

# A Case for the Contemporary Individual: Plato and John Stuart Mill on Social Justice and Well-being.

Un caso para el individuo contemporáneo: Platón y John  
Stuart Mill sobre la justicia social y el bienestar.

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## Abstract

Plato's Republic is a treatise that tries to present an answer, systematically and objectively, to the fundamental problem of how we must live within a city, and, more specifically, the problem that arises necessarily from humans coexisting under a certain political organization, that is, the problem of justice within the city. Similarly, John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism provides a simpler alternative to the demands of more well-known rigid moral structures, and sets forth clear concepts within his utilitarian theory, one of which is to ensure justice. So if society nowadays is characterized by the "loss of an ability to think about values in a systematic way",<sup>1</sup> which is precisely what the understanding of these traditional values is about, the question that follows is: What can the concept of social justice in Plato's Republic and John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism contribute to the well-being of the individual within western contemporary society?

This article is developed after revising quite strenuously some of the literature found on the subject, and to gain some critical insight on the workings of Plato's Republic and Mill's Utilitarianism, which leads to the application of the theory towards a conceptual proposition regarding its application to our society, which will be understood after comparing Plato's and Mill's philosophies. We will also see how in our days the concept of justice is fleeting, and the very essence of the individual is threatened by comparing him to the individual of the Republic who has a purpose because he is just in his soul and seeks to achieve justice through his job, and the utilitarian individual who is guaranteed a little more than his mere survival by the welfare State, thus allowing him to not depend on it as long as he can and freeing him to act with justice also.

What this paper aims to achieve is only theoretical in nature, given that the implications of proposing a Kallipolis in real life, or even a utilitarian society within a welfare State, would imply a shift not only in the political, institutional and economic

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<sup>1</sup> Walmsley, "Is There a Place for Traditional Values and Virtues in Society Today?", 31-32.

framework. It would also imply a drastic shift in the way relations are maintained between individuals themselves, seeking a utilitarian approach from our own attitudes to life within the State as it is today, but with some modifications to the way these institutions answer to their own parts in order to deal justice the way Plato might have meant.

KEY WORDS: JUSTICE, WELL-BEING, POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, MORAL PHILOSOPHY, PLATO, JOHN STUART MILL

## Introduction

### Description of the problem

The Republic is a treatise that tries to present an answer, systematically and objectively, to the fundamental problem of how we must live within a city, and, more specifically, the problem that arises necessarily from humans coexisting under a certain political organization, that is, the problem of justice within the city. As it is, there is an apparent dichotomy between what's considered just for the individual himself, and what's considered just for the State - or City-State - the individual lives in, with personal justice coming before social justice. Richard Mohr considers that this order leads to a paradox of justice which can be resolved if social justice is taken over individual justice,<sup>2</sup> in a platonic sense of the word, barring some exceptions that understand the opposite from the "vulgar" definition of justice.

Similarly, John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism provides a simpler alternative to the demands of more well-known rigid moral structures, and sets forth clear concepts within his utilitarian theory, one of which is to ensure justice.<sup>3</sup> Although generally economically driven, he still worries about the injustice present in whatever action fails to follow his quest to maximize the overall happiness of society, and throughout other texts, comes up with several theories which can be interpreted as in aid of achieving a similar kind of social justice as Plato's. Seeing as both of them are interested in defining what is good for the individual within society and in relation to other individuals, both arise a secondary question about the well-being of the individual in order to advance and conclude their interpretation of the role of social justice.

It is necessary to discuss the impact these theories have in our day because they are not isolated phenomena and both Plato and Mill hold relevance within contemporary society

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<sup>2</sup> Mohr, "Social Justice in Plato", 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bowden, "In Defense of Utilitarianism", 1.

insofar their theories remain being discussed, analyzed and studied, from where they have been found to aid the individual in a deeper understanding of himself when faced with the challenges his own contemporary society imposes upon him. If society nowadays is characterized by the “loss of an ability to think about values in a systematic way”,<sup>4</sup> which is precisely what the understanding of these traditional values is about, the question that follows is: What can the concept of social justice in Plato’s Republic and John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarianism contribute to the well-being of the individual within western contemporary society?

Therefore, it is important to characterize the concepts mentioned before, that is, the concept of social justice within the proposed texts, either in accordance or in opposition to each other, in order to accurately start suggesting what its possible application might be concerning the well-being of the individual within a contemporary society, if possible, at all.

### Hypothesis

My initial proposition was based upon the understanding that the need for the question of social justice and the well-being of the individual derives from the lack of a sense of affinity of the individual with himself and in accordance with the world around him. Therefore, Plato’s conception of social justice as written in the Republic, and understood as the necessary and invariable part the individual plays within the city in unison with other individuals who perform a similar necessary and invariable part as himself, in turn leads to the establishment of a necessary understanding of how individual justice works within himself under the guidance of the Philosopher King, which is precisely what guarantees his well-being.

Mill’s take on social justice through his utilitarian theory, although much more criticized, is characterized as desire to stop harm to the individual’s fellows as is followed closely by resentment, or, on the contrary, by rewards, through which the author seeks to apply his theory to an economic sphere, relying on the establishment of a welfare State which

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<sup>4</sup> Walmsley, “Is There a Place for Traditional Values and Virtues in Society Today?”, 31-32.

is supposed to carry out his utilitarian model through which the well-being of the individual is guaranteed as well.

As such, what these two theories contribute to the well-being of the individual nowadays is a structured and deep analysis of the forms of social collaboration which can be applicable to a situation which calls for it, and cultivates a sense of belonging the contemporary individual lacks, therefore, developing his well-being.

## Methodology

As such, in order to ascertain if what is mentioned above is indeed as stated, and as pertaining of a philosophical article, the methodology used consists of much more of a theoretical nature as opposed to a practical one. The information acquired and the reflection that follows it did not imply any sort of empirical or thought experiment, besides those other authors may have presented in their own texts. Additionally, the resources I used to arrive to my conclusions consist mostly of digital articles, and books accessed through digital libraries, online databases and web search engines such as Jstor, ResearchGate, Scopus, and Google Scholar, with a few exceptions where accessing a physical copy was possible.

