



Contemporary Applications of Ancient Greek Drama in the Light of Philosophy

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TERRITORY ARTS & HUMANITIES



ANCIENT GREEK DRAMA VS PHILOSOPHY

Ancient dramas (tragedies and comedies) by the major representative authors – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, as samples of the greatest artistic expressions of human life, bring together the weaknesses and tensions of human actions in relation with the challenges of life at any historical period or geographical and cultural context.

Our inquiry into ancient Greek drama starts from the plurality of values and conflicts that arise by the ancient dramas and their contemporary revival in theatre and educational practices. During our search, we come across the fragile nature of certain human values as well as with the invincible power of passions, that is, human emotions and their effects (Nussbaum, 2001, 83). Such a vacillating state owes its presence to the birth of ancient drama and the honest capture of a delicate kind of artistry of human culture. Therefore, beyond the limits of narration and performance we consider drama as a form of lifelong teaching and perennial education.

Tragic dramas investigate human life instances in the light of art, and their purpose is not only to entertain but also to transmit deep and substantial knowledge, across time and space. Reading -even performing or watching - such dramas like the Aeschylean *Persians* or *Eumenides*, Sophocles' *Antigone* or Euripides' *Bacchantes*, evokes powerful human emotions and thoughts, which is a feature and characteristic of the philosophical method that tries to overcome the limits of the present and become an object *sub specie aeternitatis* (=under the prism of eternity) thus imparting timelessness in the data of history and myth.

Therefore, *logoi*, the verbal dialogues, included in the performance of a tragedy have the purpose of disengaging the audience from the present, i.e. the loss of time where the actions of the protagonists unfold, while at the same time they

must introduce the spectators to the immediacy required by the drama scene (Zeitlin 1994, 149). Participants in a performance must commit to the plot, so that they become themselves responsible at the end, having experienced all the stages of the theatrical 'ritual' as a form of creative and self-changing dialogue with one's inner 'world' of feelings and intentions.

The element of creation lurks in all stages of drama, since it belongs to the 'primary circle', where the constitution of society is based. Social relationships influence artistic expression while at the same time functioning as a basic feedback condition for creators. In this way, they walk side by side through history, creating unbreakable bonds as well as points of convergence in terms of issues of immediate interest. Consequently, beyond its role as a work of art, drama also actively participates in the examination of the institutions of a state since through its criticism it 'supervises' the process of enactment at all levels.

By comparing on the other hand, the various therapeutic techniques used nowadays (e.g. psychotherapy of cognitive or Jungian orientation, drama therapy or psychodrama) and inspired by the Socratic example, we realize that philosophical therapy is a timeless practical model of the art of living and self-improvement far beyond a plain technique of reasoning and a means of mitigating or curing the passions of the human soul or even more of a kind of counteraction to unorthodox or 'unhealthy' thinking. It is a comprehensive worldview, according to which ancient wisdom meets the needs of modern man (Padesky 1993).

In our presentation we attempt to conjunct ancient Greek drama in a global context with philosophical therapeutic counselling founded by the ancient educational and cultural institutions.

MARTHA NUSSBAUM & THE PLATONIC DRAMA

The recognition of the importance of philosophical therapy through art in general, and dramatic art particularly, owes much to the multifaceted work of Martha Nussbaum. Today's reality finds the arts and humanities marginalized in curricula at all levels of education as studies are designed around the acquisition of applied skills for short-term profit, as she states (Nussbaum 2010). This situation has serious consequences for the quality of democracy, human rights and peace itself. Cultivating responsible, self-realized, and

autonomous types of persons, i.e. accountable active people, is the crucial stake of global development.

Discussing moral dilemmas through concrete examples that Nussbaum draws specifically from literature and ancient drama emphasizes moral commitment as she finds in “good fiction” “specificity, appeal to emotion, exciting plot, variety and indeterminacy” (Nussbaum 1990, 46). The “schematic examples” on the contrary, which philosophers like to use, lack these qualities and therefore blur rather than clarify the various problems. The role and importance of the example was literally used in Wittgenstein’s philosophical tactics, and this is an inspiration for its application in the use of examples of art in philosophy in general and especially in philosophical therapy.

