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# “Political Correctness” from a “Border Reason”: Between Dignity and the Shadow of Exclusion

Ivón Cepeda-Mayorga

Tecnologico de Monterrey, Carlos Lazo 100, Santa Fe, 01389 Mexico City, Mexico; icepeda@itesm.mx;  
Tel.: +52-55-9177-8343

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**Abstract:** The concept of political correctness highlights a set of principles and structures that should (or, in other cases, must) be followed to pursue a specific social behavior that characterizes a society and endorses an ideal identity. Nevertheless, even when this behavior implies a sense of social recognition and acceptance by a specific group, it also encompasses a risk of imposing a particular model of life, halting the emergence of criticisms and differences as far as it could be misguided to promote discrimination and exclusion. All of these raise the question of whether it is possible to conceive political correctness from a perspective of inclusion that transcends this layer of exclusion. If this is the case, following Eugenio Trías’ philosophy about the limit, the concept needs to be reconsidered through a “border reason” that enables one to conceive the benefits it brings as well as the criticisms that come from the analysis of the “shadowy” practice of the concept. This approach will lead to accepting that political correctness fulfills a function for society but that it requires a reflexive attitude along with its practices as part of a border relation between its benefits and the risks that it also has to tackle. Finally, a concept that could serve as a hinge to reinforce the perspective of a border limit is dignity, which could lead to an ethical reflection that underpins politically correct actions.

**Keywords:** political correctness; discrimination; philosophy of limit; dignity; Eugenio Trías

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, as societies become heterogeneous, the demand to reconsider how to manage diversity inside them has become an important challenge to contemporary politics and practices, especially because there is a rise of discriminatory movements that use cultural, racial, or gender differences to promote violent actions against specific groups, such as the rise of discrimination towards migrants in the United States [1], the emergence of xenophobic movements and conflicts in South Africa [2], or the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and Mexico City [3], just to mention some. The challenge then is promoting a sense of coexistences among all members of society; respecting and valuing differences, without reinforcing attitudes or actions of exclusion. These are necessary if they want to achieve the principles of justice and equity under democratic regimes. Dealing with problems of exclusion and discrimination is not a recent controversy; however, one of the ways in which this issue can be perceived is analyzing the use of language because there are some linguistic expressions that promote a racist, sexist, homophobic, or violent conducts.

The concept of political correctness was firstly conceived as a way to refrain expressions, attitudes, and actions encouraging the marginalization or exclusion of a person or a group based on their cultural, racial, ideological, or any other particular characteristic considered as relevantly different [4] (p. 270). We are not saying that differences do not exist; moreover, they are perceived, mainly without formal arguments, as relevant aspects that underpin an ideological response against those who are different or think differently. Nevertheless, even when the idea of political correctness was intended to promote

respectful coexistence beyond differences, it also raised certain controversy, since it could be used to endorse a “proper” use of the language or an “accepted” way of thinking. The problem is that it could censor, without presenting a reasonable dialogue or debate, other perspectives that attempt to question or criticize what is considered as politically correct [4] (pp. 271–272). This is a risk that should not be underestimated as it carries with it the complication of imposing one point of view over another, an action that could lead to an authoritarian behavior. This conduct misrepresents the relevance of political correctness as it is perceived to be an invention “to discredit those who wished to change the *status quo*” [5] (p. 3), when it actually encourages a subtle form of exclusion by specific formulas of cultural and linguistic expressions or actions that influence political, social, and even economic relations between people.

Because of this, it is relevant to inquire whether it is possible to reconsider the concept of political correctness emphasizing the effort to create a harmonious coexistence within diversity, as well as noting the possible risk of imposing a specific standard of expression and thought. Therefore, the main objective of this text is to highlight the need to analyze the concept of political correctness from a perspective of inclusion and dignity. In this sense, it proposes to re-examine this idea from the perspective of “border reason,” which was developed by the Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías. It implies considering both aspects of the concept of political correctness: its capability to create an environment of respect and recognition of the value of diversity, as well as the possibility that it can be used to impose a way of thinking and acting. Then, this border reason demands a reflexive attitude through which there is an exchange between the two mentioned aspects that act as complementary parts of one same concept, which is political correctness. In this sense, for Trías, the knowledge of an idea requires being aware of the positive elements of that idea as well as its negative referents, because both are part of the process of defining an idea. The limits between them are a hinge or border where the plausible and rejected elements coexist in the same concept. Therefore, as a way of understanding this proposal of a border reason, we introduce the idea of dignity because it could also be perceived as a hinge that conjoins both aspects of political correctness. First, it highlights a value that underpins the search for respect and recognition that is within the spirit of the first defence of political correctness, second, acknowledging the value of dignity, allows for the possibility of learning from the risk of imposing one perspective above others, and finally, recovers the notion of the value of diversity from a respectful and tolerant perspective. By facing the negative precedents of an authoritarian and prejudicial thought or language, it is possible then to pointedly endorse the value of diversity and consider it as part of a virtuous behavior based on praising dignity.

