

PLATO'S ESOTERIC FIRST PRINCIPLE

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I

Socrates' account of the form of the good in the *Republic* is couched fully within the framework of a series of analogies: the analogy between the good and the sun, the Divided Line, and the Allegory of the Cave. The appeal to analogies, we are told, is necessitated by an unnamed difficulty (of which we shall have more to say later) which precludes a full account of the nature of the good itself:

... let's leave aside for the time being what the good itself is —for it looks to me as though it's out of the range of our present thrust to attain the opinions I now hold about it (506d-e).¹

Whatever the nature of the aforementioned difficulty, Socrates does assert, at least, that the good is graspable —though it is “the last thing to be seen” in the intelligible realm, “and that with considerable effort”. (517b-c) In fact, we are told that

the idea of the good is the greatest study and that it's by availing oneself of it along with just things and the rest that they become useful and beneficial (505a).

It is, at the outset, quite puzzling that the greatest study of philosophy should merit such a terse account in the *Republic* —and at that, only by way of analogy— especially since Socrates himself claims to have at least certain ‘opinions’ about the nature of the good itself. The aim of this paper, therefore, will be twofold: First, we shall attempt to sketch out an analytic account of the nature of the good itself —based partly upon reconstructions of relevant evidence found in the *Republic* and other Platonic works, and partly upon a critical effort to draw certain Platonic metaphysical hypotheses to

¹ *The Republic of Plato*, trans., Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1968). All passages quoted from the *Republic*, hereafter, will follow Bloom's translation, and will be documented in the body of the text.

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their logical conclusions; second, we shall suggest an explanation for Socrates' (Plato's) reluctance, in the *Republic*, to discuss the nature of the good itself. Although my suggested interpretation of Plato's account of the nature of the good is not exactly novel, it is far from being universally accepted; and it seems to me that this interpretation deserves much more attention than it has hitherto received.

II

At the very heart of Plato's theory of forms lies the hierarchical relation between the forms and their instances, which we find illustrated in Plato's analogy of the Divided Line. According to this analogy, the forms are both ontologically and epistemically 'higher' than their instances in the hierarchy. Ontologically, the forms are more real than their instances, the sensible particulars. Forms can exist without particulars but not *vice-versa*, just as a body can exist without its shadow, but not the reverse. Epistemically, the forms are objects of knowledge; particulars, merely objects of belief or opinion.

There is another hierarchical relation of interest to us, that between the good and the forms. Just as the forms are hierarchically 'higher' than their instances, the good is 'higher' than the forms, both ontologically and epistemically. For the good is that which makes both existence and knowledge possible —although the good is itself neither knowledge nor existence. (508e, 509b). Hence, the good represents the very pinnacle of the ontological and epistemic hierarchy depicted by Plato's Divided Line.²

Let us consider, for a moment, these two distinct hierarchical relations —that between the good and the forms, and that between the forms and their instances. The differences between these two relations are easily recognized and well-noted. What I should like to examine presently, however, are the similarities shared by the two relations.

A form, on Plato's account, is that which stands in a one-over-many relationship with its instances, and constitutes the essence of its instances —*i.e.*, what is essentially common among every instance

² Regarding the question whether the good is to be located *within* (though at the pinnacle of) the fourth section of Plato's Divided Line, or *above* the fourth section, there seems to me to be a genuine tension here in Plato's metaphysical scheme. Nevertheless, this issue is neutral with respect to the thesis of this paper. We are simply seeking to establish that the good is hierarchically higher than the remaining forms; whether this higher position locates the good within, or outside of, the fourth level of the Divided Line is a moot point for our purposes.

of the form in question. Now consider the following passage from the *Republic*:

We both assert that there are, . . . and distinguish in speech, many fair things, many good things, and so on for each kind of thing. . . . And we also assert that there is a fair itself, a good itself, and so on for all the things that we then set down as many. Now, again, we refer them to one idea of each *as though the idea were one* . . . (507b).³

Socrates' claim that we treat an idea *as though* it were one could, no doubt, be taken to mean any of several different things. My suggestion is that we interpret the claim roughly as follows: Relative to a form's instances, we treat that form *as though* it were one simply because in certain other circumstances (or, perhaps, relative to some other entity) we treat a form as though it were *not* one.

