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Socrates and Bosnia

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When I was a student of philosophy before the war, I was puzzled by one aspect of Socrates' teaching. Namely, in Plato's dialogue the *Gorgias*, Socrates, in discussion with Polus, says that injustice is the greatest evil. To Polus' question whether he would rather suffer injustice or to do injustice Socrates replies that he would not want either, but if he has to choose he would choose to suffer injustice, rather than to do injustice. At that time I was trying to imagine a specific situation in which Socrates' answer could be correct, but I was not completely convinced of the correctness of this view.

When the war started in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the terrible pictures of killing and torture forced me to ask myself again the question that Polus asked Socrates. Is it better to be a victim who suffers a terrible injustice or to be the one who does injustice? One day, I was watching an event on television in which a truck that was transporting the wounded to the hospital was hit by the artillery from the surrounding hills. Most people in the truck were killed or mutilated. In that moment, Socrates' answer to Polus' question became absolutely acceptable to me: I would rather be among those people who suffered injustice, than among those who did injustice.

It does not mean that we should conclude from this that it is good to be a victim of abuse and that we should keep quiet and tolerate an evil that is being afflicted to us. I think Socrates' view, that he would rather choose to suffer injustice than to do it, should be understood as an attempt to emphasize the great evil of injustice. If people would understand the great evil of injustice, they would not do it. It seems that Socrates believes that this view against acts of injustice when taken as a universal principle means that anybody would give up from doing injustice. In an ideal situation, there would not exist anybody who suffers injustice. For Socrates as well as for other ethicists in antiquity, to be a good person means to be happy. A virtuous person will do what is right in every moment of his life and because of that his life will be happy. A person with a corrupted soul will be torn between the countless desires and attempt to fulfill them which will cause injustice to other people, and consequently that person will be unhappy. Therefore, for Socrates, injustice is the greatest evil and to have an evil soul means to live a miserable life. Taking all this into account it seems acceptable, indeed desirable, to embrace the strange view that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it.

If we go back to the war in Bosnia, the Socratic conclusion would be that one should by no means consent to commit injustice or to be on the side of those who do it. It would be best not to suffer any injustice or do it, but if one must choose then one should choose the side that suffers injustice and not the one that does it. This view can be expanded to post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To hold the Socratic view in today's BiH does not mean to be silent and suffer the evil which our politicians do. In conversation with Polus, Socrates says that our souls may be as sick as our bodies, so in the same way that the body can heal, the soul of the person who does wrong can heal as well. Those who do wrong should be reproved and, if necessary, punished. To act in the Socratic way in today's BiH does not mean to remain silent and suffer injustice, but it means that we should not do injustice, and those who do it should be admonished, counseled, and punished for the sake of the goodness and happiness of the whole community, and for their own sake.

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