



The Hermeneutics of *Metaxy* in the Philosophy of Plato

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Drawing on Plato's intuition of *metaxy* our human existence can be characterized as being „in-between” the opposite poles of reality. This ontological condition is reflected by a tension, common to all humans and present within the realm of consciousness. Such a tension reveals one of the perennial truths about human nature as such, that is, the phenomenon of being as given in the form of an intermediate state between immanence and transcendence, the sacred and the profane, finitude and eternity, determinacy and indeterminacy, individual and community, self and other, unity and plurality, the fear of nothingness and the promise of plenitude. Indeed, human beings are beings „in-between” and thus remain in a state of dynamic tension between poles such as the ones just mentioned. As a matter of fact, it was in order to render expression to this „in-between” condition of man that Plato in his *Symposium* applied the term *metaxy*¹.

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1. Plato and Philosophy

Among the Classics the first known to use *metaxy* is Plato. In order to understand better the context let us consider a general background of the platonic philosophy. Plato (c. 428-348 B.C.) is the protagonist of a philosophical discourse (dialogue) aimed at discovering and contemplating the truth, the goodness and the beauty of reality. His profound insights, being the result of contemplative „love of wisdom” and not of eristic speculation, have generated innumerable responses and reactions throughout history. His vision constitutes one of the classical paradigms of philosophical *Weltan-*

¹ The Greek term *metaxy* (μεταξύ) denotes the middle, the intermediate, the in-between or the center. The term μεταξύ is often transliterated as *mataxu*, *metaxú*, *metaxy* or *metaxy*¹.

schauungen in history. In fact it is essentially impossible to imagine the nature of European philosophy without reference to this thinker. There are many who are convinced that the whole of European thought is hugely indebted to Plato. One of them is Alfred Whitehead, who concludes: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. His personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience at a great period of civilization, his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization, have made his writing an inexhaustible mine of suggestion”².

Even nowadays the number of commentaries and new translations of Plato’s philosophical masterpieces in the form of paradigmatic dialogues prove that his intuitions are still timely and reflect the universal desire for knowledge, truth, beauty and answers to the ultimate questions about human life. His works are extremely fecund resources, thus inspiring generations of disciples, and of critics as well. Even his numerous adversaries have found it necessary to take a position toward his views, at least as far as they discussed the matters that preoccupied our „philosophical ancestor”. One of the contemporary political philosophers, Alain Badiou, translator of Plato’s *Republic*, argues about the need for and the relevance of studying Plato today. According to Badiou even nowadays Plato should be our guide, because “he is the one we need first and foremost today, for one reason in particular: he launched the idea that conducting our lives in the world assumes that some access to the absolute is available to us, not because a veridical God is looming over us (Descartes), nor because we ourselves are the historical figures of the becoming-subject of such an Absolute (both Hegel and Heidegger), but because the materiality of which we are composed participates – above and beyond individual corporeality and collective rhetoric – in the construction of eternal truths”³.

Philosophy, in its original, classical definition is the „love of wisdom”. However, at the same time philosophy was more a style of life than just a reflection on the nature of the world. Pierre Hadot, writing about the ancient tradition, concludes that philosophy was, above all, „the choice of a form of life, to which philosophical discourse then gives justifications and theoretical foundations”⁴. This consciousness was particularly present in

² Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 39.

³ Alain Badiou, *Plato’s Republic* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), xxxi.

⁴ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, tr. M. Chase (Oxford-Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 281.

the life of Socrates, Plato or Aristotle. Those philosophers did not dissociate philosophical reflection from the existential dimension, so they sought a constant verification of their moral and political choices. Furthermore, Greeks started to ask the most fundamental questions about human nature, but in relation to the divine reality. They were immensely perplexed by the distance between gods and human beings, but, realizing the force of the divine inspiration in the human soul, they desired to find that mysterious sphere of encounter between the transcendent and the immanent pole of reality. Simone Weil points out that Greeks were the builders of bridges⁵ and that the modern man tends to forget what should be the proper use of them⁶. The main goal of philosophy, for the Ancients, was to acquire wisdom (*phronesis*). The starting point for it was the recognition of being in the state of ignorance. This desire for wisdom, resulting from the awareness of lacking something essential in human existence, was expressed eloquently by Plato as a form of noetic tension. This condition was epitomized by the figure of Eros in the *Symposium*. He was to symbolize the nature of the philosopher himself as the seeker of wisdom, thus standing „in-between” his experience of lack and his attraction to the truth and wisdom⁷. Now we

