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Who is the Patient in Plato's *Dialogues* ?

Abstract: Throughout his *Dialogues*, Plato speaks about medicine in many ways and with many purposes. Asking about the patient in Plato's "medical" thinking requires an analysis about the meanings of the term "patient" as we understand it today as well as how it might have been understood by the philosopher. It also connects with other important terms like "care". The paper makes a short analysis of five examples where Plato speaks about ailments, cures and care: *Laches* (185d-e), *Charmides* (156d-e), *Symposium* (186b-d), *Phaidros* (244d) and two examples in the *Laws* (733d-e and 854b-c). The discussion concludes that the "patient" in Plato's *Dialogues* might be whatever part of a body, a soul or a community which got dislocated from the metaphysical order of the whole and needs to be restored in its proper place and function.

Keywords: medicine, bioethics, doctor-patient relationship, Plato.

Plato's ideas about medicine and care often appear in his *Dialogues*. The philosopher uses medicine as a metaphor (Lidz 1995), as an analogy for philosophy (Thivel 2004), as an example of privileged practice (Joly 1961), an allusion to politics or craftsmanship (ἡ τέχνη), sometimes worthy of despise, sometimes respectable, an itinerary that parallels the evolution of his Theory of Forms (Thivel 2004). This has led some authors to think that Plato had a rivalry with medicine (Levin 2014) and that his opinion shifted from despise to praise and then back to a reconciling attitude. However, not only did the philosopher's attitude toward medicine change along the *Dialogues*, but there is also some uncertainty regarding the type of care one receives, the nature of ailments, the types of cures being promoted and the specifics of the physician-patient relationship. This relationship is considered when comparing what Plato tells us along the *Dialogues* with the concepts we use today to understand such "medical" activities. Therefore, one central question concerning what Plato thinks about medicine would be: who is the patient in *Dialogues* ?

First, we need to take into consideration the terms being used in this paper as well as the terms that Plato used with respect to the patient-doctor relationship. As the reader can easily notice, the question asked in English

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contains the word *patient* which might or might not be a good label with the entity receiving care (ἡ *θεραπεία*) mentioned in *Dialogues*. In standard English, *patient* as noun means a person receiving or registered to receive medical treatment (Pearsall 2001). It comes from the Latin word *pātiens*, the present participle of *pātior* which means *to suffer, to endure, to be the victim of* (Gaffiot 2002).

Plato, himself, when discussing about a person who receives medical care or something that can be construed as such, often uses a present participle of *κλῦνω* (Plato 1903a, *Republic* 342d¹, 1903c, *Laws* 720d). The word means *to work, win by toil, labor, toil, to be weary, to be sick, to be suffering, to be distressed* (Liddell and Scott 1940). He does that, for instance, in the *Republic* when he says

neither does any physician in so far as he is a physician seek or enjoin the advantage of the physician but that of the *patient*? For we have agreed that the physician, “precisely” speaking, is a ruler and governor of bodies and not a moneymaker. (Plato 1982, *Republic* 342d)

He uses the same term in the *Laws*:

But the free-born doctor is mainly engaged in visiting and treating the ailments of free men, and he does so by investigating them from the commencement and according to the course of nature; he talks with the *patient* himself and with his friends, and thus both learns himself from the sufferers and imparts instruction to them, so far as possible (Plato 1967, *Laws* 720d).

It follows that, the basic term in ancient Greek has a broader meaning than what we currently understand by *patient*. It appears to purport to an entity who suffers, is weary of or sick from the effect of some other entity, the effect itself being of indeterminate nature. This suffering, enduring or victimized entity is meant to be in a relationship with someone who cares for (θεραπεύει) that entity and the care itself (ἡ *θεραπεία*) is of a larger nature than what we construe today as medical intervention. The verb *θεραπεύω* has multiple meanings as well: *do service to the gods, do service or honor to one's parents, wait upon a master, pay court to, treat medically*. The connected term *θεραπεία* carries meanings like *attendance of persons, service paid to the gods, worship, service done to gain favor, medical or surgical treatment or cure* (Liddell and Scott 1940).

The multiple questions that can be raised about this network of meanings deal with the mutual relationship among those who are suffering, those who provide care, the type of suffering and the type of care. We can ask ourselves whether, across the *Dialogues*, the patient is only the whole of one person, a part of a person, a community of people or another entity. We can also observe who those are who appear to be suffering but also who, or what inflicts the suffering. What kind of suffering is taken into consideration, and

who are the ones providing care? Last, but not least, what type of care is being considered when Plato speaks about contexts when meanings close to *patient* are at hand? From this intersection of the four main elements: the sufferer, the care provider, the suffering and the care, the problem raised in this paper can be abstracted as such: who suffers and who gets care in Plato's *Dialogues*?

