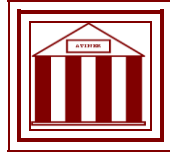


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**Retrieving Plato:  
The Dialogical Method in  
Nussbaum and Williams' Readings**

**Elisa Ravasio  
PhD Student  
Università degli Studi di Pavia  
Italy**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209  
Email: [info@atiner.gr](mailto:info@atiner.gr) URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)  
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**Retrieving Plato:  
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**Elisa Ravasio  
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**Abstract**

Nussbaum harshly criticizes Plato's philosophy, because it erases vulnerability and fragility from human life: only philosophers are *eudaimones*, since they devote their lives to rationality and they can reach a stable truth with such a peculiar device, namely the *dialegethai*. By contrast, Aristotle's philosophy shows the incommensurability of different desires and demands, and it highlights the importance of several goods in achieving a proper happiness actually tied to human beings. Thus, according to Nussbaum's reading, Aristotle's philosophy can be defined as *democratic*, unlike the overbearing Plato's dialogical method that aims at reaching a single and immutable good able to make people forever fulfilled.

By contrast in Williams view, Plato's dialogical method is helpful to grasp how the true philosopher, namely a person who takes care of individual and public good, should think and act to enrich his own and his interlocutors' view about what a virtuous and just life is. Thus, thanks to Williams' reading, we could define Plato's method as *democratic*, since it aims at providing the reader with an enlarged mentality about ethical and political matters.

In conclusion, I will argue that through Contemporary readings of Ancient philosophical reflections, we could broaden our own conceptions of what a democratic interplay and the human good are, enhancing, in turn, our overview about ethics and politics.

**Contact Information of Corresponding author:** [eli.ravasio@gmail.com](mailto:eli.ravasio@gmail.com)

## Greek tragedy

Most of the contemporary moral philosophy – Bernard Williams claims – has been always deeply attached to giving good news, and it has not been concerned with the concrete life of people, describing them only as moral agents that should act respecting a categorical imperative (as it is for the kantianism) or a very general concept of wellness (as it is for the utilitarianism). Thus, morality is overriding than ethics, and philosophy is no more concerned with human life and the research of our happiness and good<sup>1</sup>.

By contrast, as Martha Nussbaum and Bernard Williams point out, Contemporary moral philosophy should turn to the Ancients, because they enable us to broaden our ethical and political conceptions, and can help to conceive a moral life that can be also happy.

Martha Nussbaum analyzes the Greek tragedy and Aristotle's philosophy to retrieve the conception of a good life that respects our fragility and shows the very importance of different goods to make people happy. Their analysis will help us in enriching our conception of democracy in that, if we comprehend that other people share our same nature, we can think about some political devices that can help others *like us* to be happy, and how to respect their needs and proposals.

In Nussbaum view, Sophocles' *Antigone* is the tragedy of the *deinon* human being (v. 333 ff.), namely someone who simplifies ethical conflicts thinking to govern better his life eliminating some of his feelings.

Creon and Antigone foil each other: they are both blind, in that they defend their own truth without trying to understand the rival outlook. Creon thinks only in terms of *agathon* versus *kakon*, thus people are valued only for their productivity of civic goods: a just person defends his city, the unjust, namely Polinices, rises against it, so Creon do not want to bury Antigone's brother, because he attempted to depose him.

Even if city traitors do not deserve respect from the citizens, Antigone tirelessly opposes to the king's decision<sup>2</sup>. Demanding natural affection above all and countering Creon's overbearingness, she outwardly seems the heroine of the tragedy: nevertheless, the development of the masterpiece will show that her feelings towards her brother Polinices are not actually passionate, but they just turn to be weapons to fight against the king. So on the stage, two kinds of values are countering each other: the one of the city against that of the family.

In addition, Nussbaum clearly highlights that the most peculiar and serious characters are Heamon and Ismene, since Ismene loves her sister and tries to convince her to give in the attempt to face the king, and Heamon counters his father defending his love for Antigone<sup>3</sup>. At the end of the tragedy, Creon will understand Heamon's point of view, but it is too late: Heamon dies and Creon just remains with his inconsolable sorrow.

