

GUIDO CUSINATO

AT THE ORIGIN OF EVIL:
AMATHIA AND EXCESSIVE *PHILAUTIA*
 IN A PASSAGE OF PLATO'S *LAWS*¹

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1. An extraordinarily important passage

1.1. Excessive philautia as the greatest of all evils

In a little explored and often misunderstood passage of the *Laws*, Plato has the Athenian stranger say:

The most serious evil innate in souls of most men is one for which everybody has forgiveness towards himself and so never contrives a way of escaping (πάντων δὲ μέγιστον κακῶν ἀνθρώποις τοῖς πολλοῖς ἔμφυτον ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἐστίν, οὗ πᾶς

¹ I wish to thank Fulvia de Luise, Donald R. Morrison, Linda Napolitano Valditara, Livio Rossetti, Alessandro Stavru and Gherardo Ugolini, with whom I had the pleasure of discussing this paper.

αὐτῷ συγγνώμην ἔχων [731ε] ἀποφυγὴν οὐδεμίαν μηχανᾶται). It is the evil indicated in the saying that every man is by nature ‘his own best friend’, and that it is perfectly proper for him to have to be such (τοῦτο δ’ ἔστιν ὃ λέγουσιν ὡς φίλος αὐτῷ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος φύσει τέ ἐστιν καὶ ὀρθῶς ἔχει τὸ δεῖν εἶναι τοιοῦτον). But the truth is that the cause of all errors, on each occasion for each man, arises through the excessive love of self (τὸ δὲ ἀληθεία γε πάντων ἀμαρτημάτων διὰ τὴν σφόδρα ἑαυτοῦ φιλίαν αἴτιον ἐκάστῳ γίγνεται ἐκάστοτε); he who loves is blind therefore to what he loves (τυφλοῦται γὰρ περὶ τὸ φιλούμενον ὁ φιλῶν περὶ τὸ φιλούμενον) (*Lg.* V 731d-e; transl. Saunders modified).

At least four notions are implied here: *a*) excessive self-love is the greatest of all evils; *b*) in every human being, there is a natural and legitimate tendency to *philautia*; *c*) as a matter of fact, however, this tendency, which is *per se* positive, often degenerates into an excessive and violent feeling; *d*) the origin of every error (*hamartia*) can be traced back to this excessive and violent form of *philautia*.

In Plato’s previous dialogues, the origin of evil is often linked to an “epistemological” limit, in the sense that the ultimate origin of evil is «ignorance» (see, for instance, *Euthd.* 281c-e).² Now, in the *Laws*, ignorance is instead traced back to «excessive self-love» (*Lg.* V 732a). Excessive self-love is not merely an epistemological deficiency, as is the case with ignorance, but implies a lack of feeling and loving and, therefore, also an axiological deficiency. The shift from the epistemological to the axiological perspective involves overcoming the famous thesis of Socratic intellectualism which follows from the Aristotelian reading of the *Pro-*

² See also, for instance: *Ap.* 29b; *Tht.* 176c; *Hp. ma.* 296a; *Alc.* I 118a. In the *Phaedo*, this epistemological limit is traced back to the influence of the body: the bodily sensations of pleasure and pain provide the «nail to revent the soul to the body», leading it to believe that «truth is what the body says it is» (*Phd.* 83c-d; transl. Grube 73). In the *Protagoras*, Plato also attributes the greatest ignorance to the influence of the body: «this is what “being overcome by pleasure” is – ignorance in the highest degree (*amathia*)» (*Prt.* 357e; transl. Lombardo & Bell 786). In the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato overcomes the dualist perspective by introducing the tripartite theory of the soul. Thus, the negative influence of the body ceases to play the central role it had in the *Phaedo*, so that the origin of evil is now sought directly in the soul – as in the *Sophist*, where it is linked with ignorance and wickedness (*Sph.* 228d).

tagoras.³ If the origin of ignorance lies in an excessive *philautia*, a purification (*kàtharsis*) from epistemological ignorance alone is no longer a sufficient condition for being virtuous, but it is necessary to also take into consideration the axiological lack of excessive *philautia*. In other words, an axiological conversion is needed to shed new light on the *tèchne tês periagoghês* whereby the prisoner in the cave looks away from the perspective of *dòxa* (*R.* VII 518d). According to Plato, this conversion does not occur on the merely intellectual level but is rooted in and nourished by the erotic affective sphere. It puts into question the purely cognitive and repressive conception of emotions themselves.

1.2. The distinction between «self-love» and «excessive self-love»

Given the relevance of this passage, it is surprising that only few scholars have analysed it so far. Moreover, even those who have done so have misunderstood it, failing to grasp the axiological difference between *philautia* – legitimate self-love – and its degeneration into an excessive feeling. Such is the case in the *Platon-Handbuch* edited by Christoph Horn, where Plato's condemnation of *philautia* as a whole is taken for granted and, hence, the axiological difference introduced in this passage is overlooked.⁴ A similar interpretation can also be found in Julia Annas, who claims that, for Plato, the greatest of all evils is not a violent and excessive form of *philautia* but *philautia* itself.⁵ In her essay on evil in Socrates and Plato, Sophie Grace Chappell observes: «Plato never re-

³ Compare *Prt.* 352b1-c1, and 352c1-2 with Aristotle *EN* VII 2-3, 1145b21-27, 31-34, 1147b14-17, and *EE* VIII 1 (V 13) 1246b32-36 (see also *MM* II 6, 1200b25-29).

⁴ In the entry on Plato's concept of «love» it is stated that by *philautia* Plato actually means *tò sphòdra philèin hautòn*: «Die Liebe zu sich selbst (*philautia*), die bei Aristoteles zur Grundlage aller Liebesbeziehungen zu anderen wird (*EN* 1168a28-1169b2), spielt bei Platon nur eine untergeordnete Rolle und wird als „übergroße Selbstliebe“ (*to sphodra philein hauton*) explizit kritisiert (*Leg.* V 731d-732b)» (Ebbersmeyer 2017, 307).

⁵ «Plato sees as the root of most evils in human life [...] *philautia* or love of self» (Annas 2017, 68). The only time Annas mentions the whole expression «excessive self-love» is when she translates the passage τὴν σφόδρα ἑαυτοῦ φιλίαν word for word from the Greek; immediately after that, though, she returns to the expression «loving ourselves», leaving out again the adverb σφόδρα (Annas 2017, 112-113).

jects the thesis in *Protagoras* 345e that vice, evil, is ignorance: he is still explicitly defending that thesis at the time of the much later *Timaeus* (86d5-e1) and *Laws* (731c2)» [Chappell 2018, 157]. In this way, Chappell also fails to grasp the novelty of this passage as she limits herself to tracing back the problem of *kakòn* to ignorance. Ultimately, thus far, this passage has been read through the distorting lens of the dominant interpretation, which acknowledges the importance of *philautìa* only to Aristotle's philosophy and ascribes a merely reductive and negative meaning to Plato's own concept of *philautìa*.⁶

Once Plato's criticism against an excessive and violent form of *philautìa* is blurred with that against *philautìa* itself, it becomes easy to regard Plato as a forerunner of Augustine's distinction between *amor sui* and *amor Dei*. On this point, an author of the calibre of John M. Rist argues: «Perhaps it is no accident that in the succeeding book of the *Laws* – and uniquely there – Plato makes the remarkably Augustinian suggestion that an excessive self-love (*philautia*) is a basic cause of moral evil (5.731d)» [Rist 2012, 237]. By overlapping of “excessive self-love” and *philautìa*, Rist ends up attributing to Augustine the opposition between “excessive self-love” and *amor Dei*. Yet in Augustine's text there is no mention of an “excessive” *amor sui*: the contrast lies instead between *amor sui* and *amor Dei*.⁷ Again, it is taken for granted that for Plato “excessive self-love” and “self-love” are one and the same thing.

