

ΣΥΝΕΣΙΣ: UNDERSTANDING (ITS) DEEPER MEANING IN THE CLASSICAL PERIOD*

Forthcoming at *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*

Penultimate Version – Please Do Not Cite

KEYWORDS: *sunesis*, *synesis*, conscience, hermeneutics, Orestes, Aristotle

WORD COUNT: 11,741 (including footnotes and references)

ABSTRACT: This article argues that the meaning of σύνεσις in the classical period has been inadequately understood, and consequently its historical significance has likely been misplaced. The traditional view is that the word possessed two basic meanings. First and foremost, σύνεσις meant a general ability to understand. Second and less frequently, it meant moral conscience or some such ability to judge the morality of human choice and action. However, by considering anew the attestations of σύνεσις and its grammatically related forms, it will be shown that σύνεσις never meant moral conscience, but instead often denoted a hermeneutic virtue by which we interpret the deeper significance of things said and done.

I.

What did σύνεσις mean in classical Greece? The long-standing view, codified in our dictionaries, is that the word possessed two basic meanings.¹ First and foremost, σύνεσις meant a general ability to understand.² When used in this general sense, σύνεσις is translated by words like “intelligence,” “compréhension,” “Einsicht,” and “conoscenza.” Second and less frequently,

* This paper benefited from the insight of many, especially David Goldstein, Sean Kelsey, Colin Guthrie King, David Konstan, Pavlos Kontos, Phillip Mitsis, David Sider, several anonymous reviewers, as well as the diligent and generous editors of RhM. Any shortcomings of the paper reflect only the shortsightedness of the author.

¹ Cf. Passow 1831; Stephanus / Dindorf / Dindorf / Hase (1831–1865); LSJ⁹ II–III; Bailly / Séchan / Chantraine 1963; Montanari 2013; Diggle / Fraser / James / Simkin / Thompson / Westripp 2021. The two basic meanings are by far the most common. But σύνεσις also seems to have been occasionally used to denote the understanding of a specific subject matter. Aristotle, for example, seems to refer to experts in the dithyramb as οἱ περὶ τὴν σύνεσιν (Pol. 8.7. 1342b8). This use, however, was quite rare and clearly dependent on the more prevalent meanings discussed in this paper.

² Hdt. 2.5.1; Eur. Tro. 672; Pl. Resp. 376b; Arist. Cael. 2.12. 292a15; Dem. 60.30.

σύνεσις seems to have meant a more specific ability to judge the morality of human choice and action. So construed, σύνεσις is typically translated as “conscience,” “coscienza, or “Gewissen.”

The present paper revises this long-standing view, and in two respects. First, it will clarify the nature of the understanding to which σύνεσις often referred. It will be shown that, in addition to meaning “understanding” in a general sense, σύνεσις also often indicated the specific ability to take the apparent features of something said or done and “put two-and-two together” in such a way as to grasp some less obvious meaning. The word thereby denoted a sort of hermeneutic virtue by which we interpret the deeper import of words and deeds. Many modern dictionary entries for σύνεσις lack this nuance, although some do correctly state that σύνεσις can mean things like “sagacity,” “Einsicht,” or “perspicacia.” The demands of brevity likely prohibit elaboration. The sole exception seems to be the *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* (TGL), which rightly recognizes that σύνεσις generally means *intelligentia*, but also, more specifically: “*Perspicax animi facultas, quae committere res inter se potest et discernere.*” This paper intends to substantiate and sharpen this specific meaning of σύνεσις. Paradigm cases will be offered in order to show that what is often discerned by σύνεσις are matters both consequential and obscure, and therefore needing to be interpreted. These interpretanda can be of moral significance, but the judgments issued by σύνεσις do not concern what morally ought to be done, or ought to have been done. This is the second revision proposed by this paper: σύνεσις never in the classical period seems to have meant moral conscience or any such faculty whose proper task is to judge the moral rightness or wrongness of human choice and action. Caution is therefore advised with respect to the claim, found in the TGL and suggested in other lexica: “*Sicut συνήμι accipitur aliquando pro Conscius sum, sic σ[ύνεσις] etiam pro Conscientia.*” While it is true that both συνήμι and σύνεσις were used to express being

conscious of something – and often something obscure – neither term was ever used in the classical period to refer to conscience or its verdicts.

Defending these claims requires attending to a wide-ranging set of passages. This selection is not arbitrary. Section II of the paper presents passages that best support the thesis that σύνεσις secondarily meant a sort of hermeneutic ability to understand the deeper significance behind words and deeds. These passages include attestations not only of σύνεσις, but also συνήμι and συνετός. Attending to these grammatically related forms will be necessary to illuminate the meaning of σύνεσις. This is because developments in the meaning of συνήμι seem to have rendered it an endonym in the classical period for these other forms. An endonym is a lexical item whose meaning is “incorporated” into the meaning of another.³ For example, the English verb “to understand” is in this sense an endonym for “understanding”: to possess understanding, or to be an understanding person, is to exercise the ability to understand. Similarly, the classical Greek verb συνήμι seems to have been an endonym for συνετός and σύνεσις: to possess σύνεσις, or to be συνετός, is to exercise the ability to συνιέναι.⁴ A comprehensive semantic analysis of σύνεσις will therefore require taking into account these other terms. After providing such an analysis, the paper will consider in section III the main evidence that we have for the misguided traditional view that σύνεσις could also mean something like moral conscience. Those passages are relatively few and scattered, but that should only reflect what shaky textual grounds we have stood on in thinking that σύνεσις in the classical period held such a meaning. We therefore have good reason to infer,

³ For further discussion of this notion of endonymy, see Cruse 1986, 123–133.

⁴ Claiming that συνήμι was an endonym for σύνεσις does not imply that all senses of the verbal form are incorporated into the noun. The claim only entails that a specific meaning of συνήμι was, at least in the classical period, incorporated into a specific meaning of σύνεσις. Someone could be said to possess σύνεσις in the sense that they are able to συνιέναι the deeper significance of things said or done.

as suggested in section IV, that σύνεσις would seem to play a role in the historical development of hermeneutics, not morality.

II.

In Homer σύνεσις appears only once and refers to a “confluence” of two rivers (*Od.* 10.515). In later authors, however, the word has cognitive significance, and this seems to be on account of developments in the semantics of συνήμι.⁵ Already in the archaic period, συνήμι can mean to listen to what is being said by Nestor or Athena or whomever.⁶ What they say are typically commands that are not difficult to understand. In such contexts, συνήμι requires little more than language competency and paying attention. This meaning of συνήμι remains in currency throughout the classical period, and Aristotle himself uses the word in this way to describe, for example, how elephants, children, and foreign peoples can all to varying degrees listen and understand what is said.⁷ These are accordingly cases in which the general, archaic meaning of συνήμι is employed. However, συνήμι also comes to be used when what is to be understood is not readily apparent and so requires interpretive effort.⁸ There are three paradigmatic cases in which σύνεσις and its grammatically related forms are used in this way: (i) in comprehending esoteric poetry and divination; (ii) in grasping sophisticated argument; and (iii) in discerning the intricacies of a practical situation, particularly those involving deceit. All three paradigms first appear in the archaic period and persist through the classical period.

⁵ On this suggestion, see Snell 1924, 40–41.

⁶ For example: ξυνίει ἔπος in *Od.* 6.289, 8.241, 19.378; ξυνέηκε ὄπα in *Il.* 2.182, 10.512.

⁷ *De aud.* 801b16; *Metaph.* 11.5. 1062a35; *Hist. an.* 9.46. 630b21.

⁸ The only lexicon that seems to recognize this is the Cambridge Greek Lexicon, which states that συνήμι can mean to understand “things, actions, words (esp. their implication or meaning) Hes. Thgn. Hdt. Trag. +.” This is correct, and the foregoing will elaborate on the paradigmatic cases of things, actions, and words whose implications are understood. This specific meaning of συνήμι, however, is not reflected in its entry on σύνεσις.

