THE SENSIBLE AND THE REASONABLE: PLATO AND RAWLS

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Key concepts

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ABSTRACT

The problem of the relationship between the individual and the collective with respect to freedom and within the framework of democracy has been the central subject and issue of some of the liveliest theoretical debates in the last couple of decades. It mostly took the shape of the debate about and around the individualistic, liberal political theory (or theory of freedom, good and justice). However, as this text claims, this renewed interest in the relationship between the individual and the collective and the debate around it seem to remain within the boundaries set by Plato, and therefore it is one of the basic assumptions of this text that the analysis of Plato's political theory is indispensable, highly beneficial and instructive for coming to terms with this debate, as well as with those concerning democratic theory in general.

To that effect, this text analyses and compares one of the central concepts of Platonic political theory – the concept of σωφροσύνη (sophrosyne), or sensibleness *– with the concept of the* reasonable *as it has been put forward by the liberal (Rawlsian) political theory in the context of the required and desired consensus upon which a liberal political community should be established. In doing that, we try to show the striking similarities between the two and thus support the claim about the actuality and relevance of Platonic thought for democratic theory.*

The problem of the relationship between the individual and the collective with respect to freedom and within the framework of democracy has been the central subject and issue of some of the liveliest theoretical debates in the last couple of decades. It mostly took the shape of the debate about and around the individualistic, liberal political theory (or theory of freedom, good and justice).[1] This debate could well be understood as the repetition of some old problems, most notably those that have occupied theoreticians and philosophers since ancient Greece: problems that were most clearly stated and articulated by none other than Plato himself. In fact, it seems that this renewed interest

in the relationship between the individual and the collective and the debate around it remain within the boundaries set by Plato, so that one can safely assume that the analysis of Plato's political theory would be indispensable, highly beneficial and instructive for coming to terms with this debate.[2]

Liberalism is extremely interesting for analysis, both because of its pronounced opposition towards Platonism of any kind,[3] and because of its own problematic nature that forces not only its opponents but even more its advocates to constantly re-think it, i.e. to re-think its framework and its foundations (its fundamental principles and standards).[4] Therefore, liberalism can and should be considered under the rubric of *Platonic anti-Platonism*, for other models of democracy apart from the liberal one[5] are clearly Platonic in their scope, structure and conception.[6] Let us, then, proceed directly to the discussion of some Platonic features of liberal democratic theory, which are however obviously designed in order to oppose Platonism in the tradition of Western political thought.

I

One of the most often repeated and called upon slogans of liberalism (and, more often than not, of contemporary political science and theory) is that it is a political position and not metaphysical or comprehensive philosophical (and generally theoretical) doctrine. One must immediately ask: Is this really so? How does this happen? To what extent is this true of liberalism? And, right away, it becomes obvious that this question should be examined from the perspective of another question, namely: What do liberals mean when they say philosophy and metaphysics? However, immediately, yet another question arises: What do *we* mean by that? What is philosophy for *us*?

Whatever the answer to this last question may be, one thing seems to be unanimously acknowledged and accepted by all, be it a negative one – namely, everyone would agree (at least declaratively) that philosophy is a constant relentless search for answers to the same "eternal" questions and problems, and that this search admits no dogmatism. In other words, philosophy *is* a struggle (opposition, resistance) against any form of doctrinarian thinking, against simple affirmative thought and life.[7] It cannot be anything else if it is to remain an inquiry and inquisitiveness itself, for this means putting everything into question again and again, even (in fact, more than anything else) its own self, its foundations and presuppositions, its structure, its method, its subject, its content and procedures. Therefore, such a concept of philosophy remains thoroughly critical, both inside and outside, both towards itself and others.

Now, how does this affect our first question, the one about a/the liberal concept of philosophy and metaphysics? First of all, it seems that the liberals have understood correctly, acknowledged and fully embraced this "critical" concept of philosophy. They too admit that "philosophical/metaphysical" in the political realm means questioning, understanding and deciding on fundamental structures of politics and society; that it

means enquiring and investigating into the social and especially the political (communal, collective) as such, their essence and existence. In a word, the meaning and the task of philosophy/metaphysics are acknowledged as questioning the very foundations of our individual and collective (communal, social) life and practices, hence questioning the limits and foundations of our liberty.

However, at the same time and with the same stroke with which they admit such character of philosophy/metaphysics, liberals deny philosophical character to their position. In fact, they do not reject it completely, but are very anxious to disavow any complete, comprehensive philosophical or (as they prefer to call it) metaphysical nature of that position. The watchword is that of John Rawls, namely his statement that political liberalism, and most notably its justice and liberty, are political conceptions, not metaphysical. But, then, what does this "political" mean?

Rawls seems to be quite clear on that. He claims that his whole theory of justice, which is to say its subject and its scope, is concerned with (and therefore only valid for) the modern Western democratic societies or liberal democracies of the developed Western countries (before and above all, the United States). Other than and outside that, it is neither interested in nor applicable to anything else, to any form of political organisation beyond or beneath its standards, forms and practices.