What Plato disputes is actually a solipsistic form of *philautìa* which is typical of the tyrant, who tries to achieve self-referential happiness to the detriment of his fellow citizens.⁸ But Plato also envisions a fully legitimate *philautìa* that converges with the happiness of others and the development and the good of the *pòlis*.

⁶ It is interesting to notice that Socrates is often associated with the paradigm of «*egoistic eudaimonism*». For a criticism against this interpretation see, for instance, Ahbel-Rappe 2012.

⁷ «Fecerunt itaque civitates duas amores duo, terrenam scilicet amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei, caelestem vero amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui» (Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XIV 28).

⁸ In the proem of Book V of the *Laws*, it is maintained that the wicked man also relates to others, yet by surrounding himself with other wicked people, which leads to his conviction (728b).

1.3. The refutation of Callicles' egotism as a "cancer" of the soul

Needless to say, Plato had already levelled criticism against egotism prior to the *Laws*. Suffice it to recall Socrates' replies to Callicles and Thrasymachus in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, which only refer to exceptional individuals characterised by violent passions such as tyrants. In the passage of the *Laws* under discussion, instead, the claim against egotism refers to a pathology common to many people and takes on new crucial philosophical importance.

In the *Gorgias*, Callicles advances two theses: *a)* by law of nature, the strong subjugate the weak, while human laws are conventions contrary to nature that are desired by the weak only for self-protection; *b)* the tyrant's way of acting is the true model of happiness, which can be embodied only by those who, being the strongest, can satisfy all their desires.

The refutation of these two theses takes place neither in the *Gorgias* nor the *Republic*. In the first dialogue, Socrates' reply reported by Plato is not persuasive to exceedingly egoistic people such as Callicles,⁹ because it does not go beyond an attempt to moralise them. In the second, Plato tries to support Socrates' virtuous effort against Thrasymachus by referring to the normative framework of the state.¹⁰ At *Lg.* 731c-732c instead, such refutation is successfully carried out. Compared to the *Gorgias*, the argument is much more reliable and convincing. Plato starts from the famous thesis that «no man on earth would ever deliberately embrace any of the supreme evils» (731c; transl. Saunders 1414). After that, however, he does not limit himself to a mere moralistic exhortation: he provides an anthropological foundation, adding that the unjust man deserves pity because he suffers from evil and thus is a sick man who needs to «find a way of escaping» (731d-e; transl. Saunders 1414).

⁹ As Fulvia de Luise points out, the negative outcome of the comparison and, above all, the high level of internal coherence of the egoistic models of happiness and virtue that Socrates' adversaries defend lead one to think that Plato considers the Socratic strategy of moralizing individuals as substantially weak, on both the psychological and political level (cf. de Luise 2021b, § 7).

¹⁰ The solution put forward by Plato in the *Republic* is to seek the conditions of possibility for justice by abandoning the attempt to act through individual morality and moving towards a re-founding of the *polis* (cf. de Luise 2021b, § 7.1).

Eventually, the Athenian stranger identifies a specific pathology, that of *excessive philautia* (731e). The moralistic exhortation, which still echoes in the *Gorgias*, gives way to a precise diagnosis. If excessive *philautia* is the greatest of all evils, then Callicles is no longer a model of happiness, but rather of unhappiness. Moreover, his case is not the expression of an ineluctable law of nature, but rather a pathology to be treated.

1.4. Further development of the argument

At 731e, Plato detects in excessive and violent *philautia* a specific pathology of the human soul: a “cancer” that leads to a serious form of alienation. In the following lines, Plato describes the two main symptoms that arise from this egotism and indicates a way to heal from it:

a) First of all, excessive *philautia* results in a particular kind of blindness that is not only epistemological but also axiological. It leads to incorrect judgment of what justice (τὰ δίκαια), goodness (τὰ ἀγαθά), and beauty (τὰ καλά) are:

He who loves is blind in fact to what he loves, so that he badly judges the right things, the good things, and the beautiful things, deeming that he must always estimate what concerns himself before the truth (τυφλοῦται γὰρ περὶ τὸ φιλούμενον ὁ φιλῶν, ὥστε τὰ δίκαια καὶ τὰ ἀγαθὰ καὶ τὰ καλά κακῶς [732a] κρίνει, τὸ αὐτοῦ πρὸ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀεὶ τιμᾶν δεῖν ἡγούμενος). For he who wants to become a man of value must love neither himself nor his own things, but the right things, either they have been fulfilled thanks to himself or, all the more, thanks to someone else (οὔτε γὰρ ἑαυτὸν οὔτε τὰ ἑαυτοῦ χρὴ τὸν γε μέγαν ἄνδρα ἐσόμενον στέργειν, ἀλλὰ τὰ δίκαια, ἐάντε παρ’ αὐτῷ ἐάντε παρ’ ἄλλῳ μᾶλλον πραττόμενα τυγχάνη) (*Lg.* V 731e-732a; transl. Saunders 1414).

- b) The second consequence of excessive self-love is the upsurge of *amathia*, that is the presumption of knowing without actually knowing:

From this same error arises in everyone the idea that what is *amathia* in everyone seems to be wisdom (ἐκ ταύτου δὲ ἀμαρτήματος τούτου καὶ τὸ τὴν ἀμαθίαν τὴν παρ' αὐτῷ δοκεῖν σοφίαν εἶναι γέγονε πᾶσιν). Consequently, even though we do not know, so to say, anything, we believe we know everything, and not entrusting to others what we do not know how to do, but acting by ourselves, we are forced to make mistakes (ὄθεν οὐκ εἰδότες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν οὐδέν, οἰόμεθα τὰ πάντα εἰδέναι, οὐκ ἐπιτρέποντες δὲ [732β] ἄλλοις ἢ μὴ ἐπιστάμεθα πράττειν, ἀναγκαζόμεθα ἀμαρτάνειν αὐτοὶ πράττοντες) (*Lg.* V 732a-b, translation mine; see also the transl. Saunders 1414).

- c) Finally, after diagnosing this pathology and describing its two main symptoms, Plato shows, if not the remedy, the behaviour that should characterize those who are not suffering from excessive *philautia*:

Therefore it is necessary that every man escapes from loving himself excessively and that he always chases the one who is better than himself, without first making himself ashamed for this (διὸ πάντα ἄνθρωπον χρὴ φεύγειν τὸ σφόδρα φιλεῖν αὐτόν, τὸν δ' ἑαυτοῦ βελτίω διώκειν ἀεί, μηδεμίαν αἰσχύνην ἐπὶ τῷ τοιούτῳ πρόσθεν ποιούμενον) (*Lg.* V 732b, transl. Saunders 1414).

Hereafter, for reasons of space, I will only dwell on these last two points, with a brief mention of the first in paragraph 2.4.

2. *Monstrous subjectivity and kàtharsis of excessive philautìa and amathìa*

2.1. *From àghnoia¹¹ to amathìa*

According to the Plato of the *Laws*, at the origin of evil is excessive *philautìa*. Is there any contradiction between this thesis and the famous claim of Socratic intellectualism, which links evil to epistemological ignorance? We can tackle this question if we look at the distinction between *àghnoia* and *amathìa*. First of all, it is inaccurate to maintain that Socrates identifies the origin of evil with sheer ignorance. Just as in the *Laws* Plato distinguishes between legitimate «self-love» and «excessive self-love», in the previous dialogues Socrates differentiates between a legitimate lack of knowledge (*àghnoia*) and its degeneration into a lack of knowledge that claims to be knowledge (*amathìa*).¹²

According to Socrates, lack of knowledge (*àghnoia*) is a typical human condition that can either degenerate into the greatest of evils and become a “lack of knowledge that presumes to be knowledge” (*amathìa*) or, on the contrary, it can elevate itself to the Socratic “knowledge of not knowing” (I know that I know nothing). In other words, erotic knowledge bears in itself a propulsive desire to know and leads to *epimèleia heautoû*. *Amathìa* is harmful precisely because it hinders us from being aware of our lack of knowledge, and thus being “lovers of wisdom”. This awareness paves the way for Socrates’ atopic singularity. While *àghnoia* helps to become aware of one’s own lack of knowledge, which can lead to the desire to know, *amathìa* is an «ignorance in the highest degree» (*Prt.* 357e) that precludes the practice of philosophy and consequently also the intermediate erotic condition that is absent in the gods and characterises human beings. For «none of the gods loves wisdom or wants to become wise – for they are wise – and no one else who is wise already loves wisdom; on the other hand, no one who is ignorant (*amathèis*) will love wisdom either or want to become wise» (*Smp.* 204a; transl. Nehamas & Woodruff 1010). What is to be condemned, therefore, is not *àghnoia*,

¹¹ In order to avoid different transliterations of single terms within the volume, the Greek term ἄγνοια is rendered as *àghnoia*, i.e. according to the Italian phonetics, as announced at the beginning of the volume.