Pindar offers an early example of σύνεσις and related forms referring to the understanding of arcane poems and prophecies. In the Second Olympian he boasts that only the few would be able to comprehend his lofty verses (Ol. 2.83–6):

[...] πολλά μοι ὑπ'
ἀγκῶνος ὠκέα βέλη
ἔνδον ἐντὶ φαρέτρας
φωνάεντα συνετοῖσιν· ἐς δὲ τὸ πᾶν ἔρμανέων
χατίζει.⁹

This sentiment that profound poetry is only understood by the συνετοί is common.¹⁰ The motivation for such sentiment depends on social context. Poetry commissioned for aristocratic patrons affirms the superior intelligence of the audience and their elite social standing.¹¹ Orphic poetry is coded for those initiated into the mysteries.¹² The deliverances of oracles and prophets are similarly riddling. In an anecdote from Herodotus, the people of Thebes lose a battle against the Athenians, and so they consult the Pythian priestess for advice on how best to seek revenge. The Pythia orders them not to seek revenge themselves, but instead to seek help from “the ones

⁹ Text from Maehler 1987. The meaning of this passage is debated, and one point of dispute concerns the meaning of ἔρμανέων. On this matter Glenn Most 1986, 308 argues persuasively that ἔρμηνεύς in the fifth century “designates the agent that performs any act of translation of signification from one kind of language in which it is invisible or entirely unintelligible into another kind in which it is visible.” Here Pindar is comparing poets like himself to divine oracles who announce divine messages to mortals of understanding. The significance of this point will become clear at the conclusion of this paper, where it will be suggested that σύνεσις is more important for the history of hermeneutics than that of morality.

¹⁰ Bacchyl. 3.85; Ar. Av. 946; Pl. Prt. 339a.

¹¹ See Battisti 1990.

¹² See Ford 2002, 75–76.

closest” (Hdt. 5.79). The Thebans are puzzled by this advice, since they already receive help from their neighbors. But upon deliberating the meaning of her words during an assembly meeting, one Theban comes forth and professes: “I seem to understand [συνιέναι] what the oracle wishes to tell us” (5.80). He then explains that by “the ones closest,” the Pythia meant not the neighbors of Thebes, but its sister city, Aegina. In the *Alcibiades* Socrates acknowledges the difficulty of such oracular interpretation when he asks: “do we fail to comprehend [συνίμεν] the Delphic inscription?”¹³ There, too, Socrates is not so much considering whether or not the injunction to “know thyself” is the morally right thing to do; he is rather concerned with understanding just what it means. The words of ordinary mortals sometimes prove as enigmatic as the divine. In such circumstances we also occasionally find σύνεσις or a grammatically related form. In the *Trachiniae*, for example, Heracles tells Hyllus: “I understand [ξυνίημ’] none of the things which you speak puzzlingly.”¹⁴

Heraclitus is the first attested author in which we find the related practice of using σύνεσις and grammatically related forms in the context of understanding complex argument. He allegedly began his *On Nature* as follows (D1; see also D51): τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ’ ἐόντος ἀεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον (“Although this account holds forever, men ever fail to comprehend, both before hearing it and once they have heard”).¹⁵ Here Heraclitus suggests that while listeners may understand the words in some superficial sense, they will likely have little insight into the philosophical views presented. Plato and Aristotle similarly use σύνεσις and its related forms with reference to the comprehension of philosophical argument.

¹³ Pl. *Alc.* 132c; see also Aesch. *Ag.* 1112; Soph. *Trach.* 90; Eur. *Phoen.* 422, 1506; Thuc. 5.80, 5.92; Ar. *Plut.* 45; Ap. *Rhod.* *Argon.* 1.1086–7; Diog. *Laert.* 2.5.22, 7.1.2.

¹⁴ Soph. *Trach.* 1121; see also Aesch. *Supp.* 462, *Cho.* 887.

¹⁵ Text and translation from Kahn 1979. For similar pronouncements, see: Epicurus VS 29; Galen *Nat. Fac.* 3.10.179K.

Such comprehension naturally requires understanding the meanings of words and the line of reasoning they articulate.¹⁶ Comprehension also requires understanding the implications of arguments and their conclusions. It is only then, after all, that we fully appreciate what an argument really means. In the *Lysis*, for example, Socrates considers whether or not he agrees with the view defended by Democritus and others that “the like must always be friend to the like.” He remarks that he agrees with τὸ ἡμισυ αὐτοῦ, ἴσως δὲ καὶ πᾶν, ἀλλ’ ἡμεῖς οὐ συνίεμεν (214b).¹⁷ The reason why he claims not to understand the meaning of the claim is because its implications are not clear. Does it imply that good people are friends with one another, and likewise bad people are friends with one another, since in both groups the individuals are alike? Or does it instead imply that good people are alike, and so become friends, but bad people are unlike, and so cannot be friends? The claims and arguments for which σύνεσις is employed need not be philosophical. With the rise of rhetors and sophists in the classical period, particularly in Athens, political debate grew increasingly more sophisticated, and σύνεσις and its related forms were regularly used in order to refer to this ability to follow complicated political discourse. Demosthenes, for example, confesses that he himself “was unable to understand [συνεῖναι] many of the arguments” with which Aeschines attempted to demonstrate his transgressing of the laws.¹⁸

This wide range of communicative contexts suggests that σύνεσις is not so much the ability to understand enigmatic or sophisticated speech, but rather, more generally, the ability to understand what is meant but not always explicitly said. Some support for this suggestion can be

¹⁶ Pl. *Tht.* 147a, 196e, *Euthphr.* 13a, *Resp.* 394c; Arist. *An. post.* 1.10. 76b37, *Top.* 1.5. 102b11.

¹⁷ This translation is mine, as are all others unless stated otherwise. For other passages in which understanding an argument also requires understanding its implications, see: Pl. *Soph.* 249e, *Tht.* 208e.

¹⁸ Dem. *De cor.* 111; see also *In Aristocratem* 97; *Hdt.* 3.46; *Eur. Or.* 921; *Thuc.* 3.83.3.

found in a passage from *De Elocutione*.¹⁹ In that text the author relays rhetorical advice from Theophrastus on how best to persuade in the “plain” (ἰσχνός) style. This style avoids the rhetorical devices like polysemy and asyndeton for which Heraclitus and others are well-known. His advice is as follows (Eloc. 222):

ἐν τούτοις τε οὖν τὸ πιθανόν, καὶ ἐν ᾧ Θεόφραστος φησιν, ὅτι οὐ πάντα ἐπ’ ἀκριβείας δεῖ μακρηγορεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἕνια καταλιπεῖν καὶ τῷ ἀκροατῇ συνιέναι καὶ λογίζεσθαι ἐξ αὐτοῦ· συνεῖς γὰρ τὸ ἐλλειφθὲν ὑπὸ σοῦ οὐκ ἀκροατῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ μάρτυς σου γίνεται, καὶ ἅμα εὐμενέστερος. συνετὸς γὰρ ἑαυτῷ δοκεῖ διὰ σὲ τὸν ἀφορμὴν παρεσχηκότα αὐτῷ τοῦ συνιέναι, τὸ δὲ πάντα ὡς ἀνοήτῳ λέγειν καταγινώσκοντι ἕοικεν τοῦ ἀκροατοῦ.²⁰

According to Theophrastus, a listener tends to feel συνετός whenever he successfully infers what the speaker meant but refrained from saying.²¹ A speaker must therefore try to engender this feeling in his listeners because doing so will dispose them to feel more favorably towards him and so find him more persuasive. A speaker should accordingly avoid insulting the intelligence of his listeners by spoon-feeding them each and every small step in his reasoning. To the extent to which listeners possess σύνεσις, they will be able to make the logical leaps and inferences on their own. Although Theophrastus does not generalize, his point would seem to hold for speech of any style.

¹⁹ This text is attributed to a certain Demetrius and written sometime between the early third and early first centuries B.C.E. For questions of dating, see: Grube 1964; Schenkeveld 1964, 135–48.

²⁰ Text from Innes 1999. Cf. Aristotle’s discussion of suppressed premises in enthymemes (Rh. 2.22. 1395b24–26). Thanks to Colin Guthrie King for drawing this connection.

²¹ Note here the evidence supporting the hypothesis that συνίημι is an endonym for συνετός: the listener feels συνετός because she is able to συνιέναι.

