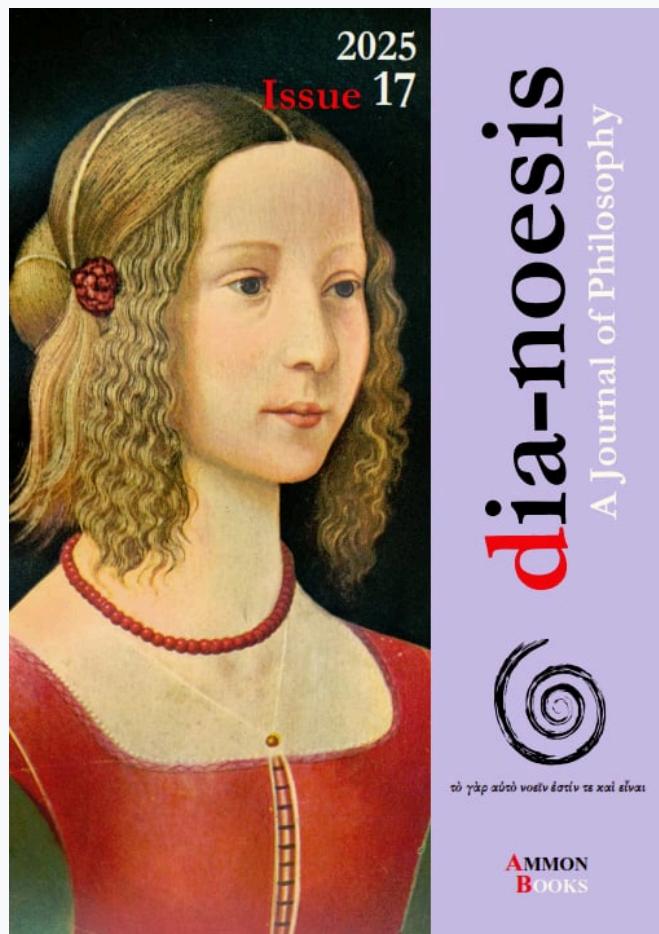


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The image of woman in philosophy



Heirs to Freedom

Panos Eliopoulos

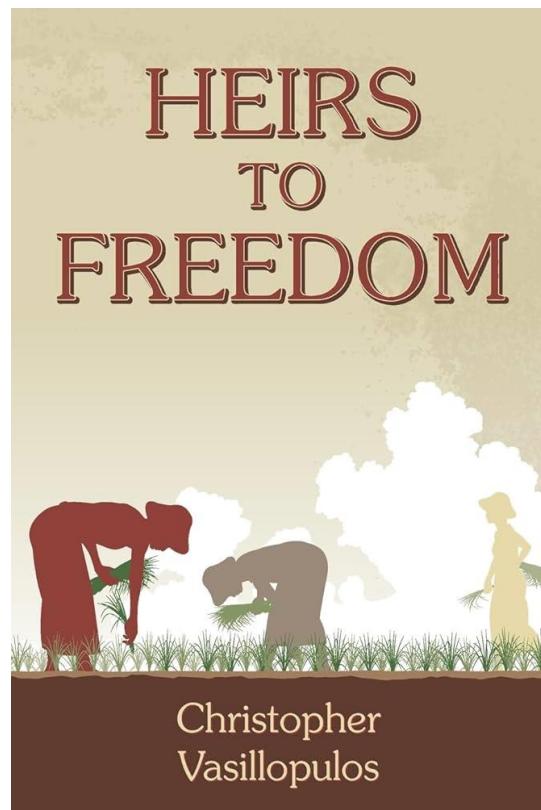
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Heirs to Freedom

