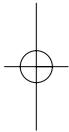
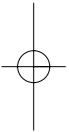


# I

## The Art & Culture of Wine



## Chapter 1

# Wine in Ancient Greece: Some Platonist Ponderings

*Harold Tarrant*

### Delights and Dangers

Homer's Odysseus tells us of the means by which he overcame the monstrous Cyclops, Polyphemus, who, in the cave where he dwelt and tended his sheep, was then imprisoning the Greek leader along with his men. Polyphemus had a voracious appetite and consumed two of Odysseus' men at a sitting. The prisoners could therefore expect a brief and unpleasant future unless Odysseus' renowned cleverness could secure their escape. Odysseus plied the monstrous one-eyed beast with the fine wine that he carried with him until Polyphemus fell into a drunken stupor. Then his Greek "guests" were able to plunge a huge sharpened stake, pre-warmed in the fire, into the Cyclops' single eye as he slept. So he lost his sight and, after further trickery, he lost his prisoners too.

Homer's work, at the beginning of European literature, seems to presuppose a great many things about wine. To begin with, it was an *ordinary* part of life, made from a common plant, and often safer to drink than water. Next, it was part of the civilized life that the Greeks and those most like them had developed, for which reason the uncivilized Cyclops is innocent both of its effects and of the expectation that it should be mixed with water. Wine varied in quality and characteristics, but it was ordinarily dark, and its value was assessed by both its strength and its sweetness. Now sweetness could be indicated by the terms *glykys* and *hêdus*, the former being translated 'sweet' as in "sugary," and the latter 'sweet' as in "delightful." In this latter case, one might doubt whether they really meant wines of

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a sugary or syrupy nature. However, such descriptions as *melieidês* (honey-sweet) clearly connect the sweetness of wine with the primary sweetener available to the Greeks.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas few of us today would relish drinking a dark red wine that was also sweet (except perhaps port), we have to remember that terms like ‘sweet’ are relative, and that if we were used to cheap wine of a vinegarish nature then we might use the term ‘sweet’ a little more freely and as a compliment rather than a criticism. In any case, it would hardly be surprising if the Greeks had interpreted certain aesthetic experiences somewhat differently from ourselves. To take a Homeric example of the delights of a sweeter wine, one could point to Odysseus’ experience of the hospitality of the Phaeacians. When he is served honey-sweet wine, the poet is inspired to mention the sweet smell arising from the mixing-bowl.<sup>2</sup> Its sweetness evidently increased its seductiveness. The majority of the Greeks, for whom hedonism came naturally,<sup>3</sup> found it difficult to dismiss anything seductive, as the tale of Helen of Troy, hated and revered in approximately equal measures, demonstrates.

While sweetness was important, one cannot forget the other quality associated with good wine: its strength. As the Cyclops had discovered, this was able to turn the wine into a potent weapon. Hence it is also clear that the dangers of wine in the hands of inexperienced drinkers were well appreciated. Dionysus, the god traditionally associated with wine and sometimes almost identified with it (or with other naturally potent juices),<sup>4</sup> is both the bringer of calm delights

<sup>1</sup> In the *Iliad* the following references to wine that is ‘honey-sweet’ (*melieidês*) may be noted:

4.348: Odysseus and his men, slow into battle, are accused of being fastest into the feast and the honey-sweet wine;

6.258: honey-sweet wine for a libation and to rouse Hector’s flagging spirits;

8.506: honey-sweet wine as a contribution to the entertainment of guests;

10.579: the soldiers relax with food and choice honey-sweet wine;

12.320: the diet of kings is said to include fat sheep and honey-sweet wine;

18.546: on the shield of Achilles a ploughman is pictured receiving a cup of honey-sweet wine.

At other times the adjective honey-hearted (*meliphron*) is used of wine, as at *Iliad* 8.506, 8.546, and 24.284. Both adjectives are only used in the *Odyssey*: ‘honey-sweet’ at 3.46, 9.208, 14.78, and 16.52, and ‘honey-hearted’ at 7.182, 10.356, 13.53, and 15.148.

