

Plato: Philosophy as Politics

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Abstract

One of the elements that obstruct the access to a presumed meaning of Plato's doctrine is the use of the conventional meaning of the term “philosophia”, that is the signification that has prevailed after Aristotle. In order to eliminate this anachronism, it is necessary to review the meanings that the term had before Plato and in his dialogues. We should see that for the founder of the Academy philosophy was not a purely contemplative act, but one that was concerned with politics. In his opinion, philosophy as dialectics was the art of contentious reasoning, of continuous and everlasting validation of true opinions. This method does not lead to truth; it substitutes the truth – and all this happens in the field of language. Thus philosophy is also a way to govern and make politics. Ergo the expression “philosopher king” does not unite terms that were previously opposites, but rather expresses the need that this model of making politics takes the place of the already established political power.

Key words: Plato, politics, dialectics, power, wisdom

Among the elements that are considered to place Plato's texts in a dark area, we could mention the following: the long period of time elapsed since their writing, the intermediate means by which we access them, philosophical culture, and our intentions and prejudices in our approaches. To all these, we could also add some aspects that are only specific to Plato's writings, such as the dialogue-based manner in which the philosopher wrote his work and the criticism to which he submitted some projections that seemed to shape his doctrine. Most interpreters also talk about the dual personality of the philosopher, encountering great difficulties in understanding how a philosopher so pure, a “metaphysician par excellence”, who advocated withdrawal from this world in order to access the world of ideas, could be interested in politics. To “save” him from a possible condemnation in the style of Karl Popper, they settle the matter quickly by citing the “complex personality” of the founder of the Academy.

In this study I will focus on this last issue starting from the idea that the aspect which casts the greatest shadow over an alleged sense of Plato's work is mainly related to philosophical culture. I am not referring to a term that has supposedly been considered minor until now and that would prove to be the key to the message of Plato's writings, but to the sense of one term which is usually considered to be quite clear, i.e. the meaning that the word *philosophia* itself received after Aristotle and that stood at the basis of Platonism. Therefore I consider it necessary for the approach to Plato's philosophy to be preceded and thus made possible by a passage through the meanings that philosophy itself had before the first great Platonist, Aristotle.

A well known commentator of Platonic philosophy, Auguste Diès, claimed that Plato "is eminently a political thinker who, in fact, entered philosophy only by politics and for politics and if philosophy and politics are sometimes differentiated and separated in his work, we should ask ourselves how, when, and for how long this happens. At its origins, in Plato, philosophy was nothing else but hindered action that was kept in reserve only to come about more safely" (Diès 1932, V). It is convenient to notice that Diès operates with the distinction philosophy-politics in the post-Aristotelian sense, thus making an anachronism. In the pre-Aristotelian Greek society, to make philosophy was to make a political gesture. Operating with the ancient meaning of philosophy, the "entry" in philosophy mentioned by Diès no longer appears as a shift from one gender to another, but as an option for another type of civic or political action, especially for a philosopher who explicitly supported the meeting of the philosopher and statesman in the same man (the philosopher-king) and that of philosophy and political art in the same method (dialectics).

In all the directions of interpretation of Plato's work¹, we find the same practice of judging the philosopher in the terms of the post-Aristotelian canon. This pattern is even more clear at traditionalists, who see Plato as a contemplative man, concerned exclusively with epistemological, ontological and metaphysical problems. Declaring himself a follower of that direction, Valentin Mureşan states: "I think, along with the traditionalists of the

nineteenth century, that the Platonic dialogues propose *philosophical theories* and that they are not just skillfully articulated vehicles for the spread of thoughts about life, sometimes hidden by a deliberately misleading language, introduced for political reasons or simply, by conformity. If it were not so, we would be compelled to lower too much this archetypal *philosopher* in the area of the derisory daily life of the city” (Mureşan 2000, 35).

A supporter of the dialogue-dramatic interpretation, Andrei Cornea considers that the origin of this mode of interpretation could be located in Plato himself, since he imposed the idea of philosophy as a heuristic approach (idea that has become conventional) and not as a justifying one: “As long as we are still influenced, even in a subtle way, by a form of Platonism, the ‘conventional’ interpretation appears in the natural order of things and cannot be avoided”. Those who interpreted Plato in terms of the conventional understanding of philosophy “were, somehow, *Platonized even if they were not Platonists*, and the first and most famous of them was none other than Aristotle” (Cornea 1995, 35-6).

Given that the traditionalist interpretation aims at reconstructing Plato’s reasoning and not at glossing on certain issues, it sins by anachronism, since it starts from the Aristotelian idea of a net separation between *epist me* and *phr nesis* (at least ambiguous, if not nonexistent, in Plato) and from the thought that by separating forms from things, Plato would have been concerned only with the former and would have repudiated concrete reality, as Platonists would actually do later on. Aristotle is the one who shared such an idea, in his *Metaphysics* (1078 b): “There are just two things one might fairly ascribe to Socrates, arguments from particular to general and general definitions, both being concerned with the starting-point of knowledge. Well, Socrates did not take the universals to be separate, nor the definitions, but they [the Platonists] made them separate, and called such entities Forms” [or Ideas] (Aristotle 1976, 97).

I think that if we refrained ourselves from judging the theory of Ideas from Aristotle’s point of view, we would discover that Plato was not so “contemplative” (attitude that he himself ridiculed) and that his philosophical projections, including the theory of ideas, are creations with a practical purpose.

