
PLATO, HUMANITY AND GLOBALISATION

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Introduction

Two books feature prominently in this article. The first is Karl Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* written about 56 years ago during World War II. The second is Plato's *Republic* written about 2,380 years ago, and just after the Peloponnesian War. Popper (1984:86) summarises the principle elements of Plato's *Republic* and concludes: "this programme can, I think, be fairly described as totalitarian" (Popper 1984: 86,87). As Popper was writing during World War II (Popper 1984: viii), his frame of reference for a totalitarian state would in all likelihood have been the fascist state.

This view gains credence when Popper records that C.E.M. Joad (1938:660,661) in his *Guide to the Philosophy of Morals and Politics* discusses the similarities between Plato's programme for an ideal city-state and the core elements of fascism, but Joad also contends that fundamental differences exist between them (Popper 1984:87). Popper, however, is not persuaded by any argument suggesting that fundamental differences exist between Plato's concept and fascism. Popper (1984:87) confirms that in his view, Plato's programme is fundamentally identical with totalitarianism. Now totalitarianism and fascism, while not being identical, share certain characteristics. In the 1920's fascism became the doctrine of the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (1883-1945).

The name "fascism" derives from *fascio*, meaning a group or bundle. In the shape of a bundle of rods tied together with a battle-axe in the centre, the symbol is indicative of strength in unity, as contrasted with the weakness of each separate piece. In ancient Rome, the symbol was used to represent the authority of the *lictors*, Roman officials who attended magistrates (Wasserman 1945:178). Dictatorial authority and the right of an elite to rule were vested in the fascist state, consequently the fascist state was resolutely opposed to both the individualism of liberal democracy and the classlessness of socialism.

It is in the dictatorial authority of the state that fascism and totalitarianism merge, for totalitarianism is defined as being descriptive of a dictatorial one-party state that regulates every realm of life. Totalitarianism, therefore, describes a state, which could be economically flourishing or floundering. If floundering, totalitarianism could describe the "tin pot" dictatorship, which is morally corrupt and economically and intellectually bankrupt. Fascism, as Wasserman (1945:180) discloses, assumes a grander mantle. It draws heavily upon the writings of Hegel for its attack on liberalism and the exaltation of the national state.

The "mystical and irrational temper which so thoroughly pervades its (fascism's) character" (Wasserman 1945:180) is directly traceable to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson (Wasserman 1945:180). These 19th century philosophers opposed liberalism's dependence on reason and logic, by asserting the relevance of intuitive aspirations, heroic instincts, irrational forces, an irresistible will and an inescapable sense of mission (Wasserman 1945:180).

Thus fascism had an idealistic and spiritual base. When we turn to Popper and Plato we find that Popper roundly condemns Plato's proposed ideal city-state, his yardstick being totalitarianism tinged with the fascism of the 1930's and 1940's.

This article is divided into three sections. The first is headed Plato and in this section I will argue that context, that is, the conditions and circumstances that are relevant at a particular place at a particular time, is all important when making comparisons, as Popper continually does, between Plato's proposed polis 2380 years ago and liberal democracy in the first half of the 20th century. The second section is headed Humanity. In this section I will attempt to highlight the connection between Plato and Humanity. The third section is headed Globalisation and in this section I cement the connection between Plato, Humanity and Globalisation and discuss Plato's relevance in the contemporary world. I begin, then, under the heading Plato, by attempting to show that context is paramount when comparing societal systems of 2,000 years ago with those of the 20th century.

Plato

The following is an extract from Plato's Seventh Letter:

... the more closely I studied the politicians and the laws and the customs of the day, and the older I grew, the more difficult it

seemed to me to govern rightly. Nothing could be done without trustworthy friends and supporters; and these were not easy to come by in an age which had abandoned its traditional moral code but found it impossibly difficult to create a new one.

At the same time law and morality were deteriorating at an alarming rate ... (and) though I had been full of eagerness for a political career, the sight of all this chaos made me giddy ... I came to the conclusion that all existing states were badly governed ... (and that) the only hope of finding justice for society and for the individual lay in true philosophy and that mankind will have no respite from trouble until either real philosophers gain political power or politicians become by some miracle true philosophers (Lee 1965: 13-14).