This text has a dual objective: first, to analyze the concept of political correctness from the perspective of a border reason, which enables one to settle connections of understanding between the benefits and the risks that come with the idea of political correctness. Second, the concept of dignity is presented as a sort of axis or hinge that may help to clarify and understand the aforementioned benefits and risks through the proposed analysis of the idea of political correctness from a border reason. Then, how should we understand the concepts of political correctness and a border reason? What is the relationship between dignity and the actions considered politically correct? Further, how does dignity function as a hinge between an ethical perspective and the practice of political correctness? These are some of the questions that serve as an outline to the text.

## 2. The Controversy of the Concept of Political Correctness

To discuss the idea of political correctness is not as simple as it could be firstly perceived. It is not just a debate about expressions and language; it also requires a reflection about the meaning of the concept and its implications in everyday behavior. The concept of political correctness has generated a series of controversies in different contexts or topics, such as politics, linguistic studies, education, gender issues, race, sexual orientation, and cultural diversity [5] (p. 2). Nevertheless, the criticisms against political correctness come from two different perspectives: the first one emphasizes that it could be seen only as a linguistic controversy more than a search for social or cultural change [6] (p. 18);

the second one sees in political correctness the opportunity to impose the perspective of one specific group and the censorship of other standpoints, as Doris Lessing suggests in her essay *Censorship* [7]. Therefore, it is not enough to highlight the definition of that which is considered political correctness; there is a need for an analysis that helps clarify how the concept is understood and applied.

The idea of political correctness became popular in academic institutions as a means of self-imposed courtesy or politeness to avoid expressions that could be offensive to specific groups of students or minorities such as black people, women, and homosexuals [5] (p. 2). It implies the use of certain linguistic expressions or euphemisms instead of other words, as in the use of “women” instead of “girls,” or “Afro-American” instead of “black people”. The main goal of these expressions was to promote social and cultural change based on the acknowledgment and respect of those minorities [6] (p. 17) and to avoid stigmatizing language; it would lead to the acceptance of diversity without prejudice, avoiding offensive or violent actions against the people who represent that diversity. Even when it is difficult to settle on an exact definition of what political correctness is, in general terms, it can be said that it tries “to stress human communality and correspondingly to downplay engrained differences and exclusivity, discouraging judgmental attitudes and outlawing demeaning language” [5] (pp. 56–57). However, this definition is open to interpretation about what could be considered a judgmental attitude or a demeaning use of language. There are also certain characteristics that can affect the way something perceived as politically correct in a particular context may be perceived differently in a distinct one. “These include various aspects that are categorized under ‘difference,’ some of them traditional, such as race and ethnicity, xenophobia, disability, disease, and mental disorders. Other areas of difference ranging from the natural, such as gender and sexual orientation, to the more extreme socialized forms, namely criminal behavior and addiction, have also been recognized for centuries” [5] (p. 113). Some of these topics could be considered sensitive or embarrassing for some groups or cultures, while for others (depending on the cultural context of each particular society), these same topics might not be perceived in a negative way. As an example, there is the case of harmful practices towards women in some communities in Nigeria that consist in genital mutilation done to girls as part of a rite of initiation to adult life as women so that they can marry. The expressions used to call these practices are “female genital circumcision” and “female genital mutilation.” Even though both expressions address the same fact, the first one emphasizes a medical condition attached to cultural aspects considered essential to their identity, while the second one highlights the violent side of the action against girls and women [8] (pp. 64–66). Nevertheless, both expressions also imply a division within the community between the people who try to defend their cultural roots and traditions, and the people who fight for security, health, and the rights of girls and women. Then, both expressions were used to identify the extremes on the discussion of the subject. Besides, both expressions also come from two different referents of cultural values and knowledge, which show how it could be tougher to define what is “politically correct” since it could be influenced by a particular context.

