

POLITICAL FREEDOM, SELF-DETERMINATION
AND FREE WILL IN PLATO:
ANALYSIS OF *ELEUTHERIA* AND *HAIREISIS* IN
AUTHENTIC DIALOGUES

Abstract

It is not easy to identify a doctrine of free will in the Platonic dialogues, since the Greek lexicon lacks a term for this concept. However, the first formulation of this theory in the history of Western thought can be traced in the *corpus Platonicum*. This study analyses the philosophical concept of freedom in Plato's thought through two aspects: firstly, it examines the concept of political freedom, ἐλευθερία, which is declined in a particularly original way by Plato. Secondly, a doctrine of free will is traced in some passages of the dialogues, demonstrating the presence and importance of this notion in Plato's philosophical thought.

Keywords: Freedom, Liberty, Free Will, Choice, Plato

1. INTRODUCTION

The Greek word ἐλευθερία, "freedom," has a different meaning from the one we attach to the term today, and is more similar to the English word "liberty" than to the word "freedom". For the Greeks, the ἐλευθερία was closely related to politics, and was contrasted with δουλεία, slavery¹: those who were not under the rule of a foreign people or a reckless tyrant were free. Freedom became, especially in the aftermath of the Persian Wars, a slogan through which the Greek people identified themselves as opposed to the barbarians: if the latter were all subservient to a single ruler, and thus united by the condition of slaves, the Greeks – through the *polis* solution – could actively intervene in political decisions, and protect their independence². It should be kept in mind, however, that excluded from the status of citizens, i.e. free men, were slaves,

¹ For an effective study of this topic, see K. Vlassopoulos, *Historicising ancient slavery*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021,

² On this topic, rather comprehensive is C. Meier, *Kultur, um der Freiheit willen. Griechische Anfänge – Anfang Europas?*, Siedler Verlag, München 2009.

women, metics (i.e. those who resided in a city other than their city of origin) and all those who by social status could not access political life (such as the perioeci in Sparta). Nonetheless, ἐλευθερία was unanimously considered the highest political value that united all Greeks, beyond their political, dialectal and cultural divisions, and was associated with the concept of αὐτονομία, "autonomy," that is the ability to give oneself laws and norms by oneself, without accepting external impositions.

Already we can see that there is a profound difference from what we mean by "free will." In political philosophy we speak in this regard of "self-determination," or even "autonomy," if not "liberation." To indicate what we mean in our times by the faculty of free choice, and thus by free will, there is no proper term in Greek³. However, "will" - βούλησις - and "choice" - αἵρεσις - are two terms whose study may reveal what the Greeks, and particularly Plato, intended by free will⁴.

A modern conception, which found its greatest theoretician in Spinoza, denies the freedom of the will, arguing that it is bound by a system of causes and thus it is impossible for man, so to speak, to be the "first cause" of an action. Unexpectedly, Plato also treats this hypothesis and discards it with an interesting argument.

This paper is therefore divided into two parts. The first explores the theme of ἐλευθερία, i.e. political freedom, in a number of

³ I cannot fail to mention Dodds' timeless observation: «To ask whether Homer's people are determinists or libertarians is a fantastic anachronism: the question has never occurred to them, and if it were put to them it would be very difficult to make them understand what it meant» (E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1951, p.7).

⁴ However, it must be taken into account that «Neither Plato nor Aristotle has a notion of will. What they do have, though, is a closely related notion, namely, the notion of somebody's willing or wanting something, in particular, somebody's willing or wanting to do something, the notion of *boulesthai* or of a *boulesis*. Indeed, this notion plays a fundamental role in their thought about human beings and their behavior, and it will continue to play a crucial role throughout antiquity [...]. It is the form in which reason desires something. If reason recognizes, or believes itself to recognize, something as a good, it wills or desires it. If reason believes itself to see a course of action which could allow us to attain this presumed good, it thinks that it is a good thing, other things being equal, to take this course of action» (M. Frede, *A Free Will. Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, edited by A. A. Long, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2011, pp. 19-20). On this topic, see also W. Otto, *Theophrastus. Der Geist der Allgriechischen Religion*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1959, pp. 82-85.

Platonic dialogues, particularly in the *Republic*, the *Laws* and the *Gorgias*. Analysis of the Platonic use of this term reveals a conceptualization that goes beyond the political sphere, and while preserving the characterization of freedom as the absence of constraints, and while contrasting it with slavery, it illustrates how a man can also be free outside the political sphere, through a control of his own drives and desires.

It is precisely with regard to this aspect, of freedom as control of one's drives, that the second part of this paper is articulated, which studies the concept of freedom independently of the use of the term ἐλευθερία. Considering freedom as the faculty of autonomous choice, some aspects of choice are explored and Plato's view on determinism and the possibility of performing our actions under the sole guidance of a free mind is expounded. In addition, life choice, made both during our existence in the world of becoming and in the Hereafter, is discussed: indeed, in the eschatological myths of the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, Plato speaks of life choice, which - independent of any causal influence - is therefore totally free.

