
Revisiting Plato's Republic: Towards a praxis of justice

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Abstract

The Platonic idea of justice is based on the historical possibility of a flourishing political community. From this perspective, it may be argued that the fundamental principle of the right to life provides the normative basis for Plato's investigation into the question of justice. Although the popular image of Plato as a utopian and esoteric thinker still dominates much of the contemporary readings of his political thought, thus given rise to persistent allegations of a "hidden agenda" of totalitarianism, racism and political elitism, I seek to demonstrate in this essay that Plato's concern with the question of justice, when viewed from the perspective of the historical possibility a flourishing political community, lends itself to a more 'practical' (concrete) analysis, whose moral significance is still relevant today. The all too familiar images of millions of people across the global South (the so-called developing world) suffering and dying from the devastating impact of globalised poverty, as the rich and powerful nations of the West continue to dictate to "the rest" how to live, seriously undermines the human right to life within a flourishing political community.

1 Introduction

The philosophical significance of Plato's political philosophy has, more often than not, been assessed in terms of the metaphysical principles that he so creatively appropriated from the doctrines of traditional Greek (Orphic) religious thought, on the one hand, and the philosophical teachings of his great Greek predecessors (most notably, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Pythagoras), on the other. Plato's appropriation of the metaphysical elements of the pre-Socratic tradition has invariably given rise to his reputation as an abstract thinker, with a predisposition towards philosophical esotericism, often to the detriment of the more practical concerns of everyday life. Indeed, the more popular image of Plato as an abstract political thinker forms the basis of Karl Popper's (1962) influential

critique of the *Republic*, which he (Popper) has identified as a major text in the development of subsequent (modern) theories of racism and totalitarianism, given its alleged ahistorical (and philosophically elitist) account of the “laws of history”.

The popular image of Plato as an abstract thinker stems from an overemphasis that he, himself, at times places on the possible role and status of the “philosopher-king” within the context of the “ideal state”, the “utopia”, the “republic”. In this regard, Plato’s political agenda (as well as his philosophical elitism) are clearly in evidence when he writes, “[T]here will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed...of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or all 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).

It should be noted that Plato’s account and definition of justice precedes his utopian reflections on the role of the “philosopher-king”. There is a deliberate break in the text between the section that covers his argument that “justice consists in minding your business” (*Republic* 433), and the section dealing with the political and historical feasibility of the state, where he indulges in speculation on the utopian implications of his “ideal” state (*Republic* 473-521).

The tension that we find in the *Republic* between the ideal of justice, on the one hand, and its historical feasibility, on the other, stems from Plato’s own uncertainty of how to reconcile the more practical-concrete conception of justice, which relates to the basic obligations, responsibilities and capabilities that he deems necessary for any human society to flourish, on the one hand, and his audacious claim, on the other, that the state is blind without “philosophy”. The hypothetical status of his account of a just political community is often overlooked by his detractors, despite Plato’s own misgivings on the matter. As he put it:

My dear Glaucon...you won’t be able to follow me any further, not because of any unwillingness on my part, but because what you would see would no longer be an image, but truth itself, that is, as far as I can see it. I wouldn’t like to be sure that my vision is true (*Republic* 533).

For Plato, the idea of justice must be grounded in the moral foundations of a flourishing society, where the right to life of the political community as a whole provides the normative context for his investigation of the question of justice. In his reflections on the possibility of life, be it that of the individual (“written large” - in the life and tragic death of Socrates), on the one hand, or in the community (“written large” - in the public institutions of the Greek city-state), on the other, the fundamental question, for Plato, remains the possibility of justice as a political and historical process or project (“praxis”), guided by the philosophical constraints of reason- in- dialogue. It is

especially from the perspective of Plato's reaction to the political circumstances that gave rise to the death of Socrates, that one can best appreciate the more "concrete" foundation of the Platonic ideal of justice.

