

# THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY: DOES PLATO MAKE ROOM FOR NEGATIVE FORMS IN HIS ONTOLOGY?

Necip Fikri Alican

**ABSTRACT:** Plato seems to countenance both positive and negative Forms, that is to say, both good and bad ones. He may not say so outright, but he invokes both and rejects neither. The apparent finality of this impression creates a lack of direct interest in the subject: Plato scholars do not give negative Forms much thought except as the prospect relates to something else they happen to be doing. Yet when they do give the matter any thought, typically for the sake of a prior concern, they try either to support the textual evidence or to contradict it, indicating that the evidence does not stand on its own. The purpose of this paper is to determine why they tend to affirm or deny the obvious, how they try to confirm or dispute it, and what this says about Plato's position. The strategic vehicle is a comparative case study. The confirmation comes from Debra Nails (2013), who needs to embrace negative Forms to demonstrate that the unhypothetical first principle of the all is not identical to the Form of the good, something she cannot do unless Plato recognizes negative Forms. The contradiction comes from Holger Thesleff (2013), who needs to reject negative (Ideal) Forms because the defining feature of his (Ideal) Forms is the possession of positive intrinsic value, which cannot be predicated of anything negative. Despite defending opposite views, or perhaps because of this, they jointly make up for any lack of interest in the scholarly community. I appreciate both, yet side with Thesleff.

**KEYWORDS:** Plato; Plato's Ontology; Plato's Forms; Negative Forms

## 1. ASKING ABOUT NEGATIVE FORMS

Are there any negative Forms in Plato?<sup>1</sup> This is a good question. Here is a better one: Why would anyone bother with the first question, given that Plato is widely known to speak of such things at least sporadically if not systematically, sometimes even bringing up the good, the bad, and the ugly all in the same breath, as he does, for example, both in the *Republic* (475c–476a) and in the *Theaetetus* (186a)?<sup>2</sup>

The negative is never too far to reach in Plato. It is always close at hand and typically under scrutiny. Other examples include talk of the just with the unjust (*Republic* 476a; *Phaedrus* 250a–b), the beautiful with the ugly (*Euthydemus* 301b; *Hippias Major* 289c–d), and the holy/pious with the unholy/impious (*Euthyphro* 5c–6e). The list can be expanded indefinitely, covering anything of any value amenable to any manner of opposition.

Is it not obvious, then, that Plato welcomes negative Forms alongside the positive ones? Evidently not. It must not be so obvious, since we keep asking the first question, or insist on answering it when no one has asked it. It is far enough from obvious that we routinely disagree on the answer. This is what makes the second question a better one. And that is the question I intend to explore in this paper.

I do not intend merely to answer the question. The answer would fit on this very page with room to spare. I will, of course, answer it. But I will also demonstrate that, and illustrate how, and explain why, we normally do not think about the matter at all until it intersects with something we do happen to be thinking about.<sup>3</sup> And I will

---

<sup>1</sup> A couple of caveats may help prevent misunderstandings even if the subject matter is clear enough as it is. First, the sense of negativity intended here is not logical negation (not-good, not-just, not-holy, etc.) but outright evil (bad, unjust, unholy, etc.). Second, the evil in question is not exclusively moral or religious evil but any manifestation whatsoever of negativity (ugliness, ignorance, pestilence, etc.). The focus, then, is on the possible connections between negativity, broadly construed, and Plato's Forms.

<sup>2</sup> References to Plato are by Stephanus number in correlation with the Oxford Classical Texts edition of his opera (Plato 1900–1907). Translations of specific passages, except where noted otherwise, are from the Hackett edition of his complete works (Plato 1997).

<sup>3</sup> This lack of direct scholarly interest does not extend to the subjects contrasted above (n. 1) with the main topic. Hence, when I speak of neglect of negative Forms in Plato, I do not mean to imply either (1) that no one is interested in how Plato handles negation or (2) that no one cares what Plato does with the problem of evil from a moral or religious perspective. Both are widely discussed, but neither addresses the problem on hand. The first issue is invariably about the logic, semantics, epistemology, or ontology of Plato's approach to negation, for example, in places where we encounter not-large, not-beautiful, and not-being (*Sophist* 258b–c), or in those where we find not-Greek and not-ten-thousand (*Statesman* 262d–e). Discussions, to name a few, include: Brown (2012); Lee (1972); Lewis (1976); O'Brien (2013); Prior (1980). The second issue, while it can be restricted to Plato's ethics, is more often about his theodicy, with

suggest that, and show how, confronting the second question can help us with the first question, even if that may seem counterintuitive because the second is inspired by the first. Finally, I will recommend an answer to the first question based on the answer to the second question, or more specifically, based on my analysis of possible scenarios giving rise to the second question.

These are not structural or logical parts of the paper. They are, more loosely, aims I hope to achieve. This is what I mean by “exploring” the second question instead of merely answering it. As for the first question, we will probably never know the answer, and we will certainly never agree on it. That is why we have the second question.

Just how would one go about exploring a question beyond simply answering it? Since the second question is about why anyone would bother with the first question, I propose to examine what has been said by those who actually have bothered with the first question. The most helpful answers will be ones that either affirm or deny negative Forms in Plato. Any other answer, say, that the matter is not clear, even if correct, will not be as helpful, because we can already tell that the matter is not clear.

People who do find the matter clear usually have more interesting things to say, if only because they are willing to go out on a limb. Debra Nails (2013, 95–101) does this as she supports negative Forms in Plato, Holger Thesleff (2013, 40–42) as he rejects them.<sup>4</sup> They are both clear on the problem and confident in their answers. This, I think, is a suitable combination for studying the opposition around negative Forms, whether in response to the first question or in connection with the second.<sup>5</sup>

---

discussions typically centering on whether evil comes from the body or from the soul or from both. Noteworthy contributions include but are not limited to: Cherniss (1954); Chilcott (1923); Hoffleit (1937); Mohr (1980); Wood (2009). In contrast to both, the focus of this paper is specifically on whether Plato has Forms for bad things in general, that is, for negatively valued, or so charged, phenomena: anything undesirable in any way for any reason. It is here that I note a relative lack of immediate and consequential interest, but even here, the matter is not in a state of complete disregard. The most prominent of scholars have been known to comment, but only in passing, and not with a view to developing a solution: Cherniss (1944, 266–267; 1954, 27); Guthrie (1978, 97–100); Herrmann (2007, 223–225); Rist (1967, especially 289–293); Ross (1951, 167–168); Sedley (2013, 119); Vlastos (1965, 6–7 [= 1973, 64], cf. 1965–1966 [= 1973, 43–57], a complementary piece).

<sup>4</sup> They are not out on a limb simply because they accept or reject negative Forms in Plato. They are out on a limb because of the way they do this, which as I show below, is in each case a Platonic adventure well worth taking.

<sup>5</sup> My own answer to the first question, though it is not relevant at this point to what I am doing with the second question, is the same as Thesleff’s (2013, 40–42), both in spirit and in print: “Thesleff (2013)” is formally “Alican and Thesleff (2013).” I abbreviate the reference as “Thesleff (2013)” not just because it is shorter but also because it preserves the third-person narrative adopted here for the case study comparing

Any attempt to answer either question stands to benefit from the prior consideration of a detail relevant to both: the distinction between the good and other Forms. The question of negative Forms, whether the first or the second, comes with a distinction between the bad and other (negative) Forms parallel to the one between the good and other (positive) Forms. It is conceivable, perhaps even obvious to some, that Plato accepts negative Forms, the bad being one of many, if indeed there are any. But it is also conceivable, though possibly with greater dissent, that he envisages a hierarchy of negative Forms with the bad at the top. The scholarly inspiration for either view would likely come from what he does with positive Forms.

Plato, it is true, tends to bring up the good with the bad, sometimes with additional room for the ugly, reminding us today of the ensemble cast of a classic Spaghetti Western: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. This is not to deny the uniquely exalted position of the good among the Forms. Plato's good comes with a status far more glorious than the edge given to the good in Westerns, even where Clint Eastwood is the good guy. The *Republic* goes so far as to single out the good as the greatest object of study (*megiston mathēma* [μέγιστον μάθημα] 505a) among the greatest objects of study (*megista mathēmata* [μέγιστα μαθήματα] 503e, 504a).

Since the greatest objects of study are the Forms, the good is thus the most important of the Forms (compared at *Republic* 504d–e). To cite just a few examples, the good is greater than justice and the other virtues (504d), more valuable than knowledge and truth (509a), and more substantial than “being” (*ousia* [οὐσία]), which then gives it a superlative mode of existence (509b).<sup>6</sup> The good is a superordinate Form. Nothing

the competing positions, one of which happens to be my own. In terms of origination, however, note that Thesleff's independent efforts (1999, 63–67 [= 2009, 447–450]) predate our collaboration.

<sup>6</sup> The “good” as more substantial than “being” is just one interpretation of the corresponding passage. The original reference (*Republic* 509b8–9), *epekeina tēs ousias* (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), simply places the good beyond being without explaining what that means. One reading, contradicting the one here, takes the good's transcendence of being to strip the good of its own being, though not thereby of its existence altogether, for something that does not exist can hardly be good, let alone serving as the good. Another reading, confirming the one here, takes the good's transcendence of being to indicate nothing more than the good's superiority over being, still leaving the good itself with a basic claim to being, the same way that Zeus is still a god despite being superior to all the rest. While nothing in this paper turns on identifying Plato's precise meaning in this regard, I do assume without argument, and without consequence here, that placing the good beyond being no more voids its being, or precludes its existence, than performing beyond expectations fails to meet expectations, or going above and beyond the call of duty constitutes a dereliction of duty. Anyone interested in a definitive solution will find the literature endless, dating at least as far back as Plotinus, who quotes the relevant passage (*epekeina tēs ousias*) more than any other in Plato, and even more than any other in general, citing it thirty-one times by the count of

else is. Or to stick to verifiable facts, the good is the only superordinate Form identified as such in the Platonic corpus. And Plato is known to have made a fuss over it outside the corpus as well.<sup>7</sup>

This being so, how could Plato have been comfortable speaking of the good as if it were just another Form, as he plainly does in many places, at least in the passages referenced in the opening paragraphs of this paper and in comparably general discussions of the good (as a Form) outside the central analogies of the *Republic*? The answer, by no means universally accepted, is that he had no choice. Comfortable or not, he had only one Form for the good.<sup>8</sup> He might at times have found cause for simply mentioning the good among other Forms without making a spectacle of it. But having loudly trumpeted the supremacy of the good, both orally and in writing, he probably saw no reason to fear being misunderstood in that regard. We are not supposed to be confused by his references to the good (as a Form), thinking he meant one thing at one time, something else at another. It is all the same superordinate Form of the good, sometimes putting in an appearance with ordinary Forms relevant to the topic on hand. A unifying perspective affords the most consistent view of the good.<sup>9</sup>

---

one careful reader (Halfwassen 2014, 192). Among recent contributions, see Baltes (1997) for a seminal statement of the position that the good is beyond being in a comparative sense accommodating its own being, and Ferber and Damschen (2015) for a formal proof of the opposite position that the good is beyond being in an absolute sense contradicting its own being.

