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Herds of Featherless Biped: Division and Privation in Plato's *Statesman* *

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Abstract: This paper explores privation in the *Statesman*, first from a methodological point of view, and then politically. I begin (§1) with

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the Rule of Bisection (262a–e): classes should be bifurcated by form, which apparently excludes division by positive and negative terms (e.g. human and non-human). The significance of the restriction is debated. I argue that the correct interpretation must take into account the preponderance of privative terms in the subsequent divisions of animals. According to one definition, humans are two-footed, non-interbreeding, hornless land animals; according to another, they are featherless, two-footed land animals (264d–266e). On my reading of the rule, classes should be bifurcated with reference to constitutive features of the resulting subclasses; while negative properties never satisfy this requirement, privations are in some cases partly constitutive of the target class in division. This insight allows me to offer a charitable reading of the Eleatic Stranger's definitions of the human herd, which others have disparaged, as relevant for political theory (§2) and tightly linked with the Myth of the Ages (268e–274d) that follows these divisions (§3). In the final section, I sketch a unified outlook on the dialogue as concerned with effective political collaboration, under the supervision of a statesman who expertly integrates each member into the self-protective fabric of society (§4).

Keywords: Plato, Division, Privation, Humans, Statesmanship

When the inexperienced Young Socrates¹ tries to isolate the class of humans, the object of statecraft, by dividing all animals into humans and brutes, the Eleatic Stranger, an expert dialectician, rejects this division (*Stat.* 262a–e).² According to a widespread reading, the division fails because the class of brutes is unified by being non-human, a negative characteristic, while a proper bisection, i.e., dichotomous division into even parts, proceeds by positive attributes.³ This interpretation cannot accommodate divisions by a property and its privation, e.g., feathered and featherless bipeds, even

¹ Not the famous philosopher.

² References advert to Burnet, 1900.

³ See e.g., Cohen, 1973, p. 189–90; Gill 2010, p. 189; Lawrence, 2021, p. 30, 35; Mié, 2021, p. 65.

though they are prominent in the *Statesman* (see esp. 265c6–8, 266e6–7).

This paper considers the role of privation in this dialogue, first from a logical perspective, and then politically. I begin (§1) by contextualizing the restriction on negative terms within the broader methodological aim of dichotomous division. On the reading I defend, classes should be bifurcated by essential properties, glossed as features which constitute the species contained in each subclass.⁴ The division of animals into human and non-human doesn't satisfy this requirement—not because one of the two attributes is negative, but because being non-human doesn't constitute the nature of non-human animals.

While negative attributes are never essential, privations in some contexts are partly constitutive of a species.⁵ This insight allows me to offer a charitable reading of the Eleatic Stranger's definitions of human beings, which others have disparaged (§2). According to the first, humans are two-footed, non-interbreeding, hornless land animals; according to the second, they are featherless, two-footed land animals (264d–266e). While scholars find these accounts unilluminating, I show that our physical constitution is relevant for Plato's political theory. Both definitions present humans as lacking features like feathers or horns, which protect other animals. This makes the human collective weaker and more vulnerable than other herds.

The relevance of these definitions becomes clear in the Myth of the Ages, which follows them. We hear that in the distant past, humans were tended by gods who secured their natural needs, as well

⁴ I agree on the one hand with those who take an extensional approach to the object of division (*contra* Moravcsik, 1973) by interpreting divisible genera or *eide* as classes (see Cohen, 1973), or “tribes,” to use Jacob Klein's terminology (Klein, 1977). However, as I will argue, the dialectician “cuts” classes with reference to essential properties of their members, which play the role of intensions in division. Thus my approach to division has an intensional, as well as extensional component (cf. Muniz & Rudebusch, 2018).

⁵ Negative attributes indicate mere difference, whereas privations signify deficiency or lack relative to a common aim or standard.

as those of other animals. Then, in the transition from the earlier epoch (“The Age of Cronus”) to the present one (“The Age of Zeus”), humans were exposed to attacks by stronger and more durable species (274b8). By exploring the connections between this myth and the definitions of the human herd, §3 sheds light on our essence as political animals and the central task of statecraft in the *Statesman*.

In the final section (§4), I raise a potential problem for my reading. According to a widespread reading, the dialogue begins with the wrong model: statesmanship as herding. This model, it is argued, is rejected by showing that it is characteristic of a different epoch, when the gods took personal care of us. The second part of the dialogue introduces the model of weaving, which governs the remaining part of the discussion (257a–277a).⁶ But the text doesn’t require this sharp divide. On the reading I defend, the example of weaving elucidates the aim and methods of statesmanship; this doesn’t amount to a complete paradigm shift, however, since the essence of statesmanship sought in the *Statesman* remains the collective tending of the human herd in the present era (“The Age of Zeus”).

1. The rule of bisection

As part of the effort to define the statesman, the Eleatic Stranger (ES) and Young Socrates (YS) are led to a consideration of the animals he tends. Since statesmanship obviously deals with human beings, YS suggests dividing animals into human and brutes in order to obtain the desired outcome (262a4). He goes wrong, according to the text, in two ways: (1) “by setting aside a small portion (*smikron morion*) of the whole against many large ones,” and (2) in doing so “without reference to form (*eidous choris*)” (*Stat.* 262a8–b2; cf. 262e4).⁷

⁶ Thus Campbell, 1867; Skemp, 1987; Miller, 1980; Benardete, 1986; Scodel, 1987; Gill, 1995; Lane, 1998; Sayre, 2011; *Contra* Weiss, 1995.

⁷ Here and throughout I follow Rowe, 1995, with modifications.