Let me illustrate with an example. When a child practices his ABC's, he treats each letter as though it were one, for each letter, in this case, has its own peculiar autonomy—its own shape or sound, its own place in the alphabet, and so on. But when a child begins writing words or uttering sentences, he no longer treats each letter as though it were one. Each individual letter becomes a member of a larger class (*e.g.*, a word, a sentence, a poem), which in turn may then be treated as though it were one, and autonomous. A letter which becomes a member of a larger class does not really lose its autonomy as an individual, but its individuating qualities may cease to be of central interest. Thus, the letter, as member of a class, is no longer treated as though it were one.

This example is not exactly paralleled by the case regarding forms, but the similarities are hopefully close enough to make my point. In the case of forms, we treat a form as though it were one relative to its instances, but when a form is considered simply as a member of a larger class (the class of forms in general), we no longer treat it autonomously—as though it were one—but rather as a large company might consider one of its employees—not so much an individual as, instead, an integral part of a larger complex.

That a form is not always considered an autonomous individual entity, that it is sometimes treated simply as a member of a larger class, turns out to have important ramifications. For, whenever a class of sensible particulars are essentially similar in some respect, they are said by Plato to participate in a given form in virtue of which they derive their similarity. On the Divided Line, such a form stands hierarchically 'above' its instances. In like manner, if Plato's metaphysical system is to be thoroughly consistent, such a relation

³ Italics mine.

should hold also for the class of forms, if the forms themselves are essentially similar to each other in some respect.

This is, in fact, the case. The forms are essentially similar to each other, with respect to their universality. And since every form is essentially universal, we should expect to find, in Plato's metaphysical scheme, a form, hierarchically above all other forms, in virtue of which the class of forms derive their similarity. We do find one such form which is hierarchically distinct from the class of all other forms: the form of the good. And it is not any great surprise that Plato repeatedly refers to the good as a form. Calling the good a form if it was not believed by Plato to fulfill the functions of a form would be a curious misnomer indeed, considering the central importance of forms to Plato's metaphysical scheme.

We have much more reason, I think, for supposing that the good—*qua* form—is intended by Plato to fulfill those functions attributed by him to all other forms: standing in a one-over-many relation to a class of instances, and constituting the essence of each of those instances. If this is the case, then we are in a position to give some account of the nature of the good: The good is that form in virtue of which all other forms derive their similarity to each other. The similarity here being universality, the good must be the essence of universals, or universality itself.

This account of the nature of the good, however, may be somewhat misleading, since it seems fairly obvious that Plato did not mean, by 'form', what we currently mean by 'universal'. In what sense, then, are we to understand the claim that the nature of the good is 'universality itself'? What sort of characteristic did Plato have in mind as constituting the essence of his forms?

We find, in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, several passages in which Plato is said⁴ to have identified the good with the one.⁵ As for Plato's reasons for making such an identification, we shall discuss this later in some detail. Let it suffice for now to note that Aristotle's report of Plato's account of the one coincides exactly with our present account of the good. For according to Aristotle, Plato held that the forms are the essences of every other thing, and the one is the essence of the forms.⁶ Thus, in virtue of Plato's apparent identification between the good and the one, our hypothesis that the nature of the good is universality can be understood as the claim that the nature of the good is unity itself. Of course, insofar as the good is

⁴ Plato is not, in these passages, mentioned by name, but the reference to him is nevertheless unmistakable.

⁵ *Metaphysics* 988b11, 988a34 ff.

⁶ *Metaphysics* 988b4, 988a9.

a universal, it can be understood to possess the ordinary characteristics commonly attributed to universals.⁷

III

We have, thus far, derived an account of the nature of the good by drawing Plato's metaphysical scheme—specifically, his notion of the function of a form relative to its class of instances—to its logical conclusion. Now, if our account of the nature of the good actually coincides with Platonic thought, we should find that the several features of the good set down by Plato in the *Republic* are all accounted for, and consistent with, our present account of the nature of the good.

