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TITLE OF THE PAPER: Exploring ethical excellence: from spiritual isolation to organic mutual dependency

Abstract of the paper: This paper discusses opposite philosophical approaches to the body and its position in the ethical discussion; in particular, the perception of the body's capability of achieving ethical excellence. One of the viewpoints in question advocates for the body-spirit duality and the spiritual superiority over mere physical existence. According to this view, the spirit can either achieve its fulfillment apart from the physical world or guide the latter to its maximum accomplishment. Conversely, the alternative perspective posits that the notion of excellence and its practice can only be conceived and put in motion by living beings in a dynamic relationship among themselves. Implicated in the former is the diminishment of the body in relation to its counterpart and its subsequent mortification and (not rarely) annihilation. Implicated in the latter is the elevation of living beings and the understanding of them being the sole performers of virtuous conduct.

Keywords: isolation, vulnerability, organicity, body-spirit, excellence.

During the recent pandemic, fear of imminent death caused a rapid change in behavior in most countries, and a change in morality. Taking measures of self protection were deemed as the right thing to do. Whoever questioned them, by words or actions was considered morally wrong. Human life was under attack, no question about that. Paradoxically, the solution for the loss of life was restrictive of life itself. When the human body was synonymous with infection, isolation became a moral duty, not only for factually infected bodies, but also for healthy ones. At once, all bodies were restricted. Decaying bodies (not only due to Covid) were impeded to seek relief in the company of others. And healthy bodies had to forcibly enter the category of infectious, ceasing to live their prime. This solution, that seems strictly sanitary and punctual, informs us of a philosophical one, where bodies are seen as defectuous and isolation appears to be the restorative medicine.

As odd as it may sound, it is not from today that bodies represent danger to life. Freud has thoroughly shown how bodily mortification has been a strategy against the fear of

extreme suffering and death. Fear, a response to imminent threats to life experienced by living organisms, manifests as persistent anxiety in individuals who not only endure present suffering but also anticipate various dangers. To confront the inevitable future faced by the living, the idea of a higher self, able to control impulses, is created.

Plato is one of the pioneers of the self-isolation discourse in which the body's obedience is required. In his *Phaedrus*, it is shown how the body's inertness represents an impediment for the higher goals of the soul. In the following passage, amidst the discussion of addressing the nature of the soul, Socrates advocates the soul's duty to control the body.

It is the job of the soul in general to look after all that is inanimate,(...) The earthy body of which it takes control seems to move itself, but that is the effect of the soul. (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 246c)

Rather than a mere observation, the wording carries an ethical assessment. Since the soul is the animate counterpart to the passive body, it must assume a supervising role in the relationship. By simply describing both instances, he implies the soul's duty to *look after* the hopeless body. However, not in an affectionate manner. As the possessor of what the body inherently lacks, it must advise and lead, exert control and suppress it according to its understanding.

According to this standpoint, intelligence is a spiritual attribute, along with real existence. Characteristics of bodies - such as colors and shapes -, discerned by senses and possessed by physical beings are considered deceitful, false and (why not) defectuous. Socrates affirms that *true being has no color or form; it is intangible, and visible only to intelligence, the soul's guide*. (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 247c). Which means that sensuousness is neither a matter to be discussed or a departure for knowledge.

In *Meno*, Socrates asks his interlocutor what is in common with the different meanings of the term "excellence". To what Meno answers by pointing out the excellence of men, women, children, elderly, free and enslaved men in their particularity. But Socrates does not seem satisfied. To him, the essential is what those things have in common, not their uniqueness (Plato. *Meno*, 71e). He pursues what is always identical to itself, and does not suffer the impact of time and corruption.

According to this version of reality, "true being" and "excellence" have nothing to do with the organic, with breathing and living beings, because bodies can only momentarily demonstrate excellence without ever possessing it. For Plato, not only the human body, but anything susceptible to decay is automatically excluded from the soul's integrity and deemed as deceitful. This train of thought calls for the soul's "isolating abilities". I cite Phaedrus:

In the course of its circuit it (the soul) observes justice as it really is, self-control, knowledge—not the kind of knowledge that is involved with change and differs according to which of the various existing things (...) it makes its object, but the kind of knowledge whose object is things as they really are. (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 247e)

Through instinctual control, the soul can calmly traverse the heavenly realm, where it "sees" the truth. Far away from the corporeal involucre, the platonic version of the "Self" is as ethereal as his "true being". The portrayed Self can jokingly be seen as no-body, when this is precisely what allows it to possess one. The excellence is thus denied to bodies, which can only somehow participate in it with total subservience to the Spirit. And as excellence is what should be ultimately achieved, we can say that the spirit's victory would coincide with the body's complete obliteration.

Hegel represents the epitome of the understanding that the Spirit, not organic beings, can develop and achieve its purpose. Perceived as two separate entities, the physical world would be the stage and means by which the Spirit realizes itself *and the sphere of its realization* (Hegel 2001, 70). For him, the essence of matter lies outside of itself, as it is the Spirit that grants meaning and purpose to the material world. Independent from matter and yet using it for its goals, the colonizer Spirit expresses its independence and immaculately follows the course of its development.

