
The Idea of Freedom and the Premises of Liberalism in Greek Thought

Adrian Gorun

“Constantin Brâncuși” University, Târgu Jiu

1. General Considerations

Together with the idea of God and Immortality, Freedom was one of the three fundamental topics of classical metaphysics and it still remains a philosophical and theological issue of maximum diversity.

There are various approaches regarding freedom that defend *the precedence of sociology over philosophy* in the sense that it exists at the social level, not at the ideatic one; these approaches insist upon a sociology of freedom that questions its *culturalizing* approaches, being secluded from the so-called *history of ideas* and denying the absolute freedom and the Kantian transcendence of individual freedom.

Freedom is contextual: it is more an action than *a state*, an action conditioned by evolutionary factual elements (from manumission – the act of freeing slaves – to the only exertion of freedom provided by the free market).

At the same time there are approaches related to the history of ideas – the so-called *culturalizing* approaches regarding freedom, such as those referring to individual transcendent freedom, moral freedom, absolute freedom, negative freedom, free will, positive freedom etc.; these approaches, by analyzing freedom in relation to a constraint system, see it as a(n) (almost) universal condition of humanity, but the free individual represents both a theoretical concept and a historical and social reality.

There are three arguments necessary to demonstrate the contribution of Greek thought to the theoretical development of modernity and late modernity:

1. Conceptual freedom – the (philosophical, abstract) idea of freedom cannot be separated from its exertion (factual everyday freedom, which is expressed by constitutional practice during modernity and late modernity – freedom of consciousness, of manifestation and association) – in the same way in which exerting freedom cannot set aside a conceptual frame either, regardless of its elaboration level;

The words “libertate = freedom” and “liberal” find their common origins in the Latin word « liber »;

2. They had been used long before the moment of employing the term “liberal” in politics (certainly with different meanings from those acquired after the segregation of the Spanish assembly – from 1800 – when one of the groups was named Liberales);

3. In order to support the title of the present study, in constructing the project of the free individual the theoretization of freedom starts from its Hellenic origins and in developing this project – factual freedom as a process – I started from P. Manent¹ and Andrei Marga’s² assumption that liberalism is a premise and a product of the modern era.

This assumption is taken into consideration in this study as an argument so as to demonstrate that:

a) Theoretical foundations of liberalism transcend the modern era, especially by what we may call the construction and reconstruction of the idea of freedom, with all the consequences deriving from this idea;

b) The concept of freedom has its own history which, *only partially* does it overlap the history of liberalism (in this case I am taking into account not only the governmental liberalism, but also liberalism as an ideological current, as a cultural platform).

Thus, I tried to avoid unilateralization. I did not find it appropriate either to assert that freedom is an exclusive component of liberalism in its political variant (constituted as an attempt to solve the theological and political problem – the 16th and 17th centuries –) or to assert that freedom belongs exclusively to government liberalism (19th century – Kahan variant). On the contrary. Considering liberalism as a premise of the modern era, I attached myself to some famous authors (P. Manet, A. Marga) and the I sympathized with ideas expressed by J. Gray, Leo Strauss, Karl Popper (who had been speaking about pre-modern anticipations of liberalism, about its «germs» ever since Greek and Roman Antiquity) and I am trying now to reconsider the historical coordinate of the idea of freedom.

And if we can talk about *germs* of liberalism regarding the representatives of the Great Generation (sometimes even regarding Plato and Aristotle), we can also introduce not only the concept of freedom, but also the germs of its exertion during Antiquity. The difference between the way in which the *free individual* was

¹ Pierre Manent, An Intellectual History Of Liberalism; Humanitas Publishing House, 1992;

² Andrei Marga, A Philosophy of European Union, Biblioteca Apostrof Publishing House, 2nd edition revised and enlarged, Cluj, 1997;

perceived during the prehistoric period of liberalism and the way in which it is perceived during the modern era is enormous. However, this enormous difference does not stand for incompatibility.