In conclusion, this paper offers an overview of the Athenian philosopher's views on both the political freedom concept of self-determination and the freedom to choose, i.e. free will⁵. To carry out this analysis, we relied on the study of the occurrences of the terms ἐλευθερία and ἀρεσις in Plato's authentic dialogues, thanks to the digital tool of *the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

2. ELEUTHERIA: POLITICAL FREEDOM AND SELF-DETERMINATION

In this section, we will analyze the concept of ἐλευθερία in the authentic dialogues, particularly in the *Republic*, the *Menexenus*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Laws*. The concept of freedom has different nuances in each dialogue, but in particular three main meanings can be identified:

1. Independence won by military valor and courage, particularly a value peculiar to Athenian citizens, in a strongly positive sense.

⁵ I recommend to consult on the entire topic R. Muller, *La doctrine platonicienne de la liberté*, Librairie Philosophique J Vrin, 1997.

2. Individual independence won through control over others - freedom of the powerful, advocated by the sophists - or through control of one's own soul - freedom of the philosopher, advocated by Socrates. In this case, freedom has a totally positive meaning in that the philosopher is able to self-determine.
3. A democratic slogan lacking actual validity, tendency to anarchy and slavery to passions, absence of hierarchy and honor. In this sense, excessive freedom is understood as licentiousness and thus radically condemned by Plato.

As will become clear in the next few lines, for Socrates freedom is by no means a negative value: rather, what is criticized is the condition of anarchy and licentiousness that is defined as "freedom" in a democratic regime. As in everything, in fact, a balance is necessary while avoiding excesses. A balanced freedom, where order and justice reign in the city as well as in the soul, is not only desirable but necessary⁶.

2.1 THE REPUBLIC

Let us first analyze the concept of ἐλευθερία as it emerges in the *Republic*. As mentioned above, in this dialogue the main meaning of "freedom" is political and the concept is closely related to that of "democracy." Speaking of democracy, Socrates thus states:

«Democracy comes about being when the poor are victorious, killing some of their opponents and expelling others, and giving the rest an equal share in ruling under the constitution, and for the most part assigning people to positions of rule by lot [...]. First of all, then, aren't they free (ἐλεύθεροι)? And isn't the city full of freedom (ἐλευθερίας) and freedom of speech? And doesn't everyone in it have the license (ἐξουσία) to do what he

⁶ «The contrast between justice and injustice is that between those who are free because they are ruled by reason and those who are totally unfree because they are slaves to their passions [...]. The just man is free to arrange his life and that of others in the most satisfactory way, the philosopher is free to turn away from this life to contemplate the reality of the forms» (R.F. Stalley, *Plato's Doctrine of Freedom*, in «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», New Series, IIC (1998), pp. 145-158, pp. 148-49).

wants? [...] And when people have license (ἐξουσία), it's clear that each of them will arrange his own life in whatever manner pleases him»⁷.

But this notion of equality and freedom is unwelcome to Plato, for whom just equality should consist of a distribution of honors proportional to each person's merits. If in Thucydides Pericles had described Athenian democracy as a model for other peoples⁸, Plato sees it as an emporium of possible models, since its "license" (ἐξουσία) allows each person to live as a democrat, timocratic, oligarchic or tyrannical. And that is why in democracy they call «insolence good breeding, anarchy (ἀναρχίαν) freedom (ἐλευθερίαν), extravagance magnificence, and shamelessness courage»⁹. It is clearly shown how in democracy freedom is nothing but a 'slogan' to mask the most profligate behaviors, and hides the anarchy that is actually inherent in democracy. The deception is made clear a few pages later, when Socrates explains:

«Freedom (ἐλευθερίαν): surely you'd hear a democratic city say that this is the finest thing it has, so that as a result it is the only city worth living in for someone who is by nature free (φύσει ἐλεύθερος) [...] I suppose that, when a democratic city, athirst for freedom, happens to get bad cupbearers for its leaders, so that it gets drunk by drinking more than it should of the unmixed (ἀκράτου) wine of freedom, then, unless the rulers are very pliable and provide plenty of that freedom, they are punished by the city and accused of being accused oligarchs [...]. Extreme freedom (ἄγαν ἐλευθερία) can't be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery (ἄγαν δουλείαν), whether for a private individual or for a city»¹⁰.

It is evident from these passages how the critique of freedom is closely connected with the critique of democracy; for the freedom

⁷ *Republic* VIII 557a2-5, b4-6, b8-10, transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve. I find what Barker says interesting: «Democracy is anarchy; or, from another point of view, it is polyarchy. It is anarchy, because there is no one element dominant: it is polyarchy, because many elements are dominant together» (E. Barker, *Greek Political Theory. Plato and his predecessors*, University Paperbacks, Methuen & Co Ltd, 1918, p. 294).

⁸ II 37,1

⁹ *Republic* VIII 560d9-561a1, transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve.