The employment of σύνεσις and its grammatically related forms in these three communicative contexts – esoteric verse, complex argument, and nuanced situations – suggest that σύνεσις at least sometimes refer to a kind of hermeneutic virtue, an ability to interpret what is said or written. And we have some evidence that thinkers in the classical period themselves may have meant σύνεσις to be interpretive in this very way. At the beginning of Plato’s *Ion*, Socrates praises rhapsodes for their ability to understand the thought of the poets whose works they sing (530b–c):

καὶ μὴν πολλάκις γε ἐζήλωσα ὑμᾶς τοὺς ῥαψωδοὺς, ὦ Ἴων, τῆς τέχνης· τὸ γὰρ ἅμα μὲν τὸ σῶμα κεκοσμηθῆσθαι ἀεὶ πρέπον ὑμῶν εἶναι τῇ τέχνῃ καὶ ὡς καλλίστοις φαίνεσθαι, ἅμα δὲ ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι ἔν τε ἄλλοις ποιηταῖς διατρίβειν πολλοῖς καὶ ἀγαθοῖς καὶ δὴ καὶ μάλιστα ἐν Ὀμήρῳ, τῷ ἀρίστῳ καὶ θειοτάτῳ τῶν ποιητῶν, καὶ τὴν τούτου διάνοιαν ἐκμανθάνειν, μὴ μόνον τὰ ἔπη, ζηλωτόν ἐστιν. οὐ γὰρ ἂν γένοιτό ποτε ἀγαθὸς ῥαψωδός, εἰ μὴ συνείη τὰ λεγόμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ ποιητοῦ. τὸν γὰρ ῥαψωδὸν ἐρμηνέα δεῖ τοῦ ποιητοῦ τῆς διανοίας γίγνεσθαι τοῖς ἀκούουσι· τοῦτο δὲ καλῶς ποιεῖν μὴ γινώσκοντα ὅτι λέγει ὁ ποιητὴς ἀδύνατον.²²

Scholars disagree as to the sense in which the good rhapsode is an “interpreter” (ἐρμηνεύς). Some take Socrates here to mean that the good rhapsode knows all the words of the poet and is accordingly able to perform his poems well. The good rhapsode is therefore a ἐρμηνεύς of the thought of the poet insofar as he can recite the poem which the poet thought.²³ Others take Socrates to mean that the good rhapsode understands the words of the poet such that he not only knows the

²² Text from Rijksbaron 2007.

²³ See, for example: Woodruff 1983, 17; Capuccino 2005, 128–31; Gonzalez 2015, 15.

words, but can also explain them.²⁴ On this reading, to be a ἐρμηνεύς of the thought of the poet is not just to be able to communicate the poems, but also to interpret them somehow. This latter reading is likely correct. Immediately after the passage quoted, Ion touts that he speaks most beautifully about Homer (λέγειν περὶ Ὀμήρου) and in a way that other rhapsodes like Stesimbrotus cannot (530c–d). Shortly thereafter, Ion also agrees that he “could explain [ἂν ἐξηγήσαιο] more beautifully what Homer says than what Hesiod says” (531a). It is uncertain what exactly it means to “explain what Homer says,” but such explanations involve more than the mere memorization of verses. Later in the *Ion*, Socrates makes clear that a good rhapsode is expected to explain whether or not a poet speaks well and correctly about subjects like charioteering, medicine, or prophecy (531c, 538a–b).²⁵ It seems unlikely that the exegetical task of the rhapsode was limited to exposition of a poem’s subject matter. In Xenophon’s *Symposium*, Socrates mocks Stesimbrotus and other rhapsodes because they do not know “the inner meanings” (τὰς ὑπονοίας) of the poems (3.6).²⁶ Even if Socrates intimates in that dialogue that there is no group “more foolish” (ἡλιθιώτερον) than the rhapsodes, his comment nevertheless suggests that a good rhapsode – even if none existed – should be able to grasp the inner meanings of poems, not just their words. After all, Socrates’ common refrain was that rhapsodes, like sophists and other alleged experts, profess to know things which they, in fact, do not. It seems quite likely, then, that rhapsodes were expected to have such interpretive skills. This is especially true if, as Rijksbaron contends, rhapsodes needed to make editorial decisions about poems in order to perform them well: “To ensure a successful

²⁴ See, for example: LaDrière 1951; Murray 1996, 102–4; Rijksbaron 2007, 124–25.

²⁵ Rijksbaron 2007, 127. See also Most 1986, 243–44.

²⁶ Given the semantics of σύνεσις and its grammatically related forms, we would expect those words to be used on the same occasions as ὑπόνοια and grammatically related forms. However much this expectation may correctly reflect the linguistic intuitions of the ancient Greeks, there seems to be no textual evidence for it. This seems due to the fact that ὑπόνοια and related forms are scarcely attested in classical Greece.

performance the rhapsode had first and foremost to make basic but important decisions about word division and accentuation, about the construal of the sentences, their declarative, interrogative or exclamative character, and about punctuation, i.e. pausing in a meaningful way while reciting the text, etc.”²⁷ These sorts of editorial decisions would have been difficult without first understanding the meaning of the poem. Admittedly, we cannot be sure about what precisely these rhapsodic practices involved and which are the ones Socrates (in either dialogue) had in mind. Nevertheless, when Socrates says that “someone would never become a good rhapsode unless he should understand [συνείη] the things said by the poet,” the understanding to which Socrates refers very likely seems to have involved some sort of correct interpretation. After all, the quality of any artistic performance depends in part on the performer’s correctly interpreting the work he or she is performing.²⁸ How well one performs a scene or stanza depends in part on correctly grasping what the scene or stanza is about and how it contributes to the overall meaning of the play or poem. Socrates does not explicitly make this point, but it would be difficult to deny. And if this is what Socrates has in mind when he speaks of “explaining what Homer says,” it would be quite similar to what he says in the *Cratylus*. There he tells Hermogenes that “the many who explain the poet [i.e. Homer] say that he has made Athena νοῦς itself and thought” (407a). Whatever goes into such an explanation, it is clearly a sort of interpretation of Homer’s poetry and what Athena signifies in it.

We can generalize Socrates’ point given the aforementioned uses of σύνεσις and related forms: just as a good rhapsode understands a poem by interpreting the thought of the poet, so too the συνετός understands what is said by interpreting the thought of the speaker or author. But

²⁷ Rijksbaron 2007, 125. See also Pl. *Prt.* 338e6–339a3.

²⁸ Thanks to Sean Kelsey for this point.

σύνεσις interprets more than the thoughts of others expressed in language. For, as we will see, σύνεσις could mean the virtue by which we interpret not only words but also deeds. This should not be terribly surprising since deeds, like words, have significance, and what they signify may not be readily apparent.²⁹ In this way, the significance of both speech and action permits σύνεσις to be the virtue by which both are understood. And if the characteristic objects of σύνεσις in the realm of speech are cryptic words, then we might expect its correlative objects in the realm of action to be deceptive deeds.

This expectation finds confirmation in classical authors who describe tragic characters and historical figures discovering, or failing to discover, treacherous plots and their execution. The first clear instance can be found in Aeschylus' *Persians*, when the messenger recounts to Atossa how Xerxes did not understand the trick of the man who exhorted him to send ships into the Straits of Salamis: οὐ ξυνεῖς δόλον Ἕλληνοσ ἀνδρὸς (361). Herodotus tells of how Arion "grasped" (συνέντα) the plot of the Corinthian crew to take his money and throw him overboard (1.24). Many other examples of such scheme detection could be cited.³⁰

Authors also use συνήμι in contexts in which someone grasps the deeper significance of what or why something is done. Oedipus says that he killed his father "not knowing [ξυνεῖς] any of the things I was doing and to whom I was doing [them]" (Soph. OC 976). By this Oedipus does not mean that he had no clue as to what he was literally doing to the travelers on the road; he means, rather, that the true meaning of that event was not apparent to him at the time it transpired. Such realizations occur later, when the facts have been laid sufficiently bare and the agent pieces

²⁹ It becomes less surprising that the objects interpreted by σύνεσις span both word and deed when we bear in mind that speech is a particular form of action. This, of course, is a topic far beyond the scope of the present paper. But for one account of the interpretability of all actions, linguistic or otherwise, see Ricoeur 1973.