According to Gabriel Liiceanu, while analyzing the study of Endre Ivánka about the Fathers' undertaking and reformulating Platonism, Constantin Noica made the following notes, that I fully endorse: "My only reproach to the author is that by introducing Plato in the first chapter, he understands him in the same way that he was later transformed by the Fathers of the Church: in line with that *chorismós*, the clear cut line of demarcation between ideal and real that was nonexistent in Plato and that Aristotle introduced into the understanding of Platonism. In Plato, Plato's ideas did not exist in the *ekei* area, a distant area clearly separated from 'here'." (Liiceanu 2005, 92)

At the beginning of the fourth decade of the last century, A. Lovejoy indicated that there are two major currents in the Platonic tradition, one that focuses on the *transmundane* understood as a "belief that both the genuinely 'real' and the truly good are radically antithetic in their essential characteristics to anything to be found in man's natural life, in the ordinary course of human experience, however normal, however intelligent, and however fortunate" (Lovejoy 1997, 26-7); another current centered on the *mundane* is, in its extreme form, the belief in the joys offered by the next life, seen as similar to this one, but without the trivial or painful matters. It seems that the former current was stronger, Plato being known as the father of the *transmundane* (along with Parmenides, of course, thought to be its "great-grandfather").

Such a use of the term "philosophy" throws the entire Platonic structure in an obscure area paradoxically generated by a term that seems quite clear. Therefore, I think that in order to overcome the difficulties arising from such an interpretation, it is necessary to reflect on a brief overview of the meanings that the term *philosophia* had until Plato, of the meanings brought to it by Plato himself (since there is the risk to expect from the philosopher what he could not give us) and, finally, to see what kind of philosopher we are dealing with in the Platonic work.

1. The Philosophy of Greeks

In one of his famous studies, Pierre Hadot makes an eloquent presentation of the meanings that philosophy had in ancient Greece. He begins with the well known story that Croesus, the king of Lydia, thought that Solon was wise owing to the journeys he had made in order to acquire knowledge and gain experience in reality and people: “Presocratics apparently designated their intellectual undertaking as a *historia* – that is, an inquiry” (Hadot 2002, 16). Solon employed the word *sophia* to describe poetic activity, and thus the term came to designate the virtues of discourse and the art of conversation including even shrewdness and dissimulation. In his famous funeral speech, Pericles praised the Athenians because they loved beauty and made philosophy relentlessly - all those who loved beauty were devoted to the love of *sophia*. In addition to these meanings, philosophy also designated science (the concerns of the Milesians and of those who followed them in the research on nature).

With Socrates, philosophy began to designate the research of one’s soul. The philosopher’s questions no longer aimed at leading his audience to the truth of things or making them acquire a skill, but rather at making them aware of their limits and of the need to extract knowledge from themselves. “In the Socratic dialogue, the real question is less what is being talked about than who is doing the talking. This is made explicit [in *Laches* – S.B.] by Nicias, one of Plato's character” (Hadot 2002, 28). With Socrates, there was a leap from the acquisition of practical skills of knowledge. But we must be very careful with the term employed to designate this knowledge. Hadot judiciously observed that, in Socrates, “knowledge is not a series of propositions or an abstract theory, but the certainty of choice, decision, and initiative. Knowledge is not just plain knowing, but knowing-what-ought-to-be-preferred, and hence knowing how to live. [...] This knowledge of value is taken from Socrates' inner experience - the experience of a choice which implicates him entirely. [...] The philosopher's entire role will therefore consist in permitting his interlocutor to 'realize', in

the strongest sense of the word, what the true good is and what true value is. At the basis of Socratic knowledge is love of the good” (Hadot 2002, 33-4)².

The philosopher is someone who will always seek knowledge without ever reaching it. He stands in the gap between knowledge and ignorance, and he always reaches out to knowledge. Here is what F.M. Cornford in his commentary to *The Republic of Plato* said: “Socratic philosophy, analyzed and expressed in the early dialogues, was neither a study of nature, nor logic or metaphysics; it was the *pursuit of wisdom* and to acquire wisdom meant to acquire human perfection, fulfillment, happiness. But this did not mean ‘to look only after your soul’ as an isolated individual, saving only yourself and leaving society to its fate. Human perfection, as Plato and Aristotle claimed after him, was the perfection of an essentially social creature, the citizen. To accomplish this perfection and the fulfillment that arose from it – that was the real goal of the ‘royal art’, that is political leadership. Therefore, as Callicles thought, a life dedicated to philosophy and political activities must not be understood as two parallel careers, but one life – in which the highest human capacities would reach their full expression” (Mureşan 2000, 44). However, I believe that these considerations are more prevalent in Plato's philosophy than in that of Socrates. Indeed, as any other Greek, Socrates was concerned with the citizen but in his philosophy, the political component was less obvious than in Plato's.

In a study about virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre observed that although there were actually several different senses of virtue in Greece, according to the age in which the term was employed, they all had one common point: “The common Athenian assumption then is that the virtues have their place within the social context of the city-state. To be a good man will on every Greek view be at least closely allied to being a good citizen” (MacIntyre 2001, 135). Moreover, I think it was all the same. The individual secluded in his private area where, sheltered by his right to be left alone, he can pass through various trials, including that of the desert, is a character that has become mature only during the modern era. As shown by A.