2 The Socratic dialogue

In his approach to politics, Socrates supported the democratic form of government. He believed that democracy offers the best possibility for the moral and intellectual autonomy of the individual. He did not, however, believe that the establishment of a democratic political order is an end in itself. For Socrates, the state is there to serve the needs of the individual. The state performs this function, in Socrates' view, by creating and securing a political environment, based on the rule of "law", in which the individual is assured of the opportunity and possibility of self-fulfilment and personal happiness. The "law" that Socrates refers to is a "moral law", and as such, it is assumed (ontologically) to precede the political institutions and "laws" of the state. The role of the philosopher, according Socrates, is to act and speak in accordance with the "moral law". Because Socrates is of the view that the "moral law" provides the foundation for the historical possibility of the just individual in society, he attributes state failure to the failure of (individual) men and women to apply the "moral law". In an imaginary conversation with the custodians of Athenian law, where Socrates has cause to reflect on the choice between his own death by execution, on the one hand, and the possibility of escaping from prison, on the other, he turns down the advice of Crito to save his own life. His decision to submit to the death sentence is based on the following "advice":

Think not of life and children first, and of justice afterwards, but of justice first, that you may so vindicate yourself before the princes of the world below. For neither will you, nor any that belong to you be happier or holier or more just in this life or happier in another, if you do as Crito bids. Now you depart, if it must be so, in innocence, a sufferer and not a doer of evil; a victim, not of the laws but of men (*Crito* 54b-c).

The belief that it better to suffer harm than to inflict it on other persons is the moral inspiration behind Socrates' conception of correct political action, which is, in fact, one of the earliest expressions of a philosophy of non-violence. Socrates' philosophy of non-violence represents a direct challenge to the popular belief that the state and its institutions are born of conventional compromise, aimed at overcoming a "pre-political condition", in which the "weak" and the "vulnerable" are believed to be in need of protection (by the state) from the destructive violence meted out with impunity by the "strong" (*Republic* 336-367).

The idea of a pre-political condition of disharmony, characterised by violent conflict, has proved to be rather influential in the formation and development of the modern (western) liberal tradition of political thought. From the liberal perspective, the justification for the authority of the modern state and its institutions derives from a “rational” desire by the majority of people to escape, what Thomas Hobbes (1930), among others, has referred to as a “state of nature”, which he describes as a condition:

{W}here every man is enemy to every man ... [and] ...wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Hobbes, 1930:253).

The Hobbesian argument is effectively articulated by Glaucon as follows:

What they say is that our natural instinct is to inflict wrong or injury, and to avoid suffering it, but that the disadvantages of suffering it exceed the advantages of inflicting it; after a taste of both, therefore, men decide that, as they can't have the ha'pence without the kicks, they had better make a compact with each other and avoid both. They accordingly proceed to make laws and mutual agreements and what the law lays down they call lawful and right. This is the origin and nature of justice (*Republic* 358-359).

Given the political circumstances of the day, Socrates' inclination to question the moral basis of the laws, inevitably brought him into conflict with the representatives of the Athenian government. As WKC Guthrie (1971) put it:

The times were desperate, and the democrats felt it their plain duty to prevent a repetition of the horrors that were so fresh in everyone's mind, the reign of terror instituted in the short period of their triumph by Critias and his oligarchic associates. Leading figures in that spell of violence...had all been intimate with Socrates in earlier days. Moreover, he was notorious for having said things which appeared incompatible with the whole democratic form of constitution as then understood. They could not feel safe until he was out of the way (Guthrie, 1971:60-61).

In spite of the constant threat to his own life, however, Socrates persisted in his quest to discover the substance of the moral law (the nature of the “good”), which he assumed would provide the foundation for the possibility of an authentic moral life for the individual in a just society. Throughout his lifetime, Socrates challenged others to provide him with a rational definition of basic virtues and values - the human sense of “right and wrong” - in the