One would have to agree that, with such a limited perspective and scope, liberal political theory definitely falls short of any metaphysics, let alone any developed and comprehensive philosophical theory. In fact, understood in this way, liberal political theory turns out to be quite dogmatic and thus opposes philosophy exactly in that which we have here taken to be its distinctive mark: its anti-dogmatism. But, the dogmatism of liberal democratic theory is not exhausted simply in its refusal to think anything else or different from the modern liberal democracies. Its dogmatism ultimately resides in the fact that this particular (liberal-democratic) form of society is being completely taken for granted, so that there appears neither any idea of the possibility of its change (much less of some fundamental improvement) nor an afterthought of the need for it (for a change). Liberal political theory presents or contains no evaluation or re-evaluation of liberal society itself. All it seems to be doing is inquiring and searching for the most adequate *description* and *articulation* of the already present and inherent principles and practices of the liberal political system as such. Thus, in a way, liberal theory remains preoccupied exclusively with the truth of political and social liberalism.

Thus, by refusing to be "metaphysical", liberalism resorts to what has generally been recognised as the most dogmatic form of metaphysics and is presented as equal to religious fanaticism and bigotry. One particular form of social organisation, which is on top of that also of quite a recent date and very short-lived, becomes petrified and absolutised as a given and unchangeable fact. One cannot lose this impression even after considering many revisions of liberal theory undertaken in the last half of a century. In the course of time, though, it has become clear that the work of John Rawls has come to be identified with liberal political theory, not the least because other prominent

liberal theoreticians,[8] in their corrections, revisions and explanations of liberal theory take Rawls's position to be exemplary of liberalism. On the other hand, when one looks at these changes, they seem to do little else than to draw liberalism ever closer to its Platonic origins and framework. Liberal anti-Platonism hence becomes ever more Platonic. In fact, the more it attempts to distance itself from Platonism (be it in its genuine form, or in some of its contemporary versions), the more Platonic it becomes. Of course, in being such, liberalism is only a typical case of Platonic anti-Platonism in theory and practice.

Let us briefly mention and comment on some of these "revisions" and "corrections". In doing that, we shall confine our discussion to the source of the whole dispute (and confusion, one might well say), namely to certain conceptions and claims made by Rawls himself. To say it in advance, we shall first concentrate on the idea of "overlapping consensus"; then proceed towards the difference he introduces between the reasonable and the rational, touching upon the idea of the "burdens of judgment"; in order to end back again in the comment on the central distinction between the political and the metaphysical character of justice as fairness.

II

The idea of "overlapping consensus" seems to stand at the very centre of Rawls's revised theory of justice, since it appears as the pillar of social stability, harmony and co-operation. As Rawls says in one of the last revisions of his idea of political liberalism, it "looks for a political conception of justice that we hope can gain the support of an overlapping consensus of reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines in a society regulated by it".[9] Therefore, overlapping consensus is the *conditio sine qua non* of the possibility of communal life in a liberal democratic society.[10] Its main characteristic is that it is a "consensus of reasonable [as opposed to unreasonable and irrational] comprehensive doctrines. The crucial fact is not the fact of pluralism as such, but of reasonable pluralism".[11] In other words, it is supposed to cover as much as possible the common ground of as many as possible reasonable comprehensive (i.e. philosophical, ethical, religious) doctrines that different citizens and groups might have or share. Differently put, it is an idea of the common philosophical and ethical ground of society as a whole. And yet, it is not supposed to be or comprise any specific comprehensive doctrine;[12] it is supposed to be a non-comprehensive common ground for a variety of different reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Without it, there would hardly exist any possibility of agreement on the political and social system, e.g. on its fundamental socio-political framework, on the basic institutions of that society, and on its adopted procedures of decision-making and behaviour.[13] Therefore, this consensus is the closest thing one has to the social contract, and both are "the very groundwork of our existence".[14] We shall immediately see how much this idea of an overlapping consensus implies philosophical deliberation (exactly in Rawls's own sense), even

though its obvious aim is not only the justification, acknowledgment and adoption of existing opinions and beliefs, but also (and perhaps even more) "to bypass religion and philosophy's profoundest controversies".[15]

As immediately becomes obvious, this overlapping consensus implies as its basis and its fundamental framework the difference between the reasonable and the rational.[16] However, it seems that this difference, at least as Rawls himself understands and articulates it, does not overcome its purely ideological origin and character. In fact, taking into consideration Rawls's statements on the matter, it does seem that there is no essential difference between the reasonable and the rational and that, if there is any difference between these two, their place and significance have to be exchanged and we must concede for rational everything Rawls says belongs to the reasonable. But, most of all, there is really no need for this distinction.

For, apart from the difference based on the distinction between the individual-epistemological and public-ethical, there seem to be no other criteria for distinguishing the rational and the reasonable. Even this distinction clearly shows that − and how – the reasonable stands on the side of comprehensive doctrines, especially the ethical ones, which is something Rawls obviously reserves for the rational.

