

# Freedom and Destiny in Ancient Greek Thought: Some Footnotes for Contemporary Scientific Research and Education

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Received 12 November 2015; accepted 14 February 2016; published 17 February 2016

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## Abstract

**In the history of thought it has been common to inquire about the relation between personal freedom and necessity. The question of self-determination and self-sufficiency was an essential question for the ancient philosophers and poets in their enquiries about how to live a good life. In this paper we will discuss the ancient Greek interpretation of freedom and its collateral of responsibility. This will bring us to three important questions for scientific research and education: 1) Are scientific deliberation and practical wisdom exclusive skills? 2) Is the will an unneeded faculty of the soul? 3) Is the *katharsis* a footnote for the lucid and robust contemporary state of mind?**

## Keywords

**Scientific Deliberation, Practical Wisdom, Ancient Greek Philosophy, Ethics, Personal Freedom, Determination**

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## 1. Scientific Deliberation and Practical Wisdom—Exclusive Skills?

In the history of ancient Greek thought the question of how to live a livable life is the principal arouser of those who dedicate time to think about the meaning and sense of the human being and his place in the universe<sup>1</sup>. Greek poets and philosophers observed that in the empirical world everything changed and nothing was eternal. But the experience of pure contingency dominated by luck turns human existence into a senseless occupation.

<sup>1</sup>We use the expression “a livable life” referring to the ancient Greek concept of happiness that is based on the practical wisdom of dealing and accepting the blows of life instead of controlling them. Life is how it is and the human being should make life livable through changing his attitude and not life itself.

It seems that our daily life, in order to make sense to us, needs to be grounded in a meta-comprehension of the functioning of the universe<sup>2</sup>. We try to interpret our surrounding and comprehend, as far as possible, the causes and effects of natural events. Through our different rational skills we try to make the world a better and safer place. But the question remains how far a life can and how far it should be controlled through the power of reason. Is there another way of dealing with insecurities and fatal happenings rather than the pursuit of rational self-sufficiency? Maybe a good life is more open and vulnerable to external influences.

If we inquire into ancient Greek thought, we observe that the desire for self-determination is always a vivid sense of love for the openness of empirical humanity. Although ancient philosophy tried to transcend plain human knowledge and elevate itself by imitating the divine science, it never had the illusion of being in complete possession of an absolute and universal wisdom.

Aristotle insisted with great emphasis on the limits of human knowledge. In his physics, metaphysics, politics and ethics, he questioned over and over again where human wisdom starts, where it ends, and where ignorance begins. The main question that guided his works was how knowledge can be reliable and still be beautifully human. Although in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle invites us to “immortalize” (*athanatizein*), he adds an important detail: we should try to “assimilate the gods as much as possible”<sup>3</sup> Aristotle (350 BC). The divine wisdom is an ideal that guides the human being and elevates his human opinions (*brotōn doxai*): it is a regulatory principal and not a constitutive quality. We should try to imitate the divine science but never have the illusion to possess it completely. Aristotle offers an intellectualism of the limits and not a triumphant rationalism. Although the highest state of being is the contemplation of universal and eternal wisdom, our human condition ties us to live in the mortal part of the universe and interact with the changes and insecurities of contingency.

Our daily decisions cannot be taken by scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*). Although in ancient Greek thought the world of the human being and its creations (*technē*) was always in an intimate relation with the objective contemplation of nature (*epistēmē*), to differ between the right and the wrong, another faculty of the human mind was needed<sup>4</sup>. To give a reflexive response to contingency and to act correctly in the correct moment (*kairos*), the ancient Greek citizen appealed to his *phronēsis*, the human virtue by excellence.

The meaning and function of *phronēsis* have their origin in the ancient tradition. In the Homeric literature, the verb *phronein* refers to an intellectual process of abstraction. The empirical knowledge, proceeded from the *phrenes* (the organ of aspiration), is digested and processed into universal knowledge, but never alienated from its physical and emotional contents. In the Hippocratic literature, *phronein* refers to “think healthily”. The condition of *phronēsis* is an organic balance, originated by strict nutritional prescriptions. Certain healthy habits avoid the states of excess (*hyperbolē*), proper to an insane mind eager to challenge the gods, and maintain the state of temperance (*sōphrosynē*). *Phronēsis* is the practical wisdom guided by our common sense of avoiding excess. To live a good life, one has to be conscious of the exact measurement of his proper limitations and the infinite distance that separates him from the gods. It is through this path how we should interpret the Delphic formula *gnōthi seauton*: “know your fingertips, your limits” and not “know yourself, your true essential being”.

