

Sappho's Proof that Death is an Evil

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IN *ARS RHETORICA* 1398b29–30, Aristotle reports an argument of Sappho's for a conclusion usually rendered as "death is an evil."¹ Barring the happy discovery of a relevant papyrus, our knowledge of the lost poem is likely to remain almost nugatory.² Nevertheless, something is to be had concerning Sappho's point, including a plausible context in which it may have occurred.

Here is Aristotle's report:³

ἢ ὡς περ Σαπφῶ, ὅτι τὸ ἀποθνήσκειν κακόν· οἱ θεοὶ γὰρ οὕτω κεκρίκασιν· ἀπέθνησκον γὰρ ἄν.

Or Sappho says, to die is an evil; for the gods have thus decided. For otherwise they would be dying.

The argument, slightly fleshed out and simplified, would appear to be something like this: If dying is a good, then (since the gods have all goods?) the gods die. It is not the case that the gods die. So, dying is not a good. Consequently, dying is an evil.⁴

¹ Fragment 201 in Edgar Lobel and Denys Page, *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta* (Oxford 1997) 105. At several places in this paper I am indebted to an anonymous referee for this journal, and to the editors.

² Surprisingly, neither the literature on Aristotle nor that on Sappho appears to contain a relevant critical discussion. Aristotle treats Sappho's proof as a special kind of argument from authority, which Most alleges is also to be found in Sappho 16. See Glenn Most, "Sappho Fr. 16.6–7 L-P," *CQ* 31 (1981) 11–17.

³ The Greek text used is that of W. D. Ross, *Aristotelis Ars Rhetorica* (Oxford 1959).

⁴ Since "dying is an evil" and "dying is a good" are contraries rather than contradictories, it is invalid to move from "it is not the case dying is a good" to "dying is an evil." This could be fixed by supposing that "either dying is a

The proof Aristotle attributes to Sappho is concise and striking, but sounds unfortunately Aristotelian. On the other hand, its pithiness is also suitably Sapphic, and there seem to be other examples of argument in the surviving fragments.⁵ Still, it is doubtful what form the original took, and especially whether Sappho's wording has been preserved. It may be that the occasion of Aristotle's report was simply Sappho's appeal to a mythical example of someone with an unconstrained power of choice who chose in the manner her claim would require, like the appeal to the case of Helen in Sappho fr.16. What is clear, however, is that in a lost poem Sappho claimed that dying is an evil, and she tried to show this by citing the example of immortals who do not choose to die.

However Sappho expressed herself, the relevance of the example of the gods requires that their immortality is open to choice. That immortals can die has some mythological support, and there are even cases in which immortals choose to die.⁶ It is said of Castor and Polydeuces, at *Odyssey* 11.300, that in the underworld they take turns in living, and on an intervening day they are both dead. Though later than Sappho, an explanation is given by Pindar in *Nemean* 10.73–89: Polydeuces begged his father Zeus that his immortality be removed, so that he can join his mortal brother in death. Similarly, Apollodorus (*Bibl.*

good, or dying is an evil." This disjunction could almost be taken for granted if I am right about the context of Sappho's original comment, for which see below.

⁵ Though I cannot argue the case here, see, for example fr.55, where Sappho backs up a prediction for the evil fate of an unknown woman by alleging that she has no share in the "roses of Pieria," presumably meaning the gifts of the muses. This appears to be a case of conclusion and premiss, and thus part of an argument. Note that this example does not cite a mythical exemplar.

⁶ Most spectacularly, *Il.* 5.388 has it that Ares would have died in imprisonment had he not been saved by Hermes. Other putative examples in which gods seem to barely escape death without giving up their immortality are less clear cut. It is doubtful whether there is a consistent explanation of the ancient concept of immortality. See H. L. Levy, "Homer's Gods: A Comment on their Immortality," *GRBS* 20 (1979) 215–218, and O. Andersen, "A Note on the 'Mortality' of the Gods in Homer," *GRBS* 22 (1981) 323–327.

2.5.4) has it that in order to escape the pain of a wound, Chiron wanted to die; his immortality was transferred to Prometheus, who asked Zeus for it. So the idea of immortals dying and even choosing to die was afloat in myths with which Sappho would presumably have been familiar. The choice of mortality is indirect in these cases, since Chiron and Polydeuces can only ask Zeus for death, but it is still efficacious.