³⁰ Aesch. Ag. 1253; Soph. OT 346; Hdt. 1.205, 3.63, 5.19, 6.2, 9.110; Aesopica 36, 142 Perry.

them together so as to see the deeper significance of the situation. In Euripides' *Andromache*, Hermione pleads to Orestes for help and begins explaining to him how she and her father attempted to kill Andromache. As soon as Orestes has heard enough to realize the nature of her plight and why she is consequently pleading for help, he responds: συνῆκα· ταρβεῖς τοῖς δεδραμένοις πόσιν (919; see also Or. 433; Xen. Mem. 2.6.21).

When σύνεσις discerns such dangers, it can instill courage in its possessor. Pericles explains how this is possible in his funeral oration, as he exhorts his fellow Athenians to trust in their naval prowess. He contends that, whereas dumb luck can give cowards an unwarranted boost of self-confidence, the contemptuous feel so on account of correctly judging themselves to be superior to the enemy. This, presumably, is what Pericles wishes the rest of the citizenry to believe. But, he notes, even in cases where the opponent has a similar chance of victory, it is ξύνεσις which strengthens our feelings of courage. This is because courage becomes stronger when it is grounded not in false hope, but rather in the judgments of σύνεσις made on the basis of existing circumstances (Thuc. 2.62.5):

καὶ τὴν τόλμαν ἀπὸ τῆς ὁμοίας τύχης ἢ ξύνεσις ἐκ τοῦ ὑπέρφρονος ἐχυρωτέραν παρέχεται, ἐλπίδι τε ἧσσον πιστεύει, ἧς ἐν τῷ ἀπόρῳ ἢ ἰσχύς, γνώμη δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων, ἧς βεβαιότερα ἢ πρόνοια.³¹

Later Thucydides recounts a speech by Demosthenes in which the general, recognizing the present perils, discourages his troops from attempting to appear συνετός. He exhorts them not to “carefully reckon quite all the surrounding danger” (ἐκλογιζόμενος ἅπαν τὸ περιεστὸς ἡμᾶς δεινόν), but

³¹ Text from Alberti 1972.

instead to advance against the enemy with “uncircumspect hope” (ἀπερισκέπτως εὐέλπις) (4.10). As it turns out, though, this is all for rhetorical effect, since Demosthenes immediately thereafter lays out all the strategic advantages they have over the Spartan enemy. Having been persuaded by their commander, the troops are emboldened and consequently able to hold off the attack from sea (4.11). In these passages Thucydides explicitly connects σύνεσις and courage, but vaguer associations are made by a number of authors ranging from Pindar to Demosthenes.³²

Diseases present similarly deceptive dangers. For like enemy plots, diseases can pose risks that are not readily apparent and so require careful attention to subtle clues. As the Hippocratic author explains, the existence of non-evident diseases is made evident by indirect signs like respiratory rate and the color, smell, and viscosity of bodily fluids (De arte 11.1–6, 12.1–5). These signs “betray” the existence of the disease. When the body fails to offer such signs, the doctor must compel it to do so by, for example, making the patient eat certain things or perform certain activities. As Joel Mann points out, we must not overlook the military imagery in this Hippocratic discussion of signs: “Signs are, figuratively speaking, allies and accomplices of the disease who have betrayed its hiding spot (i.e., its location within the body; cf. [De arte] 11.6, where the disease is said to ‘occupy’ the body) and plans (i.e., its nature and causes, and thus its past and future course of development).”³³

This analogy between deceptive action and non-evident disease can be extended. Just as an enemy plot is recognized when their intention is inferred from observed behavior, so too is a disease recognized when its cause is inferred from observed symptoms. The cause of disease explains the present symptoms and helps predict those to come. It also helps determine how to

³² Pind. Nem. 7.60; Democr. B77, B181; Eur. frag. 552 Kann; Dem. 60.17.

³³ Mann 2012, 218.

treat the symptoms; by knowing the causal chain of physiological effects, the doctor can identify opportunities to stop the progression of the disease.³⁴ Likewise, understanding the intentions of the enemy not only helps explain present and future furtive behavior, it also helps thwart the plot. In this way the analogy illuminates similarities between discerning deceit and disease. It also offers a plausible explanation as to why the Hippocratic author attributes σύνεσις, of all things, to the competent doctor (De arte 11.4).

Thus far we have presented mounting evidence in support of the claim that in the classical period σύνεσις could mean a hermeneutic virtue for understanding the deeper significance of not just words but also deeds. In the *Ion* passage the connection between σύνεσις and the interpretation of speech seems explicit: the rhapsode is good if he should “understand” (συνείη) the thought of the poet, and insofar as he can do that he is an “interpreter” (έρμηνέα) (530c). There is a Hippocratic passage that seems to draw a similar connection between σύνεσις and the interpretation of certain medical conditions treatable by the doctor (De arte 12.6):

Ἔτερα μὲν οὖν πρὸς ἐτέρων καὶ ἄλλα δι’ ἄλλων ἐστὶ τὰ τε διόντα τὰ τ’
ἐξαγγέλλοντα, ὥστε οὐ θαυμάσιον αὐτῶν τὰς τε πίστεως χρονιωτέρας γίνεσθαι τὰς
τ’ ἐγχειρήσιας βραχυτέρας, οὕτω δι’ ἄλλοτριῶν ἐρμηνειῶν πρὸς τὴν θεραπεύουσαν
σύνεσιν ἐρμηνευομένων.

³⁴ Joel Mann 2012, 202 is insightful on this point: “The αἴτια must be those fundamental natural regularities in virtue of which one event causes another and which must be known both to predict the course of a disease and to determine correct treatment in a particular case [...] If I know a patient has diabetes, and if I have a reasonably complete grasp of the biochemical and physiological explanation of diabetes, then I will know, *ceteris paribus*, what will follow from modifying his blood sugar in various ways, and certainly this is a non-trivial component of devising treatment for him in case of a diabetic episode.” The course of human behavior, of course, is much more difficult to predict.

Thus, the things escaping [the body] and betraying [non-evident diseases] are from different sources and take different paths. As a result, it is not surprising that convictions about them [i.e., the diseases] become more time-consuming, and the time for treatments becomes shorter, since they [i.e. the diseases] are expressed to the attending σύνεσις through indications not belonging to them.³⁵

This sentence compactly summarizes the account just presented (De arte 11.1–12.5) of how invisible diseases located in the bones and internal organs indirectly communicate bodily signs of their existence to the doctor. The “things escaping and betraying” refer to such signs. The expressions πρὸς ἐτέρων and δι’ ἄλλων seem deliberately vague. Both prepositions can convey spatial and causal senses, and here it is unclear whether one or both are intended; bodily signs appear by means of different physiological pathways and from different underlying sources. Despite the vagueness, the meaning is still clear: bodily signs convey different things, and because of the complexity of these corporeal semiotics, it may take some time for a doctor to observe symptoms and reach a convincing diagnosis. The doctor reaches this diagnosis when the symptoms “being expressed” (ἐρμηνευομένων) become apparent to the doctor’s attending σύνεσις. This is a somewhat striking choice of words. If the author intended ἐρμηνευομένων to connote not just

³⁵ Text from Jouanna 1988. Jouanna follows Heiberg and Heidel in printing πίστιας instead of ἀπιστίας, which is only attested in a group of more recent and supposedly inferior mss. Jouanna’s justification is persuasive: “Cette phrase conclut le développement sur les maladies invisibles et sur les difficultés qui expliquent que le diagnostic est plus long et le traitement plus lent pour ces maladies que pour les maladies visibles (ainsi s’explique le comparatif χρονιωτέρας; cf. [De arte 11.2] οὐ μετ’ ἐλάσσονος χρόνου...γινώσκειται)...Dans chaque cas, la conviction (πίστιας) est longue à se faire” (1988, 267–268). See also Heiberg 1927; Heidel 1914, 144. Those who print ἀπιστίας include: Littré 1849; Gomperz 1890.

expression but interpretation, then this passage would, like the *Ion* passage, explicitly characterize σύνεσις as interpretive. Yet regardless of what exactly the author means, it is clear that the general point is that the diagnosis of the doctor is an interpretation whereby the doctor comes to grasp what the observed symptoms really mean.³⁶

All this evidence suggests that σύνεσις meant a hermeneutic virtue by which we understand the deeper meaning of things said or done. This evidence thereby substantiates and specifies the sense in which some lexica have correctly stated that σύνεσις could mean something like “sagacity,” “Einsicht,” or “perspicacia.” This particular meaning of σύνεσις is accordingly distinct from, but closely connected to, its more general meaning. Their relation could be delineated, at least in part, by the relation between what hermeneutical theorists sometimes call “immediate understanding” and “explicit interpretation.”³⁷ In immediate understanding, we grasp what is meant without pausing to reflect on what is being said. This is the sort of understanding captured by the more general meaning of σύνεσις. It is the sort of understanding that takes place when Achaean warriors hear the commands of Nestor or Athena and straightway grasp what they prescribe. Explicit interpretation, by contrast, is required when what is meant is not so readily understood; in order to come to an understanding, what is said or done must be reflected on and explicitly interpreted. This is the sort of understanding captured by the specific meaning of σύνεσις suggested by the preceding textual evidence. It is the sort of understanding that takes place when a Greek citizen comes to grasp the meaning of an enigmatic oracle, a sophisticated oration, or a subversive plot. Immediate understanding and explicit interpretation lie on a continuum, ranging from understanding that requires no reflection at all to understanding that requires quite a lot. The

³⁶ There seems to be agreement on this. See, for example: Jouanna 1999, 322; Mann 2012, 227.