Consequently, the methodology of the research stage consisted mainly in accessing the digital resources listed above and carefully selecting the texts which talked about three or more key concepts of interest and still remained relevant to the topic. These concepts were initially divided into four global categories, as well as a final study on how to best understand the issue today. The first two being the authors themselves, Plato and John Stuart Mill. Maintaining the relevance of the question at hand, the initial research process on these authors consisted in confirming a relation could be established between both of them, and then rectifying that this relation could sustain a critical scrutiny that would advance the problem I am proposing. Authors such as Eliopoulos (2019), Morrison (2007), Kamtekar (2001), Guisán (1984), Annas (1981), Ekelund & Tollison (1976) among others, were key in aiding towards this goal. After this initial screening, a few concepts sprang up which helped establish which were the main categories in these authors' texts that should be the focus of



the investigation. Therefore, the next two categories included in the research became the concept of “social justice” and “well-being”. Key aspects on each of their philosophies (Plato’s and Mill’s) but also specific enough to show almost directly there is a link between the two separately. To achieve this particular goal, Eliopoulos (2019) will remain relevant alongside Bowden (2009), Rowe (2007), Kosman (2007), Sen (2006), Kamtekar (2001), Neu (1971) and others. The research then concluded by designating the topicality of the problem which leads to the reflection stage when the characterization of the problem is finalized, based on authors like Walmsley (2013), Morrison (2007), Camps (2002), Reisch (2002), as well as refining points made through other authors previously.

All of this allowed me to revise quite strenuously some of the literature found on the subject, and to gain some critical insight on the workings of Plato’s Republic - such as the problem of justice, well-being, and the structure of the City-State - and Mill’s Utilitarianism - in regards to the economic and moral problems before I question where justice might find its place based on previous considerations - far beyond what I might have gleaned after merely reading of these texts, however thoroughly. This implies that the interpretation I may offer in my own article is based partially off of others’ interpretation of the texts and the problems each found within them. This, in turn, leads to the application of the theory towards a conceptual proposition regarding its application to our society, which will be understood after comparing Plato’s and Mill’s philosophies. From this it follows the closing deliberations about the problem, mainly concerning the debate on whether these theories may or may not, in fact, be applicable to a contemporary setting, which allows us to hypothesize how that might be feasible. It’s clear this would have to be furthered by studies done in more fields than the philosophical one, in which case the article justifies itself and opens the possibility to more discussion on the matter.

## Objectives

1. To reflect on how and if the outcomes that arise from Plato's and Mill's social justice theories as vehicles to achieve the well-being of the individual can be applied within a contemporary setting in which the individual lacks a fitter system through which to achieve said well-being through
  - a. To characterize the concept of social justice and its proposed applications towards the construction of the best city in aid of the well-being of the individual working harmoniously within Plato's Republic.
  - b. To characterize the concept of social justice and its proposed applications towards the construction of a better moral and economic system promoting the well-being of the individual in John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism.
  - c. To identify key aspects of the individual within a contemporary society which could be improved by achieving a personal sense of well-being stemming from the application of Plato's and Mill's theories of social justice.
  - d. To briefly propose how Plato's and Mill's theories of social justice and well-being may be applied in aid of the construction of a better sense of individual purpose in accordance with contemporary society surrounding him.

## 1. On Plato's Republic, the Division of the Soul, and How Justice Comes to be in a City According to the Philosopher

The characterization of justice in Plato's Republic is, to say the least, problematic to define. We can maintain this from the beginning, that the concepts of justice and well-being are essentially contested, in the terms of W. B. Gallie,<sup>5</sup> in the sense that it cannot be stated that there is a general consensus on the way these concepts may be used. It is logical for concepts to be developed and changed over time, making it so that what was understood for justice, as well as happiness, by both Plato and John Stuart Mill within their respective historic eras is not the same as what they denote nowadays. This does not mean, however, that we cannot take it upon ourselves to examine what they might have meant in order to make a possible extrapolation of their signification that is relevant to the discussion which has brought us here today.

In itself, the problem which Plato tries to tackle throughout the text, and some say<sup>6</sup> he fails in this regard, is to prove that justice is good in itself. He is considered to fail because in the dialogue, the arguments given by Glaucon and Adeimantus - who continue for the sake of the argument Thrasymachus' idea that being unjust is better than being just - are unequally compared to Socrates' argument for the opposite. Unequally compared given that Socrates, as stated above, tries to prove that justice is good in itself whilst his companions, despite affirming they are arguing in the same way, can only really prove, through examples, that being unjust is better than being just because of the consequences of being unjust, not because injustice is better than justice in itself.<sup>7</sup>

In order to better illustrate his ideas, Plato is forced to imagine a scenario in which we can see the development of justice through the relations that are established between individuals when founding a city. The main aspects we need to pay attention to here is the way the city is founded, followed by the way justice is established and maintained within

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<sup>5</sup> W.B Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts", 167-198.

<sup>6</sup> Annas, "Plato and Common Morality", 437-451, David Sachs, "A Fallacy in Plato's Republic", 141-158. J.L Creed, "Is it Wrong to Call Plato a Utilitarian?", 349-365.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Heinaman, "Plato's Division of Goods in The Republic", 315.

the city, to then find how this structure guarantees the well-being, or happiness, of the citizens.

The first step Plato takes is to identify the origin of justice in a city<sup>8</sup> in order to identify that the origin of the city itself is bound to our dependence on others.<sup>9</sup> The first city he imagines is far from perfect, where things go awry rather quickly because of the lack of reflection of the citizen's actions, which leads to excess and harms them because of their lack of moderation. Therefore, the city that follows must be a much more moderate city, where the division of classes follows a simpler structure where injustice is not necessarily introduced, but is refuted by Glaucon to be too lacking to be the ideal republic. Socrates then organizes the argument for Kallipolis, the ideal city, where the division of classes and the behavior of the citizens is much more complex, and where justice is the principle which ordains the relationships that are established within it.