Let us investigate whether this is the case. The features attributed to the good by Plato in the *Republic* are the following:

(a) The good is a form, yet is hierarchically distinct from the class of all other forms;

(b) The study of the good makes all other studies useful and beneficial, though it is "the last thing to be seen" in the dialectical process;

(c) The good is not existence, but rather, that which makes existence possible;

(d) The good is not knowledge, but rather, that which makes knowledge possible.

In light of our hypothesis that the nature of the good is universality itself, we shall consider each of the above features of the good in turn.

(a') One of the most important features of our account of the nature of the good is its appeal to the notion that the good is intended by Plato to be considered a *bona fide* form, possessing all of the characteristic features attributed by him to the forms—including its standing in a one-over-many relation to a specific class of instances (all other forms), and its constituting the essence of each of these instances. Because of the nature of this relationship, the good must

⁷ We may wonder, at this point, what connection, if any, exists between this notion of the good and the 'vulgar' conception of goodness. Apparently, Plato's notion of the good parallels the 'vulgar' conception of goodness (for many non-philosophers may have true belief about the good), yet seems to be a more inclusive concept than the 'vulgar' notion of goodness. There is evidence, for example, that Plato believed the good to be the logical predecessor of cosmic order. (Cf. *Timaeus* 30a, *Gorgias* 503d ff.) We shall not undertake an examination, here, of why Plato thought that unity, harmony, and order constituted goodness in essence; we do, however, point out that there is textual evidence for attributing such a belief to Plato.

be a higher-order form, *i.e.*, hierarchically distinct from all other forms.

The question arises whether it is not paradoxical to say that the good is both hierarchically distinct from all other forms, and yet is itself a form. I think that there are some problems here in Plato's account, perhaps not unlike the problems arising from the supposition that there is a class of all classes, which is itself a class, yet is a higher-order class, and is thus hierarchically distinct from all other classes. Any such difficulties inherent in Plato's account, however, are irrelevant to the purpose of this paper, and are therefore accorded to the critics of Platonic philosophy. We are not here attempting to defend Plato's theory of forms, nor his account of the good, but merely seeking to fill the exegetical holes left over from Plato's sparse account of the nature of the good in the *Republic*.

(b') It should not be very surprising to find that Plato had universality in mind when he alluded to the good in the *Republic*. He very clearly asserts that the philosopher—the lover of wisdom—is he who looks at each thing itself, at the things that are always the same in all respects (the forms). Furthermore, the good is seen by Plato as a paradigm for his notion of philosophical activity:

... many men would choose to do, possess, and enjoy the reputation for things that are opined to be just and fair, even if they aren't, while, when it comes to good things, no one is satisfied with what is opined to be so but each seeks the things that *are*, and from here on everyone despises the opinion . . . (505d).

Seeking the good, thus, is the paradigm of seeking out the essences of each thing, of seeking the things that *are* and despising belief and opinion. Since the object of all studies is to acquire knowledge, and since the objects of knowledge are the things that *are* (the forms), one implicitly undertakes the methodology of understanding the nature of the good (*i.e.*, seeking out the essences of each thing) whenever he strives to attain knowledge in any study whatsoever. Paradoxically enough, then, though the good is "the last thing to be seen" in the dialectical process, some understanding of its nature, at least, is presupposed in every philosophical activity, or search for knowledge.

This is simply to say that grasping the good may be, *chronologically*, the final stage of dialectic, but the methodology which leads to a grasping of the good is *logically* prior to any knowledge whatever. A philosopher must already have at least some basic recognition of the nature of the good (*i.e.*, universality) prior to any

knowledge of the forms; otherwise, he is presumably ignorant of the very existence of universals (the forms), and is not unlike the prisoner in the cave that Plato speaks of: believing that the shadows of his perception truly *are*, and are the proper objects of knowledge.

