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**Bee Imagery in Plato's Dialogues**

It is impossible in this article to cover the numerous (611) passages from the *Corpus Platonicum* where the term ἀρετή (virtue) is mentioned. Similarly, it is impossible to examine all the various issues raised by these passages. Given the restrictions of time and space, it is difficult to reflect on the meaning of such a significant term even within the context of a single dialogue. Instead of referring to ἀρετή—its various parts or its capacity to be taught, themes for which a copious critical literature already exists<sup>2</sup>—I shall attempt to carry out a different operation: to trace some of the *symbols* that refer to ἀρετή, beginning *not* from the places where the term itself is used, but rather from ones in which the interlocutors refer to it *implicitly*, namely through examples and images introduced into the discussion in a seemingly random way.

I will argue that the most salient features of ἀρετή, the definition of which is hard to find, controversial, and disputable at an explicit level, can be strongly inferred at an implicit level from these images which act as symbols. To show this, I will consider the bee imagery in the following contexts. Starting with Plato's *Meno* 72a-b, where the bee imagery is clearly associated with excellence, I will turn my attention to Plato's employment of images, like that of a swarm.

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<sup>2</sup> For example: Hans J. Krämer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles: zum Wesen und zur Geschichte der Platonischen Ontologie* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1959); Roslyn Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave: Moral Inquiry in Plato's Meno* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Michael Cormack, *Plato's Stepping Stones: Degrees of Moral Virtue* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006); Sandrine Berges, *Plato on Virtue and Law* (London: Continuum, 2009); Julia Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); *Thinking, Knowing, Acting: Epistemology and Ethics in Plato and Ancient Platonism*, ed. Mauro Bonazzi et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

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Then, I will briefly treat passages from *Republic* II, *Phaedo*, *Statesman*, *Laws*, and *Ion* to demonstrate that the educational atmosphere of Plato's dialogues is grounded in the repertoire of the symbolic values of traditional Greek culture. At the end of this essay, I will discuss bee imagery in the mythical story of Aristaeus to develop some concluding remarks on the Platonic construction of the bee as a symbol of living virtue.

**The bee and virtue**

The first case of bee imagery that discloses something salient about virtue occurs in the *Meno*, where Socrates and Meno speak of virtue using language related to bees (μέλιττα). At *Meno* 71b, Socrates states that he does not know what ἀρετή is and, since he does not know, he cannot reply to Meno's question about whether it can be taught.<sup>3</sup> Meno, meanwhile, says that he does know and refers to the virtue of a man, the virtue of a woman, and then to the virtue of a child and of a slave (71e-72a).<sup>4</sup> He states that for each action, for each of us, and for each age, there is a different virtue. This is the point in the dialogue where Socrates introduces the example: "I am indeed extraordinarily lucky, apparently, Meno. In the course of looking for a single excellence, I've found a veritable swarm of them (ἀρετήν συμῆνός τι) have settled in your house"<sup>5</sup> (72a). By using the term συμῆνος (swarm), Socrates introduces the image of the bee into their consideration of virtue, and, as I will show, the bee image has significant symbolic power. Indeed, on the subject of the bee, Socrates asks Meno the same question he had asked about ἀρετή, namely, "what is the real nature of the bee (μελίττης περὶ οὐσίας ὅτι ποτ' ἐστίν)" (72b).

The example of the bee appears to be introduced only to demonstrate the following point: just as there are numerous and

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<sup>3</sup> On the principle of epistemic priority, see Hugh G. Benson, "The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1990): 19-65.

<sup>4</sup> On manifold virtue, see Franco Ferrari, "Un microcosmo della filosofia di Platone: il Menone," in *Platone: Menone* (Milano: Bur, 2016), 24-41.