These same examples show, however, that it is not quite true that the gods do not die. On the other hand, it appears that the major Olympians never entertain the idea of giving up their immortality, and it is probably these who are supposed to make Sappho's case. Assuming that the gods can die, there are mythological instances in which the opportunity of dying presents itself, but they do not take advantage of it. The appearances of the gods on the battlefield in *Iliad* 5 include the wounding of Aphrodite by Diomedes at 330–340, the confrontation between the same warrior and Apollo at 431–442, the presence of Ares in the likeness of a man at Hector's side in 594–595, and the wounding of the same god at 845–866. Though the gods take part in the war in the role of combatants and suffer wounds, there is no indication they do or would risk death in battle.⁷

It does not appear that Sappho's claim concerned the evil circumstances of being dead, though there would have been literary precedents for this. One thinks of *Odyssey* 11.488–491, for example, where the dead Achilles is portrayed as complaining, if I may so put it, that being dead is a terrible way to live. Sappho's wording does not require anything of this kind (assuming Aristotle has preserved it correctly); the word ἀποθνήσκειν connotes having one's life brought to an end, rather than being dead. Moreover, for whatever the evidence is worth, Sappho does not portray the lot of the dead wholly unfavorably, at least in the fragments we possess.⁸ It is more likely

⁷ Apollo almost says as much of himself at *Il.* 22.13–20, when he tells Achilles that the latter will not kill him, since it is not his μόρσιμος, or fate, to die, though Achilles is eager to kill him. (I am indebted to the editors of this journal for the reference.)

⁸ In fr.95 Sappho (or at least, the speaker) expresses a desire for death, and to see the “dewy, lotus-covered banks of Acheron.” The post mortem evils mentioned in fr.55 appear to be reserved for the unknown woman who

that the object of contention is whether the *event of dying* is an evil, rather than whether *being dead* is. As will emerge, the former interpretation is the more fruitful.

If Sappho's claim concerned the event of dying, there is a context which would explain why (and perhaps with whom) she is arguing. The following begins Tyrtaeus fr.10:⁹

τεθνάμεναι γὰρ καλὸν ἐνὶ προμάχοισι πεσόντα
ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν περὶ ἧ πατρίδι μαρνάμενον.

Dying is [a] good, for the good man falling among the fighters in the forefront, fighting for his country.

Sappho and Tyrtaeus differ as to whether dying is always a κακόν, or is sometimes a καλόν. This dispute concerns whether *being killed in battle* is an evil, and it may even be that this was all that was at issue in the lost verses. To claim that Sappho was familiar with these lines from Tyrtaeus would go beyond the evidence, though there is no reason to think that this would have been impossible, or even particularly unlikely. But it is a plausible hypothesis that at the least Sappho was responding to something of the same kind.¹⁰ Most importantly, such an interpretation explains why she would try to substantiate what to most people then and now will seem an obvious truth.

Moreover, so understood, Sappho's thinking is acute and plausible. As noted earlier in regard to *Iliad* 5, major Olympians take part in the fighting around Troy, and even suffer wounds in doing so. But there is no sign they would seek the kind of death in battle so highly praised by Tyrtaeus. The gods do not seem to agree with his evaluation. Although Aristotle uses the proof as an example of an argument which relies on the authority of those whom it is shameful to contradict, Sappho need not be so interpreted. According to popular belief

is the object of Sappho's wrath, and by implication do not seem to be the lot of all the dead.

⁹ The Greek text used is that of Douglas E. Gerber, *Greek Elegiac Poetry* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1999).

¹⁰ That Sappho rejects "militaristic" values has also been maintained in the interpretation of fr.16; see, for example, Margaret Williamson, "Sappho and the Other Woman," in Ellen Greene (ed.), *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (Berkeley 1996) 248–264, at 260.

which she could take for granted, the gods are in a far better epistemic position than we are; they are supposed to have perfect, or nearly perfect, knowledge. Divine evaluations are made from a favored position unobtainable by humans. Sappho's remark (however expressed) can thus be regarded as an argument from authority, but not an objectionable one, since (had they existed) there is nothing wrong with the authorities it invokes.

It is plausible, then, that in a lost poem Sappho explicitly or implicitly responded to the militaristic values of a Tyrtaeus. With what may have been a dry wit, she points out that the divinities do not concur. If the theological beliefs in question were acceptable, Sappho's case would be persuasive.

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