The Emergence and Establishment of Psychological Ἀρετή

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PART 1: LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

1. Introduction to the Etymology of Ἀρετή

Frisk's and Chantraine's etymological dictionaries state that the etymology of Ἀρετή is not clear.¹ Similarly, Beekes's recent etymological dictionary suggests that "an Indo-European etymology exists for the entry concerned, but it is not entirely convincing."² Even so, all of these scholars suggest that Ἀρετή is cognate with ἀρείων and ἀρίστος (better, best).³ In fact, Vine calls this the "traditional comparison."⁴ And Massetti, who also includes the verb ἀρέσκω (to please, satisfy) as a cognate, describes this as the "theoria recepta" of the etymology of Ἀρετή.⁵

Massetti’s inclusion of ἀρέσκω in fact mischaracterizes the received view. Scholars of the early twentieth century maintain a connection between Ἀρετή and ἀρέσκω.⁶ But in a footnote to


² R. Beekes, Etymological Dictionary of Greek, vol. 1, Brill, 2010, ix. This description explains the symbol < IE? > associated with his proposed etymology < IE? *h₂erh₁- >. (Note that Beekes uses the abbreviation IE to refer to Proto-Indo-European.)


his chapter "Nobility and Areté" in volume 1 of Paideia Jaeger criticizes this position. Schwyzer endorses Jaeger's criticism; and Frisk, Chantraine, and Beekes all also disfavor the association between ἀρετή and ἀρέσκω, on semantic grounds.

Following an earlier discussion by Brandenstein, Vine suggests an "alternative" etymology according to which ἀρετή is cognate with ἀραρίσκω (fasten together, join). Massetti has recently defended and elaborated on Vine's account.

These contributions make it seem as if interpretations of the etymology of ἀρετή that associate this word with ἀρείων/ἀριστος, with ἀρέσκω, or with ἀραρίσκω must be exclusive. But that is not so. For instance, almost a century ago Prellwitz had suggested a derivation from Proto-Indo-European (hereafter PIE) *aro-s, whose meaning he renders as 'füglich, gut, passend'. In treating these German terms as semantically akin, Prellwitz in effect allows a derivation of ἀρετή cognate with both ἀρείων/ἀριστος and ἀραρίσκω. More recently, in his discussion of ἀρείων and ἀριστος, Sihler says that ἀρέσκω is "obviously [etymologically] related somehow." And Dieu begins his recent discussion of the etymology of ἀρείων and ἀριστος with the statement that they share a PIE root with ἀραρίσκω. In fact, it is generally maintained that ἀρείων/ἀριστος, ἀρέσκω, ἀραρίσκω all derive from a common root *ἀρ- (PIE *h2er-).

In light of this – and granting that morphosyntactic and semantic considerations conjointly inform etymological inquiry – it may be helpful to distinguish

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7 W. Jaeger, Paideia, Hight, trans., Oxford University Press, vol. 1, 1945 (orig. German 1933), 418, n.10: "The Greeks felt that areté was above everything a power, an ability to do something. Strength and health are the areté of the body, cleverness and insight the areté of the mind. It is difficult in view of this to accept the modern subjective explanation which derives the word from ἀρέσκω ... It is true that areté often contains an element of social recognition — its meaning then alters to 'esteem', 'respect'. But that is a secondary sense, created by the highly social character of all human values in early times. The word must originally have been an objective description of the worth of its possessor, of a power peculiar to him, which makes him a complete man."

8 E. Schwyzer, Griechische Grammatik I: Lautlehre, Wortbildung, Flexion, Munich, 1939, 501: "Doch areté nicht zu ἀρέσκω ... sondern zu ἀρε-ίων."


13 The connection is in fact explicit in Prellwitz (1905) 49.

14 Sihler (1995) 362. He does however acknowledge syntactic complications, on which more below.


16 Beekes (2010) 128, s.v. ἀρείων; J. Pokorny, Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, Francke, 1959, 55-6; Sihler (1995) 362; H. Rix, Lexicon der indogermanischen Verben, Wiesbaden, 2001, 269 (for ἀριστος and ἀραρίσκω, cp. 761). This is also true of earlier contributors such as Prellwitz (1905), Boisacq (1916) 76.
the question of the morphosyntactic derivation of ἀρετή, ἀρείον, ἀριστος (or any other cognate) from the root *ἁρ- (or from any other root) from the question of the semantic derivation of the meaning of ἀρετή, ἀρείον, ἀριστος (or any other cognate) from the meaning of the root *ἁρ- (or any other root). Or rather, since the morphosyntactic derivation of an expression often cannot be wholly insulated from semantic considerations, we may insulate those semantic aspects of morphosyntax that are related to so-called grammatical or functional meaning from those related to so-called lexical meaning. This is how I propose to proceed in the immediately following remarks.