Plato is saying, in essence, that as all Greek city-states were badly governed, a just society would remain elusive until philosophers were involved. To remedy this situation the Academy, Plato's school for a new type of politician, the philosopher-ruler, was founded in about 386 BC. The *Republic* was written as a statement of the aims the Academy set itself to achieve, in about 380 BC, when, if Plato's birth date 427 BC is correct, he would have been 47 years of age (Lee 1965:15,16). To help place Plato's Academy in chronological perspective, here are some important events in the 175 years from 561 - 386 BC:

561 BC Peisistratus, aristocrat and reformer, liberated land laws and beautified Athens.

507 BC Cleisthenes, aristocrat and reformer, remodelled the constitution; all adult males can now speak on public affairs.

480 BC the Persians destroy the Athenian acropolis.

480 - 431 BC the Athenian Golden Age (the rebuilding of the Athenian acropolis; democracy, limited franchise). 460 BC aristocratic reformer Pericles leads Athenians.

431- 404 BC the Peloponnesian War, in which Athens and Sparta fought for the supremacy of Greece.

Sparta won this 27 year long encounter during which Plato (427-347 BQ, who was of aristocratic birth, is believed to have served in three campaigns (Lee 1965:14).

404 BC the end of the Peloponnesian War saw the decline of the polis as a fulfilling entity in the lives of its members (Kitto 1979:152).

386 BC Plato establishes, near the grove of the hero Academus, what came to be know as the Academy and which could be called the first university. There a small, wealthy group of students united in a museum (a friendly society dedicating itself to the Muses, the patrons of letters and music) would take part in common studies, religious exercises and meals. The practical purpose of the society

was the restoration of decent government to the Greek city-states. Some, like Aristotle, would stay there for 20 years, others for the rest of their lives (Robinson 1983:220).

Popper makes much of denouncing Plato's aristocratic heritage, even suggesting that *The Republic* is Plato's own claim to kingly power (Popper 1984:153). Yet Popper says little about how the high culture of Athens, enjoyed in the Athenian Golden Age, was made possible by the reforms of the aristocrats, Peisistratus, Cleisthenes and Pericles. A high culture, as Kitto (1979:108) observes, originates with an aristocratic class. This is so as only the aristocratic class has the time, the energy and the qualities necessary to create a high culture. Further, Kitto notes that the Periclean Age (460-431 BC) was steeped in Homer, who taught that quality comes before quantity, noble struggle comes before mere achievement and honour comes before opulence (Kitto 1979:117). Although there is much to admire in the high culture presided over by the aristocratic Pericles, the democracy of this period was a strictly limited one. Only adult male citizens had the vote. Women and slaves had no vote. Bowra (1966:94) writes that in 430 BC (that is, a year before the Peloponnesian War) the population of Attica (Athens included) was estimated to be 315,000.

Of this total 115,000 were slaves. That is, over a third (36.5%), of the population were slaves. Thus the democracy of the Athenian Golden Age of Pericles, which was "utterly exclusive" (Levi 1994:113), bears little resemblance to Popper's 20th century liberal democracy, which was utterly inclusive. The difference is compounded when Popper compares democracy of the 1930's and 1940's, which he consistently does, with Plato's ideal *polis*.

For democracy as Popper understood it, consisted of voting rights for men and women over 18 years, and of course, no hint of slavery. Popper (1984:43) attempts to make light of the slavery that existed in Periclean Athens, but others tell a different story. Levi (1994:113) says that neither war nor piracy nor slave raiding could have maintained the systematic slave states of the 5th century Greek world without organised trading and organised markets. The greatest concentration of slaves, 20,000 to 30,000 (nearly the equivalent of the free population of Athens), was at the silver mines at Mount Laurium (at the southern tip of Attica), where the conditions were "nasty" (Levi 1994:113). Bowra (1966:94) does not hesitate to name three reasons why democracy worked in Periclean Athens: the population was small so every male citizen could make

his voice heard; male citizens were civil minded; and slavery afforded the male citizen the time to participate in public affairs. Thus what I have, very briefly, attempted to show is that the circumstances and conditions then pertaining, that is, the context in which the Athenian *polis* functioned in the 5th century BC, was entirely different from democracy of the 1930's and 1940's.

