

The Sun, sight, intellect and transcendency

The *Republic* – a dialogue primarily an exploration of the relation between the soul and justice (and, of course, injustice) – centres much of discussion upon the Good, arguing ultimately that for the soul, the good life is the just life, and that the just life is the good life.

Since throughout the dialogue Socrates uses the organization of the citizens of a city-state as an analogy of the way that the elements of a human being work together, he is interested in ensuring that the guardians of the city – who represent in the analogy the governing thinking power of the human self – have an understanding of the Good. For the good is the goal of every organism – be it an animal, a city, an individual soul, or indeed the universe as considered as a living whole – and without knowing what the good is our ability to make the right decisions from moment to moment and from step to step is severely limited.

But what is the Good? Socrates says (505e), “This then is that which every soul pursues, and for the sake of this it does everything, intuiting that it is something, but being dubious, and unable to comprehend sufficiently what it is, and to possess the same stable belief respecting it as of other things; and thus are they unsuccessful also in other things, if there be in them any profit. About a thing now of such a kind, and of such mighty consequence, shall we say that even these our best people in the city, and to whom we commit the management of everything, shall be thus in the dark? . . . I think then that whilst it is unknown in what manner the just and beautiful are good, they are not of any great value to a guardian to possess, if it be likely he shall know these, whilst he is ignorant of this; but I say that no one will arrive at the knowledge of these before he sufficiently knows what the good is.”

What Plato offers us in answer to this question stretches his normal metaphysics to a new and, some would say mystical, height. Whereas we expect him to talk about ‘Forms’ as immaterial eternal realities which give rise to material reflections or instances of those forms in the temporal and sensible world, here in the sixth book of the *Republic*, he suggests that the Good transcends all the forms of the immaterial intelligible world: it is the Good which gives eternal Forms their foundation – their underlying reality and intelligibility.

Later in the dialogue he will explore his famous story of the Cave, in which a person escapes from a cave of shadows – representing the material world – to a sunlit world above. The goal which the prisoner aspires to is a vision of the Sun – the source of all things in both the sunlit upper world and the shadowy cave. But before that story with its application to the enlightenment psychology of Plato, he must first unpack his transcendent metaphysics.

The Republic, 506e-509d – trans. Thomas Taylor (adapted)

(This extract from the sixth book of the *Republic* begins at the point where Socrates has named the first principle as *The Good*: but what, asks Glauco, is The Good? He replies:)

506e SOCRATES: But, O blessed man! let us at present dismiss¹ this inquiry, what the good is; (for it appears to me a greater thing than we can arrive at, according to our present impulse,) but I am willing to tell you what the offspring of the good appears to be, and what most resembles it, if this be agreeable to you; and if not, I shall dismiss it.

GLAUCO: But tell us, for you shall afterwards explain to us what the father is.

507a SOCRATES: I could wish, both that I were able to give that explanation, and you to receive it, and not as now the offspring only. Receive now then this child and offspring of the good itself. Yet take care however that unwillingly I deceive you not, in any respect, giving an adulterate account of this offspring.

GLAUCO: We shall take care, to the best of our ability; only tell us.

b SOCRATES: I shall tell, then, after we have thoroughly assented, and I have reminded you of what was mentioned in our preceding discourse, and has been frequently said on other occasions.

GLAUCO: What is it?

SOCRATES: That there are many things, beautiful, and many good, and each of these we say is so, and we distinguish them in our reasoning.

GLAUCO: We say so.

SOCRATES: But as to the *beautiful itself*, and the *good itself*, and in like manner concerning all those things which we then considered as many, now again establishing them according to one idea of each particular, as being one, we assign to each that name which belongs to it; and *these* [many instances] indeed we say are seen by the eye, but are not objects of intellectual perception; but that the *ideas* are perceived by the intellect, but are not seen by the eye.

c GLAUCO: Perfectly so.

SOCRATES: By what part then of ourselves do we see things visible?

GLAUCO: By the sight.

SOCRATES: And is it not, by hearing, that we perceive what is heard; and by the other senses, all the other objects of sense:

GLAUCO: Why not?

¹ Socrates says this in consequence of the inability of his auditors to understand the nature of *The Good*: for, as it is well observed in the Greek Scholia on this part of the *Republic*, through the inaptitude of subordinate natures, such as are more excellent are unable to energize.

SOCRATES: But have you not observed, with regard to the artificer of the senses, how he has formed the power of sight, and of being visible, in the most perfect manner?

GLAUCO: I have not entirely perceived it.

- d SOCRATES: But consider it in this manner. Is there anything else, which hearing and sound require, in order that the one may hear, and the other be heard, which third thing if it is absent the one shall not hear, and the other not be heard?

GLAUCO: There is nothing.

SOCRATES: Imagine then, that neither do many others (that I may not say none) require any such thing; or can you mention any one that does require it?

GLAUCO: Not I.

SOCRATES: But with reference to the sense of seeing, and the object of sight, do not you perceive that they require something?

GLAUCO: How?

- e SOCRATES: When there is sight in the eyes, and when he who has it attempts to use it, and when there is colour in the objects before him, unless there concur some third thing, naturally formed for the purpose, you know that the sight will see nothing, and the colours will be invisible.

GLAUCO: What is that you speak of?

SOCRATES: What you call light.

GLAUCO: You say true.

- 508a SOCRATES: This thing then is not despicable; and by no small idea are the sense of seeing, and the power of being seen, connected together; but by a bond the most honourable of all bonds, if light be not dishonourable.

GLAUCO: But it is far from being dishonourable.

SOCRATES: Whom then of the Gods in heaven can you assign as the cause of this, that light makes our sight to see, and visible objects to be seen, in the best manner?

GLAUCO: The same as you, and others do; for it is evident that you mean the sun.