<sup>5</sup> Translations of *Meno* are from Robin Waterfield, *Meno and Other Dialogues*: (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

varied types of bees, which do not differ at all insofar as they are bees, similarly there are numerous and varied types of ἀρεταί, which do not differ from each other insofar as they are ἀρεταί. However, this is not all that is at work in the bee image. The term ἀρετή, which belongs to the semantic field of ἀρείων (comparative of ἀγαθός, good), meaning “superior,” “better,” and whose superlative form is ἄριστος, is traditionally translated as “virtue,” or “excellence” and is always associated with meanings such as “distinction,” “talent,” “quality,” “ability,” and “value.” The term μέλιττα (bee), which indicates a producer of honey, possibly linked to the lexical field of song,<sup>6</sup> is employed in the text to convey these meanings of ἀρετή.

In ancient Greece the bee was associated with immortality, rebirth, and industriousness. It was a symbol of order and purity.<sup>7</sup> In an *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, J.C. Cooper writes that bees were thought to be parthenogenic and so signified virginity and chastity. They carry a heavenly message, and honey is a proper offering to supreme deities. Bees represent the stars and are also winged messengers carrying news to the spirit world. Bees are messengers of oak and thunder gods. As carved on tombs, they signify immortality.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the bee is considered lunar and

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<sup>6</sup> On the cross-cultural extension of honey-related concepts in the ancient Mediterranean, see F. Aspesi, “Il miele, cibo degli dei,” in *Saperi e Sapori Mediterranei: La Cultura dell’Alimentazione e i Suoi Riflessi Linguistici*, ed. D. Silvestri et al. (Napoli: Il Torcoliere, 2002), 923.

<sup>7</sup> As Virgil explains in the beginning of Book IV of his *Georgics*, bees need a pure habitat, clean leaves and green ponds, and a stream that runs through the grass where there is a hive.

<sup>8</sup> In Greek culture, in particular, bees indicate immortality (the souls of the deceased can enter into bees) and purity (Demeter is the Pure Mother Bee). The Great Mother is likewise called “Queen Bee” and her priestesses are the Melissai. The Pythia is also called the Delphic Bee (Pi. P. 4. 60-61), and the officiants at Eleusis are Bees. Bees confer the gift of eloquence and song; they are the “birds of the Muses.” Cretan Zeus was born in a cavern of bees and was fed by them. See J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), s.v. “bee.” On bees feeding the infant Zeus,

virginal. For all these reasons Plato chooses the bee as an image of virtue and uses the bee image in Socrates’s search for the essence of virtue in the *Meno*. Before being presented as a logically definable concept, ἀρετή enters Plato’s text together with the bee and with the bee’s symbolic linkage to the virtues of purity, chastity, industriousness, harmony, the capacity for social and collaborative life, and so on.

The subject matter of the debate in the *Meno* is not virtue in the sense understood by Greeks during the age of Homer, who identified it with the heroic values of the warrior. When *explicitly* discussing the epistemic issue of its definition, Plato implicitly introduces his new meaning of virtue, linked to the musical values and divine symbols associated with bees.<sup>9</sup> If this hypothesis is proven correct—as this paper intends to do by examining various meanings of the term μέλιττα in the *Corpus Platonicum*—it could reasonably be argued that Plato entrusts the bee in the *Meno* with the delicate task of introducing a semantic shift of the term ἀρετή from referring to the qualities of a warrior to something much more important from Plato’s perspective, related to the path of happiness for individuals and their communities.

### Σμῆνος in the *Corpus Platonicum*

Before testing this hypothesis, it is worth examining another aspect of the issue which is of great importance for reconstructing the argumentation implicit in Plato, specifically in relation to the

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see Plin. *Nat.* 21.57. The nymph Melissa, who feeds the infant Zeus with honey, is confused in Greek myth with the bee itself. Νύμφη appears to be an ancient Greek name for “bee” (Aspesi, “Il miele, cibo degli dei,” 924). The contiguity between the bee and the nymph means that νύμφη became the name of the goddess of caves, woods, and water, i.e., th habitat of wild bees; see Marco Giuman, *Melissa: Archeologia delle Api e del Miele nella Grecia Antica* (Rome: Bretschneider, 2008), 148.