Consequently, attempting to compare or find likeness between one and the other because they are democracies, as Popper attempted to do, is like attempting to compare apples and oranges because they are fruits, or elephants and hyenas because they are animals, or vultures and sparrows because they are birds.

Humanity

Humanity belongs to a family of words clustered around the word human. Human means relating to man or mankind, relating to the human race, having the attributes of man, kind and considerate, and a human being or person. A variant of human is humane which means kindness, mercy, and sympathy. Humanitarianism is the doctrine that a man's duty is to strive to promote the welfare of mankind. And humanity means the human race, the quality of being human, and kindness and mercy. If we attempt to draw the main inference from these definitions it would be that to be human, to be humane, to be humanitarian, and to have or show humanity, is to promote the welfare of, and to show kindness and mercy to, all human beings. As human beings are not born good, or well mannered, or kind and merciful, there is a code of behaviour in all societies to which its members should aspire. A part of this universal moral code is to show kindness and mercy to other human beings. Thus embodied in human, humane, humanitarian and humanity, is this universal moral principle of kindness and mercy to others, which by its presence, makes explicit the oneness of all human beings and the necessity for a code of conduct for all human beings.

When we now return to Popper's attack on Plato's ideal *polis* and on Plato himself, the question that requires answering is: does Plato through his writings demonstrate that he is humane, that he possesses humanity? The answer, if in the affirmative, should illuminate the link between the "Plato" and the "Humanity" in the title of this article.

As noted previously Popper (1984:153) claims that the philosopher-king of the Republic is a position that Plato has

reserved for himself. In mock sadness Popper tells us that Plato could not occupy this position because he elected instead to teach potential philosopher-kings. Popper then mounts another attack:

What a monument of human smallness is the idea of the philosopher-king ... what a decline from this (Socrates') world of irony and reason and truthfulness down to Plato's kingdom of the sage whose magical powers raise him high above ordinary men; although not quite high enough to forgo the use of lies or to neglect the sorry trade of every shaman - the selling of spells, of breeding spells, in exchange for power over his fellow-men (Popper 1984:156).

This is a sample of the venom that Popper injects into page after page of his vendetta against Plato. Despite Popper's laudatory phrases like: "My opinion that he (Plato) was the greatest of all philosophers has not changed" (Popper 1984:343), he remains intensely hostile to Plato. For example, following his statement that he thinks Plato was the greatest of all philosophers, Popper says Plato's moral and political philosophy is an intellectual achievement without parallel.

Then he immediately qualifies this by saying "though I find it morally repulsive and indeed horrifying (Popper 1984:343). Popper praises only to rebuke. To give another instance of Popper's pattern of praise and rebuke, Popper (1984:170,171) says that his attempt to understand Plato by analogy with modern totalitarianism led him to modify his view of totalitarianism. For he saw that both old and modern totalitarianism attempted to answer a very real need. In Plato's case that need was the happiness of the citizens of the polis. Popper says he is prepared to grant Plato's fundamental benevolence. Here again praise is followed by rebuke. For Popper cites as the reason for Plato wanting the happiness for the citizens of the polis was because he (Plato) found that his contemporaries (aristocrats implied) were suffering under the severe strain of the social revolution which had begun with the rise of democracy and individualism.

A further instance of Popper's praise and rebuke style, begins with his belief that there was a titanic struggle going on in Plato's mind between the merits of democracy and those of oligarchy. Plato's strongest argument was, I believe, sincere: according to the humanitarian creed, he argued, we should be able to help our neighbours" (Popper 1984:198). Popper's happy thought quickly turns to derision. The reason for Plato's humanitarianism, Popper

declares, is to arrest the breakdown of the closed society. For Popper the closed society is a fatal mistake as it hinders the advance of the open society, that is, democracy and individualism.