⁵ „Hantée par cette distance, la Grèce n’a travaillé qu’à construire des ponts. Toute sa civilisation en est faite. Sa religion des Mystères, sa philosophie, son art merveilleux, cette science qui est son invention propre et toutes les branches de la science, tout cela, ce furent des ponts entre Dieu et l’homme. Sauf le premier, nous avons hérité de tous ces ponts. Nous en avons beaucoup surélevé l’architecture. Mais nous croyons maintenant qu’ils sont faits pour y habiter. Nous ne savons pas qu’ils sont là pour qu’on y passe; nous ignorons, si l’on y passait, qui l’on trouverait de l’autre côté. Les meilleurs parmi les Grecs ont été habités par l’idée de médiation entre Dieu et l’homme, de médiation dans le mouvement descendant par lequel Dieu va chercher l’homme”; Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* (Éditions Gallimard: Paris, 1960), 77.

⁶ „The bridges of the Greeks. (...) We no longer know that they are bridges, things made so that we may pass along them, and that by passing along them we go towards God”; Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, tr. E. Craufurd (London, N.Y.: Routledge, 1952), 146.

⁷ „For the ancients, the mere word philo-sophia – the love of wisdom – was enough to express this conception of philosophy. In the *Symposium*, Plato had shown that Socrates, symbol of the philosopher, could be identified with Eros, the son of Poros (expedient) and of Penia (poverty). Eros lacked wisdom, but he did know how to acquire it. Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one’s being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical

move to exegetical and hermeneutical interpretation of this notion in the light of Plato's philosophy.

2. Allegory of the Cave

The term *metaxy* cannot be understood apart from its Platonic context and interpretation. The general vision of Plato starts from the perplexity of duality or bifurcation experienced by the human beings. The tension of opposites such as body and soul in human nature reinforces one's quest for the harmony of the opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*). In epistemological terms, Plato believed that man lives in an illusion about reality when taking for truth what is merely a shadow on the wall. For him, that which appears to our senses as phenomenon does not represent the complete truth, but it is rather lacking something, is fragmentary and, ultimately, is the cause of error and illusion. However, beyond this imperfect world there is a realm which contains the ultimate answers to our perplexities and is thus characterized as a perfect state, the ideal image of the imperfect one. That realm contains „Ideas” or „Forms” that are matrixes for the existing world, which is a mere „shadow” of the ideal state. Therefore, such ideas as „beauty”, „goodness” or „unity” have their perfect equivalent. This fundamental distinction present in Plato explains how something that manifests itself as „true”, „good” or „beautiful” ultimately stands for a real existence, behind and the source of this manifestation, that is „Truth”, „Goodness” or „Beauty” par excellence. These „Forms” are the true origin of all particular, but only partial, representations, each of which takes its name after its axiological original.

Human beings realize that there operates a certain dualism of soul and body and that, the faster the soul is able to grasp the true nature of the ideas, the less it is attached to what is corporeal. Therefore, for Plato, even after the fall into this imperfect world, the soul has retained its ability for recollection (*anamnesis*) of the forms it grasped before its incarnation. The actual state of the embodied soul is partially a result of the former existence, as well as the retribution for previous moral actions⁸. Plato takes the position that ordinary human beings are unenlightened and that, living in a state of ignorance, they are not able to see reality as it is. He recognized that there are, however, „lovers of wisdom” who have the capacity to get deeper in-

conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being”; Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 265.

⁸ Plato states that there is „the inevitable evil caused by sin in a former life” (Plato, *Republic* 613a). This passage may indicate that the view of retribution presented here seems to be analogical to the Buddhist concept of Karma.

sights into this state of reality, to investigate the nature of the forms and to become enlightened. Only in this way, he held, can they teach others how to lead life in accordance with wisdom⁹.

Platonic realism puts into doubt common sense experience. This platonic criticism wants to demonstrate the weakness of the common conviction that knowledge about the real world can be acquired by a person through the mediation of the senses. Platonic realism is based, rather, on what really exists, that is, on the existence of universals, abstract objects, forms and ideas. When addressing the question regarding the nature of goodness and moral action, Plato speaks about the „Form of the Good” and this way constructs the theory of ethical realism. To deduce our knowledge only from sensory data remains, for Plato, rather limited, illusory and blind. This he has presented eloquently in the famous Allegory of the Cave¹⁰ that can be found at the beginning of Book VII (*Republic* 514a-520a), and it is placed after two important passages: the Metaphor of the Sun (508b-509c) and the Analogy of the Divided Line (509d-513e). All these three parts are explained in relation to dialectic, which explanation is at the end of Book VII and VIII (531d-534e).

