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PLATO ON WHAT IS GOOD

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SÍNTESE – Este artigo analisa o conceito de bem na filosofia de Platão. Este é, claramente, um tema fundamental da filosofia platônica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Platão. Bem. *Górgias*. *República*. *Filebo*.

ABSTRACT – The article examines the concept of the Good in Plato's philosophy. This is clearly a fundamental theme in Platonic philosophy.

KEY WORDS – Plato. Good. *Gorgias*. *Republic*. *Philebus*.

The concept of good is clearly a fundamental theme in Plato's philosophy. The Form of the Good occupies a central position in the *Republic*, where it serves as the goal for the moral and intellectual training of the guardians. In a final vision that will complete their education, the perfected guardians "will lift up the beam of their soul to behold the source of light for all things, the Good itself, and they will use it as a model (*paradeigma*) to fashion their own lives and that of the city" (VII, 540a). Another dialogue, the *Philebus*, is entirely devoted to discussing the nature of the good. And in the reports concerning Plato's unwritten teaching, we hear of a famous lecture entitled "On the Good". No topic could be more important for Plato. Even justice, the explicit concern of the *Republic*, is subordinate to the supreme concept of the good.

We may begin, however, by taking note of a philosophical problem. From a contemporary point of view, it is not easy to make sense of a conception of the good so strong that it is said to be the source of all knowledge, truth and reality (*Rep.* VI, 508e-509b). In fact today it is no small challenge to defend any notion of the good as objective, that is to say, as independent of what anyone holds to be good. In a well-known attack on the concept of objective value, J. L. Mackie has cited the Platonic Forms, and the Form of the Good in particular, as vulnerable to what he calls "the argument from queerness". Objective values, according to Mackie, would have to be "entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe", since they would have to be "intrinsically prescriptive", having the peculiar property of obligatoriness or "to-be-pursuedness" somehow built into them. What is

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strange about this property, according to Mackie, is that objective values would have to be entities with the unique "power, when known, automatically to influence the will."¹ Incidentally, Mackie's attack on objective values in his "argument from queerness," with its insinuation that objective values were somehow logically abnormal, was unintentionally prepared by G.E. Moore's earlier characterization of the predicate "good" as referring to a "non-natural quality". Unlike Mackie, Moore believed that such qualities actually exist. But his description of them as non-natural prepared the way for Mackie's rejection of them as logically bizarre.

Now I do not propose to defend a thesis of objectivity in value. On the contrary, the term "objective value" seems to me an oxymoron. The notion of value conjures up something like market value or consumer demand. A value is something we give to things by valuing them, and it is not at all clear how the value of anything could be independent in principle from the desires and preferences of someone who values it. As a term for philosophical discussion, "good" has the advantage over "value" (or "valuable") of aspiring to be an ordinary descriptive adjective, as when we speak of a portrait as a good likeness or a marksman as a good shot. In such cases, where "good" means simply *good of its kind*, it makes sense to speak of goodness as objective, as independent of anyone's preferences or desires, since the relevant criteria of excellence are directly implied by the concept of a portrait or a marksman. Hence it is understandable that Étienne Gilson is said to have been outraged when an English translator of one of his works rendered "le bien" not by "the good" but by the language of value. Gilson complained, in medieval style, that a transcendental attribute (the good) had thus been reduced to an "extrinsic denomination", that is, to a non-essential external relation. I imagine that Gilson was sensitive to the fact that anyone who undertakes to defend objective values begins with a serious disadvantage built into the terminology. (This terminology is so convenient, however, that the temptation is great. I note that in the program for this Bonn symposium "Güterlehre" was rendered in English by "values". I shall even use the term "value" myself, but as rarely as possible.) Anyone who is aiming at a sympathetic understanding of the ancients in these matters will be well advised to speak in terms of *good* and *bad*, *just* and *unjust*, rather than in terms of value.