It is at this juncture that I wish to note that Popper (1984:171) states that, as he does not claim scientific status for his reading of the historical material, his interpretation should be regarded, he says, as a point of view. Popper thus invites an alternative viewpoint. And this could be that due to his passion for promoting democracy, Popper may have seriously misinterpreted Plato's motives in attempting to preserve the polis.

It appears that Popper did not sufficiently consider that the Golden Age of Athens, including its limited democracy, was supported by a long-standing and solid aristocratic foundation. Kitto (1979:124) says of the Golden Age of Athens, that a people of fine quality were living in conditions which accustomed them to high spiritual, mental and physical endeavour. He also says that the spirit of the Periclean Age was exemplified by the values of Homer (Kitto 1979:117). Clearly this people of high spiritual, mental and physical endeavour did not suddenly appear nor did the Homeric values by which they lived.

It was the Mycenaean aristocratic warrior-heroes, the sole focus of Homer, who prompted aristocrat and ordinary citizen alike to strive for physical and mental areté, "excellence". Kitto (1979:5 5) relates that for a thousand years the Greeks turned to Homer for the education of their children and the instruction of adults. For Homer's works were not just historical sagas, on the contrary they "*possessed all those qualities which made Greek civilisation what it was*" (Kitto 1979:55).

These are stirring words. Kitto (1979:55) is saying that Greek civilisation was founded by, and flourished because of, a particular type of society. And that society was an aristocracy. An aristocracy being government by those of noble birth. Now Popper would be severely disturbed by these observations and Plato would be greatly stimulated by them. Popper would desire that all privilege in the polis be eradicated in favour of individualism and democracy. Plato would desire that the polis be reconstituted with all authority vested in the philosopher-ruler, who would come from the aristocratic class. To return now to the question posed near the beginning of this section: does Plato through his writings demonstrate that he is humane, that he possesses humanity?

Already Popper (1984:171) has indicated that he does not doubt Plato when he says that through his ideal *polis* he wishes to win back happiness for its citizens. Popper (1984:198) also attests to Plato's sincerity in upholding assistance to neighbours. Yet Popper's sincerity is suspect, due to his pattern of praise and rebuke, which leaves an impression of insincerity. So we should turn to other sources for more constructive opinion. Flew says that there are over two dozen dialogues that can be confidently attributed to Plato. What are they about? Most of the early dialogues are about *excellence of character (areté) and its development* (Flew 1984:268,269).

Robinson (1983:221) describes Plato's *Ones Themselves (Forms) as seen through the Eye of the Mind (Intellect)*. He says because there are many beautiful things, there must be One beauty that is purely, unchangingly beautiful.

With this thought we arrive at the conclusion that there is a second world (other than the world of visible things), of forms of beauty, courage, virtue etc. each perfect and eternal (Robinson 1983:221). Lee (1986:7) writes that Plato's *Timaeus* is of great importance as it is the *first Greek account of a divine creation*. Guthrie (1986:7) says that Plato's *Protagoras* is universally acknowledged to be a *dramatic masterpiece*. Tredennick (1986:11) tells us that Plato "is the author of some of the *most beautiful love-poems in the Greek anthology*". Lee (1986:25) writing on translating Plato from Greek to English says his objective has been to discover Plato's meaning and then express it in the sort of English actually in use. In doing this something is lost, but even in plain language something of *the grandeur of Plato's thought may be apparent*.

When account is taken of these comments about Plato and his works, we are forced to ask, was Popper writing about the same man? For these comments contradict the very essence of Popper's argument; that Plato politically, was an inveterate villain. If this was so, and if totalitarianism (a dictatorial government that regulates every realm of life) was so strange and repugnant to the small and consultative community of the Athenian *polis*, why was Plato not banished from Athens, or given hemlock to drink and his Academy closed down? The answer must be that the neither the government nor the citizens of Athens saw anything villainous, strange or repugnant in the Academy or *The Republic*.