³⁷ See Gadamer 1960, 402–403.

general and specific meanings of σύνεσις would seem to lie on such a continuum, ranging from understanding in ways that demand little interpretive effort, to those that require quite a bit. If that is correct, then the relationship between these general and specific meanings of σύνεσις are not accidental; they reflect relative degrees of interpretive effort. The general and specific meanings of σύνεσις are nevertheless distinct, just as the “understanding” of the child who knows what the words of a poem mean differs from the “understanding” of an adult who grasps the meaning of the poem itself.

III.

By now it should be clear that the traditional view of the meaning of σύνεσις in the classical period is deficient at least insofar as it leaves underdetermined a specific but nevertheless significant meaning it possessed, namely an ability to understand the deeper meaning behind words and deeds. But the traditional view also falls short insofar as it mistakenly sees σύνεσις as secondarily meaning moral conscience or some such capacity for morally evaluating human choice and action. Some scholars regard such a capacity as worthy of the name “moral conscience,” while others disagree. That debate hinges in part on the essential attributes of moral conscience: whether it involves evaluating oneself or others, whether those evaluations must involve attendant feelings of approval or disapproval, and whether those feelings specifically include guilt, remorse, or shame. However, we need not delve into the intricacies of that debate. We need only focus on a claim that all parties in the debate would agree to, namely: as a capacity for moral evaluation, σύνεσις answers questions like: “what is the morally good thing for that person to do?” “did they say the morally right thing?” “are they giving morally sound advice?” This, it will be argued, mischaracterizes the meaning of σύνεσις in the classical period. Σύνεσις instead answered

questions like: “what is really going on here?” “what is that person really up to?” “what does the author or speaker really mean by that?” Its judgments could certainly be evaluative – concerning, for example, sickness in the body, unpersuasiveness in argument, or inexpediency in a proposed law. But σύνεσις could be said to yield such evaluative judgments precisely because it discerned what the bodily symptoms, argumentative claims, or legislative stipulations really mean. If σύνεσις somehow also meant some capacity for moral evaluation, we should find it being described or referred to as a moral arbiter, perhaps like a moral δαίμων that sounds the alarm whenever we or others are up to morally bad things. We do not, however, come across any descriptions like that from classical authors. Σύνεσις does not mean moral conscience in the three passages most commonly cited as evidence that the word could, indeed, bear such a meaning in the classical period (viz. Eur. Or. II.395–8; Arist. Eth. Nic. 6.10. 1142b34–1143a18; Men. fr.745.2 K.-A.). It is not even clear that σύνεσις means moral conscience in the first post-classical passage typically cited (viz. Polyb. 18.43.13).

a. Euripides *Orestes* II.395–8

Let us begin with the famous passage from Euripides’ *Orestes*:

Με.: τί χρῆμα πάσχεις; τίς σ’ ἀπόλλυσιν νόσος;

Ὅρ.: ἡ σύνεσις, ὅτι σύννοιδα δεῖν’ εἰργασμένος.

Με.: πῶς φῆς; σοφόν τοι τὸ σαφές, οὐ τὸ μὴ σαφές.

Ὅρ.: λύπη μάλιστά γ’ ἡ διαφθείρουσά με . . .³⁸

³⁸ Text from Diggle 1994.

The traditional reading of these lines is that Orestes is acknowledging both his moral wrongdoing and the painful remorse he feels.³⁹ Menelaus asks what sickness he suffers from, and Orestes replies that it is his *σύνεσις*, in that he knows that he has done “dreadful things.”⁴⁰ His feelings of guilt are part of the pain which is consequently “destroying” him. So interpreted, these lines would appear to be the first attested instance in ancient Greek in which *σύνεσις* was used to denote moral conscience.

This reading, however, has not gone unchallenged. Some scholars deny that *σύνεσις* here signifies moral conscience, even while agreeing with the traditional view that Orestes is expressing feelings of guilt for his morally reprehensible deeds.⁴¹ As Harold Osborne has argued: “The notion of Conscience is undoubtedly present in this passage. But it does not necessarily follow that it is located in a single word; rather it belongs to the whole sentence.”⁴² That is, the sentence expresses a guilty conscience without designating *σύνεσις* as a moral faculty whose principal task is to determine the rightness or wrongness of actions; *σύνεσις* instead refers to some general faculty of understanding that is able to exercise all sorts of reasoning, including the moral evaluation of actions.

Other scholars reject the traditional reading on the grounds that Orestes does not feel or express any guilt at all. He neither sees his decision to kill his mother as wrong, nor does he feel any remorse for having done it.⁴³ At no point does Orestes apologize or seek forgiveness. Instead,

³⁹ See, for example: Snell 1924, 56n.2; Zucker 1928; Osborne 1931, 9; Class 1964, 107; Di Benedetto 1965, 86; Biehl 1965, 47; West 1987, 210; Sorabji 2014, 16.

⁴⁰ This reads *ὅτι* as epexegetical, as does, for example: Di Benedetto 1965, 86; Biehl 1965, 46; Rodgers 1969, 241. However, it is not impossible to read *ὅτι* instead in the causal sense that often occurs with verbs of feeling.

⁴¹ See, for example: Osborne 1931; Cancrini 1970, 63.

⁴² Osborne 1931, 9.

⁴³ See, for example: Rodgers 1969; Willink 1986; Bosman 1993; Konstan 2016.

he repeatedly attributes responsibility to Apollo, who commanded him to do it (1.276, 285–6, 416). As C.W. Willink aptly points out, “even in his saner moments (as 280–300*) we feel that he would do the same thing again, given the appropriate ἐλπίς.”⁴⁴ Orestes certainly does call his deeds “dreadful,” but that does not imply that he now believes himself to have made the wrong decision. The Greek term δεινός can be used to characterize all sorts of things which may be dreadful, terrible, strange, awesome, or powerful, but not necessarily immoral. What Orestes has done is dreadful in probably all those senses, but he shows few signs of contrition. This is not to downplay his pain and distress, the severity of which does not surprise Menelaus: οὐ δεινὰ πάσχειν δεινὰ τοὺς εἰργασμένους (1.413). Orestes is not entirely surprised either. Prior to committing murder, he surely foresaw that he would likely pay a price for it. But now the full price has become clear. The Furies are hunting him down and tormenting him.⁴⁵ The Argives refuse to provide protection due to his pollution. His enemies, Oiax and Aisgistros, are bent on seeing him dead or banished. All this leaves Orestes feeling hemmed in all sides. His demise is all but certain. This seems to be what his σύνεσις makes him realize, and this painful realization is likely to have caused dread and regret. In tragic moments, this is precisely what σύνεσις does: it delivers unpleasant news, but the news need not be about moral wrongdoing.

In further support of this reading, σύνοιδα is never used in the classical period to convey moral guilt. The verb is instead frequently used, as it is by Orestes himself, to express an awareness of culpability.⁴⁶ Demosthenes, for example, uses σύνοιδα in this way to explain why Philocrates

⁴⁴ Willink 1986, 151.