¹² In the *Sophist*, *amathìa* is considered as a degenerate form of *àghnoia* (*Sph.* 229c).

but *amathìa* (*Ap.* 29b; *Alc.* I 117c-118a), because it makes it impossible to “know that one knows nothing” and leads one to act without awareness of one’s own limits. *Amathìa* is a serious disease of the soul because it entails a form of axiological blindness¹³ that leaves us «deceived about matters of importance» (*Prt.* 358c; transl. Lombardo & Bell, 787) and about the most relevant evaluations concerning human existence.

However, in the *Apology* and other dialogues prior to the *Laws*, Socrates does not explain the causes of *amathìa* but rather limits himself to describing its effects. At 731e-732b of the *Laws*, instead, the Athenian stranger shows that *amathìa* is rooted in excessive *philautìa*. For this reason, the epistemological limit of *àghnoia* turns into an axiological one. With *amathìa*, one commits evil, not because one does not have enough information to understand how things stand, or because one has incorrect information or some other epistemological problem. Instead, one commits evil because one is axiologically blinded by an excessive *philautìa* that distorts the perspective on reality and condemns to the shadowy existence of *dòxa*. In terms of mere “quantity” of information, the *amathèis* can well be erudite and informed. Rather, it is from a “qualitative” or “axiological” point of view that their knowledge is limited.

2.2. *The expressivist turn and the question of singularity in ancient culture*

By criticizing excessive *philautìa*, Plato is already seeking an alternative model of subjectivity to Calicles’, one that would give rise to a form of self-awareness still unknown at the time. We must, however, keep in mind Charles Taylor’s warning against projecting our modern conception of subjectivity onto ancient culture.¹⁴ As he claims in *Sources of the Self*, it is only through the *expressivist turn*, which took place in modern times, that a subject came into being as one who realizes oneself through self-expression. Prior to this, the individual was limited to conforming with the paradigm predetermined by a universal reason

¹³ This concept also recurs in the already quoted passage *Lg.* 731e.

¹⁴ For an overview of discussions prior to Taylor on Plato’s conception of “selfconsciousness”, referring to Hegel, Mondolfo, Nestle and Snell, see Napolitano 2011.

[Taylor 1989]. Nevertheless, Taylor himself seems to forget this warning when, in the chapter dedicated to Plato, he assumes that for Plato «we are good when reason rules, and bad when we are dominated by *desidere*» [Taylor 1989, 115]. What does Taylor mean here by «*desidere*»? Is he not himself projecting onto Plato's thinking the categories of modern intellectualistic rationalism? How else can he come to the conclusion that for Plato desire, and therefore also *eroticism*, are necessarily linked to evil?

One can raise a similar objection to another notion mentioned by Taylor, namely that of reason. Indeed, Taylor appears to trace Plato's position back to a modern concept of reason, similar to the Kantian *Vernunft* or the Hegelian *Weltgeist*. By subjecting the entire ancient world to our concept of reason, Taylor fails to grasp some peculiar features of that world. His approach could maybe be viable for the Hellenistic period and the imperial age, but not for Socrates and Plato. In their thought, in fact, we can find the germs of an *erotically atopic* singularity that hardly fits into the modern concept of reason.¹⁵ Think, for instance, of the eulogy for Socrates given by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades notes that while individuals can normally be classified according to specific types (such as generals and statesmen), there are no concepts and words to describe Socrates. In Alcibiades' view, Socrates goes beyond any characterisation because he is a unique and unrepeatable singularity that cannot be compared to any other human being (*Smp.* 221c-d). Socrates is *àtopos*, as one cannot trace him back to a certain type of subjective form typical of his age. In fact, Socrates testifies to a new subjective being, and this is why he awakens so much interest in Kierkegaard, the philosopher of singularity *par excellence*. Socrates represents an atopic subjectivity that is already endowed with what, in modern times, we call moral consciousness. His mission consists in helping his interlocutors give birth to this new atopic subjectivity and become aware of its importance. But the Athenians did not realize its full extent and therefore did not know what to do with the Socratic atop-

¹⁵ I raised the issue of rethinking Plato's conception of subjectivity beyond Taylor's perspective in Cusinato 2014, 39-41. In this same direction, see the fundamental analyses provided by Rossetti 2020 on the relationship between subjectivity and self-esteem in Plato's philosophy.

ic subjectivity, let alone how to cultivate it. Consequently, the question concerning the rise of a new form of awareness and subjectivity was already present in the Socratic maieutics and in the Platonic critique of excessive *philautia*.

2.3. The breakdown of the “bicameral mind” and the birth of singularity

A more poignant perspective on the problem of the Greek conception of subjectivity can be found in a little-read text: *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976) by the American psychologist Julian Jaynes. It is certainly a pity that Jaynes does not discuss the theses put forward by Walter Friedrich Otto, who devoted much of his work to the problem of the gods in ancient Greece, as doing so would help to better understand the meaning of what Jaynes calls «voices». In fact, Otto points out that the relationship between the human and the divine does not result in the former's passive execution of an order: rather, the divine often manifests itself as an enhancement of abilities, faculties or characteristics that one already possesses. For instance, thanks to the intervention of the gods, Achilles is made stronger, Helen more beautiful, Odysseus more cunning and so on.¹⁶ Jaynes' argument therefore presents some obvious loopholes, partly stemming from the fact that he is not a classical philologist or historian of religions. However, the very fact that he is a psychologist allows him to explore an unusual perspective.

Today, hearing “voices” is considered a typical symptom of schizophrenia. However, up until about 3000 years ago, according to Jaynes, hearing “voices” was people's main source of orientation and motivation in life. At that time, the human mind was still divided into two parts: a directive part called “god”, and a subordinate part called “individual”. Since individuals had not yet achieved self-awareness, they blindly followed what the directive part of the brain told them to do through the hallucinatory messages and voices of the gods. Such voices were part of everyday experience and were able to effectively motivate and persuade every person's mind and will.

¹⁶ Here I follow Stavru's interpretation of Otto: cf. Stavru 2005.

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According to Jaynes, the last and most relevant document of this era is the *Iliad*: in it, the characters are incapable of introspection and do not see themselves as subjects responsible for their actions. Ultimately, they are not yet endowed with a free will¹⁷ and a self in the modern sense of the term, as their actions are directed by the gods. For example, Agamemnon replies to Achilles' accusations by denying any responsibility for stealing his lover, as it was Zeus himself who instigated him:

This is the word the Achaians have spoken often against me / and found fault with me in it, yet I am not responsible / but Zeus is, and Destiny, and Erinys the mist-walking / who in assembly caught my heart in the savage delusion / on that day I myself stripped from him the prize of Achilleus. / Yet what could I do? It is the god who accomplishes all things (*Il. XIX*, vv. 85-90; transl. Lattimore, 416).