Through her analysis, Nussbaum leads the reader to discover and to confront with very different approaches to life: Creon and Antigone are cold and

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<sup>1</sup>Williams 2006, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup>Nussbaum 2001, p. 52 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Ivi, p. 61.

determined in achieving the destruction of their respective adversary; by contrast, Heamon and Ismene are actually *human*, because they let their feelings properly raise.

In Nussbaum's view, this tragedy show us that simplifying human life and its conflicts in order to escape from fragility lead us to an emotional barrenness: our rationality can subdue contingency, but the penalty we have to pay is the loss of our humanity. Man is fragile and only mutual compassion and aid between people who share the same condition could save him from sorrow and pain: we do not have to repress our feelings and emotions, because they play a very serious role in our daily life as well as rationality, and we should learn how to direct them to live a full existence<sup>1</sup>.

### Nussbaum's Plato

Nussbaum's analysis of this feature of the tragedy show the connection with her reading of Plato's proposal: Creon and Antigone are like the philosopher that want to control his life and contingency with only one element of the soul eliminating all the others.

According to Nussbaum, the tragedy of simplification is perfectly portrayed in Plato's dialogues, namely the *Protagoras*, the *Symposium*, and the *Republic*<sup>2</sup>. In each of them, Plato oversimplifies human dilemmas: people can control their lives in order to be happy, devoting all themselves to the rational part of the soul.

*Protagoras'* aim is to find a *technē* that can stem the power of the *tychē*: Socrates will defeat Protagoras, because he finds a kind of *epistēmē* that can help people not to be stricken by chance. He describes the possibility to achieve a good life in terms of calculation, and his *technē* meet an inner demand of everyone: people are often at the mercy of events and Socrates provides us with a method that can order our chaotic existence. Pleasure is the measure of this method, and when a person understands that the most pleasant life is the one of the wise man, he will of course choose it, thus he could be forever happy (361c)<sup>3</sup>.

In the *Symposium*, *erōs* portrayed by Aristophanes is embodied by Alcibiades, and opposes to the one described by Socrates (165 ff.). Aristophanes speech stages the tragedy of the human condition: we always love a particular person, and our sorrow will be inconsolable when we lose him<sup>4</sup>. We need our partner to feel complete and in order to be happy.

In Nussbaum's reading, Alcibiades is the very example of human passions, because he loves one peculiar person and he is suffering, because his love is not returned. By contrast, Socrates' speech concentrates on the importance of

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<sup>1</sup>Nussbaum 2009, p. 235 ff.

<sup>2</sup>I will not analyze the *Phaedrus*, since in Nussbaum 2001 it seems that it can redeem Plato, but in Nussbaum 1998, she presents again a critique against the philosopher: so I will consider just the dialogue helpful for my reflections.

<sup>3</sup>Nussbaum 2001, pp. 98-99 and pp. 112-113.

<sup>4</sup>This remind the reader of Heamon's love for Antigone.

devoting our lives to the real beauty: the philosopher starts seeing the beauty of bodies, then he soars above the human condition, and he will contemplate the ideal beauty being forever fulfilled. This kind of love is free from human sorrow, because its object is always ready to be caught by our intellect (210a ff.).

At the end of the dialogue, the philosopher defeats his adversaries– the playwright, Aristophanes and the tragedian Agathon, so Plato lead us to conclude that the love of wisdom is more fulfilling than that of other humans.

### **The Republic**

I would like to broaden my reflections to Nussbaum's remarks about the relation between the political regimes and the human nature in the *Republic*.

This dialogue is not only a political masterpiece, but also a profound analysis of human desires, since Plato intertwines the description of different souls with different kinds of govern.

According to Plato, Athenian democracy tries to allow each person to live in accordance with his own choices and thoughts, enabling the indiscriminately raising of a person's inner faculties of love and reflection. Democracy fails in this attempt, because it breeds license and corruption in the human soul (*VII Letter*, 326b): thus, in Plato's proposal, social norms must be shaped by true wisdom and not by the majority vote.