Plato’s image of the cave is a metaphor of tension between ignorance and knowledge. From this view, it results that real knowledge is knowledge of the Forms. Plato proposes that the reader imagine a cave in which prisoners are chained in such a way that they can see only the shadows cast on a wall in front of them. All they know of life is these shadows. They would think that these shadows were reality, having known nothing else. If one of these prisoners were freed and allowed to emerge into the daylight, he would see things as they are and would realize how limited his vision was in the cave. He would be quite unwilling to return. In the Allegory of the Cave Plato argues that the invisible world is the real world; it is therefore intelligible (*νοητον noeton*) and can be perceived only by reason (*λογική logike*), while what is visible cannot, in fact, be appre-

⁹ Richard Kraut, „Plato”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed 11 November, 2017, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/plato/>.

¹⁰ „Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets ...”; Plato, *Republic* 514a-b.

hended, because it is illusory. On this distinction is founded the general dualism separating what is spiritual from what is material and positing the irreconcilability between them. This philosophical vision, which stands at the basis of the Plato's *Theory of Forms*¹¹, had a profound impact on the history of Western philosophy and religion. In the light of the Plato's philosophy, man's whole life is symbolized by this Allegory of the Cave, because one sees only shadows and experiences the reality of his existence in terms of becoming, that is as inconstant, and the delusory world of sensory perception. Only through an act of transformation or conversion (περιᾶγωγή *periagoge*)¹² can man turn around and realize that he has lived in illusion (εἰκασία *eikasía*), that the true light is in the other direction, and that the world of shadow cannot represent the truth of reality. This turning toward the sunshine reorients man towards the source and origin of all that exists, as symbolized by the sun. Then this person starts to understand that the Sun is the „source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing” (*Republic* 516b-c). That perfect world is the world of ideas and forms, by which man is attracted. This is the transcendent world of Being as the Absolute reality. Such an experience of being moved or pulled by the transcendent reality is a tension that may lead to awakening, transcending and opening oneself into the realm of the highest Goodness and Beauty. Through this act of intuitive consciousness one arrives at mystical realization. This Allegory of the Cave plays a special role in shedding light on Plato's epistemology and metaphysics and has ramifications for his vision of political philosophy, because those who become awakened into the new vision of reality are called to govern the state. The enlightened ones, those who dwell in the contemplative state, have an obligation to share their insights with the others. This is the origin of the idea of the „philosopher-king” who is chosen by the people to rule over them.

From this description of platonic realism we arrive at the question of human experience and the nature of *metaxy*. The origin of philosophical reflection on man's nature is epitomized by the perennial conflict or, rather, tension between opposite poles or dimensions, characterizing the human orientation in reality. The awareness of this movement and its wording can be considered a sign of the very beginning of human philosophizing. Indeed, this philosophical placement of the human being in the „between the

¹¹ Plato's *Theory of Forms* (also called *Theory of Ideas*) regards the belief that the material world as it appears is not the real world, but rather only an „image” of the real, that is, the immaterial world.

¹² Literally: „turning round”, cf. Plato, *Republic* 518d.

extremes” is a feature of human reflection that took place (in chronological terms) around the same time, but independently (in geographical terms), in different civilizations¹³.

3. Exegesis of the *Metaxy*

What is the classical use and interpretation of the term *metaxy*? This notion basically denotes an „intermediate state”, a being „in-the-between”, „in-the-center” or „in-the-midst”. Its usage takes us back to the context of the philosophical and literary tradition of ancient Greece. In the different textual references and its various contexts, the term *metaxy* can have different meanings, proving the etymological richness of this symbol. In classical Greek this term indicates everything that has intermediary character as something between what is superior and what is inferior. However, its particular exposition and development was the work of Plato, who applied this term on three levels: ontological, cosmological and gnoseological¹⁴.