Cornea, “philosophy was never disinterested contemplation, and it did not have to wait for Marx to learn to stop the wheel of history and change its course” (Cornea 1995, 31).

MacIntyre considers the relationship between philosophy and politics within the framework of a more comprehensive term of the ancient Greek: *agon* (competition, contest). In ancient Greece, the *agon* was an institution because it reunited Greeks from different city-states and it also built the internal cohesion of each city. It assumed various forms, from debates in courts to philosophical dialogues. In this context, politics, theater and philosophy were closely related categories: “At Athens the audience for each was potentially largely and actually to some degree one and the same; and the audience itself was a collective actor. The producer of drama was a holder of political office; the philosopher risked comic portrayal and political punishment. The Athenians had not insulated, as we have by a set of institutional devices, the pursuit of political ends from dramatic representation or the asking of philosophical questions from either. Hence we lack, as they did not, any public, generally shared communal mode either for representing political conflict or for putting our politics to the philosophical question” (MacIntyre 2001, 138). Indeed, Plato's philosophy questions politics that seems to be a form of virtue management.

Jan Patočka (*Platon et l'Europe*) said that Plato set the basis of the “great philosophical project of a State of justice where people like Socrates could live, and where they would no longer necessarily need to die.” It is a city where people would live according to Socrates' model, that is “showing concern for one's soul and achieving the philosophical idea that asserts that one should live and think only by looking at what it exists” (Maci 2006, 205). This enterprise involves a project regarding the truth, one regarding the community and an examination of the human soul (Maci 2006, 208). The interrogative, challenging placing of the soul between the everyday world and that of unity requires attention, availability, accountability and discernment, as well as individual and civic virtues. The concern for one's soul is expressed at the crossroads of the three

directions; it is “the ideal of the philosophy of life lived in truth” (Maci 2006, 210).

Drawing attention on the practical dimension, which he considers to be the cause of the theoretical act, Hadot argues that “at least since the time of Socrates, the choice of a way of life has not been located at the end of the process of philosophical activity, like a kind of accessory or appendix. On the contrary, it stands at the beginning, in a complex interrelation with critical reaction to other existential attitudes, with global vision of a certain way of living and of seeing the world, and with voluntary decision itself” (Hadot 2002, 3). Theory does not have any origin or end in itself, but in the existential challenges of everyday life. It is therefore inappropriate to abstract from the concreteness of his life, the disciple of someone who brought philosophy from the sky into the city, transforming it into a way of life closely connected to philosophical discourse.

2. Philosophy in Plato

If Socrates’ philosophy was political by default, to the extent that it aimed at educating the citizen, in Plato, this component becomes the purpose of the philosophical approach and gains substance in a program, the founder of the Academy explicitly stating the need to identify philosophy with political power: “Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, [...] nor, I think, will the human race” – Republic, 473 d-e (Plato 1997, 1100). This statement is not evidence that Plato saw philosophy as a distinct or even opposite occupation to politics, because what he wanted was not to identify politics with philosophy, but political power with philosophy. Philosophy was a way to do politics but had no power, a fact that did not exclude it from the political sphere. When Plato says that the ideal situation would be for the philosopher to be king this does not mean that up to that

moment the philosopher was not involved in politics or that politics was only the prerogative of the king. Therefore it is necessary for the distinction between philosophy and political power not to be read as an opposition between philosophy and politics since Plato does not see philosophy as opposed to politics, but as a way of doing politics in opposition to the political power of his time and he wants philosophy to attain power and to govern. It is an ideal that is true even today (when politics deals with a more clearly defined area) in the aspirations of the intellectual elites who are involved in politics in the structures of the civil society.

It is known that even before Plato, philosophers were involved in politics and what was called philosophy also had this component. However, in Plato, the accession of philosophy to power, its conquest of the public space and its taking over the management of institutions appear as imperative. The subject of the *Politeia* dialogue is not the mere knowledge of Good or the manner in which one can attain the knowledge of justice, as it has been said (Mureşan 2000, 50-1), but the achievement of justice, an act that is both philosophical and political.

It is clear that in Plato, we are dealing with the speech of a school founder inspired by Pythagorean discourses. Philosophy is the road to a truth that each man carries out with the other, his interlocutor in the dialogue. But it must be separated from heuristics, the dispute for the sake of the dispute, since its purpose is not to win a fight at all costs, but the journey on the path of reason. Each of those participating to the dialogue will be moved and trained in a *more Socratic* effort. “[The] Platonic dialectics was not a purely logical exercise. Instead, it was a spiritual exercise which demanded that the interlocutors undergo an *askēsis*, or self-transformation” (Hadot 2002, 62). As Plato tells us in the *Seventh Letter* (340 e), the orderly mode of daily life is that which befits the subject.

In the perception of Platonism, I do not consider as appropriate the distinction made by one of Plato’s opponents, Isocrates (*Exchange*, § 271), between wisdom, the skill of making good decisions, and philosophy, seen as meditation in order to obtain the state of mind necessary for reasoning, because philosophy involves both dimensions, the slow

education of character, that is a way of life. Like Bréhier said: “the nobility of an old Athenian and the subtlety of a sophist – here is what philosophical nature should encompass” (Bréhier 1926, 151).

