

## Platonic and Aristotelian points of convergence in Freire’s work

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**Abstract:** In this study, I attempt to discuss the Platonic and Aristotelian readings of Freire’s pedagogy, taking into account the contemporary bibliography as well. The main subject-matter of my elaboration is how an adult learner understands the world. In other words, this ‘how’ originates from the meaning of our own view and develops a discourse with the current political and social circumstances. Both dialectics, as Plato suggested, and the dynamics of action, as Aristotle recommended, may render assistance and support in this sort of discourse.

On this prolific ground for elaborating the discourse, Freire structures those paths which will lead an adult learner to face the truth of his own life, after he deals with the lessons of the state and develops a critical attitude for explaining the events. The desideratum revealed by this way of approaching things is political and social freedom as well as the capability of calling into question the status quo. Ultimately, provided that this critical attitude can be found within the boundaries of a citizen’s freedom, it turns out that the potentiality of freedom forms the potentiality of the adult education in the reflective proposals of its political origins.

**Key words:** pedagogy, humanism, freedom, dialectics, *action*.

### Introduction

“So I continue to continue  
To pretend my life will never end,  
And flowers never bend with the rainfall”.

(Camus, 1956:271).

Paulo Freire, as a philosopher of education, among other things, deals also with the pedagogical experiences by starting from some philosophical concepts (Sacadura, 2014). Specifically, the educational process includes a dynamic course of thought, which is permanently formed during our lifetime. That is to say, it is about how every learner understands both the world and his actions in it. Therefore, Freire’s pedagogical perspective pertains to the meaning of the political and social values and, in this sense, establishes the way in which we think when we face uncertainty and difference by suggesting “in a post-modern way, persons with less certainties” (Freire, 1994:96).

Specifically, in this study I will attempt to investigate the philosophical aspect found in Freire’s work and teaching. In particular, I will focus on Plato’s and Aristotle’s anthropological views, aiming at identifying their influence on his work having in mind the existential dimension of the adult education, as it was addressed by the Freirean pedagogy.

In this way, although Freire attempts to compose the former philosophical influences in a well-ordered life proposal, he demonstrates in every possible way the beauty of pedagogy, focusing on a humanist dimension of morality, the main suggestion of which is the love for human being. As he stresses:

“My intention here is to demonstrate that the task of the teacher, who is also a learner, is both joyful and rigorous. It demands serious and scientific, physical, emotional, and affective preparation. It is a task that requires that those who commit themselves to teaching develop a certain love not only for others but also of the very process implied in teaching” (Freire, 1998:3).

So, from a different point of the Freirean thought, I will attempt to focus on how problems are approached by means of the Socratic method, which raises “a problem which allows for a systematic discussion from various points of view through multiple arguments and counter-arguments” (Nikulin, 2006:6), so that to investigate the Platonic aspects of his thought. Definitely, it is to be mentioned that Freire cannot be placed in a particular School or theory; instead, he is considered to be a representative of a well-ordered combination of all the paths that one should take into account, in order to accomplish the current purpose and provide the solution to a problem. That is to say, theory, as a constant derivation of thought, is not an end in itself but a source of approaching the world. After all, what Freire faces is not the problem itself, but how we deal with it and how we organize our thought to come to a solution.

Under this terms and conditions, I will attempt, taking also into account the relevant bibliography, to provide a new perspective of the philosophical proposal of the Brazilian thinker, in order to raise more questions. After all, Freire is not just a free voice in our life, but he also establishes the foundational manifesto of our consciousness, by his intervening in a different each time critical way in how we understand and interact with our history.

## **1. Aristotelian projections of the Freirean humanism**

The way in which Freire’s Critical Pedagogy debates with moderation indicates the repositioning of truth from its carrier to the message. His devotion to social justice reflects the idea of liberation of humans that was inspired by their critical attitude to the inhumane conditions they face in their political life (Freire, 2000). That is to say, inhumanity is due to the illiberal grounds of a political status quo that transmits the request for freedom in the context of its social divergences, since this (inhumanity) stands “not only as an ontological possibility but as a historical reality” (Freire 2000:42).

