

Why Is Plato's Good *Good?*

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...philosophy is often a matter of finding a
suitable context in which to say the obvious.

—Iris Murdoch 'The Idea of Perfection'

It is all too easy for a modern reader to harbour serious reservations about some of Plato's ideas. First and foremost, we may wonder how he could be so dismissive of the contribution of the senses in our quest to understand the world. One obvious way to placate such misgivings is by playing them down, but I would like to try a different approach here. For the fact of the matter is that Plato occupied a rather different world from most of us today. His was a teleological world with an overarching unity. Indeed, anything less would have been a cause for concern. Unlike today's students of nature, Plato sought *certain* knowledge – the kind of knowledge that we feel we can get from mathematics, for instance. Accordingly, if he thought the world was contingent, it could hardly be the object of certain knowledge: to be amenable to such certainty the world would need to exhibit a necessary structure or the like. And this is where teleology comes in. The purpose of this paper, then, is to bring to light a deep connection between Plato's view

of nature and his epistemology; namely, that the desire for certain knowledge based on immutable principles led him up into the realm of metaphysics and teleology. I essay my case for this in reference to Plato's form of the Good in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. As I shall argue, various scholarly attempts to make sense of the Good tend to ignore certain aspects of this all-important form because they fail to register the central role it plays in tying together Plato's metaphysics, epistemology and ultimately his ethics.¹ I do not intend to give a detailed treatment of Plato's metaphysics, the assumptions that underpin it, or even the form of the Good. Rather, I wish to clarify how and why the Good is *good* in light of Plato's broader philosophical project.

1. The Problem with Plato's Good

Plato discusses the Good in the *Phaedo* at 95e8–99c6 and in the famous sun-line-cave analogy of the *Republic* at 504c9–517d2.² But in neither of these passages is it entirely clear why the Good is good. In the *Phaedo* passage we are left with an impression of the Good as a cosmic principle, while in the *Republic* we learn that the Good functions as the principle of knowledge – but in both cases, notwithstanding a general aura of philosophical pre-eminence, it can be difficult to pinpoint what exactly makes the Good good. More generally it seems as if Plato asks far too much of the Good by presenting it as the metaphysical principle and the epistemological principle as well as the ethical principle. The purpose of the present section is to foreground these problems by briefly discussing the two aforementioned passages.

The *Phaedo* passage (*Phd.* 95e8–99c6) attempts to give an account of generation and destruction (περὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς τὴν αἰτίαν – *Phd.* 95e10). By means of an apparently biographical anecdote Socrates lays out a critique of 'what they call the inquiry into nature' (ἦν δὴ καλοῦσι περὶ φύσεως ἱστορίαν – *Phd.* 96a7–8).³ As becomes apparent, Socrates' inquiry into *phusis* ('nature') leads him directly into the metaphysical realm of the forms (see *Phd.* 100b and following). Indeed, an essential point of Socrates' autobiography is that we should not seek knowledge of nature by examining material things with the senses (*Phd.* 99e). Note, this does not mean he abandons the inquiry into nature. We are still concerned with understanding generation and destruction – and these processes certainly apply to the physical world. But the key point that emerges is that we cannot ground knowledge of nature in the changeable objects of the senses and thus we are

¹ I cite some scholarship on the Good in a more convenient place below. One of the more interesting treatments of Plato's Good is Evans, who endeavours to view Plato's conception within a broad perspective. He claims, for instance, that for Plato and others, 'value forms part of the fabric of reality' (Evans 2000: 116). Cf. Benitez (1995).

² References are to the Oxford Classical Text. One might also look to the *Timaeus*, the *Philebus* and perhaps the *Symposium* (on the Beautiful) regarding the Good.

³ Translations of the Greek are my own.

warned away from appealing to corporeal *aitia* ('causes' or 'explanations').⁴ Instead the physical must be understood through the incorporeal.