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- ¹³ This phenomenon of being extended between two extreme poles and dimensions marked the way of thinking not only of our western tradition of religion and philosophy, but the elements of it we find in various expressions in other cultures as well. In my understanding, one of the eminent examples of these representations we find in the oldest Asian traditions, with their many intuitions about the „middle way”, the „middle position”, or the „betweenness” of the human life, as developed in Confucianism, Taoism, and, above all, in Buddhism, with its philosophical method of the „middle way” (*madhynta*).
- ¹⁴ „Metaxy (μεταξύ). – In greco indica tutto ciò che ha carattere intermedio, solitamente tra qualcosa di superiore e qualcosa di inferiore. Il termine riceve particolare sviluppo in Platone, che applica questo concetto soprattutto a livello ontologico, cosmologico e gnoseologico: 1) a livello ontologico, esso indica le realtà intermedie tra il sensibile e il soprasensibile (il mondo delle idee e dei principi), cioè: a) il mondo del divenire, in quanto intermedio tra l'essere vero e proprio (il mondo delle idee) e il non essere; b) gli enti matematici; c) il demiurgo, l'anima del mondo e le anime individuali. In questo ambito rientrano anche i cieli di Aristotele, che sono sensibili, ma eterni (cf. *Metaph.*, 1050 b 20–27). 2) A livello gnoseologico, *metaxy* è la *doxa* (dovxa, opinione), che riguarda la conoscenza sensibile (cf. Platone, *Resp.*, 476 e–477 b); in un altro senso, *metaxy* può essere la conoscenza matematica, che riguarda realtà intermedie. Aristotele applica questo concetto in sede logica, affermando che non esiste un termine medio tra due contraddittori (cf. *Metaph.*, 1011 b ss.). Il concetto di »intermedio« riceve grande sviluppo anche in età ellenistica (in diversi ambiti di applicazione), benché la terminologia differisca spesso da *metaxy*”; Emmanuele Vimercati, „Metaxy”, in *Enciclopedia filosofica*, vol. 8 (Milano: Bompiani, 2006), 7384-7385.

In grammatical terms, *metaxy* can be used either as an adverb or as a preposition. Its basic meaning refers to the reality in the midst, but it has a connotation of intermediation and participation, as well. The „in-between” is not just an empty space, but a connecting reality between two opposites. The etymology of *metaxy* provided by *A Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell-Scott-Jones (LSJ) demonstrates that there are many instances when this term can be used. The term μεταξύ has its late form of μετοξύ. Essentially, *metaxy* means *in the midst* and is made of two words: μετά (in the midst of, among, between) and ξύν (or σύν) meaning „with, together, connexion, or participation in a thing”. There are two basic grammatical applications of the term. It can be used as adverb and also as preposition (with genitive). As adverb it has diverse functions: 1. adverb of place, *betwixt, between*; 2. adverb of time, *between-whiles, meanwhile*; 3. adverb of qualities, *intermediate* (τὰ μεταξύ), i.e., neither good nor bad; 4. adverb of degree, to demonstrate how great is *the difference* (ὄσοντό μεταξύ); 5. grammatical, as the neuter gender. The preposition μεταξύ is used with genitive and means „between”¹⁵.

Plato was one of the first to explicitly employ *metaxy* as a category. Eric Voegelin demonstrates that this symbol may have its origin in Anaximander and Heraclitus¹⁶. The *metaxy* reflects the dialectical tension between what Anaximander considered as *Apeiron* (Infinite, Boundless) that is depth and what, for Plato, was *Hen* (One) that is height¹⁷. Plato’s conviction was that the human beings are something between gods and beasts, not perfect, not completely evil, but between these two realities. Later, after Plato, the tradition of Neoplatonism referred to *metaxy* as well. Plotinus, for example, similarly to Plato, put man in the ontological context of being placed „in-between” gods and animals¹⁸. The use of *metaxy* was developed

¹⁵ Cf. „μεταξύ”, in Henry George Liddell et al., ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Commenting on these two Presocratics Eric Voegelin reflects on their insight: „Reality in the mode of existence is experienced as immersed in reality in the mode of nonexistence and, inversely, nonexistence reaches into existence. The process has the character of an In-Between reality, governed by the tension of life and death”; Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 233.

¹⁷ Kenneth Keulman, *The Balance of Consciousness: Eric Voegelin’s Political Theory* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 141.

¹⁸ „Τὸ δὲ κείται ἄνθρωπος ἐν μέσῳ θεῶν καὶ θηρίων καὶ ῥέπει ἐπ’ ἄμφω καὶ ὁμοιοῦνται οἱ μὲν τῷ ἐτέρῳ, οἱ δὲ τῷ ἐτέρῳ, οἰδὲ μεταξύ εἰσιν, οἱ πολλοί”, „But humanity, in reality, is poised midway between gods and beasts, and inclines now to the one order, now to the other; some men grow like to the divine, others to the brute, the greater number stand neutral”; Plotinus, *Enneads*, tr. S. MacKenna (London: Penguin, 1991), III, 2.8.

