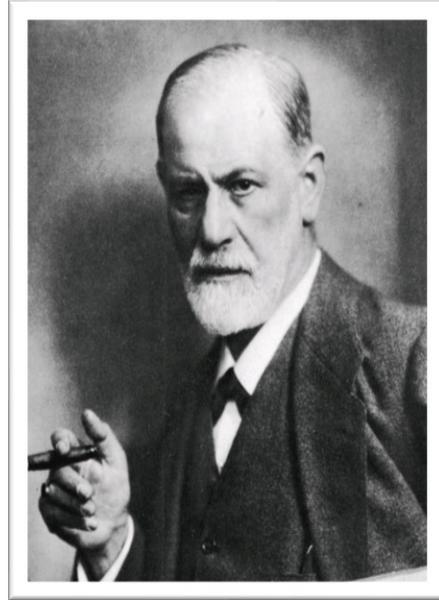
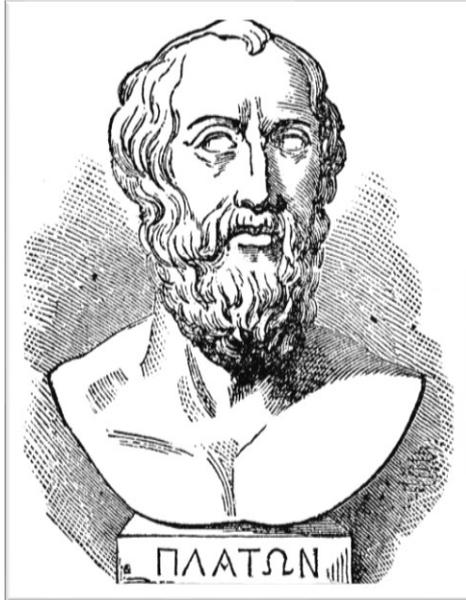


As if Plato had read Freud

The Onto-anthropologic Origin of Tyranny



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One of the main tasks of Plato's *Politeia* is to understand how tyranny comes to be. Plato, after the living lesson hardly learnt with and by the process that led Socrates to what the former considered to be a most unjust damnation and politically obligatory death, knew that tyranny is no deed of the gods, no ill-fated cosmic doom, but the fruit of a human option, an ethic and political one. Tyranny is the act of Man and of Man alone.

The main disciple of the hemlock drinker understood human possibility of action as the ethic and political *topos* situated between two paradigmatic extremes: one of these was the *typos* embodied in the historic figure of Socrates, the man who died as a consequence of a mature life of dedication to common good, which he faithfully served to his last breath. The other extreme was the figure of the tyrant.

In the *Republic*, Plato introduces a concrete historical human entity to be manifested as the symbol of ethic and political perfection: his old master, the philosopher in constant pursuit of a greater level of human perfection. As to the opposite extreme anthropological model, though infamous examples of tyrants were not scarce, no one had a negative greatness comparable to the positive greatness of Socrates. Plato had to create a model, a kind of "idea" of the tyrant. Dramatically, he left that task to the narrative figure of Thrasymachus, a platonic transformation of the historical persona, dully suited to the finality of the *Republic*.

Thrasymachus defines the "typos" of the tyrant as the embodiment of what he considers to be true justice: "I affirm that the just is nothing else than the advantage

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of the stronger" (338c).² Justice is, therefore, nothing else than the rules and the action those rules allow and promote in accordance to the convenience of the one, preferably the only one, who holds power. The statute of the power holder improves in the direct measure of its proximity to absolute possession of the capacity to be the sole bearer of the staff of command. All others are and may be no more than slaves.

This is the most radical definition of tyranny and all phenomena historically related to it can and should be evaluated accordingly to it. The tyrant's conception of justice is that true justice resides in the utter universal injustice. The universal enslavement of humanity is the goal of the special political being portrayed by its Sophist advocate. Instead of universal common good there must be universal enslavement.