Socrates explains that, try as he might, he simply could not understand how a man is thought to grow from *eating food* or how ten is more than eight because *two is added to it* (*Phd.* 96c3–97b7). Socrates is well aware that these claims seem perfectly adequate, but he rejects them all the same. We might surmise that food is not the necessary cause of growth, or that addition is not the necessary cause of being bigger. To anticipate, Socrates needs an *aition* that is immutable, something that holds necessarily; above all, something that can be vouched-safe *by thought alone* without the fallible senses.⁵ Thus he goes on to elaborate the kind of cause that he would like to find. Namely, having heard that Anaxagoras wrote about a special cause called 'Mind' (*nous*), Socrates became excited in the hope that here he had struck upon his objective: an *aition* that explains how the cosmos and everything within it has been arranged for the best (*Phd.* 97c5–6). Although Socrates is quite emphatic about the *goodness* of the *aition* – τὸ ἄριστον καὶ τὸ βέλτιστον (*Phd.* 97d3) – it is clear that we are still within the realm of physics, namely how generation and destruction are to be understood (εἰ οὖν τις βούλοιο τὴν αἰτίαν εὐρεῖν περὶ ἐκάστου ὅπῃ γίγνεται ἢ ἀπόλλυται ἢ ἔστι... – *Phd.* 97c6–7). Thus he explicitly mentions that this Mind would reveal the shape and location of the earth and why this is necessary and for the best. And so too with the sun, moon and other heavenly bodies (*Phd.* 97d8–98b3). Ultimately this Mind should account for what is best for everything (*Phd.* 98b2–3). That said, this special goodness is *metaphysical* so it need not apply to the vicissitudes of individual people like the unlucky Candide in Voltaire's satire. In crude terms, it explains general truths, not one-off happenings.

But alas it turned out that Anaxagoras did not use his 'Mind' in the way Socrates had hoped. For he too appealed to material causes. In fine, the problem with Anaxagoras and the other materialists is that they are unable to distinguish an *aition* from its prerequisite conditions (*Phd.* 99b2–4). Socrates illustrates this point with the following example: instead of explaining his incarceration in reference to the decision of the jurors, they would refer to the bones and sinews by which his body is kept upright on his prison bed. Note that even here Socrates is concerned with explanations about the arrangement of the cosmos: for this is said to be the self-same error that leads people to explain the placement of the heavens in reference to physical things like a spinning vortex rather than its true cause (*Phd.* 99b6–8).

In the immediate sequel Socrates goes on to elaborate the 'second sailing' that is the theory of the forms. I will not argue the point here but it is worth mentioning that

⁴ Some scholars doubt that Socrates is still talking about the physical world once he introduces his theory of the forms. For example, Annas (1982: 318) does not hesitate to claim that 'Plato, in fact, has changed the subject.' See also Sharma (2009: 172). Yet it is clear that Socrates thinks his forms can apply to things like snow melting (see *Phd.* 106a) and we should not be surprised to find the ancients understanding nature in reference to metaphysical causes of some kind.

⁵ On the *Phaedo's* account of forms as *aitia* see Sedley (1998) and Bailey (2014). For a review of the scholarship see Wolfsdorf (2005). For causality in Greek philosophy generally see M. Frede (1987).

this second-best attempt seems to lead to the same destination, namely the Good (or Mind).⁶ It is easy enough to understand the forms as part of a broader metaphysical vision. Furthermore, we can note that Socrates returns to his ‘best’ explanations in the myth that closes the dialogue: the earth is said to be a sphere located in the centre of the cosmos because an equiposed thing in the middle of something akin to it (ισόρροπον γὰρ πρᾶγμα ὁμοίου τινὸς ἐν μέσῳ τεθὲν) will not suffer to lean in one direction rather than another, but will remain uniformly still (*Phd.* 109a4–6). However persuasive we find this explanation, it seems sufficiently clear that it attempts to provide a teleological explanation of the earth and that it proceeds on purely intellectual grounds without direct reference to the senses. But to come back to the main point: in the *Phaedo* we encounter a Mind – explicitly identified as the fount of *goodness* – which functions as the cosmic principle; it is supposed to explain the physical cosmos all the way from the location of the earth to the nature of generation and destruction. Here then is one aspect of the Good.

The *Republic* passage (*R.* 504c9–517d2), like most passages in the *Republic*, is difficult to treat in isolation from the rest of the dialogue. Nevertheless, and in light of the deluge of scholarship our passage has generated, it seems prudent to tread lightly (like a cat burglar) taking only what we need and leaving the rest undisturbed. The alternative would surely open a Pandora’s box of issues.