hope of finding an answer to the question: 'How should we live?' As is well-known, Socrates approached those with a reputation for moral excellence by engaging with them in dialogue, always motivated by the same desire to discover a rational justification for their knowledge claims and expertise in the area of virtuous conduct. The debates, however, invariably broke down at the point when Socrates insisted on a definition of virtue, much to the annoyance of his interlocutors, for whom the citing of concrete examples of virtuous conduct was enough to validate their claims to knowledge, as well as justify their reputations as experts and moral leaders. It must be emphasised that Socrates conducted these dialogues, not so much out of disrespect for the reputation of the experts, but more with a view to overcoming his own "ignorance". It was the failure to discover a formal basis for the rational justification of knowledge of virtue that led to Socrates' ultimate position of philosophical "ignorance". According to Socrates, if the experts were so confident of their own ability to identify various examples of "good" behaviour, then they must surely also be able to tell him what the "good" is, and what makes "good" behaviour possible? Is the "good" merely a matter of social convention and indoctrination, or does it have a more universal moral significance? The Socratic dialogue, which was conducted from the perspective of the fundamental assumption that all virtuous conduct originates in a common source, and the purpose of philosophical inquiry is to discover the nature and status of this common source of the "good", was unable to provide answers to these important questions. When Socrates, for example, inquires into the nature of "piety" ("holiness"), his response to his interlocutors is typical of the way in which he responds to all such inquiries:

Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general form which makes all pious things to be pious....Tell me what is the nature of this form, and then I shall have a standard to which I may look, and by which I may measure actions, whether yours or those of anyone else, and then I shall be able to say that such and such an action is pious, such another impious (*Euthyphro* 6d-e).

The knowledge that Socrates sought, however, and which he sincerely believed was in the possession of others, eluded him throughout his lifetime. His dialogues often turned friends into enemies. This did not, however, lead him to despair, but motivated him instead to find a rational explanation for the profound sense of ignorance that so often overwhelmed him. Socrates states:

This inquisition has led to my having many enemies of the worst and the most dangerous kind, and has given rise also to many imputations, including the name of 'wise'; for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others But the truth is...that God

only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; although speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He...is wisest, who like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing (*Apology* 23a-b).

The politically destabilising effect of the Socratic dialogue finally led to Socrates' arrest on trumped-up charges of worshipping false gods, and of corrupting the youth. When the death sentence was passed, Socrates waived his legal right to propose a lighter sentence, just like he later waived his right to leave the city and thus save his own life by seeking refuge abroad. In this regard, Socrates offered the most concrete demonstration of his personal belief that the laws of the state originate in a divine source that transcends the authority of "man"; the true politician, according to Socrates, must be guided by this divine sense and source of political authority. Socrates' refusal to seek refuge in another country underlines his acceptance of the sanctuary of the *polis* as the only authentic and appropriate public sphere for the human being (to be human) in his or her capacity as a citizen. It is from this perspective that Aristotle was later to declare, "A man who cannot live in society, or who has no need to do so because he is self-sufficient, is either a beast or a god; he is no part of a state" (*Politics* 1253a).

Given the profound moral impulse at the heart of Socrates' philosophy, his critique of the political-philosophical thought of the day posed a direct challenge to the popular Sophist doctrine that morality is, in the final analysis, a function of rhetorical power for the self-advancement of the individual. In order for Socrates to succeed in persuading his opponents of the moral bankruptcy of a philosophy inspired by the rhetorical will-to-power, however, he would have had to provide a meaningful alternative; something he was unable to do. The failure of the Socratic dialogue to establish a rational foundation for the understanding of morality, with a view to transforming and adjusting the values of traditional Greek society to the demands and conditions of contemporary Greek political life, ultimately meant that the realm of the political was inevitably bound to degenerate into a playground for the "strong". The victory of democracy rang hollow for Socrates for as long its institutionalisation excluded the real possibility of justice in the state. The belief that the most personal (and subjective) of human experiences have their origins in an objective (universally) shared frame of reference, set Socrates apart from his contemporaries. More importantly, for Socrates, the ability to live (meaningfully) with others is a moral prerequisite for being able to live (meaningfully) with oneself.

Socrates' "moral philosophy" is grounded in an assumption of universalism, in terms of which the philosopher is urged to inquire into the ontological status of the moral possibility of being-human-in-the-world. According to Socrates, it is knowledge of the "moral foundations" of human

life, in the context of a political community inspired by the ideal of justice, that ought to direct the human being towards the goal of self-fulfilment and the pursuit of happiness. It is from this perspective that Plato appreciated the significance of his mentor's famous claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology* 38a).