2. The concept of freedom in Greek Antiquity

Nowadays the analysis of the idea of freedom (the philosophical, abstract foundation of freedom) cannot be detached from factual everyday freedom (respectively its constitutional exertion – the freedom of association, of consciousness and of manifestation), because the exertion of freedom has always implied a conceptual frame, a theoretical foundation of its own, and the exertion of freedom requires a complement of theoretizations. As a novelty, political life and political thought “only during the modern era are they directly and internally connected, existing the possibility of recounting the political history of Greece or Rome without making use of ideas or doctrines³. Recounting this story, Thucydides – the historian who describes and analyzes the Peloponnesian War, a full conflict manifestation of the Greek cities Athens and Sparta – finds that it “does not consecrate a single page to what we would call «intellectual life» or «cultural life»”. Moving forward: “Nowadays his history is still considered the masterpiece of Greek historiography, a part of historiography itself. This fact is even more remarkable because Greece, as we already know, is the cradle of philosophy, and especially of political philosophy. Plato and Aristotle started from the experience of Greek city life in elaborating their interpretations of human life, which constitutes the matrix of the entire subsequent philosophy. But these interpretations were developed *after* the conclusion of the great cycle of Greek politics. Totally different is the case of modern political philosophy. One may be tempted to say it was conceived *before* being put into practice. The skylark of liberalism flew away at dawn”⁴

Starting from the analysis developed on the ancients’ conception about freedom in the 18th century by the warrantist Benjamin Constant, John Gray puts forward “the pre-modern anticipations of liberalism”⁵ and discovers the differences (sometimes extended to contradiction) between the conception upon freedom of the ancients and that of the moderns. Thus:

➤ ancients identified freedom as being the same as the right to make decisions concerning community problems, whereas for the moderns freedom implies the

³ Pierre Manent, op. cit. p. 11

⁴ Ibidem, p 11-12

⁵ John Gray, *Liberalism*, Du Style Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 27

existence of a sphere secured from undesired disturbances as well as independence under law authority;

➤ modern people associate freedom with the representation of *privacy*, while the ancients associated freedom with the possibility of representing options in the collective decisional system;

➤ for the ancients the idea of freedom implied both individuals and communities, signifying autonomy (lack of control), whereas the moderns understand it as the field consecrated to the independence of the individual;

➤ in a certain way, when it referred to individuals, freedom seldom meant “immunity against community control, being only the right to participate in its deliberations; the ancient conception of freedom is contradictory to that of the moderns”;

John Gray adverts to the somewhat exaggerated character of B. Constant’s interpretation, who speaks about certain germs of liberal thought, germs existing in the ancient world, especially in the Greek thought. Thus, Gray insists upon the distinction made by sophists between *natural* and *conventional*, a distinction by which it is argued the *universal equality* of people. In this sense, he gives as example both Glaucon and Lycophron who are representative for the sophists distinction between human nature and human convention, so as to combat the conception regarding natural slavery.

“This – wrote Gray – is the case of Glaucon, who in the second book of Plato’s *Republic* develops a theory of social contract, mainly of sophist origin. He says that *justice represents a contract according to which one should neither commit nor endure injustice*. Moreover, Aristotle mentions Sycophron as being advocate of the idea that the law and the state are based on a *contract*, so that the only mission of law is to provide the security of individuals, and that all the functions of the state are negative in the sense that they should prevent injustice”⁶.

Freedom is born within the continuous area between obedience and disobedience; Alcibiades, as the first private citizen, will hold the power of civic disobedience, and Alcidas, considered the author of the assertion “the gods created all people to be free, nobody is a slave by nature”, puts forward to public the *idea of equality by natural freedom*. Therefore if people are born free (are equal by freedom), the issue of natural slavery has no value in agora.

⁶

Ibidem, p. 28

Germes of liberal thought of the ancient world are also found in the group named by Karl Popper «The Great Generation», ranging from the schools of the sophists Protagoras and Gorcias, the atomist Democrit, the democrat Pericles – a generation that also included Alcidas and Lycopfron.