particularly by Plato in *Symposium*, *Philebus* and the *Republic*. It appears in many others texts, altogether ninety-nine times in Plato's opera. Plato refers to *metaxy* when discussing the nature of *mythos*, *logos*, and *poiesis*. In its literal formulation, *metaxy* is defined in *Symposium* as the „in-between” or „middle” (*Symposium* 204a-b). For the purpose of clarification, Plato refers to the figure of the priestess Diotima in order to stress the prophetic dimension of the realization about *metaxy*. Using oral tradition as the point of reference, she described Eros as daemon (δαίμόνιον, *daimonion*)¹⁹, not someone perfect or pure, but standing „in-between” the gods and people. Love (Ἔρως, *Eros*) is described as the source of transcendence, originally being a child of Poverty (Πενία, *Penia*) and Possession (Πόρος, *Poros*)²⁰. Eros finds itself in the between; he is intermediate „between a mortal and an immortal” (*Symposium* 202e)²¹, in the midst of the divine reality and the mortal condition (cf. *Symposium* 202e-203c).

According to the ancient mythology there are two figures named Poros. In Plato's *Symposium*, Poros (Porus) was the personification of plenty and resourcefulness. He was seduced by Penia (poverty) while drunk during Aphrodite's birthday. As the consequence, Penia gave birth to Eros (love) from their union. Plato considers the name Poros to be the symbol of „creative ingenuity” because he is the son of Metis (wisdom). This figure exists also in Roman mythology, according to which Poros, as the brother of Athena, became the personification of abundance. The figure of Eros epitomizes this ambiguity and tension between lack and fullness, because it is neither the former nor the latter, but between them: „(...) Love is at no time either resourceless or wealthy, and furthermore, he stands midway betwixt wisdom and ignorance (...)” (*Symposium* 203e)²². It is worth to mention that, in this passage, Plato does not use the term μεταξύ but μέσω²³; nevertheless, from the context we see that it has the same meaning as *metaxy*.

¹⁹ Etymology of *daimonion*: δαίμονες and τὸ δαίμόνιον represent the mysterious agencies and influences by which the gods communicate with mortals.

²⁰ Etymology of *poros*: πόρος means resource, plenty or efficacy.

²¹ „μεταξύ ἐστὶ θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ”.

²² „(...) Ἐρῶς ποτὲ οὔτε πλουτεῖ, σοφίας τε αἷ καὶ ἀμαθίας ἐν μέσῳ ἐστίν”; Plato, *Symposium* 203e.

²³ Etymology of *meso*: μέσω, from μέσος *mesos* meaning „midway” or „in the middle”. The term μέσος (*mesos*) appears in Plato 418 times. According to *Liddell-Scott-Jones* (LSJ) μέσος means: 1. The middle, in the middle, the middle point, c. gen., *midway between, inter-mediate*, freq. c. gen., 2. μέσον, τό, *midst, intervening space*, mostly with Preps., 3. Adv. μέσον, in the middle, c. gen. Between. Cf. Skt. *mádhya* „middle”, Lat. *medius*, etc.

Plato, after discussing the nature of Eros, continues his discourse reflecting about the „lovers of wisdom” (philosophers) who are also, like Eros, in between: ignorant, but having desire for wisdom²⁴. This discussion of *Symposium* shows that the ultimate goal of philosophy is immortality and is described in terms of the „Desire of Immortality”. According to John Alexander Stewart, Plato, using the allegoric description of the birth of Eros (as son of Poros and Penia) through the „Diotima’s Discourse”, creates a „true Myth” by „setting forth in impassioned imaginative language the Transcendental Idea of the Soul”²⁵. Moreover, *Symposium* underlines the question of recognizing the drama that occurs in the human soul, penetrating the „depths of consciousness in an effort to explore the full range of human experience”²⁶. Priestess Diotima, explaining the myth of Eros and its genealogy, points out that Eros is always in the middle between knowledge or wisdom and ignorance. As she states, not only ignorant, but also gods are „lovers of wisdom”. In this configuration philosophers would be placed between ignorants and gods. Plato’s presentation of the nature of philosophy stresses a characteristic of Eros: that it constantly changes, is dynamic or fluctuating, because his “existence is a continual ebb and flow, from plenitude to vacuity, from birth to death. By this is symbolised the experience of the φιλόκαλος and the φιλόσοφος, who by a law of their nature are incapable of remaining satisfied for long with the temporal objects of their desire and are moved by a divine discontent to seek continually for new sources of gratification”²⁷.