In this sense, Freire’s pedagogical proposal constitutes basically a view of the Aristotelian interpretation on human being. Thus, the Aristotelian anthropological aspect appears in an extensive part of his work, since it forms a dominant concept with individual gnoseological extensions. The Aristotelian eudaemonia, prudence, entelechy, for instance, are crucial points of reference in the Freirean humanism, for they reveal the ontological pillars of the human course. Or, else, he develops a relationship between that humanism which results from the attitude that a learner-citizen decides to adopt to approach the true nature of his life and the democratic origins of this attitude.

That is the reason why a significant part of his argumentation is about his pedagogical word of advice to consider that “educational practice should be restricted to a “reading of the word,” a “reading of text,” but rather it should also include a “reading of context,” a “reading of the world” (Freire, 1997:43). That is why humanism in a classroom is not about “transmitting knowledge but building it” (Dale & Hyslop- Margison, 2010:83) through a critical approach of life. So, educators need to “critically read day-to-day life and analyze, with learners, the shocking facts and disjuncture of our democracy” (Freire, 1996:155).

For instance, the Aristotelian distinction between substances is one of Freire’s basic arguments (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010:87), to contend that a human being cannot deny providing humanism to someone else, since all human beings share the same substance by participation (*methexis*) (Aristotle, 1924, 978b). That is to say, this is the substance that projects the individual reason, the fact of participation, that participation in being (Aristotle, 1950:185b, 7-8.). So, the question raised refers to the substance, that is, the “what it is and some this” (Aristotle, 1924: 1028a, 11-12) and brings to light the truth of this participation in the act of communicating, i.e., in the *how* of the relationships. In this way, a human being is not capable of harming someone else or denying his humanistic attitude towards him, since they both share the same substance, that of humanism. However, what is the *component* of humanism?

As mentioned before, human’s freedom “to be” (Freire, 1996:146) is not “a fear of freedom” (Freire, 1998: 160); it depends on his attitude towards humanism, since “concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality” (Freire, 2000:42). One could argue that this is both a logical and moral approach, for the purpose of the Brazilian thinker does not only concern the constant transformation of reality by means of the questions and objections of a citizen to the oppressive dominating schemata of institutions and ideologies of the state but also the explanation of the causes of this oppression, which will lead the oppressed citizens in moral decisions. Similarly, Aristotle raises the demand for freedom as he mentions that authentic free life is that of education, that is, a cognitive investigation made by a wise man to gain a truly self-sufficient life without any social fails (Aristotle, 1894:1177a, 12). This actually involves practicing the intellectual virtue to approach moral virtue as well.

On the other hand, *action* is a somehow existential fact, since it depends on the critical realization of human being, which faces the liberating knowledge, in order to accomplish the

transformation of the social injustices and inequities. In fact, this is the purpose of the Critical Pedagogy, that is to say, to lead learners to a new meaning of freedom and justice in terms of social change and political self-awareness, so that they gain “a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naive knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality” (Freire, 2000:131). In Aristotelian terms, it is about the inner reflection (Aristotle, 1984:111b, 20-23) of a free citizen, in order to accomplish his own purpose, that is, human eudaemonia, as a whole of actions set under the purpose (purposiveness) of social justice. Therefore, what may be defined as a kind of practical wisdom is prudence, which is suggested in any case as the proper criterion (Aristotle, 1984: 1140a, 25-28 & 1140b, 4-6).

Furthermore, *action* involves another characteristic of Freirean theory; its constant exercise of it by oppressed humans, who orientate to the highest point of freedom by following their rational priorities, after they face their fears and external coercions (Freire, 2000). The same perspective is found in Aristotle’s suggestion, since a virtuous citizen exercises self-control, having as a measure the “logos of a prudent man”. According to those ideas, practicing the logic of intellect for explaining both the circumstances of life and the fact of “akrasia”, that is to say moral weakness, constitutes a desideratum (Aristotle, 1984:1151a, 20-24).

Thus, practical philosophy functions in terms of a teleological proposal, by making a citizen’s participation in social and political life a requirement (Aristotle, 1894:1170a, 5-6; Aristotle, 1957:1253a, 9-11). That is, it is the same requirement detected in Freire for accomplishing the democratic principles of a fair society and state under the *light* of a formative culture, which could constitute a strong field of political interaction against the dominating projections of a neoliberal market.