⁴⁵ This point about the Furies is, admittedly, less persuasive to those who interpret the Furies as the personification of his guilt. But we need not interpret them so. They may just be tormenting figments of Orestes’ mind. In any case, the Furies are among the painful consequences that the σύνεσις of Orestes recognizes as resulting from the murder he committed.

⁴⁶ See Rodgers 1969; Bosman 1993. Both offer compelling interpretations of an array of passages, but all of those will not be rehearsed here.

and Aeschines never defend themselves against his accusations: ὅτι τάληθές ἰσχυρόν, καὶ τὸναντίον ἀσθενές τὸ συνειδέναί πεπρακόσιν αὐτοῖς τὰ πράγματα. τοῦτο παραιρεῖται τὴν θρασύτητα τὴν τούτων, τοῦτ' ἀποστρέφει τὴν γλῶτταν, ἐμφράττει τὸ στόμα, ἄγχει, σιωπᾶν ποιεῖ (19.28). According to Demosthenes, Philocrates and Aeschines are fully aware that they have done the deeds accused of them, and they lose confidence when faced with the prospect of defending themselves against those accusations. But their loss of confidence is not due to feelings of moral guilt, but simply an awareness that they are, indeed, culpable, and their culpability would make it difficult for them to persuade their fellow citizens of the contrary. Orestes is similarly aware of his culpability. He may even now wish that the circumstances had been otherwise, and that he had not been commanded to kill his mother. But having such a wish does not require that Orestes see his decision as wrong and therefore warranting remorse. In this respect, Orestes finds himself in a situation not unlike that of Oedipus. Both committed terrible deeds, and both feel regret for them. It is, of course, true that, unlike Oedipus, Orestes voluntarily and knowingly killed his parent. But since his matricide was ordained by Apollo, Orestes still feels no remorse, at least in part because he does not consider himself the ultimate cause of the deed.⁴⁷

The elliptical character of these lines makes it difficult to settle once and for all whether or not σύνεσις here means moral conscience, but the semantic analyses presented in this paper support the alternative interpretations doubting that it does. For we can make good sense of what Orestes says if we take him to mean σύνεσις in the sense of a general faculty of understanding. If that were what he meant, his σύνεσις could reveal that he has committed dreadful deeds for which he is regretful, or perhaps even remorseful. In order to express this sentiment, he also could have used

⁴⁷ For helpful discussion on how tragic characters can make the right decisions, even if their deeds are not good and even ruinous, see Hursthouse 1999, 63–87.

words like νοῦς or γνώμη (setting aside metrical considerations). But it seems no accident that Orestes appeals to σύνεσις, since the word can also refer to an ability to understand the real significance of our actions. Such an ability would be quite relevant for Orestes in his situation. For it is his σύνεσις which would enable him to appreciate more fully the significance of his actions and the painful consequences that are following from them.⁴⁸

b. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.10. 1142b34–1143a18

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.10, Aristotle sets out to distinguish σύνεσις from prudence. This passage is rarely if ever listed in lexica as among those in which σύνεσις means moral conscience. But if we bear in mind that moral conscience is some sort of faculty which evaluates the moral rightness or wrongness of actions, then this passage becomes quite relevant. For in his distinction of σύνεσις from prudence, Aristotle seems to suggest that σύνεσις is just such a faculty of moral evaluation:

Ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἡ σύνεσις καὶ ἡ εὐσυνεσία, καθ' ἃς λέγομεν συνετοὺς καὶ εὐσυνέτους, οὐθ' ὅλως τὸ αὐτὸ ἐπιστήμη ἢ δόξη (πάντες γὰρ ἂν ἦσαν συνετοί) οὔτε τις μία τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἐπιστημῶν, οἷον ἡ ἰατρικὴ περὶ ὑγιεινῶν, ἢ γεωμετρία περὶ μεγέθων· οὔτε γὰρ περὶ τῶν ἀεὶ ὄντων καὶ ἀκινήτων ἡ σύνεσις ἐστὶν οὔτε περὶ τῶν

⁴⁸ One might object to both of these alternative interpretations on the grounds that it would be odd to translate the line: “my understanding, in that I know that I have done dreadful things.” The translation seems clumsy at best. This, however, is not so much an objection against the two interpretations as a peculiarity of English (and a number of other modern languages). We can perhaps resolve the issue by rendering σύνεσις in this particular context as “mind.” In English “the mind” is often used to refer to the most general faculty of human understanding (as in: “my mind is telling me to go for it”). It is also natural to speak of “the mind” as able to know that bad and immoral deeds have been done (e.g., “in my mind I knew that was the wrong thing to do”).

γιγνομένων ότουοῦν, ἀλλὰ περι ὧν ἀπορήσειεν ἄν τις καὶ βουλευόσαιτο. διὸ περι τὰ αὐτὰ μὲν τῆ φρονήσει ἐστίν, οὐκ ἔστι δὲ τὸ αὐτὸ σύνεσις καὶ φρόνησις. ἡ μὲν γὰρ φρόνησις ἐπιτακτικὴ ἐστίν· τί γὰρ δεῖ πράττειν ἢ μὴ, τὸ τέλος αὐτῆς ἐστίν· ἡ δὲ σύνεσις κριτικὴ μόνον. ταῦτὸ γὰρ σύνεσις καὶ εὐσυνεσία καὶ συνετοὶ καὶ εὐσύνετοι. ἔστι δ' οὔτε τὸ ἔχειν τὴν φρόνησιν οὔτε τὸ λαμβάνειν ἢ σύνεσις· ἀλλ' ὥσπερ τὸ μανθάνειν λέγεται συνιέναι, ὅταν χρῆται τῆ ἐπιστήμῃ, οὕτως ἐν τῷ χρῆσθαι τῆ δόξῃ ἐπὶ τὸ κρίνειν περι τούτων περι ὧν ἡ φρόνησις ἐστίν, ἄλλου λέγοντος, καὶ κρίνειν καλῶς· τὸ γὰρ εὖ τῷ καλῶς τὸ αὐτό. καὶ ἐντεῦθεν ἐλήλυθε τοῦνομα ἢ σύνεσις, καθ' ἣν εὐσύνετοι, ἐκ τῆς ἐν τῷ μανθάνειν· λέγομεν γὰρ τὸ μανθάνειν συνιέναι πολλάκις.⁴⁹

In this passage Aristotle identifies four main features of σύνεσις: (i) it is neither knowledge nor opinion; (ii) it concerns the same objects as prudence, namely mutable things about which we deliberate, which Aristotle elsewhere says are “the things that are good and advantageous to oneself” (Eth. Nic. 6.5. 1140a26–7); (iii) it nevertheless is neither the having nor acquiring of prudence, in part because it is judicative and not prescriptive⁵⁰; and (iv) it uses opinion in order to judge well about objects of deliberation, and apparently when others are speaking. From these features alone we can see that Aristotle is here ascribing to σύνεσις a meaning far narrower than any other attested classical author. Whereas σύνεσις quite often means the sort of understanding that one could employ in geometry or medicine, Aristotle limits its application to things about

⁴⁹ Text from Bywater 1894. It is worth noting that, with the exception of a fragment attributed to Critias, εὐσυνεσία is not attested prior to Aristotle. Prior to this passage, εὐσύνετος is also quite rare, only appearing in Thuc. 4.18.4, Eur. IT 1092, Democr. B119.

⁵⁰ This division of labor between the discerning and the prescriptive is a familiar one from Plato's *Statesman* (260b).

which we deliberate. In speaking this way, Aristotle means by *σύνεσις* something quite distinct: the correct judging about human choice and action. But what exactly does he mean by this?

The widely held answer is that by *σύνεσις* Aristotle here means the intellectual virtue which judges the moral rightness of human choice and action.⁵¹ Some scholars go so far as to translate *σύνεσις* as “conscience.”⁵² This is not implausible. If the objects of *σύνεσις* are things we deliberate about, and if *σύνεσις* differs from prudence insofar as prudence deliberates and prescribes how to act, then it seems reasonable to understand *σύνεσις* here as the virtue which only judges the moral rightness of those deliberations.