2. The Morphosyntactic Derivation of Ἀρετή

Regarding the morphosyntactic derivation, a key question is whether the verbal stem is athematic or thematic. In particular, both *h₂er- and *h₂erh₁- have been proposed. Assuming an athematic stem, the formation of the superlative ἁρ-ιστος is regular. On the other hand, the formation of the comparative ἀρείον seems based on a thematic stem: *ἁρε-.

The Greek comparative affix -ου- derives from the morphological complex *-ISON-. The first constituent *-is- (the zero grade of *-jos-) is a comparative, perhaps an originally intensifying, morpheme meaning "very." The second constituent *-on- possibly originally functioned like an indefinite determiner. If so, for a root R, the derivation would be *R-is-on-, literally "a very R one." Sihler, who presents this interpretation, provides the example of ἕδιον (sweeter) < *sweh₂d-is-on- (a very sweet one). In the case of ἁρείον, then, the "spurious" diphthong ει would derive from contraction of the epsilon at the end of the thematic stem *ἁρε- and the iota the beginning of the comparative affix -ισ-.

Dieu criticizes this interpretation, however, for two reasons. One is that it contradicts Pinault's Law. Sihler's reconstruction assumes a PIE form *h₂erh₁-jos-, which yields the Greek *ἁρειο-jo-. According to Pinault's Law, a laryngeal in medial position – following a consonant or sonant and preceding an antevocalic yod (j) – is elided. In that case, the PIE and therefore

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19 Throughout, I have used the symbol ḷ rather than r to represent yod.
20 Cp. Sihler (1995) 357-8; R. Beekes and M. de Vaan, Comparative Indo-European Linguistics, John Benjamins, 2011², 222. This is contested and I return to the point below.
23 Sihler (1995) 362. [Why does the final laryngeal h replace s?]
Greek forms should be: *h₂erjos- and *άρεοh- respectively. But the latter would yield the comparative *άρουh-.

The second problem is that the reconstruction ignores the evidence of the Mycenaean forms α-rollo-a and α-rollo-e, attested on several Knossos tablets. On these expressions, Chadwick and Ventris remark: "the parallel declension of me-zo-a2 and me-zo-e [cp. μεῖζονα/μεῖζονες] suggest the comparative ἀρείον." And Dieu argues: "the grapheme α-rollo-a must correspond to a form *άριοhα, which derives from *άριοσ- ... given synthesis according to Sievers' Law." Assuming the athematic stem *άρ-, Dieu's interpretation elaborates a proposal by Seiler, according to which ἀρείον derives from a positive form ἀρ-εῖος. Among other considerations, Dieu suggests "traces" of this positive form in Homer and the Theognidea. I will return to this topic in the semantic discussion below.

Turning now to ἀρετή, the epsilon again requires an explanation; and again the assumption of a thematic stem *h₂erh₁- would solve the problem, in this case with the feminine suffix *-tēh₂- serving as an abstract nominalizer. Evidently, this would render the

29 Dieu (2011) 81-87.
morphosyntactic derivation of ἀρετή inconsistent with those of ἀρείων and ἄριστον. However, there is an alternative possibility, advanced by Vine, who in turn develops a thesis and suggestion of Waanders.  

Waanders first proposed that alongside *-to/-teh₂, there existed a PIE suffix *-eto/-eteh₂. He suggested that the primary function of this suffix was to produce nouns, perhaps specifically "action nouns," from zero-grade verbal roots. Among examples he provides are: πνευτός (choking), τυπετός (beating the breast, mourning), and βρυχετός (chattering of the teeth). In this context, Waanders mentions ἀρετή as a possible case.

In his own study, point of departure is the morphological interpretation of the Aeolic noun ὀρπετόν (creature), Vine develops Waander's thesis of the existence of an *-etó-/-etή- (*-eto-/eteh₂) suffix. Vine's discussion includes an interpretation of the morphology of ἀρετή, which he suggests derives from the deverbial adjectival, i.e. gerundival, form *h₂er-etó-, subsequently nominalized with the feminine abstract suffix *-éh₂.  

