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The personality of philosopher in Plato's work

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ABSTRACT

Plato synthesizes all the ideas of his predecessors into his notion about the term philosopher. According to Plato, the wisdom that philosophers strive to achieve is neither aimed at the interpretation and understanding of everyday life nor is it the wisdom of knowledge of various sciences. Plato discusses that wisdom represents the wisdom of the divine idea of the good whose purity and clarity may be grasped only by the bodiless soul. The memory of the world of ideas, present in every soul, is the ontological presupposition for the creation of wisdom, whereas spirited parts of the soul represent gnoseological power so that each of them contributes to the attainment of the crucial idea. According to Plato, philosophers are not the ones who know that the world of ideas exists but rather those who have grasped the crucial idea and assimilated with it. This resurrection of the soul breeds a series of virtues that determine the character of a philosopher. This further confirms the ancient notion that the philosopher is not merely the person who knows the truth but rather the one who witnesses the truth.

Key words: number, infinity, irrationality, philosophy, mathematics, ἀρχή.

So these men, for whom philosophy is most suitable, go thus into exile and leave her abandoned and unconsummated. They themselves live a life that isn't suitable or true; while, after them, other unworthy men come to her—like an orphan bereft of relatives—and disgrace her. These are the ones who attach to her reproaches such as even you say are alleged by the men who reproach her—namely, that of those who have intercourse with her, some are worthless and the many worthy of many bad things.¹

(Plato, *The Republic* 495c)

The strictness which can be detected in Plato's tone of voice expressing his idea about the dignity of philosophy and a philosopher might be a warning to all those who consider themselves to be philosophers but it also raises the question of responsibility of those who teach and educate philosophers. However, despite a great significance given to the personality of a philosopher, this notion has remained overshadowed by other questions that Plato explores and discusses in his philosophical thinking. Yet, is it possible to understand the core of Plato's philosophy without understanding Plato's idea about the very term philosopher? Plato describes the character of a philosopher in a great number of his dialogues, in which this character is purposefully presented so as to support a particular topic or thesis that he is debating over in the dialogue, which can be attributed to the fact that Plato does not depict one single person as a philosopher but rather more of them. This argument is endorsed by Roslyn Weiss², who presumes that Plato proposes several philosophical profiles that are classified into two categories in his dialogue *The Republic*: a philosopher by nature and a philosopher by design (education and nurture). According to this author, the fifth and the sixth book of *The Republic* describe the philosopher by nature, whereas the seventh book of *The Republic* depicts the philosopher whose characteristics are combined with those of a warrior and which are obtained in the process of education. A dedicated and studious reader of Plato's work *The Republic* may actually come to

¹ Translation: Ljiljana Janković.

² Weiss (2012).

such a conclusion, but the question still remains: Was that Plato's conscious intention or was it simply an oversight? None of Plato's works imply that there are two categories of a philosopher but only that there is a difference between a philosopher and a *philodox*³, the one who is and the one who bears strong resemblance to him, but who is not actually a philosopher. Plato makes a clear distinction between such subtle nuances with the purpose of rendering those intellectual and moral traits that might appear quite identical from the point of view of the public but completely differed from the aspect of education.⁴ The thesis that Plato presents two completely different profiles of a philosopher is further unsustainable because Plato synthesizes all previously known meanings of the term philosopher in Ancient Greece, emphasizing the divine, spiritual aspect of the person of a philosopher, something that has been overlooked at present for a variety of reasons while it used to be an integral part of a philosopher's personality in Ancient Greece. It is this spiritual aspect of the philosopher's personality that represents an integrative factor that creates a connection between the philosopher by nature and the philosopher by education. According to Plato, this spiritual element is essential for a true philosopher. Since Plato always refers to a philosopher as a single person, it is justified to confirm that Plato shapes the philosopher's personality to suit the topic of a particular dialogue, but that there are clear implications that he would have the same characteristics in various dialogues that he would display in the same or similar manner. This paper is an attempt to outline and describe the unique personality of a philosopher as presented in Plato's various works.

However, it should be emphasized that Plato's idea about the personality of a philosopher was preceded by another notion in Ancient Greece that established the contours of the unique profile.