The first requirement is *quantitative*.⁸ When we bifurcate a class, the resulting two subclasses should be roughly equal in size, rather than having a small number of kinds or species on one side and a large quantity on the other. YS separated the human class from all other animals and ended up with an unbalanced division: one side containing many more kinds than the other, which by design contains only one.⁹

The second rule is *qualitative*. Each of the resulting classes should have a form (*eidos*, 262b2). Our expectation, based on our familiarity with the dialogues, is that the members of each subclass will be similar in some respect, and that the form by which we divide partly explains this similarity (see *Men.* 71e–72c; *Resp.* 596b–597a, *Prm.* 132e). We will have to clarify this requirement.

Plato says that by meeting the quantitative requirement we are more likely to fulfil the qualitative requirement: “it’s safer to go along cutting through the middle of things, and that way one will be more likely to encounter forms (*ideais*, 262b5–7).” This suggests that the qualitative rule is more essential to the method than the quantitative requirement, which is introduced as a safety rule for getting at forms.¹⁰ From now on, when I mention the Rule of Bisection (RB) I will mean the qualitative rule of bisection, not the quantitative

⁸ Lee Franklin says that the requirement to divide ‘down the middle’ (i.e. the quantitative requirement above) is “notoriously unclear... the prescription calls for parity of some unspecified sort between the species into which we divide” (2011, p. 3). I think we can safely extrapolate from the example of the human herd, which is set against all other herds, exactly what ES is asking us to do.

⁹ Notice that the quantity here is not of individual animals, but their kinds. Otherwise it is hard to see why the division must be unbalanced, since some species certainly contain more members than others. So the quantitative rule is not concerned with the extension (in the modern sense) of the genus or its subspecies, but instead with the quantity of the subclasses on either side of a dichotomous “cut.” Keep in mind, however, that what’s being divided is not an intension (see Cohen, 1973, *contra* Moravcsik, 1973), but a number of classes initially mixed together and gradually separated apart by being grouped in accordance with their properties.

¹⁰ As the shorter division of the human herd also suggests (see 265a1–5, 266e4–7). Even the requirement to divide into two, i.e., dichotomously, later turns out to be optional, see 287b10–c5 and Vlastis, 2021, for discussion.

requirement, which is here subordinate to the aim of discovering the nature of the target class, namely, the human herd.¹¹

There's a large consensus that dichotomous divisions are supposed to yield natural kinds rather than arbitrary groupings.¹² But there's considerable disagreement about what constitutes natural kinds and whether there are rigid criteria for them. Some scholars think that to divide by form is to individuate a class with reference to a positive property.¹³ This interpretation of RB commits Plato to a thin conception of natural kinds, if the members of each subclass [merely] have a positive attribute in common.

Scholars derive this rule from three examples in the text: (i) the division of animals into human and brutes, (ii) the division of humans into Greeks and barbarians, and (iii) the division of number into the number 10,000 and all other numbers (262c10–e3). While (iii) is intuitively problematic, ES insists that the other examples are just as bad. The only difference is that non-Greek people share a name, “barbarians,” which might tempt someone to construe them as one kind, even though they have nothing in common (262c10–d6). ES suggests different cuts: humans should be divided by female and male, and numbers by even and odd (262e5–6). Here classes are divided by two mutually exclusive, and jointly exhaustive, positive attributes.¹⁴

Perhaps divisions by positive features are intuitively more satisfying. But we shouldn't leave it there. Suppose YS demanded to know why negative characteristics do not constitute kinds. According to some, he has a case. For example, Mary-Louise Gill maintains that his division applies a lesson from the *Sophist*, namely, that “a

¹¹ For a helpful discussion of the target of division, see Gill, 2010.

¹² See Franklin, 2011, for discussion and literature. See also Proios, 2022.

¹³ See Gill, 2010, p. 189, Cohen, 1973, p. 189–90, Lawrence, 2021, p. 30, 35.

¹⁴ According to Moravcsik, 1973, there is no compelling reason to reject division by negation: “the point of the passage is that divisions should carve out natural kinds, be these negative or positive. What Plato cannot give us is some sort of a decision procedure to tell us in any given case what is and what is not a natural kind” (p. 164). These examples suggest otherwise.

property and its negation... are both forms with their own natures.” But “if the not-beautiful is a form, Socrates made no error in treating animals other than human as a form,” Gill contends (2010, p. 190; cf. Wedin, 1987, p. 223–4).

However, it is not obvious that every form constitutes a natural kind, as Gill suggests. Arguably, the form by which we divide must be an essential property of the classes which participate in it, i.e. properties which constitute the nature of each subclass.¹⁵ Bipedality, for example, is partly constitutive of our animal nature because it constitutes an ability (*dynamis*) to locomote, which is essential for human life. By contrast, being non-frogs, for example, i.e., differing from these animals, while true of all humans, is not essential to who we are.¹⁶ If there were no such animal as a frog, we would lose our non-frogness, for there wouldn't be frogs from which to differ. Yet our human nature would remain unaltered.¹⁷

As the example hopefully shows, the nature of something in the present context refers to its way of being, e.g., the way humans live. Accordingly, what partly constitutes a nature, on the present interpretation, is some feature or aspect of the kind in virtue of which it is the way it is, e.g., the distinctive features of human beings, both physical and mental, constitute their nature in this sense.

¹⁵ See Fine, 1993, p. 11, Dorter, 1994, p. 186. I agree with these writers that the aim of dichotomous divisions is to reveal the essence of the target kind, e.g., the nature of the human herd. But they do not explain the relationship between the (multiple) forms by which we divide and the (single) target, nor why negative attributes never count as essential.

¹⁶ Plato interprets 'not-F' as 'being different from F' in the *Sophist*, 257b1–c4, cf. 257c5–258c5. The precise upshot is debatable, see Brown, 2011; McDowell 1982; Crivelli, 2012, Ch. 2. For our current purposes this doesn't matter, since no one would argue that difference from F belongs to the essence of those kinds which have difference from F.

