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## **Goodness, the good, the Agathon**

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Abstract: This is a revised short overview of Plato's "greatest thing to be learned" or the "greatest lesson" (megiston mathêma) – the Idea of the Good.

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determine human social functions on the basis of sex. Individual abilities, the nature of one's soul (which is not immediately apparent), is what should determine citizens' jobs (R. 5.452e-6b). In modern terms, Socrates uses what we call 'sex' to question traditional views of women as a *genos* (Sandford 2010: 30–1). The gender binary as a principle of social and spatial division vanishes in his Kallipolis. When Aristotle retorts that comparing women to females of other species is ridiculous since 'animals have no households to manage' (*Politics* 1264b6-8), his critique falls flat since the elite citizens of Socrates' Kallipolis do not have such responsibilities. The abolition of property and nuclear family, the division between private and public spheres, and the gender binary all go together. Although Socrates' eugenic proposal will not appeal to most, perceiving how these dimensions are connected is still illuminating. The same goes for his critique of the 'masculine ethos of the Athenian polis' (Brown 1994: 158, cf. Larivée 2012b: 295) and his pedagogical project of cultivating the opposite virtues of courage and gentleness in the soul of his guardians (R. 3.410b-2c, cf. *Statesman* 309b-11a, Larivée 2021: 80–6). Both proposals challenge a gendered conception of virtue (*Meno* 71e, Aristotle, *Politics* 1259b-60a) still widespread today. Like good guard dogs, philosopher-queens and philosopher-kings – aggressive or gentle depending on the circumstances – need both sets of qualities to rule.

## GOODNESS (THE GOOD, AGATHON)

RAFAEL FERBER

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For the Platonic Socrates, the good is that for the sake of which everything is done (cf. *Grg.* 468b). This is the 'axiom' of motivational monism to which Plato adhered during his whole writing career (cf. *Smp.* 205e-6a, R. 6.505d-e, *Phlb.* 65a). This motivational monism is also an evaluative monism when this good becomes, for Plato in the *Republic*, the idea of the good, which is also the 'greatest thing to be learned' and the 'greatest lesson' (*megiston mathēma*) (R. 6.505a, 7.519c). We can find a first allusion to this idea in the *Lysis*, in the expression 'what we like in the first place' (*prōton philon*) (*Lys.* 219d) (cf. Penner and Rowe 2005: 278–9; Szlezák 2021: 504). The *Statesman* also potentially touches on this idea, under the term 'the exact itself' (*auto t'akribes*) (*Plt.* 284d) (cf. Ferber 1995: 69–70, 2002: 190, 2020: 205–53; Szlezák 2021: 604). But the idea of the good is discussed explicitly only in Books 6–7 of the *Republic*, by means of three similes. However, a word of caution is in order: through these similes, the Platonic Socrates expresses only his 'opinions without science' (R. 6.506c) and even these opinions are not given in their entirety, since Socrates leaves out his opinion about the 'father' by giving only his current opinion (*tou ge dokounta*

*moi to nun*) about the ‘offspring’ (R. 6.506e2-3). First, he distances himself from contemporary philosophical conceptions of the good, according to which the good consists of pleasure or of knowledge (cf. R. 6.505b-c). Both conceptions are refuted, the former because there are also bad pleasures, the latter because knowledge would have to be knowledge of something, namely, of the good. Second, the Platonic Socrates makes three positive statements about the good: (a) It is not sought like ‘just and beautiful things’ (R. 6.505d) – in which case we may be satisfied also with the appearance – but rather as something which really is good. Thus, we may be conventionalists concerning ‘just and beautiful things’, insofar as we may be satisfied here with existing conventions concerning them, but we are realists with respect to the good: we want the real, not the apparent good. (b) It is the final cause of all desire and all action (cf. R. 6.505d-6a). (c) Knowledge of the idea of the good is the condition for knowledge of the just and the beautiful things, that is, for the ideas of justice and beauty (cf. R. 6.506a). This means that if the ideas of justice and beauty were not also good, they would not be ideas of real justice and beauty, but only of apparent justice and beauty.

These two negative and three positive determinations are merely formal and are supplemented by the substantive description that the Platonic Socrates gives in the three similes. Common to them all is the claim that the idea of the good figures as a cause (*aitia*) (R. 6.508e3, 7.517b2) or principle (*archē*) (R. 6.510b7). In the simile of the sun, it functions as the cause of knowledge, truth and being, although it is itself not being (*ouk ousias ontos tou agathou*) (R. 6.509b8-9), but rather ‘surpasses being and essence in dignity and power’ (*epekeina tēs ousias presbeia kai dynamei hyperechontos*) (R. 6.505b9-10). In this way, Plato seems to found his ontology and epistemology in a supreme principle. According to the principle of alien causation, that is, the principle that the cause is not the same as that which is caused (cf. *Hp. Ma.* 297a1-3), this supreme principle must be ‘something else and more beautiful than knowledge and truth’ (R. 6.508e5-6) and being. Pace Baltes (1997), Brisson (2002), and Seel (2007: 181–2), the term *ousia* is not only to be restricted to the meaning of essence (cf. Rawson 1996: 111; Ferber 2005, 2015), such that the idea of the good is not only beyond essence, but also beyond being.

We can see in this description of the good the inauguration of the problem of the third item between *and* above being and thinking: just as light and its master, the sun, function as a third item (*triton*) (R. 6.507d-e) between and above sight and the object of sight, so, too, does the idea of the good function as a third item between *and* above thinking and being. In the simile of the line, the idea of the good functions as an unhypothetical principle (*anhypothetos archē*) of the mathematical ‘presuppositions’ (*hypotheseis*) (R. 6.510c6), that is, the presuppositions of the four arts of the *quadrivium* (on the text of the simile, cf. Lafrance 1994; on the interpretations proposed between 1804 and 1984, cf. Lafrance 1986).