³A *philodox* enjoys the status of a supposed philosopher as opposed to a *philosopher* who is considered to be a genuine philosopher whose status is based upon the actual knowledge about the **idea of the good**. The person who has no knowledge of the **idea of the good** or who only dreams about it and has some vague notion what it may mean cannot be regarded as a philosopher.

⁴ Philosophical nature is rare and uncommon and is to be distinguished from the wisdom of the mass and their demagogy (Plato, *The Republic* VI 491a, 493 b).

Sage or philosopher?

As regards the chronicles and traditional tales preserved from the ancient times, the term philosopher (philosophos) was preceded by the term sage (sophos). Scholars disagree on whether the term philosophos was first used by Heraclitus or by Pythagoras. Heraclitus discusses that “philosophers must possess knowledge of many things”.⁵ Thus he distances himself from the “multi knowledge”⁶ which he does not see as a path to wisdom – wisdom could be attained only by knowledge that is related to logos. Pythagoras, on the other hand, deliberates that the lovers of wisdom strive for observing the world unencumbered by any kind of material interest. He “compared life to a fair attended by some for the reason of competing for the first prize, by others in order to sell their goods, but only by the most worthy ones (philosophers) for the sake of observation”.⁷ The most worthy ones are the persons whose main activity is contemplation and not desire to gain fame or profit, which is often the case with the majority of those who are present at that “life fair”.

The term philosopher thus refers to extraordinary personalities who strive for knowledge and who accord their lives with the supreme axiological principles and tenets. However, before this term began to be used, those worthy of such exceptional characteristics were known as sages. They were ascribed an ability to possess a genuine knowledge of all that is and all that should be. Because of their practical wisdom, sages were appointed heads of states in ancient times. It can be exemplified by the rule of the seven sages⁸ who were selected on the basis of their rich life experience and who advised or warned their citizens, contributed to the establishment of ethical principles and were included in legal matters, as well as any other issues of public importance.

⁵ Diels (1983), B 35.

⁶ Diels (1983), B 40.

⁷ Laertije (1985), VIII.8.

⁸ Seven sages is the common name used for the oldest representatives of the Greek philosophy who expressed their thoughts in the form of brief and concise utterances. They lived in the period from 620 B.C. to 550 B.C.: Thales, Pittacus, Bias, Solon, Cleobulus, etc.

This term, sage, was later replaced by the term philosopher, the reason for which is to be found in Socrates' apology where he states that only God is wise whereas a man can only aspire to wisdom⁹. The same meaning is confirmed by Plato in his dialogue *The Phaedrus*¹⁰: *To call a man wise ... is nonsensical, this only befits God*¹¹. In *The Symposium*, Plato asserts that the philosophers stand between the wisdom of gods and the ignorance of common people: gods do not need wisdom since they already have it whereas the ignorant ones strive for it. Therefore, the term sage was definitely replaced by the term philosopher, containing the same characteristics previously attributed to the term sage with the addition of one subtle explanation that suited both the sage and the philosopher, nonetheless: divine wisdom reaches far beyond human wisdom, yet, a man can reduce that remoteness between him and god by his aspirations, knowledge, love and contemplation! However, this subtle distinction, or rather correction in terming the same spiritual endeavour, has been so detrimental to philosophy that it has separated itself from its spiritual aspect and turned to pure intellectualism. The ideal of wisdom was eventually abandoned as unachievable except for gods, whereas philosophers were no longer expected to be wise but only skillful and scholarly. Philosophy thus deserted its divine ideal and transformed into something readable and possible. It stopped exploring the limits of its possibilities and became satisfied with the space shared with other sciences as a complementary academic discipline. The one who does not explore ever reaches their limits and never crosses them. That is exactly what befell philosophy and philosophers. Philosophers no longer strive for supreme wisdom since their ideals are not divine but mundane, they do not want to glance over the wall because they think it impossible. In the beginning, philosophy was not only considered to be a theory but also a way of life whose purpose was a transformation of man. Consequently, even those thinkers who did not produce any works during their life were considered to be philosophers merely due to their teaching about philosophical life through their actions and speech.

⁹ Socrates defines wisdom as the state of consciousness on the border of ignorance: *I don't think I know what I don't know* (Plato, *The Apology of Socrates X*).