As such, Plato organizes this ideal city in a pyramidal way where there are commoners, guardians or warriors, and rulers or philosophers. This division is necessary because the members of each class have different types of souls - which dictates to which class they belong -, interests - which are a result of their souls -, and virtues - which are the expressions of both soul and interest.

However, when addressing the division of the souls, it is necessary to touch upon the different types, if I may be allowed to call them as such, of justice. Before presenting his argument for the different types of souls, Plato introduces a question which brings up a few interesting inquiries. He begins by talking about the appetitive soul, and starts the dialogue with Glaucon by stating: "It is impossible for us to avoid admitting this much, that the same forms and qualities are to be found in each one of us that are in the State? They could not get there from any other source."<sup>10</sup> Then, he adds, "No such remarks then will disconcert us or any whit the more make us believe that it is ever possible for the same thing at the same time in the same respect and the same relation to suffer, be, or do

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<sup>8</sup> Plat. Rep. II 369a

<sup>9</sup> Plat. Rep. II 369b

<sup>10</sup> Plat. Rep. IV 435e

opposites.”<sup>11</sup> In this regard, he starts by outlining his theory of the soul which, compared to the theory he introduces in the *Phaedo*,<sup>12</sup> the function it serves is less psychological as he unifies it with the physical aspect of it, as is the city itself in this case.

This is where we start recognizing that, the same way the individual’s soul is divided into these three aspects but only one rules over the others, the city, which is comprised of citizens, also presents this division with one ruling above the others. That is to say, the Philosopher King, who’s soul is rational, therefore making him wise because he is a seeker of truth, should be a reflection of the highest tier of the social organization of the city, and as such, of the entire organization of the citizens below him. This is because the accepted definition of justice in the *Republic* comes from every individual working harmoniously in accordance with what they’re made for, or in other words, with what their soul dictates, and this harmony between the parts makes the whole just in itself – As opposed to justice being taken simply as “physic harmony.”<sup>13</sup> Here, the discussion mentioned above with Glaucon and Adeimantus, where they only seem able to prove that injustice is better than justice because of its consequences but not on its own, raises the stakes of the question because it can jeopardize the entire edification of the ideal city.

The inquiries I am referring to, however, have more to do with the paradox this division of the soul brings forth. That is to say, the unity of man is made up of his soul, which is divided. For a man to work properly, to achieve harmony, it is necessary for him to act in accordance with his soul. But he can’t achieve justice on his own. It is necessary that he becomes part of the city, which is also divided the same way as the man’s soul, in which he stops acting as whole by himself but becomes a part of the soul of the city itself, where he needs to work in accordance with his class and in harmony with the other classes so that the institution as a whole can achieve justice. It is evident that all of this indicates a symbiotic relationship under which the individual cannot exist outside the city, and the city cannot exist without the individual. What would happen if someone were left out? The question we must ask ourselves, then, is which type of justice must come first because we

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<sup>11</sup> Plat. Rep. IV 436e-437a

<sup>12</sup> Plat. *Phaedo* 114d-115a

<sup>13</sup> Annas, “Plato and Common Morality”, 437-451, David Sachs, “A Fallacy in Plato’s *Republic*”, 141-158.

could argue, according to what has been explained thus far, that what is just for the individual and what is just for the city work in a similar way, but that they are surely not the same in nature. Which one holds precedence over the other? Can there be such an order?

The logical answer so far is that the justice of the State precedes that of the individual because the individual cannot achieve justice by himself and needs to work within the framework provided by the city. However, this seems to only answer to part of the problem because for justice to be fulfilled in the State, that is, social justice, the individual must first act in harmony, and therefore, justice, to whatever part of the soul is predominant in himself, that is, individual justice. We can also bring forth this discussion from a moral and civic standpoint to our days when we consider whether our moral responsibility falls first within the realm of the political State or whether ethical theories would force us to forego these delimitations. Angel Puyol states that individuals are ultimate moral unit of ethics, and as such moral responsibility should be understood irrespective of States or cultures. This cosmopolitan stance is opposed by those who defend the State as the only source of citizen duties.<sup>14</sup> According to Hobbes, the State is a necessary condition of justice, and, Puyol says, the political system within a State is the only thing from which a distributive equality can be demanded.<sup>15</sup> The text proceeds to explain how, for authors such as Martha Nussbaum, education is the one true thing from which a political compromise may be reached. However, for Plato, whose theory may not be called cosmopolitan, the State as a political institution does not exist. Justice can only be acquired under the rule of the Philosopher-King under the order of the city.

Richard Mohr<sup>16</sup> also identifies this question in *The Republic*, and he considers this paradox as well when Plato starts analyzing the origins of justice in this manner.<sup>17</sup> This paradox seems to be resolved in what has been said above: the State in which we live

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<sup>14</sup> Puyol, *Deberes del Ciudadano con la Humanidad*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 65, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Mohr, "Social Justice in Plato", 193-199.

<sup>17</sup> Plat. Rep. IV 4343-35a

determines justice because we cannot act justly if we only take a single individual, in this case, ourselves, in consideration, so that we need to be subject to others in a justly manner to properly express justice ourselves, stemming from others doing the same.<sup>18</sup> Again, this relationship shows how intrinsically linked both manifestations of justice are so that to hold one as above the other would involve serious consequences to the entirety of the Platonic justice theory.

Until now we have considered the division of souls and the first appearance of justice under Plato's Republic. Still, there is a key element, that is still missing. Everything I have shown so far does not answer as to why this city Socrates comes up with is the best city of all, since that is indeed Socrates' purpose in presenting this thought experiment. The best city, under which justice, the best virtue, improves the individual and gets him closer to the supreme good. Or rather, as Creed states: "[...] Plato ends up by asserting [...] that the true nature of justice can be understood only in the light of the Form of the Good."<sup>19</sup>

But as Glaucon also points out, and this is also a major part of his argument that injustice is better than justice in itself, is that this structure doesn't necessarily mean that the citizen will be happy. As seen, Glaucon's arguments for injustice being better than justice are considered only from their consequences, as already show above because they bring a feeling of satisfaction to whoever commits that particular injustice, or, after Socrates disagrees with this, at least brings an indifferent sentiment that does not equate with injustice being bad, or evil. The role these feelings are given is important insofar as they force Socrates to establish that to be just is to be good, and therefore to be good is to be happy. After all, surely, and Plato repeats this in the Gorgias as well,<sup>20</sup> to suffer an injustice is better than to commit one. We can equate this with the functions of the soul, and plausibly say that to suffer an injustice is better to commit one because it does not go against the detriment of the soul and therefore doesn't impede the individual from acting harmoniously, and being good; this, in turn, allows the individual to find happiness, if we

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<sup>18</sup> Plat. Rep. IV 422a-27

<sup>19</sup> J.L. Creed, "Is it Wrong to Call Plato a Utilitarian?", 363.