<sup>7</sup> The earliest known source still in existence on Plato's notorious public lecture (possibly lectures) on the good is Aristoxenus (*Harm. Elem.* 2.30–31) drawing on the testimony of Aristotle. For current commentary, see: Gaiser (1980); Ferber (1989); Thesleff (1999, 104–105, 164–165 [= 2009, 485–486, 531]); Alican (2012, 84–87).

<sup>8</sup> An alternative answer is that Plato had two Forms for the good rather than one. Gerson (2015, 225–242), to cite a recent example, holds that Plato must, and does, employ both a “superordinate Idea of the Good” and a “coordinate Form of the Good” in order to meet the different needs described here. Our disagreement is important in itself but irrelevant in the context of this paper. The focus here is on the possibility, reality, and perhaps also psychology of the negative counterparts of Forms, quite apart from how many there would be if there were any. Yet anyone interested in the quantitative question, that is, in the purported duality of the good, can pursue the matter further through an abundance of references in Gerson's piece. The use he makes of Proclus is especially informative in that regard (2015, 230–235).

<sup>9</sup> One may be inclined to challenge the consistency of interpreting a good listed among ordinary Forms as the same good invoked elsewhere as a superordinate Form. But this is like challenging the consistency of holding the Bible dear while placing it on the same shelf as ordinary books. We can surely tell the Bible apart from all the other books no matter how they are shelved or stacked. The point is not just that the Form of the good is still a Form even if it is a superordinate Form, but also that it is still a Form of something, hence of the good (or of goodness), even if it is a superordinate Form, also of the good (or of goodness). The distinction, then, is not in reference to the good as content, always the same, but in

What would be the most consistent view of the bad and of negative Forms in general? The good might still be considered the only superordinate Form, with ordinary Forms coming in positive, negative, and neutral varieties. Alternatively, the bad could be assigned a special status among negative Forms, similar to the one for the good among positive Forms.<sup>10</sup> One would be in keeping with what Plato says about the good (the supremacy of the good thereby prohibiting us from assuming the same for the bad), the other would be in keeping with what he does with the good (the supremacy of the good thereby inspiring us to do the same with the bad). This evinces a subtlety in the possibility of negative Forms. Is this the possibility of ordinary negative Forms or is it the possibility of a negative superstructure with the bad at the top of a systematic negative hierarchy?

To repeat, I am not concerned, at least not immediately so, with the question opening this paper, not, that is, with whether there are negative Forms in Plato (be it at random or within a system). I am concerned, rather, with the one right after that, the question why it would occur to anyone to ask (or to answer unprompted) the first question, given that the answer seems to be in plain sight with abundant references by Plato to what appears to be negative Forms. Since the textual evidence, the direct kind anyway, is about ordinary negative Forms, with a superordinate Form of the bad requiring extrapolation, I will be pursuing the (second) question only as it pertains to ordinary negative Forms.

I am not against investigating the possibility of a special role for the bad. It just is not necessary for what I am doing here. Otherwise, it is only sensible to consider all the possibilities where we are not sure of the reality. Nails (2013), for one, has already explored this particular possibility. I myself will be content to consider negative Forms without regard to whether they are somehow shaped and sustained by the bad as the organizing principle and driving force of a negative hierarchy. This is because the second-order question with which I am concerned is not about a superordinate Form

---

reference to the level of the Form, that is, its ontological status, which as it turns out, is also the same, just as the Bible is still the Bible even when it sits right next to pulp fiction, and still holy then, if it is holy at all.

<sup>10</sup> It might be objected that the good has a special place among all Forms, not just among the positive ones, leaving no room for a comparable place for the bad among negative Forms, nor among all Forms. But this will not do. It is difficult to see the good as having anything to do with negative Forms (if there are any), and it is outright contradictory to take it as having the same thing to do with negative Forms (if there are any) that it has to do with positive Forms. A negative hierarchy is not an abomination. We need good reasons to rule it out. The fact that it is not mentioned by Plato is not good enough. Not everything accepted by Plato need be mentioned by Plato.

of the bad, since the direct and possibly obvious evidence, conclusive or not, is about ordinary negativity.

So, why indeed do we ask whether there are negative Forms in Plato in full awareness of passages pointing to negative Forms in Plato? The immediate motivation is either to reinforce or to reject the obvious: the appearance of negative Forms. But why do either? If Plato seems to be talking about negative Forms, why not just leave it at that? We do not bicker and dicker over the presence of positive Forms in Plato. We do not, when Plato seems to be talking about positive Forms, ask whether he is really talking about positive Forms. Why lock horns over the negative ones? Is it because there are more references to positive Forms than to negative Forms? Or is it because there seems to be a greater conviction behind positive Forms than behind negative Forms?

I think it is neither. The typical motivation for asking (and for answering) the first question is not a reaction, favorable or unfavorable, to putative negative Forms in the texts. The typical motivation is the solution of an altogether different problem, whatever it may be, that either requires or precludes negative Forms. This is manifested in the tendency to raise the question of negative Forms as part of an effort to promote a pet theory on a related but different matter that turns on whether there are negative Forms in Plato. The pet theory can be a general interpretation of Plato or a particular position resting on a general interpretation of Plato. In either case, the outlook on negative Forms remains indexed to a general interpretation. Scholars are typically not moved to study Plato's references to what seems to be negative Forms out of a genuine or immediate concern for whether Plato's intention really is to countenance negative Forms. How, then, can we verify what they say about the matter?

There is no verification.<sup>11</sup> The only relevant consideration is whether we are persuaded. Can we trust what these generalists say about negative Forms, suspecting all along that they will be tempted to say whatever makes their pet theory work, with no special regard, or at most a lesser one, for what may actually be true of negative Forms? I believe we can. Let us not exaggerate the potential for bias in the vested

---

<sup>11</sup> That is to say, there is no verification beyond going through Plato's specific references to putative negative Forms and attempting to determine whether the referents really are negative Forms. But we can do all that equally well (which happens to be not so well) outside the context of anyone's general interpretation of Plato. The question here is whether to accept the implications of the general interpretation for the specific problem.

interest. These generalists will, I imagine, be all the more careful with details and implications precisely because their own thesis is so special to them. They will want to avoid proceeding on the basis of questionable assumptions or hasty generalizations. Their particular position on negative Forms will indeed be in conformity with their general position on Plato's thought, but this is not a good reason to reject the latter, which is not a bad reason to accept the former.

Much of what we do with Plato is about trying to understand one thing without undermining what we thought we understood about another. This is not, if I may continue to speak for all of us engaged in and with Plato, because we are particularly slow or sloppy. It is because Plato is not sufficiently forthcoming with his thoughts. Although the Platonic corpus is not systematic philosophy, the actual interests and thoughts of its author cannot possibly have been as arbitrary as his combined output makes them out to be. A general interpretation will therefore be as useful as the extent to which it exposes a basic outlook underlying the competing perspectives in the Platonic corpus while uniting the complementary ones. A general interpretation that works, especially one with great explanatory power, can be an acceptable proxy for a specific theory on a special topic.

This does not mean that we must accept whatever a general theory, even a good one, assumes or implies in regard to negative Forms. Nor does it mean that between any two general theories, let us say good ones, we must favor the one that is more general. What it does mean is that we ought not to reject a position on negative Forms just because it was not conceived specifically as a solution to the problem of negative Forms. And between any number of equally appealing positions, or in this case, metapositions, we have to decide which one has greater explanatory power, not which one is more general (though the same one could be both).

Is this circular? If anything can be a *little* circular, then this would seem to fit the bill, perhaps not as a full circle but certainly as a winding spiral. We are to decide what to do with certain details based on what a successful general theory tells us to do, while judging the success of that theory by whether, among other things, it is able to make sense of those details. However suspicious this approach may seem, it is not necessarily a problem. It can, of course, turn into a problem if handled badly, but it does not start out as one by design. It is, in fact, a common feature (of one way) of trying to understand Plato.

There is nothing wrong with trying to figure out Plato's overall philosophical outlook on the basis of what he says about certain issues (given the prohibitively exhaustive and jointly inconsistent catalog of everything he says about every issue),



while also trying to determine what he says about certain issues with the help of what we take to be his overall philosophical outlook. This is both acceptable and helpful so long as the set of issues invoked while going in one direction is not identical to the set of issues clarified while going in the opposite direction.<sup>12</sup> We cannot afford to dismiss the spiral of evidence as circular reasoning if we are unable to get very far with the linear kind. But we also do not have to give up a close reading of relevant passages. The point is that a holistic approach works, not that nothing else does. It need not be followed exclusively, nor even very strictly.<sup>13</sup> It just ought not to be rejected out of hand.

This is how both Nails and Thesleff handle negative Forms. Each one proceeds with an assumption about negative Forms in conformity with their respective positions on a broader issue, that is, with their interpretations of Plato on a wider scale, but each one also introduces evidentiary benchmarks (in the form of passages in the corpus) to demonstrate that the assumption is consistent with the texts. Nails (2013) portrays Plato as reveling in negative Forms, complete with a hierarchy led by (the Form of) the bad, mirroring the better known order of (the Form of) the good.<sup>14</sup> Thesleff (2013) gives us a more conservative ontologist, wary of the negative and reluctant to make too much of it, least of all by countenancing Forms of that nature. Nails's Plato is open to all abstractions as potential Forms, which is why he does not weed out the negative ones. What this means is not that her Plato has a Form for every abstraction but that he is willing to consider them all without prejudice. He may (or may not) have other reasons to limit the population of Forms, but blocking the negative is not one of them. In contrast, Thesleff's Plato is preoccupied with (positive) value, eager to privilege the Forms that possess it, and ready to dismiss or discount the ones that do not. This is the basic difference between them.

Nails may be said to have the easier job because Plato already appears to endorse

---

<sup>12</sup> And it may be acceptable even then. A circular method of interpretation could arguably be judged by its propensity to predict or explain relevant episodic details, especially bits and pieces that are not explained as well by competing methods of interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> Even Quine warns against exaggerating holism, at least his own holism, specifically by taking it to preclude empirical inquiry altogether: "I must caution against overstating my holism. Observation sentences do have their empirical content individually, and other sentences are biased individually to particular empirical content in varying degrees" (1986, 427).