Therefore, there is a need to understand both history and the world in terms of possibilities and potentialities arisen from distinctness, in order to reveal a “language of possibilities” (Freire & Marcedo, 1987:5). This will be accomplished provided that the purpose of the educational process “is questioning social reality and the problems it causes as a first step to transform the world toward greater measures of humanization and social justice” (Dale Hyslop & Margison, 2010:86).

## **2. Dialectics as a measure of the Platonic perspective in Freire’s work**

Debate, as a form of democratized conditions of both the state and philosophical reflection, established a style of thinking, which empowered the gnoseological approaches of the world and human being. Specifically, the Heraclitean and the Socratic maieutics (Nikulin, 2010) structured a system of thought that fed the Freirean dialectics by suggesting experiential learning in adult education. As Freire mentions, the cycle of civilization contribute to the investigation of the experiences, by turning the perspective of the world into a constant question on the critical explanation of the learner (Freire, 1996).

This approach composed a sort of pedagogy that gives priority to critical thinking, which depends of the learners’ experience. In this context, humanistic perspective is combined with the dialectics resulted from the critical thinking with regard to the detection of hidden social and political questions, leading to a “humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed” (Freire, 2000:68). Contrary to the process of debating which is provided by humanistic pedagogy, in order the learners to discover new dimensions of versions of their life, “banking education resists dialogue” (Freire, 2000:83). Therefore, as Sartre mentions, the aim is how it “confronts man with the possibility of choice” (Sartre, 1957:263).

That is why Freire starts from the historical context to investigate the subject-matter and suggests the experiential process for raising questions about the world, in order learners to grow an “organized, systematized, and developed ‘re-presentation’ to individuals of the things about which they want to know more. (Freire, 2000:94). This is how they investigate questions that will constitute the conceptual map of their lives, which helps them to be in communication with the historical context and the way in which the former conceptual topics are connected, in order to deduce critical aspects about their empirical reference. The question is: in what way does Freire approaches Plato?

One could think that Plato, as the greatest founder of debates, introduces a type of philosophy that gives priority to debating in the sense of both a method and a philosophical expression (Notomi, 2006). Thus, dialectics becomes a new way of revealing a philosophical position in a different kind of reason (compared for instance to Parmenides). So, it is a debate, a form of syllogism with equal arguments (those of Protagoras’ and Socrates’) with a competing spirit, which follows the principles, as mentioned in the Platonic dialogues, and the Socratic deliberation developed in agora or gymnasium. One could argue that he initiates his reader into his own questions and doubts, in order to take them into consideration.

Therefore, as in Freire a question is raised and the interlocutors attempt to prove the correctness of their positions by discovering the truth as they adopt a specific argument after having thoroughly examined it, in Plato as well “knowledge ... has to prove itself in dialogical coming to an understanding—that is, in an unlimited willingness to justify and supply reasons for everything that is said” (Gadamer, 1991:52). This is a lesson that utilizes dialectics, which is glorified according to Socrates’ “exasperating enigma” (Kofman, 1998:6) and contributes to the change in humans’ life. A typical example of this change is found in *Symposium* where Alcibiades admits the change in his own life, since his stunning beauty and recognition for his victories in chariot races as well as his generosity earn him good credit with the public opinion. Nevertheless, he does not represent the greatest value of good as a whole of all things and that is why he performs a self-reflection by praising Socrates “atopy” (Plato, 1973: 221d), that is, the invisible beauty, who experiences truth in a way that leads him to approach God.

Therefore, the Platonic philosophy involves two Freirean qualities: dialectics, as a method for seeking the truth, and lesson, as a change in attitude that a human holds for his life. It is

actually a life course, a course towards knowledge, as Plato mentions in the allegory of the cave, which comes through reflections and a critical approach of the world (Plato, 1962: 514a-517a). Thus, both Plato’s and Freire’s student has to be convinced and determined to participate in the life lessons decisively and revolutionarily, to form his own style of living. This is discovering the truth through the beauty of inner statue, which is illuminated by the freedom of the selfhood.