I shall attempt, then, not to defend objective values but to give a sympathetic account of Plato's theory of the good, as presented in three dialogues: *Gorgias*, *Republic* and *Philebus*. To this end it will be best to begin not with the *Republic* but with the *Gorgias*, the earliest of the three. For one of the principal claims of the *Republic*, namely that all human actions aim at the good, is also presented in the *Gorgias*, but without the metaphysical framework that makes the doctrine of the *Republic* more problematic.

¹ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin Books, 1977) pp. 38-40.

In the *Gorgias* this claim (namely, that all human action aims at the good) appears in a context where Socrates is maintaining, against Polus, the paradoxical thesis that tyrants do not do what they want, although they do whatever they please (466d ff.). Socrates' argument depends upon the principle, accepted by Polus, that what everyone wants is the good, or something good, whereas the action that people perform may itself be neutral or even bad. The primary distinction here is between ends and means, between goals or actions desired for their own sake and actions desired for the sake of something else. The *Gorgias* text represents a milestone in philosophical literature, since the distinction between ends and means is clearly articulated here, probably for the first time. But the further claim, that all actions are done for the sake of the good (or for the sake of something good), goes well beyond the distinction between ends and means. We must take account of two major assumptions, left implicit in the text but fundamental for the understanding of Plato's claim.

1) First assumption: The notion of good, introduced here as the object of desire or wanting (*boulesthai*), is implicitly limited in this context to the notion of intrinsic good, things desired for their own sake as ends of action rather than as means to further ends. Plato's terminology here for what we would call instrumental goods is not entirely consistent. Actions done only for the sake of something else are initially described as "neither good nor bad, but in between" (467e-468a), but they are also said to "share in the good", to be "beneficial" or to be "better for us to do" (467e7, 468c4, 468b2,6). I suggest that Plato avoids the terminology of instrumental goods in this context precisely because he wishes to locate the notion of good in what is desired as an end, desired for its own sake. Thus Socrates gets Polus to agree that "when people act, they do the intermediate actions for the sake of things good, not good things for the sake of the intermediates" (468a5). So "good" here means "intrinsic good".

2) Second assumption. The notion of desire operating here is to be understood as rational desire (*boulesthai*), by which I mean a deliberate desire for whatever upon reflection one regards as best or most advantageous. This concept of rational desire presupposes a judgment of what is the best end to be pursued "all things considered". Plato indicates a conception of desire that is rational in this sense by his systematic use of the verb *boulesthai* in the argument with Polus, rather than the more emotional verb for desire *epithumein*, which he will use later in the dialogue to express the position of Calicles, who insists on satisfying all desires without restriction. (This rational connotation for *boulesthai*, "to want" is reinforced by the cognate terms *boulê*, "council", and *bouleusis*, "deliberation".) This is precisely the terminological distinction between two kinds of desire that becomes canonical in Aristotle, where *boulêsis* means rational desire for what is good (or what is perceived as good) while *epithumia* designates animal appetite or desire for pleasure. Plato is not generally committed to such a technical vocabulary; and he will often use these two terms for desire interchangeably. But in the *Gorgias* he regularly observes the semantic contrast between *boulêsis* and *epithumia*, which Aristotle will employ as a doctrinal distinction.

Thus with desire understood as rational and good limited to the end pursued in action, Socrates' claim that all actions are done for the sake of the good can be seen as an implicit definition of rational action, with rational desire conceived in terms of the "for-the-sake-of" relation, that is, in terms of the relation between ends and means. An action counts as rational, as the expression of *boulesthai*, only if the agent has an end in view that he perceives as good and he deliberately pursues the action in question as a means to achieving this end.