<sup>2</sup> *Odyssey* 9.210.

<sup>3</sup> As evidenced by Plato, *Republic* 502b and *Laws* 663b.

<sup>4</sup> See Euripides, *Bacchae*, lines 278–83 (wine); 708–11 (milk, liquid honey).

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and a highly dangerous god for any mortal to cross, the paradox being beautifully brought out in Euripides' disturbing tragedy, the *Bacchae*.<sup>5</sup> Hence wine could be the source of a variety of experiences, some of them to one's apparent advantage, some to one's undoubted detriment. Its commonness in no way lessened the need to use it wisely.

**The Use of Wine**

When they were confronted by natural power of any kind, the Greeks desired to harness it, eliminating from their world as far as possible all that was unpredictable and beyond human control. Like Odysseus, every adult Greek male with wine at his disposal was faced with the challenge of getting it to work for him rather than against him. To judge from Greek comedy, this would involve keeping it away from those members of his household likely to use it against his own interests, including women and slaves whom he needed to perform regular tasks in an efficient fashion. But it would also involve consciousness of its long-term effects, restricting one to whatever one's physical constitution could withstand.<sup>6</sup>

Like so much else around them, the Greeks saw that wine had positive or negative value in accordance with how and in what circumstances it was used. Plato's *Lysis*, when making the important distinction between what is valued for its own sake and what is valued for what follows from it, chooses the example of a father who discovers his son has drunk hemlock; the father attaches considerable value to wine insofar as he believes that wine is the cure for hemlock poisoning (219e). Ultimately the high value that he then attaches to wine is similar to the high value that he attaches to the cup by which the wine is administered, for both are esteemed at that moment only because of their role in saving his son's life. This does not mean that wine, when considered in isolation from its effects, could have no aesthetic value, only that some circumstances give it a value that overrides aesthetic considerations. If one requires wine as an antidote to poison, then one does not question whether it is a

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 677–774, 848–61, etc.

<sup>6</sup> In Plato's *Symposium* the participants agree (initially) to limit their drinking because the side effects of the previous night's revelry were still being felt.

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Sauternes or a Chablis. So, given that wine, or the drinking of wine, like any other commodity or action was not in itself one of life's goals,<sup>7</sup> the challenge was to use it so as to facilitate rather than hinder those goals – and the philosopher could see this more acutely than most others.

### Goals, Pleasant and Otherwise

The Greeks would regularly agree that happiness (*eudaimonia*, also translated as 'well-being') was the goal of life. What was more controversial is how this goal was to be interpreted. Was it some single thing, such as honor, wealth, pleasure, or freedom from trouble by which one's happiness was to be judged? Or was happiness made up of an amalgam of several things, all necessary for the best life and desirable in themselves? The ordinary person would often have some supposed human archetype of the happy life in mind, such as the King of Persia or some Greek tyrant – somebody whose wealth and power they could envy but never actually aspire to. The place of wine in such a life would no doubt have been taken for granted, but its presence there did not necessarily mean that it was actually contributing to happiness. Others, mindful of the mutability of human fortunes and some serious impediments to the happiness of such autocrats, were keen to introduce a very different set of paradigms, and so it was in the case of Herodotus' account of Solon's choices for the happiest persons of his time.<sup>8</sup> Often they would want to avoid pronouncing anybody happy until their entire life from beginning to end could be assessed, and a high premium would be placed upon leaving heirs behind one and achieving high honor in the eyes of one's community. The place of wine in such a life was less assured. And, for illustrating the happy life, Greek intellectuals were considerably more likely to select this alternative paradigm of the quiet achiever of honors, blessed with surviving heirs – if not one that seemed even more counter-intuitive to the artisan or goatherd.

One notable feature of Greek ethics is that it was never inherently altruistic, for it was one's own happiness at which one was expected

<sup>7</sup> See Plato, *Lysis* 219b–220b; *Euthydemus* 278e–282d; *Gorgias* 467c–468c.

<sup>8</sup> *Histories* 1.30–3.