Exactly as the prisoner of the cave is chained to the wall facing the reality (*ιδεῖν* is identified with *νοεῖν*), Freire’s learner *faces* the reality of the “banking education” (Freire, 2000:73) of the neoliberal politics (Gibbons and Heraud, 2007) to the ideas and prejudices, which have been included in society as a normativity. So, he experiences a false reality, since the Platonic shadows of the facts (the dark bodies of the shadows) and relationships, that is, “φλυαρία” (Plato, 1962:515d) keep the captive learner imprisoned in the cave, therefore, they keep him imprisoned in the dominant views of the convenient “truth” which holds true.

Consequently, the bonds of the prisoner break and he can now see things clearly (although he originally reacts against the truth due to that it is not easy to leave the former condition), since he follows the touch ascent (the path of education, that is, the educating relationship, for instance of the Platonic Academy or some other teacher, for philosophy is eventually a lesson; he finally comes out of the cave and sees the bright world of truth and reality “ἀναμνησκόμενον τῆς πρώτης οἰκίσεως” (and remembers his first place) (Plato, 1962, 516cd). Similarly, in Freire pedagogy a learner can see the true state of his life, provided that he follows the path of knowledge, which shines during his transition from the blindness caused by established opinions to the truth arisen by a critical reflection. In other words, the Platonic *Good* (Plato, 1962, 506d-509b), as the transcendental light emission, corresponds to the Freirean freedom from the bonds of our prejudices.

In fact, this process is accomplished by the reversion of the prisoner to the cave, in order to set free the other prisoners (by planting the seed of knowledge in their souls) from the dominant opinions, which have been introduced by the social models of a particular life attitude. Exactly as Socrates is accused of being even a Sophist (Aeschines, 1927:173.2-4), and he is condemned by society and the state for his decision to adopt a different life style compared to the dominant ideology of his time, since as a horsefly aroused the citizens from their own views, similarly the prisoner desires to share the truth that he discovered... to communicate it to the other prisoners. That is, this is a political action, the same with that recommended by Freire, for the Brazilian thinker attempts to *arouse* his oppressed fellow-citizens and to take them out of the deadlock of the false life they experience. So, he defines as a priority the awakening of the citizens, so that they can understand “how powerful groups shape our consciousness for their own purposes” (Kincheloe et al., 2000:409). Finally, society is for both of them a form of school and education, since gaining knowledge depends also on the experiences carried by every citizen.

Therefore, not only knowledge and sciences were taught in the Academy, but participating in its *lessons* taught also “the concept of philosophy as a distinct practice” (Woodruff, 2000:26).

Every student had to co-exist with wiser students of the School or even other Schools, and to compose his personal spiritual heritage, which was constantly transformed by the relationships developed between them. So, philosophy was not presented as a pure knowledge, but it was forming a constant reflection, which was leading to “an awareness of the real value of one’s own actions” (Landazuri, 2015:12). In this process a “self-controlled man, then, will know himself and will be capable of looking to see what he actually knows and what he doesn’t know” (Plato, 1903, 167a).

On the other hand, debate was quite important in Ancient Greeks’ daily life (Nikulin, 2006:2), for it was a fertile condition for the learners as well, “the value of dialogue” as Freire suggested (Freire, 1996:13), since it was the mean by which particular dimensions of the solutions of a problem were revealed. Or, else, it was involving an intense expression that could establish new ways to think, in order to develop more advanced discussions on the subject-matters under elaboration. So, according to the Freirean model, the proximity of a subject-matter, which we intend to understand, debates with our distance from it (Freire, 1998).

Therefore, philosophy, as a constant production of thought, is considered to be a change of education, a somehow power that affects human soul, which is capable of opposing to those who handle in democracy authority and specifically spiritual authority (for example, Sophocles or the poets or politicians, i.e. the great Sophists) (Plato, 1962:363-365). Similarly, Freire opposes to the firm receptions of the dominant structures, which reproduce the stereotypes of a suppressed political order. And this opposition raises the question about a citizen’s culture and changes the course of society to the extent that he “is open to the world or to others inaugurates thus a dialogical relationship with which restlessness, curiosity and unfinishedness are confirmed as key moments within the ongoing current of history” (Freire, 1998:121).

