
Plato and the modern African State: Some thoughts on the question of justice

Michael Cloete

Philosophy Department, University of South Africa

Abstract

The influence of the Platonic metaphysical tradition on the development of modern Western political institutions, and the modern state in particular has been quite significant. The influence of the modern Western state on the formation of the modern African state has been no less significant. In both political traditions the principles of human freedom and dignity have provided the moral impetus in the struggle for democracy and political independence. The African political experience of modernity, however, has, been less than salutary, given the devastating impact of European colonial domination and racism, as well as current neoliberal projects of globalization. For Plato, the ideal of the good life is inseparable from the historical possibility of economic (material) well-being, without which there can be no talk of justice. Given this argument, this paper seeks to reflect upon the idea and possibility of justice in the modern African state.

1. Introduction

Plato was born in an age of social and political upheaval. At the age of twenty-three, he had witnessed the demoralizing effects of the Peloponnesian War, as well as the potentially destructive application of Pericles' revolutionary legacy of democratic idealism. It was the Periclean legacy, more than anything else that provided some of Plato's contemporaries with the philosophical resources for subjecting the values of traditional Greek society to radical skepticism and doubt. For the defenders of the democratic vision, reason and politics were deemed to be philosophically incompatible. Moreover, the defeat of Athens at the hands of Sparta had contributed significantly to a general feeling that the nationalistic spirit of Pan-Hellenism (engendered by the Persian War) could no longer sustain itself in a political climate characterized by philosophical nihilism, given reason's incapacity to provide the normative framework for the reconstruction of Greek society as a whole. Whereas the philosophers of traditional Greek society, that is, those of

the pre-Periclean age, were more inclined to view the values of traditional religion as the inspirational source of philosophical thinking, those of post-Periclean society were inclined to a more “scientific”, that is, a post-religious orientation, in which the ethos of spiritual universalism was rejected in favour of a secularized moral-political vision of relativism and individualism. From this perspective, justice, narrowly viewed as a pursuit of power, was widely accepted as the only realistic (and therefore) rational option in an enlightened-democratic Athenian society (Crossman, 1959:3).

As an alternative to the pursuit of personal and political power, Plato offered a moral vision of society, guided by a dialectical process of reasoning, and grounded in the transcendent Idea of the Good as the only hope of human happiness in a world steeped in political violence and moral disorder. In this regard, Plato’s critical appropriation of traditional Greek virtues, as articulated within the context of his theory of recollection, serves to remind his reader that if the state is to embody the principle of justice, the shared history of its citizens ought to provide the narrative and normative context for the articulation and validation of such a principle of justice.

In many ways, the post-Periclean age resembles postcolonial Africa insofar as the promise of democratic freedom from colonial domination and exploitation has faded in the face of the continual threat of political instability, as well as economic and social insecurity. Given the violent nature of Africa’s historical encounter with Western Europe, as witnessed in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, followed shortly by the violent seizure and dispossession of African land and material resources during the colonial period, as well as the subsequent denigration of African culture in the face of widely held assumptions of European cultural and racial superiority, contemporary African philosophy is faced with the challenge of finding constructive and creative ways of reformulating the question of reason, following centuries of denial and ignorance regarding Africa’s ability and will to reason, by the defenders of Western reason in general, and Western modernity in particular.

As a point of departure, Africa’s “place-in-the-world” would have to be defined beyond popular racist ideas and stereotypes that persist in constructing it as Europe’s negative “other”; a “dark continent” of irrationality and primitivism, trapped (economically) in a “global ghetto”, a continent of “wasted lives” which offers nothing of any substance to the capitalist world economy (Ferguson, 2006:29). We would also have to look beyond popular Western myths of “African failure, African savagery, African darkness... that cast Africa as a ... [continent] ... of failed states, uncontrollable violence, horrific disease, and unending poverty” (Ferguson, 2006:10). Just as for Plato the possibility of justice in post-traditional Athenian society depended for its implementation on the authority of

reason-in-dialogue, postcolonial Africa is likewise challenged to raise the question of the possibility of justice from a perspective that allows Africa the freedom to speak with the authority of reason-in-dialogue.