¹⁰ *Republic* VIII 562b10-c2, c8-d4, 564a3-4, transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve.

spoken of here consists in the absence of superior control, of government; it is "mass freedom" (ἐλευθερίας τοῦ πλήθους). Hierarchization, characteristic of Plato's theory, is in fact to be applied as much to the soul as to the city: a free soul is an anarchic soul, while justice wants the rational soul to take control over the irrational one. Likewise, excessive freedom (ἄγαν ἐλευθερία) results in anarchy, where equality is not proportional to individual merits or tendencies. The consequence of this condition of freedom, also called "license" (ἐξουσία) by Plato, is precisely the emergence of tyranny, since he doesn't suppose «that tyranny evolves from any constitution other than democracy – the most severe and cruel slavery from the utmost freedom»¹¹. Where no one is actually in control because everyone is 'free,' that is, subject to no one, the tyrant has an easy time and can impose himself all the more deleteriously¹².

The notion of freedom, as we can see, is always associated with the notion of slavery (δουλεία) and gains value only in opposition to it. Freedom is thus not to be understood, in Plato, as the absolute independence of every citizen: the social hierarchy he proposes requires that there should always be rulers, and excludes democracy; the rulers themselves then must know how to govern themselves – as argued in the *Gorgias* – because otherwise freedom has equally deleterious effects. True freedom occurs only in a context of justice, that is, where the rational side prevails; this must happen as much in the city - where the rulers are philosophers or led by philosophers - as in the soul - where the rational side must prevail over the irrational. Otherwise, the refusal to submit to rulers, a choice that can guarantee the only true freedom, leads to anarchy, then to the emergence of tyrannical power and thus to the most bitter slavery.

¹¹ *Republic* VIII 564a6-8, transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve.

¹² «Here liberty ceases to be an unstable equilibrium, and becomes a mere chaos, alike in the State and the family, in the school and the street. In the State, all distinction between rulers and ruled is now abolished: subjects become like rulers and rulers like subjects. In the family, distinctions equally disappear: father and son, master and slave, husband and wife – all alike rise, or sink, to a level of uniform liberty. In the school, too, rule and subordination vanish: the master fears his scholars, and the scholars despise their master» (Barker, *Greek Political Theory*, cit., p. 298).

2.2 THE *LAWS* AND THE *MENEXENUS*

As has been mentioned, the notion of freedom takes on many nuances in the Platonic dialogues. On the one hand it is understood positively, as in the *Menexenus*, in which the Athenians are praised for strenuously defending their freedom. On another hand it is understood negatively, as an absence of order and control, both in the soul and in the city. The disorder of the soul is mentioned, for example, in the *Laws*, when the Athenian observes that the drunkard, «bursting with self-esteem and imposing no restraint on his speech and actions, the fellow loses all his inhibitions and becomes completely fearless: he'll say and do anything, without a qualm»¹³.

However, freedom is not an evil in itself for Plato: it is deleterious the moment it is used by democracy as a shield to eliminate all sorts of hierarchy and leads all the way to anarchy and tyranny. On the other hand, a freedom used conscientiously, in the context of strict submission to the sovereign, is precisely the Platonic goal. The soul is perfectly free, but it must be a freedom other than anarchy between the parts. Indeed, it is only when the soul is properly guided by its rational part that justice and freedom occur, and so also in a State: it is only when it is governed conscientiously and justly by those with intelligence that freedom of speech and honor becomes a value. If this freedom is to be protected, on the contrary, «complete freedom from all authority is infinitely worse than submitting to a moderate degree of control»¹⁴.

¹³ *Laws* I 649b3-5, transl. T.J. Saunders. Literally: «it is imbued with the most total frankness and freedom and the most total lack of fear».

¹⁴ *Laws* III 698a10-b2, transl. T.J. Saunders. Basically, Plato «wants all citizens to live in complete subjection to lawful authority. They must thus avoid, on the one hand, the kind of liberty that consists in being able to do whatever one wants and, on the other, the arbitrary rule of despots who think only of satisfying their own desires. The ideal situation is one in which they willingly permit a strict code of law to govern every part of their lives» (Stalley, *Plato's Doctrine of Freedom*, cit., p. 155). In contrast, Adkins believes that the adoption of the body of laws envisioned by Plato involves the renunciation of free will: «Plato's psychology leaves room for free will; but Plato's code of laws calls upon the inhabitants of any city which adopts it to resign its free will, in exchange for those things which it prizes most highly, for *endaimonia*» (A.W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility. A Study in Greek Values*, Oxford University Press, Amen House, London 1960, p. 303). According to Adkins, then, there is thus a gap between a freedom we possess by nature, which is unlimited, and a condition under the laws, in which we give up-always because of that freedom we possessed by nature-to exercise

Plato's position regarding political freedom should now be evident. The theme of ἐλευθερία is also touched on in the *Menexenus*, a dialogue in which, however, the concept is not further explored. Throughout the *Menexenus* the notion of "freedom" is always understood as independence from an external or totalitarian regime, thus always with a strictly political meaning in the context of a praise of the Athenian constitution and its traditions or of the Greeks in general, who for the sake of freedom and autonomy cannot tolerate a regime imposed by someone not chosen by them, be it another Greek or barbarian people¹⁵. As we have said, freedom is in this case praised by Socrates, who himself engaged in many battles fighting for his polis, and the philosopher is ready to defend it to the hilt, where it is not a mere slogan used by a *de facto* anarchist regime to mask the ἐξουσία, the "license," that actually prevails in the state.