It is, however, crucial for Rawls's whole position, because it founds and establishes what he obviously holds to be the major improvement on his previous theory, namely the difference between the political and the metaphysical, or what he elsewhere calls the difference between a "political theory of justice" and "comprehensive doctrines". Unfortunately for him, though, whenever he sets out to define or specify these terms, especially the second one, it turns out that he practically uses the same description for both, so the alleged difference remains purely rhetorical. In fact even worse, because it denies and undermines everything he otherwise says about political justice. For one thing, it does not clarify criteria on the basis of which we are to pronounce and acknowledge something as reasonable or unreasonable. If one takes social stability and co-operation to be such criteria,[17] it is hard to see why any given comprehensive doctrine would be unsuitable for a political conception of justice, and particularly why it has to be a democratic or liberal political conception at all. The second solution that Rawls proposes, the well-known idea of "the burdens of judgment", which springs from this distinction between the reasonable and the rational, i.e. from the criteria of the public and the private use of reason, does not seem to work any better. For nothing that is said about this can serve as the point of distinction and separation between the reasonable and the rational.[18]

What is the basis of this distinction between the reasonable and the rational then? In fact, one should better ask where the idea of this distinction comes from, or what would be the cause and the motive for making such a distinction in the first place. Certainly, the obvious motivation is the prevention of the institutionalisation of extremism and particularly of the possibility of hegemony of any one specific set of religious and metaphysical beliefs[19] or of one particular cultural tradition and system of values.

However, the proper treatment of this question must concern theoretical reasons for this separation, or rather exclusion.

Of course, the obvious place to look for an answer is our starting point, namely the separation – or emancipation and simultaneous alienation – of the political from the metaphysical (that is, philosophical and ethical). It seems that all these and many other distinctions ventured by Rawls (but no less by the majority of liberal political theorists) spring from there. However, since the differentiations derived from there seem fallacious it is reasonable to assume that their origin will also be misleading or insufficient to found the disjointing of politics from ethics and philosophy. As such, then, it is not only the wrong way out of the Platonic framework of political theory, but actually just another path back into it. Moreover, it seems only to re-confirm and fortify the unity between the political and the metaphysical established in Plato's philosophy.

III

One immediately recalls the Platonic (and generally Greek) counterpart of reasonableness, which in Rawls obviously serves as the criterion and point of separation and division between the political and the metaphysical, i.e. between the freestanding political theory and the comprehensive philosophical doctrines. This counterpart is none other than the complex Greek notion of sophrosynê (σωφροσύνη). And the resemblance is striking, both in the scope and in the status of this concept within the wider framework of political and philosophical theory.

The term σωφροσύνη has a long and diverse history of interpretations and translations. However, most often it has been understood and translated as "soundness of mind"; "self-control"; "sobriety"; "temperance"; "moderation"; "prudence". One could think of a number of other words to render this term more comprehensible for the contemporary reader, like: "discretion"; "chastity"; "wisdom"; and "probity". To these, one could also add terms like "decency" and "honesty", which could also apply. However, none of these alternatives is fully acceptable, and in no way covers the whole spectrum of meaning denoted and connoted by this word. There seems to lack a single word, or a signifier, that would by itself be able to keep or reflect the important element of either the usual Greek or the Platonic concept and term, which element is exactly the decisive role of moral disposition that combines with sense and rationality in them. In any case, what σωφροσύνη directly implies is not simply and not only the rational, wise understanding and practice in one's affairs, but rather the tendency and the disposition to do and obey the wise demands. In other words, it is related to φρόνησις, that is, to philosophical-theoretical wisdom, but is not reducible to it:

> *Phronesis* (wisdom), which may signify *phoras kai rhou noesis* (perception of motion and flux), or perhaps *phoras onesis* (the blessing of motion), but is at any rate connected with *pheresthai* (motion); *gnome* (judgment), again, certainly implies the ponderation or consideration (*nomesis*) of generation, for to ponder is the same as to consider; or, if you would rather, here is *noesis*,

the very word just now mentioned, which is *neou esis* (the desire of the new); the word *neos* implies that the world is always in process of creation. The giver of the name wanted to express this longing of the soul, for the original name was *neoesis*, and not *noesis*; but eta took the place of a double epsilon. The word *sophrosune* is the salvation (*soteria*) of that wisdom (*phronesis*) which we were just now considering.[20]

And, it relates to φρόνησις especially in the part where it means obedience and good behavior. Σωφροσύνη, therefore, also eminently means understanding the wise as the wise, plus obeying the wise command (demand, indication, imperative, etc.) even if and when one does not completely grasp its wisdom. In other words, one need not fully comprehend or even believe in the propositions and principles of this wisdom; it is enough to let oneself be guided by it and to behave in accordance with its instructions or imperatives.

Already here, before any detailed insight in the particular meaning of σωφροσύνη, one sees how close it stands to the modern Rawlsian concept of the reasonable. However, at the same time, one also sees that it relates to the rational none the less − exactly by being reasonable. It actually belongs to both dimensions and pertains to the individual-epistemological as much as to the public-ethical. In fact, σωφροσύνη seems to represent the unification of the two in that it brings the individual virtue and behaviour under the aegis of the general and public sphere, thus emphasising the fact that the political and the metaphysical (theoretical, philosophical, religious, etc.), or the reasonable and the rational, are inseparable. But, one needs to have a closer look at the meaning(s) of σωφρσύνη in order to fully realise this.

As is usually the case in Plato, the crucial concepts of his philosophy (and especially those that were quite extensively used in Greek letters as well as in everyday communication) are explained and analysed in a separate dialogue. In this case, we find an extensive consideration in the *Charmides*. And, in this dialogue alone, this term is used in a variety of ways and contexts, which *both* refer to the standard Greek meanings and uses of the word *and* discuss or comment on these, thus revising and criticising them to a certain extent. In the dialogue, the first task is performed by Charmides and, to a certain degree Critias, whereas the critical and revisionary part of the work is performed by Socrates.