Here, of course, it is good to point out the function and importance of philosophy as a therapeutic practice according to its 20th century proponent Ludwig Wittgenstein. While it is well known that Wittgenstein did not aspire to build a philosophical system, the therapeutic element of philosophical activity can be detected in his work, albeit occasionally but with particular emphasis (Monk 1991, Drury 1984). Philosophical therapy is that which, through clarifications, reconciles us to our human form of life, which ensures cultural and moral health. In summary, the two-representative works of his early (*TLP*) (Wittgenstein 1922) and late (*PI*) philosophy (Wittgenstein 1953) stand in a therapeutic relevance and continuity where the latter constitutes an invasive and corrective continuation of the former¹.

Nussbaum explores the connection between philosophy and literature, the relationship of style and content in the investigation of ethical issues, the nature of knowledge involved in ethics, and the role of emotion in deliberation and self-awareness. In the context of moral philosophy, according to this important author, both emotions and intellectual activity must be considered, while the priority is the understanding of specific human examples and situations rather than the highlighting of abstract rules. The most appropriate expression of this attitude is found in literature rather than in philosophical writing (Nussbaum 1996, ix). In fact, ancient philosophy and especially Aristotelian philosophy is recognized as the basis of this approach to

1 The solution he had proposed for the problem of life in *TLP* was based on recognizing only the relationship of the self with the world, ignoring, on the one hand, us, and the relationship of the ego with its own body, as something philosophically important. In *TLP* we tried a treatment based on the restorative view of the person in the light of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*) and while we initially felt cured, then we saw that the philosophical problems came back more severely (as bumps), we felt “trapped” in a “paper tower”. Thus, the therapeutic protocol was changed in *PI* and corrected with the view of us through the lens of humanity (*sub specie humanitatis*) (Peterman 1992).

moral philosophy that includes in philosophical investigation the narrative arts. Prior to Nussbaum’s related texts in which she recognizes love and emotions as moral phenomena important for the good life, Stanley Cavell (Cavell 1979 et al.), argues for the moral-educational scope and use of literature in the perspective of good life – *eužin* (Leontsini 2018).

At this point it is appropriate to connect the concept of human development, as one of the noble goals of almost the entire human history and during the last decades as well, with the concept of sustainable development. Regarding growth, there are again many ancient theories – from the time of Socrates to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Newer and modern theories include those of Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill who developed an anthropology of the integration of men through the fulfillment of their needs, as well as the social developments in our centuries (20th- 21st) which expanded previous theories by studying holistically the human being. At this level too, Martha Nussbaum in a series of publications from 1995 to 2016, develops an important theory - known as the capabilities approach - with the main purpose of highlighting its importance for the recognition and integration for personal development of feelings and love, beyond meeting biological needs or realizing the creative human potential. Governments and institutions can act, depending on their level of development, culture and history in the direction of planning their future (Gluchman 2018). The approach of capabilities according to Nussbaum refers to mental states necessary for the emotional and personal human development as they connect with other people and things, not only rationally but also emotionally, i.e. with love, desire, sadness, gratitude or justified anger, while the inhibition of their expression is due to fear and anxiety (Nussbaum 2011).

About applying the Socratic paradigm in the therapeutic revival of philosophy, Martha Nussbaum introduces the recognition of theatrical elements in the Platonic dialogues, and of the dramaturgical dimension of Plato’s work in general (Nussbaum 2001), without giving way to the priority of the philosophical search over poetry and drama. Quite the opposite. The fact that the dialogic structure of the Platonic text has a theatrical starting point and primacy, rather contributes to the common reflective and self-healing function of theater and philosophy. It is an internal process aimed at bringing out the genuine feeling of the spectator, because through the theatrical experience the participant to dramatic performances and contests will encounter one’s passions towards their ‘purification’ (“*catharsis*”), just as in the philosophical dialogue guided by Socrates’ method of midwifery.