In this paper, I seek to investigate the question of the possibility of justice in the postcolonial African state from a perspective that not only acknowledges the humanist tradition of thought at the root of Plato's "ideal state", as discussed in (arguably) his most important dialogue, the *Republic*, but also from a perspective that underlines the betrayal of that humanist tradition within the context of Western modernity, when viewed as a project of colonialism and racism.

2. The religious foundations of the Platonic state

Plato's theory of justice is inseparably linked to his philosophical appropriation of the mystical doctrines of the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition, in which human happiness was determined by the presence of the "divine" in the earthly life of the individual. According to these doctrines, it was the condition of "the soul" that determined the degree of happiness that a person could realistically or potentially experience during his or her life on earth. In the development of his own thought, however, it was the Orphic-Pythagorean notion of spiritual immortality and purity that impressed him the most. From the assumption of spiritual immortality as the precondition of eternal bliss for the "soul" (released from the impediments of the human frame), Plato developed an epistemological and moral theory, aimed at emphasizing the human potential for knowledge and virtue. It is also from this perspective that we can appreciate his respect for the Socratic imperative, "not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul" (*Apology 30b*). Given the historical Socrates' (im)famous "ironic" confession of ignorance regarding questions of knowledge and virtue, however, Plato turned to the authority of traditional religion for guidance:

Some of them are priests and priestesses, who have striven to learn how to give a religious account of the things with which they concern themselves...and they say that the soul of man is immortal, and at one time has an end, which is termed dying, and at another time is born again, but is never destroyed ...[T]he soul, then, as being immortal and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all – and it is no wonder that she should be able to call to remembrance all that she ever knew about virtue, and about everything; for all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no difficulty in a man eliciting out of a single recollection all the rest – the process generally called 'learning' - ...for all inquiry and all learning is but recollection (*Meno 81a-e*).

The passage above provides the general religious context for the development of Plato's own philosophy, in which the contemplation of "reality" (ontology) is made possible through knowledge of the Platonic Forms or Ideas (epistemology), the originating source of which is the Form of the Good (the ethical), the "soul's" ultimate goal of contemplation – all of which are assumed to exist in a metaphysical realm beyond the appearances of our sensory experience of the world (*Republic 502-521*). Plato's ontological arguments for the existence of transcendent Forms (Ideas), and more specifically the Form of the Good, are motivated by a desire to achieve a sense of unity and coherence in a world seemingly characterized by permanent change, as famously claimed by Heraclitus before him. For Plato, a world characterized by constant change poses the unwelcome philosophical threat of ethical-epistemological relativism, on the one hand, and the equally unwelcome political threat of anarchy, where tyranny and cynicism represent the most logical expression of the will to power, on the other hand.

While it may be tempting to interpret Plato's appropriation of the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition as a form of chauvinistic reverence for all things Greek, it should be pointed out that Plato had no intention of defending "truth" on ethnocentric grounds. From the Platonic perspective, "truth" is the possible outcome of an objective process of reasoning, in which the rules of dialectical inquiry are strictly adhered to by all participants in the debate. Human equality for Plato, therefore, means equality before the formal processes and "laws" of discursive reasoning. In this regard, Crossman (1953:3) correctly points out:

Although the early Greek philosophers were theologians 'intoxicated with reason', to whom it was self-evident that truth was the priestess and reason the oracle of true religion, the effect of their teaching was revolutionary. Freed from all authority and restraint, Greek thought roamed at large over the universe, questioning and denying the accepted order of things...Man, it was felt, had at last been freed from bondage of superstition and from subjection to absolutism. Since reason and intelligence were now the standards by which worth was measured the aristocrat and the priest could be treated as ordinary men and judged on their merits. In future no one's opinion should carry extra weight because of his family tree or social position or holy office.