The popular wisdom of ancient Greek thought has its expression by excellence in the Greek tragedy. The tragic hero learns his limits by committing acts of *hybris* (arrogance). He learns from his errors by suffering. The chorus is especially sensible to the right and the wrong in the speeches of the antagonists and encourages the practical wisdom of the *phronēsis*:

A good judgement (*phronein*) results in  
the most important part of happiness:  
And it is also advisable to not commit acts of impiety,  
at least that what is in consideration of the gods.  
Because immoderate reasoning of the arrogant  
is punished with immoderate blows send by the gods,

<sup>2</sup>The ancient Greek philosophers based their practical theories about happiness on metaphysics, religion and science. The human being was conceived as a rational being that only was happy if he developed his natural skills by trying to comprehend the universe that he was a part of.

<sup>3</sup>*E.N.*, X, 7, 1177b33 (The *Nicomachean Ethics*, translation by H. Rackham, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1934).

<sup>4</sup>It is interesting to observe that in ancient Greek thought scientific and technical knowledge were not considered as incompatible but as connected to the observer and producer: the active human subject. The pre-Socratic naturalists interpreted the changes of contingency in the light of the changes that the human being was able to realise, that is to say in the light of the techniques of that era. Objective knowledge and products had the same origin: the subjective world of the human being.

and by suffering they will learn at old age to be wise (*phronésis*)<sup>5</sup> (Sophocles, 442 BC).

The *phronésis* protects us in our ambition and remembers the beauty of our humanity and vulnerability as a key to happiness. During the last centuries, the scientific knowledge (which the Greeks considered divine) has increased enormously and made us “competitors with the gods”. But the development of our knowledge in the eyes of the tragic poets is a risky business: the higher the human ambition the deeper the fall. The ancient Greeks continually asked themselves if they should strive for everything that is in their reach. The practical wisdom helped them to remember the limits of being mortal, connecting them with their humanity, emotions and feelings.

Maybe we could take the ancient *phronésis* as a footnote for our scientific investigation. Only when we are completely human we can digest correctly objective information. It is a misconception to assume that real knowledge can only be achieved by pure objective contemplation. To understand a scientific dilemma we need to connect ourselves with the theoretical question. Our subjective associations make us more open to the dilemma and help us in giving an answer altogether. It makes us slow-thinkers and instead of giving a quick ready answer we first connect our feelings and values with the objective knowledge: we feel and think something personal about it. But the input of our complete subjectivity requires spunk: we can no longer evade our personal responsibility, attributing the consequences of our decisions to the determinism of the unbreakable chain of cause and effect. Our *phronésis* made us personally involved with the risks and failures of the scientific investigation.

## 2. The Will—An Unneeded Faculty?

In the history of ancient Greek thought, we observe an absence of an absolute dichotomy between practical, empirical and concrete knowledge (*phronésis*) and theoretical, immaterial and abstract knowledge (*nous*). Although the ancient philosophers wanted to distinguish the intellect from the senses, the popular interpretation of *noein* as a “seeing clearly” and “being alert” remained an essential connotation during Greek antiquity. The Homeric conception of the living human being as a whole of flesh and spirit<sup>6</sup> influenced the philosophical conceptions. Even the dualistic thinkers, like Parmenides, Pythagoras and Plato, could not radically separate the pure cognitive intuition from the sensitive impression without contradictions. In the Aristotelian thought, *nous* is conceived as the highlight of the cognitive process of abstraction and apprehension (*dianoia*), it is the moment of complete comprehension: the intellect receives the enlightenment in a “block” of knowledge and no deliberation is needed.