Thus, since the good makes possible the existence of the forms, and forms are the objects of our knowledge, it follows that the idea of the good—to put it crudely—is a necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge. Moreover, the primary goal of any study is to acquire knowledge, and it is in this sense that the idea of the good makes all other studies useful and beneficial—for without the possibility of attaining knowledge, a study is useless, and beneficial to no philosopher.

(c') Assuming that the good is universality itself, it follows that the good is not existence—universality and existence are not identical. Yet it is clear, granting our assumption, in what sense the good can be said to make existence possible: Those things which really *are* are the forms, all else being either an image of a form (e.g., a sensible object), or else an image of an image (e.g., the shadow of a sensible object), according to Plato's Divided Line. The good makes possible the existence of forms in this manner—without universality there would exist no universals. And universality is a necessary condition for the existence of universals (forms) in the same manner that a form like beauty is a necessary condition for the existence of beautiful particulars. Hence, what makes possible the existence of forms, *ipso facto*, makes possible the existence of all else, in accordance with Plato's metaphysical scheme.

(d') Plato's appeal to the existence of forms can be viewed as a logical consequence of two of his epistemic hypotheses: first, that knowledge is possible; second, that nothing can be an object of knowledge which is mutable.⁸ When Plato, in the *Republic* (479e), limits the objects of knowledge to the forms, he is appealing to the constancy and immutability, to the atemporality and resistance to change, that the forms possess in virtue of their ontological status. The very belief, for Plato, that X is a form—that which is predicated of, or shared by, many particulars—seems to imply the belief that X does not exist in the physical world, which is earmarked by him as the domain where change occurs. Hence, the belief that X is a form is, in part, the belief that X does not exist in the domain which undergoes change, quite simply, because X is never found to exist in the physical world. In short, the thesis that the objects of our knowledge must be immutable firmly establishes that what makes knowledge possible, on Plato's account, is the ontological status of

⁸ Cf. *Cratylus* 440a-b.

the forms —*i.e.*, their universality. For it is the universality of a form which, for Plato at least, commits it to an existence outside the domain of change.

IV

No one should expect to find this account of the good completely satisfactory unless it could be shown to have some explanatory power; and I think this can be shown to be its main virtue. We may, after all, be puzzled as to Plato's reason for introducing a discussion of the good into an inquiry which is supposed to be concerned with the nature of justice. There is a relatively straightforward reply to this question; it is that Plato introduced his discussion of the good in the *Republic* because he believed that no one can have knowledge of any other forms—including justice—unless he has knowledge of the good.

This reply, however, seems to me to be unsatisfactory for two reasons: First, if it had been Socrates' intention to endow Glaucon and Adeimantus with *knowledge* of justice, then he should have, in accordance with the reply, endowed them with knowledge of the nature of the good, rather than simply hinting about the nature of the good by way of analogy. This, then, is evidence that Socrates was content to instill, in his audience, mere true belief about justice, based on good evidence. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the reply fails to adequately explain the puzzle to which it is a response. It simply replaces our question about why Plato introduced a discussion of the good in the *Republic* with the question, 'Why must someone have knowledge of the good before he can have knowledge of the nature of justice?'. The reply fails to settle this latter question, for the nature of the good and the nature of justice are at least not obviously connected.

On the other hand, our analysis of the nature of the good *does* explain why a discussion of the good is warranted in an inquiry about the nature of justice. We have already shown that Plato identified the good with the one, or unity. But this is exactly the feature which characterizes both the just state and the just individual. The theme that justice is manifested by unity recurs throughout the *Republic*. We find Plato arguing that the just state is that state which is bound together and made one, that state which is "most like a single human being" (462b-d), the state which develops "up to that point in its growth at which it's willing to be one, . . . and not beyond". (423b). Likewise, the just individual is he who harmonizes the three parts of his soul, "and becomes entirely one

from many, moderate and harmonized" (443d).

Such examples may be multiplied indefinitely. Taken together, they provide conclusive evidence for attributing to Plato the belief that discussion of the good is a necessary element in his analysis of the nature of justice. For justice simply is the individual, and social, manifestation of unity; and to come to know this is to begin to understand the nature of the good. It is unity of the soul, and of the state, that Plato has in mind when he proposes that each do the task for which it, or he, is best suited.