If "truth" is the possible outcome of a dialectical or discursive inquiry, it is important to note that for Plato the formal process of inquiry is as important as the attainment of knowledge of the object of inquiry, regardless of whether one is inquiring into the nature of justice, beauty, or courage. From this perspective, all claims that are uttered within the discursive framework of the Platonic dialogue are potential truth claims, to be thoroughly examined and cross-examined by all participants in the dialogue. Moreover, within the

context of the Platonic dialogue, all truth claims are at best of hypothetical account, and all participants are potentially discoverers of the truth. Even in the face of constant failure to achieve knowledge of the desired object of inquiry, Plato has cause to encourage his reader as follows:

[C]ling to the safety of your hypothesis, and answer accordingly. And if anyone were to fasten upon the hypothesis itself, you would disregard him, and refuse to answer until you could consider the consequences of it, and see whether you agreed or disagreed with each other. But when the times comes for you to establish the hypothesis itself, you would pursue the same method; you would assume some more ultimate hypothesis and continue until you have reached something more satisfactory (*Phaedo 101d-e*).

Plato's reformulation of traditional religious thought into a philosophical conception of reason, informed by an awareness of the "hypothetical", thus becomes the philosophical foundation for the inquiry into questions of knowledge and virtue. Within the political context, however, knowledge of justice is regarded by him as the highest virtue.

3. Justice in the Platonic state

Plato's *Republic* provides the dramatic setting for the investigation into the question of justice. In this famous text, Plato's Socrates is especially focused on rebutting the popular thesis that justice is an expression of the will to power, and as such, a mere product of convention. The latter position is held by Plato's Thrasymachus, who argues rather forcefully that justice (or "right") has no moral basis; it is merely an expression of the political will to power, and, as such, it can assume many different forms in political society. In the final analysis, however, justice is merely an ideological construct that is aimed at concealing the selfish interests of the powerful ruler/s of the day. As Thrasymachus puts it:

Each ruling class makes laws that are in its own interest, a democracy democratic laws, a tyranny tyrannical laws, and so on; and in making these laws they define as 'right' for their subjects what is in the interests of themselves, the rulers... That is what I mean when I say that 'right' is the same thing in all states, namely, the interest of the established ruling class; and this ruling class is the 'strongest' element in each state, and so if we argue correctly we see that 'right' is always the same, the interest of the stronger party (*Republic 339*).

Thrasymachus' argument stems from an empirically-based, psychological analysis of human nature, and it claims that all human beings are essentially egotistical, power-driven creatures, and if placed in a position of advantage over others, they will certainly exercise their advantage to the

detriment of others. Thrasymachus concludes that morality and justice cannot therefore be accounted for on normative grounds.

When Plato's Socrates challenges the "conventional" and "natural" view of justice, in pursuit of a normative foundation for justice in society, it is interesting to note that his point of departure is an explication of the "natural" needs of the individual within the broader context of the community. For Plato, it is only when the individual is placed within the broader context of community life that the question of justice ultimately makes moral sense. As he puts it, the community is the individual "written... in larger lettering" (*Republic 368*). It is from the perspective of the community, conceptualized as an organic whole, the effective functioning of which can only succeed when grounded in principles of mutual cooperation, that Plato delivers the first blow to the "natural-conventional" view of justice. He is of the view that any assessment of human nature must of necessity begin with an account of the individual's being-with-others, within the general context of community-inspired principles of mutuality, reciprocity and interdependence. From this perspective, Plato claims "[s]ociety originates... because the individual is not self-sufficient, but has many needs which he can't supply himself" (*Republic 369*).

This "simple" economic principle, which is aimed at addressing, amongst other things, the most basic of human needs, such as the need for food, water and shelter, requires the introduction of an infrastructure that will ensure the provision of material security for all members of society, without exception. But even when these basic human needs have been met, Glaucon objects that Socrates' "first city" lacks the sophisticated comforts of civilized society, and such, is therefore only fit for a "community of pigs" (*Republic 372*).