There are, however, two major difficulties with this interpretation. First, the interpretation makes it hard to see how Aristotle distinguishes *σύνεσις* from *γνώμη*, the virtue he discusses immediately thereafter. In that discussion, Aristotle characterizes *γνώμη* as “a correct judgment of the fitting [*ἐπιεικοῦς*]” (6.11. 1143a20). How, then, do *γνώμη* and *σύνεσις* differ? Scholars typically answer in one of two ways, neither of which is terribly satisfying. The first is to understand *ἐπιεικής* in a very restricted sense, as referring only to what is just in light of the spirit of the law rather than its letter (5.10. 1137b11–27). The difference between *σύνεσις* and *γνώμη*, then, is that the latter only evaluates matters of justice when the letter of the law is deficient, whereas *σύνεσις* evaluates all other moral matters.⁵³ Aristotle can at times make artificial distinctions, but this one seems especially so. Besides, in Aristotle “*ἐπιεικής* is quite often

⁵¹ See, for example: Stewart 1892, vol. 2: 84; Gauthier and Jolif 1958, vol. II,2: 519–531; Gadamer 1960, 328; Bodéüs 1993, 103–105; Louden 1997, 112–14; Reeve 2013, 225–26; Simon 2017. These scholars all seem to hold that Aristotle takes the term *σύνεσις* to mean this virtue, not just refer to it. They sometimes cite as further evidence Mag. mor. I.34 (1197b12–14), where the author (if not Aristotle) says that “someone is said to be *συνετός* because of their being able to deliberate, that is, in that they judge something and see correctly.” So whatever exactly the virtue is to which *σύνεσις* here refers, scholars take it to reflect a narrower meaning of *σύνεσις*.

⁵² Gauthier and Jolif 1958, vol. II,2: 519–531.

⁵³ See, for example: Reeve 2013, 228–9.

synonymous for ἀγαθόν or σπουδαῖον (cf. Bonitz 1870, s.v.). If Aristotle is instead characterizing γνώμη as a correct judge of the good, what remains for σύνεσις to evaluate? An alternative suggestion made by scholars is that σύνεσις is a forward-looking virtue exercised, for example, by members of an assembly when they evaluate proposals laid forth by fellow citizens. This is supposedly why Aristotle refers to exercising σύνεσις “while another is speaking.” By contrast, γνώμη is a backward-looking virtue exercised, for example, by jurors when evaluating the actions of those on trial.⁵⁴ This is a clever distinction, but there is hardly any textual support for it. Nowhere does Aristotle mention jurors or law courts. And while jurors swore to “judge by their best judgment” (τῆ δικαιοτάτῃ γνώμῃ κρίνειν, Pol. 3.16. 1287a26), γνώμη nevertheless could also refer to a choice or decision made.⁵⁵ If γνώμη can be forward- or backward-looking, and if ἐπιεικῆς can refer generally to moral goodness, why not just take γνώμη to be the correct judgment of the moral worth of actions, regardless of whether that judgment is exercised in the law courts or anywhere else?⁵⁶ This would be a natural reading of Aristotle’s account of γνώμη, and it should call into question the way in which his account of σύνεσις is often read.

Even if this worry about how to distinguish σύνεσις from γνώμη can be addressed, the common way of reading this σύνεσις passage in Aristotle should still give us pause. When Aristotle says that σύνεσις is “judicative” (κριτική), he need not thereby mean that σύνεσις is specifically tasked with the moral assessment of choice and action. Σύνεσις can be judicative in the sense that it involves discerning the real significance of actions either done or under consideration. Aristotle speaks of exercising σύνεσις “while another is speaking” in order to point out that σύνεσις can be

⁵⁴ See, for example: Stewart 1892, vol. 2: 84–9; Louden 1997, 112–17.

⁵⁵ Arist. Mag mor. 1.19. 1190b4; Rh. 3.18. 1419a34–35; see also LSJ⁹ III.5.

⁵⁶ This suggests we might find moral evaluation or conscience present in the exercise of γνώμη, but pursuing that suggestion lies far beyond the scope of this paper.

employed in contexts outside the sphere of practical deliberation to which prudence is limited. We employ *σύνεσις*, for example, when others make proposals for action, although that need not imply that *σύνεσις* is only employed when others speak.⁵⁷ These proposals concern “the same things” as prudence, namely what is good and beneficial for oneself. In response to such proposals, we do not employ *σύνεσις* specifically in order to evaluate its moral rightness. Suppose someone proposes that we apologize to someone we have wronged. What might *σύνεσις* judge about this proposal, if not its moral rightness? Many things. It might judge the underlying intention the person has in making the proposal: Are they proposing this because they hold a grudge against us? Or instead because they want to keep the peace? Alternatively, *σύνεσις* might judge what the person really means by “apologizing”: Do they mean giving a verbal apology? Or offering a conciliatory gift? *Σύνεσις* might also judge what the consequences would be of apologizing in these different ways: If we apologize, will the person be less resentful? Or will they continue to begrudge us?⁵⁸ All these judgments naturally draw upon opinion, since all acts of *σύνεσις* involve putting two-and-two together, and we cannot put two-and-two together without beliefs about such things. We cannot, for example, judge that an apology will make someone less resentful without drawing upon our beliefs about, say, that person’s character and situation.

Such judgments rendered by *σύνεσις* would give us a deeper understanding of some proposal, yet none of them concern the moral rightness or wrongness of the proposed action. However, insofar as *σύνεσις* can discern what is really going on and what is really being said, its judgments can give rise to subsequent evaluations. We have already seen this in the cases of bodily sickness and philosophical argument. When a doctor exercises *σύνεσις*, they are able to understand

⁵⁷ Pace Broadie / Rowe 2002, 377.

⁵⁸ This is a nice example from Irwin 1999, 249.

the observed symptoms, how they relate to other reported symptoms, and what symptoms will follow. By putting all these things together, the doctor grasps the deeper meaning of the patient's bodily condition and makes a diagnosis: this patient is sick with cholera! When a philosopher exercises *σύνεσις*, they are able to understand the claims in the argument, how those claims relate to other beliefs they hold, and what the logical implications of the argument are. By putting these things together, the philosopher grasps the deeper meaning of the argument and can make a similar sort of diagnosis: this argument is unpersuasive! The same holds analogously for individuals who exercise *σύνεσις* when considering a proposed decree or law, or even just a bit of personal advice. When a citizen exercises *σύνεσις* in order to understand the proposed decree or law, they grasp how it accords with other decrees and laws, and what the consequences of its adoption will be. They reach a verdict: this proposal will not advance the interests of the city!

Here *σύνεσις* might seem to be shading into the domain of moral appraisal, but we should still be skeptical. To begin with, we will only judge the proposed decree (or bit of advice) as something that ought not to be done when we see it as being at odds with our practical ends: we believe the decree ought not to be done because we believe we ought to advance the interests of the city. Aristotle, however, seems to think that such considerations belong to good deliberation (*εὐβουλία*), not *σύνεσις*. But, more importantly, even if *σύνεσις* yields such evaluations of actions or decrees, that does not imply that Aristotle or anyone else intended *σύνεσις* to mean a capacity for morally evaluating action. In the classical period, *σύνεσις* was no more regarded as the moral conscience of a citizen than it was the medical conscience of a doctor. The reason why *σύνεσις* could be applied to the doctor and citizen alike is that *σύνεσις* was understood as a faculty by which we discern the true significance of things said and done. At least in this respect, Aristotle is not departing dramatically from ordinary usage.

c. Menander PCG fr. 745.2

Consider now a fragment from Menander in which *σύνεσις* supposedly denotes moral conscience:

ὁ συνιστορῶν αὐτῷ τι, κἂν ἦ θρασύτατος,
ἢ σύνεσις αὐτὸν δειλότατον εἶναι ποιεῖ.

This fragment has been taken to mean that *σύνεσις* is the conscience which recognizes moral wrongdoing and consequently makes cowardly even the very bold man: “the one acknowledging to himself something: even if he is most bold, conscience makes him to be most cowardly.” Presumably the recognition of wrongdoing makes someone cowardly insofar as they become reluctant to do perform other bold, potentially morally hazardous, actions. But this reads too much into the fragment. There is no explicit mention of wrongdoing. The locution *συνιστορῶν αὐτῷ τι* does not seem to be attested prior to Menander, but it appears to mean something like *συνειδῶς αὐτῷ τι*: being aware of, or conscious of, something about oneself. And, as discussed, that awareness or consciousness does not seem to entail moral conscience, nor does it seem to have attendant feelings of guilt.⁵⁹ Besides, there is already a precedent (cf. Thuc. 2.62.5 and Dem. 19.28 above) for drawing a close connection between *σύνεσις* and feelings of confidence and cowardice.