2.3 THE *GORGIAS*

In the *Gorgias*, unlike in the *Menexenus*, the notion of freedom is enriched with an additional nuance: ἐλευθερία here is not exclusively political freedom but also the possibility of doing what one wants, even to the point of imposing one's will onto others. Socrates and Gorgias converse:

«SOCRATES: So come on, Gorgias. Consider yourself questioned [...] and give us your answer. What is this thing that you claim is the greatest good for humankind, a thing you claim to be a producer of?

GORGIAS: The thing that is in actual fact the greatest good, Socrates. It is the source of freedom (ἐλευθερίας) for humankind itself and at the same time it is for each person the source of rule over others in one's own city.

SOCRATES: And what is this thing you're referring to?

it, at least in practice. Personally, I do not agree with his view, which I think is almost Hobbesian, and I think that for Plato, submission to laws, thus the exercise of reason, is precisely the employment of our freedom of choice in the most proper way.

¹⁵ For a study of the relationship between Plato and the Athenian political system, see D. Cammack, *Plato and Athenian Justice*, in «History of Political Thought» XXXVI (2015), pp. 611-42.

GORGIAS: I'm referring to the ability to persuade by speeches judges in a law court, councillors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering that might take place»¹⁶.

The freedom proposed by Gorgias, as noted above, is clearly not a political freedom, but is again a tool having to do with imposing oneself onto others and controlling people. The concept is identical, except that the physical violence that takes away the people's freedom is replaced by cunning and verbal persuasion, which have the same effect. In a situation where one man controls another, the one who controls can be called free: hence the concept of freedom in the *polis* of Athens, whereby in a democracy no one man prevails over another¹⁷. In a state as Persia, on the other hand, only one man is free – the tyrant – and all others are his subjects. Taking up this concept, Gorgias defines "free" only the rhetorician who is able, by persuading others, to control men.

2.4 THE *THEAETETUS*

The concept of freedom that Socrates has in mind is quite different, and this point of view is expressed in the *Theaetetus*, where Plato shows that true freedom is not at all what Gorgias is talking about, but precisely its opposite, and that the man Gorgias called free is actually a slave¹⁸. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates proposes a concept

¹⁶ *Gorgias* 452d1-e4, transl. D.J. Zeyl.

¹⁷ On the contrary, Plato believes that «the deliberation of the normative philosopher-ruler is characterized by two main features. One is that: 'His rational second-order decision prefers the ends ... acquired by deliberation about the good of the whole soul [...]'! The second is that the philosopher-ruler's reflection leads him to give absolute priority to virtue, including other-directed virtue, in a way that the defective types do not. Critical reflection leads reason to make 'a second-order decision in favor of "its own" [rational] first-order ends' (232). The 'rational' end which reason prefers must include the desire 'to express [one's] knowledge of Justice, Beauty, and the other moral Forms in actions which embody them' (237)» (C. Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy. The self in dialogue*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996, p. 263, referring to T. H. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory. The Early and Middle Dialogues*, Oxford University Press 1977).

¹⁸ I find Dilman's point about the problem of freedom of choice helpful: the man that rejects morality, is only exchanging one form of bondage for another. «It is true that to find the freedom he lacks such a person must face aspects of himself

of freedom that retains all the connotations of ἐλευθερία, to the extent that it is contrasted with slavery, but is conceived in a way quite different from how the sophists suggest in the *Gorgias*. We seem to read, in these pages of the *Theaetetus*, a real response by Plato to the arguments of Gorgias and Callicles: these are overturned and it is shown how, in fact, only the philosopher can be called free, and the tyrant – the slave of the passions – is the man who, least of all, is free. In the *Theaetetus*, after Socrates illustrates to Theodore the difference between the ignorant and self-confident common man and the philosopher, he concludes thus:

«These are the two types, Theodorus. There is the one who has been brought up in true freedom (ἐν ἐλευθερίᾳ) and leisure (σχολῇ), the man you call a philosopher (φιλόσοφον); a man to whom it is no disgrace to appear simple and good-for-nothing when he is confronted with menial tasks, when, for instance, he doesn't know how to make a bed, or how to sweeten a sauce or a flattering speech. Then you have the other, the man who is keen and smart at doing all these jobs, but does not know how to strike up a song in his turn like a free man (ἐλευθερίως), or how to tune the strings of common speech to the fitting praise of the life of gods and of the happy among men»¹⁹.

which he dreads facing. But this is not to give way to them. Callicles is wrong to think that this kind of licence adds up to freedom. If a man in this predicament can face those aspects of himself he finds unacceptable he will no longer need to use his moral beliefs as a means of keeping them at bay. This will make it possible for him to find a new relation to those beliefs. It is in this relation that he will find freedom» (I. Dilman, *Morality and the Inner Life. A Study in Plato's Gorgias*, The Macmillan Press LTD, London and Basingstoke, 1979, p. 137). Moreover, «If the conformist lacks freedom because he acts in slavery to public opinion, the sensualist, too is unfree insofar as he has become dependent on pleasure» (*Ivi*, p. 145).