And he concludes by saying «But since I was deluded and Zeus took my wits away from me, / I am willing to make all good and give back gifts in abundance» (*Il. XIX*, vv. 135-140; transl. Lattimore 417). After hearing this speech, much to our surprise, instead of drawing his sword in a fit of his famous wrath, Achilles considers Agamemnon's justification fully valid:

Then in answer to him spoke Achilleus of the swift feet: / “Son of Atreus, most lordly and king of men, Agamemnon, / the gifts are yours to give if you wish, and as it is proper, / or to keep with yourself. But now let us remember our joy in warcraft, / immediately, for it is not fitting to stay here and waste time / nor delay [...] (*Il. XIX*, vv. 145-150; transl. Lattimore 418).

It is only with the breakdown of the bicameral mind, which occurs in an era reflected in some sections of the *Odyssey*, that the individual gradually begins to acquire new awareness.

In my opinion, Jaynes' thesis is confirmed by the famous episode

¹⁷ However, it should be emphasised that in the Greek world the lack of free will did not necessarily imply not being free and therefore being passively hetero-directed. On these issues, cf. Stenzel 1956.

about Ulysses and the Sirens (*Od.* XII, vv. 151-200). Ulysses is compelled by the desire to listen to the Sirens' "voices" but, at the same time, knows that he cannot resist them. He thus decides to have himself tied to the mast of the ship and urges his companions to plug their ears with wax. The means thanks to which Ulysses manages to overcome this challenge is already the Socratic γνῶθι σαυτόν: Ulysses is aware of his own limits, although the thirst for knowledge that drives him, unlike Socrates, is boundless and induces him to the most reckless actions.

Being aware of his own limits, Ulysses knows that his will is not enough to resist the "voices" of the Sirens. In this episode, Ulysses faces the problem of distancing himself from the voices and not following them – a problem that other heroes such as Agamemnon did not have to deal with. When Ulysses has tied himself to the mast of the ship, it is as if he lowers himself into the bicameral mind in order to observe it, but without becoming enslaved to it. This objectification of and resistance to hallucinatory voices is probably one of the first attempts to escape the bicameral mind and inaugurate a more conscious form of subjectivity.

According to Taylor, Socrates and Plato are still immersed in the prehistory of subjectivity, at a time when there is no free will and the problem of expressing and realising one's singularity has not yet arisen. My claim is instead that Socrates and Plato, by inviting us to know ourselves and to take care of ourselves, were already practising a peragogical formation process typical of singularity – a process which in our contemporary age is in danger of being jeopardised.

It should be noted, however, that a kind of free will, independent of the gods, already existed in Greek antiquity. At the time of Socrates and Plato the breakdown of the bicameral mind led to a new model of subjectivity embodied by individuals like Calicles, who claimed they had complete free will. There is no doubt that the voices of the gods still played a role, as indicated, for example, by the reputation still enjoyed by the oracle of Delphi. However, they were already being countered by the voice of a self-infatuated with excessive *philautìa* and *amathìa* – a self not far removed from self-sufficiency and subjectivity typical of our times.

As Otto [2014] shows, the ancient Greeks never lost contact with the divine. Socrates' path to the new subjectivity was not based on the

will of a self-sufficient subject, as in modern times, but rather on a different way of relating to the divine. The *daimònion* described in Xenophon's *Apology* has many of the characteristics attributed by Jaynes to the voices of the bicameral mind: «whereas [some] call the sources of their forewarning “birds”, “utterances”, “chance meetings”, “prophets”, I call mine a “divine” thing (*daimònion*)» (Xen. *Ap.* 13).¹⁸ However, Otto also emphasises the differences with traditional Greek religion. Socrates describes his *daimònion* (the “daemonic sign”) as a private, singular and exclusive entity. It dwells only within his inner self, and is therefore “new” and different from the voices of traditional mantic arts. Precisely for this reason Socrates will be accused in 399 of having introduced *hètera daimònia kainà*, divine entities that are new and different from those known to his fellow citizens (Pl. *Ap.* 24c1). For the first time in the Greek world, with Socrates «everything is transposed into human interiority, even if at first this phenomenon is limited to an inner religiosity. The *daimonion* should also be considered in this context».¹⁹

With Socrates, the “voice” speaks to an inner dimension that did not exist before. This has a number of notable consequences for the development of a concept of subjectivity alternative to Agamemnon's as well as Callicles' and the modern self-sufficient subject. The first concerns the response of the Delphic oracle, according to which Socrates is the wisest of all men. This response has a particular echo in Socrates' inner life, since it is closely intertwined with the Delphic precept of «know thyself!». The oracle's response induces Socrates to become aware of the limits of human knowledge, and thanks to this new awareness Socrates inaugurates a new form of subjectivity. The second consequence concerns maieutics. Due to this new awareness, based on his “I know that I know nothing”, Socrates conceives of the philosophical exercise as a maieutic dialogue through which his interlocutors can give birth to a better self-awareness. In this way, a new awareness and a new subjectivity are also born in Socrates' interlocutor.

Socrates' effort is twofold: on the one hand, he aims to rethink his own consciousness through a different relationship with the divine, an attempt that will cost him the accusation of impiety; on the other hand,

¹⁸ See also *Mem* I 1, 3-4.

¹⁹ I am quoting Otto from Stavru 2005.

he criticises Callicles' egotism. Here arises what Kierkegaard, referring to Socrates, will call «singularity».

In modern terms, the problem is to get out of the Kantian «minority» (*Unmündigkeit*) without reaching the egotistic self-sufficiency of any possible “Callicles”. The self-referential self-sufficiency of *amathìa* is itself an expression of minority and should not be confused with a real and conscious autonomy of judgement. The *amathìa* of the egotistic self is in fact unconsciously submissive towards the dominant *dòxa*, so much so that it judges as desirable precisely what is commonly considered as such: honours, wealth and fame. More than *desire*, it is a compulsive *pursuit of pleasure* that has not yet been singularised [Cusinato 2014, 165]. The «demonic sign» is the first expression of a critical reason exercised in all directions, without exception; it is the first conscious form of critical distancing from both oneself and common sense. It is in this space that the new path of singularity begins.

2.4. Towards a different interpretation of shame in Plato

A problem that is closely connected to the emergence of subjectivity is that of shame (*αἰσχύνη*). As shown above, excessive *philautìa* at first determines a form of axiological blindness that results in «making us bad judges of justice (*τὰ δίκαια*) and goodness (*τὰ ἀγαθὰ*) and beauty (*τὰ καλὰ*)» (*Lg.* V 731e-732a; transl. Saunders 1414). This, in turn, makes *àghnoia* degenerate into *amathìa* (*Lg.* 732a-b). By preventing the Socratic “awareness of lacking knowledge”, *amathìa* precludes the philosophical exercise from which the atopic singularity originates. Life driven by *amathìa* is neither erotic nor philosophical nor atopically intermediate: rather, it corresponds to a subjectivity that is unable to adopt a critical attitude towards itself. The subjectivity of the *amathèis* cannot become aware of its own limits through the Delphic *know thyself*. This is why it turns out to be monstrous (cf. above § 2.1). Because of their axiological blindness, the *amathèis* fail to recognize their faults and ugliness: «For what's especially difficult about being ignorant (*ἀμαθία*) is that you are content with yourself, even though you're neither beautiful and good nor intelligent» (*Smp.* 204a; transl. Nehamas & Woodruff, 487; cf. *Lg.* 732a-b). More precisely, *amathìa* hinders a very peculiar type of shame,

namely the shame that can measure and indicate the level of the obscenity of one's own subjectivity. This kind of shame orients the care of the soul and, thus, acts not on a psychological but on an anthropogenetic level related to the singularity formation process.