V

This sums up our analytic account of the nature of the good. We have hopefully presented compelling evidence for supposing that the nature of the good, on Plato's account, is universality itself, and also that the identification between the good (universality) and unity explains Plato's discussion of the good in conjunction with his account of the nature of justice. These hypotheses are reasonably straightforward, however; and thus, Plato's reluctance to directly discuss the nature of the good in the *Republic* remains a curious mystery.

We find a telling clue to this mystery, nevertheless, in Plato's seventh letter. Here, Plato alludes to an unnamed 'subject' which can only refer to the nature of his ontological first principle:

I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining (341c-d).

Any doubt that this unnamed subject refers to the nature of the good is adequately dispelled by the evidence found in Plato's second letter, where he again speaks of a subject about which he shall never write (314c), but here openly identifies the subject as "the nature of the first principle" (312d).

Clearly, then, we may impute to Plato the belief that the nature of the good cannot be adequately captured in words alone, and this would explain his mysterious silence concerning the nature of the good in the *Republic*. What remains to be investigated, for reasons of philosophical interest, are Plato's *reasons* for holding such a belief. We may, with the help of Plato's second and seventh letters, find it possible to piece together a sketchy explanation on Plato's behalf.

The most telling case for Plato's belief in the ultimate ineffability of the nature of the good is found in his seventh letter:

For everything that exists there are three classes of objects through which knowledge about it must come; the knowledge itself is a fourth, and we must put as a fifth entity the actual object of knowledge which is the true reality. We have then, first, a name, second, a description, third, an image, and fourth, a knowledge of the object . . . (342a-b).

Plato goes on to distinguish knowledge from names and descriptions (for knowledge is not found in sounds), and from images (for neither is knowledge found in shapes of bodies). Rather, he argues, knowledge is found in minds; and of all these four classes—names, descriptions, images, knowledge—it is knowledge and understanding which approach nearest in affinity and likeness to the actual object of knowledge itself, while the other classes are more remote from it. (342c-d) This doctrine, claims Plato, holds true for all cases, the good included. (342d)

For if in the case of any of these a man does not somehow or other get hold of the first four, he will never gain a complete understanding of the fifth (342e).

Thus our attempt, in this paper, to set down an account of the nature of the good may have been perfectly acceptable to Plato as a necessary condition for grasping the good, so long as the status of our account is understood—for having the ability to *describe* the good is not at all the same as having *grasped* the good. Apparently, having the ability to describe the good is simply a preliminary step in the process of coming to grasp the good:

. . . these four [names, descriptions, bodily forms, concepts] do as much to illustrate the particular quality of any object as they do to illustrate its essential reality because of the inadequacy of language. Hence no intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable—which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols (342e-343a).

Plato's view, thus, of the inadequacy of language to adequately illustrate the essence of the good results from his conviction that language inappropriately focuses one's attention upon particular qualities as opposed to the essential reality. This hypothesis is paralleled in Plato's second letter, where he argues that the mind tends to fix its attention upon the qualities of an object when it

seeks knowledge of that object, because the mind attends to that with which it itself has some affinity. This process, he points out, is inadequate as a means to philosophical understanding (312e).

We can only conclude from all of this that Plato viewed a full grasping of the nature of the good as, ultimately, a non-linguistic mentalistic process—a search for pure essence itself, a quest devoid of inquiries concerning particular, or individuating, qualities.

But what is it that exemplifies pure essence, that which has no qualities? There is but one possibility: the one.⁹ Recall that Aristotle tells us that Plato had identified the good with the one. We are now in a position to understand Plato's reason for such an identification. The one is that which has no parts and hence, no particular qualities. The one, therefore, exemplifies pure essence, universality itself. But this is precisely the nature of the good. Hence, the two principles must be identical.