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It seems only proper that when writing about a novel, the first thing that must be explored is if this novel conveys any novel-ty at all or if its novelty is exhausted in the presence of just one more story. In the case of the *Heirs to Freedom*, there is a complete affirmation of this fact, which facilitates breaking the chain of our reading habits. So, what is surprisingly ‘novel’ about this novel? The first, unassuming answer could be that its novelty lies in its perspective, but one might reasonably argue against why exactly another perspective, in the vast and ruffled sea of other perspectives, would be such a valuable asset. Especially if, as for Derrida, what I, the reader, interpret as read in the text is the essential thing. That is, if my perspective is equal, if not superior, to the perspective of the writer/storyteller. In such a case, my perspective, the reader’s perspective, would become indispensable, with the vehemence of an unrestrained force. Cunningly, Professor Vassilopoulos has predicted that when he upholds through the lips of one of his heroes: “*We wish to communicate, and we wish not to be hurt by having the content of the message ridiculed or treated disrespectfully... So we wrap our message in ambiguity. In lieu of making as clear a statement as our abilities allow, which after all only rarely requires a Newton or a Locke, we scatter hints. These we hope will become a trail for the right investigator... If it doesn’t, nothing is lost, or rather, less is lost than if a clear rejection follows a clear message*”¹. Let us then try to decipher this message but let us do that as Derridean readers and also as investigators. To achieve this aim, I will temporarily undertake the attempt to highlight several aspects of the book which, in my estimation, will lead closer to what I would eventually rather call a mature, genuine and brilliant trip than a doubtful and obscure destination.

For the main character of the *Heirs of Freedom*, Gideon Gibson, this is a trip comparable with the trip of the Buddha, the enlightened one. Not from a metaphysical but mostly from a psychological and historical point of view. His meeting with the old stinky man dying near his beloved dog leads to a revelation like that of the young prince Gautama

when he first walked out of his protected life and palace. For Gideon the initial revelation is the pain of the black man and gradually, even more purely, that of the naturally distressful situation of every man, even the one who is seemingly happy and successful. The human condition, the problems and misfortunes, the agonies and the conflicts, the discord with what consists our ontological reality, bear the traits of a cosmic mishap, of an anomaly. Although men make endless efforts for the telos of eudaimonia, as Aristotle observantly assures us, and they try to shape chaos into order, their strife for security and order proves exactly this, how insecure their human life truly is. The Charleston of Gideon's time is nothing less than a case study for human psychology and for what human action aims at, therefore a diachronic, not only a certain time and place connection. In this context, a plethora of great discussions among the characters of the book is initiated in Gideon's Charleston, similar ones to the plenteous and glorious philosophical discussions in the *symposia* of ancient Athens. With the method of Socrates and Plato every argument can be visited and revisited and no conclusive theses are attempted, not because there cannot be any but because it is disrespectful to reality to say that it is you, the writer, who has full possession of the truth. Thus, the book does not waste our reading time with nebulous or, quite the contrary, despotic answers; it does not submit a doctrine; it does not fall in the temptation to preach. But it does a lot to educate us and it enhances our will to reach truth through search by our own means. Christopher remains an educator and it is evident that he has a true admiration for the virtues of the New World, for pragmatic men who embody these virtues, men capable of political friendship but also of deep and enduring emotions for their wives, their sons, their properties, and the community and institutions that surround them. Liberty and Prosperity become the new apostle-principles, opening the door for the next centuries, the 19th and 20th, and the realization of a rapid progress on every level but not predicting the demoralization of the human being who initiated this progress. Although not one -sided at all, and although its "Russian side", in terms of the depth of

tragedy and of grandeur, cannot be even slightly neglected, this is also a genuinely American novel. But being American, it comes to belong to the whole western world and to comprise such a vigorous and unambiguous reference to its ideology and value system.

In this exquisitely dialectical confrontation within transformative historic events, parts of the early American history are lucidly becoming bare through the juxtaposition of many confronting ideas and points of view. Fostering frequently an ideology of progress and growth, this is more than a unique and very comprehensible reading of capitalism and of its later foundations; it brings to light characters that serve not only our curiosity to take a look at the time but at the essence of the New World. Gideon's son, Alexander, is such a model, as a prototype of the *Homo Economicus*. In a way, he is a subverted Marxist, as much as capitalism can be comprehended as a subverted form of Marxism, in the sense that it may, occasionally at least, still fail to recognize human value per se and be one that narrows man's existence down to economic terms. Alexander does not always fall in the trap; as a matter of fact, he stands out as the worthy son of a great father and he sustains the author's inner conviction that such men, pragmatic men, are capable for more than ploughing fields and hoping for piles of money. After all, property creates responsibilities, it makes you a man. And manhood takes precedence in this immensely motivating debate among the heroes of the particular novel. But how does this become possible or, better, why is it necessary?