This is Plato's fundamental contribution to the classical theory of action, which he offers here as a basis for his interpretation of the Socratic paradox that no one does evil voluntarily. Plato's interpretation posits a universal human desire (*boulesthai*) for what is good, so that everyone who acts voluntarily is pursuing an end they perceive as good. In this, its weakest form, Plato's claim is little more than an identification of voluntary action with rational action in the sense just defined, action motivated by *boulêsis*, by deliberate desire. So it is not difficult to get Polus to accept this claim that all actions are done "for the sake of [something] good" (468b). Polus does not raise the objection that might occur to a modern reader, beginning with Hobbes and Hume: namely, that we call something "good" simply because we desire it. On the contrary, that objection is ruled out in advance by the Platonic-Aristotelian conception of *boulesthai*: as Aristotle says, we desire something because we judge it good, not conversely (*Metaphysics* 1072a29). And in the context of the *Gorgias*, Polus does not disagree.

This notion of voluntary action motivated by rational desire still leaves us rather far from the Socratic paradox. To move Polus closer to the paradox Socrates relies on the ambiguity between two interpretations of "good": on the one hand, good for the agent or advantageous, and on the other hand good absolutely or good of its kind. Although the tyrant may do whatever he pleases, if his action leads to his political downfall he has done something bad, and hence something he did not want (*boulesthai*, 468d5). He has, as it were, acted involuntarily. The conclusion is paradoxical, but the argument thus far relies only upon the subjective conception of good as an end perceived by the agent as advantageous or in his self-interest. It is in this sense that (as Aristotle says) every action aims at some good. The next step of the argument is one that Polus cannot really follow, since Plato wants to determine the good more narrowly and more objectively as an end of action that is "good of its kind", a good end for all human action to aim at. In effect, Plato means to ask: what is the end of action that is good for every agent and in every circumstance? The relatively innocuous claim that every action aims at some good is thus reinterpreted as the strong philosophical thesis that there is one good that every voluntary action should aim at, and would aim at if the agent knew what was really good, what was really in his interest. In the context of the *Gorgias*, this universal good or *telos* is conceived as the good state of the *psychê*, the soul adorned by the moral and intellectual virtues.² This is the good both for

² The semi-technical expression *telos* for the good as "the end of all actions" is introduced later in the dialogue (499e). Here again an innovation in the *Gorgias* is taken for granted by Aristotle.

the individual and for the political art, which aims at making the citizens virtuous. Thus for Plato in the *Gorgias*, we have essentially the same conception of the good that is defined by the *ergon* argument in Aristotle's *Ethics* (except that Aristotle will add his characteristic distinction between potency and act, so that the good is not merely the possession of the virtues but their active exercise).

In the *Gorgias*, the argument for this view of the good depends upon two analogies: an analogy between virtue for the soul and health for the body, on the one hand, and an analogy between the excellence of the soul and the excellence of artefacts such as a painting, a house or a ship (503e ff.) In each case excellence (*aretê*) is said to be produced by order, arrangement and harmonious fitting-together. Latent here is a definition of the virtues as the harmonious cooperation between parts of the soul, in the theory that will be worked out in *Republic IV*. But the *Gorgias* does not work it out. There is no psychological theory here, and Plato's conclusion relies heavily upon the exemplum of Socrates' own life and character, and upon the ad hominem attack on Callicles' appeal to a life of sensual indulgence.

Before leaving the *Gorgias* we may point out that the parallel between psychic excellence and bodily health, a parallel that is more fully developed in *Republic IV*, suggests how we might proceed to explicate Plato's conception of an objective good. The notion of physical health is complex, just as the notion of sickness is clearly diverse. But it seems reasonable to maintain that there is an objective difference between health and sickness, and that health is the better condition of the two. The Platonic conception of the good in the *Gorgias* can be interpreted as making a similar claim for the healthy state of the psyche, that is, for the human character and cognitive condition that is defined as virtue in *Republic IV*. We may or may not accept Plato's conception of psychic excellence. But there is nothing epistemically bizarre or ontologically abnormal about the quality or thing that figures here as the objective good. It is a certain state of the psyche which, it is claimed, is in everyone's interest to achieve, the end they would pursue in every action if they knew what was truly in their interest, that is, objectively good for them, just as health is objectively good for them. Given the notion of *boulesthai* or rational desire for what is good (and hence also good for the agent), there is no mystery why a judgment that X is good, or that X leads to the good, should motivate the agent to do X. This is Plato's (and Aristotle's) answer to Mackie's argument from queerness. In effect, the classical theory of action, as we find it in the *Gorgias* and in Aristotle, takes for granted a certain version of psychological egoism, structured by a concept of *boulêsis* as deliberate desire. There may be theoretical problems with this concept of desire for an open-ended object, an object identified only as "what the agent judges to be best, all things considered". But such a conception of the end is not more indeterminate than the object of egoism generally, if that is understood as "what the agent judges to be in his or her best interest". The good as object of *boulêsis* is not more logically odd than self-interest conceived as the object of ordinary egoism.

