PLATO, *REPUBLIC* 606a7–606b2: SYNTAX AND MEANING

ABSTRACT

Plato, Republic *606ab, which deals with the soul bipartition and the behaviour of the two soul components during a theatrical performance, has been the object of scholarly dispute concerning both its grammar and its meaning. This article proposes a new syntactical approach and argues that the passage does not have to be interpreted as contradicting the context.*

Keywords: *Politeia*; 'decent man'; soul tripartition; soul bipartition; theatre

Plato, *Republic* 606ab, which deals with the soul bipartition and the behaviour of the two soul components during a theatrical performance, has been the object of scholarly dispute concerning both its grammar and its meaning. In this passage, Socrates says that theatrical performance boosts precisely that soul component which 'decent men' otherwise struggle to keep under control by force. So far so good. But what happens to the rational component during a theatrical performance? Here is Socrates' answer (*Resp.* 606a7–606b4):

[a7] τὸ δὲ φύσει βέλτιστον ἡμῶν, ἅτε οὐχ ἱκανῶς [8] πεπαιδευμένον λόγῳ οὐδὲ ἔθει, ἀνίησιν τὴν φυλακὴν τοῦ [b1] θρηνώδους τούτου, ἅτε ἀλλότρια πάθη θεωροῦν καὶ ἑαυτῷ [2] οὐδὲν αἰσχρὸν ὂν εἰ ἄλλος ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς φάσκων εἶναι ἀκαίρως [3] πενθεῖ, τοῦτον ἐπαινεῖν καὶ ἐλεεῖν, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο κερδαίνειν [4] ἡγεῖται, τὴν ἡδονήν κτλ.

The general meaning is that even the best spectators consider the theatrical performance rather innocuous because they believe that the feelings displayed on the stage, since they belong to a different person, can be experienced and enjoyed without risk or shame. Socrates' point is that the pleasure experienced in someone else eventually becomes one's own pleasure.

Let us take a closer look. At the theatre the rational component of the soul, if it has not been educated enough, loosens up the guard over the non-rational component. Now the participle θεωροῦν (b1) which seems to be grammatically connected with the subject τὸ βέλτιστον ἡμῶν (a7) suggests that it is the rational component which beholds the onstage performance and praises and pities the mourning dramatic hero without feeling embarrassed or ashamed. This, however, is not the meaning we expect since throughout the critique of poetry and even a few lines before this passage Socrates has repeatedly and consistently pointed out that it is the lower half of the soul which is affected by poetic imitation and is able to feel pity. This is why Halliwell wrote:[1]

> The grammar of the sentence, if taken strictly, makes it seem that it is the best part of the soul which is lulled into enjoying the emotional experience of poetry, even though that is clearly not the required sense … The incongruity is caused by the analytical separation of psychological faculties within the coherent experience of an individual.

Criticizing this discrepancy between grammar and meaning, Mastrangelo and Harris suggested detaching the passage from the context and admitting that in these lines

[1] S. Halliwell, *Plato: Republic 10, with Translation and Commentary* (Warminster, 1988), 148 (on 606b1).

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Plato maintains that the rational component of the soul is susceptible to emotions when exposed to theatrical performance.[2] This suggestion was later adopted without further comment by Halliwell.[3]

The issue has been recently reopened by Storey, who rightly emphasizes the significance of the philosophical context for the interpretation of this passage and the need to find a solution which fits Plato's views on the bi- and tripartition of the soul.[4] Storey points out that the ἅτε-clause at b1–3 does not make much sense if ἑαυτῷ (b1) refers (like θεωροῦν) to the rational component (τὸ βέλτιστον ἡμῶν, a7), as the syntax seems to require, since the main clause has just stated that the rational component loosens up its guard over the lamenting component (ἀνίησιν τὴν φυλακὴν τοῦ θρηνώδους, a8–b1).[5] Indeed, why should the rational component loosen its guard over the non-rational component at the theatre if it is the rational component which enjoys the dramatic performance?

Storey proposes to read the reflexive pronoun ἑαυτῷ as referring to the whole person, a reading facilitated by the presence of ἄλλος ἀνήρ in the next line and the change of subject brought by the masculine καταφρονήσας (b5). This reading has the obvious advantage of interpreting the puzzling sentence in accordance with the context. In particular, it demonstrates that it is not necessary, as Mastrangelo and Harris suggested, to accept the idea that Plato exceptionally attributes here to the upper half of the soul feelings and emotions such as pity, which he otherwise consistently associates with its lower half. The reason is that Plato easily moves between the perspective of the person as a whole and the perspective of the soul's parts endowed with their own agency.[6]

Although Storey's reading is preferable to that of Mastrangelo and Harris, it is not exempt from difficulties. Storey argues that the ἅτε-clause at b1–3 must refer to the whole person because, if it refers to the upper half of the soul alone, it is a *non sequitur*.[7] However, since the participle θεωροῦν (b1) is neuter, the entire ἅτε-clause cannot refer to the whole (masculine) person. Rather, according to Storey's explanation, the change of subject must take place within this clause, namely between θεωροῦν (neuter) and ἑαυτῷ (masculine), which would be more than just a 'minor difficulty'.[8] Moreover, it is not clear whether in Plato's Greek a reflexive pronoun such as ἑαυτῷ at b1 can be used without an explicit subject.[9]

In view of these difficulties, I suggest a different approach. In his discussion Storey assumes that the ἅτε-clause at b1–3 must have one of two possible subjects, namely

[2] M. Mastrangelo and J. Harris, 'The meaning of *Republic* 606a3–b5', *CQ* 47 (1997), 301–5, at 302–3.

[3] S. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton and Oxford, 2002), 112–13 n. 29.

