Thumos’s function in Plato’s Republic

As F. M. Cornford showed, thumos is the “weak point” of the city-soul analogy, a psychic part created ad hoc to fit the tripartite city, but eventually referring to a fundamental aspect of social life and behaviour: “Self respect”. Similarly, M. Vegetti found three shifts in the city-soul analogy, two of them being explicitly caused by a certain interpretation of thumos, because its function in the psyche is hardly understandable without referring to the social structure in which the individual acts. Thumos’s function is then difficult to define.

Moreover, thumos is linked with the ideology of honour and shame, and in the Republic, Plato aims at using thumos’ energy, neutralizing it and converting its force to fit into a new frame of values. As A.-G. Wersinger showed, Plato uses two distinct psychological models in the Republic: a first one centered on the Homeric thumos (Rep. III), and a second one, founded on an erotic psychology, which is responsible for a new function for the thumos.

Following this path, I’ll try to explain Plato’s strategy of converting the meaning of thumos, which is taken to be a function of valuing things. In doing so, we can understand how a misuse of thumos is responsible for the corruption of the philotimos’ character, but also, conversely, how thumos is naturally the target of preliminary education. The aim of this paper is to show how this “weak-point” of tripartite psychology is coherent with Plato’s aim of leading non-philosophers to virtue.

1. Thumos as intermediary part of the soul.

The first part of this paper is devoted to a brief analysis of IV, 439-441, where thumos is defined as an intermediary part, between reason and desire.

Following T. Penner’s analysis of this passage, I claim that Socrates does not demonstrate that thumos is an autonomous part of the soul (for the distinction between reason and desire does occur somehow, even when they are not explicitly mentioned).

However, and contrary to Penner’s conclusions, it does not mean that thumos is reducible to either of them: the frontiers of thumos are deliberately kept vague, precisely because thumos denotes a deep “I” in action, in which cognitive judgments and conative forces are mixed.

Nevertheless, Penner is right about one very important thing: book IV lacks a point to make thumos autonomous: the delimitation of the very object of this function of the soul, which is, I claim, timē.

2. Thumos as a valuing function.

The second part of the paper tries to define more accurately the object of thumos’ function. Thumos is the seat of a certain kind of emotions and actions. They are spontaneous, reactive, but also determined by a judgment of value. Following A. Hobbs’ definition of thumos, I try to justify a way of defining thumos as a valuing function (not, though, as an evaluative one, as reason is).

Thus, we can explain why the notion of timē receives two meanings which are closely related in the Republic: first the result of an operative capacity of valuing things, and second, the way a thing is interrelated within a larger frame of values that society confirms. The two meanings, which are assuredly differentiated in Plato, merge into what the philotimos seeks: honour, as a kind of object awarded by others. That’s why, following now the analysis of A.-G. Wersinger, the act of valuing things is grounded, for the philotimos, on a desire of esteem or honour.

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1 This is a outline of the french version; please refer to the full draft in french for the text and references.
3. Philotimia as an educational tool.

Because it is obviously difficult to reify timē as Socrates sometimes does, and because the fact that timē is, besides being an object, a network of social relationships, philotimia as a natural tendency of one’s thumos can be a target of an educational process in the Republic. In other words, Socrates seems to use thumos function to make the non-philosophers more concerned with virtue. How so ? Plato superimposes the archaic mechanism of honour-giving on the real system of values the reason has settled. In the Laws (V, 744e3), we find a clear example of this educational use of philotimia in a strange formula : “anyone who has the ambition to be virtuous” (hostis philotimos ep’ arête).

Thumos must then be defined as a powerful tool in the education of the character, because it links the individual with his/her community. Thumos might be a “weak point” of the analogy in a sense, but it also helps to explain how the analogy can never be taken as a mere isomorphism. Without reason, thumos acts according a frame of values which the community values, and does not question them as such : thumos “adheres” to them. If the worst comes to the worst, thumos transforms the individual into a man who makes of honour a mere object of value. But it is also true that Plato tries to dissociate thumos from the archaic ideology, and attempts to show the mechanism of timē in order that non-philosophers could realize what they esteem most, in a spontaneous way, by directing the competitive spirit to the values settled by reason. Thumos is not the ad hoc analogous to the auxiliaries, it is a psychic function that guarantees the spontaneity and the commitment of individuals into the system of values of their political community.

Olivier RENAUT
Université Paris Ouest – Nanterre-La Défense
olivier.renaut@u-paris10.fr

Main secondary sources :