All these developmental receptions of discourse and specifically dialectics take place in the state, in the Aristotelian “οἰκεῖν ποῦ” (the place of residence) (Aristotle, 1957, 1275a), which will constitute the level of the human capabilities, since this is a natural organization to accept the evolution of the human hypostasis. That is to say, the *state* includes both the participation and the open coexistence of humans by setting as the most important goal political philosophy in terms of a here and now life style based on moral values or political ideas. Therefore, *acting* is quite important, for it establishes a moral approach of the political action, in the sense that it defines the political and moral questions. Similarly, in Freire, *action*, as “as integral to language, as part of the word itself” (Freire, 2000:61) includes the said dimensions, since it projects the requests of the social change in a moral and social way.

### 3. Further discussion

This was an attempt to approach points of convergence of the Platonic and Aristotelian references in Freire’s work, with the intention to reveal both the philosophical origins and

aspects of his pedagogy and the existential proposal against inhumanity. Therefore, an existential and gnoseological discussion was elaborated on the basis of the Freirean theory about critical investigation, so that indirect views-paths of the oppressed people to come into light.

This was the direction to which the thoughts of the philosophers under examination also pointed, by forming a dialectical course with regard to Freire’s existential proposal, which is also found in personal freedom. A freedom constantly proved by “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin, 1984:6). The question is why Freire considers humanism to be so important? This is because, according to his justification, it depends on human’s freedom over the dominant rules and transforms the former ideas of the learners into a journey of discoveries and changes that take place in a personal and social level. In other words, there arises a dynamic course to be followed by the learners towards “self-initiated inquiries, assignments, and learning journeys” (Matusov, 2011:37).

Nevertheless, this is not a journey to come to an end. Hegelian or Marxist dialectics, for instance, give priority to the end of history, and stress an imprisonment of the subject in a “deterministic vision of the future” (Sacadura, 2014:502). On the other hand, Freire suggests a dialectics on the basis of the constant structure of history according to how subject experiences the evolution. Therefore, dialectics is a path without end, which proves the different and particular nature of every human being beyond any dependence on a dominant truth, since it always provides “a sort of a blueprint that others with a similar purpose can follow, ignore, deny as they form their own selves” (Nehamas, 1998:3). So, Freire’s attitude towards history is “hyperdialectic” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:100), since it is far from conforming views of a centralist requirement and recommends a “dialectic interpretation” (Gadotti 1996:xvi) of the world and history. This is actually a Socratic dialogue, during which “reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality” (Freire & Shor, 1987:99).

In this sense, Freire’s pedagogy breaks the limits of a *regular pedagogy*, which reveals the conformism of the “educability and perfectibility” (Sacadura, 2014:503) of education, and *hosts* in the place of the political and social reference the *exile* or that who has been excluded from the institutional principles by giving priority to autonomy and difference. Thus, the method to perform arises through the Aristotelian “βούλευσιν” (will) and “προαίρεσιν” (intention) (Aristotle, 1894, 1112a, 15) of a free citizen to set himself free from the conservative terms and conditions, who is not afraid of dealing with the end of history and to re-define the boundaries of his course in the context of an open society. This is how learners attempt to “understand history as a living process rather than a reified set of facts or dates.” (Darder, 2002:63).

Finally, Freire will seek the way in which the learners’ actions have to be interpreted and understood within the historical and social becoming according to the Platonic approach of the state, where a lesson is constantly performed. On the other hand, *action* (Aristotle, 1894,

1112b, 31-32) is defined as a constant political request against the predetermined establishment of the oppressing controls. In the end, Freire’s pedagogy is combined with a utopian process and constantly expands the aesthetic requirements of the art of education in a world, where the certitude of the dominant models give ground on the intensity of action. As Freire contends “There is no tomorrow without a project, without a dream, without utopia, without hope, without creative work, and work toward the development of possibilities, which can make the concretization of that tomorrow viable” (Freire, 2007:26).

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