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31 Vine's account is in turn noted sympathetically in Dieu's (2011, n.70) discussion and has since been endorsed by Massetti (2014, passim).
32 F. Waanders, "The suffixes -to/tā and -eto/-etā in Greek action nouns: the structure of nouns of the type δανατός, κάματος," Mnemosyne 227 (1974) 1-6. Waanders' contribution in fact forms part of lineage of scholarship unrecognized by Vine and worth noting here. This line of work extends back to research in the late nineteenth-century by A. Stratton, some of which he published as "The History of Greek Noun-Formation I. Stems with -μ-," Studies in Classical Philology 2 (1899) 115-243. Stratton's material was subsequently transmitted to C. Buck to be mined and elaborated by him and his students; cp. C. Buck, "Studies in Greek Noun-Formation: Introductory Note," Classical Philology 5 (1910) 323-5. Among numerous works in the ensuing series, C. Carruthers, "Studies in Greek Noun-Formation: Dental Terminations IV.1," Classical Philology 26 (1931) 178-95, esp. 181-3, discusses so-called "nomina actionis" terminating in -τη, including ἀρετή. Chantraine in turn refers to Carruthers' treatment in the context of his own discussion the nominal suffix -to-, where he notes "un petite groupe de féminins en -τά/-τη- qui jouent le rôle de noms d'action," also including ἀρετή. (La formation des noms en grec ancien, Paris, 1933, 301, n.1) Finally, Waanders indicates his debt to Chantraine in the first footnote of his article.
33 Waanders (1974) 3. [Note, however, that these nouns don't have a passive or potential meaning, pace Vine.]
In short, the combination of Dieu's Seiler-inspired treatment of ἀρείων and ἄρστον and Vine's Waanders'-inspired treatment of ἄρετή yields a consistent morphosyntactic derivation of all three words from the root *ār-

Before turning to the lexical semantic derivation of ἄρετή, one final consideration is worth noting. In Rix's Lexicon der indogermanischen Verben, the first footnote to the treatment of the PIE root *h₂er- reads: "In case the Hittite word āra 'right, appropriate' usw. belongs here ... [*h₂er-] should be replaced by *h₁ar-."38 Dunkel has recently drawn this inference.39 He claims that Hittite āra makes the standardly cited root *h₂er- impossible. Instead, he maintains that the root is *h₁ar- (passen, sich fügen), "not on theoretical grounds, but in order to connect this form with Vedic sūrī-, Greek ἐρτ-, and Phrygian ἐρά."40

Within his discussion of the root *h₁ar-, Dunkel does not mention ἄρετή. However, he does include ἀρείον and ἄρστον. Since the stem in question is athematic, the formation of the Greek superlative remains regular. With respect to the comparative, Dunkel's suggestion reiterates a view proposed over a century ago by Güntert,41 namely an analogical reconstruction ("Umbildung") of the expected form ἀρείον > ἀρείον following the pattern of χείρον (worse) < χερπιόν and μείον (smaller, fewer) < *μείʃον- (Myk. me-wi-jo, me-u-jo) as well as Attic μείζον (larger) and κρέαττον (stronger).42

In short, Dunkel's position provides an alternative account of the formation of the comparative ἀρείον and an alternative view of the PIE root of both the comparative and superlative. And while Dunkel does not discuss ἄρετή, there is, in principle, no reason why the Vine-Waanders proposed suffix -ἐτή- (or its PIE source) could not be joined to the root *h₁ar-.43

Finally, with respect to this suggested root *h₁ar-, it should also be noted that in his discussion of the Hittite word āra Kloekhorst suggests, on the basis of a cognate Anatolian stem era-, that both expressions derive from a proto-Anatolian root *ʔor-, which in turn derives from a

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38 Rix (2001) 270, n.0. In support of this possibility, the authors refer to the unpublished MA thesis of K. Praust, Studien zu den indogermanischen Nasalpräsentien, Vienna, 1998, 46, n.100.


42 Dunkel (2014) 291, n.21. (One might also cp. Rau (2010, 175) on κείρο < *kerjο/e-). Dieu (2011, n75) suggests the following critical remark on this proposal: "Cette hypothèse doit ... être rejetée, dans la mesure où il est plus probable que la forme χερπιόν est secondaire par rapport à χείρον, précisément sous l'influence de ἀρείον." [Dieu writes here: cf. II, 2.1.2 – unfortunately I'll need the rest of his book! Even so, one may wonder whether Dieu's resistance is compatible with the several other such analogical reconstructions that Dunkel sites.] Dunkel also suggests as derivative of *h₁ar- the prefix ἄρ- (good, very), which appears, for example, in ἄρτιγνωτος, ἄρτιφραδής. [However, I see no evidence that the prefix means "good" here or in any other cases.]