So much for the *Gorgias*. When we turn to the *Republic*, there is a more complex story to tell. In Book VI we have not only the metaphysical background of the Forms and the realm of intelligible being; we also have the epistemic foreground of the Form of the Good, the greatest object of knowledge, of which no direct description can be given. Despite this larger perspective, the account of the good in *Republic* VI preserves direct continuity with the *Gorgias* in its claim that the good is "what every soul pursues and for the sake of this it performs all its actions" (VI, 505d-e). The same context alludes to debates about the *telos* of human life, similar to those we find in the *Gorgias*: "Most people think the good is pleasure, but the more refined think it is intelligence or wisdom (*phronésis*, 505b)". And the refutation of Callicles is directly recalled when Socrates then reminds us that those who claim the good is pleasure must contradict themselves when they are forced to concede that some pleasures are bad (505c8).

So although the good in *Republic* VI is no longer conceived as the best state of the human soul, but instead as the best thing in the universe, the source of everything good, nevertheless the normative and teleological function of the good as the goal for all human action has been preserved and reinforced. The passage in *Republic* VI begins by claiming that it is "in conjunction with the good that justice and the rest become useful and beneficial. There is no use in possessing everything, if it is not good, or in knowing everything without knowing anything good" (505a-b). In regard to what is just and honorable (*kalon*), says Socrates, many would choose the appearances without the reality. But, he continues, no one is satisfied with what is good in appearance only; everyone seeks what is really good (505d).

Leaving aside for the moment the specifically metaphysical and epistemological functions of the Good, we can say that in its practical function alone it plays a double role. On the one hand, it continues to figure as the *telos* presented in the *Gorgias*, as the goal of human life and the object of rational desire. On the other hand, the *Republic* introduces the dimension of Platonic metaphysics that is unknown to the *Gorgias*.³ In the context of the theory of Forms as intelligible paradigms or models for the visible realm, the Good as supreme Form assumes a new role. It is by taking the Form of Good as model that the guardians, operating like artists, will be able to fashion a virtuous life for themselves, for the citizens and for the city as a whole. This imagery, the vision of the Good as an indispensable model for wise and benevolent action, provides the unifying link that ties together Plato's political doctrine, his theory of education, and his metaphysics.

Powerful as it is, such imagery does not tell us much about the good itself. Despite its supreme importance, Socrates does not offer an account of the good. He offers instead an analogy with the sun. This analogy indicates nothing about the intrinsic nature of the good; it illustrates only its function in the intelligible realm, as the source of knowledge, truth and reality. We do have the famous en-

³ Are Plato's references to "the good" in the *Gorgias* ambiguous enough to allow for a proleptic allusion to the Good of the *Republic*? The grammar of *to egathon* would allow for this at *Gorgias* 468b7, but there is no clear hint of any metaphysical reading in the text of the *Gorgias*.

igmatic statement that the Good “is not being (*ousia*) but beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power” (509b). But what does this mean? The passages that follow in *Republic* VI and VII, namely the Knowledge Line and the allegory of the Cave, do not tell us what we want to know about the Form of the Good. How is it related to the Form of Justice or the Form of Virtue? In what sense are the other Forms dependent on the Good for their being and their knowability? Assuming that the Good is the “unhypothetical (or unconditional) first principle” that is said to stand at the summit of the Divided Line, how is the dialectician supposed to rise above the hypotheses of mathematics in order to proceed to this supreme principle? What exactly are the guardians supposed to see, or understand, when they lift the eyes of their soul to the vision of the Good?