<sup>14</sup> Nails does not insist on a superstructure of negative Forms versus a superstructure of positive Forms. This is my interpretation of a part of what she does in her approach to negative Forms (Nails 2013, 95–101). However, my assessment of her demonstration that Plato accepts negative Forms does not depend on this particular interpretation. So, I prefer to explain it only at the end (section 5), where it would no longer be disrupting the discussion in progress.

negative Forms, at least insofar as he seems here and there to be talking about them. By the same token, Nails may be said to have the tougher job if only because whatever she says (about negative Forms) will tend to be interpreted as confirming the obvious (regarding negative Forms). In an important sense, however, neither one has this job at all, since each one sets out to do something else entirely.

In the final analysis, alignment with or against either Nails or Thesleff will not be a matter of whether they do a good job with negative Forms. If we were in a position to judge that, we would not need to mine their derivative input for primary insight. It will instead be a matter of whether they enrich our understanding of Plato. Even if they both do so, and certainly if they both do so equally well, a choice will be necessary, for their views are mutually inconsistent despite the absence of a direct contradiction. It will then be a matter of whose Plato is closer to our own. And since the only sense in which we can have our own Plato is distributive rather than collective, I will be summoning my own where necessary.

I do not mean to ignore other contributions. But these two stand out with the strength of their stake in the matter. My aim, in any case, is not to survey the literature. It is to show that and how and why the question of negative Forms tends to be treated as a derivative problem, and more importantly, to see if anything in that treatment can be adopted toward a better understanding of the primary problem. A focused case study is better suited to the task than a sweeping survey. To return to the distinction in the beginning of the paper, this means exploring the second question for insight into the first question.

## 2. EMBRACING NEGATIVE FORMS (DEBRA NAILS)

Nails (2013) finds plenty of room for negative Forms in Plato. She finds it in the course of developing a separate argument (2013, 88–101) that requires negative Forms (95–101) as a premise.<sup>15</sup> Her main concern is with a problem that works out the way she wants only if Plato countenances negative Forms. It could possibly go her way even without negative Forms, but that is a detail best left for later, especially since negative Forms make her argument stronger than otherwise.

Fortunately, the default position on negative Forms happens to be that such Forms

---

<sup>15</sup> A critique of this argument may be found in Franklin (2013, 102–109), but the objections there are not relevant here.

do belong in Plato's ontology.<sup>16</sup> Yet Nails expands on the default position instead of merely drawing on it. She not only presents evidence and arguments in support of negative Forms but also takes issue with the common objection that negative Forms (e.g., the bad, the ugly, the unjust) are nothing more than privations of positive ones (e.g., the good, the beautiful, the just). Nails finds this inconsistent with the texts (2013, 96). Her own reading is that Plato ranks negative Forms right up there with positive ones, holding them on a conceptual and methodological par with their more popular counterparts.

Nails thus maintains not just that there are negative Forms in Plato but further that their claim to being a Form is just as valid as the corresponding claim of positive Forms. Positive or negative, a Form is a Form is a Form. Hence, the ugly, the unjust, and any other negative Forms are all Forms in their own right, not privations or absences of their respective counterparts among positive Forms. The bad, however, stands out: It is not an ordinary Form. Nor is it merely the absence of the good. It is, like the good, a special or privileged Form. To borrow the adjective favored by Nails, it is a "robust" Form (2013, 96, 99, 100).

Convinced that negative Forms are more than the ontological residue of imagining away the positive ones, Nails illustrates her position through the framework of opposition in Platonic metaphysics. She distinguishes between two basic manifestations of opposition in Forms (2013, 96): Some Forms are opposed to each other as the extreme ends of a continuum: e.g., motion and rest; sameness and difference; hot and cold. Others are mutually exclusive with no gradation in between: e.g., life and death; odd and even; finite and infinite. The main difference, beyond the association of mutual exclusiveness with the second group but not with the first (at least not explicitly so), seems to be that the paired elements in the first group (but evidently not those in the second) "might well be described as privations of one another, though neither need be considered negative" (2013, 96).

What does this mean for negative Forms? We get a better idea through the position of the good and the bad in her classification. Nails places the good and the bad in the

---

<sup>16</sup> The acknowledgment of a default position may seem inconsistent with the search for an answer. Actually, it is quite consistent, given that the aim of the paper is to answer the second question (why we keep confirming or challenging the default position) rather than, or at least before, the first (whether there is a default position at all). The sense in which the acceptance of negative Forms constitutes the default position is that, despite the fact that scholars are typically not concerned with the subject unless and until it intersects with a subject they are concerned with, there is some *prima facie* textual evidence in support of it and no particular textual evidence in contradiction of it.

first category (2013, 96). Given her earlier distinctions, this would seem to suggest (1) that the good and the bad are not mutually exclusive and (2) that the good and the bad may possibly be privations of each other, though neither one need (for this reason alone) be considered negative (as against the other as positive). Since she also acknowledges that “there is a vast range of the neither-good-nor-bad (NGNB),” we know further (3) that the good and the bad are not jointly exhaustive. We can combine the first and third implications, leaving the second as it is in essentials: (1) the good and the bad are neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive; (2) the good and the bad can (but need not) be privations of each other without either one being negative.

The second implication worries me. For one thing, acknowledging that the good and the bad may reasonably be considered privations of each other (and presumably just as reasonably not) seems strategically to be the opposite of what Nails ought to be doing, given that she does not want the bad (or any other putative negative Form) to turn out to be a privation. For another, adding that this, the possibility of a symmetrical privation relation, need not make either the good or the bad negative, also seems inimical to what she should be promoting, negative Forms. If neither the good nor the bad has to be negative, then neither one has to be a negative Form, and if neither one has to be a negative Form, then why are we talking about them, and where are the negative Forms? Without anything negative established in the scenario, the context is not about showing that a negative Form counts as a Form in its own right as opposed to a mere privation. It is instead about showing that some Form bearing an opposite, but itself not necessarily a negative Form, counts as a Form in its own right as opposed to a mere privation (and that the same holds for its opposite). Furthermore, the bad would, it seems to me, have to be considered negative if anything at all can be. How can the bad not be negative? It is the very embodiment of the negative. It is the common denominator of negativity. And it is, according to Nails herself, the sole explanation of destruction (2013, 94, 99, 100).

Perhaps I am misinterpreting what Nails is saying. Her reluctance to diagnose the negative might, in this context, indicate simply that even if the good and the bad were privations of each other, which they are not (according to Nails), it would still not be clear which is the substantial element and which the privation, and hence, also not clear which is the positive element and which the negative. That is not quite it. Nails does not seem to be saying either that it would not be clear which is the substantial element and which the privation or that it would not be clear which is the positive element and which the negative. She seems to be saying that neither one would have to be negative even if each were the privation of the other. The only commitment she

actually makes in this regard is that “neither need be considered negative” (2013, 96). This would correct my first mistake, my construal of Nails as admitting the possibility and reasonability of taking the bad as a *mere* privation of the good just because she admits the possibility and reasonability of taking the bad as a privation of the good (in placing the good and the bad in a category of examples that “might well be described as privations of one another”) (2013, 96).

I do not know whether Nails would agree with any of this, but her correction of my mistake would probably have to run deeper, just as the mistake seems to do. The mistake to be corrected may be as basic as my supposing that the bad as a privation of the good would be a privation rather than a Form as opposed to a privation that is (or has) a Form. This would be a fundamental disagreement: whether a privation can also be a Form (or whether a privation can have a Form). I doubt that we can settle that debate here as an incidental concern, but even the recognition of it as the source of our disagreement on related issues would be a step toward constructive dialogue. Either way, there is still the matter of what would be my second mistake, my construal of Nails as leaving room for a bad that is not negative, or more specifically, a negative Form. I might here have distorted an otherwise innocuous general observation that a privation need not be negative (whether or not the bad actually is). Maybe that, too, would resolve itself upon the resolution of the more fundamental question at the root of our disagreement.

Yet even with all my misconceptions corrected, we might still disagree on the correlation between negativity and privation, despite agreeing that not all privations are negative. I would be inclined to think that the assignment of the status of privation proceeds from the prior identification of a positive element against which the privation is considered negative. It is not the other way around: We do not neutrally, that is, dispassionately, identify pairs of elements that are privations of each other, proceeding from there to value assignments. There might be cases where we do start out by identifying pairs of elements that are privations of each other, but those are cases where we consider neither element negative and where, therefore, there are no value assignments to be made. The contrasting elements in the first cluster of passages Nails presents are excellent examples of privation without valuation: motion and rest; sameness and difference; hot and cold (2013, 96). But the cases where one element is positive and the other negative do not get those value assignments after a neutral identification of the privation relation. What happens instead is that we first sort out the good (the positive) and the bad (the negative) and then decide that the bad is a privation of the good (if we actually do believe that the bad is a privation of the good).

What is the problem if the examples Nails provides are excellent? The problem is that her good and her bad do not belong in that category of examples. The good *is* good and the bad *is* bad. The question of value does arise.

Let us grant Nails all her claims and see what follows: The good and the bad are neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive, and neither one of them has to be negative even if each one is the privation of the other. The upshot of all this, together with the supporting evidence (2013, 96–99), seems to be that the bad is a Form in its own right and that this is the case with negative Forms in general. Does this really follow as a conclusion? There is a strong presumption in its favor, emphatically so as Nails turns to citation, but there is also some clutter, which may admittedly be peculiar to my reading as opposed to her writing: If the good and the bad are not jointly exhaustive, then neither one alone can be the privation of the other (thus validating the original opposition of Nails) regardless of whether they are mutually exclusive, and regardless of which one, if either, might be negative. This is because the absence of the good stands to leave us not just with the bad but also with the neither-good-nor-bad as Nails correctly and repeatedly points out. Nails does not seem to need all her initial claims, though invoking them all does not damage her position.<sup>17</sup>

None of my objections so far overturns Nails's opposition to privation as an explanation of negative Forms, which, on that explanation, do not count as Forms. Any attempt to prove her wrong would have to contend with the examples she adduces from the Platonic corpus (2013, 96–99), especially since her main point against the privation interpretation is that “the texts do not allow it” (2013, 96). Nails organizes the relevant citations in two separate clusters, which together cover most but not all of the Plato references in her article. The first cluster (2013, 97), comprising six passages, one each from six dialogues, constitutes evidence that Plato found a reciprocal relationship between knowing the good and knowing the bad. The second cluster (2013, 97–99), comprising nine passages, all from the *Republic*, illustrates that “the good and its results are kept distinct from the bad and its results” (2013, 97). The first cluster supports her claim that negative Forms are Forms in their own right and not mere privations of their positive counterparts. The second cluster may also be said to do this, at least with some of the references, but its main function is to fortify her broader position against

---

<sup>17</sup> The identification of a category where paired elements “might well be described as privations of one another, though neither need be considered negative” (Nails 2013, 96) becomes superfluous where the elements in question are not jointly exhaustive, and therefore, cannot be privations of each other in the sense of either one alone representing what is entailed by the absence of the other.

equating the unhypothetical first principle of the all with the Form of the good. This is what she is really after.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to say something relevant about her perspective on negative Forms without engaging her at the level of specific examples. Let us go back to basics: What is the motivation? Why does she need negative Forms? She needs them because Plato has to accept negative Forms alongside positive Forms if Nails is to establish her thesis that the unhypothetical first principle of the all is not identical to the Form of the good (2013, 88–101, especially 95–101). She cannot do this unless her Plato accepts and works with negative Forms in addition to whatever else makes the world go round. Perhaps it could also be done in some other way, but this is the way she does it, and to be able to do it this way, she needs there to be bona fide negative Forms, or rather, she needs for Plato to believe that there are bona fide negative Forms.