¹⁷ The most relevant sense of difference for us is within a genus: humans, dogs, fish, etc., are species of non-frog animals. My point is that if there were no such animal species as a frog, then the opposite category, namely, non-frog animals, would not exist, either, without thereby affecting the natures of the species contained therein. The point arguably transcends the properly scientific context (i.e., the domain of natural kinds), if the invention of unicorns at the same time “produced” the non-unicorn class of beings.

It might be objected that individual parts, however natural, shouldn't be referenced in the definition of the whole, e.g., that the parts of human beings shouldn't be referenced in the definition of humans, conceived as a whole and in general. But we have evidence that Plato doesn't think so. He says (in *Phdr.* 270c–d) that the first step in the investigation of nature is to determine whether our object of study is simple or complex (*haploun e polueides*), and then, if it is complex, that we should enumerate and analyze its powers (*dynameis*).¹⁸

On the present reading, then, classes should be divided by essential properties, construed as partly constitutive features of the resulting subclasses.¹⁹ This gives us a thicker conception of RB, instead of an *ad hoc* restriction on negative terms, which in light of the doctrine of the *Sophist* seems inappropriate. But the proposal is flexible enough to admit more than one proper division of a single target, as the text seems to require, since ES defines the human collective in two different ways.²⁰ This seems entirely reasonable if the nature of the target class is complex (having multiple constitutive parts), as is generally the case with animals.

If so, negative terms might be excluded from dichotomous divisions because they are not essential, i.e., do not contribute to the nature of the kinds into which we divide. By contrast, privative terms like “hornless” may be used to individuate a class in some contexts, as I am about to explain. That is because privations, unlike mere

¹⁸ In the *Timaeus*, he carries out an investigation of human nature along these lines (see 41d–42b, 61c–73d, 91e–92a). But notice that there he is not interested in our political nature. The relevance of our natural constitution, in particular our physical makeup, to political theory is not obvious. Nonetheless, I will argue that it is decisive.

¹⁹ Cf. Vlastis, 2023, p. 24: “the [ES’s] divisions are mistaken because the big class that is divided off has no unity and thus it cannot be part of the essence of the kinds that it contains.” On my reading non-human animals are genuinely unified by their difference from humans (*contra* Vlastis; cf. Cohen, 1973). The problem is that the unifying feature of the class doesn't constitute the nature of the species it contains, in part or as a whole.

²⁰ Cf. Moravcsik, 1973.

differences, are in some contexts essential to the class that they characterize.

Consider a dichotomous division of job applicants based on their academic backgrounds. The first cut sets apart those with high school diplomas from the rest of the pool; the second sets apart college graduates; the third those with a master's degree; the fourth and final cut divides those with a doctoral degree from the remaining pool. Each cut sets aside one subclass not merely as *different* from the collateral subclass, e.g., college graduate applicants against applicants who did not graduate from college; rather, those with a college degree are set aside as more qualified for the job than those without.

Let me be clear that dichotomous divisions have different aims. Here, specifically, ES aims to define statesmanship by separating it from all other crafts; the division of animals, which is internal to this larger division, aims to define the human herd by separating it from other herds. Nonetheless, the example brings out an important difference between negation and privation (*steresis*).²¹ If college education is needed, applicants who lack the qualification are ill-equipped to do the job. In general, 'not-F' indicates mere difference, whereas 'F-less' signifies deficiency or lack relative to a standard; negation is factive, while privation is both factive and normative.²²

Accordingly, I will suggest that ES divides animals with an eye to physical abilities (*dynameis*) by which they secure their existence. In this context, privations indicate ways in which the deprived class is ill-equipped for some task. By reading the divisions of animals in

²¹ For Aristotle, this becomes a technical term, contrasted with *hexis* (see *Cat.* 12a26 ff). Plato doesn't use these terms, but the idea is relevant.

²² Let me clarify, furthermore, that the distinction is logical. The surface grammar (un-F, F-less) does not have to entail deficiency. The division of hornless herds into interbreeding and non-interbreeding (265d3–e12) is a good example. ES refers to this class as "unmixed in breeding (*amiges genei*), one with another" (e5). Here the unmixing points to a kind of purity, and easily translates into a positive, rather than negative phrasing in the original (see: *koinogenous physeos e tinos idiogenous*, e8). English seems less flexible on this point, so I will keep Rowe's negative labels (see Figure 1 below).

this way we will discover the significance of the resulting definitions of the human race to the main topic of the *Statesman*.

2. Two definitions of human beings

The ill-conceived division of animals into human and brutes is replaced by two alternatives. According to the first, the human herd consists of two-footed, non-interbreeding, hornless land animals (264d1–266a9). ES also proposes a division which yields the definition of human beings as featherless, two-footed land animals (266e4–7). Readers are disappointed by these divisions. To quote Kenneth Dorter:

According to one, humans are like birds with the feathers missing; according to the other, we are like pigs with two legs missing. And yet this method is supposed to lead us to a thing's very essence (1994, p. 186).²³