In his early dialogues, Plato addresses those who, by their occupations, contributed in a more or less harmful way to the carrying out of public affairs, making his entrance on stage as an alternative to those old “masters of truth”, to use Detienne’s formula (Detienne 1996). In his dialogues of maturity, he articulates his symbolic offer whose sole condition of achievement is precisely to identify philosophy with politics, and the image of the “philosopher-king” is significant in this respect. The project was completed in his last dialogues, where political art was separated from others that existed in the sphere of power (they would become “auxiliary arts”), and it was nothing but dialectics.

While accepting that the purpose of the Platonic endeavor is a political one, V. Mureşan considers that there is a clear difference between the methods of Plato and Aristotle; it would prove that, unlike the Stagirite, Plato gives a metaphysical answer to the political challenge: “I can accept that Plato's ultimate intention is a political one (“what form of political association would be the best”, as Aristotle says), but it is also clear that the methods used by the two are completely different: Plato develops the theme of the ideal city within the frame of what Aristotle would call *epistéme* (science) or *sophia* (speculative wisdom), a definite knowledge of what is necessary, as his purpose is to discover the *Form* of the just city, while Aristotle placed his ethical-political discourse in the sphere of practical wisdom (*phrónesis*), which is contentious knowledge about the contingent of actions. Plato responds to political challenges in a different manner than Aristotle: not by proposing a specific political agenda, even a “mad” one, but by simulating how the statesman-metaphysician has to clear up, by “twisting” his spirit, the true nature of the just city. Therefore, the *Republic* seems to me a *metaphysical* dialogue, above all other things” (Mureşan 2000, 235-6).

I think the interpreter overlooks the fact that Plato did not make science in the same manner as Aristotle. For him, the

distinction between *epistéme* and *phrónesis* was not so radical as it would appear in the Stagirite. In Plato, to distinguish does not mean to separate. We will understand more about this issue if we stop to take a look at dialectics, which he considered to be both knowledge and an instrument of government.

If for the sophists, dialectics meant the possibility to speak generally about all things, to the art of opinion that is different from science, from the ability to speak as a specialist about a limited field, Plato wants to give the weight of a science, without losing the possibility of the whole. Here is what Aubenque said: “For Plato, dialectics is not what it was in Socrates’ mind: the knowledge of ignorance is even less than what rhetoric was to Gorgias: the substitute of competence. Plato is the only philosopher for whom dialectics is not opposed to science; the orators’ technique of persuasion, a critical tool in Socrates is opposed to the competence of cultivated people; this is a view shared by Aristotle himself later on; a kind of general knowledge, that has opinion as its subject and the probable as its purpose, dialectics is opposed to the science of work. Plato believed that he could overcome this dissociation: for him, the dialectician is not so different from the scientist, as he is a man of supreme competence; dialectics is not so different from science, as it is ‘the climax and the crown of all sciences’” (Aubenque 2002, 277).

Plato's dialectics does not abandon all previous earnings; however, it takes its distance from two elements: the anti-specialization supported by Gorgias and the irony regarding specialization practiced by Socrates, because it does not want to miss either universality or accuracy. It also preserves the rhetorical element - what else is the new art of the Muses proposed by Plato than a rhetorical cover appropriate for dialectics in its new content? A new rhetoric was necessary for the new mission of dialectics.

Setting Good as its object, Plato wants to give dialectics both universality and knowledge. Dialectics will develop both, because it does not have them yet, being the science of the principle of things without having the principle as a given fact. It remains unknown. Deduction is not sufficient for the truth, it

always needs a practical confirmation in the useful and beautiful. Therefore, dialectics is not a purely theoretical science.

As Aristotle tells us in *Topics* (100 a), dialectics is the art of contentious reasoning. Dialectics is not about demonstration: “A deduction, then, is an argument in which, certain things being supposed, something different from the suppositions results of necessity through them. It is a demonstration if the deduction is from things which either are themselves true and primary or have attained the starting-point of knowledge about themselves through some primary and true premisses. A dialectical deduction, on the other hand, is one which deduces from what is acceptable” (Aristotle 2003, 1).

Even if Plato's dialectics claimed to be a science (which Plato labeled as ‘infallible’, but only in relation to opinion [*Rep.*, 477e]), it did not offer us demonstrations, but also contentious reasoning. It does not express essences, principles, but leads us to principles. As Aristotle (101 a-b) tells us, dialectics helps us assess the principles of all sciences: “it is impossible to make any statement about these (since these starting-points are the first of them all), and it is by means of what is acceptable about each that it is necessary to discuss them. But this is unique, or at any rate most appropriate, to dialectic: for since its ability to examine applies to the starting-points of all studies, it has a way to proceed” (Aristotle 2003, 2-3).

In Plato things were not very different. In *Meno*, dialectics starts from the right opinion expressed by a wise man and, by linking different causes, produces a truth which would be confirmed by beauty and utility. Sophists and Socrates also took into account this starting point, to which they added the opinion of the crowd. Aristotle tells us (100 b) that contentious arguments that lie at the basis of dialectical reasoning are those “which seem [acceptable] to everyone, or to most people, or to the wise - to all of them, or to most, or to most famous and esteemed” (Aristotle 2003, 3).