According to Nussbaum, the dialogue will focus on the relation between the philosophical passion and other desires: philosophy make other human demands to yield, and justice should be cherished for its own sake because it is an orderly state with one's desires regulated by a correct account of what is worth valuing. In Plato's proposal will appear that to get this correct ordering one needs to live in a correct society, so the educational system is thought in order to produce the right relation between happiness and justice, in the soul and in the city. Accordingly, this will lead to an antidemocratic regime, because the central problem of politics will be to redeem the depraved desire: Plato will *'introduce lots of public measures to impose a discipline on these desires, that will lead to the famous totalitarian society that Plato's calls ideal'*<sup>1</sup>.

To sum up, in Nussbaum account, the *Republic* is an inquiry about human desire, accordingly, a heinous attack against democracy: the democratic man is subdued by his desires and he will turn into the tyrant, namely a person who does not know what is good or bad and cannot control himself (136 ff.). On the contrary, the philosopher harnesses his desires to the correct object of love, the immutable truth (584d), thus his life will be the best (587e), because his happiness, that derives from contemplation, will never end: he is the only one that lives a life worth living, since he soars up common pleasures to dedicate his life to what actually matters (582d), so he can make everyone happy if he will govern the city.

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<sup>1</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 16.



**Some final remarks: Plato's Dialogue**

Nussbaum clearly highlights that Plato's philosophy tries to eliminate contingency from human life in order to make people forever *eudaimones*: devoting all our lives to knowledge of eternal truth, we free ourselves from daily troubles. The method, *i.e.* the dialogue, that Plato uses to show to the reader how one should live, perfectly endorses its contents, and its features oppose to those of tragedy.

Tragedies stage the fierceness and violence of human feelings, namely passionate love, sorrow, pain, regret, and characters are extra-ordinary people—Creon and Oedipus are kings, Tiresias is a blind prophet. On the contrary, Plato's characters are common people that are discussing about some values, *i.e.* justice or courage, and how one should act to be happy, but Plato does not develop characters' stories, and replaces concrete situations with rational arguments. Each dialogue starts from a particular and contingent situation, but these are just *exempla* of the general case we are looking for. Characters and the reader's persuasion raises through the intellectual path followed by the arguments presented by the author. Philosophical speech is emotionless, so the argumentation will involve only rationality and will convince the reader that the philosophical life can help him not indulging in what make his life unreliable. Plato chooses the style that perfectly addresses to the philosophical life, namely the dialogical method, because it can contribute to free the soul from passions and needs, and also leads the interlocutor and the reader to the philosopher's truth; to understand that there is only a single way of life that can render him happy<sup>1</sup>.

To conclude, it is important to highlight that Nussbaum retrieves Ancient reflections to help Contemporary readers to enhance their political and ethical conceptions: Plato's philosophy cannot be helpful in re-thinking some political laws, because he leaves aside a proper analysis of human soul and demands. Human beings do not know what is the actual good for themselves, and only the philosopher can show them how to be happy. Plato does not regard the intrinsic value of free choice, so we must turn to Aristotle, since he understood the very importance of human (different) desires, and he criticized Plato and his idea of the good. Through his description of human rational deliberation, Aristotle shows how people can live virtuously without eliminating their emotion and needs. According to Nussbaum, democracy should enable every single desire to grow, because each demand deserve social recognition, so we can consider Aristotle more democratic than Plato, in that he recognizes the worth of human free choices in preferring a human good to another.

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<sup>1</sup>Nussbaum 2001, pp. 122-136.

### Nussbaum's Aristotle

According to Plato, the science of measurement is motivated by the desire to simplify and render tractable the bewildering problem of the choice among heterogeneous alternative, in order to remove vulnerability from human life<sup>1</sup>: through a science of measurement human beings could be rescued from the confusion of the concrete possibility to choice. In addition, he believed that passions cause many of our troublesome problems when we have to act, so they must be eliminated or rendered innocuous by an utter belief in the commensurability of all values<sup>2</sup>.