3 The whirlpool of public life

When one turns from the philosophy of Socrates to that of Plato, one is immediately struck by the intensity of the latter's faith in a transcendent realm, as opposed to the simple patriotic faith of Socrates, whose thought was confined to an examination of Greek virtues in Athens. In Plato's system, we discover a gradual but definite development from the concrete ethics of Socrates to a transcendent approach which progressively becomes more universal in scope as Plato began to realise that the challenge that Athens faced at the time, namely that of establishing the moral foundations for a political community, guided by a universally shared sense of justice, was a challenge that had invariably confronted just about every political community in history.

Plato's concern with the universal was not, however, an attempt to escape the political realities of the day (on the wings of metaphysics). The "practical" element at the heart of his metaphysical speculation is clearly demonstrated in the allegory of cave (*Republic* 511-521), where he describes the educational journey of the philosopher from a state of ignorance to an "ecstatic" revelation of "Truth", based on the knowledge that the Good as the moral foundation (and precondition of the possibility) of being-human-in-the-world, must of necessity guide the political leader in his or her search for a just and humane society. When the philosophers in the allegory are finally exposed to a vision of the Good (the sun), they immediately assume that their life in the cave is finally over. Plato, however, urges his philosophers to return to the cave in order to communicate their vision of the Good to their former fellow cave-dwellers.

In the allegory, the cave represents the realm of the political, while the "space" beyond the cave's entrance represents the transcendent realm of human spiritual hope, born of the metaphysical desire to transcend the limits and limitations of human reason (human uncertainty). Plato's allegory suggests that the human incapacity to transcend the limits of human reason, in the search for the ultimate meaning of life, will invariably result in human suffering unless the metaphysical elements associated with the human desire for transcendence are mediated within the political community. According to Plato, the metaphysics of the human desire for transcendence, traditionally mediated in the language of religion must now be mediated in the language

of philosophy. The death of the “gods” does not, therefore, mean the end of metaphysics as the appropriate medium for the expression of the human desire for transcendence. What is required, in Plato’s view, is the transformation of the metaphysical legacy of traditional religion into a philosophical language that is adequate to the political and historical needs of a post-religious (but not necessarily secular) society. It is from this perspective that Plato’s theory of justice may be seen as something more than an excuse for a totalitarian state, occupied exclusively with the satisfaction of basic human needs within the economic sphere of production, for the sake of preserving the privileged status of the “philosopher-king”. In the final analysis, justice for Plato presupposes the real possibility of being-human-in-the-world. Plato’s approach to the question of justice may therefore be summed up as follows: Philosophy without politics is empty; politics without philosophy is blind.

As is well known, Plato was brought up in a political environment of war and revolution. As a child of an aristocratic family (whose lineage went back to Solon), he was expected to embark on a political career in Athens, and during his early youth he never doubted his own ability to live up to the expectations that his family and friends had of him as a future political leader. From his family circle he developed a strong prejudice against the democratic form of government, in view of the violence and corruption that had characterised the political approach of the democratic government of the day. In some respects, quite naively, he rested his hopes for the salvation of Athens on an aristocratic form of government which, he believed would restore political stability. He soon realised, however, that self-centred political ambition as well as moral corruption, had become the order of the day.

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato offers his reader an interesting insight into his observations and assessment of the political situation in Athens at the time. More significantly, he records his personal reaction to the execution of Socrates who, in the *Phaedo*, Plato describes as, “the finest man...of all of whom we came to know in his generation, the wisest too, and the most righteous” (118). For Plato, the death of Socrates represented the seemingly insurmountable alienation and mutual antagonism between the political and philosophical spirit, and hence the moral corruption of political life. In the *Seventh Letter*, we read:

Once upon a time in my youth, I cherished like many another, the hope of entering upon a political career as soon as I came of age. It fell out, moreover, that political events took the following course. There were many who heaped abuse on the form of government then prevailing, and a revolution occurred. In this revolution, fifty-one men set themselves up as a government...Some of them happened to be relatives and acquaintances of mine, who accordingly invited me forthwith to join them, assuming my

fitness for the task. No wonder that, young as I was, I cherished the belief that they would lead the city from an unjust life, as it were, to habits of justice and 'manage it'; as they put it, so that I was intensely interested to see what would come of it (324b-d).