¹⁰ Plato (2006), 119–126.

¹¹ Plato, *The Phaedrus* LXIV 279d.

Contemporary philosophy has unfortunately remained separated from spiritual exercises that used to be its essence and uttermost task in Ancient Greece.¹²

Plato dedicates his whole work to the discussion of wisdom as a philosopher's characteristic, the wisdom that prepares a human being for death and contemplation of the divine world through the process of ascesis. He defines several theoretical and practical traits as befitting a true philosopher, but not only that: he also states that the wisdom philosophers strive for is not directed towards explaining and understanding everyday life but towards the **idea of the good**, which could be grasped only through the true and refined soul. The wisdom that Plato discusses is not merely the one that gives counsel, offers the knowledge of other sciences, participates in passing good laws and contributes to the development of critical thinking. It is the wisdom that cannot be grasped by the soul until it is imprisoned within the body but only when it has become "light" enough to soar into the world of ideas in which it can recognize the supreme idea of the good.

Ontological knowledge as precondition for wisdom

The idea of the good is the ontological prerequisite of Plato's concept of a philosopher and represents an essential precondition for wisdom. No wisdom (*phronēsis*) can be attained without the idea of the good nor is it possible to become a philosopher without it, because the philosopher is the person who clearly perceives **the idea of the good**, which is otherwise unrecognizable by human senses. The question can be raised why it is the case. What is it that philosophers know and see but which is not known to the majority of people? Philosophers actually remember the world that others have forgotten, they have the recollection of the world ruled by **the idea of the good**.

Plato emphasizes that the soul originates from the world of ideas which people forget when they are born. However, the soul still vaguely remembers the world it originates from and where it resided before its birth. The world of ideas is for Plato the world of the truth as opposed to the world of senses which is the world of shadows and deception in which only the contours of ideas may be perceived obscurely and hazily.

¹² Ado (2011).

Who is then to be considered wise?! Certainly the one who knows and who follows the path of their recollections of the world of ideas and who thus eventually reaches the truth related to that world. However, the road from anamnesis to contemplation is not an easy one and requires not only particular dispositions of character but also a metamorphosis of the soul so that it can perceive the unique world of eternity. Plato emphasizes two preconditions for wisdom: cognition of the world of ideas and the life lived in accordance with that world.

The idea of the good presented in *The Republic* and **the idea of beauty** discussed in *The Symposium* are the axiological criteria of wisdom according to Plato. Wisdom cannot be achieved by “measuring shadows in the cave”¹³ but by understanding the supreme idea. The supreme idea permeates the soul of the philosopher. But how is the soul permeated with this supreme idea? In other words, what are those powers in the soul¹⁴ that might contribute to the perception and understanding of the world of ideas? In his dialogue *The Republic*, Plato defines those powers as the logical part of the soul, whereas in *The Symposium* and *The Phaedrus*, Plato speaks about the spirited part of the soul transformed to pure love. These being two different parts of the soul, Plato gives the impression that he is proposing two contradictory theses on the view of the world of ideas. In *The Republic*, the philosopher is depicted as the person whose logical part of the soul dominates over the spirited and the appetitive part. Therefore, Plato favors the innate abilities whose appropriate development to wisdom depends on social and psychological conditions. Plato asserts that those are royal souls, free and revolting against any form of imprisonment notwithstanding the fact whether its source is to be found in the outside, social world or in the inside, appetitive part of the soul.¹⁵ The nature of this logical, royal part of the soul is such that it is predetermined to rule over the spirited and appetitive part, which consequently means that philosophers should rule over soldiers and merchants.

¹³ In *The Republic* VII.

¹⁴ Plato asserts that the soul is composed of three parts: logical, spirited and appetitive.

¹⁵ Plato, *The Republic* VII 486b.