In the ancient Greek world the intellectual knowledge had a social function. In archaic and classic thought there is no rigid dichotomy between the “Self” and the “Other”. The Greek citizen never conceived his individuality as a separate being alienated from his community: it is the sense of togetherness that gives him a personal value. The metaphysical conception of limits has a natural extension in the contingency of socio-political spheres. In ancient Greek societies Ethics and Politics were conceived as inseparable knowledge areas: the individual virtues needed the community to practice and were meant to serve the common good. The task of philosophy was to educate the citizens in practicing their ethical and political skills. The Greek citizen gained awareness of his individual ethical being through his awareness of the limits of the universe, guarded by gods, destiny and social structures.

In archaic and classic thought, Self-consciousness is not the result of introspection, but the natural consequence of living and dealing with the insecurities of the surrounding. The wise man is not a closed and self-reflecting intellectual being, but an open and practical deliberator. His decisions are guided by experience and common sense. He is vulnerable to external influences and his actions are co-motivated by factors he does not determine. But instead of controlling the insecurity of luck and the determination of destiny, he accepts the uncontrollable as an essential part of his decisions. He knows that interiorizing the unchanging is the first step of

<sup>5</sup>*Antigone*, vv. 1347-1353. The translation is ours. See for the original Greek text Sophocles I, London, Harvard University Press, 1968, first edition, 1912.

<sup>6</sup>In Homeric literature the soul and the body constitute the identity of the living human being. Cognitive and sensitive functions were conceived as a unified whole of aggregate discrete parts. The spirit was never perceived as the essence of the human being or a separable identity. Only in the moment of vanishing and the approaching of death did the soul leave the body. But the identity of the hero stays in his corpse, and the soul is described as his last exhalation or as a vague shadow. This Homeric conception has nothing to do with the dualistic comprehension of *metempsychosis*, the travelling of the soul to other dimensions and other living beings.

dealing with it.

The Homeric hero is a good example of how the ancient Greeks conceived their place and extension in the universe. It is a commonplace in the philosophical literature to conceive the Homeric man as a passive marionette predisposed by the gods. This progressive interpretation<sup>7</sup> (Snell, 1946) denies that the characters of archaic poetry had a personal conscience or sense of autonomy and due to this absence they express a primitive, incoherent and childish moral. The main argument of the “progressive” scholars is that the Homeric hero was not able to distinguish between the subjective and objective reality and therefore he did not have a consciousness or a free will. Both faculties (the consciousness and the *voluntas*) are conceived by this tradition as the essential constitutive conditions of an ethical agent: an individual capable of taking personal responsibility for his actions. But the *Iliad* and the *Odysseus* give plenty of examples of moments of daily autonomous decisions in the battlefield, introspection, reflection and individual and social responsibility<sup>8</sup>.

To interpret the history of thought as a linear progressive evolution results in simplifying the complexity of reality. In archaic and classic thought the notion of freedom<sup>9</sup> does not evolve from a state of predestination to a state of absolute self-sufficiency; nor does the notion of destiny develop in this linear direction. Necessity is never conceived as absolute, omnipotent and universal, but as flexible and open to divine decrees, changes of luck and human actions. In ancient Greek thought the notions of freedom and necessity are conceived as preconditions open to external and internal influences. Destiny is represented as a distributive instance that designates the limits and functions of every living being<sup>10</sup>. But the limits assigned to the human being are not absolute and irrevocable. The only limit that cannot be transgressed is the condition of mortality. The rest of the predestinations are open to possible changes. The idea of freedom was not considered as absolute either. The inner autonomy is conceived as the acknowledgement of destiny and the determination of our inner attitude. We cannot change necessity, but we can change how we interpret and face the unchangeable<sup>11</sup> (Aeschylus, 458 BC).

This interpretation of the human action as co-motivated and limited by external and internal forms of necessity was common in ancient Greek thought. Instead of a radical rupture between archaic and classic thought we

<sup>7</sup>This progressive tradition was initiated by Bruno Snell (*Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, Hamburg, Claassen & Goverts, 1946).

<sup>8</sup>In this paper I will not discuss the particular freedom of the Homeric hero in detail, but it is worthwhile to review some passages of the *Iliad* that contrast the progressive interpretation (Il., II, 366-68; Il., XIII, 455; Il., I, 210-218; Il. XIX, 138). The end of the *Iliad* gives us a very different perspective. It is the moment when Achilles returns the corpse of Hector and recognizes the suffering of Priamus. Achilles shows a moral sensibility for the suffering of the old king and decides to appease his resentment and pride and make peace with the old king. The war makes all men equals; nobody is able to escape from its destructive and inhumane logic. The *Iliad*, instead of being an ode to war, shows us its cruelty and its hope for the consciousness of humanity.