Plato's initial optimism, however, soon turned into disillusionment in the face of the blatant corruption of the new government, especially demonstrated in their attempts to compromise the moral and political integrity of Socrates, by forcing the latter to participate in the arrest of a fellow-citizen who was in exile at the time. Socrates refused to obey the orders of government, at great risk to his own life. Soon afterwards, the government was overthrown, and Plato once again contemplated an active role in public life. But this was not to be:

Once more... I was moved by the desire to take part in public life and politics...in those days, too, full of disturbances as they were, there were many things occurring to cause offence, nor is it surprising in time of revolution men in some cases take undue revenge on their enemies. Yet, for all that, the restored exiles displayed great moderation. As it chanced, however, some of those in control brought against this associate of mine, Socrates...a most sacrilegious charge, which he least of all men deserved. They put him on trial for impiety and the people condemned and put to death the man who refused to take part in the wicked arrest of one of their friends, whose exile had coincided with their own exile and misfortune (*Seventh Letter* 325b-c).

The lack of moral and political integrity demonstrated by the government of the day, made it extremely difficult to create the conditions necessary for producing the kind of stability that Plato craved. The political uncertainty was of such a profound nature that its overcoming required a political process of radical reform. It is from this perspective that Plato advocated his proposal of the "philosopher-king" as a key element in the possible transformation of Greek society as a whole. It is in response to the obvious failure of the democratic state to produce a society governed by "law", in the Socratic sense, and thus reducing "civilised" society to a "state a nature" in the Hobbesian sense, that Plato finally relinquished his political ambitions:

Now as I considered these matters, as well as the sort of men who were active in politics, and the laws and the customs, the more I examined them and the more I advanced in years, the harder it appeared to me to administer the government correctly. For one thing, nothing could be done without friends and loyal companions, and such men were not easy to find ready at hand, since our city was no longer administered according the standards and practices of our fathers. Neither could such men be created afresh with any facility. Furthermore, the written laws and customs were being corrupted at an alarming rate, The result was that I, who had been full of eagerness for a public career, as I gazed upon the whirlpool of

public life, and saw the incessant movement of shifting currents, at last felt dizzy, and while I did not cease to consider means of improving this particular situation and indeed of reforming the whole constitution, yet, in regard to action, I kept waiting for favourable moments, and finally saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad (325c-326b).

For Plato, the political is destined to remain a realm of uncertainty; and “philosophy” must therefore provide the “public space” for the pursuit of a “new” system of politics. But, in addition to that, “philosophy” also serves as a constant reminder of our failure (morally and politically) to discover “how to live” as human beings in the realm of the political. As a result, humankind is constantly exposed to the possibility of becoming either man or beast in the realm of the political. As a deferral of the political, “philosophy” lives on in the faith that its time has not yet come.

4 Towards a praxis of justice

According to Plato, the political community (the *polis*) provides the inescapable context for the translation of the universal (moral potential) for doing what is right into a political imperative of justice that provides the normative framework for the possibility of being-human-in-the-world. Plato’s consideration of the challenge of justice-in-the state proceeds with a generalisation of certain basic human needs into an economic programme that that will serve the interests of the community as a whole. Plato writes:

Let us suppose we are rather short-sighted men and we are set to read a distant notice in small letters; we then discover that the same notice is up elsewhere on a larger scale and in larger lettering: won’t it be a godsend to be able to read the larger notice first and then compare it with the smaller to see if they are the same?...Justice can be a characteristic of an individual or a community (*Republic* 368)

Given the above, Plato brings the individual into the larger context of the public domain, where the general interests of the community inform the private sphere of individual existence, with a view to emphasizing the relations of mutuality and reciprocity within the *polis*. Plato thus rejects the view that justice in the state originates as a result of a general fear of being harmed or disadvantaged by others, since for him the society and state originate “because the individual is not self-sufficient, but has many needs which he can’t supply himself” (*Republic* 369).