<sup>9</sup> Fabio Roscalla, “La descrizione di sé e dell’altro: api ed alveare da Esiodo a Semonide,” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 29 (1988): 23-47, 23 writes that by the time the bee took symbolic flight in Greek culture, it could already claim a long social and religious history in the civilization of the Near East and Egypt.

happiness of a community. It is necessary to emphasize that the first term employed in the passage under consideration is not *bee* (μέλιττα) but *swarm* (σμήνος). This fact alone seems significant for Plato's notion of the relationship among individual virtues, considered as bees, which move in swarms— i.e., one virtue calls to the others and all of them aim toward happiness. The term σμήνος is used elsewhere in the *Corpus Platonicum* to indicate things that are linked to each other, as in the case of the “swarm of wisdom” (σμήνος σοφίας) that Socrates feels coming upon him at *Cratylus* 401e, or “the swarm of pleasures” (τὸ τῶν ἡδονῶν σμήνος) mentioned at *Republic* IX 574d, which crowd into the tyrannical soul and lead it to perdition.

When Plato uses the word “swarm” without specifying that it is a swarm of bees, he refers to a mobile multiplicity which takes its character—good or bad—from the natures of the individuals that belong to the “swarm.” When, however, he specifies that the swarm is one of bees, the reference is always positive, referring to an ordered and virtuous group.<sup>10</sup> Within this group, a κηφήν (drone) may be born, which functions as a parasite.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, however, a king

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<sup>10</sup> The σμήνος can be good or bad but a bee σμήνος is always positive because bees' industriousness and its product, honey, is evoked. This is what makes the bee σμήνος an orderly and virtuous group.

<sup>11</sup> The “drone,” which is a Greek symbolic invention unknown to oriental cultures, is a parasite that destroys the perfect world of the bees. On its use in metaphorical discourse, see Roscalla, “La descrizione di sé,” 24. On the drone-parasites, see Hes. *Th.* 592-599. Aristotle (*HA* IX 623b) contrasts the worker bee (μέλιττα) and king bees (βασιλεῖς τῶν μελιττῶν) with the drone-parasite. He calls it the κηφήν “that finds itself living amongst bees” (ὁ ἐν ταῖς μελίτταις), an expression that explicitly indicates the extraneous nature of the insect in relation to the world of the hive; cf. Roscalla, “La descrizione di sé,” 27. If the bee is the symbol of virtue, the drone-parasite is the symbol of vice and indeed the 15 occurrences of κηφήν in the *Corpus Platonicum* represent all the possible vices. In *Republic* VIII, we find the drone associated with dissipation (552c), violence (554d), greed (556a), love for the superfluous (559c), lasciviousness (559d), disease (564b-c) injustice

may also be born in the swarm. In *Statesman* 301e, the Eleatic Stranger contrasts the city with a hive in which—by contrast to the city—a king immediately distinguishes himself from the others in the σμήνος (swarm) on account of being “superior in body and soul.”<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to note that the term σμήνος is conventionally translated as “swarm” when the intention is to underline its mobility,<sup>13</sup> and as “hive” when the intention is to refer to the organization of the collective life of bees.<sup>14</sup> The semantics of the term always refer to a multiplicity, however. The swarm is the group of bees, and none of them is imaginable without the group to which they belong. Like the pleasures of the tyrant referred to in *Republic* IX 574d, individual pleasures are linked to and implied by the others of the swarm, and the discourses on the constitution mentioned in *Republic* V 450b refer to each other reciprocally, such that when one is uttered it re-awakens the entire “swarm.” Similarly, the insect with the same color as the sun<sup>15</sup> is never alone and, if mentioned at all, it is introduced specifically to indicate the exemplary nature of its collective, orderly life, which aims at the good of the community under the guidance of a king who is superior in body and soul. The clearest use of the comparison between the σμήνος and the city is found in *Republic* VIII 552c: “as a drone born in a cell is a blight on the hive, so a man like this [is] born as a drone in a household, and is a blight on the city.”<sup>16</sup>

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(565c), and covetousness (567d); in Book IX, it is associated with lust and sloth (573a). The occurrence at *Laws* X 900e-901a is exemplary.