<sup>20</sup> Plat. Gorg. 475b-e.

may use the word, through the fulfillment of his place in the Republic to ensure the common cause is met, which is the improvement of society and the attainment of justice.

We learn two things from the above. First, is that well-being can only be achieved in the absence of injustice, and the conscious exercise of one's duty. And second, that justice is something that does not merely happen but must be worked upon constantly, this making it an achievable goal that society must procure.

To continue with the problem we first elucidate, the same way we did with social and individual justice, which comes first, or rather, which is the necessary condition for the other: justice or well-being. The paradox seems to continue in this matter. If we've established that individual justice is determined by the State because citizens need each other in order to establish the collaboration that will make it so, we might argue similarly that in order to achieve this well-being, the individual must also be conscripted under the organization of the city. This is because he himself cannot possibly account for his own well-being if he's too preoccupied doing what does not answer to the order of his own soul.

Glaucon's arguments also focus heavily on this, that is, that someone may be happy without necessarily being just. Although, compelling, his reasoning falls apart under Socrates' scrutiny, since he can see that these consequences may bring temporary goods, but they are not good for the soul itself and such corruption causes the opposite in the end. This means that although the individual may have material goods, he might not enjoy true well-being; again, we come back to Socrates' argument that suffering an injustice is better than being unjust.

## 2. John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism and a Brief Look into His Economic and Social Thought

To examine what the previous statements may mean to us nowadays, we must then see how Plato's theory may be compatible with a modern point of view which has gained traction



these past few decades. Since John Stuart Mill wrote his *Utilitarianism* in the 19th century, his theory's relation to Plato's theory has not been deeply explored. Initially it seems this is due to Utilitarianism being considered mainly from an economic point of view, although the main subject of the book is ethics. So what does Plato's theory of justice have to do with John Stuart Mill's Utilitarian theory? Let's explore the idea. Eliopoulos<sup>21</sup> presents a rather interesting argument that seems to support what we've said before. For Plato, although the City-State is more important in the long term, the individual is a key aspect of his philosophy – that is not to say Plato didn't present a sort of Utilitarian maxim in *The Republic*, but to classify it as such would “mean the Platonic project is doomed to failure.”<sup>22</sup> Placing good and justice and supreme virtues, while at the same time coming up with a similar utopic State as Plato, although it is not his main argument and it is brought forth more as a consequence of his explanation, rather than as the figure through which it is explained by itself.

The Utilitarian maxim, the principle of the greatest happiness, is as follows: the more pleasure an action causes, and the more pain it reduces, the better it is morally insofar it increases the general amount of happiness. Unlike Bentham, however, he takes a much more qualitative approach to the theory, rather than merely a quantitative one. That is, the concept of the quality of the pleasures Mill introduces is key to understanding how his theory can be applicable both in the economic and moral field, and it may present us with a first link to Plato's philosophy, specifically, the division of the interests of the souls.

To do this, we must first establish if there is indeed a difference between the concepts of happiness, well-being, justice, and good in these contexts. Initially we can confirm that the previous four words refer to different things. As stated above, the meaning of concepts change overtime, and it is perhaps only natural to assume that the conception of these terms have evolved historically until we can understand them as referring to different states of being - Philosophers are keen to categorize any other possible definition of happiness under two other accounts, such as hedonism and satisfaction with life, which, I

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<sup>21</sup> Eliopoulos, “Plato, Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill on Justice as a Political Virtue and on Political Conformity.”

<sup>22</sup> Mohr, “A Platonic Happiness”, 135.

believe are both integrated under the previous dimension of “state of being”. As such is, we use them in our everyday lives to indicate, at first, entirely different courses of action, of modes of existence. This is, colloquially, what we mean when we say we are happy when we’re not sad; we are good when we don’t feel bad; and well when we’re not sick, or stressed, etcetera. It follows that we say we are just when we’re not being necessarily unjust. This tells us we experience these states because we have experienced the opposite, thus being able to make the comparison. Effectively, we feel more strongly towards something positive in the absence of something negative that we’ve experienced previously.

The point I make here is that this is precisely what is lying behind both the Republic and the Utilitarianism: we’ve seen how the Republic first established two previous imaginary cities in order to start building the best city, Kallipolis. This systemic way of thinking is what allows Glaucon to realize how his arguments can be taken out of proportion, and that they need to be reevaluated within a more controlled framework; this means that Socrates first needed to show what life without justice was like, so that Glaucon may see more clearly the need for it in itself. In Mill’s case, this may also be true.<sup>23</sup> Within this framework, we need to maximize happiness in general. This, in turn, maximizes morality, and, thus, good. It follows that justice comes from moral actions that result from the increase of happiness. And we call something just precisely because we do not want to suffer the opposite, that is, the decrease of happiness, or the increase of injustice. Again, we can see, at least at first glance, and similarly to Glaucon’s posture in the Republic, that justice is not desirable for itself, but for its consequences. Unlike Bentham’s classical utilitarianism, which is a “radically consequentialist doctrine”,<sup>24</sup> Mill’s can be considered both as a consequentialist and a hedonistic theory.<sup>25</sup>

However, we know that for Mill, we can prove something is good because it is desired. And who doesn’t desire justice? Only the unjust, who profit off of the consequences of their injustice which mostly only brings happiness to themselves and

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Kaufmann, “The Origin of Justice”, 209-239.