In *Posterior Analytics* (91b-92a), the Stagirite distinguishes between science and dialectics, arguing that the latter proceeds through questions. The entire dialectical approach should not be confused with a syllogism: “Nevertheless, there is

no deduction here; rather, the procedure lets us get to know what the thing is in some other way (if at all). [...] If you state the definition on the basis of the division, you do not give a deduction. In the case of conclusions without middle terms, if someone says that if these items are the case then it is necessary for this to be the case, it is possible to ask why: so too in the case of divisional definitions” (Aristotle 1993, 53). Although the dialectical approach can lead us to a definition, it is a provisional one, since the conclusion is obtained without the appropriate middle terms able to show the need to connect attributes.

Plato noticed the fact that dialectics means placing the right opinion in causal chains, but division failed to meet this requirement: the simple listing of attributes, that can provide the elements of a demonstration, does not contain the need to connect them in a certain way and not otherwise, like demonstration is supposed to do. So, the fact that Plato considered dialectics a science does not mean that this method did not preserve the characteristics of an art of contentious reasoning to him. When we talk about science in Plato, it is necessary not to operate with the Aristotelian content of the term, but to remain in these Platonic frameworks.

Aubenque identifies two types of dialectics in Aristotle: a provisional or pre-scientific one, aimed at “seizing and defining an essence which, serving as the principle of a demonstration, will start a type of independent knowledge before the dialectical conditions of its establishment” (case of induction), and “true dialectics”, the one that “does not reach any essence, any nature, but nevertheless proves to be strong enough ‘to take into account the opposites’ without the help of the essence”, that dialectics that “no longer steps away from analytics but replaces it to fill its gaps: the constancy of dialogue itself becomes the human substitute of a meditation that cannot be found in things. The word becomes once again, as it was for sophists and orators, the inevitable substitute of knowledge” (Aubenque 2002, 294-5). The French commentator considers this latter form of dialectics to be “Aristotle's original contribution in terms of dialectics”.

But, this view would be supported if we ignored the *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* dialogues where Plato describes how meaning is constituted dialectically, through words, being the substitute of truth. Dialectics also has the former meaning, just as it claims to seize a principle, like in the first meaning. I consider Parain's remark to be revealing: "between the world of ideas and the sensible world, that are impossible to separate in an absolute manner without destroying everything, he [Plato – S.B.] will introduce language with an intermediary role, as a mediator, it should be said, that he will define it as a genre of being. If language was not a genre of being, we could not say about anything that it exists. This new view, which is not separated from Plato's earlier thinking but, on the contrary, is perfected in the field of logic, results from his entire dialectical activity. In this case, the nature of being was not considered in itself, directly or through mystical insight, but through the meanings of the word *being* and its uses" (Parain 1998, 113). Plato's dialectics also has the characteristics of the provisional one, as it claims to seize a principle (which, in fact, it sets up itself) and, at the same time, it replaces knowledge establishing the meanings of words that draw out of themselves both the Being and the sensible world. Through dialectics, we determine the two worlds, and the whole process takes place at the level of language.

Aristotle's reading of Plato made an entire tradition believe that in Plato, dialectics arrives at the knowledge of principles. But, we will see that it is a substitute for knowledge, a pre-science or a proto-science with the claims of a science, if we are to relate to science in the sense it acquired from Aristotle. It will not find the middle term in theory, but by resorting to the useful and beautiful. We do not have a pure science, which develops a *priori*, but one in a perpetual configuration at the level of language (where there is also a dose of convention), which always uses elements that do not fall within the theoretical framework and therefore are always relative.

I think it is wrong to believe that from Plato to Aristotle, dialectics passed from "the status of a science to that of simple logic of the plausible", a path that might seem like a degradation, because in Plato, science, which is dialectics, develops only

as the logic of the plausible. Plato did not commit the sin to think science otherwise than in the logic of the plausible. The fact that in Aristotle, it appears as the simple logic of the plausible is true. His text reads: “For sophistry and dialectic are concerned with the same class of subjects as philosophy, but philosophy differs from the former in the nature of its capability and from the latter in its outlook on life. Dialectic treats as an exercise what philosophy tries to understand, and sophistry seems to be philosophy; but is not” (*Metaphysics*, 1004 b). Plato’s dialectics is such a guess, it is the only thing it can do as a science. Therefore, in my opinion, Aubenque’s comment on the Aristotelian text seems to be true for Plato’s dialectics “what will draw dialectics nearer to philosophy is not only the identity of their subjects, but also the identity of their approaches: the dialectical moment of searching and testing is no longer remote from its outcome; to resume the Aristotelian distinction, the philosophy of being is not a collection of data in a field, but of issues. The always "wanted" science, the science of being as being is such that the dialectical training for knowledge becomes the substitute of knowledge itself” (Aubenque 2002, 300). In Plato, truth is the method.

Why does Plato stop to consider this guessing a science? Because its purpose is not to give us knowledge in one area, but to prepare us for any knowledge. Dialectics makes us human, beings whose main characteristic is to reason. This is enough. We cannot understand Plato’s dialectics if we consider it outside its anthropological stake kept by the sophists. It is the one that helps us understand ourselves by problem-raising. As Aubenque puts it, “dialectics provides a universal technique of questioning, without being concerned by the humans’ potential to respond; but man would not ask questions if he did not hope to answer them” (Aubenque 2002, 301).

