

The Two Solons in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Studies of Aristotle's engagement with Solon in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10 typically focus solely on the philosophical arguments (e.g. Irwin, 1985), not questioning the sources of the relevant ideas (or seeing this as besides the point). But, if we do just this, something quite intriguing comes to light. This paper argues that Aristotle knowingly refutes the Solon of Herodotus' *Histories*, distinct from the historical Solon of the extant poems, with an idea found in the very poems of Solon himself.

Aristotle invokes Solon and his maxim, "look to the end" (τέλος ὁρᾶν), as a natural conclusion to the fact that man can cease to live well, i.e. lose his *eudaimonia* (1100a10). *Eudaimonia* is not merely a thing of chance nor God-given, but severe misfortune can deny *eudaimonia* to a man previously *eudaimôn*, like Priam (1099b8-1100a9). But *eudaimonia* is lasting (μονίμη), so shouldn't we wait to see that man's life ends *eudaimôn* before declaring it truly so (1110a25-1100b7)? No, Aristotle argues, for, among other reasons, the stability (βεβαιότης) of virtue (ἀρετή) and its essentialness to *eudaimonia* enables us to declare a living man *eudaimôn* despite the possibility of its negation (1100b8-1101a21).

It seems clear that Aristotle refers explicitly to the Herodotean Solon and not Solon himself (that they are not the same: e.g., Chiasson, 1986; Irwin, 2012). The maxim "look to the end" is found only in Herodotus' account, and this notion of *telos* is substantively distinct from the *telos* in Solon's poetic fragments (Chiasson, 1986). Moreover, Aristotle's preceding discussion on chance strongly alludes to Herodotus' Solon, especially in light of the subsequent invocation. For example, Aristotle questions whether *eudaimonia* is just a divine allotment (θεία μοῖρα) or a matter of fortune (τύχη)

(1099b10), while the Herodotean Solon attributes *eudaimonia* solely to good fortune (εὐτυχία) and the whim of the divine (τὸ θεὸν φθονερόν) (1.32.6 and 1.32.1). Also, Aristotle's description of Priam, who was thriving (μάλιστα εὐθηνῶν) before his wretched end (τελευτήσας ἀθλίως) (1100a7-8), evokes the man whom the god of Herodotus' Solon gives happiness (ὄλβος) only to overturn it "root and branch" (πρόρριζος) (1.32.9-33.1).

While there are many similarities between Herodotus' Solon and Solon himself (Chiasson 1986), there is one vital, pertinent difference. The Herodotean Solon makes mortal life utter chance (πᾶν συμφορῆ, 1.32.4) and entirely unpredictable until death. But, in his poetic fragments, Solon himself describes stable goods, partly as a result of gods that semi-predictably dispense goods. First, justly acquired wealth is stable (ἔμπεδος) "from lowest root to its top" (ἐκ νεάτου πυθμένος ἐς κορυφήν), while unjustly acquired wealth is divinely punished (frag. 13.9-15). And second, importantly, virtue (ἀρετή) is even more stable than justly acquired wealth: one's virtue is always stable (ἔμπεδον αἰεὶ), while wealth might fluctuate and change hands (frag. 15).

This point, the stability of virtue, is fundamentally what Aristotle uses to rebut Herodotean Solon. Now, I am not suggesting that Aristotle simply parrots Solon, for there are important differences between Aristotle's and Solon's virtue. Aristotle's virtue is a developed character, while Solon's virtue is hereditary (and thus God-given, though stable). But, I am suggesting that Aristotle has Solon foremost in mind in his refutation of Herodotean Solon.

In light of the differences between their notions of virtue, why not take the likeness between the arguments as coincidence? Because elsewhere Aristotle refutes the ideas of Herodotean Solon with Solon's own words. As Leslie Kurke notes (2011), in his

discussion of *sophia* in the *Metaphysics* 982b32-983a5, Aristotle denies the divine jealousy (το θεϊόν πθονερόν) described by “poets”, jealousy that might be aimed at one with *sophia*, by citing the line “poets tell many lies”. “Divine jealousy” quotes the Herodotean Solon, while the very proverb with which Aristotle rebuts divine jealousy is Solon’s (Kurke, 2011). But the similarity doesn’t end here. Later in this same *Metaphysics* passage, Aristotle quotes the poet Simonides (“God alone can have this privilege”) (982b.28-32). And in Aristotle’s rebuttal of the Herodotean Solon, Aristotle also quotes Simonides (“four-square, fashioned without reproach”) (1100b21-2). Aristotle’s similar use of Simonides, the Herodotean Solon, and Solon himself in the *Metaphysics* supports my reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10.

Thus, I suggest that, based on both internal evidence and comparison with the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle uses an idea of Solon himself to rebut the Solon depicted by Herodotus, illustrating a more complex engagement with prior thinkers than may first appear.

Works Cited

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