<sup>24</sup> Shapiro, *The Moral Foundation of Politics*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> J.L. Creed, “Is it Wrong to Call Plato a Utilitarian?”, 349.

hardly increases the general happiness; for now, it is safe to say that for both Mill and Plato justice is equal to good and injustice to wrong.

Earlier, I mentioned the link between the authors may have to do with the division of the interests of the souls of Plato. After examining the above, we must now remember that the concept that Mill introduces after Bentham is not only the quantity of the pleasures, but also their quality. He clearly states how pleasures are not comparable because if they were, what is good enough for a pig would then also be good enough for a man. We may say this is not the case, however, because an animal's conception of pleasure would not comprehend the conception of happiness for a human being when we take such category of quality under consideration. Mill himself states that it is better to be a wise man dissatisfied than a happy fool.<sup>26</sup> Here, we start comprehending the real depth of the concept of justice for the author, and we see the Republic reflected clearly in this passage: Mill's posture is the same as Socrates' when he states that it is better to suffer an injustice than to commit one.

To understand this claim better we must first examine what moral theory Mill is truly proposing. Whilst maximizing pleasure and avoiding pain are the guiding principles of his philosophy, it's true worth and possible applications are hidden behind aspects which at first glance may seem like no more than consequences of, or previous conditions to the establishment of such maxim within society, and like Plato, the key to understanding this lies in education. This education is only achieved within the State, given that man needs to be flexible to others in his surroundings, but is never fully finalized or completed. This does not mean that the State should be the only source of education, however. This would lead to a loss of critical thinking on a mass scale that would ultimately deny the individual a chance at self-determination. Even if someone acts unjustly at first, this only opens the possibility of learning to become more just, but he cannot do it by himself: "What must be ensured is that "all instruction which is given, [teaches] not that we may live, but that we may live well; all which aims at making us wise and good."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mill, *Utilitarismo*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism*, 73.

Plato also argues for something similar, knowing that, while it is true a citizen is born with a certain dominant part of his soul which dictates how he should, this nonetheless does not exempt him from the obligation to learn and perform his duty with justice in mind. Creed offers an enlightening paragraph in his text, which is followed by this quote: “Plato is thus much less like the utilitarian finding the answer to what we ought to do in the satisfaction of everyone's desires, and much more like the Stoics in their insistence that moral virtue is the only good.”<sup>28</sup> This seems to tell us why, for example, a philosopher would go back inside the cave even if he does not desire it. From this, it's clear that the role of society, and learning, both in Plato and Mill is of paramount importance. Now, the cooperation that must arise from such dynamics needs to be regulated, however; first by the individuals themselves, since they must act in accordance with the principle of greatest happiness, as we've seen, and then, by the State. From here we start seeing just how similar Mill's theory really is to that of Plato - However, I do consider it important to mention the studies on Mill by Giorgini,<sup>29</sup> Loizides<sup>30</sup> and Devigne,<sup>31</sup> especially when the last one shows us how “Mill distinguishes himself from almost all commentators on Plato of his age with his position that Plato primarily teaches a “mode of philosophy”— a method to understand and discover the truth—and not a “philosophy of beliefs”.”<sup>32</sup> This signifies this relation between their theories to stem from a purely literary interpretation and philosophical elucidation on my part.

This will also serve as a link to the claim that “what these two theories contribute to the well-being of the individual nowadays is a structured and deep analysis of the forms of social collaboration”, as I have stated in the introduction.

Another problem arises when we start thinking about individuals acting blindly according to this principle, which is also something that has been largely criticized in from this theory, which is the problem of liberty. How can individuals be truly happy if they

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<sup>28</sup> J.L. Creed, “Is it Wrong to Call Plato a Utilitarian?”, 358.

<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Giorgini, “Radical Plato”, 617-646.

<sup>30</sup> Antis Loizides, “Taking Their Cue from Plato”, 121-140.

<sup>31</sup> Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

must sometimes make sacrifices that will be unpleasant in order to increase the maximum amount of happiness in general? Does this mean, then, that in order for a society to be considered truly happy there must be some truly unhappy individuals? Eliopoulos comments, “Mill defends individual liberties by appeal to the general good, in the utilitarian sense, while, in our opinion, he does not make an unobstructed transition from justice to liberty.”<sup>33</sup> He also raises the question about whether increasing the amount of happiness can mean the place of the law within the State is merely suggestive but not absolute. If this is the case, must we also understand the principle of the greatest happiness as a law so as to not undermine the entire system? Plato’s proposal somehow seems more attractive when we consider this, only because his theory of the division of the souls and the fulfillment of their duty within a strict framework which represents in itself the justification of the final goal, which is justice; whereas Mill’s philosophy seems to trust too much on the nature of a man who seeks only what seems good for himself and those he loves, which is why he must also want the good for those he does not necessarily love in case he found himself in their position. Nevertheless, the problem of liberty persists. Which individual is truly free? The obvious answer would be to say that it depends on how we define freedom. Surely, to be free for an Athenian in times of Plato was radically different than to be free as an Englishman in times of Mill.

We can, for now, provide a sort of partial definition of what freedom means for Mill. When on *Liberty* he states that freedom consists of doing what is desired,<sup>34</sup> we might argue as Devigne shows us, that “[In] *On Liberty*, Mill argues that the actualization of different ways of life will induce people to make choices about their own character, thus promoting self-determined modes of existence.”<sup>35</sup> Meaning that Mill’s concept of freedom is not that one of negative freedom, but of the possibility of self-determination, the same way that Rousseau and Kant understood it because “If we are to be consistently free, we must be autonomous, directing our lives in a way wholly self-imposed and self-

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<sup>33</sup> Eliopoulos, “Plato, Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill on Justice as a Political Virtue and on Political Conformity”, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Mill, *Sobre la Libertad*, 108.

<sup>35</sup> Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism*, 70.

regulated.”<sup>36</sup> Much like Plato’s theory of the division of the soul, the individual must first answer to the ordainment of his soul to benefit the society at large; but also unlike Plato, for whom this ordainment would not be considered self-imposed.