From a historical perspective, it is important to recall that the idea of political correctness was conceived during the second part of the 20th century as a way to determine which was the proper language that must be used by the people who belonged to the Chinese Communist Party. Mao Tse Tung introduced this specific linguistic formula through his manuscript *Little Red Book* (1964), which establishes how to call people that share or do not share the same ideology as the Party [5] (p. 15). Later, the left-wing movements relied on political correctness as an option to tackle racism and discrimination. Then, for left-leaning individuals, political correctness also implies supporting certain topics as gay marriage, women’s rights, the refusal to use racial terms on migration issues, or consideration for Aboriginal people who have a special connection with land and nature [9] (p. 42). This shows two different uses of political correctness: it is used to reinforce a specific ideology that endorses an identity, and serves to target anyone who does not belong or does not share the same ideas of the group in power. Moreover, it is used to prevent discriminatory and insulting behavior against specific groups or beliefs, based on a sense of justice and the acceptance of people who are different [6] (pp. 17–18).

Even though, in a way, political correctness appears as a linguistic or semantic issue (because of the use of certain expressions or words), in reality the concept emerged within a context where the goal was to incorporate this concept within cultural policy, and to struggle for cultural diversity to be acknowledged and taken into account. As Hughes argues, “[i]n many ways the impulse behind political correctness in its essential sense of respect derives from an awareness of multiculturalism” [5] (p. 19). Besides, this emphasis on values as justice and dignity reinforce a moral dimension of political correctness from a sense of recognition of diversity as something valuable inside society. The sense of recognition endorses an intersubjective approach that strengthens an ethical life and the social fabric inside society [10] (p. 26), as it also serves to regulate individual freedom by raising the importance of how to relate to other persons [11] (pp. 3–6). However, it is necessary to understand that a social and cultural change is a complex task that demands more than just a change in the use of specific words or expressions. To talk about cultural and social practices, one has to deal with questions of time, context, and perceptions that validate and legitimate the use of specific language. Then, even when it is primarily perceived as a linguistic or semantic strategy, political correctness emerges surrounded by an atmosphere of cultural policies and the fight for recognition and inclusion of cultural diversity [5] (p. 20).

Now, the different uses of the concept of political correctness could lead to diverse types of actions. To follow politically correct behavior could also be perceived as an imposition of language from dominant groups that harms and prevents questioning and discussions from other points of view. It also could refrain people from expressing what they truly believe about “sensitive” topics, resembling a “permanent spirit of inquisition” [12] (p. 109). Due to this, the idea of political correctness has been harshly criticized for being a form in which authoritarian discourses are being imposed [13] (p. 175). This authoritarian perspective refers to the notion that, protected by policies regarded as politically correct, actions of violence and discrimination could be carried out against certain groups through society’s mechanisms and institutions, very much similar to the Spanish Inquisition in the Middle Ages. An example of this was the propaganda used in Germany during the Second World War to describe music and art as “deprave,” as they emphasized a particular set of characteristics that were against the values approved by German society at that time. Therefore, by denying the possibility of developing other perspectives, this led people to censor themselves as a means of self-protection against the criticism that could come from other members of their community [4] (p. 271), which could also harm the debate and dialogue inside a community. This conduct of self-censorship misguides the values of respect and recognition behind the idea of political correctness, and implies the reinforcement of specific structures that (intentionally) promote specific ideas and behavior in accordance with social pressure [5] (p. 20).

The fact of self-censorship also raises the question of whether or not there is a sense of commitment to the values of respect, recognition, and dignity, or if it is just an attempt to avoid mechanisms of coercion and exclusion from a group because someone expresses something different to the ideology and beliefs that are socially accepted. This is important because the defence of political correctness is based on promoting a social change by inculcating different expressions and linguistic forms [4] (pp. 23–24) that could affect the attitudes and habits of people. In other words, the point of political correctness is to promote a specific kind of action of respect, recognition, and acceptance [9] (p. 43); depending on its motives, the action could lead to the acceptance and treasuring of diversity, or avoiding exclusion and fear. Both promoting social change and reinforcing the imposition of discourse depend on clarifying the motives behind behaving in a politically correct manner. Additionally, semantically, politically correct discourses work with euphemisms as a means of sanitizing language by substituting words with more complex formulas. Some examples of this are “*terminated pregnancy* instead of *abortion*, *erectile dysfunction* for *impotence*, [and] *liquidate*, *neutralize*, or *terminate with extreme prejudice* instead of *kill*” [5] (p. 16). Besides, even when governmental institutions promote the use of these expressions, it does not imply that people will automatically use them. An example of this could be seen in the analysis made by Helena Halmari (2011) [14], who studied the case of the expressions that appear in the *Houston Chronicle* (<http://www.chron.com/>) in comparison with the ones of Google