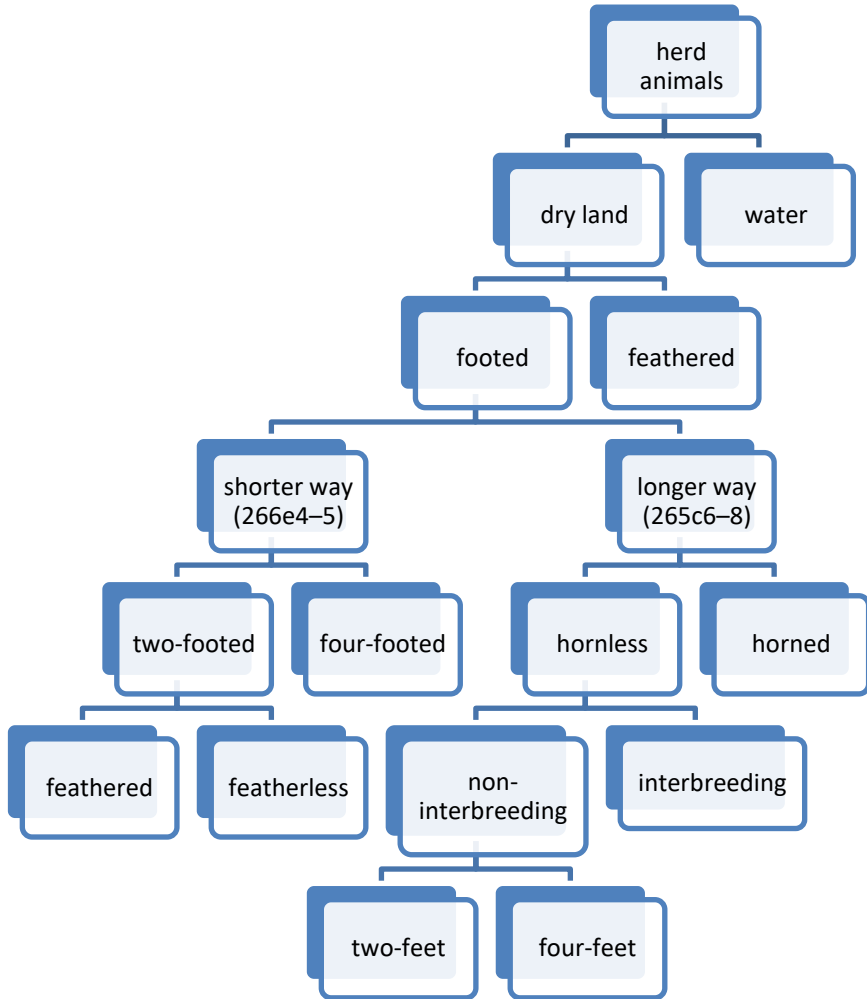
Perhaps there's more to these divisions than scholars realize. ES is looking at human beings as an animal collective, a herd. I'll argue that it matters from this perspective whether we have two legs or four, or whether we are winged and covered with feathers.

ES obtains these definitions by two divisions: one longer, another shorter.²⁴ It is usually assumed that the two divisions, the long and the short, depart from the same category, namely, footed herd animals (see: Figure 1).²⁵

²³ See also Lane, 1998, p. 44; Rowe, 1995, p. 27.

²⁴ The shorter way flouts the quantitative norm of bifurcation (265a1–5). Nonetheless, it is legitimate, which further supports my claim that it is a rule of safety while the qualitative requirement is essential to the process.

²⁵ See Dorter, 1994, p. 182; Gill, 2010, p. 188.

Figure 1: Both ways, as commonly interpreted

(Stat. 264d1–266a9)

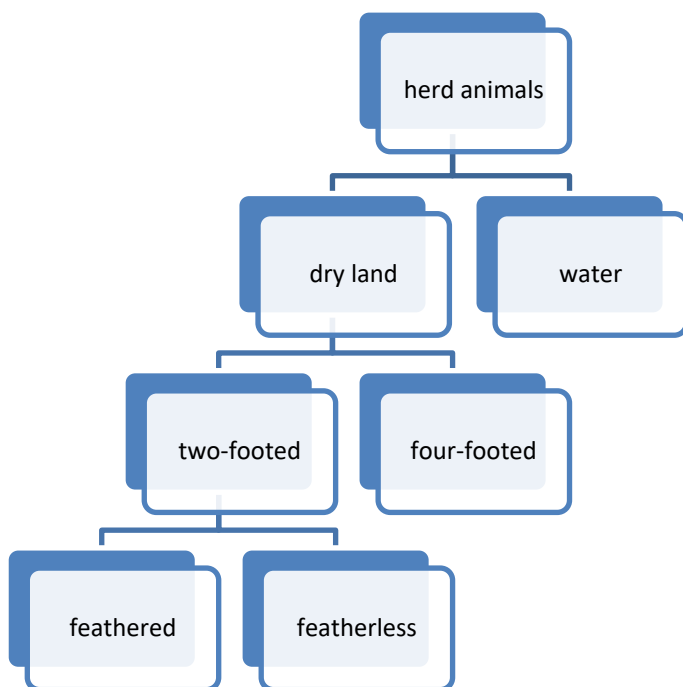
Since feathers were already used to bifurcate dry land herd animals, ES should not have used them again in the shorter way.²⁶

²⁶ Thus Dorter accuses ES of “a remarkable decline from the rigor and precision of the divisions in the *Sophist*” (1994, p. 82–3). Cf. Gill, 2010, 190.

However, it is more charitable to suppose that the shorter way departs from dry land herd animals.