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to aim, and the happiness of one's friends mattered to one primarily insofar as they constituted an extension of oneself. One did of course have duties to them that one wished to fulfill – duties whose non-fulfillment would make one seriously unhappy – but the parting advice given by Plato's Socrates to his friend Crito was that his ability to be of assistance to others depended crucially on his ability to look after his own inner person (*Phaedo* 115b–c). Other characters in Plato and elsewhere tended to condemn the individual who, by neglecting his own interests, was powerless to help his friends. Therefore the primary question to be considered in the case of wine was “Can it make *me* happier?” while a secondary question might nevertheless ask “Can wine contribute to the happiness of my friends?” Most of us probably think we know the answer to both questions, but any Socrates look-alike would surely try to persuade us that we do not.

A major topic of Greek ethics was pleasure, and particularly whether or not pleasure was to be regarded as the highest goal. And if it was, then one naturally had to ask what kind of pleasure was an appropriate aim, for few were prepared to affirm that pleasures associated with the basest of acts were ever worthy of pursuit.<sup>9</sup> One might expect that the place of wine in the hedonist's ideal life was more likely to be assumed than in that of the anti-hedonist, since most would count either the taste of the wine or the resultant intoxication as in some sense a pleasure. In fact, the Greeks would more readily have assumed that good wine is pleasurable than we should, since one word that we have encountered for ‘sweet’ (of taste), *hêdys*, regularly applied to attractive wines, was also applied more generally to what was pleasurable. So it was natural to think of drinking wine, or good wine at least, as pleasurable. Therefore it ought naturally to fit into the hedonistic life, unless perhaps its pleasures were outweighed by painful consequences that would counterbalance the pleasures of the moment in the eyes of most people.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The hardened hedonist Callicles in the *Gorgias* (494–9) clearly drifts into this category, when he resists the idea that there is intrinsic merit in the pleasures of the *kinaidoi* – those who sought out the passive role in homosexual relations, or the pleasures of scratching, and ultimately has to admit to qualitative variations in pleasures that affect their claim to be good.

<sup>10</sup> This is the upshot of the examination of the popular concept of ‘being overcome by pleasure’ in Plato's *Protagoras*, 352a–358e.

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Furthermore, the pleasurable life would be assumed by the majority of Greek males to involve *symposia*, at which fine food, pleasant drink, and entertainment of a sexual nature would all be present. These social occasions, where friends gathered together, and, unlike Polyphemus, had nothing to fear from others present, were the appropriate place for exploiting the pleasures of wine while minimizing the risks. The very word ‘symposium’ implied social drinking, and the drink concerned was wine: usually mixed with what was held to be the appropriate quantity of water in a large broad vessel known as a *krater*, often decorated with scenes of revelry. As we have seen, the tendency to see friends as extensions of oneself naturally led to a concern for their happiness, leading to a willingness to share those things that best made one happy – and in this context the sharing of wine at *symposia* became natural, while gifts of wine were also favored by those rich enough to be giving it.<sup>11</sup>

Philosophers, of course, were likely to argue against many of the ideas that pervaded society, and its beliefs about pleasure and pleasurable experiences were not exempt. For instance, Plato usually argued against a straightforward hedonism,<sup>12</sup> though recognizing that appropriate types of pleasure did have value. For example, in his later work the *Philebus*, which deals primarily with the relation between pleasure and the good life, he willingly includes pure or harmless pleasures low down on its list of what contributes to the good life (66c–d). The wine lover will surely note that among harmless pleasures the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus* include those of smell, which were thought to involve no antecedent or consequent pains,<sup>13</sup> while a considerable degree of approval was given to pleasures associated with pure colors.<sup>14</sup> So even the most cautious Platonists could sit and admire

<sup>11</sup> I note that Plato or an imitator wrote in an *Epistle* (361a8): “I’m sending you also 12 *stamnia* of sweet wine and two of honey.” Gifts of wine, as of food, could even consist of something of which one had already partaken, as is seen from Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.9.25–6.