In response to Glaucon's objection, Socrates proceeds to include the luxuries and comforts which one normally associates with the material wellbeing of modern Western bourgeois society, which in the Platonic view, represents but the "lowest level" of society, and which is made possible by the workers, manufacturers, producers and medical doctors – all of whom are there to see to the physical needs of the community as a whole. With the introduction of all sorts of material comfort and luxury, however, comes the need to protect the community from military invasion abroad, as well as from internal strife, hence the need for a military class (the "auxiliaries"). Finally, Plato introduces the class of rulers (the "guardians" of the state), who are given the responsibility of providing wise leadership aimed at the preservation of the community as whole.

Throughout the development of the Platonic state, the principle of specialized labour - based on the natural aptitude and skill of the individual - forms the functional core around which the three classes of society, namely

the working class, the military class (the “auxiliaries”), and the ruling class (the “guardians”) must operate. The principle of justice, therefore, finds expression in the functionality of a state in which cooperation for the good of society as a whole takes the form of a division of labor that acknowledges the reality of basic human needs, on the one hand, as well as the principle of human capability, on the other. According to Plato, “in our state one man must do one job, the job he is naturally suited for.... justice consists in minding your own business, and not interfering with other people” (*Republic* 433).

Plato is fully aware that his state represents an ideal insofar as he cannot provide rational grounds to justify its existence; it is merely an hypothesis. This accounts for his use of founding myths and “noble lies” to provide the necessary persuasion in the form of carefully elaborated programmes of education and socialization – some would say, indoctrination – all of which attest to his fundamental acceptance of both the “divine” as well as the “beast” within the general psychological structure of all humankind. In terms of this approach, the humanity of humankind must be gauged on the strength of the presence of the “divine” within, and the more humanity strives to attain “the divine”, the greater the possibility of human happiness. By the same token, the more we submit to the “beast” within, the more we contribute to our own unhappiness, as well as the unhappiness of others. From this perspective, Plato offers his ideal of perfection in and through the human capacity for the “divine”, which is also the capacity for reason and rationality. For Plato, the expression of reason in the state is the only guarantee of justice in the state, hence his oft-quoted claim, “there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed...of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands” (*Republic* 473).

The absence of justice therefore testifies to the absence of reason, and given Plato’s own skepticism of the possibility of the “philosopher-king” ever assuming political power, the human all too human must navigate between the “divine” and the “beast” in the search for justice in society. For Plato, the realm of the political (the *polis*, the city-state) represents the only true realm of authentic human existence. This is perhaps why his famous student, Aristotle, is often quoted as having said, “He who is unable to live in a society or has not need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either beast or god, he has no part of a state (*polis*)” (*Politics* 1253a, as cited in Ophir, 1991:22). From this perspective, Aristotle argues that it is only on the assumption of reason in “man” that we can account for our common humanity in this world, “since reason more than anything else *is* man” (cited in Ophir, 1991:44).

4 Western modernity and the African beast

When the Platonic metaphysical tradition of human-being-in-the-world is appropriated by the leading representatives of the Western-European philosophical tradition of modernity-enlightenment, and is turned upon the non-Western world, and Africa in particular, it loses its universalistic appeal, given the brutal will to power that has accompanied the European projects of slavery and colonialism, the structural components of the "project of modernity" (Habermas, 1981). For leading modernists, such as Jürgen Habermas, modernity, construed as an exclusively "European phenomenon" (Tate, 1997:281), is essentially a question of understanding the central status and validity of reason in a post-traditional (modern) world, which is assumed to be inaccessible to the mystical irrationalism of the "African mind", currently trapped in the dogmatic slumbers of the "closed" traditional society (Levy-Bruhl, 1923; Levy-Bruhl, 1985). From this perspective, the Platonic idea of affirming the humanity of the "other", in and through the potential for the "divine", and thus the rational in the "other", has been distorted and subverted in order to accommodate certain racist theories that seek to restrict Africa's presence in the world to the realm of the "beast", given Africa's alleged childlike (natural-primitive) status within the universal timeframe of human evolution. Thus we find Western modernity's now familiar metaphysical frameworks of binary oppositional-thinking that seek to justify the core racist assumptions underlying what Jacques Derrida has referred to as "white mythology" (Derrida, 1982:207-271). From the perspective of the Western metaphysical tradition, with its founding metaphor of reason as the expression of ("white") civilization, "Africa" becomes a European construct of radical "otherness", in which the African person's moral claim to humanity is subjected to radical doubt. Just as the Greek philosophers of old prided themselves on having been born human (and not a beast), or having being born male (and not female), or having been born Greek (and not barbarian), so the representatives of Western modernity have also prided themselves on having being born European (and not African), civilized (and not primitive) - given the alleged (exclusive, superior) presence of reason in the "White man's mind".

