it is and sometimes it is not—and so with another argument and then another" (*Phaedo* 90b). As Plato himself notices, the similarity between misanthropy and misology is not perfect because, while the misanthrope may be in some sense partially justified since men can be indeed wicked and unreliable, arguments are not by themselves wicked or unreliable. Rather, for Plato, the misologue typically adopts his characteristic attitude because, given that he is unskilled at argumentation, he fails to appreciate his own limitations and, consequently, "in the end gladly shift[s] the blame away from himself to the arguments, and spend[s] the rest of his life hating and reviling reasonable discussion and so [is] deprived of truth and knowledge of reality." (*Phaedo* 90d).

These passages make clear that, for Plato, both misanthropy and misology are moral failings, and they suggest too that, out of the two conditions, misology constitutes an even more problematic one. Indeed, a misanthrope who turns his back on men fails to perform his duties to the *polis*, but he may still retain his faith in the power of argumentation as a tool of enlightenment for himself. However, a misologue who turns his back on all argumentation neglects not only his duties to the *polis*, but also to his soul as he abandons the path to moral excellence:

> If we become misologues in Socrates' sense by turning our backs on argument, refusing to appreciate its value, then we cut ourselves from what Socrates believes is the only method for attaining the kinds of philosophical truth that is necessary to the soul's welfare. (Jacquette 9)

Considering that misology is not only a serious type of epistemic failure but also a moral one, it is not surprising that Plato offers advice through Socrates on how to resist the urge to succumb to misology when he writes: "we should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it; much rather should we believe that it is we who are not yet sound and that we must take courage and be eager to attain soundness" (*Phaedo* 90e). However, even if this proposal seems to be initially appealing to prevent misology, it leaves a potential difficulty unaddressed, which he been raised by Jacquette:

> The difficult question remains how we can achieve this resolute denial if misology is not itself the result of a conscious choice, but something that

> may come to us like a virus, against our will, when a triggering event of some kind finally makes us completely disillusioned about the value of argument. (9)

In response to this worry, Jacquette suggests a series of practical measures such as properly mentoring individuals from the beginning of their education, so that they become aware of the limitations of the *elenchus*. However, these measures are, as he (15) himself acknowledges, *prophylactics*: they do not eliminate the threat of misology and they seem to be ineffective vis-à-vis individuals who are already misologues since "we cannot expect to convince misologues by means of argument because they hate argument." However, this raises a further question: should we strive to eliminate the threat of misology altogether? In response to this, I contend that, even if this could be done, eradicating the threat of misology would not be a desirable goal since the possibility of succumbing to misology (which is a type of human vulnerability) and the susceptibility to other ills such as error and death allow the cultivation of certain human virtues. In the next section, I will defend this claim by showing how the threat of misology and other vulnerabilities Socrates is subject to enable him to cultivate and exhibit certain human virtues.

III. Vulnerabilities as Conditions for the Development of Certain Virtues

As I mentioned in the introduction, Socrates confesses to his interlocutors that he is vulnerable given his circumstances when he states: "I am in danger at this moment of not having a philosophical attitude" (*Phaedo* 91a). This vulnerability is actually the result of different types of vulnerability that interact with each other in rather complex ways. The first type of vulnerability is what I call *elenctic vulnerability*. This vulnerability arises in light of the fact that participants in a discussion who rely on the *elenchus* often use it to get the better of others in argument, while sometimes overestimating his persuasive power and forgetting that it is limited in virtue of its open-ended character.[4] Socrates makes clear that he is vulnerable in this sense when he states that "like those who are quite uneducated, I am eager to get the better of you in argument, for the uneducated, when they engage in argument about anything, give no thought to the truth about the subject of the discussion but are only eager that those present will accept the position they have set forth" (*Phaedo* 91a).

Now, in virtue of his awareness of the discursive vulnerability that he is subject to, Socrates then moves on to argue that this elenctic vulnerability allows him to develop of a form of epistemic humility. Indeed, even though he is as interested as the uneducated men to have others accept his position through the deployment of the *elenchus* (which is precisely what opens the door to a certain form of

intellectual vanity), he points out that there is a crucial difference between the uneducated men and him in the following respect:

> I differ from them only to this extent: I shall not be eager to get the agreement of those present that what I say is true, except incidentally, but I shall be very eager that I should myself be thoroughly convinced that things are so. (*Phaedo* 91a)

As we can appreciate, since Socrates realizes that the *elenchus* has limitations in virtue of its open-ended nature, he channels his eagerness to get the better of others into an eagerness to use the *elenchus* to convince himself of certain claims. In doing this, Socrates is very clearly using the elenctic vulnerability that he is subject to in order to develop a certain form of *epistemic humility*: he no longer aspires to convince others that his position is correct (except as a secondary goal) but he is satisfied if he is able to convince himself of the correctness of his position, which is a more modest goal.