Thus, according to the common understanding and use, σωφροσύνη (*sensibleness* and *self-control*, as we alternately translate it throughout this essay) is the right balance of elements, pertaining to the health (of both body and soul).[21] Further on, σωφροσύνη is defined as the quietness of manner and character, as well as doing the worldly things (τὸ κοσμίως) or the things appropriate to the manners of the world in a quiet and slow way.[22] Then, also, it is understood and specified as shyness, or shame, and modesty which at the same time mean consideration for others, considerateness; in other words, sensibleness as prudence.[23]

In the following critical analysis, σωφροσύνη is conceived of as a social-political virtue, as the quality of good government, which is to say the right balance of rights and

obligations and the proportionate division of labour.[24] And this aspect of its meaning and application is preserved all the way through to the end of the dialogue. Therefore, σωφροσύνη is here a two-dimensional virtue, so to speak, that is: both a personal (even private) quality of character pertaining to one's personal affairs and manners, and a social, behavioural virtue, which constructs and forms our social profile and status. It always cuts both ways, it is at the same time the way we are treated by the others and the manner in which we relate to them. Therefore, σωφροσύνη keeps and expresses the tight connection between the individual and the collective, suggesting that no virtue is strictly private or strictly public.

As a continuation of and an addition to this objective (social, collective, inter-subjective) dimension of σωφροσύνη, it further appears as a characteristic of (practical-pragmatic) action and (material) production, of arts and crafts and generally of practical skills and knowledge. Therefore it is also about proportion, sensible planning and skilful carrying out of the plan; it is understood and pronounced to be the beautiful and appropriate realisation, materialisation of some blueprint or guidelines. Hence we find σωφροσύνη to mean a reasonable, balanced and proportionate action and production, the right performance of one's task or duty.[25]

Thus, however one looks at it, σωφροσύνη implies measure and mean, and indeed the right, proper, balanced, proportionate and just measure in all things (πᾶν μέτρον ἄριστον) and all matters in life: material and spiritual. That is why Socrates and Critias can even consider examining the possibility of σωφροσύνη being a kind of knowledge. (The fact that this is eventually rejected is of no importance here.) For σωφροσύνη is obviously supposed to possess and prescribe the measure of both positive and negative, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, acceptable and unacceptable; which is, of course, totally in keeping with its character as a measure.

Still, the fact that σωφροσύνη always has to do with (some form and sense of) measure and mean (i.e. with balance, proportion, equilibrium) does not make the understanding and interpretation of this term (concept) any easier. Σωφροσύνη obviously does have to do with measure, but is not reducible or identifiable with it; it just supposes and comprises the measure but is not identical with it. In other words, the question here is how to make visible the modes in and through which sensibleness intends the measure (proportion, balance, equilibrium, reasonableness, etc.).[26] That, however, cannot be done without getting into further detailed description, but we need not perform it here, for we now possess enough material to discuss the issue in question here.

IV

We have seen how similar σωφροσύνη and reasonableness are. The resemblance is so striking that the former seems to have served as the model and the paradigm of the latter. If nothing else, the latter is compelled to dwell within the framework circumscribed by the former. On the other hand, we have also seen that this same framework prevents

the division and separation attempted through the hypostasis of reasonableness as an exclusive and sufficient condition and attribute of the political (i.e. of both the political sphere on the whole and the political character of theory). Exactly the experience of σωφροσύνη showed that the reasonable and the rational, in spite of all the obvious differences between them, cannot be separated nor kept in isolation from each other, but rather always cross (or, if you like, transgress) the dividing line between them.

Therefore, the insistence on such an unsustainable difference, and consequently the problem of the liberal point of view as such, must and does spring from another set of differences that serve as a foundation for this whole point of view; that is, from the separations that distinguish liberalism from other political-theoretical doctrines. We find this deeper foundation in the liberals' general insistence on the difference and separation between the state and society, more precisely civil society, on one hand, and on the difference and separation between ethics and politics.

As for the first distinction, liberalism claims that civil society (as opposed and distinguished from the state and political institutions) is the right place for the expression of our tradition, beliefs, thoughts and worldviews, i.e. of our culture and different conceptions of the good. However, at the same time, it wants to separate these from the realm of liberty and equality, as if the two are not a part (and indeed a product) of certain, particular tradition and its own proper set of beliefs, opinions and conceptions of the good. This is, of course, in keeping with the second distinction mentioned here, namely with the conviction that ethics and politics can be separated and, furthermore, that this separation occurred or started in early Modernity (Renaissance and Reformation). This is Rawls's general idea that stands behind the claim that "justice as fairness" is a political, not a metaphysical (i.e. basically philosophical) conception.[27]

The second distinction seems to be especially important for the liberals and they insist on it very much.[28] That difference is the crux of the argument for the neutrality of the state (and generally of the political sphere) in moral matters, i.e. in the choice of the good (life, deeds, society, etc.). In that line, then, at least some of them insist on the fact that politics is not the only mode (kind, form) of socialisation (and indeed not even the most important and paradigmatic one) but that, instead, the social (or generally non-political) forms are not only more desirable but also more effective from the point of view of securing human liberty. Thus, as they believe their remote (but still, according to them, close enough) ancestor Machiavelli did, they too tend to separate politics from morality/ethics. With significantly different effects and results though, since they at the same time see Machiavelli as a theoretician of warfare, despotism and monarchism. But, just as this is hardly the case with Machiavelli (for his political thought and theory is anything but separated from morality and ethically neutral), thus they also cannot provide sufficient argument, let alone ground, for this distinction and separation. For every time they are run down into a corner, liberals add another ethical-political element or ingredient to their position, or simply re-interpret it so as to be able to ward off attacks. If nothing else, they eventually always call upon moral values to justify their

position, e.g. claiming that theirs is the position that secures *better* social and political organisation, secures broader and fairer conditions for the pursuit of the *good* (or better, different goods, different conceptions of the good), prosperity and happiness, and thus *best* contributes to overall liberty.