Our passage begins with a provocative allusion to something even greater than the virtues (*R.* 504d). Socrates has broached the topic of how they will educate the future rulers of the beautiful city and he alludes to some object of knowledge that promises to dwarf all others. As Socrates explains, this superlative good is of course the form of the Good which he frequently mentions and by which justice and the other virtues gain their goodness and utility (ἧ δὲ καὶ δίκαια καὶ τᾶλλα προσχρησάμενα χρήσιμα καὶ ὠφέλιμα γίνεται – *R.* 505a3–4). Here the Good is unambiguously ethical and useful. Socrates continues: there is confusion over what the good actually is, some saying that it is pleasure, others that it is knowledge; and when we ask, ‘knowledge of what?’ they reply, ‘knowledge of the good,’ as if we already knew what ‘good’ meant (*R.* 505b5–506a2). To repeat, we are firmly in the realm of ethics. The good is simply ‘that which every soul pursues and on account of which every soul does everything’ (*R.* 505d11).

Typically, if tragically, Socrates cannot deliver on this tantalizing object and instead of telling his companions what it actually is, he offers them a likeness or ‘offspring’ of the Good (αὐτὸ μὲν τί ποτ’ ἐστὶ τὰγαθὸν ἐάσωμεν...ὄς δὲ ἔκγονός τε τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ φαίνεται καὶ ὁμοίωτατος ἐκείνῳ, λέγειν ἐθέλω – *R.* 506d8–e4). Thus begins the first analogy in a trilogy of interlocking analogies, the analogy of the sun – but not before Socrates

⁶ For the claim that Socrates abandons the pursuit of Mind, and the relevant scholarship, see Sharma (2009: 142–3). Sharma argues that Socrates abandons teleological explanations *in favour of* metaphysical ones. I do not consider the two as exclusive alternatives. No doubt the *aitia* that Socrates settles for do not explicitly refer to teleology, but it seems unnecessary to insist that Socrates totally abandons this project (or to suppose that forms are incompatible with teleology). In spite of the ingenuity with which scholars argue their case (or perhaps *because of it*), one cannot ignore how myopic it is to claim that Plato has here given up on teleology. Teleology is surely a core Platonic tenant.

reminds us of his metaphysical physics, the theory of the forms (see *R.* 507a7–b10). From here on, the ethical dimension of the Good is displaced by its epistemological one. The sun, Helios, is said to be an offspring or analogy of the Good in that it makes visible things visible just as the Good makes knowable things knowable. That is, light (here identified with the god Helios) allows our eyes to see and visible objects to be seen (*R.* 508a5–6). Helios is the cause of sight (*R.* 508b10–11). By analogy, when the soul ‘looks’ at those objects illuminated by the Good it has knowledge, but when it looks to the manifest world it does not (*R.* 508d4–9). In a word, the Good grants truth to the things that are knowable and gives us the ability to know (τὸ τὴν ἀλήθειαν παρέχον τοῖς γινωσκομένοις καὶ τῷ γινώσκοντι τὴν δύναμιν ἀποδιδόν – *R.* 508e1–3).

The analogy of the sun is focused on establishing a broad ontological distinction between the visible and the intelligible realms with special reference to the epistemological role of the Good. In the next analogy, the image of the line (*R.* 509d6–511e5), Socrates moves away from the Good and works on setting up a series of epistemological ‘stages.’ The line is divided into four segments giving us a kind of hierarchy of epistemological states with pure unmediated knowledge at the top. It is the ascent *up* through these stages that is described in the following analogy, the image of the cave. Here Plato uses a subterranean cave to represent the physical realm and the surface world above the cave to stand in for the intelligible world of the forms. We are said to be like prisoners trapped in this cave, looking at shadows which we mistake for reality rather than the images that they are (*R.* 515c1–2). Socrates rounds off the passage thus:

These things, then, seem to me like this. In the intelligible realm the form of the Good is the last thing to be seen, and not without difficulty. But having been seen, reason must reveal it to be in every case the cause [αἰτία] of all things right and beautiful; in the visible realm it begets light and his dominion, in the intelligible realm, its own dominion, it furnishes truth and knowledge [νοῦν]; and one must see this cause if they are to act rationally [ἐμφρόνως πράξειν] in public or private (*R.* 517b8–c5).