¹⁹ *Theaetetus* 175d7-176a2, transl. M.J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat. It seems to me that this is also the point of the Cave myth in Book VII of the *Republic*, and I agree with Stalley: «The prisoner, having been freed from the bonds which kept him in the world of shadows, is turned to face the fire, and then begins the arduous ascent culminating in the sight of the sun. The message is that ignorance and false belief constrain the mind much as chains constrain the body. We are genuinely free only when we see the truth, that is when we grasp for ourselves the form of the Good. But to achieve this we must first be released from the influence of the appetites, the 'leaden weights' which keep us in the 'world of becoming' (519a-b)» (Stalley, *Plato's Doctrine of Freedom*, cit., p. 147).

In this passage, the philosopher's freedom is identified with self-awareness and independence from extraneous constraints. Indeed, knowledge of virtue and truth, characteristic of the philosopher, is ignorance of even the simplest notions, but it is independence; the other man on the contrary is a slave to time. However, the concept of freedom, in this context, is not to be understood as free will, but always as non-slavery; philosophy is configured as a free profession, by free men, not subject to constraints of any kind. It is in this sense that the philosopher is free. Freedom here is thus characterized, as we have said, as the absence of constraints, as mastery of discourse, of oneself and especially of time. In fact, as Socrates explains,

«The one man [the philosopher] always has [...] plenty of time (σχολή). When he talks, he talks in peace and quiet, and his time (ἐπὶ σχολῆς) is his own [...]. But the other—the man of the law courts—is always in a hurry (ἐν ἀσχολίᾳ) when he is talking; he has to speak with one eye on the clock. Besides, he can't make his speeches on any subject he likes; he has his adversary standing over him, armed with compulsory powers and with the sworn statement, which is read out point by point as he proceeds, and must be kept to by the speaker. The talk is always about a fellow-slave (περὶ ὁμοδούλου), and is addressed to a master (πρὸς δεσπότην), who sits there holding some suit or other in his hand. And the struggle is never a matter of indifference; it always directly concerns the speaker, and sometimes life itself is at stake»²⁰.

Socrates here directly thematizes the motif of σχολή, leisure time – the *otium* of the Latins – as a peculiar element of philosophical activity, which had already been evoked in the course of the dialogue. The philosopher is distinguished from the rhetorician and the man engaged in political activities mainly by virtue of a different relationship to the dimension of time, in relation to which he is "master" and not "slave".

Only the philosopher can actually be called ἐλεύθερος, free, insofar as he is not a slave to his own passions and insofar as he has free time, not having to account to others for his time and words.

²⁰ *Theaetetus* 172d4-5, d9-173a1, transl. M.J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat.

True ἐλευθερία is temperance, balance, rationality, self-control and autonomy.

3. *HAIRESIS*: CHOICE AND FREE WILL

In this section, we will consider some passages from the Platonic dialogues that can show the author's conception of free will and free choice²¹. In particular, through the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*, a path is outlined that leads from the freedom of choice in this life, that is, the choice of the best among the possibilities offered to us, to the "allotment of the second life," which is discussed in *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, and which consists of an entirely different kind of choice.

3.1 THE *PHAEDO*

To begin with, let us consider a passage from the *Phaedo* in which Socrates, refuting the theory of Anaxagoras, states that at one time, when he had become engrossed in the theories of the Clazomenae philosopher, he had cherished the hope that his books would reveal the truth about astronomical phenomena and the nature of the world. However, while affirming that there is an ordering Cosmic Mind of everything,

«[Anaxagoras] mentioned as causes air and ether and water and many other strange things. That seemed to me much like saying that Socrates' actions are all due to his mind (νῦν), and then in trying to tell the causes (τὰς αἰτίας) of everything I do, to say that the reason (διὰ ταῦτα) that I am sitting here is because my body consists of bones and sinews [...], after the Athenians decided it was better to condemn me, for this reason it seemed best to me

²¹ This is how Frede defines free will: «The notion of the conception of an ability to make choices and decisions, in particular choices and decisions which amount to one's willing to do something. And this ability is supposed to be potentially or actually free in the sense that, if it actually is free, there is nothing in the world, no force or power in the world outside us which can prevent us in virtue of this ability from making the choices or decisions we need to make to attain a good life» (Frede, *A Free Will*, cit., p. 175).

to sit here and more right to remain and to endure whatever penalty they ordered [...]. To call those things causes is too absurd. If someone said that without bones and sinews and all such things, I should not be able to do what I decided, he would be right, but surely to say that they are the cause (διὰ ταῦτα) of what I do, and not that I have chosen the best course (τῆ τοῦ βελτίστου αἰρέσει), even though I act with my mind (νόῳ), is to speak very lazily and carelessly. Imagine not being able to distinguish the real cause (τὸ αἴτιον τῷ ὄντι) from that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause (ἐκεῖνο ἄνευ οὗ τὸ αἴτιον οὐκ ἂν ποτ' εἴη αἴτιον)»²².