*News* (<https://news.google.com/>). Halmari compared the use of phrases with premodified nouns (disabled people) and postmodified nouns (people with disabilities) because the last ones fulfill the criteria of focusing on people instead of on any characteristic that could be used as a label or to discriminate them. Following these criteria, some governmental agencies have changed their names, such as “The President’s Committee on Mental Retardation” to “The President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities”, or “The American Association on Mental Retardation” to the “American Association on Intellectual and Development Disabilities”. Here, euphemisms are used as a means of avoiding expressions that could be interpreted as offensive or disrespectful. Nevertheless, those euphemisms are replaced from time to time because at the end they make reference to those dispreferred expressions that they were trying to change or hide [14] (pp. 828–829). The problem is that the use of these “more sensitive” phrases does not guarantee a change on the prejudgments that underpin thoughts and actions about certain minorities. In addition, the use of euphemisms could also be a form to reinforce certain practices, as in the case of female mutilation in Nigeria, where people continued to engage in this practice on girls as a way of reinforcing their cultural identity, even though it disguises discrimination and violence towards women [8] (p. 73).

For Johan Galtung, violence could be understood as the failure to fulfill what he calls basic needs: material and immaterial ones (basic material needs focus on means of survival, shelter, clothes, health, and education, while immaterial ones include the development of freedom and identity). It is important to have these needs in mind, as they guarantee a human life with dignity, quality, and welfare [15] (pp. 11–14). Following this, Galtung argues that there are different forms of violence depending on who performs the action and the results given by that action. Then, violence can be classified as direct, structural, and cultural. The three types are intrinsically related, and Galtung even suggests that they are part of a triangle of violence. Even though direct violence is the easiest one to recognize, as it presents physical forms of aggression, this type of violence is also supported by institutional structures that promote mechanisms of aggression and actions of violence (structural violence), which are justified by accepted attitudes and beliefs that are “normalized” by the society (cultural violence). What is the relationship between these types of violence and political correctness? The problem arises when the policies that promote political correctness are perceived as a means of censorship and discrimination because if they are seen as part of an authoritarian perspective, then they could be endorsing a system of cultural and structural violence. In the case of female mutilation, this authoritarian perspective is present in both types of the politically correct expressions: on the one hand, calling it as “female genital circumcision” tries to highlight the cultural aspects that make this action a mark of identity, fertility, and solidarity among women, and that justifies the exclusion from the group of those women that avoid this practice based on the beliefs and traditions of the group [8] (pp. 69–70). On the other hand, “female genital mutilation” endorses the idea of considering it as a violent and barbaric action, naming as barbarians all those who participate in this practice [8] (p. 74). Following this, political correctness could be criticized for reinforcing the triangle of violence based on socially accepted beliefs, instead of fighting against it as a way of promoting diversity and social change, as its primary goal.

In this sense, it is important to understand the different perspectives of political correctness: it could be seen as the search to protect specific groups (minority groups) against discriminatory and violent behavior; or it could reinforce the risk to impose a unique perspective as the socially accepted one, denying the opportunity to develop and value diversity. Following this and in accordance with Eugenio Triás, it can be said that political correctness is at a “threshold” or “border zone” where it has to deal with two possibilities: the protection of diversity or the imposition of one perspective. However, both possibilities are part of the concept of political correctness, and they need to be understood regarding a complementary approach. It requires a different type or reasoning, a border reason, that conjoins the ideals and values of the concept with its “shadowy” practice in real life. Thus, the analysis of political correctness from a border reason is the main objective of the next part of this text.



### 3. Political Correctness from a Border Reason: An Understanding from the Limits

In accordance with Eugenio Trías, a Spanish philosopher from the second half of the 20th century, one of the concepts that should be reconceived is the idea of limit. He maintains that a limit can be thought from a positive perspective instead of only from a restrictive one, which means to regard a limit as a space of creation and coexistence instead of just as a prohibition for trespassing. According to him, this opens the opportunity to understand how different and contradictory ideas could work together in a “border zone,” which he claims to be one of the main elements of the human condition. Thus, before analyzing the concept of political correctness from the positive perspective of a limit, it is important to give a general panorama about the philosophical system of Eugenio Trías and his philosophy of limit.

For Trías, one of the main issues in philosophy is the problem of knowledge that includes the following questions: “Who is [the one] who knows? What does that person know? How is it that [the] knower knows that what is ‘knowable’ is in fact known?” [16] (p. 76). These kinds of questions lead him to develop an epistemological configuration of the knower, the known object and the condition of knowing, as well as the categories related to these terms [16] (p. 76). He claims that philosophy is looking to comprehend what can be understood as “reality” or “existence,” or, in a more humble expression, “the world of life” that determines and constitutes a human being [17] (p. 25). In an attempt to offer one possible answer, Eugenio Trías conceives what he calls “the philosophy of limit,” which is based on a different conception of a limit that demands a change in the way reason and human beings are perceived. Trías uses the concept of limit in a very particular way as he recalls the limit from its Roman roots of *limes*, which refers to a fringe or space that usually was inhabited by both Roman citizens and barbarians. It was a space where both coexisted together; they harvested their food and covered their needs. Then, the *limes* represents a space where two different worlds could face each other and cohabit, but also where there is a constant tension between them as far as they contradict each other and question each other’s identities. Then, the limit, as a border zone, becomes a space of constant criticism but also of creation due to the encounter with the opposite, which is usually neglected. Besides, facing a stranger could also be considered a form of self-recognition even when this same stranger is rejected as someone different, offensive, and unknown; however, Trías states that this is a compulsory encounter for the inhabitants of the limit. Then, it is within these borders that important changes and mixtures between cultures and races could take place as part of this encounter between strangers [18] (pp. 17–18).