Pericles's Funeral Oration sets the foundation of this Generation that claimed its *egalitarian-liberal* and individualist principles and that existed in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Therewith, Protagoras elaborated a theoretical foundation of *participatory democracy* (according to him all the people bring their contribution – sometimes unevenly – to providing justice), being the initiator of political equality doctrine in political history, doctrine developed at first as a criticism of the esoteric and elitist conceptions regarding the state (frequent in Greece)⁷.

The complexity of the problem of freedom and constraint, of democracy and freedom is also dealt with in the miniature (but famous) *Democracy As Violence*, attributed to the Athenian Anonymous (ca. 450 BC), representing the oldest criticism of democracy as a destructive and oppressive but perfect system⁸. But democracy, born as a rupture and not as a convenience word, expresses the prevalence of a certain part, not the equal participation of everybody, an equidistant participation in the city public life (the term *insonomia* would fit best to define it). For instance, Plato asserts that democracy is born as an act of violence “the moment that the poor conquer, killing some of the rich, hunting away some others. This violent instauration is achieved either by the power of weapons, or by excluding the antagonist who is forced to draw back by fear.”⁹ Is not this idea prefigured by those expressed by A. Toqueville and J. St. Mill concerning the menace of the dictatorship of the majority?

In Gray's opinion, Plato and Aristotle are against the germes of liberalism expressed by the representatives of the Great Generation. Thus, quoting E.A. Havelock and K. Popper, Gray writes: “In Plato and Aristotle's works one will not discover a development of the conception of the Great Generation, but a reaction against it, an effeminacy of the Greek liberalism or a counterrevolution aimed at the open society in Pericles's Athens”¹⁰. In this sense, he advocates that:

⁷ G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 144;

⁸ Anonimo ateniese: *La democrazia come violenza*, Seleiro Editare, Palermo, 1982, p. 30;

⁹ See Plato's *Republic*, Book VIII, in *Opera*, V, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1986;

¹⁰ J. Gray, *op. cit.* p. 29;

➤ the sophists and Democrit's skeptic and empirical perspective is replaced by a «type of metaphysical rationalism» in Plato and Aristotle's works;

➤ Plato rejects the ethics of freedom and equality of the Great Generation philosophers «radically»; Aristotle proceeds in the same matter «more moderately, but not less substantially»;

➤ In his *Republic* Plato disclaims a “veritable anti-liberal utopia”, denying «individualist requirements», rejecting moral equality of people, repudiating the criticism of institutions which, once established, become immutable.

However, it has to be admitted that Plato, preoccupied with the consolidation of the Greek state facing the imminent danger of decadence, with the ideal state (as an absolute necessity and supreme achievement), threw into the background the signification of the intrinsic value of individual freedom. His approach regarding the elaboration of an organic theory of the state and the laws is a finalist one. At the same time it has to be also mentioned the fact that Plato's work is not a homogeneous one and is not limited only to some dialogues and to the *Republic*. Consequently, the transfer from the sceptic and empirical point of view towards metaphysical rationalism that Gray mentions should be seen quite diffidently. For example we have in view that in his late works – especially in *Laws*, Plato displays an attempt to exhaustively prescribe the sphere of individual action under the form of some all-embracing laws that are able to guarantee the free actions of an individual, the constraint being limited to those actions that are not prescribed by law.

Concerning Aristotle, Gray varies his position, even though he remarks the fact that the anti-liberal feeling is not “as virulent as the one that animates Plato's works”, but “remains vigorous and incisive”¹¹. In this sense, he finds that the majority of thinkers reached the conclusion that in Aristotle's work there is no concession of individual freedom or human rights but their assumption that “any attempt to assign elements of the liberal conception to a pre-modern thinker is anachronic” is not embraced by Gray. The reason for which he rejects this point of view is represented by the obvious characteristics of individualism that are found in the sophists' conception, characteristics that he denominated as “liberal thought germs in the ancient world”, previously referred to. This aspect is even more important as Alasdair MacIntyre affirms that “by the end of the Middle Ages in any ancient or mediaeval language there cannot be found any phrase that could be appropriately translated as designating what we commonly understand by «right». In

¹¹

G.Gray, op. cit, p. 29;

Hebrew, Greek, Latin or in Japanese before the mid 19th century this concept lacks any possibility to be expressed”¹².