In his works *The Symposium* and *The Phaedrus*, Plato emphasizes the importance of the spirited part of the soul for the cognition of the world of ideas. The spirited part of the soul is positioned between the logical and appetitive part resembling in its role that of Eros as a mediator between the divine world and the world of senses. Plato acknowledges the feeling of love as some “sacred rapture” that elevates the soul to the realm of a metaphysical comprehension of the world of ideas. Philosophy is Eros, a feeling which has been cleansed of every sensual and lustful aspect, while philosophical speeches affect both heart and soul so that Plato compares them to an adder’s bite since they inflict love wounds to those who have just entered the world of philosophy ...¹⁶ Philosophy is thus no entertainment or some incidental conversation but something that requires the engagement of the human beings in their entirety. This explains why only certain individuals can practice philosophy – in the beginning, they are all exalted and endorsed in it, but later the majority of them abandon this path either because of the lack of their own logical abilities or because of the lack of courage to endure all the pains of transformation demanded from the soul of a philosopher.

The idea of the good is compared to light and the knowledge about it is compared to the touch of light, which is completely opposite to the darkness in the cave.¹⁷ The touch of light is essential for the knowledge of what really is. Wisdom is accomplished by knowing what really is, which is neither visible to the human eye nor easily attainable but requires both a personal effort and an action of the light of **the idea of the good** that comes from the outside. While the majority of people unwillingly turn their faces away from that strong light, philosophers “gladly look directly at the truth”¹⁸. The personality of a philosopher is thus different from that of ordinary people since it sublimates in itself two irreconcilable worlds: the world of shadows and the world of ideas. The world of ideas is the one that the philosopher accepts by his nature, but the world of shadows is the world into which he was born and

¹⁶ Plato, *The Symposium* XXXIII 218b.

¹⁷ *The Republic* VII.

¹⁸ Plato, *The Republic* VII 474e.

which he has to transcend by education, nurture and purification of the soul.

Intellectual and ethical virtues of the philosopher

All this contributes to a clearer understanding of Plato's idea of the personality of the philosopher. He asserts that the human soul is a white sheet on which it can be recognized which part of the soul will predominate after birth. As the logical part is predominant in philosophers, it means that there should exist some intellectual virtues that precondition the development of wisdom. However, Plato states that this is not always the case. Namely, whether the individuals possessing such predispositions will become the best or the worst among people depends on good and proper education. Since they are evidently endowed with intelligence, they may commit more evil than anyone else in the world precisely due to that discernible logical part of the soul. This is the reason why both the spirited and appetitive parts of the personality are to be educated because only in that way can all abilities develop evenly, which will contribute to a development of a complete personality.

The following are the predispositions, i.e. intellectual virtues that a philosopher should possess: good memory, ability to understand and learn¹⁹ and the ability to easily venture into the idea of every being²⁰. All these predispositions are channeled into the most important one: **longing for an overall** wisdom or an insight into the whole. The philosopher has to be a good dialectician²¹, i.e. to be able to analyze various ideas, but also a metaphysician who is able to synthesize them. Plato's philosopher is not only occupied by eristic arguments, analysis of ideas and their enumeration, since this pertains to those who are

¹⁹ Plato, *The Republic* VI 487a.

²⁰ Plato, *The Republic* VI 486d.

²¹ **A dialectician** is the person who is able to discern one notion that permeates numerous notions. ... i.e. to be able to classify them (*Sophist* (253d). If he composed that knowing what the truth is, although he **can defend himself** during the hearing about that which he wrote ... (Plato, *The Phaedrus* LXIV 279d).

curious²², who are only pleased with ideas and particular instances of beauty but are not able enough to understand the entirety of the world. Even when referring to something particular, the philosopher is always concerned with the general and total; whenever he speaks of the transient, he thinks of the eternal. *The philosopher does not strive for a single wisdom, but for the entire one*²³. Therefore, philosophers are able to understand that which is always **uniform** and **unchangeable**²⁴. Since the logical part of the soul predominates in the philosopher's personality, he is able to see the whole because it can be perceived by the mind. It is the natural characteristic of the philosopher to always long for the knowledge of the eternity²⁵, which makes him an *adequate and well-balanced person*²⁶, *a great spirit that spends life in observing all time and all being*²⁷. Since the philosopher strives for the wholeness and eternity, he surpasses time and space and knows transcendence.

However, these innate characteristics are not sufficient for the development of the personality of the philosopher. The true philosopher is distinguished by ethic virtue that is the true result of the encounter of the soul and **the idea of the good**. Philosophers are royal souls²⁸ that do not tolerate imprisonment, primarily the one caused by their own soul²⁹. For the justice to be established, the logical part should rule over the spirited and the appetitive part, which means that besides being wise,

²² *Curious are those people who eagerly listen and observe, like beautiful sounds, beautiful colors and shapes and everything made out of it, but whose spirit is not able to perceive the nature of beauty by itself and to love that* (Plato, *The Republic* V 476b).