Apart from his constant claiming that justice as fairness is a moral doctrine,[29] one good example of this relapsing to ethics and ethical foundations of politics – or, which is the same, of political foundations of ethics – is Rawls's idea of "social co-operation", an idea he himself announces as one of the "fundamental ideas" of justice as fairness. With regard to this idea one might ask: If the idea of social co-operation is a basic political idea, then what is political in the political sphere? Or, more to the point: How can the social and the political be separated or even distinguished if the basic political idea is a fundamentally social idea, or the very idea of socialisation (which the idea of social co-operation definitely is)? Rawls does not give any reason to think that the idea of social co-operation differs in any way from the usual meaning of the term and therefore obviously conceives of it as broadly as any common sense and knowledge would have it. Hence, he clearly uses a social term and concept to talk about politics, political system and forms of organisation. Because of this, we can put our question still more sharply: How can civil society and politics (i.e. the state and other political institutions) be separated when their common basic idea is this idea of social co-operation? And is it not, then, more reasonable to suppose, as Plato did, that the social (communal, collective) and the political are one and the same sphere, and that they therefore necessarily share everything (including culture, tradition, beliefs, opinions, principles, conceptions of the good and the just, etc.)? In other words, is it not much more reasonable and productive to suppose the unity of the good and the just (of good and justice), which would also entail the unity of the state and the civil society? That something is (more or less) reasonable here means the same thing as in Rawls: it means that something is more consistent with the shared basic beliefs of a society. Thus, Rawls actually undermines his basic shared idea of social co-operation by insisting on the separation between politics and society, that is, on the separation between the political and the social. As has already been made clear, everything points to the conclusion that the reason for this inconsistency lies in the fact that Rawls does not recognise (or goes against) the Platonic origin of his own position and his anti-Platonism is hence bound to fail.

In addition, even the idea of separation between politics and philosophy, together with the consequent insistence on the separation of politics from civil society to which philosophy and culture are supposed to be allocated, can be traced almost directly to Plato. Plato does say of his Guardians that they unwillingly engage in politics because they would rather sit around and discuss philosophy (meaning purely speculative philosophical, metaphysical problems)[30] as if the two were different and separate spheres of life and action. So, the "political not metaphysical" stance was taken into account by Plato and Platonism in general.

The insistence on the separation of politics from ethics and philosophy, especially in the form of "neutrality" and the "common good", goes hand in hand with the difference between the state and civil society. Thus, in a totally Hegelian manner, liberals assume an unbridgeable gap between the two, such that it seems there can (and there should) never really exist a satisfactory political form or expression of any conception of the good which would not be repressive and coercive to everything and anything else other than itself. In other words, every possible political articulation of any conception of the good is necessarily totalitarian, oppressive and coercive. And, of course, this does not stand the test of time or circumstances. From this it also seems to follow directly that liberalism necessarily and inevitably ends in libertarianism.[31]Furthermore, exactly in their insistence on the private character of the good and its (more or less) exclusive assigning, allocating to the sphere of *civil society*, liberals seem to forget the very character of that society, namely its *civility*. This civility, however, leads directly back to the political, for only in and through politics do people become citizens, or civilians, so this non-political civil society holds on to the political as its foundation and condition. In other words, the political is revealed and recognised as the foundation of the social exactly (and nowhere more or to a greater extent than) in the concept of *civil* society.

Therefore, despite all the systematic and structural differences in their conception, one could easily come to think that liberal democracy is exactly Plato's *Republic* (more precisely, the popular image of it) brought down to earth and turned into a popular rule. In the final analysis, Rawls's and generally liberal insistence on this separation appears as hardly anything more than a repetition of Plato's inconsistency. For Plato was indeed inconsistent in stating such a thing as preference for philosophy (i.e. philosophising) over politics, especially since this claim is made within a discourse based on a conceptual system founded upon the complete unity of the two, in a discourse that shows and establishes an unbreakable bond between philosophy and politics, within which it is impossible to assume anything else than philosophy being a path to politics and *vice versa*. Plato's whole system issues in the (notorious) conclusion that being a philosopher is equal (even identical) to being a statesman and that philosophy is the ultimate statesmanship. But, whereas one could concede to Plato that statements such as the one mentioned above are functional parts of a more comprehensive discourse and that therefore they do not have any definite and decisive character,[32] one cannot grant the same benefit of the doubt to Rawls and other liberals, simply because for them this difference is the central, the fundamental idea upon which they try to build their whole position − and it is on this idea that this whole position seems to collapse.