The (Western) project of modernity is based on a philosophical denial of the humanity of the African, and this denial of African humanity accounts for the prevalence of philosophical racism as justification for (Western) modernity's violent encounter with, and dismissal of Africa, as a continent of civilized human beings. Whether one considers the exploitative nature of the colonial state, and its violent dispossession of African land and material resources, on the one hand, or the postcolonial nation-state, and the violent marginalization of the African continent in the global economic order of the

free market system, on the other hand, one is struck by the profound indifference of the so-called developed world to the enormous scale of human suffering on the African continent. This indifference is all the more striking, given the fact that the theme of humanity, of human-being-in-the-world, has occupied such a central place in the history of Western philosophy. Even more bewildering is the denialism on the part of the so-called developed world, regarding its complicity in the violent destruction and impoverishment of human and ecological life in Africa. How is one supposed to reconcile the Western philosophical affirmation of being-human-in-the-world, on the one hand, with its simultaneous philosophical negation of Africa's humanity-in-the-world, on the other? For Plato, as we have seen above, the political must coincide with the rational for justice to emerge in society. From the perspective of (Western) modernity and colonialism, however, African life has been condemned to the "less than beast", given Plato's argument that the satisfaction of the most basic human needs is the first step towards the realization of justice in society.

Whether one examines and reflects critically on the major texts, the subtexts or the so-called minor works of Western philosophers of modernity, such as Hume, Kant, and Hegel (to mention but a few), one cannot but be struck by the depth of philosophical racism that runs like a common thread through their various works. Yet one is bewildered by the ease with which the canonical doctrines of these thinkers of the European Enlightenment have been accepted in the Western academic world and beyond, as articulating some profound universal truth, some metanarrative, accessible only to those Western "minds" endowed with the spirit of reason. In this regard, Hegel informs his reader that "the only thought which philosophy brings with it, is the simple idea of reason – the idea that reason governs the world and that world history is therefore a rational process" (Hegel, 1975:27). Hegel's philosophical views on the cultural superiority of western "world history" are well-known. His postulation of the African as the non-historical "other" of western "world history" ultimately boils down to a complete negation of the possibility of reason beyond the philosophical discourses of (Western) modernity. From this perspective, Hegel condemns African culture to the non-historical and the non-philosophical when he writes:

The characteristic of negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity - for example, of God or the law – in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being. The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality, so that he knows nothing of an absolute being which is other and higher than his own self (cited in Masolo, 1994:4).