Under her interpretation, the Form of the good cannot account for harm or destruction, and this is why it cannot be identical to the unhypothetical first principle of the all, which can account for harm and destruction (and for everything else). The unhypothetical first principle of the all, then, covers more ground than the Form of the good. But it also covers more ground than the combined total associated with the Form of the good and the Form of the bad. This is because it alone includes “the vast range of the neither-good-nor-bad (NGNB)” (2013, 96). In some sense, the unhypothetical first principle of the all is equivalent to the Form of the good plus the Form of the bad plus everything in between or beyond, specifically “all those NGNB things made good or bad through their use” (2013, 99).

This is not the whole story. My summary is missing a key ingredient present in the original: the anthropocentricity of Plato’s Form of the good, and for that matter, of his Form of the bad (if there is one). Nails takes this up in several places: (1) “Plato’s form of the good is anthropocentric” (2013, 95). (2) “Plato has a robust form of the bad, a form as intelligible as the others and yet — like the good — an anthropocentric form without application to the universe as a whole” (2013, 96). (3) “[G]ood and bad are importantly, though not exclusively, anthropocentric” (2013, 100). This suggests that the unhypothetical first principle of the all covers not just the good, the bad, and the neither, but all that plus the nonanthropocentric senses of both the good and the bad (and perhaps also the nonanthropocentric sense of the neither if it, too, admits of that distinction).<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Nails (2013, 94–96, 99–100) provides both reasons and references for her characterization of the Form of the good as anthropocentric. I might add, without a personal inclination either way, that her claim seems

Right or wrong, this observation has implications outside the context in which it is presented. The anthropocentricity postulated seems to trickle down to places Nails does not discuss (because she does not need to for her immediate purposes). If the anthropocentricity of the good and the bad in Plato is part of what makes both the Form of the good and the Form of the bad less comprehensive than the unhypothetical first principle of the all, should it not pose an additional problem such that neither the Form of the good nor the Form of the bad is as comprehensive as its nonanthropocentric version would be? Under Nails's interpretation, Plato's (anthropocentric) Form of the good is too narrow not only as the unhypothetical first principle of the all but also as the (unqualified) Form of the good. It therefore does not work as the Form of the good it is purported to be. I am here observing rather than opposing what she is doing.

As for Nails's own observation, anthropocentricity is an integral part of her opposition to the tendency to identify the unhypothetical first principle of the all with the Form of the good. It is so important that she could have based her entire case on this premise alone, had she been inclined to do so, without ever requiring a robust Form of the bad. She could have held the difference between the unhypothetical first principle of the all and the Form of the good to rest on the generality of the former and the anthropocentricity of the latter. This is not an objection to Nails such that she should have done this instead. It is a note to the reader such that she could have done this instead. That is how relevant and important her observation is (especially for her own thesis).

On the other hand, had she done it that way, she would have ended up with a less significant difference between the unhypothetical first principle of the all and the Form of the good. She would have had to settle for an unhypothetical first principle of the all that is basically the Form of the good without an anthropocentric bias. And she would not have needed negative Forms for that. As it is, she does need them. It is to meet that need that she adduces textual evidence supporting the existence of negative Forms, particularly the Form of the bad but also others.

I am not convinced, however, that the evidence is conclusive. I will not challenge her examples one by one. They obviously support her position. It is the default position anyway. What I want to know is whether the reasoning that leads Nails to her position

---

to be confirmed by the author of the *Seventh Letter*, who declares that "there is nothing worth mentioning that is either good or bad to creatures without souls, but good and evil exist only for a soul, either joined with a body or separated from it" (334e–335a).



on negative Forms as genuine Forms successfully blocks the alternative that they are instead privations of corresponding positive Forms. The crux of her argument seems to be this: “Since the good that opposes the bad and makes NGNB [neither-good-nor-bad] things good cannot cause harm or destruction, but harm and destruction do exist, there must be something else that harms and destroys” (2013, 99). Why? Why must there be something else that harms and destroys?

Nails and Plato have an answer: “The bad is what destroys and corrupts, and the good is what preserves and benefits... And do you say that there is a good and a bad for everything? ... for the good would never destroy anything, nor would anything neither good nor bad” (*Republic* 608e4–7, 609b1–2, as quoted by Nails 2013, 99). But this is not what I am asking. I am not asking why there must be something that harms and destroys. I am asking why there must be something else that harms and destroys. Might not the privation of the good work as an explanation of the bad, naturally covering harm and destruction as well, without requiring a separate cause dedicated to negativity: a robust Form of the bad?<sup>19</sup>

An apple a day keeps the doctor away. Take the apple away, the doctor comes to stay. Is this not a good explanation? It is admittedly not the best, but what exactly is wrong with it? There are, to be sure, better accounts of physical ailment. Yet if the absence of the apple is not the cause of harm and destruction, or in this case a sufficient explanation of disease, this is because its presence never was the source of health in the first place, nor a sufficient explanation thereof. What we are facing is not an explanation that works in the first case but not in the second. What we are facing is an explanation that cannot consistently be dismissed in the second case unless it is dismissed in the first. Even if it is not a good explanation, or the correct explanation, it is a coherent explanation because it anchors both the positive and the negative accounts to the same factor, present in one case, absent in the other. This would not be the first time Plato came up with an explanation that did not strike our fancy.<sup>20</sup>

Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone! Do we really need another explanation? Not if we are to enjoy the song. But if we would rather have a weather report, then we need more information if not an altogether different explanation. This one has limited value

---

<sup>19</sup> Thesleff, it seems, would have joined me in this reaction even before our collaboration (Alican and Thesleff 2013, 40–42): “Evil is no active force: evil is imperfection and the chaotic state of lower-level tendencies getting the upper hand” (Thesleff 1999, 124 [= 2009, 505]).

<sup>20</sup> Note by way of connection with Alican and Thesleff (2013) that if Plato indeed holds Forms proper (“Ideal Forms”) to have positive intrinsic value, he might well associate negativity with the absence of the positive (an absence that can all the same be filled partly by the neutral).

in its present form. Although we know not to expect sunshine when she is gone, there is no guarantee there will be sunshine when she is here, just an implication to that effect for those who want to see it. Nor do we know for sure that she is absent every time the sun is absent. We know only the reverse, that the sun is absent whenever she is.

These are all gaps in the association but they are easily fixed. The real problem is hidden underneath. Let us ignore the superficial issues and turn to the real problem. Let us assume, therefore, not that the song depicts a partial correlation, one limited to the mutual absence of the sun and the heroine, but that it draws on a complete causal relationship such that she bringeth forth the sun just as surely as she taketh it away.<sup>21</sup> This must be what is meant anyway, given that we are talking, with poetic license, about someone so special. The problem, however, is that her absence is not as revealing as her presence: No sunshine. That we know. But how do we explain the rain? Where does all the snow come from? What brings on the tornadoes and the hurricanes?

Suppose there ain't no sunshine and she's gone. Should we expect a drizzle or a blizzard? Or just overcast skies? It is hard to tell. It would help if we knew whether there's a bad moon on the rise. It might help even more if we knew whether there's trouble on the way. The absence of sunshine does not always mean we're in for nasty weather. But that is just when to expect it. Although it need not rain cats and dogs every time the sun is gone (as is she), it would indeed be more likely to do so (if at all) when the sun is gone (as is she). The poet probably intended the absence of sunshine as a blanket reference to conditions conducive to bad weather, ranging from scattered showers to biblical floods. But where is the poetry in that? We leave the art behind as we turn to the science, and vice versa, but we need not be ignorant of one just because we are focusing on the other.

Plato is a poet too. He knows very well that the absence of the good does not automatically translate into the presence of the bad. He trusts us to make that distinction — and to trust him to make it in silence. It is as a poet, I think, that he leaves it all to the good, and to its absence, not bothering to fill in the details with the bad. Nor do we ourselves need to invent a Form for the bad to work out those details.

---

<sup>21</sup> This is still poetic shorthand for the causal relationship, which can be expressed as the mutual satisfaction of the following conditions: (1) there is no sunshine when she is gone; (2) she is gone when there is no sunshine; (3) there is sunshine when she is here; (4) she is here when there is sunshine. From the opposite perspective, there is never a case when she is here but the sun is not, or when the sun is here but she is not. And none of this obviously has anything to do with the difference between day and night, instead representing a daytime difference between sunshine and its absence (obstruction).

The possibility is there, but the requirement is not: If the absence of the good is no more likely, in any particular case, to leave us with the bad than it is to leave us with the neither-good-nor-bad, a Form for the bad is no more useful, or necessary, than a Form for the neither-good-nor-bad. Given that they both represent the privation of the good, and given that they do that better together than on their own, why would we ever need a Form for one but not for the other? I do not believe we need a Form for either. I believe we have all the Forms we need.

### 3. REJECTING NEGATIVE FORMS (HOLGER THESLEFF)

Thesleff (2013) rejects negative Forms in Plato.<sup>22</sup> He maintains that any and all apparent negative Forms are instead negative concepts or abstractions. Since Forms belong to the highest ranks of Plato's ontology, while mere concepts and abstractions do not, Thesleff thus stands out with a more restricted population for Forms than acknowledged by most other scholars.

But where does Plato draw this distinction between Forms and mere concepts? Where does he explain the difference between abstractions that are Forms (or have Forms) and abstractions that are not Forms (or do not have Forms)? That would be nowhere.<sup>23</sup> Plato does not employ (or have) a second-order language to describe Forms in terms of concepts or abstractions. We have to use our own if we are so inclined. Thesleff's point, on the other hand, is not that the distinction is explicit in this or that dialogue but that it goes better with what we know of Plato than does a predisposition to accept absolutely anything as a Form.

We would not be able to get past the first few pages of the *Parmenides* if we were to assign the same weight to everything admitting of abstraction. The *Parmenides* gives us a Socrates who is certain that there are Forms for justice, beauty, and goodness (130b), certain again that there are no Forms for hair, mud, or dirt (130c–d), but ambivalent as to whether there might be any for man, fire, and water (130c). The sample size may not be large enough to draw conclusions about the general population with any

---

<sup>22</sup> His most forceful stand is in Alican and Thesleff (2013, 40–42), though his resistance can be traced back to Thesleff (1999, 63–67 [= 2009, 447–450]).