Leo Strauss contrasts the «classical natural right», regarding the adjectives of the phrase, with the modern conceptions regarding natural rights by taking into account the *civic-private* relation, thus advocating the civic duty as being the root of classical natural right and the illusion of civic duty in the modern theories referring to natural rights by illustrating the substantiation of individual freedom. With the moderns individual freedom is not only independent from civic responsibilities, but also prior in relation to them. This approach is acknowledged by J. Gray as well, and if the concept of *civic duty* is added the concept of touché, the Greeks’ approach becomes much more comprehensible. Besides, by fathoming the analysis of Aristotle’s work, in comparison to the sophists he was contemporary with, but also to Th. Bobbes and J. Lucke, Gray reaches the conclusion that “nowhere in his work is there any suggestion referring to the negative rights of individual freedom”, but the ethics of the Stagirite contains “under a rudimentary form, a certain conception upon the natural rights of man, that is of those rights that everyman owns by reason of their belonging to human species”¹³.

By reference to *Nicomachic Ethics*, Gray reinforces his arguments regarding the «rudimentary» character of the Aristotelic conception of the natural rights of man as universal rights based on human species belonging; he even finds a similarity between the assertion of natural rights in Aristotle’s work and Thomas Aquino’s conception regarding the foundation of these rights rooting in natural justice. “Indeed – he says – with Aristotle there is an almost functional conception of rights, where they appeared because of the different roles that individuals fulfilled within the polis. In Aristotle’s view, these functions were clearly attached to some extremely unequal rights, without even generating the right to non-interference or personal independence. Aristotle’s unalterable rejection of political equality has to be understood as being part of his conservatory reaction against the germinal liberalism in Athens”¹⁴.

3. The Democratic Ideal and Greek Antiquity

I consider that it is not less interesting a short presentation of the Greeks’ conception about democracy, especially in order to illustrate, on the one hand, an

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, p. 67

¹³ J. Gray, *op. cit.* p.30

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 30-31

eventual relation freedom – democratic ideal during the prehistory of liberalism, as well as the major differences between the significances of democracy in its incipient stages and liberal democracy, on the other.

For the Greeks, democracy means common people's governing, people who for the most part were poor, with no experience or solid education. The demos represented the majority group, the government of the city-state being realized for its own benefit in the first place, as opposed to aristocracy, which implied the government of *aristoti* («the best»), those about whom many Greek thinkers stated that they were the most suitable for governing. The decentralization of political life implied self-governance concerning the city-state (*polis*), and during the period of the Golden Age in Athens, its inhabitants considered the polis as being *a democracy*. “Our government form – said Pericles – does not rival with the institutions of other peoples. We are not imitating our neighbours, but we are an example to them.

It is true that we are called democracy because the administration is in the hands of the many, not of the few. But whereas the law provides equal justice for everybody regarding their personal disputes, it is also acknowledged the demand to be the best; and when a citizen singularizes himself in one way or another, he is preferred for public functions not as a privilege, but as a reward for his merit. Poverty is not an obstacle, on the contrary, a man can bring benefits for his city-state [polis], no matter how obscure his condition may be”¹⁵.

Pericles's *Funeral Oration* suggests, apart from the distinction *democrats*-aristocrats, another distinction of great importance for the Athenians, namely that one between the citizens interested in public affairs (*polites*) and the persons who only had an eye to the main chance (*idiotes*): “An Athenian citizen does not neglect the state, the «polis», because he cares for his own household; and even those fellow beings who are involved in business have a very good notion of politics. It is us alone who consider that a man who is not interested in public affairs is not a prejudicial character, but a useless one; and if few of our fellow beings initiate a politics, we all judge it thoroughly”¹⁶.

