

HOW TO LIVE: THE CHOICE OF ATALANTA (ATLANTA) IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC* 620 b

At the end of the famous Platonic *Republic* and in the choice of lives by the souls¹, remarkable is the αἵρεσις of Atalanta, whose name is etymologically connected with Atlanta (the city in the USA which is preparing the Olympics of 1996) and Atlas, Atlantis as well. All are of the same root tla-, as τλάω (suffer), τάλας, τλήμων, πολύτλας, ταλαίπωρος (wretched, suffering, miserable, distressed, steadfast, patient). So the name of the American city acquires a deeper meaning. It becomes synonymous to the ἀγών (act, contest, fight), συναγωνισμός (competition). It seems that Atlanta has the most appropriate name for the athletics and for competition of every kind. (Athens, however, had more historical reasons to organize the Olympics of 1996).

But it is not only the etymological connection of Atalanta and Atlanta; the whole case of Atalanta and her choice of life in the end of the Platonic *Republic* represents a special case of individual αἵρεσις. The very fact that an individual chooses his life freely and without any intermingling of any other persons divine or human is in itself enough to show that Plato retains a very high place for each human being separately. So K. Popper is wrong, I believe, by insisting that Plato strangles the individual².

Let's see how we can present closer the platonic scenery, the spectacle of the election. It is wonderful and could receive a special place in an attempt to get Plato visualized. Such an attempt has, as far as I know, not been undertaken as yet. So our senses have not participation in the judgement of the souls and their choice of new lives in an eternal chain of transformation. Such an attempt would be an iconic presentation of a high philosophical myth, an artistic contribution to the work of the alleged enemy of art, Plato.

1. See L. EDELSTEIN, The Function of the Myth in Plato's Philosophy, *Journal of the History of Ideas* X (1949), pp. 463-481.

2. K. POPPER, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, I The Spell of Plato, p. 1 passim. It is striking that Popper completely ignores the last 14 pages of the Platonic *Republic* (608 - 621; there is only a slight mention of 615 d). It is more astonishing, however, that the great champion of Plato and accuser of Popper, Levinson (*In Defence of Plato*, Harvard 1953) failed to note this startling omission).



According to Plato the souls are immortal. They live one century (αἰών is the fullest span of human life) in one form and then are rewarded tenfold for their good deeds or punished respectively for their bad actions on the earth. So is completed a time of 1100 years.

After this the concrete human or animal forms (types) are called to choose another way of life. It is a great moment for which we must be prepared and Plato himself wrote the Republic to help us.

In the platonic scenery the souls have before their eyes a great exposition of models. Lives of men and animals of every sort are displayed. On the one side are the souls (in a special individual form already) which are going to choose and on the other side those who can be chosen. Αἵρεσις is going to take place. And αἵρεσις is choice in an active and passive meaning. It means choice by myself and choice of myself. I remark, however, that in the platonic scenery there are not lives of contemporaries. All belong to the far distant past. Should they have finished the span of one millennium after they *vivebant*, especially those who are to be chosen. It seems that Lachesis does need too much time (more than 1100 years?) to write and put on her lap and form types of the lives. This procedure does not occur, however, in the cases of animals which are not divided into subtypes.

The souls αἰροῦνται (choose) in an order determined by lot. The set of lives of the two sides are not of equal number. Those to be chosen are far more numerous than the souls present (Plato, *Rep.* 618 a) but not infinite. Those with first tokens have a wider range of choice.

The choice takes place after a magnificent declaration of the prophet of Lachesis, the daughter of Ananke (Necessity), as also Clotho and Atropos. The declaration is made as an oracle which inspires awe. The prophet enunciates our whole duty to ourselves. We elect our deity, genius, plan of life. We are not helped at the moment. And our choice binds our subsequent life. We pick our own destiny. We will be good or bad to the extent we value virtue. With us alone lies responsibility, not with god.

Each one needs his charioteer who is his δαίμων; this daemon δαίει, i.e. divides, arranges life. He leads the soul. And we choose him ourselves and depending on our choice we become εὐδαίμονες or κακοδαίμονες, happy or unhappy.