Dialectics is Plato’s science and it shows us that there are opposites in each thing. The best way to perceive Platonic thought is dialectics itself, which will show us that philosophy in the manner proposed by Plato did not refer to a type of asceticism, as it can be read in *Metaphysics* or in a passage extracted from its context from the Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics*³. Although there are a few places in Plato’s texts where

the philosopher appears as being the one who knows the Ideas, “the things themselves that are always the same in every respect” – *Republic* 479e (Plato 1997, 1107), we must not interpret these passages outside their context. Knowledge is the connection in a causal chain of what is supposed to become knowledge and not revelation. Let us not forget that a condition of the truth of a piece of knowledge is its possibility to be transmitted. Plato wants to break from the religious practices of the mysteries of all kind and to establish knowledge as a product of a rational and methodical approach. It is, as he says in *Timaeus* (51 e), the science that only belongs to “the gods and but a small class of men”, which “arises in us by teaching..., is always in company with true reasoning... is immovable by persuasion”. But, this science, which is dialectics for Plato, fails to give any certainty; the knowledge of Ideas that it postulates or that makes it possible leads us to paradoxes, a fact proven in the dialectical dialogues. Therefore, Plato’s philosopher is not an expert, but a lover of knowledge, as this label also recommends him.

As an example of access to the world of Ideas we could note the Platonic approach itself in the *Republic*, where we are presented the idea of justice. We do not have a definition that leaves no room for probability, but one that needs representations such as the man and the just city, with all the imperfections that such projections require. To this example, we could add *Parmenides*’ henology.

Dialectics made possible for both the discourse regarding the city in the *Republic* and the one in *Laws* to be practical, even if, considering it from the Aristotelian canon, the former seems to be predominantly theoretical. None of the perspectives eliminates the other, because in Plato, there is no clear distinction between human happiness and that of the city; it is not about two realities, but only about one: the *man*, for whom political action is one of self-acknowledgement. In Aristotle, we have a different situation: he devotes a treaty to individual happiness (*Nicomachean Ethics*) and one to that of the city (*Politics*, IV, chap. 1-2), because, in his view, there is a distinction between the happiness gained in working life and that earned in contemplative life, a distinction between politics and

philosophy. In spite of all this, in *Nicomachean Ethics* he says: In spite of all this, in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094 a) he says: “Knowledge of the good would seem to be the concern of the most authoritative science, the highest master science. And this is obviously the science of politics” (Aristotle 2004, 4). Working with the distinctions that we make today can lead us away from the meanings we seek. I retain, in this respect, one of Aubenque’s observations: “the opposition between ontology and theology, like that between opinion and science, between rhetoric and ‘profession’, reproduces the opposition between democracy and aristocracy on another level. Should this convergence really surprise us? Should we be surprised by the fact that the prehistory of metaphysics leads us to a trap, a crossroads of issues in which politics, philosophy, reflection on the word and art give meaning to each other in a non-differentiated complex? Should we be surprised by the fact that the project for a science of being as being, which seemed to be abstract as soon as its human reverberations had been forgotten, originated and extracted its lifeblood from a debate focused on the condition and the vocation, inextricably theoretical, technical and political, of man as a man?” (Aubenque 2002, 280). Therefore, I think it is inadequate to judge Plato in the light of Aristotle’s authority. As Whitehead suggested: “the idea of pure knowledge, or of pure understanding [...] was completely foreign to Plato’s thought. The age of the Professors had not yet come” (Hadot 2002, 70).

3. Plato’s philosopher

Those who argue that there is a clear distinction between philosopher and statesman in Plato, primarily point to the *Statesman* dialogue; Mihai Maga argues that “the determination of science or political art, be it by gradual dichotomous division or by analogy, no longer privileges the philosopher – a fact proved by both the absence of the term ‘philosopher’ from the structure of the dialogue and the initial indication, referring to another possible dialogue, dedicated to the philosopher that would complete a triptych sophist-statesman-philosopher. Should we understand that there is a contrary relationship between

the statesman and the philosopher? [...] The distinction is made when science is divided into *directive* and *critical* science, into the action of guiding and that of judging” (Maga 2006, 191). To this, we should add the distinction between the three at the beginning of the *Sophist* dialogue.

Indeed, at the beginning of the *Sophist* dialogue, he speaks of the three (the sophist, the statesman and the philosopher), but we must consider the context: Socrates tells Theodoros that a wise man as the Stranger of Elea is thought to be a philosopher and is seen by the crowd whether as a sophist, a statesman or as a madman (216c-d). Here Socrates expresses the perception of the crowd, because he continues: “Did they consider all these one, or two, or, as there are three names, did they divide them into three classes and ascribe a class, to each that corresponds to a single name?” The Stranger answers: “I have no objection, and it is not difficult to say that they considered them to be three” (217a-b). This is the theme: to decide whether the three names designate three distinct genres. The presentation of the three concerns should not be taken as truth, since they are opinions, statements under the sign of probability, that are to be proven true through dialectical exercise. And this exercise, carried out now not as a genealogy (like in the *Republic*) but as a dichotomy, will propose the same character as in the *Republic*: the statesman of the “scientific city”. Those from other forms of city are sophists, not statesmen (303c).

To begin with, I think that Plato did not write the dialogue about the philosopher after all, because he did not have anything else to say about him after the *Republic*. And even if it was not so, we cannot say that the philosopher saw a clear distinction between the two characters, explaining this opinion only by the fact that he had announced an idea. Secondly, the dichotomy in *Statesman* should be considered *con grano salis*, because it is a dialectical exercise, thus situated under the sign of probability. There is no contradiction between the directive and the critical. The stranger asks himself: “Now to which of these two classes is the kingly man to be assigned? Shall we assign him to the art of judging, as a kind of spectator,

or rather to the art of commanding, inasmuch as he is a ruler?” (260c). The directive part does not exclude the critical one. Division is not achieved by exclusive disjunctions; the two terms are species of the same genus. The statesman should be placed among “those who have a science” (258b).