<sup>12</sup> Much controversy persists over the concluding pages of the *Protagoras*, where Socrates appears to endorse the popular analysis of good and bad in terms of pleasant and unpleasant, but, even if the argument is not *ad hominem* as it is often claimed to be, it is never said that we should be choosing any action with a view only to its ability to yield pleasure rather than pain.

<sup>13</sup> *Philebus* 51e; *Timaeus* 65a.

<sup>14</sup> *Philebus* 51d2; cf. *Hippias Major* 297e ff.

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both the bouquet and color of a decent wine, even in circumstances where they would hesitate to drink it! Perhaps Plato might respond positively to the modern activity of wine tasting, where the pleasures of taste are vigorously pursued without any commitment to the pleasures of consumption. Yet it seems that he was as innocent of non-consuming wine buffs as he was of glue sniffers and paint sniffers.

Aristotle associated pleasure with unimpeded activity of an organism in its natural state (i.e., its proper activity and proper state) thereby giving his own favored activities their own special pleasures, and associating the best of pleasures with the best of activities.<sup>15</sup> The Stoics were able to condemn what they called “pleasure” by defining it as a *pathos*, or irrational response to an occurrence, in this case an irrational welcoming response, but their ideal human being would nevertheless experience a rational sense of elation in appropriate things; they called this elation “joy” (*chara*).<sup>16</sup> Since their sage was sufficiently sound in judgment to know when it was appropriate to indulge in activities generally frowned upon,<sup>17</sup> one can only assume that an occasion for wine would not entirely elude him. Even the hedonistic Epicureans were acutely conscious of the likelihood that many

pleasures would lead to consequent distress, and were therefore to be rejected. Therefore, the hedonists shared the caution of the non-hedonists about the consumption of food and drink.

What I want to stress here, however, is that even those who took a stand against hedonism tended to suppose that the lives they advocated were the most pleasant available. Rejecting pleasure *as one’s goal* did not involve banishing it from one’s life or denying it value, either as a whole or in part, for most anti-hedonists would expect to enjoy *symposia*, too. Rather, thinkers such as Plato (in the majority of his works) and Aristotle (in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4–5) preferred to argue that their preferred lives of moral and intellectual excellence, though they were not recommended *because* they would prove pleasurable, did offer very substantial pleasures – and without the pains that often followed from the direct pursuit of the life that most persons thought pleasant. Such thinkers could not be expected

<sup>15</sup> Pleasure is treated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.11–14 and X.1–5, with X.4–5 doing most to explain his own distinctive theory and to relate pleasure to the happy life.

<sup>16</sup> *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 3.431–9.

<sup>17</sup> *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 3.555.

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to advocate the use of wine simply because it is pleasant, but they might nevertheless endorse it for what else it could offer.

### **The Socratic Paradigm: Overcoming the Ill Effects**

Many of those who wrote philosophical works in the fourth century BCE had a new model of the happy life to offer: the example of Socrates, often considered to have achieved an extraordinary degree of justice and excellence, but likewise known to have participated without qualms in the delights of social drinking and some of its associated pleasures. To adopt Socrates as one's paradigm, as Plato and many others did, was already to concede wine a place in the good life. The challenge was to explain its admission.

Socrates' conduct at, and contributions to, the *symposia* of Athenian society swiftly became legendary, giving rise to what might be regarded as a special sub-genre of the philosophic dialogue. Socrates will be just one of a number of characters who contribute to the partially serious conversation on topics thought suitable for a "dinner-party" atmosphere. Plato wrote a *Symposium* that has been preserved for us, and so did Xenophon at around the same time. There may have been more admirers of Socrates who did likewise, and others, like Aristotle (not old enough to have heard him in person), who wrote works of the symposiac genre in the fourth century, but their work is lost to us. However, we do possess works of that genre from the early Roman imperial period, including Plutarch.