[4] D. Storey, 'The translation of *Republic* 606A3–B5 and Plato's partite psychology', *CPh* 114 (2019), 136–41.

[5] Storey (n. 4), 138.

[6] To Storey's arguments I add two more. First, that ἀνίης at 606c7 takes the whole person as its subject only a few lines after ἀνίησιν at 606a8 is said to be the activity of a specific soul part, namely τὸ βέλτιστον ἡμῶν. Second, from 603d on (or even earlier) Plato is concerned with psychic conflict. In fact, his doctrine of the parts of the soul, as introduced in Book 4, is meant to explain situations of psychic conflict. However, our passage describes a situation in which the two parts of the bipartition are more or less in agreement (hence ἀνίησιν τὴν φυλακήν, 606a8). In such a case the distinction between the whole person and one of the two parts of the soul is practically irrelevant.

[7] Storey (n. 4), 138.

[8] Storey, ibid.

[9] This use of the reflexive is different from those quoted by R. Kühner and B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache. Zweiter Teil: Satzlehre* (Hannover and Leipzig, 1898–1904[3]), 1.562–3 n. 2.

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either the upper half of the soul[10] or the whole person. He prefers the whole person because the alternative seems worse (which is true). However, there is a third possibility. As Storey points out, the subject of ἐλεεῖν (and ἐπαινεῖν)[11] at b3 must be the lower half of the soul (τοῦ θρηνώδους, b1).[12] In this case, why not assume that the entire ἅτε-clause refers to τὸ θρηνῶδες? This meaning can be obtained by connecting θεωροῦν not with the (grammatical) subject of the main clause (= the upper half of the soul) but, by way of an anacoluthon, with τὸ θρηνῶδες which, though a genitive, is its logical subject.[13] That in the sentence 606a7–606b4 the focus is still on the lower half of the soul (following the previous sentence) is shown by the emphatic use of the demonstrative τούτου at b1, which directs the reader from the grammatical to the logical subject of the sentence and could justify an anacoluthon.

Plato does not shy away from giving such sense constructions to a participle.[14] Take *Tht.* 168c8–d4 ἐνενόησάς που λέγοντος ἄρτι τοῦ Πρωταγόρου καὶ ὀνειδίζοντος ἡμῖν ὅτι πρὸς παιδίον τοὺς λόγους ποιούμενοι τῷ τοῦ παιδὸς φόβῳ ἀγωνιζοίμεθα εἰς τὰ ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ χαριεντισμόν τινα ἀποκαλῶν, ἀποσεμνύνων δὲ τὸ πάντων μέτρον, σπουδάσαι ἡμᾶς διεκελεύσατο περὶ τὸν αὐτοῦ λόγον; Here, the subject changes from the second person of ἐνενόησας to the third (= Protagoras) of διεκελεύσατο. Consequently, the first participle ὀνειδίζοντος has the same case as Πρωταγόρου, while the following participles ἀποκαλῶν and ἀποσεμνύνων are nominatives, as if Protagoras had been the subject of the sentence all the time. This shift is possible because Protagoras is obviously the logical subject of the sentence, which also explains the use of the reflexive pronouns ἑαυτοῦ and αὐτοῦ. Similarly, at *Phdr.* 241d4–6 the text reads: καίτοι ᾤμην γε (v.l. σε) μεσοῦν αὐτόν (v.l. αὐτοῦ), καὶ ἐρεῖν τὰ ἴσα περὶ τοῦ μὴ ἐρῶντος, ὡς δεῖ ἐκείνῳ χαρίζεσθαι μᾶλλον, λέγων ὅσα αὖ ἔχει ἀγαθά. Here, the participle λέγων is nominative instead of accusative for the same reason, namely that the logical subject is more important than the grammatical subject.[15]

As mentioned above, the context requires that the subject of ἐλεεῖν (and ἐπαινεῖν) at *Resp.* 606b3 be the lower half of the soul. For this reason, we may regard τοῦ θρηνώδους τούτου as the logical subject of the ἅτε-clause at b1–3. Therefore, the use of the nominative participle θεωροῦν to refer to τοῦ θρηνώδους τούτου is similar to the anacolutha in the *Theaetetus* and *Phaedrus* passages. Assuming an anacoluthon here, ἑαυτῷ at b1 may refer to τὸ θρηνῶδες as well.

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[10] τὸ βέλτιστον ἡμῶν (606a7), which echoes οἱ βέλτιστοι ἡμῶν at 605c9.

[11] In this argument praise, like pleasure, seems to originate in the lower half of the soul: 605d3–4, 605e3, 605e5, 606a6–7, 606e1.

[12] Storey (n. 4), 138.

[13] Kühner and Gerth (n. 9), 2.105: 'Der Nominativ des Partizips wird häufig auf ein im Dative oder Akkusative oder Genetive stehendes Substantiv bezogen, wenn der Dativ oder Akkusativ oder Genetiv in grammatischer Hinsicht zwar das Objekt, in logischer Hinsicht aber das Subjekt ausdrückt, und durch diese Konstruktion das logische Subjekt als Hauptbegriff hervorgehoben werden soll.' Examples of participles in the nominative referring to nouns in genitive are found on page 107.

[14] L. Reinhard, *Die Anakoluthe bei Platon* (Berlin, 1920), 88–96.

[15] G. Stallbaum (ed.), *Platonis Opera Omnia* (Gotha and Erfurt, 1857[2]), 3.1.68, ad loc.: 'constructionis ratio exigebat λέγοντα, quod Stephan. requirebat. at nulla opus est mutatione, quandoquidem nominativus κατὰ τὸ νοούμενον subiicitur, quasi praecessisset: καίτοι ἐδόκει μοι μεσοῦν καὶ ἐρεῖν κ.τ.λ.'