According to Plato, it is the “bread and butter” issues of survival-economics that provide the rationale for the establishment of human society. This “simple” observation, so often overlooked in various authoritative accounts of Plato’s political philosophy, provides the concrete basis for his

consideration of the question of justice. In this regard, Harold Laski, drawing heavily upon Plato's theory of basic human needs as the point of departure for the development of political morality, writes:

Hunger, drink, sex and the need for shelter and clothing seem the irreducible minimum of human wants. All else is capable of transmutation into forms as various as the history of society. All that we know with certainty is that the wants are there. Some, as hunger, we cannot deny in general measure if the society is live to; others we can meet with responses so complex as almost to conceal the true desire beneath. But what, above all, is urgent is that we should realize that our institutions are the response to the totality of these impulses. They are inexplicable save in terms of their formidable complexity (Laski, 1973:23).

It should be noted that Plato's assessment of the "irreducible minimum of human wants" is geared towards an economic infrastructure in which the individual is required to contribute towards the common good. From this perspective, the principle of specialised labour and professional training constitute the *modus operandi* of a flourishing political community. It is the principle of specialised labour (practiced in accordance with the community's right to life) that can best contribute to the general wellbeing of society as a whole, beyond the divisive (individual and social) structures of selfish greed; and as such it also provides the moral basis for justice in society. As he puts:

[O]ur purpose in founding our state was not to promote the happiness of a single class, but, as far as possible, of the whole community...We are therefore... trying to construct what we think is a happy community by securing the happiness not of a select minority, but of the whole (*Republic* 420).

The challenge for Plato is to prove that justice is a principle worthy of human pursuit for its own sake. His response to this challenge is to argue that justice (in the form of specialised labour) is ultimately an expression of personal and social harmony, and hence may be seen as a counterargument to the Sophist creed of individualism, where the "will-to-power" forms the basis for the individual's "respect" and "self-worth" in the community. In keeping with the political imperative of social harmony, Plato finally asserts:

I believe that justice is the principle we laid down at the beginning and have consistently followed in founding our state...We laid it down, if you remember, and have often repeated, that in our state one man was to do one job, the job he was naturally suited for...justice consists in minding your own business and not interfering with other people (*Republic* 433).

The justice that Plato therefore has in mind is a function of "doing" or "performing" something well, at the most basic and concrete levels of

human society. Justice is not an abstract idea laid up in technical and legal jargon of a constitution; it is rather presupposed and “reinvented” every time we are faced with the challenge of overcoming hunger and developing a sense of personal belonging and human solidarity in the context of political life. As far as Plato is concerned, however, the realm of the political is characterised at the best of times by uncertainty, and at the worst of times by chaos, suffering and death. Plato’s answer to the challenge of political life is a political utopia in the light of which he seeks to reinvent the past for the sake of an uncertain future. In this regard, the views of Michael Ignatieff (1984) are certainly worth considering:

Political utopias are a form of nostalgia for an imagined past projected on to the future as a wish.... It is the vision of the classical *polis* - the city-state of ancient Greece...which beckons me backwards, as it were, into the future. No matter that Greek democracy was built upon the institution of slavery...Utopias never have to make their excuses to history; like all dreams they have a timeless immunity to disappointment in real life. The *polis* would continue to beckon us forward out of the past even if no actual *polis* had ever existed (Ignatieff, 1984:107).

The reason the *polis*-as-utopia continues to beckon us is that it offers a vision of justice that allows, not only for the possibility of being-human-in-the-world; it also creates the conditions for the development of a human sense of belonging in the world.

5 Concluding remarks

From our contemporary perspective, Plato’s idea of justice represents a strong challenge to the rich and powerful nations of the current world order to face up to the fact that the tragic suffering and death of millions of people, caused by the globalisation of poverty, is a structural consequence of (western) modernity’s projects of slavery, colonialism and global economic neo-liberalism. It is a sad testimony to the uncharitable spirit of our times that, in a world characterised by economic interdependence (which, in effect means - or should mean - that we can all now eat from the same table) the more popular explanations of economic inequality are constantly based on assumptions of cultural inferiority and intellectual backwardness of the so-called “developing world”.