In Plato’s anti-tragic drama, the primacy of philosophical thought over theater is recognized according to Nussbaum, because the examination in which the participant proceeds is personal, self-referential while one is called upon, by cultivating and activating critical thinking, to control the emotions and passions that can alter human judgment. Still,

there is the opposite opinion as expressed by Martha Beck in *Tragedy and the Philosophical Life: A Response to Martha Nussbaum: Protagoras* (Beck 2006). The protagonists of the dialogues themselves, and especially Socrates, are tragic figures, according to Beck, as they are led to a conscious recognition of their fall from the control of truth to which Socrates subjects them. He himself will be called upon with his death to 'pay' the price of his unyielding adherence to truth by opposing the city itself and its fragile political system. "The dialogues demonstrate the curse of honesty because Socrates insists on telling the truth, confronting the sophists, trying to teach the youth, and talking to anyone anywhere about the serious questions of life, even when he knows he might be killed for something like that. To make his point, Plato uses many literary techniques that were used in many different genres at the time, including those of tragedy" (ibid. 33).

SOCRATES VS NIETZSCHE

The critical approach to the dramatic dimension of the Platonic dialogues, and to Socrates himself as a dramatic person, concerns modern literature at the level of extensive studies and doctoral theses (Spyridis 2022, Charalabopoulos 2012etc.) and comes as a continuation of a historical debate in the newer literature initiated by Friedrich Nietzsche's views on the juxtaposition of Dionysian model and Socratic paradigm in the context of cultural history and criticism.

According to Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche recognized in the Platonic dialogues a new literary model combining poetry and dialectical philosophy, a perfected Aesopian fable (Nehamas 2001, 104-105) managing to exceed the influence that Dionysian theater and tragedy had in his time and highlighting a Socrates who only by the charm of his philosophical clarity showed a path of healing to the decadent Athenian nobility. Nietzsche's binary approach to ancient Greek culture, based on the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy, is developed both in the *Birth of Tragedy* and in the later *Twilight of the Idols*, and among other things justifies the retreat of the tragic-Dionysian element against the rational-Apollonian one with the Socratic influence on Euripidean drama. Arguing in favor of the Nietzschean man, Nehamas emphasizes the importance of the tragic conception of the world and life for the justification of human existence beyond and in opposition to the Socratic dialectic and the pursuit of absolute truth and virtue (Nehamas 1991, 186ff.). But this opposition of Dionysus-Socrates by the angry-competitive Nietzsche turns out to be questionable on closer examination, as Plato's Socrates remains a revolutionary and a challenger of his time by putting forward an understanding of the power of a prevailing value system (theatre, art, city, traditions). However, on this issue Nussbaum's point of view differs as she argues against Nietzsche and that Euripides severed tragedy from its Dionysian origins and therefore from any mystery of the essence of life (Nussbaum 2002 [1991]). In addition, it has been observed, from the comparative approach of the Platonic *Symposium* with the

Aristophanic *Frogs* and the Euripidean *Bacchae*, reinforced by other historical elements of the portrayal of philosophers and especially of Socrates and Plato, the Dionysian-theatrical affinity of Socrates' personality and portrait and the conscious manipulation of this subject by Plato imitating the Dionysian worship to advantage the victory of philosophy (Capra 2021, 2018 and Castrucci 2015, Catoni, Giuliani 2019, also Halliwell 2002, Rhodes 2001).

The bridges of theatre with philosophy and political life constantly active in the era of evolution of Platonic writing are reconfirmed by recent studies on the Platonic *Symposium*, such as that by Leo Strauss (2003) in relation to the Aristophanic *Frogs*, but also of Greta Castrucci (2015) in relation to both the *Frogs* and the Euripidean *Bacchae*.

To close our discussion with the proposal to bring back Socratic philosophy as a contemporary form of counseling through theatrical practices, as we argued in our recent publication (Lazou 2020), education, politics and even history are important dimensions of a contemporary application of the Socratic method (Candiotta 2013, Candiotta 2017), while art and dramatic processes, as well as other alternative forms of teaching and interaction using philosophical dialectical practices remain an open challenge for us today, where we could pursue more systematically and with the collaboration of experts, the combination of cognitive methods (Aaron Beck) with psychodramatic therapy (Jacob Moreno), in the context of performance actions, which dramatize the philosophical experience by illuminating its 'human face'.

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