This may give us some clue to understanding Plato's inclusion of the *Parmenides* among his dialogues, long a subject of heated debate: Fully two-thirds of the *Parmenides* consists of a verbal analysis of the one—specifically, a consideration of the consequences of assuming that there is (and is not) a one. The discussion, throughout, seems riddled with inconsistencies, and concludes in apparent utter absurdity:

It seems that, whether there is or is not a one, both that one and the others alike are and are not, and appear and do not appear to be, all manner of things in all manner of ways, with respect to themselves and to one another (166b).

To my mind, the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn is that Plato thought knowledge of the essential nature of the one to be unsusceptible to linguistic exposition and analysis.¹⁰ As we have already argued, this is exactly Plato's position regarding the essential nature of the good—showing, once again, that Plato did indeed identify the good with the one.

Perhaps Plato's esoteric persuasion regarding the nature of the

⁹ Cf. *Metaphysics* 987b21.

¹⁰ Cf. 201e-210b of the *Theaetetus*, where Plato concludes that: (a) even the first elements must have some sort of account; but (b) such an account of a first element would not yield knowledge of that element. These conclusions very nicely reflect the theme of this paper, which is that (a) Plato did have in mind a specific account of the nature of the good; but (b) he believed that this account was not sufficient to yield *knowledge* of the good (which, we have suggested, he conceived as a non-linguistic, mentalistic apprehension).

good is most appropriately summed up in his own words, taken from his seventh letter:

... there are two things, the essential reality and the particular quality, and when the mind is in quest of knowledge not of the particular but of the essential, each of the four [names, descriptions, images, concepts] confronts the mind with the unsought particular, whether in verbal or in bodily form. Each of the four makes the reality that is expressed in words or illustrated in objects liable to easy refutation by the evidence of the senses.¹¹ The result of this is to make practically every man a prey to complete perplexity and uncertainty.... For this reason no serious man will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public so as to make them a prey to envy and perplexity (343b-c, 344c).

¹¹ Could this belief perhaps explain the 'easy refutation' of the theory of forms in the first third of the *Parmenides*?

ADDENDUM

This paper begins with a disclaimer: my defense of the thesis that Plato identified the good with unity itself is not (nor is it purported to be) the defense of an original thesis. In fact, the thesis can be traced back at least as early as the writings of Aristotle. This fact prompts a brief explanation of my programmatic reasons for thinking that a satisfactory exegetical account of Plato's general metaphysical scheme merits further discussion of his notion of the nature of the good in the context of its relationship to the class of forms.

Of the relatively few Platonic scholars who have seen fit to discuss Plato's notion of the actual nature of the good, most (perhaps all) seem to accept, at least implicitly, the hypothesis that the good is indeed identified, by Plato, with unity itself. One can find common appeals to the notion of unity even in otherwise diverse discussions of the nature of the good —e.g., those of Benjamin Jowett (*The Dialogues of Plato*), J.N. Findlay (*Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines*), and even Richard Nettleship (*Lectures on the Republic of Plato*). What one does *not* find in such discussions, to my mind, are any completely satisfactory accounts of Plato's *grounds* for his identification of the good with the one.

Most recent accounts of Plato's first principle assert or imply either that the principle of unity (the good) constitutes the essential condition for justice (in the context of the *Republic*), or else —and more generally— that the principle of unity symbolizes harmony and cosmic order, thus illustrating a means-end relationship between a whole (the good) and its constituent parts (e.g., the forms). As I have indicated in my paper, I think that both of these hypotheses are correct, as far as they go. But I also believe that they do not go far enough towards explaining the role of the good in Plato's metaphysical scheme.

I have tried to show that Plato's appeal to unity symbolizes an appeal to what we might best term 'universality itself'. This hypothesis, if correct, would reflect Plato's move to insure the internal consistency of his metaphysical scheme —particularly his notion of the one-over-many relationship developed in his theory of forms. In this context, I might add that equating the good with universality itself handily reflects Plato's attempted resolution of the

one-many problem that had engaged the Eleatics and the pluralists before him—the problem of how the many can be generated from the one. For in this case, there is no question how plurality is generated from unity: the very concept of universality involves an appeal to the many.

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