<sup>23</sup> I am not claiming that concepts and abstractions are the same thing. I am merely reporting that Forms tend to be compared and contrasted, and indeed even confused, both with concepts and with abstractions. See Alican and Thesleff (2013, 29–33, 44) and Alican (2014, 35–37, 44–52; 2015, 323) for what we might, in the absence of instructions by Plato, be able to make of the distinction between Forms and either mere concepts or mere abstractions.

confidence, but the premium on value is hard to miss. Everything that makes the cut happens to be intrinsically good. Everything else is met with either hesitation or out-and-out rejection. The defining difference is intrinsic value. The only things the passage identifies as Forms are those that are good in themselves (valuable for their own sakes). If those lacking positive intrinsic value are at best held in abeyance, and just as easily dismissed altogether, why should there be, and how could there be, any Forms that carry negative value? Or to put it crudely, if hair, mud, and dirt are not good enough, how can ugliness or injustice or ignorance ever qualify?

The answer I am fishing for, rather transparently at that, is that they never can. I am, of course, cheating. Such a controversial conclusion is not established with a single reference unless the message is beyond dispute. This particular passage is open to interpretation. The restriction imposed on the population of Forms is not as authoritative as it might seem. We have evidence to the contrary, for example, in the character of Parmenides, who immediately opposes (130e) Socrates's inclination to reject Forms for "worthless" things such as hair, mud, and dirt. This then vitiates the sole reason for invoking the passage as supporting Plato's rejection of negative Forms. We do not know whether to look to Socrates or to Parmenides (or to both or to neither) for what Plato thinks about the matter. It is clear, at any rate, that we are not to ignore the explicit warning of the older and wiser Parmenides. Even more indicative is the self-criticism of Socrates, who expresses misgivings about the consistency of attributing Forms to some things while denying them of others (130d). Must the assignment of Forms be so comprehensive as to leave nothing without a Form?<sup>24</sup> Whatever the answer to that question, there is too much dramatic opposition here to read this passage as a categorical rejection of negative Forms.

Yet the *Parmenides* is not the only dialogue to spurn negative Forms. The Forms mentioned in the central myth of the *Phaedrus* (246e–249d), each one favored beyond a doubt and positive without exception, are entirely consistent with the ones eagerly accepted as Forms in the *Parmenides* (130b). Beheld upon the completion of the cosmic ascent of the soul, these Forms include justice, temperance, knowledge, and such (247d), together with beauty (249d, 250b, 250d–e), which shines more brightly than the rest, with glimpses of it available in our phenomenal experience as well. The list is representative rather than exhaustive. But it is easy to tell that hair and mud and dirt are not meant to be included. And there is no mention of man or fire or water. Nor is there an elderly sage warning us not to underestimate such things. They are not there

---

<sup>24</sup> See Alican (2017) for the possibility of Formless things (13–15) and empty Forms (16–29).

anyway. All we have is the good stuff.

This is the sublime vision awaiting the soul (of the philosopher) upon its attainment of spiritual purification and intellectual enlightenment, not to mention the various gods, who are presumably already purified and enlightened to some extent even before the journey. Mortals and gods alike, the latter with greater success, travel to the outer edges of the heavens to behold the Forms in their full glory.<sup>25</sup> No wonder there is no room in the *Phaedrus* for any of the muck rejected in the *Parmenides*. Judging by the short list (justice, temperance, knowledge, beauty), nary a negative Form will be found there either. This is no place for negative Forms. And that, contends Thesleff, is because there is no place for negative Forms.

Thesleff does not allow any reification of negativity in his interpretation of Plato. But why should everything negative (e.g., badness, ugliness, injustice) be restricted to insubstantial concepts while positive phenomena (e.g., goodness, beauty, justice) are hailed as fully fledged Forms? And what are we to make of the various neutral abstractions that look like they belong somewhere in the middle, apparently qualifying as more than concepts, though hardly deserving designation as Forms? No neutral items we come up with (nor the ones that come up in the *Parmenides*) will be as good as the positive ones, but they are also not going to be as bad as the negative ones. Would they not need a category of their own: “neither-Forms-nor-concepts,” or more perspicuously, “not-quite-Forms-but-more-than-concepts,” possibly to be abbreviated for convenience to something like “überconcepts”? Maybe so. Classification and specification can be useful, but a single category may not be enough. The category of the neutral in the *Parmenides*, for example, does not seem to be homogeneous, admitting as it does of significant items such as man, fire, and water, on the one hand, and of insignificant ones such as hair, mud, and dirt, on the other. If Thesleff is going to be insisting on a distinction between the positive and the negative, associating Forms with one but not with the other, should he not tell us what to do with everything in between? He should. And he does.

Thesleff is not suspicious only of the negative. He is rather vigilant across the board. He can even be open to one neutral Form while rejecting another. He is picky. And this is the impetus behind his opposition to the negative. It is perhaps best to start with the negative, even though that is not where Thesleff starts. He does, after all, reject the negative, lock, stock, and barrel, no matter how flexible or finicky he is about

---

<sup>25</sup> The myth (*Phaedrus* 246e–249d) has two distinct parts, starting with the gods (246e–247e) and moving on to human souls (248a–249d).

everything else. Indeed, let us ask why.

Thesleff's resistance to negativity is motivated by a vision of Plato's ontology that precludes negative Forms.<sup>26</sup> This may seem like a circular answer, but it is the actual reason. This is not a direct answer, as he has never been asked the question, at least not in print. Nevertheless, this is his position. Thesleff has to reject negative Forms.

The vision that dictates this rejection covers more than Plato's ontology.<sup>27</sup> It is, in essence, a general outlook on Plato's philosophical orientation, thereby observable in his ontology as well. And the outlook simply does not work with negative Forms. But Thesleff also prepares individual cases against some of the strongest candidates for negative Forms (2013, 40–42) independently of the general outlook that already precludes negative Forms. Because of this overlapping coverage, it may at times be difficult to tell whether he is opposed to negative Forms because the cumulative evidence shows that Plato is opposed to them or because his own overarching perspective on Plato rules out negative Forms.

This, however, is not a problem. If we find Thesleff convincing, it should not matter whether this is because we find his overall interpretation compelling, and consequently stand ready to reject anything that contradicts it, or because we find his specific objections to prominent examples of negative Forms persuasive. The general vision may be more effective than the specific objections, given that it is difficult to prove the negative, especially piecemeal: this one is not a negative Form, that one is not a negative Form, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Thesleff should not, in any event, be expected to present a case against each and every putative negative Form in the Platonic corpus. There are surely not as many reasons for rejecting negative Forms as there are candidates for negative Forms. One should be able to detect a pattern for rejection after a few key cases. And Thesleff does present a few key cases (2013, 40–42). They might even be sufficiently representative of

---

<sup>26</sup> The vision I have in mind, as elucidated below in the main text, is the stratified monism Thesleff and I have been championing, both separately and together, as the proper way of reading Plato. The inspiration originates with Thesleff (1989, 4, n. 14, 14, n. 45, 24–25; 1993, 17–45; explained: 20–22, 35–37; illustrated: 23–35; 1999 [= 2009, 383–506]). The present version takes shape in our collaborative account in Alican and Thesleff (2013, 11–47, especially 13, 17–19). The interpretive platform continues to unfold in Alican (2014, 2015, 2017), extending rather than either abandoning or merely retracing the main lines of the joint initiative.

<sup>27</sup> Critics tend to be quick to find an anachronism in such statements. I am not suggesting that Plato himself distinguished between the various branches of philosophy, just that there is no harm in our doing so, even in discussing his philosophy.

the whole for readers to decide whether to side with Thesleff or to stand against him. I personally find the general vision more persuasive, or rather, persuasive enough not to require the specific cases to serve as additional proofs, better taken instead as supplementary considerations working in an explanatory capacity.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the general vision, a skeletal sketch is all we need here. This is not just because the original is easily accessible and clear enough on its own (Thesleff 1989; 1993; 1999 [= 2009, 383–506]; 2013) but also because expository and critical commentary is readily available (Alican 2014, 2015, 2017). Thesleff's Plato is not the metaphysical dualist he is often made out to be. This Plato does not distinguish between the world in which we live and the world in which the Forms dwell. They are one and the same. This Plato handles the difference between Forms and particulars with a gradation of reality in the only world there is. Thesleff describes this gradation as a hierarchical stratification of reality with two main levels and countless subdivisions in between (1993, 20–22, 35–37; 1999, 11–52 [= 2009, 397–436]; 2013, 13, 17–19).

The Forms occupy the top level but not as a uniform class of entities. They are not simply one kind of thing, undifferentiated in any way, or at least in any way that matters. The intelligible phenomena we have come to know, one and all, as Forms, are actually a motley crew of ontologically distinct and distinctive constructs (or entities) emerging from (or discovered through) Plato's thought experiments in concept formation.<sup>29</sup> These "Forms" are best taken up in three categories: Ideal Forms; Conceptual Forms; Relational Forms (2013, 19–23, 26–38, 43–45).

- Ideal Forms are the transcendent sources of unconditioned positive value in our phenomenal experience. The value in question is not limited to moral value as in goodness, or aesthetic value as in beauty, or religious value as in piety, instead being broadly consistent with anything of intrinsic value: e.g.,

---

<sup>28</sup> This is, in fact, exactly how the specific cases are intended. While my certitude may smack of privileged insight into intentions, it is nothing more than a reflection of the fact, perhaps bearing repetition here, that "Thesleff 2013" is really "Alican and Thesleff 2013." See the end of this section for more on the function of the specific cases.

<sup>29</sup> The construct/entity distinction is a matter of perspective: Those who do not share Plato's commitment to the existence of Forms could well take them to be constructs conjured up by Plato in thought experiments. Those who agree with Plato that the Forms are objectively real could instead characterize them as entities discovered through such thought experiments. I leave the matter open here (by supplying parenthetical alternatives) because the existence of the Forms is not relevant to the question(s) I am exploring in this paper.

justice, temperance, knowledge (*Phaedrus* 247d). This makes Ideal Forms the objectively real and metaphysically perfect paradigms of all that is good in and of itself.

- Conceptual Forms are reified concepts with an ontological eminence falling short of Ideal Forms. They, too, are objectively real, but their phenomenal manifestations are not intrinsically valuable. Typical examples are types (e.g., man, bed, fire) and properties (e.g., tall, hard, hot), though types are not necessarily restricted to natural kinds and may include various other phenomena, such as events, actions, experiences, and possibly even mental states.
- Relational Forms are ontological categories making up and sustaining the cosmos as the noumenal building blocks of reality. They come in pairs of correlative contrasts representing fundamental universal concepts, as in the metaphysically productive pairing of rest with motion, or of same with other, all familiar from the *megista genē* (μέγιστα γένη) of the *Sophist* (254d–e). The apparent opposition is complementary rather than contradictory.