V

Regardless of how one looks at it, the political remains the basis of the civil. As for its relation to morality and the ethical as such though, however disputable the primacy of the political (or ethical for that matter) in this relationship might be, it is certain that

the two are inseparable and that they hold tightly on to each other. So much so that there is no political claim, goal or demand that does not understand and present itself as moral as well,[33] and *vice versa*: moral ideas and ideals (at least the highest ones) always see themselves as feasible and realisable primarily in and through politics and the political. Moral good, especially the ultimate ethical good, cannot but tend to realise itself politically; just as the political, and especially the genuinely political, always needs to pose itself as ethical, i.e. as morally good.

Thus, the separation of ethical from the political ends up in a mere replacement of absolutism with relativism where the latter appears just as absolute and total (totalitarian) as the former. In other words, what starts as an attempt at curbing dogmatisms, extremisms and fundamentalisms in social-political life, ends up in just another kind of dogmatism, since it is impossible to discern any kind of substantial difference in the status and scope between the two.[34]

Of course, in some more tempered versions of liberalism, the gap tends to be overcome. As a rule, such attempts always go beyond the opposition between the two and productively use elements of both positions without prejudice. And that is a genuine Platonic move and procedure. For, one will recall Plato's determination of the statesman and of his relationship with the rest of the citizen body. In the dialogue by the same name, Plato's statesman is primarily the weaver, the constitutor, or the one who deals with the constitution and legislation of the state.[35] He even uses his executive power to these ends, so that, in dealing with his everyday problems and duties, in exerting his executive power, the statesman remains constantly occupied with legal and constitutional matters. For him, there is not much difference between establishing, amending and implementing the constitution, or between the passing of new laws and their enforcement. One is the same as the other, it is united with the other and, in doing one thing, the other thing is automatically being done. It is practically the same thing to establish a state, to legislate it, and to execute ruling power in it. Apart from the nature, the methods and manners of acting in each case and on each instance, there is no clear institutional (or personal) demarcation between executive power, on one hand, and the legislative and judicial ones, on the other. They seem to be united in one and the same institution and authority. Thus, all the time being acknowledged as different in nature, these three instances of power are still not separated on the practical level.

However obsolete, insufficient or even inappropriate this might seem (especially for a democratic political system and constitution as it is understood today) we must recall that it is exactly this characteristic of Platonic political thought that enables us to claim that there is no fundamental separation between the citizens (subjects) of a state and the state officials (rulers) with respect to their sovereignty and political power. It also makes us assume that the Platonic statesman does not necessarily have to be a monarch, or that the notion of kingship does not exclude elected officials, which is all indeed very close to our modern notions of democracy. Given the difference between exteriorisation and interiorisation of the state interest (or the *raison d'état*), Plato's descriptions of

the statesman strongly resemble the ideal tribune, or the ideal (democratic) political representative of the people.[36] This, of course, provided that we agree that "the people", e.g. the populace or the citizen body, have the *raison d'état* in mind, or that there is an identity (or at least a unity, a unanimity) between the (real, objective) interest of the people and the interest of the (their) state.

Finally, speaking particularly of the relationship between Platonism and liberalism, one could safely say that, just as Plato is not some hardboiled totalitarian whose greatest desire is to deprive people of their liberty, their preferences, convictions, beliefs and opinions; so likewise liberalism is not (or at least should not be understood and taken as) some wild individualism that aims at abolishing all state power together with the fundamental communal values and beliefs. On the contrary, the sensible and reasonable balancing of the individual and the collective interests, needs and values, is indeed the admirable objective of both positions; an objective that makes them both relevant and indispensable for any kind of pursuit of liberty and equality.

END NOTES

1   Thus, apart from disagreements and differences within its own camp, which result in its different versions, liberalism has been exposed to quite strong criticism by the so-called communitarians.

2   In their recent discussions, though, both liberal and communitarian theorists tend to forget their Platonic roots and ancestry (the former more than the latter, though), and behave as if these had nothing to do with the present. This makes one wonder whether it happens simply because of neglect or obliviousness, or if there are some other tactical or strategic reasons for that. Whatever the case may be, contemporary thinkers do generate the impression that they are not saying much (if anything) new and different on the matter. Indeed, they seem to lack the depth and width of the genuine Platonic insight; they seem to lack his vision of the whole, thus remaining enclosed in particular positions, hopelessly stuck in one or the other side of the opposition, or even more often in one or the other procedural-technical problem.

3   This anti-Platonic impulse acquired the form of aversion to anything Platonic already in the work of the paradeigmatic contemporary liberal thinkers, such as Popper (*Open society and its enemies. Vol. I: The spell of Plato*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1999[5]), Hayek (*The constitution of liberty*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) and Berlin (Cf. *Four essays on liberty,* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969).

4   Communitarianism is already fashioned according to Platonic standards, or at least consciously takes positions that are evidently Platonic. Almost everything in it seems profoundly Platonic, starting from its insistence on the precedence of the communal, through its emphasis on communal values as primary ones, its reliance on the common conception (notion, idea) of the good as the indispensable basis for social and political co-operation and organisation, to its endorsement of collective, communal virtue and morality as prior to individual rights or interests. The sheer fact that communitarianism puts forth the idea of the Good (and indeed, the Good conceived of as a communal, collective and above all philosophical-ethical concept and notion), not only as a more important idea and criterion, but also often as opposed to rights and interests either of individuals or of specific groups; this fact alone would suffice to claim such a

close proximity of communitarianism to Platonism (or better, to Platonisms of different kinds, and most of all to the Aristotelian Platonism).