The feeling of shame discussed by Socrates differs from the one considered in the classic distinction between shame and guilt culture [Dodds 1951; Williams 1993]. Dodds refers to 9th-century Homeric society and focuses on αἴδομαι understood as fear towards public opinion. What Socrates talks about, instead, is *aischýne*, such as the feeling of shame Alcibiades has only towards Socrates, for which not public opinion but one's conscience matters (*Smp.* 216 b-c)²⁰. Socrates' standpoint does not coincide at all with the dominant *dòxa*, nor does it intend to undermine Alcibiades' moral autonomy by inducing his sense of shame. On the contrary, it performs a cathartic function that is essential for the care of the soul, which is an indispensable premise for Alcibiades to learn to govern himself.

Claiming that Plato falls within the canon of shame culture subjected to the vision of the dominant *dòxa* means confusing Plato with those whom Socrates calls "sophists". Indeed, in Plato's view, one should not «follow the opinion of the many and fear it», but «that of the one, if there is one who has knowledge [...] and before whom we feel fear and shame (αἰσχύνεσθαι)» (*Cri.* 47d; transl. Grube, 139). Sophists worry about the dominant opinion. In *Gorgias*, Socrates reveals that sophists feel no authentic shame. They only fear that they might fail to correspond to the fame which they have cleverly built and on which their material fortune also depends. Their fear is something very different from a cathartic shame that applies to the "know thyself" precept. In fact, it inhibits the propulsive drive that originates from realizing that "one knows nothing". If I feel ashamed when others notice that "I know nothing", then I will do everything I can in order to hide it, so that I will shamelessly pretend to know. Without the modesty of the claim "I know nothing", instead of taking care of the soul, I rather conform my image to the canons of the dominant opinion by disguising my true nature with useless

²⁰ On this aspect and on the *Symposium*'s passage, see Napolitano 2018, 259-269 and 281-291.

burdens and incrustations and thus end up resembling the sea god Glaucus, covered with shells and seaweeds (*R. X* 611c-d).

2.5. Philosophy as kàtharsis through èlenchos and the function of shame

In the *Philebus*, *amathìa* is considered harmful because it goes in the opposite direction compared to the famous Delphic inscription and pushes towards not-knowing oneself (*Phlb.* 48c). In this light, we can understand Socrates' mission, which primarily consists in questioning his fellow citizens in order to purify them from *amathìa*. He aims at healing them of *amathìa* because it hinders them from becoming aware that the care of the soul is more important than the concerns about satisfying the lust for pleasure and wealth as well as about one's name and reputation (*Ap.* 28d-30b).

Authentic shame is not subject to the dominant *dòxa*, as the “shame culture” theory holds. Its function is not moralistic but anthropogenetic. It allows us to distance ourselves from the monstrous and obscene aspects in us. It thus shapes the physiognomy of singularity and guides its formation process. *Amathìa* is something more than simple non-knowledge. It is the driving force of a false *cura sui* that goes in the direction opposite to a true *epimèleia heautoû*. In other words, it is a form of excessive complacency towards oneself that fuels the egotistic Self. Like a cancer, it kills the soul from the inside and makes it a deformity similar to adipose tissue developing without restraint: if *amathìa* blinds the soul, there can be no spontaneous shame – the only reaction able to contain and cure this disease. Indeed, the *amathèis* can never feel shame because they are prisoners of an *egocentric bias*. Nevertheless, occasionally, when they are openly refuted from the outside, they may manage to overcome the self-deception resulting from *amathìa*. Only in this case can they recognize how obscene they are and thus experience the healing pang of shame.²¹

Plato's concept of *kàtharsis* (purification) has thus far been underes-

²¹ On the cathartic function of shame in Plato for the formation of personal identity, see Cusinato 2012, 269-270; de Luise 2021a.

timated and overlooked compared to that used by Aristotle.²² For Plato, *kàtharsis* is not limited to the purification from the body as described in the *Phaedo*. In the *Sophist*, in fact, the cathartic process already appears to be re-thought and re-modelled over and above the fear of the body still evident in the *Phaedo*. While the body can be purified through gymnastics (which purifies from ugliness or deformity) and medicine (purification from illness) (*Sph.* 229a), the soul can be purified through justice (purification from wickedness, understood as an illness of the soul) and through shame (purification from *amathìa*, understood as ugliness or deformity of the soul) (*Sph.* 230b-d).

Without the healing pang of shame, it is not possible to heal the soul, because «the soul [...] won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone, by refuting it, reduces it to an attitude of modesty (εἰς αἰσχύνην καταστήσας) and, by removing the opinions that interfere with learning, *manifests it as* cleansed (καθαρὸν ἀποφήνη)» (*Sph.* 230c-d; transl. White, 550, modified). Here, we are no longer dealing with a merely intellectual process. The *kàtharsis* described in the *Sophist* does not consist in the simple *logical recognition* of one's own errors and contradictions. Instead, it is a purification from one's own false opinions that takes place through the feeling of shame. Therefore, *kàtharsis* becomes the basis for the practice of transforming one's way of living.

A philosophical *kàtharsis* based on refutation (*èlenchos*) thereby takes shape. It brings us to distance ourselves both from a counterproductive overestimation of ourselves, or literally, our «inflated and rigid beliefs» about ourselves (*Sph.* 230c; White, 550), and from other false opinions. This *kàtharsis* goes on until it induces the interlocutor to feel ashamed and thus makes their soul ready for transformation. In this way, *kàtharsis* takes on the character of an erotic *paidèia*. The *kàtharsis* through *èlenchos*, which is «the principal and most important kind of cleansing (καθάρσεων)» (*Sph.* 230d; transl. White, 550), shapes the image of singularity by distancing itself from the obscene images of the Self. Therefore, this type of *kàtharsis* orients our attempts of «giving birth in beauty» (*Smp.* 206b; transl. Nehamas & Woodruff, 1014). Such *kàtharsis* does not occur through prescription, but dissuasion.

²² On the significance of Plato's notion of *kàtharsis* and its influence on the 20th-century issue of phenomenological reduction, cf. Cusinato 1999.

3. Excessive self-love from an anthropological perspective

3.1. Overcoming «excessive self-love» and following a maieutic exemplarity

The third section of Plato's argument (cf. § 1.4) deals with those who follow the example of those who are better:

For these reasons, then, it is necessary that every man avoids loving himself excessively, and be always loyal to his superior instead, without before making such a man feel ashamed (διὸ πάντα ἄνθρωπον χρὴ φεύγειν τὸ σφόδρα φιλεῖν αὐτόν, τὸν δ' ἑαυτοῦ βελτίω διώκειν ἀεί, μηδεμίαν αἰσχύνην ἐπὶ τῷ τοιούτῳ πρόσθεν ποιούμενον) (Lg. V 732b; transl. Saunders 1414, modified).²³

Even if he does not explicitly mention “exemplarity” in this text, Plato is likely referring to the example set by one's betters. This is what the previous passage also suggests: if we do not overcome *amathia*, as Plato has the Athenian stranger say, when we do «not leave to others what we don't know how to handle; we inevitably come to grief when we try to tackle it ourselves» (Lg. V 732b; transl. Saunders 1414, modified).²⁴

We ought to bear in mind that, for Plato, otherness is not something that emerges only after knowing oneself, but the other way around. In *Alcibiades I*, while discussing how to follow the Delphic «know thyself», Socrates points out that, in order to know our soul, we must first look into the soul of the other, just as we must look into another person's eye to see our own face reflected in them (*Alc. I* 132c-133c).²⁵ To

²³ In *Alc. I* we find the same invitation to *amathèis*: Socr.: “But when people don't think they know how to do something, they hand it over to somebody else, right?” Alc.: “Of course”. Socr.: “So the sort of people who don't think they know how to do things make no mistakes in life, because they leave those things to other people” (*Alc. I*, 117d-e, transl. Hutchinson 575).

²⁴ Recent studies have discussed the issue of exemplariness in Plato and Aristotle in relation to the notion of admiration. Cf. Irwin 1995, 195-197; Kristjánsson 2006; Zagzebski 2015, 206; Irwin 2015; Kristjánsson 2017.