Trías goes one step further and states that the *limes* represents a space between the world as it is known (in this case, symbolized by the figure of the Roman citizens, with all their infrastructure and their order) and a world that is beyond it, which is still unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrolled (symbolized by the figure of the barbarians with all their practices that were seen as a rupture against the Roman order and way of life). From this figure, Trías emphasizes the notion of limit (*limes*) as a border that serves to connect different spaces in a complementary relationship. He even uses the analogy of a hinge to highlight the idea that this tool functions as long as it connects both spaces in its inner structure; they can only fulfill their objective as a hinge if they work together by being the connection and support of both spaces. This analogy also illustrates the intrinsic complementary relationship with constant movement between both spaces. Another image that Trías usually uses is the one of a threshold: if someone stands just below the threshold of a door, it could be said that they are neither in nor out, just between both spaces, but still, this person functions as the connector of both. The threshold also shows how the limit between both spaces fades away as both spaces are blended there. Following these analogies, Trías defines the limit as a penetrable border between the physical world that appears in front of the human being, and a world that remains hidden in the shadows and stays mysteriously apart. The limit, then, becomes the “border zone” of a world of appearance and a hermetic world [17]. Additionally, one of the characteristics of this hermetic world is that it covers the rejected ideas that are considered as “nonsensical” or “irrational,” or as negative referents. For Trías, they are the “sombre” or “shadows” that contradict those ideas considered as plausible or rational.

Following this, the limit as a “border zone” allows for questioning what Trías calls, the Enlightened or Modern reason, which is linked with the Modern idea of knowledge where certainty and truth can be achieved through rational thinking and become the “source of light” [16] (pp. 84–86). However, Trías suggests that this Enlightened reason must also face its “sombre,” or in other words, the shadows of reason. These “shadowy” ideas could include the passionate desires, actions, and even the selfish, evil, and inhumane behaviors that could pervert the Modern rationale. In this sense, Trías maintains that the human being, as an inhabitant of the limit, has the possibility of behaving in accordance either with Enlightened Reason or with its “shadowy” counterpart. This means that a human being has a spontaneous inclination toward those actions or ideas that contradict their rational capability, and in this sense, this kind of inclination could lead them to act in an evil or inhumane manner. Trías argues that this is the “sombre” that haunts, tempts, and challenges us to behave without being fully rational [19] (p. 13). This means that, in the limit, every person has the possibility of acting in a humane or inhumane way, and this is part of their condition as a “border self.” Nevertheless, being conscious about this condition also implies being aware that both possibilities of action—the rational one or the shadowy one—are a kind of hinge that influences the decisions of every human being and allows them to be critical enough about those rational ideals or principles that otherwise seemed to be untouchable. This suggests a deeper understanding of the human being as an inhabitant of the limit that gives them the capabilities of questioning as well as the possibility of changing, not only from a logical-rational perspective but also in consideration of the passions and shadows of their thought and behavior.

In this sense, Trías assumes that, by facing the shadows of reason, there is a deeper understanding of the complexity of the human being, as it unveils the need for dialogue with those obscure zones of the human condition that a “border self” provides. Thus, a new form or rationale is required: a border reason. This kind of reason that comes from the realization of the limit as *limes* should be critical enough and able to assume not only its rational legacy but also its “shadowy” passions that lead the human being to act under inhumane standards [18] (pp. 15–17). To accept and understand the existence of these shadows encourages a sense of uncertainty that leads to a constant questioning of those principles that were believed as truth and untouchable. The border reason situates as an essential element of the condition of the “border self” the capacity to decide whether to act humanely—respectfully and with consideration for the other—, or to act inhumanely, from the shadow side, where hurting someone is acceptable as long as one’s instincts and passions are satisfied. In this sense, the human being has two possibilities: to assume a compassionate or an evil form; thus, they always have to make a decision about how to behave not only for themselves but also in relation with other people. This highlights the deep vulnerability that also underpins the human condition because people could choose to take care of one another, or to exercise control over them in pursuit of a desire for power and domination [13] (p. 13). However, this also emphasizes the sense of liberty from an ethical perspective where all people have the capability of deciding upon their actions and facing their consequences. For Trías, the “border self” uses this liberty with the realization that, inside the human being, there is a possibility of behaving inhumanely, taking advantage and damaging other human beings [18] (pp. 58–62).