The reduction of reason to the instrumental-strategic level of the colonial will to power in the face of Africa's alleged non-historical being-in-the-world could only have been possible on the strength of modernity's less than "noble lie", namely, that the presence of (Western) reason determines the humanity of the "other". In the modern (Western) world it is reason in the form of Western "science and technology", teleologically captured in the metaphysical concept of "progress", that ultimately provides decisive proof of Western humanity's "advanced" status in the world. If the historical is an expression of the rational, however, and the rational an expression of the historical, as Hegel would have us believe, then we need to inquire further into the normative grounds for the possibility of African justice in the world. If the historical paths of the African continent and the West are to converge, however, in non-violent dialogue with each other, such a convergence can only become meaningful on the basis of a mutually inspired acknowledgment of both the "beast" and the "divine" as the moral-potential of all humankind. With such an acknowledgement the question of justice may (hopefully) be debated in a dialectical-dialogical context where all participants are accepted as potential discoverers of the (historical) truth of (Western) modernity's complicity in denying, deferring and distorting Africa's historical being-in-the-world. The search for justice in an African context must therefore presuppose the possibility of invoking a commonly shared humanity-in-the-world, not as a metaphysical metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984), or a "noble lie" (in Plato's language), but as a moral truth that is self-evident. Within an historical context, the pursuit of justice in the African state cannot ignore or disregard the precolonial traditions of African moral-political thought as its point of departure. The discursive foregrounding of indigenous traditions of African moral-political thought must not, however, be seen as a romantic attempt to reclaim or regain a precolonial past of historical innocence and African authenticity, but as a moral-practical means of collectively coming to terms with Africa's violent dehumanisation in the world. African justice in the world would therefore be "blind" if it fails to acknowledge its own history. As Kwame Nkrumah (1964:78) once put it:

Our philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of the African people. It is from these conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created. The emancipation of the African continent is the emancipation of man. This requires two aims: first, the restitution of the egalitarianism of human society, and, second, the logistic mobilisation of all our resources towards the attainment of that restitution.

Given Nkrumah's argument above, one may controversially claim that African philosophy may variously be viewed as a conceptual reaction, an interpretation, a hypothesis, a speculation, a creation, a gesture, a sign,

even a silence – that speaks to our historical being-in-the-world through the universalising voice(s) and language(s) of reason. And justice may be interpreted as an expression of the “divine” in the “other”, as a respected member of the human-all-to-human political community.

5. The possibility of justice

The inauguration of political independence in Africa, following the withdrawal of its former colonial powers, has coincided with the general adoption of the nation-state as proof of Africa’s arrival in the modern world. To the extent that the postcolonial nation-state has failed to prove its effectiveness and credibility on the African continent, as well as within the international community of nation-states, however, the African continent has increasingly been marginalised in view of the general association by the African and Western political elite of modernity with the achievements of Western science and technology, on the hand, and “progress and development” according to the economic-capitalist-consumerist imperatives of the industrialised Western world, on the other. The question of whether the nation-state does indeed represent Africa’s best chance of political credibility and economic recovery, given its blatant disregard for the “historical homes” of precolonial African communities, remains to this day an open question. Moreover, by accepting the “national” borders unilaterally decided upon at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, a measure clearly aimed at protecting the economic interests of its former colonial masters, African political leaders have perpetuated the very colonial structures of governance that had generated the economic injustices of its colonial past. In this regard, Mogobe Ramose (2002:462) correctly points out:

In the case of Africa, the violence of the unjust wars of colonization, was the violation of the both the territorial and the political rights of the African peoples. By adopting the technique of government instead of state succession, decolonization was a device to protect and perpetuate the privileges acquired through conquest in the unjust wars of colonization. This imposes - in the name of historical justice - the necessity upon Africa to correct the situation.

The adoption of a postcolonial form of government modelled on the European nation-state is an unequivocal condemnation and relegation of Africa’s precolonial moral-political traditions to the problematic status of the non-historical and the non-rational in world history. It is also the adoption of government succession in the form of the nation-state in postcolonial Africa that has led to what Basil Davidson (1992) refers to as the “the Black man’s burden”. For Davidson, the adoption of a Western (modernising) model of political and economic governance, based on neoliberal policies of

development, within the context of African nation-state, simply makes no sense at all. He writes:

Learned scholarly foundations, great international banking agencies, a host of specialized institutes devoted to "aid for Africa" have all abounded in versions of the same nonsense: a successful nation-statism in Africa must dispense with, or better still, ignore, every experience of the past. Tradition in Africa must be seen as synonymous with stagnation. The ballast of past centuries must be jettisoned as containing nothing of value at present. And yet these convictions were never seriously questioned, at the level of policy, until it would at last be seen, and even could no longer not be seen, that an imported model was a dismal failure (Davidson, 1992:50-51).