These are types of Forms in the sense that they represent various episodes in Plato's lifelong experimentation with abstraction. The spotlight is on Ideal Forms. The other two can sometimes approximate to Ideal Forms under certain conditions through a phenomenon or process called “ontological ascent” (cf. 2013, 22 [n. 21], 43, for the term; 2013, 29–33, 42, 43–44, for discussion and details). But this does not blur the boundaries between the three categories. Most importantly, Ideal Forms are the only ones with intrinsic value. The other two may come to embody nearly all the features of Ideal Forms (2013, 27, cf. 26–29), but never intrinsic value, which is had either naturally (essentially) or not at all. Something that is not intrinsically valuable may come to be valued for something that is, perhaps eventually coming by association to be valued for itself, but that is not the same as its being valuable simply in virtue of what it is, that is, without the intermediation of the facilitating association.

It is this emphasis on value that precludes negative Forms. Negative Ideal Forms are strictly out of the question, since positive intrinsic value is a defining feature of this category. But that is not all. The emphasis on value is so extensive as to shape Plato's tendencies in reifying universals in the first place (2013, 29–33, 44). Not all concepts are Forms, just the important ones. And the importance is the importance to Plato. He



decides, because it is his “theory” (labeled as such by convention but actually more of an outlook than a theory). This explanation may seem simplistic. But that is how simple the matter really is. Forms come from among the concepts Plato finds universally important, significant, or valuable in some way or other. The odds are stacked from the outset against negative concepts. Perhaps some may turn out to be Conceptual Forms, but none can qualify as an Ideal Form, while Relational Forms are not quite apposite to the discussion.<sup>30</sup>

This allusion to the possibility of negative Conceptual Forms is intended only in admission of the fuzzy distinction between concepts and Conceptual Forms.<sup>31</sup> It is not a standard feature of Thesleff’s analysis of the negative in Plato. Then again, no attempt to separate concepts from Conceptual Forms in the Platonic corpus can be entirely free of doubt and hesitation. Thesleff admits, for example, that “anything Plato could and wanted to conceptualize ended up as a Conceptual Form” (2013, 31). Does this include negative concepts? Not by intention, but it does seem open to that implication if one wishes to force the issue, since anything at all, and thereby negative concepts as well, would fall under an unqualified reference to “anything.”

Against this, however, we must note, if we are fair, that the admission just quoted does not contradict the emphasis on Plato’s value assignments and preference patterns. On the contrary, it *is* that emphasis. In that regard, it could also be interpreted against negative Conceptual Forms. For how “could” Plato have conceptualized what remained below his threshold of significance, or importance, as negative concepts clearly would have been? And why would he have “wanted to” conceptualize what he did not find valuable?<sup>32</sup> Value, the primary qualification for proper reification, is not simply lacking but actually reversed in what would otherwise be negative Forms (of any sort). Who would want a good-for-nothing Form? Worse, who would want a bad Form? Not Thesleff. And, so he tells us, not Plato either.

Hardly any hesitation, as in distinguishing concepts from Conceptual Forms,

---

<sup>30</sup> Relational Forms may perchance appear to be relevant because they come in pairs of contrasting elements, one of which is “dominant” in relation to the other. The contrast, however, is between complementary counterparts, not polar opposites. One “dominates” but the other is not negative. The most extensive coverage of the distinction is in Alican and Thesleff (2013, 40, cf. 35–38, 41–42).

<sup>31</sup> See Alican and Thesleff (2013, 29–33) for a discussion of the ontology of concept-formation in Plato as “conceptualization and formalization” (reification). See Alican (2014, 44–52) for further analysis of the same process as a “continuum of abstraction.”

<sup>32</sup> Thesleff denies that bad or evil holds much interest for Plato (1999, 28 [= 2009, 412]). He claims that Plato is interested in just the opposite: “minimizing the significance of ‘evil’” (1999, 32 [= 2009, 417] n. 63).

accompanies Thesleff's resolve to reject negative Forms: "Plato is evidently reluctant to speak of negatively valued conceptual Forms" (1999, 51 [= 2009, 435–436]; "conceptual" begins with a capital "C" from 2013 onward). While this observation is specifically in the context of *Phaedo* 105d, Thesleff's overall outlook shows him to be identifying a general tendency in Plato in addition to assessing usage in that passage (perhaps drawing on or confirming a previously identified general tendency in the process of assessing usage in that passage). He supplies the broader context for the observation before sharing the observation itself: "Here [*Phaedo*] as elsewhere Plato is unable to imagine a cosmic opposition of 'good' and 'evil'" (1999, 49 [= 2009, 434]). Note also that "Plato sees the conflict between opposites as a matter of the lower level" (1999, 50 [= 2009, 435]) and "takes it for granted that there is no antagonism or conflict of opposites on the higher level" (1999, 52 [= 2009, 436]). Since all Forms, and not just Ideal Forms, occupy the higher level, this leaves no room for negative Conceptual Forms.

Even if Thesleff could be read as somehow leaving the door open for (a few) negative Conceptual Forms, this would be as far as negative concepts could go, and it is neither certain nor likely, just conceivable from our perspective, that they would make it that far. Thesleff is confident that he has enough evidence to conclude that there are "certainly no Ideas [= 'Ideal Forms' in 2013 and afterwards] (except in playful thought experiments) for negative notions such as 'violence,' 'ignorance,' or indeed 'evil'" (1999, 120 [= 2009, 502]). "Mark well," he urges, "there is no αὐτὸ τὸ κακὸν, αὐτὸ τὸ ἄδικον for Plato" (1999, 52 [= 2009, 436]).

As for the cases where Thesleff goes through original passages with putative negative Forms in an effort to suggest alternative interpretations (2013, 40–42), they are not so much individual proofs or arguments against the possibility of negative Forms as they are systematic demonstrations of how to dig beneath the surface to avoid misinterpretation. They are intended as heuristic guidelines for reading examples that might otherwise be misconstrued as negative Forms. The idea is that the putative negative Forms we tend to come across in various dialogues are not proper Forms but abstractions somehow falling short of Forms. To be plausible, this would have to be a general shortcoming, not a collection of random problems. In other words, the abstractions failing to qualify as Forms would have to have a common explanation for that failure. And that common explanation is the lack of positive value in the examples rejected. Positive value that is intrinsic comes with automatic qualification as an Ideal Form. Any other association with positive value, as well as the neutral absence thereof, is up for consideration in connection with one of the other two types of Forms. But

outright negative value is not.

#### 4. SORTING OUT THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

My resistance to negative Forms is not reducible to the song and dance of my metaphorical response to Nails: Ain't no sunshine when she's gone. My suspicions, I confess, originated precisely at that level of abstraction as a devil's advocate. But they matured through the dialectical orientation against negativity — particularly against systematic negativity and negative causal principles — in the general vision I have been advocating with Thesleff regarding a tripartite classification of Forms at the upper level of a monistic reality.<sup>33</sup> Objective checks and balances, beyond any in the general vision mentioned, have also been instrumental. The ones I have in mind may not confirm my suspicions beyond a doubt for outside observers, but they do keep me from feeling bad about remaining skeptical, or even in complete dissent, on the matter of ideal negativity.

One such example, prejudicing me against a singular superordinate negative force or Form, though not against any ordinary ones, comes late in the *Republic*. The relevant passage constitutes part of a proof (608c–611a) for the immortality of the soul, drawing on the major premise (609a–b) that the soul, like everything else, is susceptible of destruction only through its own evil and not through any other (and therefore not through a generic one).<sup>34</sup> Everything, we are told, has a specific evil common and peculiar to its kind, and this is the only way anything can be destroyed at all. These customized patterns of destruction, then, leave no need, nor much room, for a broadly applicable destructive force.<sup>35</sup>

While this particular appeal, if successful, works only against a cosmic destroyer, and not against specific negative Forms, in fact, confirming specific negative forces, others tend to be relevant in either case. For example, another passage diverting me from idealizing the bad, be it as a supreme destroyer or as an ordinary one, is the scientific explanation of disease: chemical imbalance at an elemental level (*Timaeus* 82a–b). This account, presumed obvious in the dramatic setting, is said to apply not

---

<sup>33</sup> See Alican and Thesleff (2013) for our collaboration, Alican (2014, 2015, 2017) for my elaboration.

<sup>34</sup> See Alican (2012, 458–462) for further discussion of this proof (the “customized patterns of destruction argument” of the *Republic*).

<sup>35</sup> There may still be both a need and some room for a broadly applicable destructive force if the way that destruction works is through the participation of these customized patterns of destruction (together with the unique evil inherent in each) in a superordinate Form of the bad (or of evil). In that case, this would not be a conclusive counterexample, and could, in fact, go the other way.

just to disease but also to degeneration in the broadest sense, actually to an “infinity of diseases and degenerations” (82b). As for diseases of the soul, even there, the cause is a privation, or at least a deficiency, specifically of intelligence, a shortage of which results in folly (*anoia* [ἄνοια]), identified as a disease, which, in turn, exhibits itself either as madness (*mania* [μανία]) or as ignorance (*amathia* [ἄμαθία]) (86b).

The ultimate destruction, that of the soul, is envisaged in one part of the *Phaedo* as a breakdown or dispersal of sorts, hence again as a systemic problem, in this case a structural one arising without external intervention and fully explicable within the system in which it occurs. One of the dialogue’s several proofs for the immortality of the soul is dedicated exclusively to alleviating the fear of such destruction (78b–80b for the main argument, 80c–84b for the accompanying mythos).<sup>36</sup> That sort of destruction, however, is not consistent with a universal principle of destruction, which must be effective beyond the things that come apart on their own.

Later in the same dialogue, after it is established (to apparent dramatic satisfaction) that the soul is not the kind of thing that is subject to dispersal or disintegration (because it has no parts or particles to break down or come apart), the discussion shifts to whether the soul can perish in some other way (whatever that may be). The destroyer then contemplated is death (105b–107a), a destructive force unique to living things, thus relevant only to the soul, with or without a body, and therefore not applicable to anything else, which is to say, not generically universal.<sup>37</sup> Hence, death is at most an ordinary Form, not a superordinate one, though it may not be a Form at all, certainly not an Ideal Form.

The role of death as a destructive force, even without universal relevance, may seem to contradict the position I am defending against ordinary negative Forms, but not so much when one considers the conclusion of the argument (105b–107a): Death fails! Not a single soul is ever destroyed by it, not one life extinguished. This is arguably a reason not to take death seriously as a Platonic Form: Life is entirely successful in animating the soul, while death invariably fails to terminate it. This would make death the only Form not to fulfill its function.

The most striking example of all awaits in the *Symposium* (188a–b), where we learn

---

<sup>36</sup> A critical analysis of this proof (the “analogic argument” of the *Phaedo*) is available, among other places, in Alican (2012, 418–424) and Alican (2015, 316–320), each providing a different perspective, though not in contradiction of the other.