The final line of this passage brings us back to *ethics*. By and large, however, Socrates has elaborated a concept of the Good that functions primarily as an *epistemological* principle. It is that which somehow makes the truth true. To be sure, such an entity is surely not bad, but one cannot help but feel a disconnect with the ethical goodness of the Good. Similarly in the *Phaedo* passage it was hard to see the goodness of the Good, at least in any precise sense. Indeed, we may well wonder why the Good has switched from its metaphysical role in the *Phaedo* to this epistemological one here. These, then, are the problems I wish to address. Namely, how is it that the Good explains the cosmos and knowledge, and above all, what makes it ethically good.⁷ The solution I would like to

⁷ Santas (1983: 257, n.2) discusses some of the older literature on the Good in the *Republic* and notes how often scholars accuse Plato of incoherence. Of the more recent literature, some look only to the *ethical* role of

offer is that the kind of knowledge Plato is after – whether of nature or of ethics – actually requires an overarching metaphysical principle.

2. Knowledge and Necessity

Students of ancient Greek philosophy know well that for Plato knowledge must be *stable* and that the changeable is *ipso facto* unknowable.⁸ But it is rare to find an explication of *why* Plato thinks this or what it means. Marjorie Grene (1963: 24) tells us that ‘knowledge, for Aristotle as for Plato, must be both infallible and real, that is, it must be a grasp of real things.... The flowing world of sense, Plato believed, lacks the stability of the purely knowable; it flits by, dreamlike, taking shape with every man’s illusion.’ Perhaps, then, we can say that Plato thinks that the objects of the sensible world cannot ground knowledge because the qualities they exhibit are transient and impermanent rather than certain and stable. Consider the following example. Simmias is taller than Socrates, but he is shorter than Phaedo. This is not strictly a case of *change*, but it is an example of the kind of impermanence that Plato has in mind. The idea seems to be that the tallness exhibited by Simmias cannot be pure Tallness, because Simmias can also be qualified by shortness, and intuitively Tallness and Shortness exclude each other. In this way the tallness of Simmias is transient; it comes and goes. So if we *can* have certain knowledge about Tallness or about what it means to be tall, this can only be in reference to the form of Tallness; namely, the tallness that is eternally and immutably tall. We can make the point more apparent by contrasting it with two alternatives. If (1) there is no such entity as the form of Tallness and the things which appear to exhibit tallness do not actually exhibit an eternal form, then we cannot have knowledge of tallness. This is nominalism. Or again, if (2) the kind Tallness is no more than an abstraction formed from the many perceptibles, then here too we do not escape the uncertainties of the sense world. The form of Tallness should not be parasitic on particulars in this way. But that is not to say that the many particulars cannot guide our understanding of the incorporeal form of Tallness. Surely they can and do. But *either* they guide our minds to an eternal, immutable form *or* they do

the Good. For example, Penner (2007) and Rowe (2007). Rowe at least attempts to address the epistemological role of the Good but reduces this to its relevance for ethical knowledge (see Rowe 2007: 148–149, 150–151) – which is clearly inadequate. Santas argues that the Good is the form of forms and as such he is more focused on the *epistemological* role of the Good (2007: 235–240). He tries to account for its ethical role by arguing that forms are thought to be perfect exemplars. While there may be truth to this (though I wonder if it applies to the form of Tallness or Oddness), Santas is satisfied to explain away the problems. By contrast, I claim to show how Plato’s treatment is a natural outgrowth of his general philosophical orientation. Some defenders of Plato get bogged down in technicalities, usually from an all-too-modern point of view. This is unfortunate given that Plato’s pronouncements on the Good operate at a broad level of generality and belong to a very different intellectual landscape. See e.g. Seel (2007). He wonders if the Good is ‘the system of the logical relations between the essences itself or the set of the properties of this system’ (Seel 2007: 183). It is hard to overlook the anachronism of this reductive formalism. In general, approaches like that of Santas and Seel must do a considerably amount of rational reconstruction to tidy up Plato’s ideas.

⁸ Which is not to suggest this is without its problems. See Keyt (1969).

not; and if they do *not*, then this is not the kind of thing that can be known with complete certainty. Rather it is something that only holds true for a time. The reason, then, that Plato needs knowledge to sit still is that he wants certain, infallible knowledge. This is the point that Grene is making.