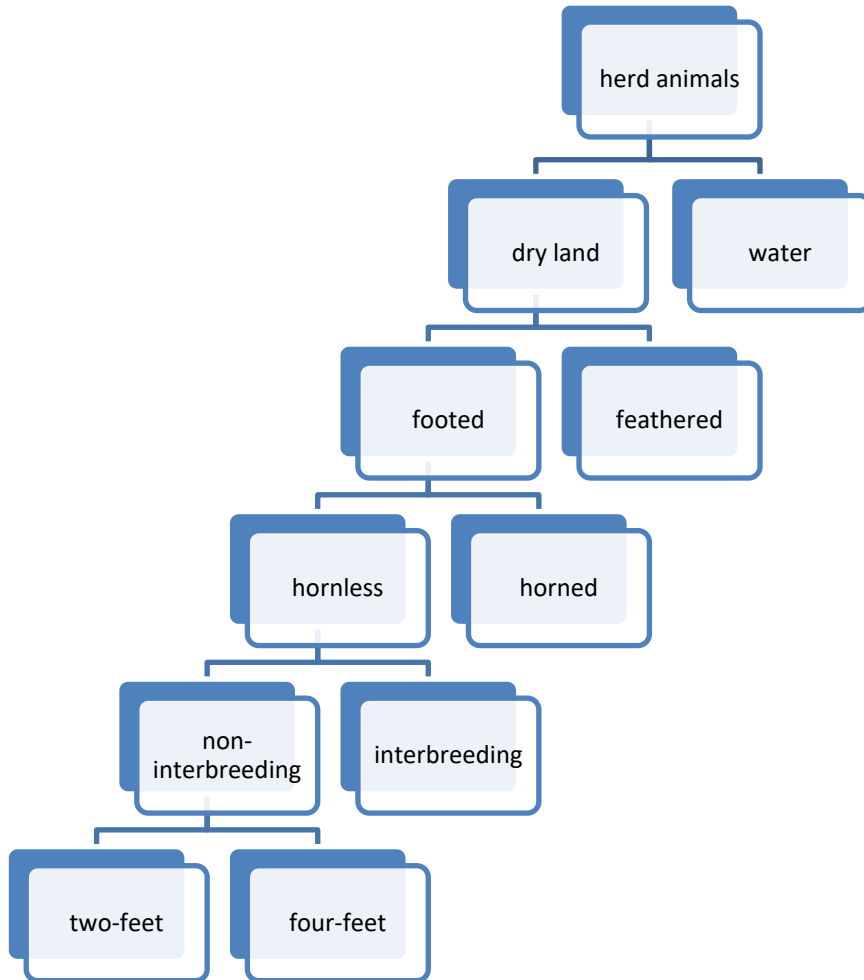
Accordingly, when ES asks us to “immediately distribute what goes on foot by opposing the two-footed to the four-footed class” (265a1–5), we should think of it like this (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Charitable reading of the shorter way



(Stat. 266e4–5)

Here, ES cuts dry land, herd animals into two- or four-footed herds straightaway; he doesn’t start from footed animals as he does in the longer division (see: Figure 3).

Figure 3: The longer way

(Stat. 265c6–8)

According to the longer way, “the king tends a herd docked of horns” (*kolobon agelen tina keraton*, 265d4). An alternative manuscript tradition would give us “a stunted herd of hornless animals” (*kolobon tina agelen akeraton*, see Campbell, 1867). Whichever reading we adopt, ES puts noticeable stress on the

privation of horns. He makes similar fuss about the slowness of the two-footed herd relative to its four-footed counterpart:

[T]he nature (*physis*) which our human kind (*genos*) possesses surely isn't endowed for the purpose of transporting itself any differently from the diagonal with the power of two feet (*dynamei dipous*) [...] and what's more, the nature of the remaining kind is in its turn in power a diagonal of our power, if indeed it is endowed with two times two feet (266b1–7).

This triggers a pun: “isn't it reasonable to expect the slowest/pigmost (*hystata*) [...] to come in last?” (266c8).

The shorter way is similarly focused on the privation of natural capacities: “one must immediately distribute what goes on foot by opposing the two-footed to the four-footed class, and when one sees the human still sharing the field with the winged alone, one must go on to cut the two-footed herd by wing-growing and wing-stripped (*toi psiloi kai toi pterophyei*, 266e4)”. The term *psilos* has military connotations: being stripped of one's armor. Here, the idea is that human beings are devoid of a natural means of self-preservation.

“Our method,” says ES, “is not more concerned with what is more dignified than with what is not [...] but always reaches the truest conclusion by itself” (266d6–8). And yet scholars have struggled to make sense of the truth of these definitions. If his point is that the attributes in the division apply to the human herd, and only to the human herd, he may be right. However, as statements of our human nature, they seem false to many.

This charge rests on a misunderstanding of Plato's aim in this section and the means he deploys towards it. The immediate task is to differentiate the human herd from others with an eye to their natural appurtenances, i.e., the kind of animal each and every one of us is before cultural and political intervention.

Taken as an account of our natural endowment, the definitions are illuminating. Stripped of culture and education, human beings

appear more naked and vulnerable than their counterparts. This is why they contrive artificial means of self-preservation and form political communities. The human struggle for self-preservation is relevant for political theorists.²⁷ In the *Statesman* especially, Plato attends to our bestial nature, which he regards as both the *raison d'être* of political communities and the main thing they ought to improve by means of culture. I will develop this point by reading parts of the Myth of the Ages and the creation story from the dialogue *Protagoras*, which thematically overlaps with it.

3. The Myth of the Ages

The reasons for presenting the myth are somewhat unclear. Officially, it is to show that statesmanship should not have been classified as “herd-nurturing,” but as “herd-caring” instead (75d4–6). However, some scholars have rejected this reason on the grounds that “so small a correction could have been made in a line or two of argument, and this mighty myth cannot be meant to have so puny an issue” (Skemp, 1987, p. 52; Clark, 1995, p. 238). Thus it has been argued that the main point of the myth is to distinguish divine rulership from human statesmanship.²⁸ Whatever its ultimate purpose, the story also elucidates the political significance of ES's accounts of the human herd.²⁹

ES begins by mentioning three seemingly distinct traditional stories.³⁰ First, he reminds YS about the quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes (268e8–9). Zeus intervened in the dispute over the throne, reversing the course of the sun and the other stars (269a1–5). The second myth describes a golden age, when the needs of humans were

²⁷ Hobbes' “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” existence of mankind in a state of nature comes to mind (*Leviathan* XIII), as well as Herder and Nietzsche (each in a different way).