Socrates' association with wine, like his association with erotic desire which also emerges in the *Symposia* of Plato and Xenophon, means that the enjoyment of pursuits otherwise regarded as an indulgence is somehow written into the very first chapter of Greek moral philosophy; many believed that it was Socrates who was responsible for bringing philosophy down from the skies and into human life. Even though it is wrong to regard him as the first Greek moral thinker – the Greeks had long been accustomed to debating issues of right and wrong, and moral views are expressed in all sorts of earlier literature – he was perhaps the first to pursue ethical thought in the systematic manner characteristic of philosophy. It is not that Socrates ever asks his tantalizing questions about the role of wine

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itself, in the same way that he asks about the accepted virtues of justice, piety, good sense, courage, and wisdom – there was no confusion in people’s minds about the nature of wine in the same way as there was about the key moral terms. Rather he is seen explaining some of his most inspired views when we are aware that he is involved in drinking.

Most of the participants in Plato’s *Symposium* (176a–e) are celebrating the triumph of the young tragic poet Agathon at the dramatic composition associated with the Dionysia, while still suffering from the previous evening’s drinking. Therefore the character Pausanias seeks to make things easy for themselves by taking a break – not abstinence, but gentle drinking. The other participants readily agree to the proposed temporary temperance, both the hard drinkers (who are suffering the worst hangovers) and those who can never keep up anyway. However, it is said of Socrates that he is up to either course of action and will be happy whatever they do. The gentle drinking that is prescribed for them by the medical practitioner Eryximachus is virtually the same as he would always recommend, the avoidance of intoxication particularly when still suffering from yesterday’s hangover, so they agree that they should drink only as far as they found it pleasant. Socrates himself has no part in this conversation, confirming his indifference to their approach to wine.

As often happens after good intentions their modest indulgence does not last. The catalyst is the arrival of a drunken Alcibiades with other revelers, asking whether they are prepared to drink with him or not (212c–213a). He soon senses that the rest of the gathering is sober, and sets about organizing some serious drinking (213e), remarking that he is not plotting on Socrates who can manage any amount without getting drunk (214a, 220a). His impermeable nature is later illustrated when Alcibiades has given a speech in praise of Socrates, more revelers invade the premises, and all semblance of orderly drinking disappears (223b). Socrates persisted in regularly lubricated conversation with Agathon and Aristophanes until dawn, whereupon those two succumb to sleep while he just sets about his daily business. Rather than succumbing to it, Socrates *controls* the drink. There is an important parallel with his sexual drives, as reported by Alcibiades in the same work. Socrates has not at all sought to avoid close contact with the young man, but he is not at any stage found to lose control (218b–219d). The *Charmides* shows us a Socrates who can

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be bowled over by a stunning young male, yet quickly recover his wits sufficiently to direct a philosophical conversation with the beauty concerned. Overall, Socrates had an amazing reputation both for having strong drives and for controlling them.

### Implications of the Socratic Paradigm

What did this paradigm of the philosopher imply for the place of wine in philosophy? Certainly it did not mean that liberal quantities should be avoided. One could, in fact, enjoy the taste of wine just as much as one wished, for it was not its taste but the resultant loss of control that could prove harmful. It did, however, mean that one should never be enjoying the feeling of intoxication, whose very presence suggested that the wine was controlling you, instead of you controlling the wine. This has a variety of consequences. It supplied philosophers with no motive for avoiding wine, unless its consumption entailed forgetting the rules of moderation – as with those whom we recognize as alcoholics who have to forfeit alcoholic beverages completely. The story is indeed told that Polemo, fourth Head of Plato's Academy, drank just water from the age of thirty,<sup>18</sup> but his case is exceptional. The anecdotes depict him as leading a dissolute life when younger – until such time as he stumbled in his usual intoxicated condition into a lecture of his revered predecessor Xenocrates.<sup>19</sup> He was deeply moved by the lecture on temperance that he heard, and duly converted to philosophy. So he may very well have suffered from that kind of alcoholism for which abstinence is the only effective cure. But Polemo, even in his life of abstinence, still seems to have retained an affection for the forbidden substance, for he was fond, it seems, of characterizing his favorite passages of the tragic poet Sophocles with a line from the comic poet Phrynichus<sup>20</sup> that I like to translate somewhat freely as:

“Neither a sticky, nor a tawny, but genuine ice-wine.”