The philosophical qualities of Eros, which became paradigmatic of the transcendental quest for fulfillment, express erotic mediation, not as a merely sentimental anxiety, but as a *daimonion* having a metaphysical grounding, as the cosmic art that intermediates between the Creator and the creation²⁸. *Metaxy*, therefore, is, in a broader metaphysical sense, the

²⁴ The seekers of wisdom belong to „(...) the intermediate sort, and amongst these also is Love. For wisdom has to do with the fairest things, and Love is a love directed to what is fair; so that Love must needs be a friend of wisdom, and, as such, must be between wise and ignorant (...)”; Plato, *Symposium* 204b.

²⁵ John Alexander Stewart, *The Myths of Plato* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), 428.

²⁶ Stephen McKnight, „Introduction”, in *Politics, Order and History: Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Glenn Hughes et al. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 33.

²⁷ Robert Gregg Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1909), xlii.

²⁸ „Eros ist also nicht Gott, nicht Sterbling: er ist ein Dämon. (...) Das Dämonische ist die kosmische Kraft, die die beiden Hälften der Welt zusammen-

interconnecting middle, the „in-between“, „Dazwischen“²⁹, which is in intermediate interrelation with things, but it is also a dimension that contains or encircles the whole³⁰.

We can conclude that Plato's first concern is wisdom, as consequence not of eristics but of contemplative insight. Therefore, *sophia*, whenever it becomes the object of philosophical inquiry, does not amount to a collection of facts or an accumulation of knowledge, but stands in unfinished quest for truth through participation in the drama of human existence³¹. The nature of this participation (*methexis*) in the human-divine reality became, after Plato, the inspiration for the philosophical and theological quest for future generations.

4. Hermeneutics of the Metaxy

Plato's notion of *metaxy* became the object of reflection mainly in the twentieth century. Paul Friedländer, a German specialist in Greek classical literature and one of the greatest authorities on Plato in the twentieth century commented about *metaxy* by stating that this view „stems from Plato and must have been of the utmost significance to him. It is the idea or view of »the demonic« as a realm »intermediate« between the human level and the divine, a realm that, because of its intermediate position »unites the cosmos with itself«”³².

There was however no common agreement about the importance of this notion. One of the problems concerning an interpretation of Plato is the question of existential meaning present in the vision of Plato's philosophy. Such scholars as Eric Voegelin finds that Plato's vision is „so badly obscured today that its knowledge can no longer be presupposed. The overall reason for this eclipse is the transformation of Plato's analytical language

schließt, Gott und Mensch vereint; es ist das Religiöse, nicht im Sinn der Kirche, sondern als schöpferischer Urgrund des Lebendig-Geistigen“; Kurt Hildebrandt, ed., *Platons Gastmahl* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1912), 17.

²⁹ Hugo Perls, „Dazwischen“, in *Lexikon der Platonischen Begriffe* (Bern-München: Francke Verlag, 1973), 50-51.

³⁰ „Dies und nichts anderes ist das kosmische, ein metaxy für göttliches und menschliches, metaxy nicht übersetzbar sondern nur zu umschreiben als ein »Dazwischen, was verbindet und zugleich umfasst«, so dass das All in sich selbst erfüllend verbunden ist“; Heinrich Friedemann, *Platon. Seine Gestalt* (Berlin: Blätter für die Kunst, 1914), 58.

³¹ Cf. McKnight, *Introduction*, 34.

³² Paul Friedländer, *Plato I. An Introduction*, tr. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 41.

into terms of propositional metaphysics ever since Hellenistic antiquity³³. This might be one of the reasons why for so long time the question of Eros as *demiurgos* has been considered apart from its metaxological nature. The modern bias toward an ideological reading of Plato has distorted his philosophy to some extent, and certain aspects of his philosophy, including the notions of *Eros*, *daimonion*, *metaxy* and *metexis*, are not discussed sufficiently. Consequently, majority of scholars do not consider the notion of *metaxy* to have an important role in Plato's philosophy³⁴.

Plato's notion of *metaxy* helps us to approach the mystery of reality because it respects the fact that human life is larger than any human category would be able to express. Hence, *metaxy* will entail the Socratic and Platonic awareness of personal ignorance and failures. There is something deeper to this than just an epistemological consideration of our ways of seeing as, in fact, the ways of not seeing or ignoring. *Metaxy* as one of Plato's central symbols represents the „in-between” of human existence. It concerns pri-

³³ Eric Voegelin, *Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 348.