Under the political perspective portrayed by Thrasymachus, the tendency to tyranny is the driving force within all forms of government and in the end all forms of government will only find their fulfilment when that driving force meets with its "telos". Therefore, all forms of leadership of the fates of all peoples use the same method of deployment of power: "And each form of government enacts the laws with a view to its own advantage, democracy democratic laws and tyranny autocratic and the others likewise" (338e).³

The power holders allow themselves universal liberty and conform the political world to that possibility, as for the others: "and by so legislating they proclaim that the just for their subjects is what is for their – the rulers' – advantage and the man who deviates from this law they chastise as a law-breaker and a wrongdoer" (338e).⁴ This is precisely what Plato had seen happening to Socrates, sentenced and killed as an offender to the rules of the city. For this form of political thought, what the rules consist on, their inner quality, their sense of service, not to a part of the society but to the common good, does not matter.⁵

² PLATO, *The Republic*, Books 1-5, English translation by Paul Shorey, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 47.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ A most unfortunate historic case is the one perennially represented by the Nazi «Laws of Nuremberg» that formally initiated the reign of terror against undesired people and that are, in the sense

Plato, through the voice of the Sophist, defines once and for all the kern of *Realpolitik*: "it works out that the just is the same thing everywhere, the advantage of the stronger" (339a).⁶

It is not a bold risk to infer that, under the theory presented by Thrasymachus, there lurks the hypothesis that for each and every man the true great desire is to become the one tyrant and ruler of everyone, the godlike figure of the universal owner of people, their bodies and souls.

The menacing dark shadow of tyranny hangs over the whole ten Books of *Politeia*. In the tenth Book, Plato reveals what he considers to be the correct ending for such a practice and its practitioners: eternal doom, away from all possibility of salvation (615e),⁷ thus emphasising the need for a kind of life that contradicts in every act the mode of the tyrant. The work as a whole ends – disallowing the accusation of platonic pessimism – with a vow of hope. In the words of Paul Shorey's English translation: "we shall fare well", rendering the original "eu prattomen" (621d).⁸

Therefore, the question of tyranny is the question of the possible salvation or loss of the city. Though, as all other men, Plato could not totally escape the times and cultural environment in which he lived, the portrait he presents us of Man in the "myth of Er" (614b-621d) is not confined to an ethnocentric anthropological perspective, but is that of an universal model: what the soldier risen from the battlefield is sent to tell humanity is valid for all human kind, not just for the people of such or such city or time.

Tyranny corresponds to the perdition of the city. The *Republic* envisages a new idea of "paideia" that can promote a form of self-construction of the human being

defended by Thrasymachus, just laws for they were produced by the ones on the siege of power. The then contemporary foreign countries did agree with Thrasymachus: though possessing the capacity of annulling those laws and their makers they chose not to do it, thus blessing Hitler as a just holder of power, as a lawful tyrant.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 49. Of course, and without any danger of retrospective illusion, this is also the generic formulation of the Darwinian axis of natural development underlying the success of the evolution motion. One always takes great advantage from reading the classics.

⁷ PLATO, *The Republic*, Books 6-10, English translation by Paul Shorey, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, 2006, LXXIII, p. 499.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 520.

that transforms each one human entity into a being traveling along an unique path towards an individual royalty, in which every human being may be able of precisely living a life that can be classified as "eu prattomen", having "fared well", as well as Master Socrates.

It is not a question of something like the Aristotelian "mesotes", something totally absent in the final determination of the fate of Socrates. It is a matter of human dignity, something that knows no possible way of being measured. It is a quality innermost felt by each human being and which preservation or abandonment determines whether the rightly human ontology survives or not. Socrates never gave up on his, against all temptations of self-betrayal.

Thus, he affirmed himself as the champion of human dignity prevailing upon all forms of ethical and political degradation. Here dwells the fountain where Plato drank his inspiration for the prototype of the autonomous man, bound to no form of heteronomy: external, bearing the form of other man's tyranny; internal, in the form of the tyranny of passions, of desires.

The champion of heteronomy, of other people's heteronomy is the tyrant. Why is this human figure so fond of being dependent?

Plato blames this tendency on the corrupt "paideia" that was ministered to the young. In "Book IX", Plato studies "the tyrannical man himself – the manner of his development out of the democratic type and his character and the quality of his life, whether wretched or happy." (571a).⁹ The matter of the essence of democracy is not to be treated here, except the fact that Plato considers that it fosters certain kinds of desires, precisely the ones which assent to on the part of the youth lead to the path of tyranny.