Now, from Trías’ arguments, to think about political correctness under a border reason suggests a tense form of coexistence between the search for respecting diversity and the risk of imposing one particular discourse or perspective. The sense of recognition and lack of discrimination promoted in favor of politically correct policies also face a “shadowy” side: the possibility of enforcing specific expressions or manner of behavior, which influence ways of thinking and acting under particular circumstances, as with specific topics such as gender, religion, migration, and minorities. Exercising a border reason will lead to the assumption of the possibility of acting under an evil condition of dominance that even betrays the sense of recognition and respect that supported at first the idea of political correctness. By acknowledging the possibility of this “shadowy” risk, a border reason would assume a critical perspective between both sides of political correctness. It will also demand that one be open to different discourses—that in a sense is also an argument to defend freedom

of expression—under an environment of dialogue and reasonable debate. The aim is to avoid the imposition of a unique idea or perspective and to recognize that even to defend certain groups does not imply subjecting others to a specific view.

Following this, Carlos Thiebaut (another contemporary Spanish philosopher) suggests the figure of a “reflective subject” as a way of highlighting the responsibility of understanding the boundaries of what is conceived as certain [20] (p. 262). These kinds of subjects are always questioning the certainty behind the ideas and concepts that sustain their decisions. This supports Trias’ concept of a “border self” as a subject that is constantly questioning their beliefs and values that give sense to their identity and their role in the world. For Thiebaut, the sense of recognition underpins the importance of a “reflective subject,” who is able to enter into contact and strengthen links with people from different beliefs and thoughts, as a means of endorsing a pluralistic society that finds relevance in recognizing the value of the other beyond differences [20] (pp. 266–267). In this sense, it is recognized as a “post-believer,” someone who understands that their beliefs are based on an incomplete truth, a fallible one, that will always lead them into a path of learning. Then, it is not a lonely subject, but someone who constantly needs the relation and dialogue with others, which highlight the social dimension of every human being. Nevertheless, like Trias, Thiebaut recognizes that coexistence with someone different imposes a tension difficult to decipher, where there is a need to reinforce a positive conception of tolerance and recognition as key elements [20] (p. 278). Therefore, to promote a culture of recognition within a diverse and pluralistic society requires reconsidering the concept of dignity regarding becoming the hinge or boundary where the rational and the “shadowy” perspectives of political correctness face each other. This is why it is important to understand what the role of dignity is for this “reflective subject” and its relevance in talking about the concept of political correctness. This will be analyzed in the next part of this text.

#### **4. Dignity as the Hinge between Enlightened and Obscure Sides of Political Correctness**

Commonly, the concept of dignity is associated with expressions of political correctness as it promotes a sense of respect and recognition as part of the value of a person; nevertheless, it is still necessary to understand what dignity means as well as the controversies that could arise if it is used as a hinge between the rational and the “shadowy” ideas of political correctness. In this sense, if dignity is going to function as the hinge that brings these ideas together, then it has to show how it serves as a “border zone” that allows for the encounter between the sense of recognition and respect for diversity, and the temptation of imposing a unique perspective through a specific discourse. In other words, the idea of dignity serves as a hinge that links the search for respect and recognition of diversity on one side, with the risk of imposing a unique view as part of the criticism against political correctness on the other side. Thus, it is important to consider the different connotations of the concept of dignity, which go beyond the defense of politically correct actions. From one perspective, dignity is based on the recognition of an intrinsic value of all human beings as part of their condition; from another point of view, dignity also serves as a reference to a social recognition and acceptance of a specific behavior. Pulling this last perception of dignity to an extreme could lead to distinguish and discriminate between those persons who are perceived with dignity from those who do not share the same value. This will allow one to reinforce the “shadowy” behavior of imposing one perspective over others. Thus, there is a need to analyze more deeply the different conceptions of dignity and how they work in the “border zone.”