Aristotle harshly criticizes Plato's idea of the Good (*NE*, 1096a10 ff.), since he demonstrates that there is no such a principle, because men are accustomed to thinking that they can achieve *eudaimonia* through a virtuous life and, in addition, in possessing some different goods: the value of these goods is not fixed altogether independently of human needs and demands, and the practice of virtue is the ability to organize one's own life and arrange his resources in an effective way for the practical life (*NE*, 1109a24-26)<sup>3</sup>.

Plato's philosopher is not concerned with human matters, because he lives out of the cave, he dedicates his life to contemplate immutable truths and he pursues universal values neglecting concrete human needs: by contrast, for Aristotle, in the domain of ethics, the *particular* has the priority over universal principles: action is concerned with contingency, and general statements must harmonize with them (*NE*, 1107 a29-32). For him, '*practical wisdom is not scientific understanding*' (*NE*, 1142 a24); *to know* is not to devote one's own life to contemplation, but to comprehend how to act in concrete situations, namely to be virtuous (*NE*, 1109 b18-23). Human life is fragile and virtues can combine the vague realm of contingency with general rules providing people with the ability to live happily: they are human devices with which successfully meet the vulnerability of our condition.

It is interesting to point out that Nussbaum considers Aristotle more democratic than Plato, because he tries to construe an ethical theory that can successfully combine individual and political demands. By contrast, in Plato's philosophy, several desires lead the soul to corruption and disorder as it is in the democratic regime where needs tyrannically govern the man.

Once again, I will highlight that Nussbaum's reading stresses a peculiar way to meet Ancient reflections, because she combines her historical and philosophical analysis with the attempt to catch how they can enhance our conception of *democracy*. Indeed, the Aristotelian focus on several kind of needs seems to be the best device to succeed in considering and understanding other approaches to life, and that kind of *enlarged mentality* can help us in comprehending different points of view, and provide us with the ability to respect other people and their demands. Thus, we can define this kind of *mentality* as *democratic* or respectful of the differences.

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<sup>1</sup>Nussbaum 1990, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Nussbaum 1990, pp. 54-56.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 60-62.

## **Plato: the Invention of Philosophy**

If Williams and Nussbaum openly clashed each other only as regards Aristotle's philosophy, my aim will be to highlight the interesting reading that Williams develops about Plato's dialogical method, and its relation with the most important topic of his philosophical inquiry, namely ethics: through Williams' reflections, I will show that also Plato's can be considered democratic compared to Nussbaum description<sup>1</sup>.

Many philosophers write treatises, but Plato wrote dialogues, and because they are dialogues, there is something more and different that can be derived from them: they are an invitation to thought, because no character draws definite conclusions, and problems are presented starting from a question<sup>2</sup>.

As Williams maintains, Plato has inquired all philosophical field, but his most serious reflections were about ethics and politics, and his dialogical method addresses very well to its content.

In different dialogues, Plato depicts the life of the just person as the most happy, but there are people for whom the best life would be that of a ruthless self-interest: two characters in Plato's dialogues express this view, Callicles and Trasymachus<sup>3</sup>.

Callicles' speeches offer a powerful challenge both to the life of justice and to the activity of philosophy, as contrasted with rhetoric and the political life. Philosophy is a charming thing, but if someone has great natural advantages, and he engages in philosophy far beyond the appropriate time of life, he will not have experience in human desires, so when he will venture into some private or political activity, he will become a laughing stock (*Gorgias*, 483e–486d).

Williams notices that Socrates refutes Callicles only by forcing him into a position which he has no reason to accept: he ends up defending a greedy form of hedonism, that in Callicles reflection, this was not supposed to be the idea. The unjust man was supposed to be a rather grand and powerful figure, whom others, if they were honest, would admire and envy, but he has ended up in Socrates' refutation as a morally repulsive man whom anyone would disdain<sup>4</sup>.