This can be perceived when Plato affirms that: "In the matter of our desires I do not think that we sufficiently distinguished their nature and number"(571a).¹⁰ Plato will establish the path to tyranny on the grounds of human deep desirability:

"Of our unnecessary pleasures and appetites there are some lawless ones, I think, which probably are to be found in us

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 335.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

all, but which, when controlled by the laws and the better desires in alliance with reason, can in some men be altogether got rid of, or so nearly so that a few weak ones remain, while in others the remnant is stronger and more numerous"(571b-c).¹¹

Plato refers not to "pleasures and appetites" as a whole, but immediately selects the "unnecessary" ones: it is on the non-necessary part of human desirability that the inclination to tyranny stands. This tendency seems to be universal. So, it is apparent that in every human being ("men" translates the Greek "anthropos") there are lawless unnecessary pleasures and appetites that, when not controlled, lead people to tyranny. The possibility of control exists only through the means of the action of the laws, better desires and reason.

These three integrated items summarize both Socratic ethic and political teachings and Socratic anthropologic action.

And the renewed lesson is very clear: as all human beings seem to be subjects of superfluous desirability, only the rational ruling of that desirability can avoid the metamorphosis of anyone human being towards the extreme human beast, the tyrant. This is a transcendental platonic finding.

Thus, without the inner rule of reason, separating necessary desirability from unnecessary one, thus immediately killing the perverse impetus at its birth, human beings transform themselves into human beasts.

One has to remember that Plato is at the top of a tradition that knows in its flesh the dangers and consequences of anomic chaotic existence: everything is preferable to chaos – the absolute lawlessness, the impediment to human life. For Plato, it is clear that the great transcendent natural or super-natural non-human forces of the cosmos are humanly not possible to be controlled. The evil produced by these forces upon humanity is a for ever uncontrollable reality.

But it is also very clear that human forces are totally within the grasp of human power, should this be logically and reasonably put into action. Evil produced by human action can be controlled and should be controlled by human action.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

This evil starts with the coming to being of the unnecessary lawless desires and it is through the proper orderly – cosmic – ruling of such desires that human evil produced by human beings can be averted.

What are these desires?

Plato answers:

"Those, said I, that are awakened in sleep when the rest of the soul, the rational, gentle and dominant part, slumbers, but the beastly and savage part, replete with food and wine, gambols and, repelling sleep, endeavours to sally forth and satisfy its own instincts."(571c).¹²

Plato tells us that the necessary desires, the ones that constitute the driving force within people's actions which contribute to their "well faring", both individual and as a "polis", are the rational ones, the ones that are "logically" (from "logos") acceptable and accepted by an awakened humanity, those that are compatible with the guidance needs of strict "well faring".

Those are the ones that may come to the light of day, to the condition of awakened for those are the ones compatible with the – also absolutely necessary – non-chaotic cosmic and human life within cosmos, its only place of possibility, logically and ontologically. Humanity is not possible within a frame – that would be a non-frame – of "alogia". The unnecessary desires are producers of "alogia", therefore they are not passible of daylight presentation. Their place is in the darkness, symbol of the lower places, neighbouring Tartarus.

Like all pro-chaos forces, the cosmically undesirable desires should be relegated to the deepest, wherefrom they could never emerge.

But, humanly, they do not inhabit a non-return place. They lurk in the shades of the soul, waiting for the daylight guards to retire, immediately emerging and causing their devastating effects.

What effects are these? Again, Plato serves us a diamantine answer:

"You are aware that in such case there is nothing it will not venture to undertake as being released from all sense of shame and all reason. It does not shrink from attempting to lie

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 335 and 337.

with a mother in fancy or with anyone else, man, god or brute. It is ready for any foul deed of blood; it abstains from no food, and, in a word, falls short of no extreme of folly and shamelessness." (571c-d).¹³

This very important piece of Plato's thought could and should be the object of a great debate. Here is not the place for it. Nevertheless, one aspect has to be stressed: the example of the action towards the mother is transcendently symbolic of the absolute of the difference between a "necessary" and a "non-necessary" desire and its derived political application. The problem is not a sexual one: Plato does not criticise the sexual impulse (*Symposium* is quite clear about Plato's view on the matter), but relates "necessary" exertion of sexuality with "non-necessary one". The one that appears in the platonic example is the latter. But the contrast remains: only a fool, and Plato is no fool, would dispute the general necessity of sexual activity for humanity. But is it a necessary act of sexual activity to "lie with" one's mother?