5   It is worth noting here that libertarianism does not seem to be essentially different from liberalism. Rather, the former is a more extreme, so to speak, and therefore a more consequential version of liberalism. (For the standard version of libertarianism, see R. Nozick, *Anarchy, state and Utopia*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974.)

6   Apart from communitarianism, think, for example, of Max Weber's elitist model, or of Schumpeter's social model, which have often been compared with Plato. (For Weber's and Schumpeter's models of democracy see D. Held, *Models of democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, pp. 143-185.)

7   Even Hegel, who has not without reason been called the apologist of Prussian regime of his time and a theoretical advocate of political *status quo* in general, even he did not miss to emphasise the essential significance and central importance of negation for philosophy. See, for example, his introduction to the *Philosophy of right* (in *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, hrsg. KH. Ilting, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Fromman Verlag 1974), as well as works of Marcuse (*Reason and revolution*, New York: The Humanities Press 1954), Lukacz (*Der Junge Hegel*, Europa-Verlag 1948) and Bloch (*Subjekt–Objekt. Erläuterungen zu Hegel*, Aufbauverlag, 1951) on Hegel.

8   Like Gaultier, Dworkin and Kymlicka, to mention just a few.

9   *Political liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press 1996), p. 10.

10   For Rawls's conception of *overlapping consensus* see his article "Overlapping consensus" in *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (February 1987), as well as its revised version in *Political liberalism*.

11   *Political liberalism*, p. 144.

12   Rawls makes this quite clear whenever he speaks about justice as fairness as "the object of consensus", which is as such at the same time "independent of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines" or "a freestanding view" (*Political liberalism*, p. 144).

13   As Rawls puts it: "Only a political conception of justice that all citizens might be reasonably expected to endorse can serve as a basis of public reason and justification" (*Political liberalism*, p. 137).

14   JS. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Ch. 5, par. 25.

15   *Political liberalism*, p. 152.

16   Cf. *Political liberalism*, pp. 48-66.

17   As Rawls himself does on many occasions. (See below, note 29.)

18   Especially not the six particular burdens of judgment listed in *Political liberalism*. These are to be found in any kind of rational deliberation about anything, including the practical-political matters.

19   It seems obvious that Rawls tends to identify (explicitly as much as implicitly) the religious and the metaphysical with respect to both their content and their scope, so the term "comprehensive doctrine" seems to name the equation of the two.

20   *Cratylus* 411d4-412a1. Except for the *Charmides*, all passages from Plato's dialogues are quoted after E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (eds.) *The collected dialogues of Plato - including the letters*

(Bollingen Series LXXI, Princeton University Press 1978[7]). Translations from the *Charmides* are my own.

21   *Charmides* 157a1-b7.

22   159b2-6: "But then he said that he thought sensibleness is to behave decently and moderately [κοσμίως], and quietly, when one walks in the streets and argues, and doing everything else in that manner. And in short it seems to me, he said, that it is quietness [ἡσυχιότης] what you're asking about."

23   160e: "It seems to me therefore, he said, that sensibleness creates a sense of shame [αἰσχύνεσθαι] and a modest [αἰσχυντηλὸν] man, and that regard for others is the very thing which sensibleness is."

24   162a4-8: "But still, said I, the sensible [σωφρόνως] city would be well governed. – Surely it is so, he said. – Therefore, said I, such things and thus also doing one's own would not be sensibleness [σωφροσύνη]."

25   163e: "Do you then say that sensibleness is good deed and creation [τῶω ἀγαθῶν πρᾶξιν ἢ ποίησιν], or how would you wish to name it? – I do, he said. – Consequently, the one who does bad things is not sensible, but the one who does good things. – But don't you think so, my friend?, he asked. – Yes, said I, but let's not yet examine what I think, but what you are saying now. – Nevertheless, for my part, he said, I don't call the things that aren't good but bad sensible [οὔ φημι σωφρονεῖν], and I call the good ones (ones that are not bad) sensible [σωφρονεῖν]. So I declare that sensibleness [σωφροσύνην] is plainly doing good."

26   That is why its meaning cannot be adequately and successfully rendered by terms such as *temperance*, *moderation*, *sobriety*, *prudence*, *sound-mindedness* or *presence of mind*. In fact, what we have to do with here is not the "*intended meaning*" at all – if that were the case, then measure or mean would really be the most appropriate way of translating it. Rather, the issue here is the rendering of the "*modes of intention*" of this particular term in all its diverse uses and contexts. This especially since there are quite a few other terms that intend the same thing, but do that in different ways, i.e. by applying and using different modes of intending it. (Think only of σοφία, δικαιοσύνη, μετριότης, ἁρμονία, to name just a few.)

27   See J. Rawls, "Justice as fairness: political not metaphysical" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (Summer 1985), pp. 223-39; as well as *Political liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press 1996), I: 1-8. For a plausible understanding of the implications of this claim see R. Rorty, "The priority of democracy to philosophy" (in *Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge University Press 1991, pp. 175-96).