Before we return to that point, it is imperative to expound the tremendously important relation between necessity and freedom, in the *Heirs of Freedom*, and how property belongs to that scheme. For Christopher Vasilopoulos, obligation, which is a form of necessity, does not bind you only; it proceeds dynamically to render you radically free. That is how you become an heir to freedom, by obligation. This is quite an excellent paradox: being an heir means the opportunity of a choice between obligation and no obligation, i.e. to accept the heritage, which here, in this case, is freedom. And what freedom would that be in a world of

such strife? It would be the ontological opportunity, not to say luxury (which would not be an overstatement whatsoever), to acquire the freedom of doing well (as in the sense of the ancient Greek “eu prattein”). Without obligation I would be a subhuman, a slave to my possessions. With obligation I can rise above it, consequently I can act well, freely and well. All is explained in the same context: not as self adulation but **as a way to be me**, as a way to attain rights to freedom. Love for my wife, my friends, my sons is deterministically connected with possession. I love them as they are mine. Same with things: I love my property as I gain from it, it is *my* (*my* as a derivative concept of *me*) possession and it brings me good things. Possession and identity lean close together. Both people and things can become possession. And possession, material or not, is dangerous because it can become the eventual possessor of the human owner, thus messing restrictively with his identity. My need can enslave me, where I would be thought to be free among my possessions; due to my need I become blind, confined, poor. So, this book has to turn, as it does, into a treatise on human love, love as need and as possession, love with the target of maturing and growing as freedom and identity.

In the issue of identity, being *me* is being a *man*, in the author’s conceptualization of the term. He firmly believes that men without privilege must be men of merit to be men at all. For Vasilopoulos manhood is almost a synonym for nobility, not from a gender point of view, but used to denote the subjective source of action. Nonetheless, the author of this generously expressive book provides portraits of women (almost in Modigliani’s manner), who shine out their inner passion and tame the absurdness of human existence into a fully understandable, warm, magnificent and memorable landscape. The author’s focal point frequently regards mothers, whereas women who love/need their husbands and are equally loved/needed by them receive a persistent attention as well. Professor Vasilopoulos brings us closer and closer to this secret of the human heart in many different pages, by pointing out that love as need leads you to

freedom, it relieves you from the burden of being a possession, by being also a master of yourself, your things and your people. That is how the everlasting controversy is resolved. By understanding relationships to such a great extent the particular novelist measures the chaotic abyss of the human need and reveals the abstruse character of human love. *“It is a “mutual possession”* he writes. *“Between man and woman”*. *“Free, happy and free, they belong”*.

Since manhood is always at play, not to say at havoc, let us confront with a functional contradiction which is that, for heroes like Todd, who is black, to act like a man (in the above frame) is to act like a white man. Todd knows that he has no other means but to break violently the chains of the protection that he receives from Gideon and to rupture his connection with his quite prosperous present in order to retrieve the value that *naturally* should belong to him. His fierce denial of the “reality” of custom and law brings us to the realization, which I think Christopher stresses as most significant, that freedom should be always seen as a necessity, an *Anagke* in its most dramatic ancient Greek form. It is quite common to say that the heroes of a book are prisoners of time and place. Here this is not the case and we come in front of the door of this returning and dazzling paradox: Freedom becomes indeed a necessity at every step, at every action that follows our will, at every decision that is taken. Our agony may be due to the fact that we *need* to act in that self liberating way. These men are not prisoners, actually they are free men in the making, men who are transforming their existence according to principles, not mere feelings. Thus their manhood, their nobility, is the manifestation of their need to become free, to serve their inner paradox, to resolve the most intense conflict. For Vassilopoulos no answer is of an automated form. Can a slave do more than a bale of hay? Sarah, Alexander, and others certainly can. The aftermath is that the qualities of men’s souls vary, not just their talents, as Schopenhauer prudently predicts. The book shows the value of nobility, depicts men who can be real not only fictional, men of principle, ideal but real men simultaneously. It strongly emphasizes the transition from

childhood to manhood: The English who become Americans, the Slaves who become Free, the Sons who become Men and Fathers. Only man eventually is capable and worthy of liberty and property. Only man may be entitled to his personal point of view against the overall point of view of the society where his time-place existence was found. Is the conflict inevitable? Christopher Vasilopoulos, acting wisely, doesn't provide all the answers. He carefully poses the problem in a philosophical manner, guiding our attention to this Aristotelian question: without purpose is there meaning in anything?