<sup>9</sup>It is important to notice that in the ancient Greek society there was no word to refer to a freedom of the *psychē*. The word *eleutheria* refers to a physical freedom of “being a free man instead of a slave”. Neither the notion of *boûlēsis* (“consideration”, “decision” or “consciousness”) has the modern meaning of “free will”. But although the Greek society did not possess a word to refer to our conception of freedom this does not mean that they did not have a conception of freedom at all.

<sup>10</sup>The most common Greek word that refers to “fate” is *moira*. It derives from the verb *meíromai*, which in the active form means “to divide” and in the passive form of the plusquamperfectum “receiving your part”. We observe that from an etymological point of view the concept of fate is related to the concept of distribution. This association is probably due to the social distribution of the ancient Greek tribes. The social functions, possessions, honours and duties were assigned to the group members by a process of drawing lots. To avoid conflicts about the righteousness of the divisions, this “lottery” of social distributions was projected in cosmic forms of necessity. The justice of destiny has always been easier to accept than the arbitrary “randomness” of pure luck. The popular imagination conceived the process as guided by the goddess of destiny *Moira/Moirai*. The goddesses of distribution amplified bit by bit their functions, assisting at the important moments of life as birth, marriage and death, deciding the longitude of mortal life. In ancient literature, especially in Greek tragedy, the three Moiras are represented as the spinners of destiny: Clotho spins the thread of life, Lachesis rolls it up and Atropos cuts the thread when the time is over.

<sup>11</sup>A clear example of the coexistence of factors of necessity and moments of autonomy is the tragic decision of Agamemnon. In the beginning of the tragedy *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, the chorus tells us that the fleet of Agamemnon is unable to sail off the bay of Aulis into open sea because Artemis had calmed the winds. The fortune teller Calchas predicts us that if Agamemnon wants to reach Troy he has to sacrifice his daughter. This puts Agamemnon into a dilemma. The circumstances are forcing him to make a decision that he would not have made in normal conditions. He has to choose between two options, both are not the result of his ‘free will’, and both have fatal consequences. If the king decides to sacrifice his daughter, Zeus and Artemis will be happy, but he will be guilty of infanticide and kin-slaying and the Erinyes (chthonic deities of blood vengeance) will pursue him until he finds the same destiny as Iphigenia. If he decides not to do it, the furies will leave him in peace, but he will be guilty of impiety and punished by Zeus and Artemis, most probably with the destiny of death. It seems that Agamemnon has not much of a choice. But it is still the king who makes a decision. Nobody forces him towards one of the options. Agamemnon converts the necessity of the situation in his own choice. He internalizes the inevitable consequences, reflects on them, doubts, makes a final decision and convinces himself that his decision is the best (Ag. 206-217): *It is a grievous doom not to comply, and a grievous one if I am to slay my child, the delight of my house, polluting a father's hands with streams of a slaughtered maiden's blood close by the altar. Which of these options is free from evil? How can I become a deserter of the fleet, losing my alliance? That they should long with intense passion for a sacrifice to end the winds and for the blood of a maiden is quite natural. May all be well!* It is clear that the king has a moment of freedom, although it is limited by external and internal forces.

observe continuity in the conception of the human inner life. Aristotle imbeds a great part of his philosophy in the archaic tradition and conceives the human will as a vulnerable faculty. In *De anima*, the philosopher conceives the *voluntas* as a rational desire (*boulēsis*) and not as a faculty with full autonomy from reason and appetites. The *boulēsis* of Aristotle needs external and internal impulses to motivate the process of volition and defines itself very differently from the Augustinian *voluntas*<sup>12</sup>. Augustine conceived the human will as a completely autonomous faculty, reducible to its own self-determination and uniquely responsible for the actions it commands.