   For a more extensive retracing of historical and traditional influences present in Rawls's theory of justice as fairness and in his particular brand of the contractual socio-political theory, see: DFM. Strauss "The mixed legacy underlying Rawls's *Theory of justice*" in *Journal for Juridical Science* 31(1), 2006, pp. 61-79. Furthermore, as it seems to me, this article confirms the main thesis of the present paper, e.g. the claim of the strong presence of Platonic elements in the core of Rawls's position, albeit in different terms (most notably, instead of collective/communal and individual, Strauss speaks of the holistic and atomistic dimensions). Since the scope of this paper does not permit us to engage in a detailed elaboration of other differences, saying that I would greatly hesitate to call either Platonic or Rawlsian theory "totalitarian" (cf. Strauss, p. 69) will have to suffice.

28   See, for example, J. Rawls, "The priority of right and ideas of the good" in *Philosophy and public affairs* 17, 1988 (as well as its revised version in *Political liberalism*, op. cit., pp. 173-

211); W. Kymlicka, "Liberal individualism and liberal neutrality" in *Ethics* 99, 1989, pp. 883-905; R. Dworkin, "Liberal community" in *California Law Review* 77, 1989, pp. 479-504; et al.

29 These claims are, as one could expect, always followed by the insistence on two different uses of this doctrine, namely political and ethical (if and when ethical bears marks of so-called "comprehensive" doctrines), as well as endless repetition of the statement that "justice as fairness" can and does serve as the foundation of social co-operation and of "basic structure" only in the first sense. However, so many questions are opened by such statements that one does not know where to start with criticism. Perhaps from the peculiar move therein through which one comprehensive doctrine among others gains such a special place (exactly "over and above" others), or from the fact that the political is being pronounced as a more comprehensive realm although it is simultaneously defined as much more limited in scope (cf. *Political liberalism*, pp. 130-40), or anywhere else in this confused position that keeps retreating to even grater inconsistencies whenever it is faced with objections?

30 Cf., for example, *Republic* 519c-520e. There, one also finds the limit of their freedom, which can now be fully comprehended as *the limit of the freedoms of the citizen*. (For the Guardians are not only model citizens, but the guarantors of the liberty of others as well, and through that they secure their sovereignty together with the liberality of the state they all live in.) In fact, as it becomes clear, being a citizen means exactly having a limited freedom, or having one's freedom limited in and by the state, or any other social-political institution for that matter. What is more, one now fully comprehends that the difference between *freedom* and *liberty* primarily consists in the fact that the latter appears as the limitation and limitedness of the former. Finally, one also understands that positive freedom, that other name for liberty, necessarily contains negation in its very core; that it is essentially negative exactly by virtue of its being positive; and that there cannot be any substantial separation or distancing between the two concepts of liberty.

31 Therefore, it seems that Nozick's position remains much more consistent than anything Rawls and other liberal theoreticians have to say about the matter, however more sophisticated their analyses may be.

32 As it is indeed shown immediately after the above quoted passage (cf. *Republic* 521a-c), they are rather dialogical and dialectical elements standing in the way towards the truth, elements whose overcoming is a part of that path, and which therefore contribute to the final result even though it is quite opposite from what they imply.

33 Rawls himself acknowledges this for his own conception of justice as fairness in many of his writings after *A theory of justice*, albeit in a revisionary tone, saying that it was exactly the limitation of his doctrine. See, among others, "Justice as fairness: political not metaphysical" and *Political liberalism*.

34 In that line, then, communitarians seem to have a much stronger case, by sheer fact that they acknowledge the necessity of some particular set of comprehensive ideas and convictions for the existence of any social-political community and system. For, as we have seen, even liberalism itself cannot dispense with the realisation that some concrete system of communal beliefs, some specific cultural identity or some common core conception or notion of fundamental values (such as good, justice, etc.), must always underlie and permeate the existing social and political organisation and institutions.

However, one must note that the communitarians do not stand much better on this issue. Namely, correctly demanding the unity of the two (of ethics and politics), they still assume the possibility of their separation. In their critique, they start from this separation as a given fact and thus

automatically remain unable to provide convincing enough arguments for the necessity of the unity of ethical with the political. Thus, for example, A. McIntyre in *After virtue* (London: Duckworth 1981) speaks about the confusion and erosion of values and virtues (cf. ch. 17, pp. 227-37) in exactly such (factual) manner, so it is of little help that he immediately states that these values and virtues are desperately in need of organisation and order. (See also MacIntyre's explicit critique of liberal conception in "The privatization of good" in *The Review of Politics* 42, no. 3, Summer 1990, pp. 344-61.) The problem is that, accepting the proposition that we managed to live, as a species and as a society, without this unity for any given period of time, proves exactly the opposite: that we can live and survive as human beings without it.

35   See, for example, the *Statesman* 310e-a: "For indeed the whole business of the kingly weaving [βασιλικῆς συνυφάνσεως] is comprised in this and this alone – in never allowing the self-restrained characters to be separated from the courageous, but in weaving them together [συγκερκίζοντα] by common beliefs [ὁμοδοξίαις] and honors and dishonors and opinions and interchanges of pledges, thus making of them a smooth and, as we say, well-woven fabric [ὕφασμα], and then entrusting to them in common for ever the offices of the state."

36   Significantly enough, in contemporary democracies, the people's representative is always a legislator, or a member of a legislative body, such as the congress or the parliament.