²⁸ I'll say more about this in the next section.

²⁹ The myth starts at 268e, soon after the two accounts are introduced, and ends at 274e, at which point ES revises the definition of the statesman.

³⁰ For discussion, see Vidal-Naquet, 1978.

met without difficulty, thanks to the gods. The third reports that “earlier men were born from the earth and were not reproduced from each other” (269b2–3).

According to ES, “all these things are consequences of the same state of affairs” (269b5–c3). That state of affairs is “that the movement of the universe is now in the direction of its present rotation, now in the opposite direction” (270b7–8). The cosmic reversal we heard about in the story of Atreus and Thyestes is not the singular event the tradition takes it to be, but one of two cycles: “the god himself sometimes accompanies this universe, guiding it on its way and helping it move in a circle, while at other times he lets it go, when its circuits have completed the measure of time allotted to it, and of its own accord it revolves backwards” (269c4–7).

In one cycle (“The Age of Cronus”), everything springs from the earth under the supervision of guardian deities who divide “living things between them, like herdsman”; as a result, there are no factions and wars among human and non-human animals (371d6–e3). A further consequence is a lack of political institutions. “Given his tendance, they had no political constitutions, for all of them came back to life from the earth remembering nothing of the past,” says ES (271e8–272a2). Humans in the age of Cronus do not remember their past constitutions, and are not compelled to invent them, arguably because they have stable peace amongst themselves and other species and sufficient resources for all. And since even the seasons were without “painful extremes,” and they had “soft beds from abundant grass,” these earthborns mostly feed outdoors, “naked and without bedding” (272a5–b1).

We are more familiar with another age. It begins when the god abandons the universe to its own devices. All at once, the things that were provided for us are no longer available and “the majority of animals—as many as had an aggressive nature—grow wild (274b6–7). Now a naked life outdoors is no longer an option, because “human beings by themselves are weak and defenceless” (*autoi de astheneis anthroi kai atechnoi*, 274b8). For they were “still without

resources and without expertise of any kind” (*amechanoi kai atechnoi*) by which they might defend themselves against other, stronger species, and they did not yet know how to provide food or shelter for themselves (274c1–4).

Because of this, ES says, they received those gifts “of which we have ancient reports [...] along with an indispensable requirement for teaching and education: fire from Prometheus, crafts from Hephaestus and his fellow-craftworkers, and again seeds and plants from others and everything that has helped to establish human life (*to anthroponon bion*) has come about from these things” (274c5–d3).

The allusion to the myth of Prometheus is surprising. In Plato's *Protagoras*, the gifts are given to people who were molded under the earth by the gods. Prometheus gives them fire and crafts after his brother, Epimetheus, unthinkingly left them without natural means of survival by wasting them on other species. Plato adds a twist to the plot by situating the event at the beginning of our own era. According to its current version, whoever gave humans their shape, whether it was Epimetheus or someone else, had failed to provide them with adequate support for the present epoch (“The Age of Zeus”). Other than that, the gifts are the same and solve similar problems.

According to Protagoras, when it was time to bring those freshly molded mortals out of the earth, the gods charged Prometheus and Epimetheus “to distribute powers (*dynameis*) to each of them properly” (*Prt.* 320d4–6). Having persuaded his brother to let him do the dealing alone, he began to distribute different powers to different species so that each may survive:

He attached strength without speed (*ischyn aneu tachous*) to some, while the weaker he equipped with speed; and some he armed (*tous de hoplize*), while devising for others, along with an unarmed constitution (*aoplon physin*), some different power for preservation (*allen dynamin eis soterian*). To those which he invested with smallness he dealt a winged escape (*pteneon phygen*) or an underground habitation; those which he increased in largeness

(*megethei*) he preserved (*esoizen*) by this very means; and he dealt all the other properties on this plan of compensation. In contriving all this he was taking precaution that no kind (*genos*) should be extinguished; and when he had equipped them (*eperkese*) with avoidances of mutual destruction (*allelrophthorion diaphygas*), he devised a provision against the seasons ordained by Heaven, in clothing them about with thick-set hair and solid hides, sufficient to ward off winter yet able to shield them also from the heats, and so that on going to their lairs they might find in these same things a bedding of their own that was native to each (*oikeia te kai autophyes*); and some he shod with hoofs (*hypodon ta men hoplais*), others with claws and solid, bloodless hides (*Prt.* 320d8–321b2, trans. Lamb, 1967, slightly modified).

I underlined the features that occurred in the divisions of the human herd. As we can see, they correspond with the challenges which humans face in the age of Zeus. Human beings are naked, unarmed, slow, and weak. These deficiencies come to light as ES makes his way from the original division to the myth. Thus, it is not an accident or oversight that ES divides with reference to our physical constitution; rather, his reflections on political institutions, under the leadership of an able statesman, are shaped by his understanding of politics as the solution to natural problems.

I will explain this claim along with further evidence in the next section. Before that, I'd like to point out a few telling differences between the divine gifts in the *Protagoras* and in the *Statesman*. According to Protagoras, thanks to the divine gifts, humans were soon able “to articulate speech and words, and to invent dwellings, clothes, sandals, beds, and the foods that are of the earth” (*Prt.* 322a5–8.) But they were still “being destroyed by the wild beasts, since these were in all ways stronger than them” (b1–3). And that is why they decided to found cities; not for the sake of food, which they already had, but in order to protect themselves more effectively (b3–b6).