<sup>12</sup> The Greeks called it the “king bee,” not “queen bee.” Roscalla, “La descrizione di sé,” 28, n.8 says: “Do not forget that it wasn't until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that Swammerdann understood the sex of the queen bee and definitively clarified the sexual actions of the hive.”

<sup>13</sup> See *Meno* 72a and *Republic* IX 574d.

<sup>14</sup> See *Republic* VIII 552c and *Statesman* 239d.

<sup>15</sup> Erika Notti and Francesco Aspesi, “Tracce del culto dell'ape a Thera?” *Journal of Minoan-Mycenaean and Classical Studies* 10 (2014): 35-53, 39 say the bee's color, life cycle, and honey endow it with symbolic meanings referring to light, fertility, purification, fire, and the sun.

<sup>16</sup> Trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

It seems to me that the imagery of the bee, which recalls the exemplary nature of its collective and orderly life, shows how Plato's writing is visual and carefully employs images.<sup>17</sup> The famed analogy of the city and the soul that governs Plato's *Republic* prompts us to recognize that *everything* that inhabits the city also inhabits the soul: the soul, which is governed by virtues as the city is governed by laws, contains (swarms of) discourses and pleasures, just as the city contains (swarms of) citizens who may resemble philosophers or tyrants.

### Μέλιττα in the *Corpus Platonium*

It is worth examining the occurrences of the term μέλιττα in the *Corpus Platonium* to understand how Plato uses the imagery of the bee in the συμῆνος—the group to which it naturally belongs—to visually provide the audience with an illustration of the delicate relationship that exists within a community between unity and multiplicity. First, the term μέλιττα occurs—fittingly—in *Republic* II 363b amid a discussion of the issue of justice. This use of μέλιττα occurs in the section of the dialogue where Adeimantus provides an analysis of traditional discourses that praise justice for the good reputation it gives and for the benefits of this good reputation rather than anything intrinsic to it. “Once they start adding in the approval of the gods, they have an abundance of rewards to offer the pious—gifts of the gods, they say. The admirable Hesiod and Homer say the same thing” (*Republic* II 363a-b).

Hesiod states that the earth bears much sustenance for the just, and in the mountains “the oak bears acorns on top and bees in the middle” (*Works and Days*, 230ff.).<sup>18</sup> The reference occurs where Hesiod refers to the path that leads to justice, just after the poet's famous parable of the sparrowhawk and the nightingale:

And never do Hunger or Calamity attend upon men of straight judgments (δίκαι), but they enjoy at festivities the fruits of the works they have tended. For them the earth

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<sup>17</sup> On this topic, see Marina McCoy, *Image and Argument in Plato's Republic* (New York: SUNY, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Translations of Hesiod's *Works and Days* are from David W. Tandy and Walter C. Neale (London: University of California Press, 1996).

bears much sustenance, and in the mountains the oak bears acorns on top and bees in the middle. (*Works and Days*, 225; translation modified)

Ancient commentaries on this passage specify that oak trees on mountains produce twice the quantity of acorns: they bear fruit in the upper part and honey in the middle because oak trees have holes where bees can find shelter from the wind and produce honey.<sup>19</sup> This is why virtuous actions, which come about when men do justice, are immediately associated with the honey produced by bees. Honey, in this way, becomes the gold of virtue. Hesiod earlier refers to an age spent at the ends of the earth on the islands of the blessed by deep-whirling Okeanos where three times a year the barley-giving land brings forth full grain sweet as honey for the happy heroes, who are brave without becoming short of breath (171-173).

It can be seen that where Plato's text cites these passages from Hesiod, the references to bees and honey evoke the happiness that Hesiod takes to be a result of virtue, an idea which, in Plato's time, represented “traditional” Greek culture. In fact, the change in tradition that Plato intends to make does not take place through a clear-cut opposition between new and old values, but rather through an association of traditional terms with new images and new values. Plato uses bee imagery to appeal to the traditional Hesiodic senses in other dialogues as well, such as the *Critias* and the *Phaedo*. In the *Critias* (111c), Plato evokes an ocean, an island, and the royal house of Atlas, telling of a time when the land contained mountains and lofty hills. Then the plains were full of fat earth, and the mountains abounded with woods, of which there are evident tokens even at present. For there are mountains which now afford nutriment for bees. It seems that the bees inhabiting trees mentioned in the *Critias* might also highlight the relation between the natural environment (φύσις) and that of the city.