Furthermore, Plato's desire for certain knowledge leads him away from the external world of the senses and towards what we might call introspective reflection. The objects of the senses are evidently prone to change, so if the immutable does exist, it must be the kind of thing we encounter with the mind.⁹ It is 'introspective knowledge' like we find in mathematics that furnishes the kind of certainty Plato is after.¹⁰ Thus *the desire for certainty leads to introspective methods*. And this, in turn, leads us into the realm of *necessity*. If Plato wishes to have certain knowledge of the natural world or the human soul or what have you, he must be able to access this knowledge via introspection; and *this* will be the kind of knowledge that holds necessarily and the negation of which is a logical contradiction. So for example, the Final Argument in the *Phaedo* (*Phd.* 102–106) purports to give a kind of ontological proof for the immortality of the soul. Socrates argues on logical grounds as opposed to empirical ones that life and death are opposites and must preclude each other: what is living cannot be dead and *vice versa*. Then he argues that the soul, by definition, always 'brings with it' life (much as three always 'brings' oddness with it). In this way, soul is said to be necessarily alive. As such it cannot tolerate death (*thanatos*) and is im-mortal (*athantos*). Soul is said to be immortal in virtue of the kind of thing it is. *QED*: the soul cannot die by necessity. This is an example (albite an unpersuasive one¹¹) of an argument that looks to introspective necessity. Thus *certainty leads to introspection which leads to the realm of necessity*. A crucial feature of Plato's approach, then, is the impossibility of knowing what is merely contingent, or what could be otherwise.¹² Knowledge must be grounded in something necessary, or to put it in ontological terms, the objects of knowledge must be immutable and eternal. This obviously contrasts with

⁹ Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* 1010a1–15. The fallibility of sense perception is a perennial issue in Greek philosophy which Plato inherited from the Presocratics and Sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras. On the Presocratics see Long (1986: 78). He says: 'The fallibility of sense perception as a source of knowledge was emphasized in different ways by Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles and Democritus in the Presocratic period. Earlier than all of these Xenophanes...'

¹⁰ I hope this use of the term 'introspection' is not too distracting here; I am thinking of something broadly comparable to the *a priori*. The problem with this term is that it comes paired with *a posteriori* knowledge and I do not think that Plato would have accepted this as a legitimate form of knowledge. In other words, the *a priori* is co-extensive with knowledge for Plato and this is rather different to how *we* use the term where it is but one kind of knowledge. Compare Moss (2019: 79): 'If *epistēmē* is of what is, and it turns out that essences, Forms, or other ultimate realities are the things that *are*, then *epistēmē* is cognition of these ultimate realities.... Like *a priori* knowledge, it will have no truck with the contingent empirical realm. Like Science, it will be especially about ultimate realities... Put concisely, on this view, *epistēmē* will be quite different from knowledge as we nowadays conceive it, for it will be a *deep grasp of ultimate realities*.'

¹¹ On the Final Argument see Cobb (1977).

¹² Aristotle too wants knowledge to be based on necessary first principles. See Arist. *APo.* 71b14–16 where he registers that *epistēmē* or scientific knowledge is concerned with what could not be otherwise (*ἀδύνατον ἄλλως εἶχεν*); cf. Arist. *Metaph.* 1026b27–1027a28. See further Burnyeat (1981: 108–115) and Reeve (2000: 27–42).

the modern scientific view of nature and is unlikely to receive a positive reception today. But that is all the more reason to be on our guard against anachronism. For Plato if something is to be known, it must hold of necessity in the sense that it can be understood in reference to immutable principles. Thus if the cosmos is to be knowable, it must exhibit a fixed, top-down structure. And he thinks it *is* knowable. In this way it was all but inevitable that Plato would grasp after some grand unifying principle.