Following this, it seems important that we examine whether the question of liberty is necessary to the development of justice within the State. So far, it’s been clear to us that the figure of the State is indispensable to the formation of a just individual. What follows is the question as to whether liberty is also a necessary concept, or rather, whether the development of the society that’s being instituted needs it in order to be set in motion, or whether it is brought forth as a side product of the practice of justice. But like justice, liberty isn’t an independent concept that can exist on its own. Some may argue that we can only perceive the illusion of liberty because everything we do is conditioned by our environment, our history, and in short, external circumstances that depend little on what we do or not. The stoics themselves understood this, and yet, we know that stoicism is not as deterministic as some may think, for we still have a sense of agency in the world.

Can we say the same about Plato and Mill? If we consider how liberty works within the Republic, it may help us bring all these concepts together so as to apply a system similar to Plato’s Kallipolis in our days – Not looking to really build such a city or following it’s hierarchical organization, but rather understanding it’s theoretical foundation - I say, because our job here is not to distinguish whether Plato’s Republic is really meant to be taken as a possible pragmatic resolution to his theories, but as a thought experiment which can nonetheless guide us from its founding principles, or perhaps also simply as a cautionary tale not meant to be taken seriously. Such studies have been proposed, but for the purposes of this paper we shall agree with Morrison when they affirm the utopia of the Republic can be of use to us today without needing to be realized.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, Mill’s approach is meant to be realized, whilst still being considered a utopia, somewhat arguably. I think it’s safe to say at this point that the

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>37</sup> Morrison, *The Utopian Character of Plato’s Ideal City*, 234.

difference strives here on Mill's theory being act-centered, whereas Plato's theory is agent-centered, based on the analysis offered by Annas.<sup>38</sup> This must not be taken to mean, however, that Mill's Utilitarianism does not offer elements which fit best an agent-centered moral theory, or the other way around in Plato's case. This is only meant to show a key difference in the way the two authors approach the conjunction between justice and morality in their quest to define their ideal societies. Mill doesn't let his economic background and financial training be overshadowed by his moral philosophy. For him, these worlds are linked to a fault. Unlike Plato, who focuses less on the formal aspect of the economy of his city, Mill's Utilitarianism shines precisely because it is meant to be taken as both a moral guide of action - under which the principle of the greatest happiness is presented-, as well as an economic guideline in which people might more easily see the results of their actions reflected - Obviating Bentham's classical utilitarian theory because one thing is being just, and acting with justice because our nature so demands it.

But Plato might place too much trust in human nature when he affirms this. So Mill's economic principles materializes this reality, thus making this moral theory more accessible to individuals since it is much more simple than other moral theories circulating at the time - see, for example, Kantianism, which seeks to see ethics applied to every individual stemming from a set group of values throughout history and societies in a much more formal way; that is, Kantianism, at least at the beginning, seems to only consider a formal approach to ethics by categorizing duties and values.

On the other hand, Mill's Utilitarianism also provides some sort of measuring scale from which the results of being just and acting with justice improve both the individual's inner life as well as the society they live in. Of course, Plato's Republic does this too, but the economy presented in it is based on pre-established classes, and the consequences of acting according to one's soul is translated to all the citizens having a specific field of action. Therefore, the macroeconomic aspect in the Republic is of little consequence to the individual because the individual already enjoys from its proper functioning since they commit to the exercise of justice. Mill's individuals are not so rigidly divided, and in a

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<sup>38</sup> Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 1-362.

bourgeoise society, the larger impact of the economy must be closely followed by everyone, especially is they mean to follow the principle of the greatest happiness.

According to this, we may then reasonably say that Mill's conception of justice is a distributive one, set on achieving a similar application of social justice as Plato. That is to say, Mill seeks to establish a sort of welfare State which would be responsible to increase the quality of life of all individuals, and where the distribution of goods is what ensures the individual's capacity to work under the utilitarian premise of the increase of pleasure. This means that societal cooperation, as well as functional aspects such as legislation, are moved by a utilitarian impulse because they are more useful than, say, a State of war.<sup>39</sup> Society does rely on an economy through which to achieve his goal, but unlike the Republic, is does not need a ruler to control it. However, since the Second World War there are some who defend a minimal State as opposed to a welfare one because they perceive these theories to have failed in their purpose. The minimal State that is lobbied, then, gives ample space to personal action and defends the good functioning of economic relations. All in all, it seems to want to return to a *laissez-faire* system.<sup>40</sup>

This system is nevertheless insufficient, as Dahrendorf notes according to Gómez, because a State cannot be reduced to just ensuring the individual's survival, and just as Kantian ethics, it is criticized by its procedures instead of its results.<sup>41</sup> Yet, even if both welfare States and minimal States are flawed in their understanding of what the proper sphere of action of a State is in our days, we can more or less assertively say Mill's thought agrees more with the former one, rather than the last.

Comparatively, we may say Plato's Philosopher King serves the same function as the shared conscience of the individual's in Mill's society because they both hold justice and happiness as the highest goods we must aspire to by making them good by themselves, from where the consequences are coincidentally also good for the whole of society as such.

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<sup>39</sup> Gómez de Pedro, "El Estado de Bienestar", 122.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 385.

<sup>41</sup> Gómez de Pedro, "El Estado de Bienestar", 390.



### 3. Comparing Plato, Mill, and Considering How They Might Complement Social Justice and Individual Purpose Today.

Might the previous analysis clue us in as to what is missing from our society? The world today is in crisis, in every sense of the world, and it all quite evidently boils down to two main phenomena: politics and economics. While the importance of the political dimension of man has been present throughout history since even before Aristotle described man as a *zoon politikon*, nowadays the essence of true politics seems to be lost to us. If before politics were important for the proper functioning of the city because it gave order to a gathering of different individuals coexisting in a same space, now, it seems to have become a synonym with economy with the application of neoliberalism - not necessarily taken together in the same sense as Mill understood them. States are being run not as political projects which are meant to guarantee the wellbeing of their citizens, but rather as economic projects which are meant to guarantee the generation of wealth - which is often believed to be the same as guaranteeing the wellbeing of the citizens. In this way, man has been relegated to the background of the functioning of society, and the State becomes a company.

