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KARL POPPER'S RECEPTION OF PLATO'S CONCEPT OF 'HAPPINESS'

Karl Raimund Popper (1902-1994) is regarded as one of the most influential intellectual figures of the twentieth century. In the philosophy of science, his primary contribution is the concept of *falsification* (or *refutation*), which he developed in critical opposition to the *verification* principle advocated by the Vienna Circle. His work in this field has had a lasting impact, especially on the understanding of scientific methodology within the natural sciences.

Beyond the realm of scientific inquiry, Popper's ideas on political philosophy, particularly his conception of the *open society*, have had a profound influence on social and political thought. Popper's critique of totalitarianism – embodied in his defence of democratic freedoms and individual rights – remains a cornerstone of his legacy. He distinguishes between the *open society*, in which individuals are free to make personal decisions, and the *closed society*, which is characterized by tribalism, collectivism, and a lack of individual autonomy. Popper argues that the closed society is fundamentally oppressive and restricts human freedom.

In his seminal work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1943), Popper critiques the totalitarian tendencies present in Western intellectualism, tracing these ideas from Plato to Marx. His criticism of Plato is particularly focused on the philosopher's conception of happiness, which Popper interprets as a dangerous and flawed ideal.

Popper does not refer to happiness as a "concept" in the traditional sense, but instead categorises it as one of the moral ideas, alongside Justice, Wisdom, Truth, and Beauty [1, p. 149]. For Popper, happiness is inherently linked to individual well-being, and he adopts a utilitarian approach to its ethical implications. He argues that there is no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure, suggesting that happiness should be considered in a profoundly individualistic way: 'there is, from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure' [1, p. 241].

Popper particularly targets Plato's belief that society is '*by nature*' divided into classes or castes. Plato's ideal state, according to Popper, envisages a return to tribalism, where true happiness is not achieved by individuals or specific classes but by the collective. This notion is intricately tied to Plato's conception

of justice, which Popper argues is inherently totalitarian. For Plato, only a totalitarian justice system can bring about true happiness. Popper, therefore, considers Plato's political philosophy to be an enemy of the open society [1, p. 149-151].

However, Popper's critique raises questions about the justice of Plato's ideas – indeed, Popper himself seems to hesitate to label Plato's views as 'unjust' or 'false'. He acknowledges 'Plato's hatred of tyranny' as well as his fundamental sincerity and benevolence [1, p. 150]. Here, Popper reveals a gap in his own understanding: the modern notion of totalitarianism, characterized by the opposition between society and the state within *representative democracies*, does not directly map onto Plato's ideas. This is because Plato's idea of a total state is rooted in a form of *direct democracy*. In Plato's vision, therefore, the totality of the state, though oppressive by modern standards, was not associated with the brutal consequences that characterized twentieth-century totalitarian regimes.

Despite this, Popper continues his critique, warning that attempts to return to tribal or heroic ideals will inevitably lead to the rise of oppressive regimes. He suggests that the desire to return to a simpler, more harmonious state of nature will eventually result in violence, repression, and the destruction of human dignity. But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society' [1, p. 177].

In the context of education, Popper criticises the moral and philosophical traditions that continue to shape modern educational systems. He believes that the classical focus on power, fate, and tribal morality perpetuates an outdated and harmful worldview [see 2, p. 262]. This system, according to Popper, fosters a distorted sense of human importance, one that is excessively preoccupied with fame and power, rather than with individual autonomy and the development of reason.

In conclusion, Popper's interpretation of Plato's concept of happiness reveals deep tensions between the ideals of the ancient philosopher and the principles of the open society. While Popper criticises Plato for endorsing a totalitarian vision of justice and happiness, he also acknowledges the sincerity and complexity of Plato's thought. Ultimately, Popper's critique serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of returning to tribal or authoritarian ideals in the quest for societal happiness. His vision of the open society, rooted in reason, individualism, and democratic freedom, remains a compelling alternative to the totalitarian tendencies he identifies in Plato's philosophy and in modern political movements.

References:

1. Popper K.R. *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Vol. 1: The Spell of Plato.* London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD, 1947 [First published in 1943]. 268 p.
2. Popper K.R. *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Vol. 2: The High Tide Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath.* London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD, 1947 [First published in 1943]. 352 p.