The stake of this main question connects to how we can explore and understand Plato's implicit teachings about what we call medical ethics, today. The significance of *θεραπεία* can enrich what we think about contemporary medical ethics, especially when considered in its relationship with philosophy. Figuring out who the patient is in Plato's *Dialogues* can pave the way in extracting valuable teachings for current day medical practices.

We will present some examples originating from Plato's work, using a chronological order of authentic dialogues (Copleston 2003). One of the fragments dealing with *θεραπεία* is found in his early dialogue *Laches*, where Socrates mentions care for the soul (*περὶ ψυχῆς θεραπείαν*): "So what we have to consider is whether one of us is skilled in treatment of the soul and is able to treat it rightly, and which of us has had good teachers." (Plato 1955, *Laches* 185e). This phrase comes as a conclusion to a larger exchange between Socrates, Melesias and Nicias about who is fit to give advice and guidance when young men's education is at stake. If we are to consider the four elements we argued about in the beginning of this paper, we can clearly see that the ones who get care are young men's souls. The nature of suffering is a lack of education, a lack leading to dishonor, as it is mentioned at the beginning of this inquiry "and we point the moral of it all to these young people, telling them that if they are careless of themselves and will not take our advice, they will win no reputation, but if they take due pains, they may very likely come to be worthy of the names they bear" (Plato 1955, *Laches* 179d). We can observe the social feature of this problem, as a reputation is something a person can acquire from their community and peers. The care (*θεραπεία*) is "an accomplishment studied for the sake of young men's souls" (185d-e) and the one providing it is "skilled in treatment of the soul" (185e) or, better said, skilled in the care provided "for the end one had in view to start with, and not about the means to be used for such end" (185d). Therefore, in this early dialogue, the patients are young souls who would be in danger in losing their honor by means of poor education and example.

In another fragment provided through the voice of Socrates, in *Charmides*, Plato teaches about the important relationship that exists between the part and the whole. Attempting to cure young Charmides' headache, Socrates explains that one cannot construe a cure for the part without a cure for the whole:

This Thracian said that the Greeks were right in advising as I told you just now: “but Zalmoxis,” he said, our king, who is a god, says that as you ought not to attempt to cure eyes without head, or head without body, so you should not treat body without soul; and this was the reason why most maladies evaded the physicians of Greece – that they neglected the whole, on which they ought to spend their pains, for if this were out of order it would have been impossible for the part to be in order. (Plato 1955, *Charmides* 156d-e).

The suffering is a morning headache, the sufferer is (apparently) a part of the body, the care is a charm (ἐπωδή) and the one providing care is Socrates himself, as one who strips the soul (154e) of the young Charmides. This relationship between the part and the whole is an important feature of platonic thinking (Lidz 1995). It follows that, in this instance, the patient is a part of a human being thoroughly connected with the mind-body whole.

In *Symposium*, we have extracted valuable information from the famous speech of Eryximachus concerning what health is with respect to the two types of love, the good ἔρως and the bad ἔρως (καλόν τε καὶ αἰσχρὸν ἔρωτα).

Reverence for my profession prompts me to begin with the witness of medicine. This double Love belongs to the nature of all bodies: for between bodily health and sickness there is an admitted difference or dissimilarity, and what is dissimilar craves and loves dissimilar things. Hence the desire felt by a sound body is quite other than that of a sickly one. Now I agree with what Pausanias was just saying, that it is right to gratify good men, base to gratify the dissolute: similarly, in treating actual bodies it is right and necessary to gratify the good and healthy elements of each, and this is what we term the physician's skill; but it is a disgrace to do aught but disappoint the bad and sickly parts, if one aims at being an adept. For the art of medicine may be summarily described as a knowledge of the love-matters of the body in regard to repletion and evacuation; and the master-physician is he who can distinguish there between the nobler and baser Loves and can effect such alteration that the one passion is replaced by the other (Plato 1925, *Symposium* 186b-d).

Therefore, in this fragment the suffering seems to be a prevalence of the bad type of Eros. The sufferer is one who has various sickly parts under the influence of the bad type of love. The care or the cure comes by distinguishing the two types of loves and replacing one type with the other. The one providing the cure is the master-physician (ὁ ἱατρικώτατος). We can see that Eryximachus speaks about a hypothetical individual body, of someone who is not in control of these two types of love.

In *Phaidros*, an important variety of religious treatment is also mentioned (Schuhl 1960). Plato writes about “diseases and the greatest troubles” that strike entire “families through some ancient guilt” (Plato 1925, *Phaidros* 244d). The treatment finds a way of release for those in need (οἷς ἔδει ἀπαλλαγὴν

ἡύρετο). The sufferer is an entire family; the suffering itself is made of diseases (νόσων) and troubles (πόνων). The cure or the intervention seems to be the madness from the gods (ἡ μανία), and the ones providing the cure are not specifically mentioned, but they possess the madness that comes from the gods. It follows that the patient would be an entire group of people who relate to each other and who inherit a spiritual imbalance.