The very essence of the individual is threatened when he feels like his purpose is to work for society without knowing why, or simply because he is forced to do so to survive. The individual of the Republic has a purpose because he is just in his soul, and seeks to achieve justice through his job. The utilitarian individual is guaranteed a little more than his mere survival by the welfare State, thus allowing him to not depend on it as long as he can and freeing him to act with justice also. But in our days, the concept of justice is fleeting. Can there be justice without harmony? What about the proper distribution of goods? Are States nowadays even the way through which justice is supposed to be met, seeing that as stated above there is a flawed understanding of what the proper sphere of action of a State is? It seems we are taught so, but in reality, the actions of the institutions designed to act justly leave a lot to be desired. After all, philosophy has long wondered between the link of justice with legality and legitimacy. Governments are legitimate, but they don't always act legally, nor justly. Sometimes, they also act legally, but also not justly. Unfortunately, it is

hard to find an example of a scenario where such an institution has acted justly, regardless of an action being legitimate or legal. If we want to define what justice is for us today, must it also correlate to these terms?

How can we help develop a better society? Amartya Sen talks about a societal development that should help us reach self-realization through the full exercise of our freedom, according to Ruiz.<sup>42</sup> This means that when we analyze categories like justice and poverty, we might set certain bases for human and economic development in a way that transcends the criticism that utilitarianism has faced which in turn may allow us to challenge the predominant notions of it, and offer new alternatives for problems such as quality of life and freedom.<sup>43</sup>

Kaufmann<sup>44</sup> also perceives the problem of the definition of justice to stem from the common, generalized conception that we have of these terms. It is clear we tend to define something by judging it from its opposite concept. This means that justice seems to be much more easily defined when comparing it to injustice, and many would like to think they possess a strong, clearly defined moral compass which makes what is just and unjust almost obvious. However, it is also clear that these definitions vary depending on external causes which depend little on said individual. As such, how general can the concept of justice really be? Is it something that can be measured? And if so, how?

In a globalized world which is setting higher goals than ever before, the divisor lines between groups fades slowly and steadily, creating a rupture of established processes that may have worked for a group before, but now start bleeding into other spheres where they may not become entire realized for the better - Geopolitically speaking, in this case, which is why I won't stop to analyze specific examples. Taking off from the economic-political couple, since the cold war the world has been more than ideologically divided, and the rise to nationalisms has led to a very poor decision-making strategy from the worlds-superpowers. Core values in our lives like freedom, justice and happiness are idealized, and

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<sup>42</sup> Ruiz, "Desarrollo y Calidad de Vida", 117.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

<sup>44</sup> Kaufmann, "The Origin of Justice", 212.

yet, the world as we know it is fighting a war against basic human rights. The concept of “Overshoot” which proves the rapid decline of natural resources on which our survival depends, the 58% decline of vertebrates over the last 50 years, the growing rates at which people of color are incarcerated given their lack of opportunities and bad quality of education, the income inequality that exists and keeps growing between the wealthiest 1% compared to the bottom 80%, the correlation between education and longevity, among others; all of this stemming from prioritizing economic growth and stretching it to the point where it is actually doing us more harm than good, as shown in an analysis by Jeremy Lent when discussing Steven Pinker’s ideas that would suggest what I said in the beginning of this paragraph to not be true.<sup>45</sup>

Economic superpowers carry out campaigns in foreign countries in order to advance their own agendas, accomplishing in the process the formation of Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*.<sup>46</sup> The citizen becomes a minuscule particle in the grand scheme of things, and the cult to institutions and companies is widespread enough to be so normalized that it’s almost impossible to break free from that invisible contract. The glorification of numbers and data, the techniques of mass control, the loss of a sense of belonging and control, the contempt of philosophy. In fact, Byung-Chul Han explores the same sense of loss of identity which has been a pillar in this text, according to Baratás, when he states that the neoliberal system relies on the self-exploitation of the individual which leads to an internal struggle because we end up wanting to optimize our performance,<sup>47</sup> not improve our quality of life. After all, today men are treated and commercialized as data packages susceptible to be economically exploited.<sup>48</sup>

What these situations cause at the core of the individual is a sort of cognitive dissonance between what we are taught to believe about our values and the practical reality of the world we live in. How can we truly believe we deserve to be happy if that fact is not

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<sup>45</sup> Lent, “Steven Pinker’s Ideas are Fatally Flawed”.

<sup>46</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

<sup>47</sup> Baratás, “Han, Byung-Chul (2016)”, 885-6.

<sup>48</sup> Han, Byung-Chul, “Política, Neoliberalismo y Nuevas Formas de Poder”, 98, quoted in Baratás, “Han, Byung-Chul (2016)”, 887.

backed up by statistics which compel a company to work for the sake of everyone, and not just a few? The government knows it is just for the citizens to have a dignified life, and yet they refuse to work on the problems injustice cause because it's not profitable. This concept of dignified life generally strives in achieving what's necessary to fulfill our everyday needs. As such, some define it in terms of eradicating poverty, and others, like Mill, it would seem, in diminishing pain – therefore increasing happiness. To have an innate human dignity should mean it is something we cannot lose, and yet organizations such as the United Nations are structured around the issue of bringing to, and maintaining, such a status for the less privileged. It would seem to be that a dignified life, as well as a good standard of living, depends on others to be either given or stripped, which reinforces the idea that social justice must be observed first.