³⁴ There are some exceptions to this. We can mention only few: Ernst Hoffmann, „Methexis und Metaxy bei Platon”, *Sokrates*, 7. Jahrg., LXXII (1919): 48-78; Heinrich Friedemann, *Platon. Seine Gestalt*, 58; Friedländer, *Plato 1. An Introduction*, 41-43; Steven Shankman, *In Search of the Classic* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1994), 21-26; and Giovanni Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone* (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1987), as well as his *Platone. Simposio* (Milano: Lorenzo Valla-Mondadori, 2001). In the latter for example Reale mentions *metaxy* when discussing the nature of Eros in terms of the intermediation between ugly and beauty, good and evil. For him Eros finds its essential explanation in the metaxic structure of reality. Reale confirms also that the „in-between” or *metaxy* „plays an essential role in platonic thought”. In his comments to the passage from *Symposium* (201 d1-202 b5) he states what follows: „Eros è un »intermedio« fra bello e brutto, buono e cattivo. Nel leggere questo primo argomento si deve tenere presente il fatto che il concetto di »intermedio« (ΜΕΤΑΞΥ) gioca un ruolo essenziale nel pensiero platonico (...). La realtà è distinta non solo in due, ma in tre piani: essere »sensibile«, essere »intelligibile«, essere »intermedio« fra sensibile e intelligibile. Nell'ambito dell'essere »intermedio« Platone poneva non solo gli »enti matematici«, di cui parlava soprattutto nelle »dottrine non scritte« (con ampi accenni anche nei dialoghi), ma altresì l'anima, come risulta soprattutto dal Timeo (...). Eros è strettamente legato all'anima, come Platone dimostra in modo particolare nel Fedro (...)”; (*ibidem*, 223). In the twentieth century there are also few philosophers who undertook Plato's intuition of *metaxy* as intermediation and applied it to their philosophical reflection. See works of Simone Weil, Eric Voegelin and especially many publications of William Desmond.

marily the question of love (*eros/egape*). *Metaxy* presented in Plato's *Symposium* as Eros/Love means a „very powerful spirit”, a mediator between God and man. But there are also other instances where *metaxy* is used when ontological and metaphysical questions are discussed. One of the places is *Philebus* (16c-17a) in which *metaxy* reflects the ontological mystery of being describing the nature of existence „in-between” of the One and the Apeiron. Plato's presentation of the *metaxy* epitomized by Eros as *daimonion* is not the subject of a direct speech or discourse, as it is uttered by Socrates in the dialogue with Agathon. During that party Socrates is not presenting a direct speech but is reporting a conversation he had with Diotima on the topic of love. The truth presented by Socrates has thus a dialectical unfolding. The story told through the dialogue regards the human search for immortality and love, here expressed by a tale which, while mythic, has the quality of a revelation about the truth of salvation. This story became the subject of noetic realization in Plato's erotic awareness in *metaxy*.

The interpretation and application of *metaxy* changed in history. The same happened to many symbols which manifest the semantic gravity they have acquired in varied contexts and historical applications. What Plato tried to convey by the term *daimonion* is that the human being is neither a god nor a beast, but somebody in between. Yet, to say that man is „in-between” god and beast is not the same as to state that man has the constitution of „in-between” God as Creator and nothingness. This more inclusive interpretation and application of *metaxy* will lead such scholars as Simone Weil, Eric Voegelin and William Desmond to include several other dimensions of the polarity of human experiences, such as time and timelessness, animate and inanimate, transcendence and immanence, and mortality and immortality. The notion of *metaxy* did not have and could not have had all these possible references when it was conceived by Plato, but its basic meaning has an explicitly Platonic character. Only later were its plurivocal possibilities elaborated in various historical contexts. The notion in its richness constitutes an important relevance for contemporary thought³⁵.

³⁵ According to William Desmond „a logos of the intermediate, of the »between«, is of crucial importance for contemporary thought. In one sense, the metaxological is as old as the Platonic metaxy in the *Symposium* through which the dynamism of human eros, culminating in philosophical vision, moves and unfolds. Yet it is deeply relevant to the thought of our own time, whether this takes a phenomenological or hermeneutical form, whether it be the recent »conversational« model of philosophy or the anti-Cartesian, antidualistic search for a new »holism« or, indeed, the post-Heideggerian concern with the problem of difference. At its best, philosophy has always spoken out of »the midst«, even when it has tried to speak about extremes

5. Conclusion

In this article we discussed the original platonic background in which *metaxy* was used, providing hermeneutical and exegetical exploration of this term with special reference to Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*, the latter with its Allegory of the Cave. Plato's *metaxy* as „in-between” denotes the existential, ontological and metaphysical tension between the extreme poles of reality. This metaxic tension characterizes, above all, human nature as it is epitomized by mythic Eros being the son of Penia and Poros. At the metaphysical dimension *metaxy* is the realm of the divine-human mutual participation (*methexis*) and communication.