But this free and infinite will does not only raise a host of unsolvable paradoxes -like the reduction to an alienated and arbitrary power which has nothing to do with all that makes us human-; but is also susceptible to become dogmatic and insensible. The Aristotelian point of view of the human will, seems far more reasonable than the Augustinian “fetishised” *voluntas*. Aristotle conceives the human will as a process of interaction with external and internal impulses and as its auto-correction by reason:

Beyond these again is the appetitive part (*orektikón*), which in both definition and capacity would seem to be different from them all. And it is surely unreasonable to split this up; for there is will (*boúlēsis*) in the calculative (*logistikōi*), and desire (*epithymía*) and passion (*thymos*) in the irrational part (*alógōi*); and if the soul is divided in three, appetite (*órexis*) will be found in each<sup>13</sup> (Aristotle, 350 BC).

It draws attention that: 1) The appetitive part of the soul (*orektikón*), although differentiated in definition and potential, does not act autonomously from the cognitive faculties. 2) The appetitive part of the soul constitutes a whole that receives the general notion of desire: *órexis*. 3) This general notion of *órexis* is proper and specified by the different faculties of the soul, in the case of the calculative/rational part (*logistikōi*) its appetitive correlate is what Aristotle calls *boulēsis*. 4) The *boúlēsis* is originated in the rational part of the soul and is defined as a rational desire (the general *órexis*):

That which moves, then, is a single faculty: that of appetite. If there were two movers, mind (*nous*) as well as appetite (*órexis*), they could produce movement in virtue of common characteristic. But, as things are, mind is never seen to produce movement without appetite—for will (*boulēsis*) is a form of appetite, and when movement accords with calculation (*logismón*), it accords also with choice (*boúlesin*)—but appetite (*órexis*) produces movement contrary to calculation (*logismón*); for desire (*epithymia*) is a form of appetite (*órexis*).<sup>14</sup>

We could describe the *boulēsis* of Aristotle as an external “motionless motor” (the desired object, *orektón*), that claims the attention of the intellect (and/or from the senses) and arouses a movement of attraction to the desired object. Both the intellect and appetite act like an internal “mobile motor”, originating the movement of volition. But this duality of motion can cause conflict:

Now appetites may conflict, and this happens wherever reason (*lógos*) and desire (*epithymia*) are opposed, and this occurs in creatures which have a sense of time—for the mind (*nous*) advises us to resist with a view on the future, while desire (*epithymia*) only looks to the present; for what is momentary pleasant and absolutely good, because desire cannot look to the future-. Thus while that which causes movement is specifically one: the faculty of appetite qua appetitive (*orektikón*)<sup>15</sup>, or ultimately the object of appetite (*orékton*)—for this, though unmoved, causes movement by being thought of or imagined-, the things which cause movement are numerically many.

The experience of what we call freedom lies in this conflict between the desires originated in the intellect (*boulēseis*) and the desires originated in the sensitive faculties (*epithymia*), although both reducible to the same pulsional movement (*oréxis*). We observe that the will in Aristotle is a process of volition and not an autonomous faculty. This process of retro-alimentation between external impulses and internal reactions has nothing to do with the unexplainable auto-movement of the Augustinian *voluntas*. In the works of Aristotle the direction of the process of volition depends on the capacity of the intellect to rationalize and auto-correct the direct impulses of the appetite. The possibility of auto-correction opens a margin of freedom in the process of volition. In the

<sup>12</sup>This conception of the will is generally inherited in the modern western societies.

<sup>13</sup>*De anima*, III, 9, 432b3-7. Translation by W.S. Hett, M.A. (*On the Soul*, London, Harvard University Press, 1964, first edition, 1936).

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 10, 433a21-26.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 10, 433b5-13.

Aristotelian interpretation of the human volition, the will becomes a superfluous faculty predisposed by reason and desire.

We could ask ourselves if the Aristotelian interpretation of the *boulēsis*, as a “needless” power of the soul, is not more plausible than the Augustinian version of the *voluntas*. Maybe the Aristotelian version could ease the general “malaise” of occidental modern society, guided by the false belief that the infinite power of the will is the promise to happiness. Perhaps rethinking our freedom as the capacity that we have to correct and redirect our immediate appetites, we could accept the vulnerability of our personal happiness. Acknowledging that a good will is not sufficient to live a good life and that goodness depends on numerically factors that are not in control of our volition, we could open a new horizon to social responsibility. Instead of spending our energy in procuring systems of domination for everything we consider a threat to our personal freedom, we could have more time to create a good life, open to interact with the uncontrollable: our violent passions, the actions and desires of others, the changes of contingency, luck and destiny.