The notion of *citizenship* includes a certain meaning of freedom; in order to be a citizen an individual had to be a free adult male Athenian. Athenian democracy does not include women, foreigners and slaves (consequently the majority of the population): only one out of ten inhabitants of Athens was a citizen (therefore free). Participating in public life implied:

¹⁵ Pericles, *Funeral Oration*, in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, vol. 4, pp.127-128

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.129

- the quality of major citizen of Athens;
- the quality of free man, derived from the quality of citizen;
- a public responsabilization that does not exclude the citizens involved in business (on the contrary, they are considered as having “a very good notion about politics”);
 - a remuneration of participation in political life, by which it was achieved the common interest shown by those involved (rich and poor) in participating in meetings and in deciding politics by direct vote;
 - filling political positions (a consequence of confiding in demos), not by vote but by drawing lots.

Some of these characteristics, together with the reduced protection of minority rights, the limits of freedom of speech (under the circumstances of equality of all citizens before the law), ostracism practice (“ostrakon” – a shell or potsherd on which Athenian citizens wrote the names of those whom they wanted to eliminate without lawsuit and without bringing legal accusations), make Athenian democracy a highly limited form of government. Besides, Athens, the first democracy, created the first martyr of the freedom of thought and speech – Socrates. Regarding this fact as well as the discontentment related to the fact that democracy is an unstable form of government, and thus a dangerous one, Plato and Aristotle’s criticism is partially justified.

Plato considered that by setting the political power in the hands of the ignorant and envy-tormented people, democracy is dangerous because:

- the common people’s ignorance generates the impossibility to use political power for community welfare;
- envy produces discriminations between promoting common welfare and one’s own welfare, the people tending to defend their own interests (personal welfare is favoured);
 - giving up common welfare in favour of personal welfare leads to robbing and plundering the wealthy;
 - ignorance and envy transform the demos into a manipulation tool for its leaders (by demagogy and adulation the leaders of the demos will speculate envy and will instigate people against each other);
 - warfare inside a city, specific to democracy, develops into civil war and anarchy, leading to the destruction of the city-state;
 - the anarchy generated by democracy will determine the people to demand “law” and “order” calling upon “power-solicitous persons” (and sufficiently powerful ones) who will govern by despotic measures (the tyrant is specified neither

the interests of the polis nor of the people, but only the power exerted on his own behalf).

In essence, with Plato democracy, governing exerted by the people, is nothing more than a series of small steps towards despotism.¹⁷

Aristotle as well saw democracy as bad and undesirable. He asserts that this is one of the six main types of political regimes or *constitutions*. The power of governing, he writes in his *Politics*, has to be exerted by a person, a small group of persons or by a large group of people. This power is potentially exerted either for the welfare of the entire community – in which case it is «good», «true», or only for the welfare of the leaders – in which case it is «perverted». Taking the *interest* in exerting this power as a reference, Aristotle synthesizes that the power is exerted for the *public interest* in a *monarchy* (a single leader), *aristocracy* (a few leaders) and *politeia* (several leaders). If the power is exerted for one's *own* interest, the forms of government are *despotism* (a single leader), *oligarchy* (a few leaders) and *democracy* (several leaders).

Consequently, the type of interest (public or personal) is certain, the number of participants being only secondly important and only by comparison with the interest by reason of which leaders are governing.

Just like Plato, Aristotle asserts that democracy is a corrupt form of government, because the *demos* aims at selfish interests as a consequence of its narrow perspectives. Simple people do not seem interested in the peace and stability of the polis (therefore they do not support long term interests), but they adjust according to their own short term interests, appropriating properties, fortunes and power from the few. These tendencies of *demos* result in the same consequences as those described by Plato: the establishment of chaos and finally of despotism across the entire polis.

An essential characteristic of Aristotle's classification is that it includes *politeia* as a good government form exerted by the many.

In the Stagirite's opinion, *politeia* differs from democracy by the fact that it combines elements of government exerted by the many, resulting a *mixed constitution* which consists of the fact that each group can monitor the other, the few can control the many and vice-versa, so that neither of these social classes can fight for its own interest in the detriment of common welfare. This is a pre-figuration of what Montesquien becomes centuries later: «the effect of freedom» in mitigating power.