Tzvetan Todorov argues that dignity is expressed as virtuous acts that should take place on a daily basis. These acts also shape how individuals relate to other persons. Following the ideas of Jean Amery, Todorov suggests that the idea of dignity could have a double connotation between a subjective perspective of what everyone considers something laudable and honorable, as well as a means of social recognition through which the entire community refers to someone having a behavior that is admired [21] (pp. 66–67). Thus, it is not easy to establish a definition of dignity; it is a concept that has been perceived differently throughout history. It also shows a double facet between a moral sense of



duty from an individual perspective and that from a form of normative regulations of political life by following certain attitudes and practices [22] (p. 2). For Michael Rosen, this will lead to addressing the concept of dignity in three different forms: first, it implies a sense of autonomy and respect; second, it regards certain behavior which is socially accepted and admired; and finally, it becomes a receptacle of political, social, or even religious convictions. This implies that there is no specific definition of dignity [22] (p. 6). Disregarding the complexity to define this concept, it is still important for the human being.

Following Rosen's arguments, the idea of dignity refers to three main ideas that have appeared and seem to be intertwined with history: dignity as a status, as an intrinsic value, and as a manner of bearing contrary conditions. Firstly, for different antique cultures, dignity was identified with "a concept that denoted high social status and the honors and respectful treatment that are due to someone who occupied that position" [22] (p. 11). It highlighted a sense of majesty that also was used to establish a distinction between social groups. These characteristics implied a sense of social recognition that could influence political powers. This position was highly criticized during the Christian era, as it was in conflict with the spiritual values proper of a religious life. Nevertheless, as a distinctive perspective, for Cicero, the term implies the best men, but he also considers dignity as something inherent to human beings and not to animals, as man has a higher nature developed by thought and study [22] (p. 12). This idea of distinguishing the human being from other creatures as part of the sense of dignity was recovered by other authors, such as Pico della Mirandola and Francis Bacon, who also respectively emphasized the fact of choosing a specific destiny of development and knowledge, and to respect others following the specific traits of character that should be worthy to develop [22] (p. 23). These characteristics of freedom and character underline the ethical perspective that addresses an individual condition and value for the human being, which is the second form of how to consider the concept of dignity. The main philosopher who developed this perspective was Immanuel Kant.

For Kant, the idea of dignity had a strong connection with the idea of autonomy and the moral commitment derived from it. In this sense, dignity is understood as the "qualities of character in the person that fulfill all [their] duties" [22] (p. 26); it characterizes someone that fulfills the moral law that exists within them, so the respect that comes from dignity is due to recognizing this lawgiving capability of every human being, which also distinguishes humans from animals. Then, dignity as this inner autonomy is something that cannot be exchanged and represents the inner value of all human being because it shows their capability of being and acting following moral rules, which are self-given. This makes human beings worthy of respect based on their inherent autonomy and not on a special status or condition given within society. By emphasizing the autonomy of humans, Kant underlines the importance of the moral law that will lead to developing a form of individual and mutual respect. For Kant, there was a sense of sublimity and constant reflection about the moral law and the actions that it demands [22] (p. 29). Thus, Kant proposes a concept of autonomy which implies human beings' faculty to give themselves moral law, carry it within them, and be conscious that such moral law implies behaving accordingly [22] (p. 24). Autonomy then, as Kant thought it, implies acting not only in accordance with people's thoughts or desires but also in accordance with what the inner moral law demands from them. "What is to be recognized as worthy of respect, according to Kant, is not the position that an individual occupies within a particular society, or even the generalized status of human beings as citizens of the world, but the lawgiving functions of morality, something that human beings carry inalienably within themselves" [22] (p. 26). Autonomy requests a constant examination of one's actions and a sense of humbleness to recognize whenever they stray from what is expected from them as part of following this moral law.

About this perspective, Todorov argues that even when dignity is present as autonomy, it is important to analyze more deeply how it is practiced. For Todorov, to be autonomous represents following the moral law given to all individuals as part of a decision made by their free will, and the idea that there should be someone who perceives this specific action as a way to expand its importance

as it is shared with someone else [21] (p. 68). Here, Todorov emphasizes that the best possible moral action should also be pursued by the same spirit of morality, as Todorov emphasizes that the only dignity that deserves respect is the one that shows goodness through actions [21] (p. 75). This conclusion comes from Todorov's analysis of the Holocaust and the ultimate evidence of autonomy that Jewish prisoners showed at the moment when they faced the extreme conditions inside Nazi concentration camps. These conditions were developed as a way of erasing the human characteristics of the Jews. In his examples, Todorov shows that dignity not only was regarded as having inherent value but also appeared while pursuing certain kind of actions that might be seen as tiny and futile in certain circumstances but made a difference for Jewish prisoners inside the camps. Some of these actions are akin to tying your shoelaces or building a wall even when it will be destroyed the next day. For Todorov, through these actions, Jews were trying to find their human dignity by behaving in a way that can still be perceived as human action, that there still was a free will to do so.