Plato taught at the Academy from its inception in 386 BC for the following 39 years, thus giving the authorities, the citizens or both, ample time to take action against him. Thus there is something very suspect about a vendetta against a man who lived some 2,340 years ago, when in the small and tight-knit community in which the man actually lived, there was no hint of anything of this nature whatsoever. So suspect in fact that Popper's attack must be set aside permitting Plato and his works to shine, as before, untarnished and brilliantly. We can confirm, then, by virtue of the constructive comment already given, that Plato was most certainly humane and did possess the quality we know as humanity. Accordingly the link between the first two words of the title of this article, "Plato" and "Humanity" has been made.

Globalisation

In this section I will attempt to cement the connection between Plato Humanity and Globalisation and to show Plato's relevance in the contemporary world. Globalisation can be described as the forging of bonds within the global community brought about by many factors including vastly improved travel and communication, computerisation, the fall of communism and the rise of capitalism. Globalisation however has its own set of particular problems, not the least of these being the continuing escalation of human numbers predicted to rise to about 12 billion in the next twenty-five to thirty years. Already the biosphere, which supports all life on Earth, is under threat from the vast human horde.

As the threat of nuclear war is ever present, so too is the threat of human numbers destroying the Earth's life support system. Nuclear war we may avoid but catastrophe awaits the human race and all of the Earth's life forms unless a concerted global effort to dramatically reduce the ever-increasing flow of human beings is activated without delay. Today six billion human beings are making ever-increasing demands on the finite resources of the Earth's natural environment. In the years ahead, if as predicted, the human population explosion continues then many if not all of the Earth's life forms are under serious threat of extinction.

Having briefly discussed aspects of Plato Humanity and Globalisation, I will now attempt to make apparent the connection between them. Plato, following Socrates, was absorbed with man, the problems presented by the human condition and the value system or virtues necessary to contain them. Plato and humanity are

thus inextricably linked. Despite the enormity of today's human population and its dire consequences for all of the Earth's life forms, Plato's dilemma, the difficulty of governing rightly, still persists in the computer age of globalisation.

No system of nation-state government has yet been devised which prevents poverty and delivers the equitable distribution of goods and services. Consequently Plato's condemnation of morality, law and governance then pertaining in Athens is as pertinent in today's global village as it was some 2,380 years ago. Thus it can now be said that Plato, Humanity and Globalisation are firmly joined.

In the preface to the first edition of *The Open Society and its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* written in 1943, Popper (1 984Mi) says that if our civilisation is to survive we should break with the habit of deference to great men, as great men may make great mistakes. By our civilisation Popper meant Western civilisation. In 1943 Popper did not know, nor did anyone else known then, that not only the survival of Western civilisation would soon be at risk but the entire human, plant and animal life on the planet Earth. The following 56 years gave rise to things formerly undreamed of and the survival synopsis changed radically. Popper's notion that we should break with the habit of deference to great men, although favoured by some of journalistic bent can be seen in the greater contemporary scheme of things as of passing significance.

With further reference to Plato's relevance in the contemporary world, Popper's *Open Society and its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* was first published in London in 1945. The constructive comments given in this article in support of Plato were from the translators of Plato's works. All were therefore Greek scholars and all had their books published in England well after 1945 giving them ample time to absorb Popper's critique. As far as I can ascertain all ignored Popper's book except H.D.P. Lee whose translation of and introduction to *The Republic* was first published in England in 1955. Lee writes that Dr Popper seems to find in Plato "the prototype of almost all political wrong-headedness: a totalitarian opposed to all liberal or humanitarian ideas" (Lee 1965:45).

Then, a little later on, Lee has this to say to those who "seek to ride their own political hobby-horses too hard" (Lee 1965:46):

If we disagree with him (Plato), we should start by trying to understand his criticisms and the problems he was trying to

solve ... (for) he does stand for a set of problems which are real, and to which every society must find its answer (Lee 1965:47).

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