In the *Laws*, Plato teaches about how different lifestyles can be defined by their limits in pain and pleasure.

The lives of us men must all be regarded as naturally bound up in these feelings, and what kinds of lives we naturally desire is what we must distinguish; but if we assert that we desire anything else, we only say so through ignorance and inexperience of the lives as they really are. What, then, and how many are the lives in which a man – when he has chosen the desirable and voluntary in preference to the undesirable and the involuntary, and has made it into a private law for himself, by choosing what is at once both congenial and pleasant and most good and noble – may live as happily as man can? Let us pronounce that one of them is the temperate life, one the wise, one the brave, and let us class the healthy life as one; and to these let us oppose four others – the foolish, the cowardly, the licentious, and the diseased. (Plato 1967, *Laws* 733d-e).

The ailment is an imbalance between pleasure and pain, the sufferer is every citizen, the cure is a way of life in accordance with a certain balance and the one who cures is the law giver. It looks like, in this passage, the patient is the community as a whole, a group of people in need of guidance about how to conduct their lives in accordance with a proper ratio between pleasure and pain.

It is also, in some other place in the *Laws*, that Plato talks about an evil which comes neither from gods nor from men; it is also connected with some wrong (ἀδίκημα) belonging to ancestors. The temple robbing is considered an ailment in itself, and Plato advises

My good man, the evil force that now moves you and prompts you to go temple-robbing is neither of human origin nor of divine, but it is some impulse bred of old in men from ancient wrongs unexpiated, which courses round wreaking ruin; and it you must protect yourself against it with all your strength. How you must thus guard, now learn. When there comes upon you any such intention, betake yourself to the rites of guilt-averting, betake yourself as suppliant to the shrines of the curse-lifting deities, betake yourself to the company of the men who are reputed virtuous; and thus learn, partly from others, partly by self-instruction, that every man is bound to honor what is noble and just; but the company of evil men shun wholly, and turn not back. And if it be so that by thus acting your disease grows less, well; but if not, then deem death the more noble way, and quit yourself of life. (Plato 1926, *Laws* 854b-c).

The sufferer is the one tempted of temple robbing. The suffering is an evil (κακός) thought oriented toward something. The ones offering care are “the men who are reputed virtuous”, and they provide care through their mere presence and example. In this last passage, we can see that the ailment is individual but is spiritual in nature and has a deep connection with the wrongdoers in the past. The patient is someone tempted to break one of the most sacred rules of the city.

Through the examples we provided, we offered some insight into what Plato teaches about care and patients. As we can see, neither the terms in use along the *Dialogues*, nor the modern words we put in place nowadays can be totally superposed to the various situations where Plato talks about ailments, sufferers and cures. The common thread that binds all the examples seems to be metaphysical in nature. The “patient” is a part of the whole which, for one reason or another, got dislocated from the metaphysical order. This metaphysical order is common for body parts, soul parts and city parts. To break the connection with this metaphysical harmony is to suffer, to be weary, to be a victim, to toil as well as to endure. Care is provided through various means, and it always seeks to restore that specific element to its original place and function. For modern medicine, a patient who asks for help might be construed as a piece of a larger order that fell into disarray. Health would, therefore, mean more than a cure for the body, or an isolated spiritual intervention which explains everything by wrongdoing and sin. Health would mean restoring or including the person or the community into the general order of proper functions and places. It means reconnecting someone to the whole which, in turn, generates another understanding of what that whole should be.

This reading of ailments and cures is consistent with other places of the platonic works where the philosopher teaches about the importance of considering the whole in order to understand the part. In *Phaidros*, Socrates asks: “ψυχῆς οὖν φύσιν ἀξίως λόγου κατανοῆσαι οἷε δυνατόν εἶναι ἄνευ τῆς τοῦ ὅλου φύσεως”; (Plato 1903a, *Phaidros*, 270c). This key fragment has been translated in various ways, either with “the nature of the Universe” in a Romanian version (Platon 1983), either with “the nature of the whole man” in an English version (Plato 1925), although the safest interpretation would be “Now do you think one can acquire any appreciable knowledge of the nature of the soul without knowing the nature of *the whole*?”. This interpretation fits the reading other scholars had about this passage, like Schul (1960).

In this platonic reading, health and cure are different and broader than what we currently understand about health, disease and medicine. Medicine itself becomes broader. It gets to a metaphysical ground where a cure is useless unless it reintegrates what was lost into the whole.

Notes

¹ Since the translations from Plato's works are significantly different, we preferred to mention in each citation in the text both the edition used and the fragment from the dialogue that we refer to.

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