The selection, as it is given by Plato, is worth seeing. There are mentioned 10 αἱρέσεις. Generally the choosers are guided by the experience of their former life. Are they under the dominion of habit? I believe that they do not lack the tendency of changing, as indicate inter alia the following verbs and phrases: μεταβάλλοντα, διαλλάξαι, εἰς τεχνικῆς γυναικὸς ἰοῦσαν φύσιν, ζητεῖν βίον ἀνδρὸς ἰδιώτου (*Rep.* 620 a - d).



The 10 choices are given here without comment. Commentary will be offered only in the case of Atalanta which lies in the middle (ἐν μέσοις) of the whole procedure:

1. The first who chose as the first took the absolute tyranny.
2. Orpheus chose the life of a swan.
3. Thamyras to be a nightingale.
4. Swan (as well as songbirds) chose to live as a human creature.
5. Ajax a life of a lion.
6. Agamemnon of an eagle.
7. Atalanta chose athletics.
8. Epeios chose the nature of a scilful woman.
9. Thersites (the funny man) chose the ape.
10. Odysseus chose the life of a private person doing nothing³.

As we have said, the lives of men and animals choose and are chosen. The general tendency for men and women (considering the 10 cases recorded), is to choose lives of animals. It is remarked in about the half instances (5 in 10). Only one animal, one swan (and singbirds to be correct), was transformed into a human being. Such a reluctance to humanity!

The soul of Atalanta when she came to choose had still a large amount of lives before her eyes in this extraordinary Madame Tussaud's to choose. In this Museum the choosers (ἐκλεγοντες, αίρουμενοι) were generally people of the Trojan age and before (in this phase of election) and chosen (ἐκλεγόμενοι) were either of indefinite age or animals. Not to forget on the other hand that "even for

3. Cf. LUCIAN, *Βίων πρᾶσις* (Lives for sale). Lucian, the famous greek author of the 2 c. AD, in his work presents a sale of philosophers, attempting to give us answers in the cardinal question of our existence: how to live in order to be happy. In the mentioned work of Lucian ten instances are given; one decade, exactly as in Plato's *Republic* examined previously. Indeed a very impressive equality of numbers. But the buyers in Lucian demonstrate in their choices more prudence and temperance. From the lives exposed (Pythagoras, Diogenes, Aristippus, Democritus, Heraclitus, Socrates, Epicurus, Chrysippus, Aristotle and Pyrrhon) impressive is that the buyers (ὠνηταί) make the morally right choice. The Pythagorean way of live was sold in 300 copies whereas that of Aristippus (pleasure of the moment doctrine which certainly would be selected today by the leisure-seeking Americans) remained ἄπρατος (unsold).

An enormous problem is opening now and remains to be examined. It is simply outlined here. The choosers (or rather buyers) in Lucian would be more appropriate to Plato's mind and vice versa. Plato could among others approve of a Pythagorean, ascetic way of life, and Lucian the life of an Odysseus modelled on the Cynics (like Diogenes). But is it not a better way to choose something between suffering and pleasure, which is exactly the Aristotelian predicate of the μέσου?



the last exists sufficient lives, provided one chooses with prudence and lives with temperance”⁴.

Choosing ξὺν νῶ (let’s say νουνεχόντως) and living συντόνως had particularly two choosers of the ten examples given by Plato, Atalanta and Odysseus. But even these two persons were diametrically opposed in their choices. Atalanta did not bypass the life of athletics but chose it. She remained the same; unchanged. Odysseus, on the other hand, remembering his former sufferings and being weary of travel and ambition, turned aside, and chose a quiet and obscure life⁵. I may say, he chose the λάθε βιώσας.

Given the fact that Atalanta lived on athletic life already and shared for example in the hunt of the Calydonian boar, where she first, famous for her hunting prowess, wounded the beast and took the first award, she joined in the Argonautic exploits, as the only woman in this great enterprise (reminding us of modern space launchings), and attended the Games for Pelias, where she wrestled and defeated Peleus, the father of Achilles, and she killed the Centaurs Hylaios and Rhoicos, who tried to rape her, and above all she submitted all her suitors to a footrace in which she herself was offered as an award. Needless to say, she surpassed them all and it was only by a trick of one man (Hippomenes, or Melanion or Meleager), only by the intervention of Eros, who handled golden apples during the race and the suitor golden apples during the race and the suitor distracted Atalanta by casting them before her, she has delayed by picking them and was defeated. Subsequently, she made love with the winner and a son, Parthenopaios, was born (who fought later as one of the Seven against Thebes)⁶.