Traditionalist interpretation tends to bring out of Plato another human type that it acknowledges him to be: Mureșan asserts that “Plato was a person always drawn in two opposite directions, that he thought to be convergent: scientific and philosophical reflection, and politics” (Mureșan 2000, 41). This is where the problem lies: if Plato thought for these two directions “to be convergent”, then we should consider that he started from his thoughts back then and not from what we think right now. In the dialogues, he argues that the only person empowered to make politics is the one who is concerned with philosophy; he avoided this separation and his conviction was not eccentric or “mad”, but it was based on the historical fact that most philosophers before him had been statesmen.

Post-Aristotelian philosophical schools have reduced the concern called *philosophia* to a simple reflection regarding the problems related to the theory of knowledge, logic or physics. It was considered that, in the development of theoretical constructions, it does not matter what the thinker actually is or does, as long as he assumes at least some of the ideas that he supports. Such meanings also left their mark on the interpretation of the philosophy of a thinker who openly declared his practical orientation more than once. It seems that Plato was not saved from non-dialectical understanding which he dismissed above all.

First of all, Plato’s philosophy suggests an attitude, challenged in his age both by the ignorance disguised in the display of over abundant pieces of knowledge, specific to the sophists, and in the candid one of the uneducated crowd. Significant for its understanding is also the ironic attitude of the philosopher regarding the model of the theoretician who, while looking at the stars, falls into a pit. We should not forget that Plato the philosopher was, above all, a citizen, each of his approaches being placed under the sign of his obligations and his political commitment⁴.

Although the concern with philosophical problems requires some degree of abstention from certain everyday activities, this does not mean that it is an ascetic endeavor, a retreat from the world – such an attitude emerges only when Pyrrho the skeptic takes on the model proposed by Oriental gymnosophists such as Guthrie who warns us that “it is too easily supposed that the Greeks, in their entirety, believed in an ideal of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, apart from practical objectives, and that they despised the useful arts” (Guthrie 1999, 23). Practical achievements were just as admired as the understanding of the universe, the stages of material progress being celebrated by all thinkers.

The “archetypal” philosopher of classical Antiquity is not an extramundane individual. It is not only unwise to lower him into everyday life, but also impossible, because he is already there. He undertakes an intra-world mission, and he is different from others in that he asks himself about his role in the city and teaches the others to do so, too. Operating with this meaning, we are able to come closer to the senses transmitted to us by the exemplary citizen who was the philosopher of classical antiquity.

In a recent study, Mihai Maci states that, with Plato, the condition of the philosopher in relation to the city has moved; “if in the beginning he was a constituent part of it, having, among other things, the duties of an effective legislator, with Plato, the thinker is placed at the borders of the city, reflecting on its structure and condition” (Maci 2006, 212). I do not share this idea, because there are sufficient instances where Plato claims that the philosopher needs to be king or legislator. If we refer to Plato himself, we know that he did not linger at the borders of the city, but was involved in its affairs. In addition to the Syracusan political experiences, the training of future statesmen was also a political act. And I do not think that a philosopher who claimed that the political act belonged to *paideia* perceived it otherwise. As for regulation, it takes its most radical form in Plato. We must not reduce political involvement to the actual participation in the government of that age, especially – and I stress this – in the case of a philosopher for whom politics was essentially an educational project.

More than once, thematic interpretations have reduced Plato's philosophy to only certain issues. If *Theaetetus*, for example, was read in terms of the radical intellectualism it contains, we would think that here Plato is also pursuing a process of stigmatization of sensation (and its universe), and denies any cognitive valence. The portrait of the wise man in this dialogue could support such a representation, making us think of a gnoseological and therefore ethical, ideal person. The "freeman", the one who thinks quietly, does not participate to the life of the city and refuses to submerge in the little things of this world: "it is in reality only his body that lives and sleeps in the city. His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way, as Pindar says, throughout the universe, 'in the deeps below the earth' and 'in the heights above the heaven'; geometrizing upon earth, measuring its surfaces, astronomizing in the heavens; tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are, and never condescending to what lies near at hand" – *Theaetetus* 173e-174a (Plato 1997, 192-3). Aware of the transitory feature and wickedness of this world, the seeker of wisdom will want to escape from it (176b). But we must take into account the fact that this description of the philosopher is made at the beginning of old age, when Plato decided to make philosophy 'at leisure', a feeling that he abandoned during the final part of his life. We can satisfy ourselves with this if we rely on the recovery of corporality in *Philebus*. Also, if in *Phaedo* (68 a), Socrates said that what the philosopher seeks all his life is knowledge, that he believed to be gained only after death⁵, in *the Seventh Letter*, written about six years before his death, Plato explicitly reveals the ideal which he pursued since his youth, that of participating to the public life of the city.

It seems that Plato was not visited by the Daimon that made Socrates refrain from the handling of city affairs (*Apology*, 31 d)⁶, as he was more interested in what he could do and acquire here than in what he should expect after death: philosophy does not prepare one for death, as Socrates believed, but for life. And the dialogue is presented as such a training. If philosophy or contemplation dominated his life, then these

terms should not be understood with meanings proposed by the philosophical tradition, i.e. without their practical connotations.