According to Williams, Plato thinks that without applying to people any idea of value, there will be no basis for any kind of admiration, and if Callicles wants to still think of himself in terms of the *kalon*, he will have to hold on to something more than a bare egoism which by itself offers nothing for admiration. At the same time, Plato himself believes something that goes beyond that only a just life can offer structure and order to make any life worth living: he is aware that the just philosopher portrayed in the *Gorgias* could never be a political leader, but, according to him, *eudaimonein* stands for *eu prattein*, thus if the philosopher would like to be happy, he must be engaged in

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<sup>1</sup>I will follow Williams' analysis in Williams 2006 of Plato's characters and dialogues.

<sup>2</sup>Williams 2006, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup>Ivi, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup>Ivi, pp. 104-105.

the political realm; he must *politeuesthai*. This is what the *Republic* is meant to show, that the philosophical, namely the just life, is the best worth living.

Thrasymachus, the other enemy of justice has been defending the idea that if a person has a reason to act justly, it will always be because it does somebody else some good<sup>1</sup>. This leads naturally to the idea that justice is not so much a device of the strong to exploit the weak: this reflection is voiced by Glaucon and Adeimantus that want Socrates to demonstrate that justice is not only a second best. An adequate defense of justice, Plato implies, must show that it is rational for each person to want to be just, and the suggestion of Glaucon and Adeimantus fails this test: if someone were powerful and intelligent and well enough placed, *i.e.* Callicles' tyrant, he would have no interest in justice, thus what Socrates is required to show is that justice is prized for its own sake.

Why Plato put the standard for the defense of justice so high emerges only after one has followed the whole discussion of the *Republic* that considers justice both in the individual soul and in the city. A just person is the one in whom reason harnesses the other two parts of the soul, and the unique that can govern the city. In addition, to remain just he certainly needs to see justice as a good in itself and he will be able to do this, since his education will give him a philosophical understanding of the good and of the reason for which justice represents the proper development of the rational soul.

According to Williams, in the *Republic*, Plato hoped to have answered the question about the transmission of virtue from one generation to another: it could be brought about only in a just city, and a just city must be one in which the authority of reason is represented politically by a class of guardians who have been educated in philosophy. In one sense, the foundation of a just city is supposed to be the final, the only answer to the question of how to keep justice alive.

In the *Republic*, Plato properly faces Callicles' challenge showing that philosophy can help people to live a life worth living: the philosopher can harnesses his desire to the correct object of love, namely the justice, and he can govern a city where everyone can live an accomplished life exercising his own task.

As it happened through Nussbaum's reflections about Aristotle, we can be helped by Williams' reading to broaden our conceptions about what is a democratic interplay: writing the *Republic*, Plato enriches reader's conceptions about justice, showing its intrinsic value, and the dialogical form urges him to thinking about this topic *from different points of view* by his own self<sup>2</sup>.

### **Plato's Dialogue in Williams' Reading**

Plato never forgets that the human mind is a very hostile environment for goodness and justice, and he takes it for granted that some new imaginative

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<sup>1</sup>Williams reads the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* as they were subsequent.

<sup>2</sup>My will be to define a possible democratic trait of Plato's dialogical method, but not to hold that the dialogues are led democratically, since most of the time, the author want to suggest his conclusion and uses his rational arguments to show his truth.

device, may be needed to keep it alive. A treatise could not actually reach the mind of the reader, by contrast,

*'the dialogues [...] do not offer the ultimate results of Plato's great inquiry. [...] There are many statements of Plato: how our lives need to be changed and of how philosophy may help to change them. But the action is always somewhere else, in a place where we, and typically Socrates himself, have not been. The results are never in the text before us'*<sup>1</sup>.

Plato thought that pure studies might lead one to transform his way of life, but he never thought that the materials or conditions of such a transformation could be set down in a theory, or that a theory would explain the most serious thing that we need to know to live well. So the dialogues do not present us with a statement of what might be most significantly drawn from philosophy, because the answer just *emerges*. Plato believed that the final significance of philosophy for one's life comes out from its activity, namely the ongoing dialogue with one's own self and with other people about ethical and political matters.