We are now quite well placed to understand the cosmological and epistemological aspects of the form of the Good. Plato thinks that either nature conforms to a necessary, metaphysical order or it is contingent and unknowable. The ethereal order of the cosmos is just that which makes it intelligible. Thus in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates is casting about for ways to understand and explain generation and destruction, he rejects the material explanations of his predecessors because the causes they identified do not necessitate their effects in the desired way. These are not immutable causes that can be firmly grasped by the mind. From the revolutions of the heavenly bodies to the behaviour of fire and snow, all must be understood in reference to incorporeal, metaphysical causes. Turning to the *Republic* it should also be apparent how this self-same cosmological principle, the Good, is the light of *knowledge*. For if it did not exist – if the metaphysical realm did not prop up the visible realm – we could have no knowledge of planets, people or anything. It is the cause of knowledge in the sense that it is responsible for the order which makes things knowable.¹³ What remains to be seen, however, is why the Good is actually good.

3. Nature and Ethics

So why is the Good *ethically* good? Obviously this keystone of knowledge would be a wonderful thing to possess, but how exactly is it ‘better than the virtues’ as Socrates says in the *Republic*? Indeed, why even call this principle ‘good’ in the first place? The answer is not far to look: ethics for the ancients must be a part of nature. That is to say, the study of ethics was intimately bound up with the study of nature.¹⁴ Certainly the Stoics and the Epicureans ground their ethical theories in their physics. Thus they urge us to ‘live according to nature.’ And Aristotle too thinks humans possess a natural function (e.g.

¹³ On impossibility of knowledge without first principles cf. Arist. *Metaph.* 994b12–28 and 1060a26–27. The latter passage asks the rhetorical question, ‘How will there be order, if there is nothing eternal, separable and enduring?’ (πῶς γὰρ ἔσται τάξις μὴ τινος ὄντος αἰδίου καὶ χωριστοῦ καὶ μένοντος;). Aristotle explicitly discusses and rejects ‘accidental’ causes, e.g., in *Ph.* 2.4–6. Although he acknowledges that things can come about by chance, these are not the causes he is interested in, these are not explanatory in the way he requires. To understand the changing world of nature we need to be able to specify in a determinate fashion *to what end* the change took place (the final cause). Chance occurrences in nature have no final cause and cannot be *known* in the technical philosophy sense. We cannot know the *why* (as Aristotle likes to say) of an accidental phenomenon. See Freeland (1991: 49–72) and D. Frede (1992: 49).

¹⁴ See Annas (1993: 137): ‘the natural life is the life led by humans who have developed in a natural way, this being understood as a way in which the potentialities which for us are given develop without interference from other, external factors.’

EN 1097b23–1098b21). Where modern philosophers tend to think that you cannot derive an ought from an is, the ancients by contrast frequently begin their moralizing from considerations about the nature of man. Thus we see in the *Republic* and the *Phaedo* that Plato's ethical proscriptions cohere tightly with his account of human nature. The *Phaedo* explores the division between the body and the soul, which, in turn, informs our epistemological endeavours and our fate in the afterlife. Here, as usual, his ethics is centred around the need to cultivate the soul (see e.g. *Phd.* 114d). In the *Republic*, charged with showing that justice is intrinsically beneficial, Socrates bases his argument on the idea that the just soul is one that is arranged according to nature, with the ruling element in control (e.g. *R.* 443c4–d4).

But it is not only the soul that has a correct state we must strive to bring about; Socrates' arguments also apply to the body politic. The city too has a correct state. This is quite clear to see in the *Republic*, where the city is a larger version of the soul, or the soul 'writ large'.¹⁵ Thus the Good is 'better than the virtues' because it underpins the virtues, both personal and political, much as it underpins physics and epistemology. It is simply not possible to understand the virtues without a knowledge of nature – and if anything, a sharp distinction between the two should be avoided. In this way the timeless metaphysical causes are also *good*. They explain the meaning of life no less than the cosmos.

Nevertheless, although Plato is concerned with the inquiry into nature, he tends to focus on its *ethical* aspect. We find this metaphysical ethics throughout his corpus.¹⁶ In the *Euthyphro* (*Euthph.* 10a–11b), for instance, Socrates raises the famous question about whether the gods love the pious because it is pious, or whether it is deemed pious because the gods love it. Plato is instinctively drawn to the answer that the gods are constrained by an objective standard: they love the pious because it is pious. What counts as pious is not arbitrarily decided at the whim of a deity. In other words, the nature of the world – including ethical concepts like piety – holds by necessity and is accessible to abstract thought.¹⁷ But what is particularly striking about the *Euthyphro* passage is the argumentation that Socrates employs. He reflects on the nature of *loving something* as opposed to *being loved* in reference to the analogous cases of *carrying* and *seeing*. It is important to

¹⁵ This can be understood in the broader context of (what we may call) the vertical integration of ancient biology, whereby a human is thought to be a miniature of the cosmos (or the cosmos is thought to be a large organism). As Hahn (1977: 63) puts it, 'The analogy between living beings and parts of the cosmos is extremely ancient in Greece and antedates all written records.'