Paradoxically, he uses the metaphor of a plant, a living organism, to illustrate the dialectical movement of the Spirit from potentiality to actuality. While employing the analogy, Hegel suggests that the progression from a seed to a fully grown plant relies solely on "the nature of the tree", excluding its dependency with the soil, weather and human care. I cite Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*:

And as the germ bears in itself the whole nature of the tree, and the taste and form of its fruits, so do the first traces of Spirit virtually contain the whole of that History. (Hegel 2001, 31)

The analogy suggests that just as the germ contains the essence of a tree and its fruits, Freedom, the Spirit's excellence, is contained in history since its beginning, even though it can only be seen in the end, fully actualized. But while beautiful, this image (that kept me captive for many years), consists of a faulty analogy and doesn't serve Hegel's purpose for three reasons derived from his own philosophy. Firstly, because the process by which a germ becomes a plant is fully dependent on external factors, while the Spirit's actualization occurs through internal contradictions. Secondly, because living organisms decay after their actualization, whereas the spiritual process of self actualization remains towards its ultimate goal. The third reason lies in the inherent strangeness between spirit and matter. The former being substantial while the latter, as a manifestation, subservient.

Hegel nevertheless carries the fallacy on as he finds no better method to convey the dialectical process but by referencing the organic growth of a plant from a seed. Later in the text he proposes some adjustments to give room to a changeable part in a plant.

Development, however, is also a property of organized natural objects. Their existence presents itself, not as an exclusively dependent one, subjected to external changes, but as one which expands itself in virtue of an internal unchangeable principle (...). (Hegel 2001, 70)

In this passage, he seeks to preserve the immutable aspect of the plant, overlooking the fact that everything in the plant is subject to change as it is in a dynamic relationship with its environment. Thus, Hegel fails to acknowledge that there is no independent part in a plant, as it cannot exist in isolation. Its development relies on numerous factors, without which germination and ripening become impossible. And more often than not, these conditions are not assured, as evidenced by deforestation. Instead of letting it grow in tranquility, the restlessness and tyranny of the spirit, that all subsums, provokes living being's premature death. In fact, he will even say how the realization of the Spirit requires expansion and *does not present the harmless tranquility of mere growth, as does that of organic life, but a stern reluctant working against itself.* (Hegel 2001, 71).

And although Hegel sees it as a work in progress towards excellence, I cannot help but interpret the so-called spiritual expansion as a violent process of subsumption of all that lives. And I credit Adorno for that.

But coming back to the analogy in which Hegel insists, despite the assertion that the development of Spirit involves conflict and opposition, while that of the plant is tranquil, it appears to be quite the opposite. When, in its dialectical but unimpeded movement, the Spirit obliterates all living things, the dependent plant has its cycle constantly disrupted by the independent Spirit, whose pervasive presence impedes its germination, growth and decomposition.

And here I would like to contrast Hegel's faulty analogy with a what seems to me a better one, by a contemporary philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, in her analyses of the Aristotelian idea of excellence. She starts her first chapter of *The Fragility of Goodness* by analyzing Pindar's poem:

A vine tree must be of good stock if it is to grow well. And even if it has a good heritage, it needs fostering weather (gentle dew and rain, the absence of sudden frosts and harsh winds), as well as the care of concerned and intelligent keepers, for its continued health and full perfection. (Nussbaum 2001, 1)

She uses the analogy to compare a plant to the part in humans that is vulnerable to the impact of luck. She also considers two instances in a plant but, differently from Hegel, she admits that neither of them is imperishable and guaranteed. According to her, the plant depends on luck in two different ways. Internally, it must come from a good heritage; externally, it must count on a good environment and proper care. Thus, even with the distinction between internal and external, she considers plants in their plurality, as opposed to the general idea of a plant - proposed by Hegel - as different heritages imply inherent disparities among plants.

The "plant image", as a symbol of human fragility, permits us to rethink what ethical excellence is. Excellence, as understood by the pioneers of what I want to call "the philosophy of isolation", is something that does not pertain to bodies. In Nussbaum's analysis, on the other hand, it can only be comprehended with reference to bodies, and to the way they interact with one another. While the plant represents the part of humans which is passive, and helpless when facing its luck, the agent portion is active in fighting the odds for the

organism's survival and thriving. But if both survivor and blossoming depend on the way an individual is situated within the web of mutual dependency, determining the best course of action cannot be done in isolation. Instead of a "true being" that contemplates the truth - and goodness itself - the organic being is changing in a changeable environment. This understanding allows for the shift from a self-centered idea of excellence, achievable in solitude, to a collaborative one, achieved by consistent consideration of mutual dependency.

In the light of this humility it is possible to recognize that, not only the body is an instance to be taken seriously when excellence is at stake, but the diversity of bodies and their single set of needs. Assessing dependency in a relational organicity allows for reevaluating the roles of each individual in the course of an individual's life cycle. Being part of a community, in which bodily needs are regarded as essential is what permits flourishing, not only for humans, but for all living beings.

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