In addition, Williams cleverly points out that, for Plato, the question about persuasion is a question about the relation between philosophy and politics, namely philosophy itself and its involvement with a persuasive method: philosophy as an *activity* is supposed to be shared, and one of Plato's repeated demands on that activity, particularly in his more authentically Socratic *persona*, is that it should consist of a dialogue and not in a monologue, and a dialogue is quintessential *exchange* between the interlocutors themselves and, mainly, between the author and his reader: the former leads the latter to consider ethical and political problems from several points of view, and he helps him to reach a sort of democratic, namely an open and critical, comprehension of them<sup>2</sup>.

## **Result and Discussion**

Nussbaum and Williams disagree in describing Aristotle and Plato's proposals, but their analysis of these two philosophers can help us to enhance our conceptions about what is the good human life and what we conceive as a democratic interplay: according to Nussbaum, Aristotle highlights the importance to consider several goods in order to live an accomplished life. He depicts our condition, our limits, and the possibility for men to be *eudaimones* considering different human needs and demands. In Nussbaum's view, Aristotle is more democratic than Plato, in that the former voices different ethics, unlike the latter that, with his dialogical method, seems to provide us with the only

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<sup>1</sup>Williams 2006, pp. 178-179.

<sup>2</sup>Williams 1995, pp. 156-157.

one device to reach that single good able to give a certain kind of happiness that lasts forever as it is in the *Symposium* (206a).

By contrast, Williams highlights the importance of Plato's dialogical method to inquiry how one should live. Through his analysis, we also have seen that Plato's method could be considered *democratic* if we focus our attention on *the reader* of the dialogues, in that it urges him to deeply delve into the ethical arguments analyzed. According to Williams, through his dialogues, Plato shows how a philosopher, namely anyone who wants to take care of individual and public life, actually thinks, and what is the best method to meet the domain of ethics and politics, namely the dialogue. Indeed, at the end of the argumentation, the reader could argue if the philosopher has succeeded in construing his just society and life, but he has also been urged to thinking deeply about what should be the just and virtuous life. Plato voices different ethics and tries to find a solution for moral problems suggesting his answer and exhorting the reader to follow his example: the true philosopher dialogues with his own self and with other citizens trying to find what is the best life to live paying heed to the different proposals discussed by people that are debating with him.

In Nussbaum's view, Plato's dialogical method undermines the democratic interplay and the possibility to seek what is the good life for human beings, since it leads the reader to understand the philosopher single and immutable truth about justice and the ethical behavior. By contrast, thanks to Williams' reading, it could be considered the very device for a democratic interplay, where for *democratic* I mean the ability to understand others point of view in order to achieve an enlarged mentality on ethical and political matters. Indeed, reading Plato's dialogues, the reader is urged by the characters to thinking about moral problems and to finding some solutions: on one hand, Plato suggests his answers trough the different voices on the stage; on the other hand, the reader himself should value Plato's conclusions and try to draw his own.

Thus, I can conclude that thanks to Williams' reflections, we can find some democratic features in Plato's dialogical method, and Nussbaum can adopt it as a good device to voice different ethical demands. If Aristotle can show us that a man needs several goods in order to be happy, Plato can display how different ethics can interact; how different voices that want different goods can affects each other.

I can conclude that through Contemporary readings of Ancients philosophers, we can re-consider and enhance some of our ethical and political categories, especially, as we have seen, the conception of a democratic interplay could be.

In addition, in retrieving the Ancients, Nussbaum and Williams show us that it is a matter of a great significance to discover again the relation existing between ethics and politics, and to show and understand that philosophy and politics are two sides of the same coin: philosophy should not stand alone as it happens in the *Gorgias* (485d), but it must cut itself in human matters, trying to portray a life that could be defined good, happy and just at the same time; helping to improve the ethical behavior along with the public life.

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