Plato's *metaxy* points to the mystery of reality in which man participates. It represents the reality as something bigger than man can imagine. Already in Plato *metaxy* has this implicit corollary: that human existence is larger than the various categories man uses to describe the reality in which he participates. This awareness starts at the epistemological level when man realizes that the way he perceives reality can be at the same time the way of non-seeing in terms of Socratic ignorance. As a linguistic index *metaxy* points also to an ontological reality that can be expressed by the term plenitude or resourcefulness, naming that to which man aspires, extended as he is in his tensional reality between poverty and richness, mortality and eternity. Even though living in his human misery and existential scarcity, man is called to participation in the ground of being, thus he lives in constant tension between „immanence” and „transcendence”. Should he lose this dynamic tension and his noetic sense of being *imago Dei*, he would become just a caricature of himself.

The term *metaxy* is a powerful symbol representing the mystery of participation in reality. Its connotation is broad enough to include those aspects of the human experience that cannot be grasped and put either into propositions or into analytical formulations. It is capable of capturing in a non-reductive way the metaphysical realm of the human soul, *ratio* and *psyche*. Moreover, in religious discourse *metaxy* protects religious truths from being limited or closed by the horizon of dogmatization. In my view the notion of *metaxy* is a particularly rich symbol serving as the perspective and ground of philosophizing. *Metaxy* still promises to be a resourceful inspiration for our contemporary philosophical reflection, not only in our Western context, but also in philosophy's cross-cultural dimension. The

and ultimates in its sometimes hubristic way. In this respect, the metaxological tries to renew the promise of an old possibility within the context of current pressing concerns”; William Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness: An Essay on Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 8-9.

metaxy is one of the most powerful and evocative symbols I have encountered to describe what it really feels like to be human, living in time, longing for the timeless.

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The Hermeneutics of *Metaxy* in the Philosophy of Plato

SUMMARY

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This article discusses the notion of *metaxy* and its role in Plato's philosophy. The *metaxy* represents the phenomenon of the „in-between” as the ontological and meta-physical matrix of the human condition. Plato describes the nature of philosophizing by comparing it to the nature of Eros who epitomizes the tension between lack and plenitude. The notion of *metaxy* as the „in-between” matrix of the human condition is a powerful concept that symbolizes the intermediate state in which man experiences diverse and opposing tensions such as the ones between immanence and transcendence or mortality and immortality. We propose to reflect on the nature of *metaxy* in Plato's philosophy and how it constitutes the realm of the divine-human mutual participation. For Plato the locus of *metaxy* resides in human consciousness (*nous*), there where the divine reality manifests itself as the origin of being. A philosophical research on the notion of *metaxy* has been neglected in the scholarship on Plato. The article argues that the „in-between” philosophical perspective is an important interpretative key that helps to understand better Plato's philosophy.

Keywords: In-between, Metaxy, Intermediation, Consciousness, Eros, Plato

Heremeneutyka *metaxy* w filozofii Platona

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł jest dyskusją nad znaczeniem *metaxy* i jej roli w filozofii Platona. *Metaxa* reprezentuje fenomen „pomiędzy” („in-between”) jako ontologiczną i metafizyczną matrycę kondycji człowieka. Platon opisuje naturę filozofowania przez porównanie jej do natury Eros, która uosabia napięcie między brakiem i pełnią. Znaczenie *metaxy* jako „pomiędzy” matrycą kondycji człowieka jest silnym pojęciem symbolizującym pośredni stan, w którym człowiek doświadcza różnych i przeciwstawnych napięć śmiertelności i nieśmiertelności. Artykuł jest refleksją nad naturą *metaxy* w filozofii Platona oraz na tym, jak konstytuuje ona królestwo bosko-ludzkiej wzajemnej obecności. Według Platona, locus *metaxy* rezyduje w ludzkiej świadomości (*nous*) tam, gdzie rzeczywistość boska manifestuje siebie jako początek istnienia. Poszukiwania filozoficzne dotyczące znaczenia *metaxy* było zaniedbane w refleksji nad myślą platońską. Artykuł przypomina, że perspektywa filozoficzna „pomiędzy” („in-between”) jest ważnym kluczem interpretacyjnym do lepszego zrozumienia filozofii Platona.

Słowa kluczowe: „pomiędzy”, *metaxa*, pośrednictwo, świadomość, Eros, Platon