¹⁶ Cf. Benitez (1995: 119): 'The *Philebus* and the *Laws*, which are quite possibly the last of Plato's dialogues, show clearly that Plato tries to the very end of his life to harmonize ethics and metaphysics in a kind of teleological cosmology.' Benitez discusses the *Philebus* on 130–138 and the *Timaeus* on 126–129.

¹⁷ By contrast, Christian thinkers like Descartes and Newton who helped usher in the modern view of nature insisted that because God is radically free the world that he created must be contingent. See Foster (1934: 452–468) and Hooykaas (2000: 7–26). Foster (1934: 453) remarks that, 'The medieval philosopher had of course believed the Christian doctrine that nature is created. But the belief had been efficacious only in his theology. In his science of nature he had continued to seek for final causes, to define essence and to deduce properties... The modern investigators of nature were the first to take seriously *in their science* the Christian doctrine that nature is created, and the main difference between the methods of ancient and the methods of modern natural science may be reduced to this: that these are and those are not methods proper to the investigation of a created nature.'

stress that such seemingly semantic analysis is not merely linguistic. Plato is wondering about the structure of reality: what causes what?¹⁸ We shall not rehearse the rather labyrinthine argument here; the key point is that the argument relies on abstract, introspective reasoning to gain its conclusion.

From an apparently early dialogue, the *Euthyphro*, let us jump to Plato's final dialogue, the *Laws*. In Book 10 of this dialogue the Athenian Stranger, having raised the spectre of atheism, rehearses the abhorrent view that the world is but a product of chance, and that nature and art are fundamentally separate things operating in two separate spheres (*Lg.* 889a4–e1); or in other words that statecraft is 'man-made.' The people who advance this view claim that, 'the good of nature is different from the good of law, and that justice has nothing to do with nature' (*Lg.* 889e5–7). To combat these agitators the Athenian launches into a grand account of the soul, the cosmos and the gods: he demonstrates that the soul *qua* first mover is prior to matter by means of an abstract argument on the nature of movement (*Lg.* 892a ff.); and from this he extrapolates that soul is the cause of all good and that it controls the cosmos (*Lg.* 896c–e), not least because circular motion is the most rational (*Lg.* 898a–b) – all this to vouchsafe the rightness of the laws. Clearly he is operating with a metaphysical view of nature, the city and mankind.



It is my hope that the foregoing has shed some light on the connections between Plato's teleology and his epistemology. The desire for certain knowledge led him away from the fallible senses and towards the necessary truths accessible to thought alone. If nature, mankind and the cosmos are to be knowable in the way that Plato wants them to be, then all these must fall under the purview of necessity. This bundle of ideas, I argue, is at the heart of Plato's Good, which is thus the principle of knowledge, the cosmological principle and, above all, ethically good.

¹⁸ See Allen (1970: 40); cf. Hankinson (1989: 210) and in general Wolfsdorf (2005).

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Why Is Plato's Good *Good*?

The form of the Good in Plato's *Phaedo* and *Republic* seems, by our standards, to do too much: it is presented as the metaphysical principle, the epistemological principle and the principle of ethics. Yet this seemingly chimerical object makes good sense in the broader context of Plato's philosophical project. He sought *certain* knowledge of necessary truths (in sharp contrast to the contingent truth of modern science). Thus, to be knowable the cosmos must be informed by timeless principles; and this leads to teleology and the Good. The form of the Good, it is argued, is what makes the world knowable insofar as it *is* knowable. This interpretation plugs a significant gap in the scholarship on the Good and draws attention to a deep connection between Plato's epistemology and his teleological understanding of the cosmos.

KEY WORDS

Form of the Good, teleology, Plato's epistemology, necessity