This emphasis that Kant and Todorov highlighted on the concordance between the action and the moral self-law is something that Friedrich Schiller identified as an important aspect of dignity. For Schiller, there is an inner inclination of human beings to act in accordance with passions and desires; thus, dignity is found not only in behaving in accordance with the moral law but also in the process of bearing the suffering it will bring because of the inner passions and inclinations the actor has to face and overcome. This is a process that is not fully appreciated and that reinforces the sense of sublimity expressed by Kant [22]. Nevertheless, it is important to consider more carefully the possibility of acting and behaving in pursuit of inner inclinations and desires. This opens the possibility of acting aside from the moral law, which will also entail a risk of acting in an inhumane or evil way; this would mean considering the possibility of acting in a "shadowy" form. Then, following Schiller's and Trías' thoughts, it can be said that the concept of dignity requires the acknowledgement of the "shadowy" possibility of human actions and behavior, and to cope with them as part of the process of following moral standards. Thus, this allows one to consider dignity as a hinge between a rational (or enlightened) sense of autonomy and the "shadowy" side of the possibility of acting under evil standards, which means understanding the idea of dignity through a border reason.

In terms of political correctness, the enlightened qualities of dignity reinforce the sense of recognition and respect that underpins the discourse of promoting the use of a certain kind of language as a way of defending a specific group or persons. However, the sense of dignity can also incur in different circumstances that will question the concept. First, to be considered a person with dignity could imply following a social conception, where there are certain kinds of rules or commands appreciated by a specific group. Therefore, following them is required to be considered laudable and honorable. The problem with this is what Hannah Arendt calls the "banality of evil," which means setting aside the moral reflection of the actions that are performed without questioning their moral implications [23]. The example given by Arendt was the analysis of Adolf Eichmann where he was shown in his trial to be a common person who thought he was just following orders from his superior officers. The "banality of evil" shows one of the extremes of following a discourse without questioning it, which is one of the risks of the concept of political correctness. Second, there is the possibility of acting in an evil or inhumane form because of the inner passions and inclinations of the human being. From this perspective, it could be argued that the concept of dignity is useful to understanding the "border reasoning" behind the practice of political correctness. This would mean not only considering the spirit of respect and recognition that is at its basis but also being aware of criticism against political correctness; this will open the possibility of constantly questioning what is perceived as a politically correct action in order to find out whether or not it implies an imposition of a unique perspective or a discourse coming from the evil side of the human being.

Finally, if the idea of dignity is considered as an intrinsic value of the human being that comes from its capability of self-lawgiving (Kant) and the process of behaving in a way that fulfills the idea of dignity (Schiller), then the accomplishment of dignity also implies covering the basic needs, material and non-material, defended by Galtung. This means that the concept of political correctness should

find a way to deal with freedom of speech under a constructive and positive perspective. This option, which could be addressed from a border reason and a “reflective subject,” could lead to a positive or hermeneutic model of tolerance, as part of moral behavior, which mainly reinforces the ideas of respect and recognition.

## 5. Conclusions

This text reviewed the concept of political correctness from the perspective of a border reason proposed by Eugenio Triás. This type of reason questions the limits between the rational ideas and concepts traditionally followed by human beings, and the possibility of acting in pursuit of “shadowy” ideas that could lead to evil or inhumane actions. Thus, Triás presents a constant struggle between these two possibilities in what he calls a “threshold.” In the case of political correctness, this threshold implies considering the search to promote respect and recognition of the value of diversity as part of a rational position of the concept, and the possibility of imposing a unique social voice as a politically correct discourse that could be part of the “shadowy” face of the same concept. For Triás, to be aware of these risks means to understand that a concept has to face its opposite, or as he called it, its “shadowy” side, as a way of being conscious of the evil possibility that is part of every idea, as of every human being. In its origins, the term “political correctness” was defended under the spirit of respect and recognition; nevertheless, it loses its path whenever it defends a unique discourse over other voices. The challenge is to value diversity while it fights against the imposition of one perspective or one discourse. Following Triás’ thought requires understanding the relationship between both sides and the need to reinforce the role of human beings as a “border self,” or in other words, a “reflective subject” that is ready to understand the boundaries of their cultures and thoughts, and learn from other discourses. This does not imply tolerating all discourses and all perspectives without any consideration or judgment because the realization that comes from the border reason demands awareness of the damage towards other people. As a first step in doing so, this text proposes a review of the concept of dignity because this concept also presents a threshold where the rational and the “shadowy” side of a human being encounter a place in which they can coexist. This is not easy to develop because of the tension that arises from both sides, and it requires that other virtues as tolerance, respect, and recognition be strengthened as a way to value differences; however, this is a topic that must be set aside at least for this moment.

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