The question of justice in postcolonial Africa cannot ignore the traditional precolonial value-systems of humanism as its point of departure. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the common theme pervading the writings of modern African political thinkers points in the direction of precolonial indigenous traditions of humanism as the normative foundation of the possibility of justice in the modern African state. Whether one is asked to consider the idea of "negritude" (Senghor, 1995), "consciencism" (Nkrumah, 1964), "ujamaa" (Nyerere, 1968), or "a return to the source" (Cabral, 1973) - all of these ideas can be traced back to indigenous African ethical systems, in which the significance and value of human life are commonly understood to be rooted in the moral life of the community. From the perspective of the African community, the individual is considered to be an integral part of a moral-spiritual universe that is assumed to precede and transcend community life in the present, and which, through the ancestral influences of the living-dead, provide the normative framework for the African's moral-political engagement with the present "here and now". It is from the ethical perspective of a common humanity, whose origins can be traced to the "divine", that African moral thinking connects with other major spiritual-religious traditions of humanistic thinking across the world, including the Platonic humanist tradition. Moreover, it is the tradition of humanism that provides the normative-moral foundation of African political thought in general. Africa's moral-political engagement with the present is therefore inseparably connected with the collective knowledge and memory of past experience. It is through the critical appropriation of traditional cultural values that the community can sustain itself in the present.

But when the traditional sources and conditions of life in the community are seriously challenged, as they have been in Africa's violent encounter with Western modernity, this encounter must first of all be understood and articulated from a collective sense of moral outrage, given the fact that Africa's moral self-identity as human beings, as well as its material and political forms of livelihood have been seriously undermined

and impoverished by the European projects of slavery and colonialism in Africa, in the recent past, and neoliberal economic policies of global capitalism in the present. While the policies of neoliberal global capitalism continue to enrich the developed economies of the industrialised Western countries, they simultaneously continue to plunge the African continent deeper and deeper into a “black hole of poverty”, the structural by-product of global capitalism. Justice as a moral idea in Africa must therefore begin with a universal acknowledgement of the denied, deferred humanity of Africa’s human-being-in-the-modern-world. As a political idea, justice must assume the concrete form of redistribution of African land, as well as other dispossessed material resources, without which present-day Africa cannot even begin to resemble Plato’s “first city”, which Glaucon described earlier as a community only “fit for pigs”. From this perspective, Plato would surely resist the hegemony of a global economic order that makes it increasingly more and more difficult for the African community to “mind its own business”. Plato would also surely acknowledge that the construction of the modern African state must take its orientation from the humanist legacy of African traditional society, not in order to assert the ontological difference of Africa’s historical being-in-the-world, but in order to provide a normative framework for asserting the African experience of wholeness and coherence in the world, as part of a moral reaction to the cultural-historical fragmentation and rupture, caused by Africa’s violent encounter with Western modernity. It is especially within the metaphysical context of the priority of the moral African community, in which the values of the past “precede” the political community of the present, that the question of justice must therefore be raised as an historical possibility in Africa. The devastating effects of the historical rupture of precolonial Africa can, therefore, only be effectively overcome by first of all “re-membering” the spiritual sources of human solidarity that once dictated the African sense of personhood in the hope of restoring the “moral foundations” of the African community (Wiredu, 2002; Gyekye, 2002). It is from within this normative context of African metaphysical thinking that the question of African justice can once again be posed in relation to the modern African state. While the search for justice presupposes an enabling political environment of democratic participation, we should not be fooled into believing that democracy is an exclusively “western” idea which, in the modern world, can only be realised when linked to the imperatives of global capitalism and consumerism. As Bénézet Bujo (2001:12) correctly points out:

[D]emocracy is transposed to the black continent without question, and promoted vis-à-vis a largely illiterate populace by means of modern media such as television and radio. This new culture, even when it claims to be democratic, destroys the world in which Africans traditionally lived. Political

life was organised in an extremely *communitarian* manner by means of the palaver. Today, however, - and precisely thanks to the mass media - a few individuals hold the monopoly of the word.