Socrates criticizes Anaxagoras' theory because it would follow from it that the cause (αἰτία) of everything would reside in a causal concatenation²³, effectively eliminating the role of the mind. Socrates, slipping from the Mind (Νοῦς) of Anaxagoras, a universal force, to the human mind (νόος), the engine of our actions, holds that what Anaxagoras identifies as "causes" are actually only conditions of possibility of human action, and that it is actually our mind that directs for the best our actions (τῆ τοῦ βελτίστου αἰρέσει). Consistent with Socratic rationalism, this position upholds the freedom of human arbitrariness and its independence from natural causes, which simply delimit its scope of action. This is why he asserts that we should not confuse the true cause of our actions – the mind – with the conditions that delimit its action, and which moreover make it possible, namely the world of becoming²⁴. Only

²² *Phaedo* 98b9-c7, e2-5, 99a4-b4, transl. G.M.A. Grube.

²³ I mention here the definition of cause that is given by the distinguished scholar Phillip Delacy: «Causation may be described as a relation of which one term produces or determines the existence or character of the other term» (P. H. Delacy, *The Problem of Causation in Plato's Philosophy*, in «Classical Philology», XXXIV (1939), pp. 97-115, p. 97).

²⁴ This is also the conclusion of Delacy's very interesting essay on the concept of cause in Plato: «Plato's treatment of causation is completely antithetical to physical causation. His criticism of physical causes forms an integral part in the development of a treatment of causation harmonious with his own transcendent metaphysics. Plato recognizes only two forms of cause, souls and Ideas, correlative with which he makes two criticisms of physical causation. Physical objects and processes, as contrasted with souls, are unable to act purposively and spontaneously; as contrasted with Ideas, they cannot explain the nature of things. The ultimate solution to the problem of causation requires a reality that transcends the physical world» (*Ivi*, pp. 98-99). Delacy's assumption is that in the later dialogues Plato develops a different theory of cause: he makes the soul the source of all motion and change, establishing a theological system in which

such a position can justify a dialogue such as the *Crito*, in which Socrates is placed before the most difficult choice, that between life and death, and he is able to give an αἰτία λογισμῶς, a causal reasoning, of his own choice by showing that the true cause of his actions is his mind, and not external causes which, moreover, made escape impossible.

3.2 THE *PROTAGORAS* AND THE *LAWS*

In both the *Protagoras* and the *Laws* Plato leaves hints – though less clear than the reasoning set forth in the *Phaedo* – of man's free will. For Plato there is a freedom of choice, and the "correct" (ὀρθή) choice is the one made by means of the most accurate calculation (μετρητική) regarding pleasures and pains, taking care that the choice of a pleasure does not preclude us in the future from a greater pleasure and does not cause us greater pain. For reason, the λόγος, is precisely the faculty of calculation:

«We want to have pleasure; we neither choose nor want pain; we prefer the neutral state if we are thereby relieved of pain, but not if it involves the loss of pleasure. We want less pain and more pleasure, we do not want less pleasure and more pain; but we should be hard put to it to be clear about our wishes when faced with a choice of two situations bringing pleasure and pain in the same proportions. These considerations of number or size or intensity or equality (or their opposites) which determine our wishes all influence or fail to influence us whenever we make a choice (πρὸς αἴρεσιν) [...]. But what we want when we choose between lives (ἢ βούλησις τῆς αἰρέσεως τῶν βίων) is not a predominance of pain: we have chosen as the pleasanter life the one where pain is the weaker element»²⁵.

all causation is purposive activity; consequently, his metaphysics requires a God who rules the universe. On the topic of causation in Plato's philosophy, see also D. Sedley, *Platonic Causes*, in «Phronesis», XLIII (1998), pp. 114-132.

²⁵ *Laws* V 733a9-c1, 734c1-3, transl. T.J. Saunders. On this topic, so Barker states: «No virtue is virtuous, unless the complete virtue of self-control is first present: self-control is the prior condition, or rather it is the necessary completion (προσθήκη), alike of wisdom, of courage and of justice (696). Nor is it only the crown of all virtues: it is also, because it is a free concord of appetite with reason, and because it issues in free self-direction by a rational will, the essence of liberty.

It might seem a contradiction that Plato here exhorts us to indulge our desires, if in a passage from the *Republic* he had Cephalus say that desires are "masters" who treat us like slaves²⁶. However, what Plato is suggesting here is that men, being called to choice and unable to escape it, should choose rationally, according to what is best for them. Since the soul has an irrational part, this cannot be eliminated, but must be disciplined through reason, which – being essentially the faculty of calculation – allows us to choose what is best for us²⁷.