One also has to remember that Plato was a man who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of Hellenic poetry: he knew very well the story of Oedipus. And this story was no mere "story", but a major narrative symbol, a landmark not just of Greek culture, but of Greek identity. To "lie with" one's mother is no faint anecdotic mention, but a paragon of cosmic disruption of the axis that permitted human existence, precisely as an integrated cosmic sub-part. To do that is to *annihilate order*, not in a social sense, but in an ontological one, the one that means the difference between possibly having the presence of humanity or not.

The tyrant is the lawless one who does in daylight what the law abiding only dream of, and, having thus dreamt, ostracise such dreams to where they should be, some kind of human soul's Tartarus.

Plato not only does not question the existence of these desires and their dream-wise manifestation, he emphasises their presence, but, instead of being complacent towards them, envoys them to the trashy place where they belong. Only thus can

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 337.

political-cosmic order be maintained, permitting human life and human "well faring".

This existence of "non-necessary" detrimental desires is transcendental to humanity, as one can perceive when Plato affirms:

"This description has carried us too far, but the point that we have to notice is this, that in fact there exists in every one of us, even in some reputed most respectable, a terrible, fierce and lawless brood of desires, which it seems are revealed in our sleep." (572b).¹⁴

Plato affirms that the existence of "a terrible, fierce and lawless brood of desires" is transcendental to humanity. No one escapes it. These desires, asleep when "the rest of the soul, the rational, gentle and dominant part, slumbers" (571c),¹⁵ when rationally uncontrolled, awake, rise to the surface of the soul, expressing themselves as dreams, erotic dreams, conceiving this Eros as the driving force permeating all desirability, either "gentle" or "fierce".

The lawless desires, if let loose, naturally evolve to a path ending in a model of life that constitutes the prototype of tyranny and the tyrant. Again, in Plato's words (574e-575a):

"[...] the opinions that formerly were freed from restraint in sleep, when, being still under the control of his father and the laws, he maintained the democratic constitution in his soul. But now, when under the tyranny of the ruling passion, he is continuously and in waking hours what he rarely became in sleep, and he will refrain from any food or deed, but the passion that dwells in him as a tyrant will live in utmost anarchy and lawlessness, and, since it is itself sole autocrat, will urge the polity, so to speak, of him in whom it dwells to dare anything and everything in order to find support for himself and the hubbub of his henchmen [...]"¹⁶

Plato perceives within the frame of human psychological structure a deep and in itself non-controllable reservoir of desires, that remind the very old primitive Chaos and its volcanic erotic primordial expression; a manifest crowd of desires controlled

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 339.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 337.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 349.

by authority, symbolized in the person of the father and other political law-holders; a firstly non-manifest host of desires, founded on the chaotic ones, that manifest themselves just when there is no no-autonomic authority, but that, when all law and order are gone, manifest themselves all the time, thus producing that which by definition is the tyrant.

So the point here is not a relation between the champion of autonomy – conquered in the end through an agonic experience of suffering – Oedipus and his parents, in any degree of consciousness, but the relation between all human beings and their desires in accordance to the possibility of common good. The sole fulfilment of all the desires of the one, the tyrant, immediately necessitates the impossibility of the fulfilment of all other people's lawful desires.

The path to tyranny consists on giving way to the transcendental human desirability without any restraint. There are laws and rules and proper authorities – the ones who do not vent perverse desires – to avoid the manifestation of the desires that are not compatible with the existence of common good.

That which is the life of all human beings in the form of desire, if not controlled by a *super-me*, embodied in the various forms of law and law enforcers, will necessarily transform *me*, my being in act, my first person in being, my "*eimi*", into a tyrant.

In a very brief way, this is how Plato could have read Freud.

ABSTRACT

In *Politeia*, Plato analyses the types of human desirability, showing that there are perverse desires, detrimental to the possibility of the existence of common-good. The paragon of human perversity is the tyrant, precisely the one whose "paideia", annulling the corrective political instances – the "super-me"–, lead to an absolute hold of power, enslaving all other human beings. Briefly, this is how Plato read Freud.

KEY-WORDS

Plato, Freud, desires, tyranny, common-good.