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<sup>19</sup> See Patrizia Marzillo, *Der Kommentar des Proklos zu Hesiods Werken und Tagen* (Tübingen: Narr, 2010); see also Richard Hunter, *Hesiodic Voices: Studies in the Ancient Reception of Hesiod's Works and Days* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24, 162.

The occurrence of the term μέλιττα in the *Phaedo* is extremely significant and is devoted to the virtue which the speeches of Socrates, implicitly compared to a bee, bring with them. After warning his friends of the dangers of misology, Socrates tells them:

But you, if you do as I ask, will give little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth; and if you think what I say is true, agree to it, and if not, oppose me with every argument you can muster, that I may not in my eagerness deceive myself and you alike and go away, like a bee, leaving my sting sticking in you (ὥσπερ μέλιττα τὸ κέντρον ἐγκαταλιπὼν οἰχήσομαι). (91c)<sup>20</sup>

The image helps to convey the effect produced by the eloquence of Socrates as an *exemplum* of virtue. In Plato's text, it becomes the indication of the poignant posterity of a philosophical discourse which leaves its trace in the audience. To substantiate Plato's interest in linking virtue in the widest semantic range of the term to the image of the bee, it is useful to refer to *Phaedo* 82b where we find references to bees as a social species of animal with mild customs which house the souls of those who have cultivated virtues even without philosophy and intelligence.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Translations from the *Phaedo* are from Harold North Fowler, *Plato: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). In Cicero's *Brutus* 9.38 this image of the sting is used by Eupolis (Δήμοι, fr. 94, Kock), a writer of Attic Old Comedy, to describe the effects of Pericles's eloquence: *aculeos etiam relinqueret in animis eorum a quibus esset auditus* (cf. *de or.* 3.138). On Socratic eloquence and its zoomorphic metaphors, see M. Naas, "American Gadfly: Plato and the Problem of Metaphor," in *Plato's Animals*, eds. J. Bell and M. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 43-59 and S. Montgomery Ewegen, "We the Bird-Catchers: Receiving the Truth in the *Phaedo* and the *Apology*," in *Plato's Animals*, 79-95.

<sup>21</sup> On the non-philosophical virtue which allows ordinary people to act virtuously, see Federico M. Petrucci, "There Should Be a Virtue for Everyone: Non-Philosophical Virtue in the *Phaedo*," in *Plato's Phaedo: Papers from the Eleventh Symposium Platonicum*, ed. G. Cornelli et al.

The swarm of bees is also used to represent the community of citizens in the *Statesman* (293d). Here the ideal form of government is said to be that which acts for the good of the city, however it goes about this—whether by killing or even banishing some citizens and thus obtaining the effect of purification, or by reducing the dimensions of the city by exporting colonies like swarms of bees, or in other ways. In the *Laws*, a law is formulated about the theft of bees: "and if any, yielding to his taste for bees, secures for himself another man's swarm by attracting them with the rattling of pans, he shall pay for the damage" (VIII 843d-e).<sup>22</sup>

The appearance of bees in the most beautiful passage of the *Ion* is useful to illustrate 1) the association of bees and honey with the educational construction of virtue entrusted to poets; 2) the comparison between bees and poets on the one hand and verses and honey on the other; and 3) the link between poetry and truth. The poets "tell us that they carry honey to us from every quarter like bees, and they fly as bees do, sipping from honey-flowing fountains in glens and gardens of the Muses" (534a-b),<sup>23</sup> and when they say this, says Socrates, they speak truly. "For a poet is a delicate thing, winged

(Sankt Augustin: Academia, 2018), 164-69. Commenting on this passage, Monique Dixsaut, *Platon: Phédon* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 355, n. 176, refers to the metaphorical use of zoology to classify souls. According to Dixsaut, it evokes three kinds of reincarnation which correspond to the predominance of each of the three parts of the soul referred to in the *Republic* (see IV 439a-441d). The appetitive part corresponds to licentious beasts, the choleric part to animals that hunt prey, while the rational part corresponds to gregarious animals—the happiest because they lack the bestiality of the former and ferocity of the latter. As in Aesop's fables, the animal is key to deciphering humankind rather than *vice versa*: animals have nothing human about them, but are useful for outlining an anthropology according to which a human being is simply a species of animal whose only original trait lies in being able to choose the species toward which it is inclined.