3.3 THE PHAEDRUS

This concept becomes glaringly obvious in the *Phaedrus*, when the myth of the winged chariot is told. The black horse, which corresponds to the appetitive soul, must be tamed by the charioteer who, as the rational component of the soul, has the task of curbing impulses and directing them toward the good. The charioteer's will is always directed toward the good, and only when he expresses it is his freedom manifested; on the contrary, the black horse forces the white horse and charioteer «to make its unwilling (οὐκ ἐθέλοντα) partners advance»²⁸. In particular, what drags the black horse is the

Man is a free agent only when rationally choosing, under the influence of self-control, a course which his reason assures him is right; and he is never less free than when, 'doing as he likes', and losing control of his appetites, he falls a victim to his own worse self (626 E-628 A: 733 E-734 B)» (Barker, *Greek Political Theory*, cit., pp. 344-45).

²⁶ *Republic* I 329c6-d2: «Old age brings peace and freedom (ἐλευθερία) from all such things. When the appetites relax and cease to importune us [...] we escape from many mad masters» (transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve).

²⁷ In this regard Frede expresses himself as follows: «There are radically different forms of motivation, which may even be in conflict with each other and which therefore must have their origin in different capacities, abilities, or parts of the soul [...]. The distinction between reasonable and unreasonable desires is not the same as the distinction between desires of reason, or rational desires, and desires of the nonrational part of the soul, or nonrational desires. It is also assumed that, just as one may act on a rational desire, one may act on a nonrational desire. What is more, one may do so, even if this nonrational desire is in conflict with a rational desire» (Frede, *A Free Will*, cit., pp. 21-22). On the possible hedonistic reading of these passages from the *Protagoras* and the *Laws*, see M. Dyson, *Knowledge and Hedonism in Plato's Protagoras*, in «The Journal of Hellenic Studies», XCVI (1976), pp. 32-45.

²⁸ *Phaedrus* 254d1-2, transl. A. Nehamas & P. Woodruff.

erotic tension, the vision of the lover, which drives him mad to the point of dragging even the other horse and the charioteer; and to the madness of desire inspired by the beloved the soul may have different responses. The rational part will tend to lead with the beloved an existence in bliss and concord, in the love of wisdom. Otherwise, if the lovers stick to a lifestyle that is vulgar and far from philosophy, they «commit that act which ordinary people would take to be the happiest choice of all; and when they have consummated it once, they go on doing this for the rest of their lives, but sparingly, since they have not approved of what they are doing with their whole minds»²⁹.

The wrong choice, which is profiled in this passage from the *Phaedrus*, stems – like any error for Plato – from ignorance³⁰. Complete awareness and knowledge would rule out a measurement error, and if the calculation is done correctly, there can be no error whatsoever. Choice, then, is something to which the soul is called, and the "correct choice" consists in the charioteer's decision to bring his chariot aloft, despite being hindered by the black horse, which, bolting, always tends to follow its desires. We have seen that for Plato, desires cannot be ignored, but by correctly applying the "art of measurement" one can always choose for the greater good, and this enables the soul to rise toward the intelligible to the "plain where truth stands" spoken of in the same dialogue³¹. The "wrong choice," on the contrary, consists in ignorance of the good and thus in indulging the desires of the irrational soul, which, deprived of guidance, falls into the same condition as the democratic city described in the *Republic*: anarchy and license, absence of order. Consequently, such an excess of freedom cannot even be

²⁹ *Phaedrus* 256c3-7, transl. A. Nehamas & P. Woodruff.

³⁰ The Socratic conviction that no one does evil by intending it raises the problem of how to understand crime: as noted above, evil coincides with ignorance, but this does not exempt the wrongdoer from punishment. Masterfully Barker explains: «[Plato] does not regard crime as the result of inherited bias, or as the consequence of an evil social environment [...] but crime remains for him crime – a thing to be abhorred; a thing not only involving social disgrace (*αἰσχρόν*), but also and in itself degrading (*κακόν*). If he holds it to be involuntary, that does not mean that it is a misfortune which has befallen the criminal *ab extra*: it means that it is a corruption of the soul which no thinking man can ever freely choose to incur. Plato, in a word, believes at one and the same moment in the real wickedness of crime and the real goodness of man's mind; and that is why he believes that free mind can never voluntarily issue into crime» (Barker, *Greek Political Theory*, cit., pp. 415-16)

³¹ *Phaedrus* 248b6.

considered freedom, as it is slavery to the passions. The only true freedom is that of the rational soul³².

3.4 ESCHATOLOGY: THE *PHAEDRUS* AND THE *REPUBLIC*

Choice and freedom are also key concepts in Platonic eschatology, that is, regarding the fate of the soul after its death. Also in the *Phaedrus*, there is talk of the "allotment of the second life," which is made at the expiration of a thousand years of reward or punishment for lives led in the form of men. Socrates explains thus:

«In the thousandth year both groups arrive at a choice and allotment of second lives (ἀίρεσιν τοῦ δευτέρου βίου), and each soul chooses the life it wants (ὄν ἄν θέλῃ). From there, a human soul can enter a wild animal, and a soul that was once human can move from an animal to a human being again»³³.