⁵⁹ For this reason we should not put much stock in the opinion of Stobaeus, who includes this Menander fragment in a chapter entitled ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΣΥΝΕΙΔΟΤΟΣ. Stobaeus clearly regards *σύννοια* and *σύνεσις* as ways of expressing moral conscience, and this was already widespread before his time. See, for example: Plut. De tranq. anim. 476e–477a. But the countervailing evidence suggests that Stobaeus misrepresents the meaning of both terms in classical Greek.

When σύνεσις discerns that one is in a favorable situation, or soon will be, feelings of confidence are stirred up; conversely, such confidence is diminished when σύνεσις sees that the outlook is not so fortuitous. If σύνεσις discerns that the situation is not only unfavorable but dire, then that may appropriately induce feelings of cowardice. We therefore should resist reading this fragment as a description of moral conscience, and we could translate it alternatively: “the one conscious of something: even if he is most bold, understanding makes him to be most cowardly.”

d. Polybius 18.43.13 B.-W.

Lexica frequently cite Polybius as offering one of the clear-cut instances in which σύνεσις means moral conscience. Although dated after the classical period, the passage is worth our examining because it can possibly be interpreted otherwise on the basis of the semantic analysis presented thus far. In the passage, Polybius describes how Zeuxippus, a Boeotian citizen and Roman loyalist, wished to assassinate Brachylles, who had been appointed Boeotarch in 222 BCE by the Macedonian King Antigonos Doseon. Seeking help in his nefarious undertaking, Zeuxippus went to Alexamenus, general of the Aetolians. Alexamenus agreed to help, and the dirty deed was done. Polybius then draws the following conclusion from the murderous episode: οὐδεις γὰρ οὕτως οὔτε μάρτυς ἐστι φοβερὸς οὔτε κατήγορος δεινὸς ὡς ἡ σύνεσις ἢ κατοικοῦσ' ἐν ταῖς ἐκάστων ψυχαῖς. By this Polybius seems to indicate that the σύνεσις dwelling in Zeuxippus's soul was a fearsome witness and dreadful accuser of his moral wrongdoing. Σύνεσις therefore seems to serve as his moral conscience, as the moral arbiter of his deeds. This line, however, has been suspected by a few as being a gloss. As Christian Maurer puts it: “Nach Kontext u. Inhalt kann es sich aber

auch um einen späteren Zusatz handeln.⁶⁰ This may be true; in his apparatus criticus, Theodor Büttner-Wobst notes that the line was found in the margin of a single codex (Urbinas 102), and prior to this line was written “γνω[μη].” But let us suppose that the line is authentic. It may very well be that σύνεσις does not here mean moral conscience, but rather the hermeneutic virtue by which Zeuxippus understands the full import of his action. His σύνεσις recognizes that he has culpably transgressed the law and is consequently facing grave danger. This recognition likely motivated him to flee to Tangra (Livy 33.28.10). His σύνεσις is accordingly a witness because it understands the deed as an assassination and could testify accordingly. It is also the accuser insofar as it could prosecute him as legally culpable for the deed. But prosecuting someone for transgressing the law is of course not the same as accusing them of moral wrongdoing. It is therefore possible that this closing line from Polybius does not actually attribute to Zeuxippus any sense of moral wrongdoing or guilt for having killed Brachylles. This possibility may seem remote to scholars who appeal to the report of Livy as additional evidence that Zeuxippus did, indeed, acknowledge wrongdoing.⁶¹ If well-founded, then this passage from Polybius may prove to be the earliest attestation of σύνεσις as genuinely meaning moral conscience. But the meaning of the Livy

⁶⁰ Maurer 1964, vol.7: 901n.14.

⁶¹ See especially Walbank 1967. In further defense of his reading, Walbank cites the Euripides and Menander passages, as well as Polybius 18.15.13 and 23.10.2–3. The Euripides and Menander passages have been already addressed. The other Polybius passages do not provide decisive evidence for reading σύνεσις in the present passage as meaning moral conscience. Both passages do not use the term σύνεσις but forms of σύνοιδα, and, more importantly, in both passages what is at stake is not moral wrongdoing, but punishment. 18.15.13 describes traitors who – even if they manage to escape punishment from both those they betray and those whose favor they sought in committing those acts of betrayal – live out the rest of their lives aware that they are despised and dream of all the plots that may be afoot against them. 23.10.2–3 describes King Philip of Macedonia as tormented by the Furies, who compel him to commit three acts that bring his house to ruin. People take this as a morality tale about the Δίκης ὀφθαλμός, but it is not clear that Philip does the same. For in all three of his ruinous acts, the motivation is not guilt, but rather the fear of reprisal from the leading citizens he deposed from cities, the children of those whom he killed, and, finally, his own sons.

passage is itself not unambiguous, for there Zeuxippus is described as: *suam magis conscientiam quam indicium hominum nullius rei consciorum metuens*. Must *conscientia* here mean moral conscience? We have repeatedly seen passages in which *σύνεσις* makes its beholder aware of the significance of an action, but without thereby recognizing it as morally wrong. We may very well be able to read *conscientia* here in similar fashion.

IV.

The present paper has demonstrated that *σύνεσις* in the classical period often meant a virtue by which the deeper meaning of words and deeds could be understood. The evidence for this far outweighs that which scholars have adduced in order to show that *σύνεσις* meant some capacity for moral evaluation; indeed, their evidence becomes underwhelming upon closer scrutiny. But if the term was not understood in the classical period as meaning the moral evaluation of human choice and action, what then can we say about its historical significance? The foregoing suggests that the term *σύνεσις* is likely more important for the history of hermeneutics than morality. *Σύνεσις* was clearly a hermeneutic virtue. The term could refer most generally to the understanding of any meaningful word or deed, no matter how deep or superficial its meaning. It could also refer to the understanding of objects belonging to traditional domains of hermeneutics: laws (Dem. Lept. 102; Arist. Eth. Nic. 5.9. 1137a11), literature (Pind. Ol. 2.83–5, Heraclitus D1, Pl. Ion 530b–c), and the divine word (Aesch. Ag. 1112, Hdt. 5.79–80, Pl. Alc. 132c). Moreover, and even more suggestively, either *σύνεσις* or one of its grammatically related forms is present in the earliest attested passages in which *ἐρμηνεία* may have meant “interpretation,” *ἐρμηνεύς* “interpreter,” and *ἐρμηνεύειν* “to interpret” (viz. Pl. Ion 530b–c; Hipp. De arte 12.6). Before then those terms meant

instead something like “expression,” “announcer,” and “to announce,” respectively.⁶² It therefore seems that if we wish to better understand the origins of hermeneutics, we would benefit from further investigation into how σύνεσις was understood and employed in antiquity.⁶³

Hans-Georg Gadamer had once suggested the possible significance of σύνεσις for the history of hermeneutics.⁶⁴ For Gadamer this possibility emerges because of the particular way in which Aristotle conceptualizes σύνεσις in *Eth. Nic.* 6.10 (1998, 14–15). But Gadamer wrongly interprets σύνεσις in that passage as the virtue by which we morally judge and advise the actions of others (cf. Gadamer 1960: 328). As has been argued, it would be more accurate to characterize σύνεσις in that passage and elsewhere as the virtue by which we discern what is really going on in a particular situation. Those discerning judgments are valuable for, but distinct from, morally evaluating behavior and issuing advice. Gadamer is nevertheless quite right that Aristotle’s account of σύνεσις describes “a basic hermeneutic virtue.” It does so insofar as it describes a capacity for correctly interpreting the deeper meaning of what people say and do.

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⁶² For discussions, see: Most 1986; Gonzalez 2015.

⁶³ It is still nevertheless true that, as Most 1986, 236 contends, the ancient Greeks “lacked our hermeneutics to an astonishing degree.” For a similar sentiment, see also Gadamer 1976, 21. Indeed, what Most says is further supported by the fact that σύνεσις was a hermeneutic virtue upon which the Greeks seem to have reflected little.

⁶⁴ Gadamer 1995, 14–15.

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