Certainly, both the traditionalist interpretation and the others that it argues with on this issue, will have enough evidence to prove their correctness. But they capture only some aspects of Platonism, because the dialogues that they rely on belong to a whole formed by repeated attempts to provide answers to the challenges of diversity, through probation and the insertion of different variants of construction in the dialogue. In spite of everything, we do not have a single portrait of the philosopher, but several ones, according to Plato's ages: in the dialogues of his youth he wants to define virtue, in *Phaedo* he asks himself about the immortality of the soul to find ontological support for his political project, in the *Republic* he governs, in *Theaetetus* he is quietly occupied with dialectics, and in *Laws* he acts like a priest. The entire evolution of the philosopher's portrait is closely linked to Plato's personal experiences and expresses his intentions at certain times of his life.

Referring to the use of inappropriate concepts in the interpretation of Plato's work, R.M. Hare notes: "It is far safer not to attribute to Plato any proposition which cannot be translated into Greek, the language in which he did his thinking. [...] If his own words are unclear or ambiguous, the most we can do is to imagine that we have him with us, put to him questions in Greek, and then speculate as to how he might answer them in Greek. If this method is followed, it will be found that many of the distinctions on which, as modern philosophers, we rightly want to insist, pass him by" (Hare 1996, 24). Of course, Hare's proposal pushes to the extreme the idea of fidelity to Plato's texts. We have here an acquisition of Schleiermacher's idea (Schleiermacher 2001, 41-2) that we must stand on the same level with the author, both on the objective side (knowing the language in which he wrote) and on the subjective one (knowing his inner and outer life). But given the fact that, as recognized by the experts in ancient Greek and by translators, it is possible for today's ancient Greek to be different from that of over two thousand years ago, I doubt it would be possible to make an interpretation that would not

extend beyond the framework of the language in which the philosopher wrote. All we have left is to try to compensate for this deficiency by a more careful approach to the subjective side.

To move beyond the distortions that a whole philosophical tradition has produced, a first step would be to bring Plato from the Pantheon back into the city, i.e. his humanization. Perhaps we would be closer to the essence of his thinking if we did not perceive it as a meditation in the intellectualist meaning of the term, without practical sources and outcomes, that is, if we relocated it where its creator conceived it and wanted it to be: in the city. This does not mean that we should consider Platonic metaphysics to be just a digression, a parenthesis of the Platonic construction. Metaphysics is an element that has its place in the Platonic project, just like the others.

Plato could not be the philosopher described by the intellectualist tradition. In my opinion, it is more appropriate to adopt an approach that operates with the meaning that *philosophia* had back then, that is involving its practical purpose. Before Plato, *philosophia* was not a concern separated from politics, and a brief overview of the pre-Platonic history of the term has proven it. From this perspective, the political conception no longer appears as a chapter of the philosopher's work, but his entire philosophy appears to be a rather political work, with its obvious metaphysical load.

NOTES

¹ Jacob Howland identified four directions: *traditionalism* (specific to the Anglo-Saxon area), *deconstructivism* (in the French area: J. Derrida), *neo-traditionalism* (M. Nussbaum) and the *dialogue-dramatic approach* (Heidegger, Gadamer, L. Strauss). See *Methods of Interpreting Plato*, conference held at the University of Bucharest in 1997 (Mureşan 2000, 33).

² Hadot also evokes A.-J. Voelke's idea that "Socratic dialectics indissolubly unites the knowledge of good and the choice of good." (Voelke 1973, 194).

³ In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says that "science which is desirable in itself and for the sake of knowledge is more nearly Wisdom than that which is desirable for its results" [982 a]. And in *Nicomachean Ethics* he makes a clear distinction between ethical virtue and dianoetics. Since ethical virtue conditions him socially, dianoetics remains the form in which man achieves

happiness. To contemplate, man does not need anything, and thus is independent. And in *Nicomachean Ethics* [1178 b] he makes a clear distinction between ethical virtue and dianoetics. Since ethical virtue conditions him socially, dianoetics remains the form in which man achieves happiness. To contemplate, man does not need anything, and thus is independent. “Happiness, then, extends as far as contemplation, and the more contemplation there is in one's life, the happier one is, not incidentally, but in virtue of the contemplation, since this is honourable in itself. Happiness, therefore, will be some form of contemplation” (Aristotle 2004, 198). In this form and out of its context, the fragment describes the philosopher who has been imagined by Western culture for over two thousand years. But Aristotle tells further on that „for human nature is not self-sufficient for contemplation, but the body must be healthy and provided with food and other care” (Aristotle 2004, 198). This is why he will claim that politics is the science with the highest authority.

⁴ I use the term *political* with the extensive meaning it had in ancient times; it can also be include the reality designated today by such terms as *civic* or *civism*.

⁵ “If they are altogether estranged from the body and desire to have their soul by itself, would it not be quite absurd for them to be afraid and resentful when this happens? If they did not gladly set out for a place, where, on arrival, they may hope to attain that for which they had yearned during their lifetime, that is, wisdom, and where they would be rid of the presence of that from which they are estranged?” (Plato 1997, 59).

⁶ “This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything. This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me” (Plato 1997, 29).

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