²³ *He does not stop here but goes forward, with the same effort and the same longing for eros, until he understands with his soul the nature of all things and until he participates in it as something close to the soul* (Plato, *The Republic* VI 490b).

²⁴ Plato, *The Republic* VI 484b.

²⁵ Plato, *The Republic* VI 485b.

²⁶ Plato, *The Republic* VI 486d.

²⁷ Plato, *The Republic* VI 486a.

²⁸ Those who are allowed to undertake dialectics must be appropriate and well-balanced since it is not something that anyone can be engaged in, especially not those who are not mature enough (*The Republic* 539b-d).

²⁹ Plato, *The Republic* VI 486b.

philosophers must be brave and temperate. The philosopher's soul does not tolerate any tyranny from the spirited or appetitive part that impose control nor does it succumb to any passions or flaws that other souls are prone to.³⁰

The philosopher neither lies nor tolerates lies³¹, he is moderate and does not long for money³², he is not greedy, boastful or cowardly³³, he is blessed with a *noble and pleasing character, closeness to the truth, justice, courage and temperance*³⁴. To sum up, he is one just and mild soul³⁵.

This outline of the philosopher's personality lacks one part that would create the whole picture about the preconditions necessary for it. Plato speaks of the ideal state in which such souls have to be recognized and nourished until they are realized in their entirety. But, if it were not possible to establish such a state, does it mean that Plato describes an unrealizable being, since it would lack social conditions in order to be fully formed? The answer is negative because, even though the establishment of a just state is not so plausible, the development of a just individual is quite likely, the example of which is certainly Socrates, Plato's teacher and an ideal of the philosophic personality.

Eidetic vision and the absence of the fear of death

Socrates is the personality that Plato depicts as a living image of the philosopher characterized by the state of the pure mind. He serenely confronts not only the temptations of everyday existence but also those related to death. This characteristic of Socrates' is particularly striking during his trial and the night prior to his death, when he sleeps peacefully, his soul undisturbed by the forthcoming doom. This proves

³⁰*The one who directed his spirit towards that which really is does not have time ... to set his eyes on mundane things, to fight with them and to fill himself with envy and hatred, but he watches and observes ordered things that always remain constant ... this is what he imitates and with which he identifies himself* (Plato, *The Republic* 500c).

³¹Plato, *The Republic* VI 485c.

³² Plato, *The Republic* VI 485e.

³³ Plato, *The Republic* VI 486b.

³⁴ Plato, *The Republic* VI 487a.

³⁵ Plato, *The Republic* VI 486b.

the fact that the philosopher is the person who is *not concerned by the processes of creation and deterioration*³⁶. This absence of the fear of death represents the most significant result of the philosophical way of life. Plato thus states: *the man who spends his life practicing philosophy truthfully is justifiably not afraid of death and lives in good hope that he will partake in great and good deeds in another world after his death...*³⁷

The embodiment of this virtue would not be possible without the metamorphosis and the purification of the soul so that it becomes “light” and able to reside in the world of ideas. The soul becomes heavy due to the appetitive part which is related to the body and thus forgets its divine origin. The recollection of the divine origin of the soul is enabled by philosophy. *Before philosophy takes the soul under its protection, it observes the things through the body as if through the prison ... whose horror is produced by lust*³⁸. Therefore, wisdom is attainable only when liberated from the flesh since the appetitive part of the soul blurs our vision and represents an obstacle to the perception of **the idea of beauty/the idea of the good**. Plato asserts that *philosophy merely warns the soul allusively and starts to liberate it from the senses and the sight ... encouraging it to compose itself and to be directed ... towards that which is logical and invisible*³⁹. It is only after the soul has been cleansed from its lustful part that the state of wisdom is attained. Consequently, the individual who has brought himself to the state of immaterial wisdom deserves to be called a philosopher ... *and those who have purified themselves through philosophy live bodiless in the ensuing time and reside in the places even more beautiful than the mentioned ones*⁴⁰. The places where the soul of the philosopher arrives are incomprehensible to reason, to the human mind, they surpass the ability of comprehension and transcend human perception⁴¹. The

³⁶ Plato, The Republic VI 485b.