The historical amnesia regarding the active role that West has played (and continues to play) in the globalisation of poverty (economic, cultural and spiritual) makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to speak of justice. Indeed from the contemporary perspective, the just and humane society is, at best, an expression of a metaphysics of desire for transcendence beyond a less-than-human-life of grinding poverty The

contemporary trend to account for the global scourge of poverty in culturalist terms that relativise and restrict human suffering to ahistorical and essentialist categories of “us” and “them” can, at best, only serve as an excuse for perpetuating the morally repugnant colonialist and racist legacy of the “white man’s burden” of “civilising” the non-western world in order that that it may “catch up” with the West.

Before the West embarked on programmes of economic development across the so-called developing world, it ought (perhaps) to have heeded the moral significance of the Socratic dialogue, in which the rationality governing the process of human discourse is not the privilege of “the few”. From this perspective, the legacy of the Socratic dialogue may be usefully appropriated for the formation of a “global” public sphere of intercultural dialogue where the question of justice may once again be addressed as a challenge of universal moral significance.

The credentials of the western philosophical tradition will always be tarnished for as long as it remains indifferent to the political circumstances that gave rise to the “political” death of its favourite son. Socrates. The credibility of western modernity (construed as a project of rationality) will continue to be questioned for as long as the western world refuses to acknowledge what Enrique Dussel (1996) has aptly referred to as the “underside of modernity”, which, in short, presents the perspective of those who have fallen victim to the globalisation of poverty across the world in the wake of colonial conquest and current neo-colonial projects of world economic domination, based on assumptions of western cultural superiority and universalism. From the perspective of the “underside of modernity”, the Platonic ideal of justice (that seeks its realisation beyond the disabling and incapacitating environment of world poverty) still resides in the realm of the transcendent when we are confronted with statistical information such as the following:

We all know that hundreds of millions of people worldwide are chronically malnourished and barely surviving. According to a recent estimate, the number of people who live below the World Bank’s \$2/day poverty line is about 2,800 million or 46 percent of humankind, and annually... 18 million people die prematurely from poverty-related causes (Shei, 2005:139).

In spite of their ostensible value, however, the more popular reports on contemporary economic inequality and imbalances tend to ignore the gendered consequences of neoliberal economic globalisation, insofar as they fail to convey forcefully enough that the vast majority of poor people in the world are women. In the non-Western world, where women in rural communities have for centuries been mainly responsible for providing sustenance in the form of traditional (small scale) subsistence agriculture

and industry, the effects of economic globalisation have been quite devastating, especially when one realises that 70% of the world's farmers are, in fact, women (Jaggar, 2005:47). The destructive undermining of viable traditional-indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in the face of neoliberal globalisation has meant, among other things, that women as the primary caregivers in the traditional non-Western community have been cast adrift, not able to negotiate their roles and status within the "modern" world. Allison M Jaggar (2005) does well to remind us of the gendered consequences of neoliberal economic globalisation when she writes:

The decline of small-scale and subsistence agriculture has driven many women off the land and into the shanty towns that encircle most major Third World cities. Here the women struggle to survive in the informal economy, which is characterised by low wages or incomes, uncertain employment and poor working conditions. Many become street vendors or domestic servants. Those who remain landless in the countryside are often forced to work as seasonal, casual and temporary labourers at lower wages than their male counterparts. Many women are driven into prostitution, accelerating the AIDS epidemic, which ravages the poorest women in the poorest countries (Jaggar, 2005:48).

For Plato, the possibility of justice presupposes the real possibility and willingness to acknowledge the humanity of others as a precondition for the articulation of one's own sense of being-human-in-the-world. In this article, I have sought to demonstrate that the popular image of Plato as an abstract political thinker is somewhat misguided because it fails, in my view, to take into account that for Plato, the possibility of life is a very practical (historical) challenge, without which the moral question of justice simply cannot be raised with any degree of credibility.

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