<sup>22</sup> Translations of the *Laws* come from R.G. Bury, *Plato: Laws*, Vols. I-II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).

<sup>23</sup> Translations of the *Ion* come from R.E. Allen, *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

and sacred, and unable to create until he becomes inspired and frenzied, his mind no longer in him: as long as he keeps his hold on that, no man can compose or chant prophecy" (534b). Whereas Plato referred to the Hesiodic tradition in *Republic* II, here there are Pindaric echoes. Pindar states that poetry is sweet and evokes honey.<sup>24</sup> According to Giuliana Lanata,<sup>25</sup> the images of honey and bees in Pindar's songs should be linked to the motif of the opportune moment (καίρως) as is clarified in *Pythian* 10.53-54. Here the poet hastens from one theme to another, using only what is essential for his poem before moving to another theme, like a bee darting from one flower to another, collecting only the best part of each.

What I have detected so far with all these references to bees and honey is that Plato draws on the rich and varied repertoire of the symbolic values of traditional Greek culture<sup>26</sup> to create the educational atmosphere of his dialogues in which messages are conveyed explicitly or implicitly with a power that has no comparison in any other ancient philosophical text.

### The story of Aristaeus

The most significant locus for symbolic values linked to the image of the bee is Book IV of the *Georgics*, where Virgil, drawing on ancient mythical imagery,<sup>27</sup> deals at length with the sun-colored

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<sup>24</sup> Pindar, *O.* 10.98, 11.4, *N.* 3.77, 7.11; 11.18, *I.* 2.32, 5.54, 6.9.

<sup>25</sup> Giuliana Lanata, *Poetica Preplatonica: Testimonianze e Frammenti: Nuova Edizione* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2020), 79.

<sup>26</sup> Homer introduces into Greek symbolism the metaphor of bees and refers to ἔθνεα μελισσάων (nations of bees; *Il.* 2.87). Hesiod alludes to the group of μέλιτται with the term φύλα (tribe; fr. 33 a, 16 Merk-West); cf. Roscalla, "La descrizione di sé," 28.

<sup>27</sup> Demonstrating that Virgil is using bee imagery the same way Plato uses it and that Virgil's account is basically identical to a pre-Platonic account with which Plato would be familiar is beyond the scope of this essay. What I would like to claim is that the mythical imaginary of Orpheus and Eurydice, which intersects with that of Aristaeus in Virgil, is a more ancient story from which Plato and Virgil draw their imagery. See G. Biagio Conte, "Aristeo," in F. Della Corte, *Enciclopedia*

insect that produces the sweetest and most divine type of food.<sup>28</sup> This text provides the story of Aristaeus with which this brief essay ends. Aristaeus, the first bee-keeper, was the son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene. As an infant, he was entrusted to the Horai (the divinities of the seasons) who raised him on nectar and ambrosia.<sup>29</sup> According to some sources, he was raised under the care of nymphs. When he reached adolescence, Aristaeus learned the art of healing and predicting the future from the Muses. A shepherd and a farmer, Aristaeus married Autonoe, the daughter of Cadmus, and became the father of Actaeon who would suffer a tragic fate. One momentous day, a challenge was held between Aristaeus and Dionysus to decide which was better: wine, the drink made by Dionysus, or honey, produced by Aristaeus. The jury consisted solely of immortals, and Dionysus was declared the winner. The verdict appears to have been linked to the idea that, by drinking wine, humans can forget death. Aristaeus did not take offence and, honoring his own name (Aristaeus), which has the same root as ἀρετή (virtue), he suggested mixing wine with honey to increase the pleasure to be gained from both products and to obtain "what is best" (ἄριστος). However, the peaceful life of Aristaeus, the producer of honey, was destined to be shattered. One awful day, his bees disappeared and his story became entwined with that of Orpheus, the Thracian lyre-player.