There appears to not be a strategy from where an individual who is already not born into an advantaged life can be self-realized in contemporary society. Walmsley translates all the previous issues to two main problems: the disruption of traditional life and practical morality, and the fragmentation of theoretical ethics which are rooted in the emergence of western modernity, especially in the emergence of modern empirical science and its underlying mentality.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. Social Justice and Well-being: Final Considerations, and the Need for an Improved System

So, why take on Plato and Mill as examples? Whilst we have already seen their theories differ in some aspects but share others, what both have in common, besides the evident structuring of the State, is perhaps the way they propose these theories. It is of course not exclusive to their own times, but indicative of their underlying mechanics which ultimately lead them to think of a way they could think about them and understand what they needed

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<sup>49</sup> Walmsley, "Is There a Place for Traditional Values and Virtues in Society Today?", 34.

to do in order to see its improvement. A part of the individual, of course, tends to want things to grow, multiply and improve, as it is just as true for the individual himself as for those he is surrounded with because it is also a part of mankind to want to control his environment. As such, the only way he can guarantee his surroundings will remain in control is to compromise with others whose ideas of control may differ, but which in the end achieve similar goals. As such, the first thing Plato and Mill provide us with is structure. Not the specific structuring of society, as we have seen, but an organized way to think about how we think of things like the division of classes, the legitimacy of government institutions, the duties and rights of citizens and, therefore, the relationships that must be established between said individuals and said institutions so as to secure the good functioning of the State mechanism.

But only establishing these relations and the importance of the proper functioning of the State is not enough. What is desired by the individual within both the Republic and the Utilitarianism is happiness. Justice then becomes a necessary condition for the individual to truly be able to find this happiness through his well-being. So if the State cannot be found to contain a capacity for justice, even if this is the case of the citizens, the individual will then see that his well-being is not given the importance it deserves, and then both social and individual justice cannot be realized because the minimal conditions for them are not met. In this case, the next thing these texts show us is a clear categorization of values based on the principle of human dignity, whilst establishing a complex political organization which would theoretically lead to a greater societal evolution. When discussing democracy, Habermas also says that unlike ethical questions, justice issues don't refer to a collective because law has to concur with moral principles over a particular community.”<sup>50</sup>

The issue with individuals today is that we have started losing sight of the future because we see our actions as insignificant within the big scheme of corporations which dictate how the world operates nowadays, whilst still being blamed for issues we have little to no control about. Climate change, for example, has been proven to be caused by overproduction, and not overpopulation. Michael Hanauer states that “population size

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<sup>50</sup> Habermas, “Tres modelos de democracia. Sobre el concepto de una política deliberativa”, 5.

matters most to the big picture and over the long term” when comparing overpopulation and overconsumption, as he concludes that “population growth directly drives increasing overall consumption, but not vice versa.”<sup>51</sup> However, whilst overconsumption may be directly caused by overpopulation, the fact remains that “we can feed more than ten billion people today more than adequately.”<sup>52</sup>

Yet, individuals are still told that small decisions they make, or stop making, are what is changing our environment whilst these companies continue to operate almost unregulated for the sake of profit, among other things. Yet, individuals are still told that small decisions they make, or stop making, are what is changing our environment whilst these companies continue to operate almost unregulated for the sake of profit, among other things. What this causes is a loss of the sense of individual purpose because we are not perceived to hold real power over the world whilst still somehow being responsible for it.

This is, in the end, what we must explore in order to provide some semblance of a definitive answer to the issue from which this text has sprung forth. What can the concept of social justice in Plato’s Republic and John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarianism contribute to the well-being of the individual within western contemporary society? As we have seen above, the first thing these theories contribute is a structure, from which the well-being of the individuals within them is guaranteed. But we have still left to understand how these ideal structures could prove to guarantee the well-being of the individual nowadays. The first question we face is that of which these structures were meant or not to be fully realized, that is, whether the finality of Plato’s and Mill’s theories was actually meant to be implemented in society, or whether they were meant to be understood as more of a thought experiment or theory which could be useful without needing to be realized. It is necessary to understand this, evidently, but not really to answer this question on our own. I think it is enough to know that, at least to Plato, to truly know something is the first step to become that. That is why in the Republic, the man who knows true justice, the Philosopher King, the individual who frees himself from the cavern is then able to differentiate between the

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<sup>51</sup> Hanauer, “Overpopulation and Overconsumption”, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Lescure, “Overpopulation vs Overproduction”.

real objects and their shadows, thus being able to analyze in himself what is real and what's not; so the Philosopher King becomes just because he knows justice in itself, not just by its reflection in the cavern wall. So is the Republic one more shadow, or the fire that brings them to us, or is it a glimpse of the real concept of justice? Those are questions that would require a much longer extension of this text for us to be able to answer them. Perhaps what Plato was hinting at is that Socrates is this Philosopher King who has seen the truth, and now must, reluctantly, go back in the cave to free us from our ignorance. In this case, Socrates' defense of justice in itself is the only argument we should take that it is true, and therefore, good.

Additionally, if we return to Habermas as an example, we may also see how he believes that a dialogical conception understands politics from reason and persuasion rather than exclusively from volition and power which should be focused on achieving something akin to a good, just, or acceptable form from which we might organize social relations and the nature of individuals.<sup>53</sup> This is why, when he compares the democratic formation of the common will as a compromise among interests, and the republican one as an ethical self-comprehension, he seeks to establish a deliberation which can be supported in a consensus based on a common culture.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, we see how Mill's democratic and liberal thought might be linked with Plato's republican and idealistic one.

Of course, to propose the same restructuring of the state of things as in the Republic is impossible. For this reason, what this paper aims to achieve is only theoretical in nature, given that the implications of proposing a Kallipolis in real life, or even a utilitarian society within a welfare State, would imply a shift not only in the political, institutional and economic framework, but also a drastic shift in the way relations are maintained between individuals themselves. As such, we must focus on a much more utilitarian approach from our own attitudes to life within the State as it is today, but with some modifications to the way these institutions answer to their own parts in order to deal justice the way Plato might have meant. In this sense, the previous reflection allows us to analyze the current

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<sup>53</sup> Habermas, "Tres Modelos de Democracia", 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

underlying structure of human relations both among ourselves and our relation to the States we currently live under. Why do we need a utopia in order to reflect on our situation? Why must we defend the idea that human beings seek happiness, and why is it so unpopular to consider that finance should not be more esteemed than morality? Is all of this really such an idealistic approach to setting clear policies and polities that work in a just way in order to make individuals happy? If so, what would really be the path we should pursue, and to what end? The problem of justice, and happiness, is certainly limitless, and there are all sorts of questions we might ask so that we truly lead the best lives we can.



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