The image of the cave shows us what education means for Plato. It is ‘a conversion of the soul’ (*psychēs periagogē*) (R. 7.521c1), which is also a return of the ‘eye of the soul buried in some sort of barbaric bog’ (R. 7.533d2) to the really good. But the idea of the good also functions as a principle of Plato’s politics, such that ‘anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it’ (R. 7.517c5). Because the philosopher-kings and -queens know what is really good, they will also – in line with the Socratic paradox that virtue is knowledge – realize the good in the city (on all three similes, cf. Ferber 1984: 49–166, 1989: 49–219; Schindler 2008: 139–75).

The *Philebus* does not continue the search for the form of the good, but rather starts with the search for a certain state of the soul that can render the life of all human beings happy (cf. *Phlb.* 11d4–6). Nevertheless, it asks the Socratic question, ‘what in fact is the good?’ (*Phlb.* 13e5–6) and holds on to the idea of the good (*Phlb.* 64a4), which Socrates cannot hunt down with one character (*mia idea*) but nevertheless tries to pin down by means of the conjunction of three characters or qualities (*poia*): ‘beauty, symmetry and truth’ (*Phlb.* 65a2) (cf. Ferber 2010: 51–76).

In his old age, Plato seems to have also held a public lecture ‘on the Good’ (Gaiser 1980), although the content of this lecture may go back to earlier ‘seminars’ or ‘*synousiai*’ ‘on the Good’ (cf. Simplicius, in *Aristotelis Physica commentaria Phlb.* 542.1012, 545.24). Nevertheless, whether this public lecture or course of lectures was not already held at an earlier time remains controversial (cf. Krämer 2015; Szlezák 2021: 635, n.109, 862). According to an anecdote told by Aristotle and reported by Aristoxenus, the audience expected to be told

something about one of the recognized human goods, such as Wealth, Health or Strength, or, in sum, some marvellous Happiness. But when it appeared that Plato was to talk *on Mathematics and Numbers and Geometry and Astronomy*, leading up to the statement that the Good is one (*hoti t’agathon estin hen*) they were overwhelmed by the paradox of the whole matter. Some then thought little of the thing and others even reproved it. (Aristoxenus, *The Elements of Harmony* II, pp. 39–40; cf. Krämer 2015; Brisson 2018)

In this lecture, Plato may have presented the idea of the good in a dialectical, that is, a scientific way, where unity as we find it in the abstract structures of mathematics may have played a significant role (cf. Burnyeat 2000). From this lecture, only fragments from notes taken by his listeners, especially Aristotle, survive (cf. the collection of fragments in Gaiser 1963: 441–557; Krämer 1990: 203–17; Isnardi-Parente 1997: 406–84, 1998: 5–115). But we find in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* a ‘short summary of the main topics’ (1.7.988a18) or a concise indication of the headings (*kephalaiōdōs*) (cf. *Metaphysics* 13.1207b22)

of the public lecture, whose contents Plato may have already communicated previously in the *synousiai* for his advanced students (cf. Ferber 1989: 211–16).

## HAPPINESS (*EUDAIMONIA*)

RACHANA KAMTEKAR (REVISED WITH ERIC SOLIS)

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In contemporary usage, ‘happiness’ is sometimes taken to be a feeling, as temporary or permanent as feelings are. In ancient Greek usage, by contrast, *eudaimonia*, the term translated ‘happiness’, characterizes a whole life and not just a moment of feeling, and has an objective dimension: the happy life not only feels good to the one who lives it, but is good. Sometimes translators use ‘flourishing’ instead; one ground for this is that not only humans, but other species as well, are said to flourish when they are in a good condition relative to their capacities, but it was for the ancients a philosophical issue whether *eudaimonia* ought to be conceived this way, and indeed whether a life of pleasure not only feels good to the one who lives it but also is the best life; the same philosophical issue arises today about happiness, and it cannot be settled by a translation (see Kraut 1979). The same may be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for other expressions treated as equivalent to *eudaimonein* (being happy) in Plato’s dialogues, such as *eu zen* (living well), *eu prattein* (doing well).

Plato takes it as uncontroversial that all of us wish to be happy, that is, to live well (*Euthydemus* 278e, *Meno* 78a-b, *Symposium* 205a). He does not mean by this that we wish that our desires, whatever they are, be satisfied; rather, happiness requires possessing, and correctly using, genuinely good things (*Euthd.* 280d; for discussion of this passage see Jones 2013). But happiness is not divorced from desire-satisfaction either, for we all do in fact desire the genuinely good things obtaining which will make us happy (*Gorgias* 468b [see Penner 1991], *Men.* 77b-8b [see Callard 2017], *Republic* 505d-e; [all three passages are discussed in Kamtekar 2006]); evidence of this includes our pursuit of what appears good, our loss of desire for things once we learn they are not good and our efforts to determine what really is good.

What are the genuinely good things the possession and correct use of which make us happy? In the *Philebus*, Socrates argues that the good or happy human life contains a mixture of knowledge and pleasure (20d-2a, see Meyer 2019). In the *Grg.* (470e) and *R.* 1 (354a), Socrates says that our happiness depends entirely on whether or not we are virtuous, but at other times he makes the weaker claim that having virtue makes one happier than any of those who lack virtue, no matter what else they have and one lacks (*R.* 2.360e-2c, 3.387d, 3.392cd, 9.580b). The comparative claim allows nonmoral goods, such as health and wealth, to contribute to the virtuous person’s happiness. (The case