After losing his beloved bees, the producers of honey and modesty, Aristaeus lost the connection between the world of nature and the world of culture. What he was forced to endure—according to Marcel Detienne's interpretation of the myth<sup>30</sup>—was arguably a necessary step because, together with bees, the entire harmony of the cosmos, based on the balance between the wild and domesticated

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*Virgiliana*, I (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1984), 319-22 and "Aristeo, Orfeo, e le Georgiche: una seconda volta," *Studi Classici e Orientali* 46.1 (1998): 103-28

<sup>28</sup> Donatus 2.2-5 states that Virgil's father was a bee-keeper.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre-Henri Tavoillot and François Tavoillot, *L'abeille (et le) Philosophe: Étonnant Voyage dans la Ruche des Sages* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Marcel Detienne, "Orphée au miel," in *Faire de l'Histoire*, ed. P. Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

spheres, was now under threat. Aristaeus was desperate and wept in front of his mother, the nymph Cyrene. In *Georgics* IV, Virgil describes the advice given by Cyrene to her son: he is the victim of a curse and in order to lift it, he would have to go to Proteus, the protean (i.e., capable of assuming many forms) god who inhabits this symbolic story, so full of *speaking names* (321ff.). After binding all the creatures that took shape from the metamorphoses of Proteus, Aristaeus discovered his own fault. He had threatened the beautiful nymph Eurydice, the young bride of Orpheus, who was fatally bitten by a snake while seeking to escape him (453ff.). In his desperation, Orpheus had gone to search for her in Hades and was even able to bring her back to life as long as he respected the prohibition against turning round, looking at her, and talking to her. However, Orpheus, who was also blamed by Plato in the *Symposium* (179d), could not resist: an enchanting singer with a voice as sweet as honey, Orpheus let Eurydice be taken back to the endless night. His fault, combined with his desperation, would also be the cause of his death because the Bacchae would kill him, dismember him, and fling his limbs into the countryside (*Georgics* IV 521-522).

But we shall return to Aristaeus: at this point in Book IV of the *Georgics*, Virgil describes how Aristaeus's bees had disappeared because, after the death of Eurydice, the other nymphs—her friends—had killed them all to punish the bee-keeper (530-35). Detienne explains that the nymphs in the myth identify with the bees and attack the guilty bee-keeper. His adulterous desire had made him unworthy of being a bee-keeper. Virgil describes how Cyrene ordered Aristaeus to seek forgiveness from the nymphs by offering them sacrifices (534-536). He would have to offer them four bulls and four heifers and would have to leave the meat of the sacrificed animals to rot. The decomposition of the meat of the sacrificed animals would give rise to a swarm of bees (554). This process was known as βουγονία, the birth of bees from the carcass of a dead cow through asexual reproduction.

The image of βουγονία—with the analogy that can be perceived between the swarm that leaves the hive and the soul that leaves the body, reappearing from a corpse to go and occupy another living

body—enables us to come full circle and view the bee as a symbol of living virtue that watches over the threshold between pleasure and law, between nature and culture, between death and rebirth. The story of Aristaeus, whose name is intimately linked to ἀρετή, with the new meaning Plato is constructing—divine and human, normative, natural but not heroic—helps us to understand the symbolic role played by the bee in the dialogues.

This symbolic role, as we have seen, has several aspects: 1) the bee is linked to the imagery of the beehive, which represents the virtuous and industrious natural community, i.e., the exemplar of social life aimed at the common good; 2) the bee is linked to the sweetness of the happiness rewarded by virtue, evoked by the golden honey of poetry (which leaves its mark as the bee leaves its sting); and 3) the bee, as we see in the *Meno*, is linked to the relationship between the unity of virtue and the multiplicity of its parts, which are identical and different like the bees of a swarm.