<sup>37</sup> See Alican (2012, 446–450) for further discussion of the corresponding proof (the “causal argument” of the *Phaedo*, often referred to simply as the “final argument”) and Alican (2012, 391–491) for extended commentary on the *Phaedo* in general.

that *even* love (eros) can cause death and destruction, or possibly that *only* love can do so, though the latter is open to interpretation. It may be objected, of course, that this is the position of Eryximachus, whose corpus presence as an interlocutor is limited to a single dialogue, which then counts against the possibility of his speaking for Plato. I will gladly concede this point if the alternative is to enter into a debate on how to pick and choose between the dramatic mouthpieces traditionally attributed to Plato, but I might then ask the opposition to demonstrate the reliability of its own witnesses for what Plato thought.

Whatever we are supposed to make of that, it is ironic, no doubt, that love should be a destructive force. And it is doubly ironic that the good doctor should even be speaking of destruction, given that his sworn duty is first and foremost to do no harm and then to prevent it or, failing that, to reverse it. The dialogue's various references to Apollo (190e, 197a) and Asclepius (186e) are quite likely intended to emphasize that irony. The manifest irony here may only undermine the presentation of love as a destructive force, but the cumulative evidence moves me to question the attribution of a cosmic causality of any sort to destruction.

I do not think the foregoing examples show a Form of the bad (or of evil) to be inconceivable. I think they show it to be unnecessary, and hence, its requirement to be unjustified. Some of them, or perhaps all of them together, may even overcome, or at least escape, the challenge Nails poses: "The privation view cannot be right for Plato because the texts do not allow it" (2013, 96). The references Nails (2013, 96–99) provides do indeed support that conclusion. Yet as is often the case with Plato, something that is not allowed in some of the texts can be allowed in others. This seems to be the case here.

That is why the subtitle of this paper is "Does Plato Make Room for Negative Forms in His Ontology?" and not "Is There Any Room for Negative Forms in Plato's Ontology?" The same choice governs the opening question of the paper: "Are there any negative Forms in Plato?" This is not the same as asking whether any negative Forms could conceivably be ascribed to the ontological scheme discernible in any of the dialogues. It is even less like asking without context whether there are any negative Forms at all. The question is whether Plato, in fact, recognizes them.

The reason I have avoided alternative formulations is not that I am against trying to figure out what to make of something left open in the texts. If I were to rule that out, I myself would have very little to say about Plato. My intention, rather, has been to emphasize that the ideal is to determine Plato's own position. This is not always possible. But it is still better to keep working with what Plato said, building on it where

both necessary and possible at the same time, as opposed to moving straight to what he should have said, which is typically an instantiation of what we think a reasonable person would have said under the circumstances.

When we are not sure what Plato's position is, we are often tempted to work out the most reasonable position as a substitute. Other things being equal, the most reasonable position is indeed a fitting tribute to Plato. Like all of us, however, Plato never once, I am sure, said anything that did not seem reasonable to him. It is good to be charitable, better still when it is needed, but it may not always be appropriate. We have much to gain from remaining open to the possibilities. We should, for example, be prepared to work with less obvious alternatives if they fit the context better than those that seem more compelling from our point of view, or if they have greater explanatory power, especially in regard to the whole or to a helpfully large or relevant portion of it.

This is the kind of choice facing us with Nails (2013) and Thesleff (2013). Nails's answer is intuitively more appealing. Thesleff's answer, on the other hand, has greater explanatory power. It tells us more about Plato than we would know without Thesleff. And it tells us more about Plato than does Nails. Both Nails and Thesleff tell us what to do with putative negative Forms. And they both say what they say in connection with something more important they have to say. The difference is in this more important thing each is after in the process of evaluating negative Forms.

Nails tells us that the unhypothetical first principle of the all is not (identical to) the Form of the good. There is room besides for a Form of the bad and for countless things that are not covered either by the Form of the good or by the Form of the bad. This is informative. Thesleff tells us that the standard scholarly approach to Forms as a uniform metaphysical designation is an oversimplification ignoring philosophically significant differences. Forms come instead in three different varieties together occupying the upper level of reality in a unitary world where each kind constitutes a metaphysical category with a special relevance to the way the world is. This, too, is informative. I find myself better informed, or more extensively so, with Thesleff's answer. The reason that I do is that I can do more with his answer than I can with Nails's. Assuming that Nails is right, I learn how to distinguish between the unhypothetical first principle of the all and the Form of the good. Assuming that Thesleff is right, I learn how to think about the Forms in general and thereby about the world according to Plato. The Forms have too much to do with how Plato's world works for Thesleff's answer not to be regarded as having greater explanatory power

than Nails's answer, that is, as telling us more about Plato.<sup>38</sup>

Plausibility, of course, is essential. Explanatory power is merely a tie-breaker. We cannot condone the wildest theories just because they explain a lot, making us reluctant to give up their implications. Nails's theory is far from wild while telling us something we (most of us) did not know or notice.<sup>39</sup> The reconstruction Nails offers is not just plausible but also desirable and even beautiful. A negative hierarchy of Forms is the perfect complement for a positive hierarchy of Forms. It is simple, straightforward, and elegant. Yet Plato is not obligated to be simple, straightforward, or elegant. Nor does he have to be reasonable from a particular perspective. There are different ways of being reasonable.

Thesleff's Plato is less predictable without being unreasonable. There is nothing unreasonable, for example, about favoring positive abstractions, discounting negative abstractions, and thinking hard about the neutral ones, eventually sorting them out on a case-by-case basis. It is our own predilection for closure, for structure, for symmetry, that prejudices us against an open, fluid, and asymmetrical scheme for the Forms. It may seem strange from our perspective that Plato should reject negative Forms while accepting their positive counterparts. But what is even stranger is to humor Plato on something as fanciful as the Forms only to take him to task for leaving some out. If we are going to allow him the most outlandish ontological concoctions in the history of philosophy, we are going to have to let him handle them however he sees fit.

Asking whether Plato accepts both positive and negative Forms is not like asking whether he accepts both odd and even numbers. There is no independent criterion of truth in Forms as there is in numbers. The Forms are his show. The positive and the negative of it is his business. Numbers, on the other hand, are everybody's concern. It is not up to Plato to judge the odd and the even, designating one series as numbers, the other as not. Concepts are closer to numbers in that regard. We do not need Plato's blessing to figure out whether there are both positive and negative concepts, not to mention neutral ones. The Forms, however, are not concepts. They are what he says

---

<sup>38</sup> It may be tempting to object that Nails, in addition to the distinction between the unhypothetical first principle of the all and the Form of the good, gives us negative Forms. She does. But what is at stake here is whether she is right to do so. We cannot decide the matter by making the outcome a part of that decision. And even if that were okay, any nominal advantage for Nails in confirming negative Forms would be fully offset by a correlative advantage for Thesleff in ruling out negative Forms, which is no less informative than accepting them.

<sup>39</sup> I am not saying that she is right. I am saying that her thesis has substantial explanatory power provided that she is right.

they are. And he does not say very much. We have to fill in the blanks, but we do not get to impose our personal preferences. We cannot make him take the negative ones just because that is what we would do. We have to fill in the blanks the way we think he might, even when that is not the way we think is right.

This seems to be the place to fulfill the promise of summoning my own Plato where the alternatives are both acceptable on the basis of reason and scholarship. My Plato reserves a special place for the positive that precludes the negative, not necessarily in our phenomenal experience but certainly among the Forms. What may read like negative Forms, including the bad, are the rudiments of what we now call concepts. This is not to say that my Plato clearly distinguishes between concepts and Forms. He does, but not clearly. What is quite clear, though, is that not every abstraction interests him. And this last bit is true not just of my Plato but also of the actual philosopher. Plato, the only one we have, was fascinated by some abstractions, not so much by others. He may well have decided that Forms are too precious to be tainted with negativity.

A negative Form is not a positive Form with the charge reversed any more than a dead person is a living person with the animation reversed. Or perhaps that is exactly what these things are, but neither one of them is then the same sort of thing as its analogic counterpart, nor even remotely similar to it. A negative Form is not a Form at all, just as a dead person is not a person at all. It might even be said to be the opposite of a Form, or the privation of it, much like the way a dead person is just what is left behind when the actual person is gone, leaving us first with a corpse, if that, and eventually with nothing more than a memory. Plato does not have to count as a Form the nebulous privation, or worse, outright opposite, of what he takes to be a Form. And he does not. This is what being a Form is all about: what matters to Plato.

We get the clearest glimpse of what matters to him in the central myth of the *Phaedrus* (246e–249d) mentioned earlier. The Forms are so special that even the gods trek out to the far reaches of the cosmos to gaze upon them (246e–247e). And the show is a rare privilege for mortals, very few of whom make it all the way out to this cosmic inspiration point as disincarnate souls (248a–249d). Everything worthwhile is there for all to see. The Forms we get to behold, if we manage to complete the journey (as good philosophers), are justice and knowledge and beauty and so on. There is no fire or water. There is no mud or dirt. And there is certainly no evil or ugliness.



## 5. THE RATIONALE OF TAKING SIDES

I have decisively sided with Thesleff, but I have not really attacked Nails. I could certainly position myself more vigorously against her, ending the paper in steadfast opposition. This is not because I am particularly clever but because the paper is almost there anyway. Giving it a little nudge at the end may help emphasize just how wrong Nails is. And it might be better for me to do that here since I have unequivocally rejected negative Forms in collaboration with Thesleff elsewhere (Alican and Thesleff 2013). What I have said here is basically a defense of what we had said there. I could now make all this work against Nails if any of it ever worked at all. But that would conceal an important part of what I think about the matter.

My understanding is that Plato rejects negative Forms while appearing inadvertently to accept them. This gives Nails perfectly good reasons (2013, 95–101) for concluding not just that Plato puts up with negative Forms but that he revels in them with flair, devising a systematic hierarchy with the Form of the bad at the top of a negative superstructure. Her own exposition is not quite so explicit, but the basic ingredients are all there. My reading is based largely on her assignment of an extraordinary status to both the Form of the good and the Form of the bad. Just as she identifies the Form of the good as a “superordinate” Form (2013, 95), an “extra-strength” Form (100), and a “superior” (to being) Form (95, 100), so too, she designates the Form of the bad a “robust” Form (96, 99, 100). While she does not, in so many words, say that this is all about a superstructure of positive Forms in contrast to a superstructure of negative Forms, both subsumed under the unhypothetical first principle of the all, she leaves us with exegetical elements that come together in precisely that arrangement.