²⁵ «I'm sure you've noticed that when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like in a mirror. We call this the 'pupil', for it's a sort of miniature of the man who's

know oneself means to look into a mirror, and this mirror is the pupil of another person. Only by reflecting oneself in another person's eye is it possible to follow the Delphic precept of *know thyself*. The *kàtharsis* through *èlenchos* directly involves the concept of otherness. Thus, it is not surprising at all that, in concluding the passage of the *Laws* under discussion, Plato thinks that the central mission of philosophy is to overcome the excessive *philautìa* which makes us blind to otherness. One would seek in vain such an explicit criticism against excessive *philautìa* in the Aristotelian *phrònimos*.

When interpreting the function and meaning of the other in *L.* 732b, we must carefully consider two possibilities. The first one concerns whether the example to follow can be considered as a way of overcoming excessive *philautìa*. This might seem a logical consequence of the whole argument, but Plato does not directly put it forward as such. Rather, he merely observes that, once purified from excessive *philautìa*, we are finally able to turn to those who are better than us. This is similar to the liberation of the prisoner in the allegory of the cave: can one free oneself alone, or is the maieutic presence of the other indispensable for one's liberation? A possible solution might involve the refutation (*èlenchos*) as described in the passage of the *Sophist* discussed in the previous paragraph. The intervention of the other is necessary because «the soul [...] won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone by refuting it reduces it to an attitude of modesty, by removing the opinions that interfere with learning» (*Sph.* 230c-d; transl. White, 550, modified). However, we can note that in the refutation of the *Sophist* the other imposes itself, while now, in the *Laws*, the other has to be sought before it can be followed. It is interesting to note that the problem of "choice" also concerns the daemon, since «your daemon or guardian spirit will not be assigned to you by lot; you will choose him» (*R.* X. 617e; transl. Grube & Reeve, 1220). The other's exemplarity enables an erotic *paidèia*, a *kàtharsis* through *èlenchos*, which seeks to awaken the *dàimon* maieutically. Its purpose is similar to our use of authority with children «until we establish a constitution in them» (*R.* X 590e; transl. Grube & Reeve, 1198). In other words, the purpose of

looking» (*Alc.* I 133a; transl. Hutchinson 592). On this passage, see also Napolitano 2007, 59-67.

maieutic exemplarity lies in planting the seed of a guiding principle in the soul of those who are transformed. Augustine will later call this seed the *inner master (magister interior)* from a Christian point of view.

The second possibility concerns whether the example to follow can be traced back to some authoritarian model. For instance, Plato maintains that it is wicked and shameful not to *obey* those we believe to be better than us (*Ap.* 29b). Moreover, he does not explicitly distinguish between *obedience to a leader* who se-duces (*ducere se*, that is to say, the one who leads away from one's own nature) and homogenizes, on the one hand, and *inspiration aroused by an example* that con-ducts (*ducere con*, that is, leads together) and differentiates, on the other. Nevertheless, there are various clues in favour of a different interpretation of exemplarity. Firstly, Plato invites us not to be ashamed (*Lg.* V 732b). In doing so, he suggests that, by turning to those who are better than us, we should not be ashamed to learn something new or to be purified from some fault.²⁶ From this perspective, the process is not *authoritarian* but *maieutic*. What we have here is neither the automatic reproduction of a model nor an uncritical transfer of knowledge. Moreover, Plato does not prompt us to turn to the idea of Good itself but, more humbly, to the “better” amongst the concrete individuals around us. Therefore, the issue at stake is neither pursuing an ideal paradigm, as is the case with the *mimesis* described in the *Timaeus*,²⁷ nor understanding an idea completely and apodictically, as is typical of *non-philosophical* erudition. Instead, what matters most is to follow an example that is not perfect and can be improved.

The reference to the other also applies retroactively to the two previous parts of the argument – namely *a)* axiological blindness, and *b)* *amathia* – and makes it possible to overcome the *egocentric bias*. *a)* Regarding axiological blindness, by attaching more weight to actions that come from oneself rather than from others, the individual proves incapable of identifying justice, goodness, and beauty (732a). *b)* Re-

²⁶ By inviting us to turn to those who are better, Plato resumes the Socratic technique of a maieutic *paidèia* as opposed to conformist imitation, of which we actually should be ashamed.

²⁷ Needless to say, the research literature on this topic is impressive: see, for instance, Napolitano 1994; Desclos 2000, 312-318; Napolitano 2007; Palumbo 2008, 302-333.

garding *amathia*, furthermore, the human beings suffering from it fail to see their own ignorance. In a delusion of self-sufficiency, they think they do not need to turn to the maieutic exemplarity of the other, with the consequence that, «thanks to not leaving to others what we don't know how to handle, we inevitably come to grief when we try to tackle it ourselves» (*Lg.* V 732b; transl. Saunders 1414).

In this passage of the *Laws*, we are already beyond the moralistic exhortation of the *Gorgias*. What is now required is a periagogical conversion on the axiological level that changes the perception of otherness. Again, a comparison is made with the education of children: «Extreme modesty, not gold, is the legacy we should leave our children», which can be obtained not by «rebuking» but by «practicing all your life what you preach to others» (*Lg.* V 729b-c; transl. Saunders 1412). Thanks to a periagogical conversion, which takes place not in response to a moralistic exhortation but to a virtuous example, one becomes excellent and therefore “better”. However, “better” does not imply a reference to an epistemological excellence that is counterposed to a greater knowledge (i.e., one is not better not because he is wiser, because true wisdom belongs only to the gods). Being “better” means being more virtuous. After all, in ancient Greek, *aretè* means not only virtue but also performative excellence. Moreover, if the most excellent example of virtue is Socrates, then this is a maieutic virtue: Socrates is better because he knows he knows nothing and has nothing to teach. What one can learn from Socrates' example is nothing more than the awareness of having no knowledge. Since it has nothing to do with excellence based on notions, Socrates' example cannot be reduced to a transfer of knowledge, but must be understood as a maieutic ability. When Socrates applies his maieutics, he does not aim at reproducing himself. His purpose is to induce his interlocutors to give birth to their own desire and to a better knowledge of themselves.

Thus, maieutic excellence is not a universal paradigm that applies equally to everyone. Whoever is better at maieutically helping one person deliver one's desire may not be good enough for someone else or may act in a different maieutic way depending on the interlocutor. The purpose of the maieutic example is not to produce copies but to bring out the interlocutor's singularity.

Still, the pivotal question remains: how is it possible to turn to those who are better if one is still blinded by excessive *philautìa*? In my view, a more careful reading of the entire passage 731e can be helpful:

The most serious evil innate in souls of most men is one for which everybody has forgiveness towards himself and so never contrives a way of escaping. It is the evil indicated in the saying that every man is by nature ‘his own best friend’, and that it is perfectly proper for him to have to be such. But the truth is that the cause of all errors, on each occasion for each man, arises through the excessive love of self; he who loves is blind therefore to what he loves (*Lg.* V 731d-e; transl. Saunders 1414, modified).

The unjust are those who overestimate themselves and think they are better than others because of a particular form of *axiological blindness*. Plato most likely refers here to an underlying axiological distortion. The unjust individual does not recognize the fundamental ontological equality between himself and others and, as a result, perceives the existence of the other as a shadow on the cave wall, that is to say, as an accidental, dispensable, and inferior existence.²⁸ The maieutic prerequisite for one to turn to someone better is that one can acknowledge her excellence without being jealous. On the contrary, as long as one keeps within excessive *philautìa*, one perceives any external value as a theft and an affront to oneself. In this way, one becomes vulnerable to the pangs of envy [Cusinato 2014, 409-415]. Excessive *philautìa* thus exposes human existence to envy: a feeling that, according to Plato, distinguishes between the non-divine and the divine.²⁹ Therefore, the question is not how to overcome excessive *philautìa* but rather how to prevent us from getting to that point. The weapon of maieutic refutation can be effective against *amathìa*, but not against excessive *philautìa*.