### 3. Katharsis—A Footnote for the Lucid and Robust Contemporary State of Mind?

Aristotle gives a place of honour to tragedy in the education of young citizens, attributing to its motivational and cognitive value. The philosopher conceives tragedy as a key to living a good life (*eudaimonia*): it shows characters in action, and a good life is made by good actions. No state of character is by itself sufficient for happiness. The value of tragic action consists of showing us that there can be a gap between being good and living well. The tragic plots explore this gap between what we are (our character, intentions, aspirations, values, etc.) and how humanly well we manage to live. The theatre is a source of public instruction and genuine learning. The answer that the tragic poets give to the question of why a good character is not always effective in action, is that an intervention of luck (*tychē*) or/and destiny (*moira*) has taken place. The tragic *hamartia* occurred: a mistake in action was done in some sense by oneself and yet not outgrowth of a settled defective disposition of character. The notion of *hamartia* refers to a variety of going wrong that do not result from an established badness but from the intervention of bad luck. The spectator feels pity for mistakes in actions and he fears to repeat the same errors and suffer the same disastrous consequences as the tragic hero on stage.

Pity and fear are the two tragic emotions that educate the citizens. Practicing our pity, we practice our vulnerability and openness to the suffering of the other. If we believe ourselves secure in our possession of the good life, we suppose that what happens to others cannot possibly happen to us and the sufferings of others do not arouse pity. We observe how the consciousness of our human fragility is an essential condition to feel compassion. We pity Agamemnon because the circumstances forced him to kill his own daughter, something deeply repugnant to his own and our ethical commitments. Taking care of our response of pity we can learn more about the vulnerability of our own deepest values and commitments.

Fear is the emotion the spectator feels when he is afraid of sharing the heroes’ fate. Fear is a sense of our passivity towards events in the world we cannot prevent or control. Responding to fear, one develops a richer self-understanding concerning his attachments to security and control.

By feeling our emotions we can give them a place. Rational contemplation is not by itself sufficient to digest emotions and learn something from them. We can clear our beliefs and attachments through emotions. Aristotle defines the social function of tragedy not as a rational purification in which the soul is freed from troubling influences of sense and emotion, but as a clarification through emotions. Aristotle is aware that sometimes emotions can mislead and distract our right decision, they can disturb the idea of measure and seduce us to commit acts of *hybris*, but they can also give access to a deeper level of our self to values that have been concealed beneath the defensive ambition or rationalization. Pity and fear are not just tools of a clarification of the rational state of the soul. Pity and fear are themselves essential elements in an appropriate practical perception of a situation; they are a part of our *phronēsis*. Aristotle conceives tragedy as an emotional *katharsis*:

Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude (...). It represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions<sup>16</sup> (Aristotle, 335 BC).

The tragedy, through pity and fear, accomplishes a *katharsis*, a clarification concerning experiences of the pitiable and fearful kind. Aristotle sustains that we can educate our emotions by digesting them. The rational

<sup>16</sup>*The Poetics*, 1449b22-4, translation by W. Hamilton Fyfe (Aristotle, London, Harvard University Press, 1965, first edition, 1927).

contemplation is not sufficient to understand which emotions are needed to live a good life and which ones should be avoided. Although it is safer to avoid violent emotions and stay in a lucid and untouchable rational state of mind, an apathetic heart is inhumanly closed and unable to feel compassion and forgive the mistakes of others.

Nowadays the idea of being a person without emotions is promoted by different “schools of life”. We should contemplate our emotions as if they were passing clouds. The conceptions that emotion does not constitute the essence of the human being and that suffering is a choice, are inspired on the Platonic vision of the pure and rational soul. This way, if a person’s character is good (completely rational), the person cannot be harmed in a serious way. And when a person is harmed, it is his own fault: he does not want to be guided by rationality. Although emotions can be dangerous and absorbent, without them we lose all our humanity and practical wisdom (*phronésis*). Maybe we can ask ourselves if the emotional *katharsis* that offers tragedy is not a necessary footnote for the *ataraxia*, the untouchable state of mind that many of us yearn for.

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