In the search for an authentic democratic political order, the leaders of the modern African state would do well to acknowledge that "democracy is a universal idea and its development in any society should allow for looking into the entire human experience to borrow institutions and ideas that will engender it" (Owolabi, 2003:442). For Africa, the question of the possibility of justice in an authentic democratic political community cannot therefore be detached from its inescapable engagement with world history, not as a passive conduit of (Western) modernity, but as a dialogue partner more than capable of contributing towards the development of a more humane world order, beyond the capitalist-inspired globalisation of human suffering in the world. In this regard, Bujo does well to remind us that "globalisation is no new phenomenon in Africa; one could say that it began with the slave trade, since the black male and female slaves were persons without culture, who could be bought and sold; their duty was to submit to their owner. Since, however, their status as slaves was the reason for this disparagement of their culture, this negative judgment was extended *de facto* to Black Africa as a whole" (Bujo, 2001:12).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that the modern African state has failed, not because Africa lacks the philosophical resources to provide the normative foundations for its own legitimate historical human-being-in-the-world, but because its modern origins are rooted in a denial of African humanity as the foundational source of its construction; hence the lack of legitimacy of the modern African state in the eyes of the majority of African people. For justice to work in any society, it must resonate with the potentially universalisable moral consciousness of ordinary people across all human societies. Insofar as the defenders of Western modernity, as the heirs apparent of Plato's metaphysical legacy, have deliberately ignored the universal "human" origins of the Platonic conception of justice in the state, their defence of (Western) modernity is also, at the same time, a betrayal of its "universal" epistemological and moral credibility.

References

- Bujo, B. 2001. *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.
- Cabral, A. 1973. *Return to the source: Selected Speeches*. Edited by African Information Service. New York: Monthly Review Press.

- Crossman, RHS. 1959. *Plato Today*. London: Unwin Books.
- Davidson, B. 1992. *The Black Man's Burden*. London: James Curry.
- Derrida, J. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ferguson, J. 2006. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gyekye, K. 2002. "Person and community in African thought". In, PH Coetzee & APJ Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Habermas, J. 1981. "Modernity versus Postmodernity". *New German Critique*, 22:3-14.
- Hegel, 1975. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levy-Bruhl, L. 1985. *How Natives Think*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Levy-Bruhl, L. 1923. *Primitive Mentality*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Lyotard, J-F. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Masolo, DA. 1994. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. London: International African Institute.
- Nyerere, JK. 1968. *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nkrumah, K. 1964. *Consciencism*. London: Heinemann.
- Owolabi, KA. 2003. "Can the past salvage the future: Indigenous democracy and the quest for sustainable democratic governance in Africa". In, J Obi Oguejiofor (ed.), *Philosophy, Democracy and Responsible Governance in Africa*. Munster: LIT.
- Ophir, A. 1991. *Plato's Invisible Cities: Discourse and Power in the "Republic"*. Savage, Maryland: Barnes & Noble.
- Ramose, MB. 2002. "Historic titles in law". In, PH Coetzee & APJ Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Plato. 1972. *Phaedo*. Trans., R Hackforth. Cambridge University Press: London.
- Plato. 1955. *The Republic*. Trans., HDP Lee. Hamondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- Plato. 1953. *Meno*. In *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans., B Jowett. Clarendon Press: Oxford.
- Plato. 1953. *Apology*. In *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. B Jowett. Clarendon Press: Oxford.
- Senghor, LS. 1995. "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century". In, Fred Lee Hord & Jonathan Scott Lee (eds.), *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Tate, JW. 1997. "Kant, Habermas, and the 'philosophical legitimization' of modernity". *Journal of European Studies*, xxvii: 281-322.
- Wiredu, K. 2002. "The moral foundations of an African culture". In, PH Coetzee & APJ Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.