The text does not provide us with answers to these questions. Rather than speculate on the unwritten sections of Plato’s work, I suggest that we rely on four other textual references to partially fill the gap left by Socrates’ refusal to describe the good in *Republic* VI. The first reference is the parallel account of *auto to kalon*, the Beautiful itself, in Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*. A second reference is the implicit definition of justice in Book IV. A third reference is the system of moral education in Book III and above all the mathematical education in Book VII, which is designed to prepare the mind for the vision of the Good. Our fourth and final reference will be the long discussion of the good in the *Philebus*.

1. In our attempt to get a fuller understanding of Plato’s Idea of the Good, we begin with the evidence from the *Symposium*. There is a close parallel between the ladder-of-love passage in the *Symposium* and the allegory of the Cave in *Republic* VI, since in both cases we have a cognitive ascent from sensible to intelligible reality, and each ascent has as its climax the intellectual vision of a supreme Form, the vision of the Beautiful in the *Symposium* and the vision of the Good in the *Republic*. Furthermore, in Greek the two terms *kalon* (beautiful) and *agathon* (good) are closely connected, both in meaning and in idiomatic usage, where *kalon kai agathon* comes to mean something like “refined” or “the better sort”. I suggest that we may take Diotima’s account of the lover’s climactic vision of the Beautiful as a model for the vision of the Good, since in the *Republic* this vision is repeatedly referred to but never described. By contrast, Diotima reports in some detail how, when a lover who has been properly guided in the contemplation of beautiful things reaches the goal (*telos*) of his erotic pursuits, he will catch sight of something marvelously beautiful, something which “forever is (beautiful) and neither comes to be nor perishes, not being beautiful in one respect, in another respect ugly, not beautiful for some, ugly for others, nor beautiful at one time but not at another, nor is it anywhere in something else [...] in earth or heaven or anywhere else, but itself by itself with itself it is eternally uniform, while other things share in it in such a way that, as they come to be and perish, it becomes neither more nor less nor suffers any change” (*Symp.* 211b). There if anywhere, says Diotima, is a life worth living for a human being, beholding the Beautiful itself (211d). So much do we have from the *Symposium*. Now perhaps not every detail in this description would fit equally well for the Good itself. But given the close se-

mantic link between *kalon* and *agathon*, and the position of both Forms as culminating point in an intellectual ascent, I think we may safely construe the final intuition of the Good after the model of the *Symposium* passage. Plato does not like to repeat himself, and he may have found it unnecessary to describe such a vision in the *Republic* precisely because he had done so at such length in the *Symposium*. But the profound cognitive conversion which prepares for, and terminates in such a vision is even more dramatically represented in the *Republic*, in the allegorical ascent from the Cave.

2. The vision passage of the *Symposium* proceeds largely by the *via negativa*: it tells us what the Form of Beauty is not-not changing, not relative, not located in a place. For a more positive account we may consider the implicit definition of the Form of Justice. No doubt the concept of good is more general and more fundamental than the concept of justice. But like beauty, justice is a close cognate to the good: *agathon*, *kalon* and *dikaion* are the three standard terms for normative evaluation in Plato. Now we can, in effect, discover a definition for justice in the *Republic*. In describing the virtues in Book IV, Socrates first defines justice for the city, in the distribution of roles between the social groups, and then defines justice for the individual, in the harmonious relationship between the parts of the soul. To get a Platonic definition of justice itself we need only generalize these two special definitions by limiting the formula to what they have in common. Such a generalization gives us something like the following: "Justice is a well-ordered whole", or, more fully, "Justice is a unity of parts, each with its own nature, so related to one another that each part performs the task for which it is best fitted". It must be an abstract structure of this kind that Plato has in mind as the Form of Justice.