A maieutic example can work only to the extent that it is able to overcome what Plato considers the greatest of all evils. It is the example of our betters that Plato invites us to turn to at *L.* 732a-b. Maieutic

²⁸ It is important to keep in mind that in the *forma mentis* of the ancient world such an argument does not automatically imply criticism against slavery.

²⁹ According to Plato, the divine acts *per definitionem* without envy (*Tim.* 29e).

exemplarity definitively emancipates Plato's *epimèleia heautoû*, which one exercises in dialogue with the other, from the ambiguities of a *cura sui* that would otherwise withdraw into an intimate and self-referential dimension.

3.2 *Evil and the àplestos nature of the human being*

Excerpt 731-732 of the *Laws* forces us to rethink the problem of evil in Plato, at least with regard to two issues:

a) in the myth of Er, souls choose the paradigm of life which they will incarnate and are responsible for this choice (*R. X 617e*).³⁰ The issue of the voluntariness (the *hekòn*) and intentionality of evil is a complex one that exceeds the scope of this paper. I only wish to point out that, in one of the most recent contributions on the subject, such intentionality is explicitly denied only in the *Protagoras*, but not in the other dialogues.³¹ In any case, in the myth of Er the problem of choice only concerns the pre-natal condition, so much so that souls, after drinking the water of the river Amelete, will forget the choice they have made (*R. X 621a*).

In the passage from the *Laws*, the issue is no longer that of souls who choose their life paradigm in a pre-birth dimension, but that of humans who, in their earthly existence, have forgotten the choice they made and, precisely because of this choice, carry within themselves the

³⁰ «Your daemon or guardian spirit will not be assigned to you by lot; you will choose him. [...] Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or less degree, depending on whether he values or disdains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none» (*R. X 617d-e*; transl. Grube & Reeve 1220). On this passage, see de Luise 2007; Napolitano 2015; Benoni 2018.

³¹ «It would seem that the *Protagoras* is the only Platonic dialogue where Socrates argues that people always act in accordance with their judgment of what is best; those who do wrong simply miscalculate. What Socrates means outside the *Protagoras* when he says that no one does wrong willingly (as, for example, at *Grg.* 509e5-6) is that it is specifically when people do wrong quite deliberately that they are in one sense still doing what they do not wish to do; by choosing fully intentionally the thing they know to be wrong, they are making themselves wretched, something no one wants to be. To live justly, Socrates thinks, simply is to live well, and to live unjustly, to be wretched (*Cri.* 47b; *Grg.* 470e; *Men.* 73a-b; *Resp.* 1.353e1-354a4)» (Weiss 2018, 280).

possible cause of evil. The problem of evil is therefore traced back to an imbalance within the subject himself.

b) Several scholars have pointed out that by “evil” Plato does not mean a “positive” principle, but the consequence of a lack: evil derives from the lack of harmony, measure, balance, and ultimately from ignorance [Cardullo 2016]. This conception, which applies even in Plato’s later writings, can be summarised as follows: where there is no order there is evil, and there is no need for some positive principle to produce it [Ferrari 2017; Chappell 2018].

A closer analysis of *L.* 731-732 forces us to question this perspective. For Plato, evil is certainly not to be interpreted in the sense of an ontological principle, as is the case in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Nevertheless, in this passage the ultimate origin of evil is no longer traced back to a simple “lack”, but rather to a precise “excess” that deeply involves the affective and axiological sphere. “Excessive self-love” is in fact an “anthropological” imbalance that affects an individual’s *ordo amoris*, their way of loving and desiring. In fact, only humans can find themselves in the situation of loving themselves excessively and only they can experience an unquenchable and insatiable greed.

Strange as it may seem, the seed of this philosophical anthropology is already featured in the image of the perforated jar (*àplestos pithos*) in the *Gorgias*.³² In the intellectualist perspective of the *Protagoras*, where reason firmly governs the soul, evil could only be interpreted as the result of a lack of reason. In the *Gorgias*, however, the perspective changes radically. In fact, some human souls, «undisciplined and unrestrained» (*Grg.* 493b; transl. Zeyl 836, modified), escape by nature the rule of reason. As Louis-André Dorion notes, «the *Gorgias* thus seems to be the first of Plato’s dialogues to recognize that the soul is not a monolithic entity, and that it includes at least two parts, that is, reason and desires» [Dorion 2007, 130]. Dorion develops this intuition with reference to the relationship between *enkràteia* and *akrasìa*,³³ but a similar

³² On the anthropological meaning of this image, cf. Cusinato 2014, 158-160.

³³ «As soon as Plato admits that the soul includes at least two parts, and that reason does not necessarily impose its law and its sovereignty upon the other part, which is in open conflict with it, *enkrateia* rediscovers a reason for existence which it lacked when the soul was monolithic and reason was sovereign» (Dorion 2007, 130). See

consideration could be made also with regard to the problem of evil: as soon as it is admitted that the soul is more than reason, then the origin of evil can no longer be explained in terms of a simple “lack” of reason.

The image of the leaky jar is used in the *Gorgias* to describe the soul of foolish people: «that part of the souls of fools where their appetites are located is their undisciplined part, one not tightly closed, a leaking jar, as it were» (*Grg.* 493b; transl. Zeyl 836).³⁴ At first sight, this image appears to have an exclusively negative and instrumental meaning, so much so that Socrates uses it to counter Callicles’ theses. The point to make here is that the rational part in the soul of foolish people is “pierced”, that is, ineffective.

The image of a “pierced” reason is an extremely powerful one, capable of capsizing the monolithic conception of the soul set out in the *Protagoras*. Desire, which is capable of dragging around others like slaves, is countered by the power of knowledge, by virtue of which humans are firmly governed by reason (*Prt.* 352b-358c). In *Gorgias*, Plato envisages something quite different. In the soul of foolish people the rational and concupiscent part are both full of holes. This “being pierced”, however, has an opposite meaning in the two parts of the soul: a reason full of holes is a reason that can no longer govern, and is in fact powerless; pierced concupiscence, instead, is uncontrollable and takes over everything.

The image of the leaky jar in the *Gorgias* is the seed of a new philosophical anthropology. In the *Gorgias*, Plato discovers that there are human drives and needs that are insatiable. So far, the focus has been on the fact that the perforated jar is the negative image of a concupiscence that cannot be satisfied. From the point of view of 20th century philosophical anthropology, the non-perforated jar resembles the homeostat-

also Dorion 2012.

³⁴ Plato deals with this inordinateness also in the myth of Er, where he refers to the souls who drink to excess the water of forgetfulness and thus cannot have the memory of the ideal world: «all of them [...] travelled to the Plain of Forgetfulness [*Lete*] in burning, choking, terrible heat, for it was empty of trees and earthly [621] vegetation. And there, beside the River of Unheeding [*Amelète*], whose water no vessel can hold, they camped, for night was coming on. All of them had to drink a certain measure of this water, but those who weren’t saved by reason drank more than that, and as each of them drank, he forgot everything» (*R.* X 620e-621a; transl. Grube & Reeve, 1223).

ic balance of the instinct, while the perforated jar represents the disruption of this balance and the beginning of humanisation [Cusinato 2014]. It is true that the tyrant is dominated by irrepressible concupiscence, but we must not forget that the tyrant is still human: his appetites have already undergone an anthropological transformation and have therefore become expressions of the human as opposed to the animal. In fact, the homeostatic animal can be represented as a “non-leaky” jar, which, when filled, automatically satisfies its need and thus regulates itself.