This book, in the multitude of orientations that it provides, unwaveringly aims to be a character study inside and outside a cultural context. It often takes the form of a hypertext, e.g. when it mentions Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* or other books. Some of its heroes write or recite poetry. All these contribute to the impression of an open-ended and lavish work, a work that does not remain restricted in its "own story". Carrying ideological influences from ancient Greek philosophy and tragedy and with a unique and original contribution to the international thematology of drama on its own, the *Heirs of Freedom* share the belief that man is a social animal and that happiness comes from activity as the Stagirite upholds. Hence, this story becomes able to portray how the human condition exceeds the narrow context of History and historicity. Man's individual story is as great as the record of humanity's collective efforts. What man does matters, not where he comes from, it is action not hereditary nobility or the color of the skin that determines personal or race value. In this story it is diagnosed anew, centuries after Euripides, that there is an inherent dualism in the human soul: there is cruelty and there is kindness and compassion. The human being stands often aghast at the awareness of these conflicting powers. Reality may seem meaningless, and human activity comes to the rescue, to mask the meaninglessness of existence, as Heidegger insists before his *Kehre*. Together people, lovers, become more human, through the wisdom of different perspective. People have to find their other halves.

It is important for them to find two persons: a) themselves, b) their mates. Often by finding their mates, their companions in existential fighting, they find themselves. *“The reward of intimacy is the confirmation of the unconfirmable, the sense of ultimate worth”*, Christopher laconically confirms.

For the particular problem of slavery, let us be reminded that Aristotle discerns the feasibility of friendship between master and slave, although he has been accused as monolithic on the issue of slavery by many scholars. It seems that oppression is the inability to become aware of this option, that friendship is possible even between two totally different social beings, as friendship always is necessitated primarily on an ethical level, before becoming political. In a world where there can be, literally, no black and white, the white master Gideon becomes a friend of his black slaves. The author maintains that: *“to be men, to have free choice making souls, required a free culture, one that rewarded free expression and punished servility”*. Despite the culture wherein we are born, which limits us, some still opt for free action and expression, perhaps because they are strong enough to resist. But some others are not, and they are not to blame. Christopher, as the educator that he is, tolerantly and with the virtue of an impressive discrimination, teaches us that there is a path to doing things differently inside a homogenized environment. He wants us to make the laborious efforts that are required in order to adjust to ourselves and to truth-reality, not to the environment where we are found in.

The writer, as the creator of a cosmos, in this book tries to impart reason to the unreasonable by exposing the constitution of both, shedding light on aspects of the former as well as of the latter. That is why throughout the book abound discussions on several political, theological, financial and philosophical issues. To ignore one of those is to ignore the total conception of this marvelous storytelling. In an unequal world, where there are so many variations and extents of strife, the strife of the master along with the strife of the slave, the strife of the two sexes, the strife of boys and

the strife of men, all strife, irrespective of where it comes from, seems to be primarily strife for dignity and for belonging. People who don't belong may as well revolt, just like Todd. What is sought at every step, from Gideon, from Sarah, from the human being in general, is "*constancy in a world of flux, impervious to man's fickle and facile nature*". Constancy and safety are sought in reason, in love, in the State and in the political situation but Christopher's heroes are willing to give up constancy and safety for what they think right, exactly because this is the heaviest price. As the Spanish existentialist Ortega y Gasset concludes some decades ago "*yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*" i.e. I am I and my circumstance. The addition of circumstances to my personality, to what I am, means that I have to shape my life where I am with what I am there. Vasilopoulos seems to cherish this idea, pointing with consistency to the practical side of our lives, not to theoretical jargon. Therefore, can I either change myself or the circumstance? Which one of the two is the immovable condition? The author as usual does not become conclusive, he hangs on to his decision to respect our own ability of thinking and making a concrete decision.