Subsequently, Socrates points out that, even if he limits his goals to just being able to convince himself using the *elenchus*, he is still subject to another type of vulnerability, which is epistemic vulnerability to error. This form of vulnerability arises to the extent that human beings are susceptible to error. Plato introduces and discusses this form of vulnerability at the end of the *Gorgias* when Socrates presents the Myth of Last Judgment. According to the myth, when Zeus was made aware that men were being judged while still alive and that the judges often issued verdicts that did not correspond to their true selves, he ruled as follows:

> Many … whose souls are wicked are dressed in handsome bodies, good stock and wealth, and when the judgment takes place they have many witnesses appear to testify they have led just lives. Now the judges are awestruck by these things and pass judgment at a time when they are fully dressed themselves, too, having put their eyes and ears and their whole bodies up as screens in front of their souls. … What we must do first … is to stop them from knowing their death ahead of time. … Next, they must be judged when they are stripped naked of all these things for they should be judged when they are dead. The judge, too, should be naked and dead, and with only his soul he should study only the soul of each person immediately after his death, when he's isolated from all his kinsmen and has left on Earth all that adornment, so that the judgment may be just. (*Gorgias* 533c-e)

What is remarkable about this passage, as Fussi and McCoy have pointed out, is that Plato seems to suggest that the epistemic vulnerability to error that the judges are subject to is to be corrected by stripping all the souls naked (i.e., by

making them vulnerable), and that it is precisely this condition of vulnerability of both the judges and those being judged when their souls are entirely denuded that allows remedying the epistemic vulnerability to error and the flourishing of justice. Now, I contend that, in a similar way, Plato shows in the *Phaedo* how the epistemic vulnerability to error that Socrates acknowledges he is susceptible to (which opens the door to a form of physical vulnerability with respect to death if he is indeed mistaken) allows him to develop some important virtues:

> For I am thinking—see in how contentious a spirit—that if what I say is true, it is a fine thing to be convinced that things are so; if, on the other hand, nothing exists after death, at least for this time before I die I shall distress less those present with lamentations and my folly will not continue to exist along with me—that would be a bad thing—but will come to an end in a short time. (*Phaedo* 91a5-91b3)

In this passage, Plato shows in my opinion that, even if Socrates is susceptible to epistemic vulnerability vis-à-vis error and to physical vulnerability vis-à-vis death, the interplay between these two forms of vulnerability allows him to develop two important human virtues. Indeed, insofar as Socrates does not distress those present with lamentations, even though he acknowledges that he might be wrong, the epistemic vulnerability vis-à-vis error allows him to develop a valuable form of emotional resilience. In addition, the vulnerability vis-à-vis death that emerges if he is wrong about the immortality of the soul allows him to develop and exhibit a form of benevolence towards others that is realized through self-sacrifice. This virtue, which reflects Socrates' well-known commitment to the well-being of the *polis* (*Apology* 30e-31a), is of crucial importance since it illustrates the depth of Socrates' social duty towards others. As Socrates maintains that he has a social duty towards others, the interaction between his sense of social duty and his awareness of his epistemic vulnerability to error results in his willingness to self-sacrifice for the sake of benevolence to spare others the danger of his folly.[5] In virtue of this, it seems clear that the vulnerability to certain dangers (in particular, misology, error, and death) has a positive side as the case of Socrates illustrates since it is required to develop some important human virtues such as epistemic humility, emotional resilience and benevolence.

IV. Conclusion

I have argued here, following McCoy and MacIntyre (and *pace* Nussbaum), that vulnerability is for Plato not a negative trait that systematically limits or hinders the possibility of living a virtuous life, but that, when it is properly acknowledged (as Socrates does when he accepts his elenctic vulnerability, his epistemic vulnerability vis-à-vis error, as well as his physical vulnerability vis-à-vis death if

he is mistaken about the immortality of the soul), it makes possible developing and exercising some human virtues. In future work, I want to examine in a more systematic fashion how human vulnerability to certain conditions or threats is necessary to develop certain virtues in Plato's works.[6]

NOTES

1. George Harris provides a good statement of this view in the following passage: 'There is a view of the dignity and worth of persons that goes back through Kant and Christianity to the Stoics. According to this tradition, when character either weakens or succumbs to life's troubles, it fails because it lacks the kind of strength ideal character should have" (1).

2. In virtue of this, a secondary goal of is to partially question Martha Nussbaum's interpretation of Plato. Indeed, she argues that Plato viewed vulnerability in negative light when she writes: "We know, however, from the *Phaedo* and from the *Republic*'s earlier books that the philosopher, to be that, must first be an ascetic, dissociating him or herself from the body's needs. It is, then, from the viewpoint of one who no longer sees his characteristic human needs as genuine parts of himself that Plato rejects the associated activities as valueless" (154). Though I do not dispute that there are certain passages that support this interpretation, I aim to show here that vulnerability had also a positive side for Plato in the *Phaedo*.

3. This qualification is important because *if* there are divine (or, at least, non-human) beings that are not subject to hunger, illness, fear, death or ignorance, these beings may have virtues that are not tied to human vulnerabilities and limitations. However, these virtues are not *human* virtues. Moreover, my contention here is that only *some* human virtues (e.g., courage) depend on the existence of vulnerabilities and limitations, but I leave here open the question of whether *all* human virtues are independent of vulnerabilities or limitations. I thank Robert Pasnau for pressing this point.

4. Several commentators have pointed out the open-ended character of the *elenchus.* See, in particular, J. H. Lesher.

5. I want to make an important remark here: though I think benevolence plays an important role in Socrates' decision at this juncture, it need not be the sole or the even most important virtue that is weighed in deciding what is the proper course of action in all cases involving the possibility of self-sacrifice. In this respect, I agree with Stuart when he writes: "[O]ther virtues apart from the virtue of benevolence are relevant in reaching a decision about what is the right thing to do. Further, a good proportion of these virtues can be manifested in a decision to take the non-self-sacrificial action" (23).

6. A prior version of this paper was presented at the 2015 Front Range Ancient Philosophy workshop that took place at the University of Colorado-Boulder. I thank for excellent feedback and questions on that occasion Robert Pasnau, Mitzi Lee, Robert Colter, Antonio Chu, Jeffrey Ogle, and Elizabeth Cantalamessa.

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