The narrative of ES differs slightly. First, he doesn't distinguish two phases, a pre-political and a political phase of human self-governance, while Protagoras does. One possibility is that he thinks that craftsmanship depends on political arrangements, however minimal, inasmuch as it requires devotion to a task, which cannot happen in an apolitical condition. If so, as soon as humans are forced into a mode of self-governance in the age of Zeus, they are immediately pulled toward political structures in order to secure an effective division of labor.³¹

ES also has a different idea about the origin of our political virtues. Protagoras includes justice (*dikaiosyne*), soundness of mind (*sophrosyne*) and any other civic virtue (*alles politikēs aretes*) in his list of divine gifts (*Prt.* 323a). ES leaves them out of the story. As we will see shortly, he thinks that virtuous dispositions must be secured through good marriages followed by proper habituation; the gods do not simply distribute the virtues to everyone, fully real and ready to go (as it were). As for fire, crafts, seeds and plants, in the *Statesman's* version of the story, they are not simply handed to us; rather, we receive them “with an indispensable requirement for teaching and learning” (*met' anagkaias didaches kai paideuseos*, 274c6–d2).

According to one reading, the point of this remark is that to make use of these gifts in the Age of Zeus “requires considerable effort from us” (Rowe, 1995, p. 197). It's true that the crafts ES mentions involve hard work and training, but there might be more to his remark. The reader might be expected to realize that the gods' gifts do not explain when and how they ought be used.

This resonates with a constant theme in the dialogues. In the *Meno*, for example, Socrates says that wisdom reaps the benefits from all the other goods by putting them into good use (*Men.* 88d–e,

³¹ ES doesn't invoke the one person, one job principle (*Resp.* 370a ff). Nevertheless, given the prominence of the diversity and distinctions among crafts, their coordination and subordination etc., it is reasonable to suppose that Plato is still thinking that the virtue of each craft requires the division of labor, in subordination to the architectonic art of the statesman (see §4).

Euthd. 280b–c). Similarly, the point of the present remark could be that the good use of the divine gifts depends on things that are not themselves divinely distributed to mankind—arguably, virtues of character and practical wisdom.³²

Notice, finally, that the usefulness of the gods' gifts depends on the reciprocal exchange between students and teachers. This once again puts the reader in a social frame of mind, by contrast with the natural or divine dispensation of powers to humans and other animal species. We benefit from these gifts mostly in a political community which provides technical training, and, in the good case, moral habituation as well.³³

4. Weaving

Let's accept that humans are weak relative to other animal collectives, and that this propelled our ancestors to found political institutions. How exactly does this bear on the political point of the *Statesman*?

To answer this question, we first need to reject a widespread assumption concerning the structure of ES's argument. It is often argued that ES begins with the wrong model, namely, statesmanship as herding. But the myth of the Ages shows, on this reading, that this is an inappropriate model for our current epoch, and so this model is

³² See *Lg.* 643b–644b for the twofold necessity to educate people (*meletan dei*, 643b5; *paizein chre*, c1; *ton mathematon hosa anankaia promemathekenai promanthanein*, c4) from early childhood to love and excel at their preassigned vocations, alongside liberal education in “reason and justice” (*nou kai dike*, 644a4; cf. *Resp.* 423e).

³³ Fowler's translation gives us a different meaning: “and that is the reason why the gifts of the gods that are told of in the old traditions were given us with the needful information and instruction (*met' anankaia didaches kai paideuseos*), —fire by Prometheus, the arts by Hephaestus and the goddess who is his fellow-artisan, seeds and plants by other deities.” Here the point is that the gods explain how to use their gifts. But “instruction” sounds gratuitous after “needful information,” and the remark would not have ethical or political significance.

abandoned in the second part of the dialogue (257a–277a) in which ES uses the model of weaving instead of herding (see: n. 6 for literature).

I think this is far too strong. The myth draws attention to important differences in the manner and scope of divine shepherding, by contrast with statesmanship in the present era. This suggests to ES that the name of rearing and herding should be reserved to the king of the previous epoch, that is, the deity who took care of us then, and so he assigns a different name, *epiemeletike*, to the collective tending of humans by humans in the present age (276d4–e13).

But the paradigm has not fully shifted. For one thing, ES still refers to the human collective as a herd of bipeds (*dipodon agelaikonomen zoion*, 276e11), thereby indicating that he conceives of statesmanship as a kind of herding, even though he reserves the name to the divine kingship of the previous epoch.

Moreover, while ES identifies the statesman as one herder among several in the original division, he doesn't think that the statesman is literally a weaver, but only that the two trades have something in common, so that by examining the art of weaving we will come to a better understanding of the way statesmanship takes care of the human herd.³⁴

He says, to be more specific, that the example of weaving will allow us to observe in an expert, systematic way what looking after (*therapeia*) those in the city consists in (278e9–10), because the art of statesmanship and weaving share a form (*eidos*, e8). This means, I take it, that at a sufficient level of abstraction, the two arts have the same *modus operandi*, each carrying its task in the same way as the other (cf., *echon ten auten politikei pragmateian*, 279a7–8), and this common method is conspicuous in one case, but not in the other.

³⁴ The division and subsequent myth gave us the statesman in outline (*perigraphē*, 277c1). The following discussions are supposed to add clarity and vivacity to the account (c2–4).

Now we can begin to see the enduring relevance of ES's depiction of the human condition in the Age of Zeus. We noted two important features: (1) humans are excessively vulnerable, and because of that, (2) they must work together, using crafts, fire, and seeds that were given to them by the gods. Both features shed light on the discussion of the statesman-weaver.