³⁷ Plato, The Phaedrus VIII 184.

³⁸ Plato, The Phaedrus XXXIII 207.

³⁹ Plato, The Phaedrus XXXIII 207.

⁴⁰ Plato, The Phaedrus XXXIII 240.

⁴¹ This reflects the apophatic knowledge only hinted at by Plato and later discussed by other philosophers, such as Plotinus and Dionysius the Areopagite.

philosopher is bound to reside in the world of ideas even during his life so that once he has seen that world outside the cave, he knows that nothing else can be compared to its beauty and order⁴². Plato thus believes that philosophy has the role of a catharsis in human life since the purified soul obtains a special eidetic vision, which is the most significant intellectual virtue that the philosopher is endowed with. *The philosopher is devoted to the idea of being ... since the spiritual eyes of the many cannot persevere by looking at the divine ones*⁴³. The philosopher is the person who has the spiritual vision and whose spirit is directed towards *that which really is*⁴⁴. However, this is not enough – one should love that which really is because that person sees *the nature of the beauty itself and loves it*⁴⁵. Philosophy is thus a *sacred mystery of fury and exaltation ...*⁴⁶ that is incomparable to any other type of exaltation, whereas the philosopher is the person who resides in that sacredness enthralled by the beauty of the celestial world. This axiological superstructure, reflected in the contemplation of the beauty of the celestial world⁴⁷, may “explain” the ascetic elements of Plato's teaching about purification since the soul would hardly liberate itself from passion without such a “reward”. *The soul of a true philosopher thinks about such salvation and it thus refrains itself from any kind of delight and lust, sorrow and passion as much as it can...*⁴⁸.

In conclusion, it might be emphasized that the aforementioned virtues culminate in two dominant spheres: the intellectual one and the ethical one. The climax of the intellectual aspect is evident in the

⁴² The one who achieves this stage in life ... feels life worth living when observing the beauty by itself. Once you have seen it, you will never compare it with gold or a beautiful dress, or with handsome boys and young men (Plato, The Symposium XXIX).

⁴³ Plato, The Sophist 254a.

⁴⁴ Plato, The Republic VI 500c.

⁴⁵ Plato, The Republic V 476b.

⁴⁶ Plato, The Symposium XXXIII 218b.

⁴⁷ The part of being observed by logos and reached by scientific thinking, dialectics, is more comprehensible than the other one that can be reached by myths (Plato, The Republic VI 511d).

⁴⁸ Plato, The Phaedrus XXXIII 208.

contemplation of the world of ideas presided over by **the idea of the good** and **the idea of beauty**, while the ethical sphere culminates in the ideas of the absence of fear from death⁴⁹. However, these two virtues are interconnected and are manifested as one virtue in various ways because only those who contemplate the beauty of the spiritual world are not afraid of death and only those who possess a spiritual vision of the eternal world do not lament over the transient one they are abandoning.

This only proves the thesis that Plato's idea of the philosopher cannot be understood without a complete insight into his teaching whose ontological basis is the world of ideas. Regardless of the extent to which contemporary philosophy is separated from its spiritual practice, it might be stated that it is embodied in the personality of the philosopher in Plato's teaching. Plato does not give precise explanations of the rules governing that spiritual practice but he is concerned with the existing practice characteristic for the Orphic cults and some earlier philosophers, such as Pythagoras and Empedocles. He asserts that philosophy has but one unique task: liberation from the burden of the material and perishable world. Therefore, love shielded by philosophy becomes a *sacred rapture* so that only the lovers who denounce their physical intercourse can be proclaimed true philosophers. A similar suggestion of celibacy is found in Pythagoreanism and the teaching of Empedocles, which further proves the thesis that, according to Plato, the goal of philosophy is the salvation of the soul and the attainment of eternal life.

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⁴⁹ The man who dedicates his life to philosophy is justifiably not afraid of death and he lives in good hope that he will partake in great and good deeds in another world after his death (Plato, The Phaedrus IX-XIV).

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