The same scheme, with the indispensable lever of obligation in mind, is applied in relation with the most important institutions of the era: the State and the Church. Christopher Vasilopoulos, as a political scientist and as a philosopher with a rare understanding of the phenomenology of the human condition, has a profound knowledge of the ever changing (and at the same time, most solid) institutions, the State and the Church, both institutions dressed with the glory rather than the actual spirit of the era of Reason. He does not deal with his issue with an overwhelming emphasis until he reveals his desire to make it explicit that no absolutes can be pursued. Beyond "reasonable" doubt, a world of reason is a quest even today, not only in the era of Gideon's Charleston. Professor Vasilopoulos remarks that: "*sometimes we expect too much of people because we expect too much from Reason*". The same goes, or should go, with institutions. The proper function of these great two institutions structurally must be guiding to the benefit of

man. If they fail somehow to serve his needs, then they should be at least re-examined if not substituted and re-invented. The core of the author's thought, though, is again directed towards relations: liberty plus property in Politics; liberty plus choice in Church. Both relations lead to bonding and solidarity in the respective communities. What is actually made manifest here is freedom as freedom from another's will, therefore from the constraint of tyranny, not from obligation and necessity. One's soul and one's political status are defined by the portion of freedom one has access to, as only a free man can consider himself a man at all, therefore a man able and responsible for the opportunity for choice. Hence, no slave seems to be able (able as in an opportunity-given ability) to be happy, for no slave can be a man, not while his soul is not his. Accordingly, only a free man can be a Christian for only a free man can choose his cross. Choice and freedom become key words in this parade of concepts and practices; among them, property, obligation, possession, love, and belonging. In the cases of the State and Church, belonging seems again to be freedom, not slavery, due to the free will of the doer who expresses himself through it.

There is no doubt that a sense of rightness (rectum) is indeed essential to societal order. However, "*the state cares little for reasons and much for results*" as Christopher brightly remarks. Coercion and law are major issues. Do we obey the law when we don't agree with it? What is the criterion of disagreement, opinion or knowledge? Do we have the right to resist the law? What is the exact distance between the Kantian terms of *Legalität* and *Moralität*? Ought law to be more than conflict resolution? Do we take men as we find them or do we teach them? The former option would mean that we would have to see morality as second to legality and become restrictive and punitive to violators, while the latter would signify our duty to render them equal partners in our social life. In the *Heirs of Freedom* Thomas Hobbes constantly confronts Jürgen Habermas: can political communication, if any communication at all, be reached if every participant does not participate freely and equally? In this story we are confronted with the fact that often men seek

stability even if stability does not offer them optimum conditions, otherwise said even if there is confusion about right or wrong. Many black people in the story of the *Heirs of Freedom* only know custom, not justice in that sense.

As an epilogue to this review, I must distinguish the fact that during the ending of this book, several references to excellence suddenly gather and abound. Christopher condenses the references to this uncomplicated and straightforward one: “*excellence has to exist*”. I notice out this single phrase instead of any other more inspiring and articulate ones in the story, while there are many, because I want to keep the core of its meaning. Love for the Ariston (the excellent) is more important than aristocracy. Excellence resides in every human activity, in thinking, in commerce, in human affairs. Excellence is not exclusively an Aristotelian quest, otherwise the *Heirs to Freedom* would not have been written. This book raises a question about the existence of the superiority that we, as human beings, can not only dream of but make real, superiority to our life conditions, to ourselves, to our eras. Like a language game borrowed from Wittgenstein, Christopher Vasilopoulos does not want us to leave the theatre yet before we get his message. I agree so much with him “*words are a trap for the flesh of the mind*”. I must confess: I was surprised that Professor Vasilopoulos wrote a novel instead of a philosophical book. Now I am not anymore. A philosophical book would fail to do three things: a) be more inclusive, i.e., speak to us all, b) address real life conditions and practical people like the ones we really and eventually are, c) use the unuttered.