¹⁷Plato, *The Republic*, book VIII

Another distinction between *politeia* and *democracy* suggested by Aristotle stems from the way of distribution of fortune and property. In democracy, under quasi-total and inevitable conditions, (this is the way things are and it cannot be changed), the many are the poor. Only in extremely rare cases the majority of the people are neither rich nor poor, but “they own a moderate and sufficient property (fortune)”¹⁸, existing the possibility that they may govern cautiously. We are thus witnessing the transformation of the middle class in the majority, which will lead to avoiding abuse specific to the envious poor and to the arrogant rich.

The middle class considers that the welfare of the polis is its own personal welfare and therefore will militate and proceed accordingly so as to maintain the peace and stability of the city-state.

Hence, Aristotle considered *politeia* as being the best of the six regimes, while democracy was seen as being vicious. However, he argued that democracy is better than despotism and oligarchy (making a gradual comparison regarding the «perverted» forms of government), being that collective reason is better than that of any individual or small group, inclusively of a group of competent persons (no ordinary man has the capacity to reason correctly what is right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful or unbeautiful). This is as available as “a banquet with several participants is better than a dinner relying on a single pocket.”¹⁹ The second element that makes democracy “a smaller evil” than despotism and oligarchy is that the first one gives several men the possibility to actively participate in the citizen life, to govern and to be governed.

Aristotle’s *Ethics* includes, in an initial form, a conception regarding the man’s natural rights, referring to rights granted to all the individuals by reason of their belonging to human species.

The German philosopher Max Pohlenz grasps an essential idea: *the Greeks’ history is the history of the evolution of their freedom*. He starts from the idea that, the Greeks have manifested a tendency towards self-decision since ancient times, people being aware of their will, even if they submitted to gods. The opinion concerning freedom in Greek Antiquity originates in a very important *judicial fact*: that slavery makes the distinction between a free man and a slave, between freedom and dependence. Freedom makes sense within *the private sphere*, the perception of freedom characterized the master and his family. Pohlenz emphasizes that after the Persian Wars the Greek consciousness clearly perceived freedom, which was provided by *nomos*, by the Greek law. Political freedom proper begins with the *polis*,

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, Antet Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p.192.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p.146.

with state autonomy, with the right of citizens to participate in decision making within a limited area. Being the result of the warfare for state freedom, the notion of freedom gets a special connotation with the Greeks: it is something different from despotism. The situation of the Spartan citizen includes an element of high specificity: for him freedom means nothing more than the military freedom of the polis.²⁰

Greek political freedom is a historical fact of life, especially a result of war. Exactly during the period of the development of classical political freedom there can be remarked a distinction between freedom characterized by adherence to *sophrosyne* (respect for tradition and existence) for social life, order and discipline, on the one hand, and to democratic freedom understood as libertinism, licentiousness, *akalasia*, on the other. The latter determines arrogance and hybris, dissolution and instability in and for community life. Besides, in his Testament Pericles warned about the danger that the second form of freedom represented for the state, highlighting that freedom without lawfulness (without submission to authorities) does not exist, and if it exists, it represents a capital deviation from *eleutheria* (community) towards a demos ruled by unlawfulness, by anarchy.

Such aspects are significant for understanding and determining Plato and Aristotle's position regarding freedom. They both use the term of freedom reticently because this term has an overly political weight. In fact they developed the concept, which acquired a philosophical precision: interior freedom reaches plenitude in the freedom of spirit, which not only guarantees man's independence in relation to the exterior world, but it also gives him the possibility to develop his real character. Freedom has only one limit, but it is inviolable. It derives from the intrinsic laws of the spirit, which are able to provide truth as well as good.

4. Conclusion

I presented a series of ideas that are circumscribed to some values on which ancient Greek philosophy is based and which are reflected in the modern era, even though the historical context requires new approaches. To them there can be added many others – all of them aiming at a vector with a rich cognitive weight – an axiological one. And as a last remark: the matrix of the small city-state that R. Dahl mentions when insisting upon the historical coordinate of the idea of democracy is a model that subsequent civilizations aspired after, the *city* representing a way of life compatible with human nature and condition.

²⁰ See Kurt von Fritz, *Conservative Reaction and One Man Rule in Ancient Greece*, in *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume Fifty-six, Academy of Political Science Columbia University, New York, 1941.