This is borne out by her acknowledgment of “a hierarchy of forms, with the good at the top” (2013, 95), suggesting that what she is exploring with the bad, especially since she makes the Form of the bad the universal explanation of negativity, is a parallel hierarchy of negative Forms, with the bad at the top. Strictly speaking, she is after an account of “destruction” (2013, 94, 99, 100), not of “negativity,” but she would need the bad to explain negativity no less than she would need it to explain destruction, which is a less general concept covered by negativity. However that may be, my interpretation of what she is doing here comes more from admiration than from antagonism. If I have overstated the role she assigns to the bad, I have also overstated my admiration.

What Nails makes of negative Forms, with or without a negative superstructure, is consistent with the textual evidence, especially with the parts of it she brings to our

attention in support of her thesis. I am nevertheless satisfied beyond a doubt that Plato rejected negative Forms, or from a different perspective, that he avoided making any, or from yet another, that he never detected any. How can I believe the opposite of what I have just admitted to be supported by perfectly good reasons? One explanation is that, “perfectly good” being a figure of speech conveying adequacy rather than perfection, I take the opposite view to be supported by much better reasons. Another is that even though I reject a negative superstructure of Forms, this is because I reject negative Forms, not because I reject the structure itself in a possible world where there are negative Forms.

The scenarios in Nails and Thesleff are both plausible in the sense and to the extent that the textual evidence cannot be said with certainty to preclude either reading. The reason I side with Thesleff against Nails, hence the reason I believe Plato rejected negative Forms, is that I would rather give up a Plato embracing negative Forms than to give up a Plato recognizing the inherent nature and value of the universe. Negative Forms undermine the metaphysical, moral, spiritual, religious, and aesthetic value Plato imputes to the universe in his vision of reality. The value in question, namely the good in the universe, is ingrained with unmistakable flamboyance in its very essence and constitution. This is a world created by design and shaped in accordance with the dictates of reason and goodness. Negative Forms simply do not belong in such a world, which is best represented, or at least better so, by the evaluative reification patterns of the ontological model sketched here with a gradation of unitary reality defined and held together by various different kinds of Forms, not one type or token of which is negative.

These are not my personal prejudices. I take my cue from the demiurge, who employs reason in the service of the good, and both in the creation of the universe, where the good emerges without rival as the supreme causal principle (*Timaeus* 29d–30c). This is why I find a Plato operating with a richer ontology, one built on categories of universal value and significance as against a homogeneous collection of indiscriminately reified abstractions, to be not just a better philosopher but also the actual philosopher who still has us discussing a thought experiment he introduced at the dawn of philosophy.<sup>40</sup> I am not willing to give that up for a more elegant

---

<sup>40</sup> There is, of course, something to be said, at least with respect to western philosophy, for identifying the dawn with Thales, or really with any of the Presocratics, or perhaps with a combination of them. There is no harm, however, in extending the duration of the dawn to include Plato. If we define it too narrowly, or push it back too far, we might have to make do, for our own part, with bumbling around in the twilight of

philosopher or even for a more reasonable one.

Nor am I the only one to saddle Plato with an organic connection between value and reality. Burnyeat, to cite just one of the eminent commentators preceding me, stands firmly behind the same observation: “It is beyond dispute that in the *Tīmaeus* value is part of ‘the furniture of the world’” (2000, 66). This line of furniture, to consult Burnyeat further, is evidently quite fashionable outside the *Tīmaeus* as well: “Plato, like Aristotle and the Stoics after him, really did believe there is value in the world as it is objectively speaking, that values are part of what modern philosophers like to call ‘the furniture of the world’” (2000, 8). Let me add that, the craftsman being divine and the Forms being perfect, the furniture comes out rather well. It is beautiful, functional, and practically indestructible. Every last piece combines good taste with expert craftsmanship in charge of superlative materials. There is no negativity by design in Plato, and since the Forms are essential to the design of the universe, there are no negative Forms.

necipalican@gmail.com  
Istanbul

---

philosophy. A dawn with Plato makes it plausible, at least for a while, to pretend that the sun is still shining.

## WORKS CITED

- Alican, Necip Fikri. 2012. *Rethinking Plato: A Cartesian Quest for the Real Plato*. Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi [Brill].
- Alican, Necip Fikri. 2014. "Rethought Forms: How Do They Work?" *Arctos: Acta Philologica Fennica* 48: 25–55.
- Alican, Necip Fikri. 2015. "A Horse is a Horse, of Course, of Course, but What about Horseness?" In *Second Sailing: Alternative Perspectives on Plato* (pp. 307–324). Edited by Debra Nails and Harold Tarrant (chief eds.) in collaboration with Mika Kajava and Eero Salmenkivi (eds.). *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 132. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.
- Alican, Necip Fikri. 2017. "Ontological Symmetry in Plato: Formless Things and Empty Forms." *Analysis and Metaphysics* 16: 7–51.
- Alican, Necip Fikri, and Holger Thesleff. 2013. "Rethinking Plato's Forms." *Arctos: Acta Philologica Fennica* 47: 11–47.
- Baltes, Matthias. 1997. "Is the Idea of the Good in Plato's *Republic* beyond Being?" In *Studies in Plato and the Platonic Tradition: Essays Presented to John Whittaker* (pp. 1–23). Edited by Mark Joyal. London: Ashgate Publishing.
- Brown, Lesley. 2012. "Negation and Not-Being: Dark Matter in the *Sophist*." Chapter 11 of *Presocratics and Plato: A Festschrift at Delphi in Honor of Charles Kahn* (pp. 233–254). Edited by Richard Patterson, Vassilis Karasmanis, and Arnold Hermann. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing.
- Burnyeat, Myles Fredric. 2000. "Plato on Why Mathematics Is Good for the Soul." *Proceedings of the British Academy* 103: 1–81.
- Cherniss, Harold Fredrik. 1944. *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cherniss, Harold Fredrik. 1954. "The Sources of Evil According to Plato" (Read: 13 November 1953). *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98:1 (15 February 1954): 23–30.
- Chilcott, Catherine Mary. 1923. "The Platonic Theory of Evil." *The Classical Quarterly* 17:1 (January): 27–31.
- Ferber, Rafael. 1989. *Platos Idee des Guten*. Second, revised and expanded edition. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag Richarz.
- Ferber, Rafael, and Gregor Damschen. 2015. "Is the Idea of the Good beyond Being? Plato's *epekeina tēs ousias* Revisited (*Republic* 6,509b8–10)." In *Second Sailing:*

- Alternative Perspectives on Plato* (pp. 197–203). Edited by Debra Nails and Harold Tarrant (chief eds.) in collaboration with Mika Kajava and Eero Salmenkivi (eds.). *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 132. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.
- Franklin, Lee. 2013. “Commentary on Nails.” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2012): 102–109, 110–112.
- Gaiser, Konrad. 1980. “Plato’s Enigmatic Lecture ‘On the Good.’” *Phronesis* 25:1: 5–37.
- Gerson, Lloyd P. 2015. “Ideas of Good?” In *Second Sailing: Alternative Perspectives on Plato* (pp. 225–242). Edited by Debra Nails and Harold Tarrant (chief eds.) in collaboration with Mika Kajava and Eero Salmenkivi (eds.). *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 132. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.
- Guthrie, William Keith Chambers. 1978. *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Volume 5: *The Later Plato and the Academy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Halfwassen, Jens. 2014. “The Metaphysics of the One.” Chapter 12 of *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism* (pp. 182–199). Edited by Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin. London: Routledge.
- Herrmann, Fritz-Gregor. 2007. “The Idea of the Good and the Other Forms in Plato’s *Republic*.” Chapter 10 of *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato’s Republic* (pp. 202–230). Edited by Douglas Cairns, Fritz-Gregor Herrmann, and Terry Penner. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hoffleit, Herbert B. 1937. “An Un-Platonic Theory of Evil in Plato.” *The American Journal of Philology* 58:1: 45–58.
- Lee, Edward N. 1972. “Plato on Negation and Not-Being in the *Sophist*.” *The Philosophical Review* 81:3 (July): 267–304.
- Lewis, Frank A. 1976. “Plato on ‘Not.’” *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 9: 89–115.
- Mohr, Richard D. 1980. “The Sources of Evil Problem and the ἀρχὴ κινήσεως Doctrine in Plato.” *Apeiron* 14:1 (June): 41–56.
- Nails, Debra. 2013. “Two Dogmas of Platonism.” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2012): 77–101, 110–112.
- O’Brien, Denis. 2013. “A Form That ‘Is’ of What ‘Is Not’: Existential *Einaí* in Plato’s *Sophist*.” Chapter 12 of *The Platonic Art of Philosophy* (pp. 221–248). Edited by George Boys-Stones, Dimitri El Murr, and Christopher Gill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato. 1900–1907. *Platonis Opera*. Five volumes. Critical texts with introductions and notes. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford Classical Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reprinted 1967–1968. New edition underway since 1995.

- Plato. 1997. *Complete Works*. English translations by various hands. Edited, with an introduction and notes, by John Madison Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Prior, William J. 1980. "Plato's Analysis of Being and Not-Being in the *Sophist*." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 18:2 (Summer): 199–211.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1986. "Reply to Hilary Putnam." In *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine* (pp. 427–431). Edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn and Paul Arthur Schilpp. The Library of Living Philosophers 18. La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Rist, John Michael. 1967. "Knowledge and Value in Plato." *Phoenix* 21:4 (Winter): 283–295.
- Ross, William David. 1951. *Plato's Theory of Ideas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sedley, David Neil. 2013. "Plato and the One-over-Many Principle." In *Universals in Ancient Philosophy* (pp. 113–137). Edited by Riccardo Chiaradonna and Gabriele Galluzzo. Seminari e Convegni 33. Pisa: Edizioni della Normale.
- Thesleff, Holger. 1989. "Platonic Chronology." *Phronesis* 34:1/3: 1–26.
- Thesleff, Holger. 1993. "Looking for Clues: An Interpretation of Some Literary Aspects of Plato's 'Two-Level Model.'" Chapter 2 of *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (pp. 17–45). Edited by Gerald Alan Press. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thesleff, Holger. 1999. *Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica. Reprinted in his *Platonic Patterns* (pp. 383–506). Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2009.
- Thesleff, Holger. 2009. *Platonic Patterns: A Collection of Studies by Holger Thesleff*. Las Vegas: Parmenides.
- Thesleff, Holger. 2013. [= Alican and Thesleff 2013] "Rethinking Plato's Forms." *Arctos: Acta Philologica Fennica* 47: 11–47.
- Vlastos, Gregory. 1965. "Degrees of Reality in Plato." In *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (pp. 1–19). Edited by Renford Bambrough. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Reprinted as chapter 3 of his *Platonic Studies* (pp. 58–75). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Vlastos, Gregory. 1965–1966. "A Metaphysical Paradox." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 39: 5–19. Reprinted as chapter 2 of his *Platonic Studies* (pp. 43–57). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Wood, James L. 2009. "Is There an *Archê Kakou* in Plato?" *The Review of Metaphysics* 63:2 (December): 349–384.