So Atalanta was, we can say, the personification of athletic life. By choosing athletics Atalanta remained the same. She remained faithful to her own name which means temperance, endurance, suffering for the sake of an award. She remained φιλότιμος and if she had had an Homer to eulogize her exploits, we, especially today in a period of respect to the female, would have a wellcome Ἀταλάντεια. Instead we expect the Olympics of Atlanta and we hope that there the spirit of τλῆναι will bring illustrious achievements.

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4. PLATO, *Republic* 619 b «ξὺν νῶ ἐλομένω...συντόνως ζῶντι...»

5. PLATO, *Republic* 620 c - d «τὴν Ὀδυσσέως...φιλοτιμίας λελωφηκυῖαν ζητεῖν ... βίον ἀνδρός ἰδιώτου ἀπράγμονος καὶ ἀσμένην ἐλέσθαι.»

6. See LIMC (*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*), v. II (1984), v. Atalanta.



Η ΕΠΙΛΟΓΗ ΤΗΣ ΑΤΑΛΑΝΤΗΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΠΟΛΙΤΕΙΑ
ΤΟΥ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ

Περίληψη

Τὸ παιδευτικὸ πρόγραμμα τοῦ Πλάτωνος στὴν *Πολιτεία* κορυφώνεται μὲ τὸν μῦθο τῆς ψυχῆς. Ἡ ψυχὴ (τὸ ἀθάνατον) παρουσιάζεται νὰ ἀλλάσσει κατὰ περιόδους βίῳ. Ἡ ἐκλογή (αἵρεσις βίου) εἶναι ἐλεύθερη καὶ γίνεται ἀπὸ μεγάλη σειρὰ προτύπων ποὺ εἶναι ὡς παραδείγματα ἄνθρωποι καὶ ζῶα. Στὸ συγκλονιστικὸ καὶ μεγαλειῶδες σκηNIKό, ὅπου παρουσιάζονται ἐπιλεκτικῶς 10 περιπτώσεις ἐπιλογῶν (ισάριθμες, κατὰ σύμπτωση ἴσως, ἀναλόγων ἐπιλογῶν τοῦ Λουκιανοῦ στὸ ἔργο του *Βίων προᾶσις*), ἐμφανίζεται καὶ ἡ Ἀταλάντη ποὺ τὸ ὄνομά της ἔχει ρίζα τοῦ τλάω, ὡς καὶ τλήμων, τάλας, πολύτλας καὶ τὸ ἐντυπωσιακώτερο, Ἄτλας, Ἀτλαντὶς, Ἀτλαντικὸς καὶ βεβαίως Atlanta τῶν ΗΠΑ ποὺ ἐτοιμάζει τὴν Ὀλυμπιάδα τοῦ 1996. Δὲν ἔχει τύχει προσοχῆς καὶ ἐξάρσεως ὅτι ὄχι μόνο ὑπάρχει ἐτυμολογικὴ σχέση Ἀταλάντης καὶ Atlanta ἀλλὰ οὔτε καὶ ὅτι ἡ Ἀταλάντη εἶναι προτυπο ἀθλητικοῦ βίου, ἀσκήσεως καὶ ἀνταγωνισμοῦ στὴ ἑλληνικὴ μυθολογία καὶ ἀκόμη σημαντικώτερο ὅτι στὴ συγκεκριμένη στιγμή, ποὺ ἀναφέρει ὁ Πλάτων, πάλιν ἐπιλέγει τὴν ἴδια ζῳή, τὸν ἀθλητισμό. Ἡ σύμπτωση ὅλων τῶν ἀνωτέρω δίδει ἰδιαιτέρη λαμπρὴ στὴν Atlanta, ἂν καὶ ἡ Ἀθήνα εἶχε περισσότερους τῶν ἀνωτέρω λόγους νὰ διοργανώσῃ τοὺς Ὀλυμπιακοὺς τοῦ 1996. Στὸν σύγχρονο ἀνταγωνισμὸ πόλεων γιὰ τὴν Ὀλυμπιάδα ἡ Ἀθήνα ἐμειονέκτησε στὴν προᾶσιν.

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