Consider, first, the aim of weaving (*uphantike*): “all the things we produce (*demiourgoumen*) and acquire (*kthometa*) are either for the sake of doing something (*poiein ti*) or things that ensure that we will not suffer (*me paschein*)” (279c6–8). Then, setting aside the class of things made for doing something, ES proceeds to divide means of protection until he gets to “these preventives and coverings manufactured from things that are being bound together with themselves that we give the name ‘clothes’” (279e8–280a1).³⁵

Although the statesman and the weaver make different things, we will see that they both generate some sort of protection, by using the same kind of operation, which ES calls ‘weaving’ after the primary, focal case. If so, the protective *telos* of state-weaving constitutes a first link with the herding model in the earlier discussion. Humans enter into a political state for the sake of mutual preservation, because they do not have sufficient defenses by nature (1).

The following sections contain detailed descriptions of the procedure of binding things together with themselves: first in weaving (280e–283a), and then, by analogy, in statecraft (287b–311c). It is the statesman’s responsibility to ensure that the different threads in society, representing different individuals, are properly integrated into the whole, which guarantees the beauty and durability of the state (311b–c).

This state-weaving has two distinctive roles, both of which involve integrating citizen-threads into the state-fabric. The first

³⁵ This is weaving, by contrast, for example, with sewing, which binds things together by relating them to a third thing (280b5–c5).

relates to the division of labor, which is of the essence of the state in the present era (2). The myth hinted at this, I argued, by offering the gifts of craft already in a political state, unlike Protagoras. Now ES elaborates this theme from the point of view of the superordinate statecraft, which oversees the work of the city as a whole. This includes putting people in office, legislation, and assigning concrete tasks to the statesman's closest subordinates: generals, judges, rhetoricians, and educators (303e–305c, 308e).

The second expression of integration is the cultivation of reason through civic education. There was already a hint of this, I argued, in the myth of the Ages, but it becomes very pronounced in the present discussion, from the point of view of the state-weaver who ensures the endurance and beauty of the state-fabric through civic education. The statesman must unite the souls of citizens by inculcating in all of them “that unshakable true opinion (*alethe doxan meta bebaioseos*) about what is fine, just, and good, and the opposites of these” (309c5–8). ES refers to this as a “divine bond” (*theioi desmoi*, 309c2) by which the statesman-weaver unites all citizens.

Furthermore, by establishing agreement on these fundamental matters, the statesman-weaver is able to overcome oppositions within the state. ES develops the idea by pointing out the tensions that arise between moderate and brave temperaments, which threaten to tear the civic fabric apart by pulling in opposite directions, in private or in state affairs (306a–308b). The bond of reason allows these natural dispositions to evolve into real virtues which are useful for the whole (309b–310a). Then the statesman-weaver further strengthens the civic-fabric by forging “human bonds” (*anthropinous desmous*, a7) between citizens with contrary temperaments in the form of marriages and professional collaborations (310–311b).

These integrative processes constitute state-weaving, whereby “the kingly art draws [all citizens] into a common life, in friendship and agreement” (311b9–c2). This results in “the most magnificent and best of all fabrics” with which statesmanship “covers (*ampischousa*) all the inhabitants of the state” (c3–4). Thus at the

very end of the dialogue Plato reaffirms the statesman's duty to protect his human flock; the magnificent state fabric he weaves, constituted by civic collaborations with the divine bond of reason, is used to cover all the inhabitants (*en tais pōlesi pantas*, c3), even slaves (*doulous*, c4). In this respect, the statesman was and remains a shepherd, even though he does not take care of his herd in the same way as other shepherds, but through the activity of state-weaving instead.

5. Conclusion

My aim was to explore the methodological and political significance of privation in the *Statesman's* definitions of the human collective, and to use these findings to offer a unifying frame for the dialogue as a whole, against the appearance of disunity between the opening sections and the discussion of weaving.

I started by pointing out a textual puzzle about dichotomous divisions. On the one hand, ES rejects divisions by positive and negative terms. This has suggested to some scholars that divisions should always make reference to positive properties. This cannot be right, I argued, since ES repeatedly divides by form and privation.

I proposed two things. First, dichotomous divisions proceed with reference to essential properties. This can be understood in more than one way; in the present context it could mean properties that are partly constitutive of the nature of the subclasses. Second, not being some thing or other does not partly constitute the nature of natural kinds, e.g., not being human does not partly constitute the nature of non-human animals; rather, every animal has its own constitutive features by which it differs from any other, and the same holds for all other natural kinds.

By contrast, privations are in some cases partly constitutive. This allowed me to offer a new, charitable interpretation of ES's definitions of the human herd. According to the first, humans are two-footed, non-interbreeding, hornless land animals; according to the second, they are featherless, two-footed land animals. Contrary to the

assumption that these accounts are unhelpful, I argued that we should take them seriously. Their political significance comes into the fore the Myth of the Ages which follows these divisions.

I compared this story to the creation myth in the dialogue *Protagoras*. Both stories highlight the vulnerable position of the human herd *vis-à-vis* other animal species which are better equipped for survival. In the *Statesman*, the crafts are given to us by the gods as compensatory means, along with a requirement to teach and learn. This means that humans in our age, the Age of Zeus, are united first of all as co-workers.

Not all collaborations are equally effective, however. The latter part of the dialogue interprets statesmanship as a superordinate craft responsible for effective collaboration in public as well as in private affairs. The dominant metaphor in this discussion is weaving whose aim and methods resemble those of statesmanship.

Weaving produces protective fabrics by weaving materials together with each other. The statesman, too, generates protection, not, however, by covering each member individually, but by ensuring the durability and excellence of their union which then functions as a protective cover to all the inhabitants together.

This has two dimensions. First, statesmanship is the generative cause of this civic union, with all other crafts as contributing causes working under it. Second, it reconciles contrary dispositions in the state: natural courage and moderation. The structural integrity of the state depends on the quality of the individual threads: if they agree about the just, the good, and the beautiful, their opposite tendencies become assets as they want the same things, respect each other, and collaborate effectively to maintain the whole.

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