<sup>18</sup> Athenaeus 2.44e.

<sup>19</sup> Diogenes Laertius 4.16.

<sup>20</sup> Diogenes Laertius 4.20 (Phrynichus fr. 68PCG = 65K).

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This was not the line of a killjoy!

The affects of Plato's adoption of the Socratic paradigm in the *Symposium* are that he is immediately conscious of the need to warn the inexperienced about lack of control, even in a work that is otherwise more of a celebration of wine (as also of love). One example of what can happen is found in Socrates' own contribution to the speech-making rituals of the *Symposium*. He tells the myth of the birth of Eros (Love), in which the father, Plenty, gets drunk in Zeus' garden on nectar (there being as yet no wine), and Poverty takes advantage of the opportunity offered by his drunken stupor to have his child (203b). So nectar, and by implication wine too, can play the flattering seductress,<sup>21</sup> or at least the seductress' apprentice. Not only unwanted children (well Eros always was a pest!), but also unwanted truthfulness could be among the embarrassing consequences of drunkenness according to a saying used by Alcibiades (*Symposium* 217e).

Implications of the Socratic paradigm for political thought were immediately visible in Plato's political writings, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. We expect to see wine provided for in the *Republic's* indulgent "City of Pigs," but it is initially mentioned in the same breath as such ordinary items as bread, cloaks, and sandals (372a), as if it is not regarded as much of a luxury item in itself. However, we also see the expected passages condemning alcohol abuse (e.g., 389e), and we shall not be surprised if there are overtones of distaste when discussing the *philoinos* ("wine lover," 475a), who welcomes *any* excuse to drink *any* kind of wine. But it is the *Laws* that both regulates and institutionalizes the use of wine. The work is particularly keen to keep the potent liquid from those who are comparatively young, and to introduce greater quantities as life goes on,<sup>22</sup> so that senior citizens who can best *control* its effects also receive the toughest *challenges* in their efforts to demonstrate their virtue. These older men are also seen to be in the most need of something to make them let their hair down a little, so that the state will provide occasions for them to drink!

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Gorgias* 518c1.

<sup>22</sup> See 637d, 645c, 646d, 649a, 666a–b where appropriate ages for different quantities of wine are discussed.

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That the nature of wine may change in relation to its users is again hinted at where its mythology is discussed later in the *Laws* at 672b–d. Here the less timid Athenian mythology is contrasted with Cretan insofar as it claims that wine has been given to us as a *pharmakon* (“drug”) rather than for revenge, nicely illustrating the ambiguous nature of wine, since the term *pharmakon*, though here intended mainly to suggest a healing medicine, can also signify a poison. Though seeing its uses, the *Laws* only allow wine to result in inebriation at festivals of Dionysus, the appropriate god (775b), while certain persons in a position of responsibility may not consume it at all (674b–c). Overall, wine is a gift to human beings, but, in a city organized with a view to the maximization of the virtues of its citizens, it is one to be regulated by the politician so that possible detrimental effects are avoided: by control of its consumers, its quantities, or the environment of its consumption. It may be no accident that this work was written in Plato’s old age, and by one who held no office that would ban his use of it!

Plato has provided us with a rich variety of material, even if it scarcely amounts to a philosophy of wine. Once Plato had set about defining the parameters of ethical debate and instituting some key topics, others would also have to turn their attention from time to time to matters of wine. One of these was his illustrious pupil Aristotle, whose *Symposium* has unfortunately been lost, though it must have provided interesting reading. At one point a comparison was apparently drawn between wine, the traditional tipples of the Greeks, and the beer-like equivalent favored by the Egyptians. The claim is made that persons drunk on wine may fall in any direction, whereas a drunken beer drinker will always fall on his back. I have still been unable to verify this intriguing claim.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion: Power and Expertise

In Plato’s later years the Academy had become more involved with the politics of various Greek states, as rulers sought status by con-

<sup>23</sup> Readers may enjoy consulting the third book of the Aristotelian *Problems* (I hesitate to ascribe the work to Aristotle himself), which is a collection of similar problems concerning the effects of wine.