On closer inspection, in Plato the difference between human and animal is not marked by reason, but by the human feature of *aplestia* (insatiableness). For Plato, in fact, the animal participates in rationality just as the human participates in bestiality.³⁵ According to Plato, the human being is not properly the *animal rationale*, but the *zôion àpleston*. It should also be remembered that in Greek culture up until Plato the term *àplestos* was not used in reference to animals (and not even to the Satyrs, half-human, half-animal creatures known for their immoderate libido). In Aristotle there is only one passage in which *àplestos* is used in reference to animals, namely to a fish (*HA* 591b2). In later times the adjective *àplestos* was referred to animal figures in the exegetical tradition of Aesop’s fables, but only within an anthropomorphic perspective. In this tradition, the animal protagonist of the fables is indeed *àplestos*, but only to the extent that it behaves and speaks like a human. In short, the Greek world remained anchored to Democritus’ view that the animal «in need knows how much it needs, whereas the human in need does not know how much it needs» (DK 68B198).

The image of the leaky jar describes the “powerlessness” of a reason full of holes just as a sieve, also irreparably perforated, corresponds to a limitless concupiscence. It is certainly a hopeless condition. After the *Gorgias*, the image of the leaky jar and the sieve undergoes a profound transformation: a) being an *àplestos pithos* becomes a characteristic of all humans, not just the tyrant: all humans, therefore, have a concupis-

³⁵ *R.* IX 587c-588b offers one of the most powerful images of human ‘bestiality’. The irascible part in the soul is represented by a lion, the concupiscent part by a dragon with «many heads that it can grow and change at will», and the rational part by a small human being that often becomes overwhelmed by the other two parts if there is a lack of care and harmony.

cent part in them that cannot be filled if not treated and educated (cf. *R.* VIII 558-559d); *b*) being a sieve, i.e. having a completely perforated rational part, is instead characteristic of only some humans, such as the tyrant. In the other humans, the *àplestos* nature of the rational part becomes manifest in various intermediate degrees between being irretrievably pierced, like an “impotent” sieve, and not being pierced at all. Being “only partially” pierced indicates that not even non-foolish humans have an “omnipotent” reason, since the rational part has to deal with a dark side, i.e. the concupiscent part. Moreover, the latter cannot be “persuaded” directly by reason, but requires a further intermediation rooted in the emotional sphere. As is well known, this thesis is best illustrated by the image of the winged chariot in the *Phaedrus*.³⁶

In non-foolish souls, the partial *àplestos* nature of the rational part indicates that the latter is not omnipotent, but, at the same time, it can act through the power of “persuasion”. This *àplestos* character of the rational part, expressed in the ability to govern through persuasion, confers reason a typically human plasticity, by giving an “atopical” shape to life thanks to the exercise of virtue. From this perspective, being *àplestos* is what marks the difference between human and non-human. In fact, being *àplestos* represents a virtuous logic by which to govern the passions as opposed to a homeostatic balance which is typical of non-human animals. In the generation after Socrates, this virtuous logic based on persuasion took various shapes: Plato’s *sophrosýne* had been preceded by Antistenes’ *pònos* and Xenophon’s *enkràteia* [cf. Stavru forthcoming]. Without this “containment”, the appetite becomes increasingly greedy and human existence increasingly monstrous.

The opening made possible by the hole in the jar thus becomes an anthropological opening that cannot be healed directly by reason, but must find a new balance through the care of the soul. The images of the leaky jar and the winged chariot certainly have profoundly different meanings. However, it is clear that the dark horse inherited the characteristics of the «undisciplined and unrestrained» concupiscent soul (*epithymetikòn*) described in the image of the perforated jar. A further connection can also be found in the *Symposium*’s myth of Pòros and

³⁶ The concept of *àplestos* also appears in the *Republic*: see 442a7, 475c7, 555b9, 562b6-10 and c5, 578a1, 586b3, 590b8, 604d9.

Penìa. Here it is also evident that the human as an intermediate and *àtopos* erotic being stands for such an opening. Human nature is lack and poverty, but it is also capacity to procure, with ingenuity and cunning, what it cannot grasp by its own nature.

Finally, this anthropological instability becomes the presupposition of evil, the origin of which is identified in the *Laws* with an imbalance of love: excessive self-love is a possibility to which humans expose themselves when they exceed the homeostatic balance that regulates animal life.

4. Conclusions

I have shown that the problem of evil as “ignorance” acquires a completely different meaning if related to *amathìa*. *Amathìa* is not equal to *àghnoia*, i.e. a simple “epistemological deficiency” such as a lack of information. It is instead an imbalance that leads to a serious form of illusion. If evil derives from *amathìa*, then it is not merely ignorance (*àghnoia*) of the good. In those who are affected by *amathìa*, ignorance is combined with the *false presumption* of knowledge: the prisoners are convinced that the shadows, which they see reflected on the walls of the cave, are all there is to know. This leads them to mistake their lack of knowledge for knowledge (*amathìa*) and abandon the desire to know. Evil therefore originates from a particular form of *àghnoia*, i.e. *amathìa*, which leads them to confuse the shadows inside the cave (the *dòxa* that corresponds to our mental *habitus*, that is, to our self-referential horizon) with the ideas that are outside the cave.

In the *Laws*, Plato takes an important step further by tracing the same illusion of *amathìa* back to a more original ontological illusion: the illusion of excessive self-love. This *philautìa* acts as a bubble that envelops us and structurally deforms our relationship with reality. Just as in *Republic* the prisoners mistake shadows for truth and thus believe they know, when in fact they do not know (*amathìa*), so in *Laws* people who love themselves excessively mistake self-love for a love of truth that prevents them from knowing what is right, good and evil (*Lg.* V 731e-732a). Both are victims of an illusion. However, while in *Republic* the illusion is a cognitive one, in *Laws* such illusion is traced back to an

excessive self-love that is rooted in an affective and axiological level, in a distorted “order of feeling”.

The concept of “excessive” self-love radically changes the very understanding of evil: it is no longer a simple lack, but an excess made possible by the anthropological condition of the human being as *àplestos*. Being *àplestos* places the human being at a crossroads: *a*) on the one hand, it opens the way to the worst of all evils, i.e. excessive self-love, which occurs when both the concupiscent and the rational parts of the soul become *àplestoi*. This folly prevents those afflicted from seeing that the reason with which they try to fill the leaky jar has been reduced to a paltry, “powerless” sieve. *b*) On the other hand, it paves the way to the excess typical of humans who, having identified the limits of reason in relation to their concupiscence, replace the homeostatic balance of non-human animals with a philosophy understood as care of the self.

In the terms of 20th-century philosophical anthropology, evil is not just a lack, but a possibility implicit in a being that discovers its “ex-centricity”, in that it is no longer self-regulated by instinct. Excessive self-love is at the root of all evil, understood not as an ontological principle, but as a serious pathology of the *ordo amoris*, that is, of the *principium individuationis* of human nature.

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Keywords

Socrates; Plato; evil; *amathia*; *àghnoia*; excessive *philautia*; periagoge; exemplarity; shame; catharsis; *àplestos pithos*

Abstract

In this paper I focus on a passage of Plato's *Laws* that so far has been the object of little study (V 731d-732b). In the *Laws*, the origin of all evil is neither an ontological principle, as in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, nor a simple lack of knowledge (*àghnoia*) or a lack of knowledge combined with the *false presumption of knowledge* (*amathia*). Rather, in this passage *amathia* itself is traced back to "excessive self-love" (*sphòdra heautoû philia*). I show that this "excess" has a specific "anthropological" relevance, because it is not limited to the intellectual sphere or to the will, but directly concerns the human way of loving. The thesis that I argue for in this paper is that this "excess" is a possibility implicit in the human being *qua àplestos*, and should therefore be interpreted in an "anthropological" sense: it does not indicate a simple "lack" of balance, but rather a possibility and a risk to which humans expose themselves when they exceed the homeostatic balance

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of needs typical of non-human animals. Finally, I trace the various steps of this “anthropology of excess” back to its origin: the image of the leaky jar found in the *Gorgias*.

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