SOCRATES: Is not the sight then naturally formed in this manner with reference to this God?

GLAUCO: How?

SOCRATES: The sight is not the sun, nor is that the sun in which sight is ingenerated, which we call the eye.

- b GLAUCO: It is not.

SOCRATES: But yet I think that of all the organs of sense it is most solar-form.

GLAUCO: Very much so.

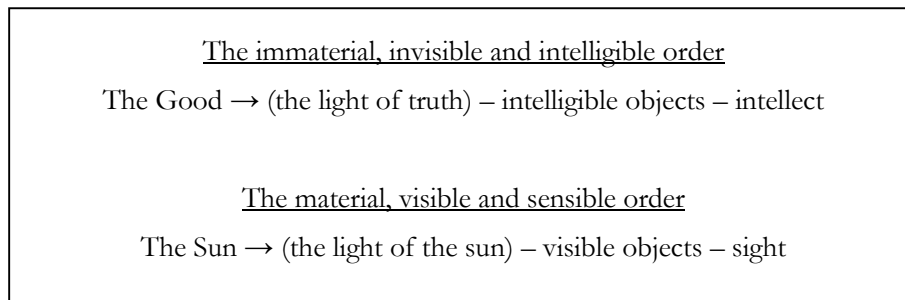
SOCRATES: And the power which it possesses, does it not possess as dispensed and flowing from hence?

GLAUCO: Perfectly so.

SOCRATES: Is not then the sun, which indeed is not sight itself, yet as it is the cause of it, seen by sight itself?

GLAUCO: It is so.

SOCRATES: Conceive then, that this is what I called the offspring of *The Good*, which *The Good* generates, analogous to itself; and that what this is in the intelligible place, with respect to intellect, and the objects of intellect, that the sun is in the visible place with respect to sight and visible things.



c GLAUCO: How is it? explain to me yet further.

SOCRATES: You know that the eyes, when they are no longer directed towards objects whose colours are shone upon by the light of day, but by the splendour of the night, grow dim, and appear almost blind, as if they had in them no pure sight.

GLAUCO: Just so.

d SOCRATES: But when they turn to objects which the sun illuminates, then I think they see clearly, and in those very eyes there appears now to be sight.

GLAUCO: There does.

SOCRATES: Understand then, in the same manner, with reference to the soul. When it firmly adheres to that which truth and real being enlighten, then it understands and knows it, and appears to possess intellect: but when it adheres to that which is blended with darkness, which is generated, and which perishes, it is then conversant with opinion, its vision becomes blunted, it wanders from one opinion to another, and resembles one without intellect.

GLAUCO: It has such a resemblance.

e SOCRATES: That therefore which imparts truth to what is known, and dispenses the power to him who knows, you may call the idea² of *The Good*, being the cause of knowledge and of
509a truth, as being known through intellect. And as both these two, knowledge and truth, are so beautiful, when you think that *The Good* is something different, and still more beautiful than these, you shall think aright. Knowledge and truth here are as light and sight there, which we rightly judged to be solar-form, but that we were not to think they were the sun. So here it is right to judge, that both these partake of the form of *The Good*; but to suppose that either of them is *The Good*, is not right, but *The Good Itself* is worthy of still greater honour.

² We must beware of thinking the Plato here uses the word *idea*, when relating to the Good, in the same manner as he uses it elsewhere: for ideas in those cases generally refer to a specific intelligible paradigm or eternal model which gives rise to particular material species or qualities. But the idea of the Good is the very thing which empowers these specific ideas with their intelligible and creative power.

GLAUCO: You speak, of an inestimable beauty, since it affords science and truth, but is itself superior to these in beauty. And you never anywhere said that it was pleasure.

SOCRATES: Predict better things, and in this manner rather consider its image yet further.

b GLAUCO: How?

SOCRATES: You will say, I think, that the sun imparts to things which are seen, not only their visibility, but likewise their generation, growth and nourishment, not being itself generation.

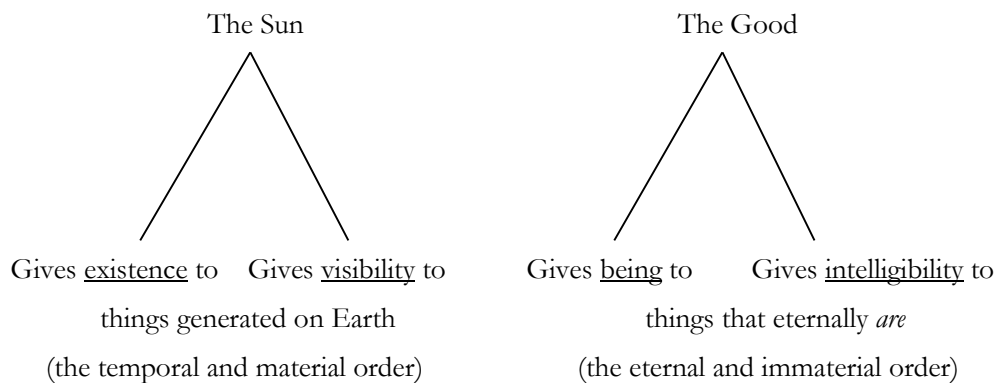
GLAUCO: Why not?

SOCRATES: We may say, therefore, that things which are known have not only this from *The Good*, that they are known, but likewise that their being and essence are thence derived, whilst *The Good* itself is not essence, but beyond essence, transcending it both in dignity and in power.

c GLAUCO (laughing): By Apollo this is a divine transcendence indeed!

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We should note that the effective power of both the Sun and the Good are considered to be twofold:



Thus the Good is not only the ontological first principle (i.e. it is the cause of the being of things), but also is the epistemological first principle (and provides the basis for the knowability of all things).