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sulting intellectuals, while intellectuals were glad of the patronage, and often glad of the opportunity to have others to put their ideas into practice. Plato had a long and fluctuating relationship with the Syracusan monarchy; his nephew and successor Speusippus both became involved with the Syracusan party of Dion and was in dialogue with Philip II of Macedon; and Aristotle ultimately came to tutor Philip's son, Alexander (still called the 'Great' in spite of his bizarre excesses). Aristotle also seems to have had some interesting dealings with the champions of the Greek cause in Cyprus. If these philosophers were to be taken seriously by men in power then there was little chance that they would mount any very serious attack on wine. The picture of life among the Sicilian ruling elite left to us by the Platonic *Seventh Epistle* is quite sybaritic,<sup>24</sup> while Alexander's penchant for seriously damaging his health by heavy drinking is well known. Those who aimed to be the friends of potentates had little option but to enjoy their wine. They might warn against over-indulgence, or condemn indiscriminate drinking, but their friends would see to it that they did not make any radical onslaught on a key source of satisfaction.

Furthermore, one should perhaps note that good wine actually resembled potentates in a very important respect. Both had strength, or, to choose a different term, potency. Modern socially aware societies very often take fright at anything with potency (e.g., nuclear power, genetic manipulation, and politicians in a hurry), because they bring with them potential dangers. Nobody can deny that alcohol has been throughout its history a potentially disruptive force, with the power to wreck seemingly worthwhile lives. The philosophy of the nanny state, however, by which we are all protected whether we like it or not from anything we could seriously abuse, was not a phenomenon that the Greeks knew much about. The dangers of their world were in any case so great, and life expectancy sufficiently low, that the risks seemed less significant. Plato at least was strongly inclined to regard power as a double-edged sword, whose potential for ill exactly matched its potential for good, for even the actions that power led to were not good or bad in themselves, only in relation to the benefit or harm they could result in (*Gorgias* 467c–8e). Consequently, while autocracy was according to the *Statesman* the recipe for the most

<sup>24</sup> 326b–c; the work's authorship is disputed, but irrelevant here.

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power to achieve good, it was also the recipe for the most evil; correspondingly, whereas democratic government had the least power for evil, it also had the least power to achieve good. That message is reinforced in the *Crito* (44d), where Crito's warnings about the power of Athenian democracy to harm him are answered by Socrates' expression of regret: unfortunately their power to harm is rather slight, which means that their power for good is rather slight too. So wine's power to harm should, according to the same principles, be exactly balanced by its power for harm.

Looked at in this way, the potency of wine, whose double-edged powers were already brilliantly contrasted in Euripides' *Bacchae*, should never be something to be thrown out unthinkingly because of its dangers, but rather something to be used for the better like any other power. Using anything for the better requires expertise, both a general grasp of social ethics and a more technical expertise relating to the thing being used. Plato notes at *Protagoras* 319c how non-experts are not tolerated by the Athenian people if they try to advise on any subject permitting expertise. Wine was no different in the eyes of the majority of Greek philosophers including Plato, something to be used with both an understanding of society's needs and an expertise in the specific capabilities of the substance itself. In short, one might expect experts on wine to be required to advise the nation on all policy relating to wine. Their advice must take full account of the goals of society at large (upon which other expertise may be sought), but any teetotaler who stood up before the Assembly of ancient Athens, seeking to advise the people on matters concerning wine, would expect to be hissed and booed until he stood down. Let us not, then, allow ourselves to be advised by such persons today!

### Further Reading

#### *Translations*

Many of the ancient texts referred to in this essay are available in a wide variety of translations. What matters for the purpose of following up references is that translations should adhere to standard referencing methods, usually by book and line numbers for verse texts, and by Stephanus page numbers (e.g., 345b) for Plato. The following are suggestions only.

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