Such a choice seems to totally admit free will, in its broadest form and free from all constraints, which – to exist – would have to consist of a physical cause, absent entirely naturally in the Hereafter. By "truth" here is meant, of course, the hyperuranium world, the "plain where truth stands," which can be seen only by those who have, as it were, led up the chariot and thus those who were once men. The theme of choice in eschatology recurs again in Book X of the *Republic*, when Socrates expounds on the myth of Er:

«Each of us must neglect all other subjects and be most concerned to seek out and learn those that will enable him to distinguish the good life from the bad and always to make the best choice possible (αἰρεῖσθαι... τὸν βελτίω ἐκ τῶν δυνατῶν) in

³² «Socrates', Plato's, and the Stoics' view of the wise and virtuous person is that such a person cannot fail to act virtuously and wisely, that is to say, fail to do the right thing for the right reason» (Frede, *A Free Will*, cit., p. 29). This for both Aristotle and Plato means that «a wise and virtuous person cannot but make the choices he makes.» (*Ibidem*) however, the attainment of wisdom and virtue is never something final, but rather it is the individual choice – which is free – that constitutes us as wise and virtuous people. Indeed, not being able to not make a choice means that only one is the right choice, and not that we are not free to make it.

³³ *Phaedrus* 249b1-6, transl. A. Nehamas & P. Woodruff.

every situation. He should think over (ἀναλογιζόμενον) all the things we have mentioned and how they jointly and severally determine what the virtuous life is like. That way he will know what the good and bad effects of beauty are when it is mixed with wealth, poverty, and a particular state of the soul [...]. And from all this he will be able, by considering (ἀποβλέποντα) the nature of the soul, to reason out which life is better and which worse and to choose (αἰρεῖσθαι) accordingly, calling a life worse if it leads the soul to become more unjust, better if it leads the soul to become more just, and ignoring everything else: we have seen that this is the best way to choose, whether in life or death»³⁴.

Picking up the motif of the *Laws*, Plato states that choice consists in a calculation between pleasures and pains – “thinking over”, literally “reasoning comparatively” (ἀναλογιζόμενον) – and that choosing correctly has consequences for the Hereafter as well, as he also states in the *Phaedrus*, when he spoke of a thousand years in which we have a fate corresponding to our life in the Hereafter, before making the choice about the next life. And, conversely, in the Hereafter we make a choice regarding the next life in this world; Er relates that this is how souls were told: «There is a satisfactory life rather than a bad one available even for the one who comes last, provided that he chooses it rationally and lives it seriously. Therefore, let not the first be careless in his choice nor the last discouraged»³⁵. So, in the choice of life, there is a percentage that depends on freedom and a percentage that depends on fate: there are a certain number of lives available, but the order in which one can choose his next life is determined randomly by an auctioneer; therefore, the first will have a vast choice and the others gradually more and more limited.

Moreover, the “justice” of the soul, consisting in the order among its parts – as is shown throughout the *Republic* – must be the goal of choice: for this it must be done by “looking” (ἀποβλέποντα) at the nature of the soul, that is, having in view its order, which coincides with its justice. True freedom, then, consists in the exercise of rationality and the submission to the rational part of the irrational components, both in the city and in the soul.

³⁴ *Republic* X 618b8-d1, d5-619a1, transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve.

³⁵ *Republic* X 619b3-6, transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve.

4. CONCLUSION

Thanks to this analysis we can eventually state that for Plato freedom of choice is undeniable, albeit to be reconciled with the circumstances we are given. Indeed, to tell the truth, freedom consists precisely in the rational calculation among possibilities in order to procure us the greatest pleasure and the least pain: the Socratic rationalistic solution thus reconciles the freedom of the will with the dispositions of fate and the capacities of the human mind with Greek religious traditions.

The analysis of the concept of ἐλευθερία has led to the conclusion that it is used only in a social-political context, as opposed to δουλεία, slavery, and where it is used outside strictly political contexts, as in the *Gorgias* or *Theaetetus*, the connection with slavery remains and is always conceived as ‘freedom from,’ rather than ‘freedom to.’

An effective reflection on ‘freedom from’ is found in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates criticizes Anaxagoras' theory by asserting that actions depend on the mind. All the references to the choice and the art of measurement that have been analyzed in the second part of this text and drawn from some of the Platonic dialogues detail this topic.

This analysis led to the conclusion that freedom for Plato consists essentially in rational calculation, thus in the exercise of rationality whose task is to regulate desires and control them. Such a calculation takes place limitedly to external conditions in the world of becoming, but is absolutely unencumbered by any physical phenomenon in the choice of the second life made in the Hereafter. Even in that choice, however, there is a fortuitous factor – Fate – and the influence that the memory of the past life can have on the choice of the next.

Nevertheless, free will – despite the lack of a term for it in the Platonic lexicon – is a factor which figures throughout his dialogues and is an essential condition of understanding both his life and his thought.

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