Of course such a definition of justice presupposes the notion of goodness (in the notion of *well-ordered* whole, or performing the task for which each one is *best fitted*). So a formula of this kind could count only as a partial definition or analysis of the good. Plato seems to have much more in mind, since he has Socrates claim that no one can know the Good itself, or any good at all, "unless he can delimit (or define, *diorisasthai*) the Form of Good in an account (*logos*) and separate it from everything else" (VII, 534b). So it is clear Plato did not hold a view like that of G. E. Moore, that goodness was a logically simple, unanalysable object of thought. More plausibly, perhaps, we might compare Plato's view of the good to the medieval concept of transcendentals, as predicates that transcend the Aristotelian categories and are therefore not too simple but too general, and too fundamental, to define in the ordinary way. In any case, the definition of justice as a unified structure, a whole of well-ordered parts, should point us in the right direction for understanding Plato's conception of the good. In logical terms, since justice is a virtue or excellence, it must count as a species or instance of the good. But there is a more specific link which reinforces this conclusion. The account of justice in *Republic* IV concludes with a musical comparison that reverberates throughout Plato's work. The just individual is said to achieve psychic harmony by putting himself in order: "he harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale - high, low and middle. He binds together those parts and any others there may be in be-

tween, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious" (443d, transl. Grube-Reeve). In *Republic V* Socrates insists that the unity of the city is the supreme political virtue, and this text indicates that it is also an ideal for the individual. It was not for nothing that later Platonists identified the One with the Good. What this simile suggests is that musical-mathematical concord or harmony is an essential mark not only of unity but also of goodness. We shall see this confirmed at length both in the *Republic* and in the *Philebus*.

3. Our third reference point is provided by the curriculum of *Republic VII*. Why must the future philosopher-kings devote ten years to mathematical studies before engaging in the dialectical training that will culminate in the vision of the Good? And why is music, or rather mathematical harmonics, the last of the four or five mathematical sciences to be found "useful for the investigation of the beautiful and the good?" (VII,531c6) In a recent discussion of these questions Myles Burnyeat has shown how the study of mathematics is designed to introduce the student to a radically different view of reality, a view of intelligible being as more objective because more stable and more non-perspectival than the relativized and context-dependent world of ordinary experience. But since Plato's non-perceptual reality also includes what Burnyeat calls "objective values", mathematics in general, and harmonics in particular, will prepare the student for a deeper understanding of what is beautiful and good.⁴

How is this possible? How will the abstract structures studied in theoretical mathematics contribute to a recognition of what we may call fundamental values? How will the quantitative relations between numbers, lines and figures help to enlighten judgments about the good and the beautiful? Burnyeat shows that the key here lies in the role of numerical proportion as the principle of concord and attunement, *symphônia* and *harmonia*. We must take quite literally Plato's insistence that the harmonics studied by the future guardians should be concerned not with the heard sounds of musical instruments but with the pure numbers of music theory and mathematical astronomy. Only in this way will these studies be "useful for the investigation of the beautiful and the good" (VII, 531c6). The harmonies audible to the ear are only sensible images of these intelligible structures. As such, the hearing and playing of music makes an essential contribution to the education of the young guardians. Book III tells us that training in music is the most important part of early education, because "rhythm and harmony will penetrate most deeply into the interior of the soul." Hence musical training will sharpen the young person's moral-aesthetic judgment, so that he or she will welcome and praise whatever is beautiful and noble (*kala*) but despise and reject what is ugly and ignoble (*aischra*), "before they are capable of receiving a theoretical account (*logos*). When such an account arrives, the one who has been musically-trained will recognize it as his own and embrace it willingly" (401d-402a). The *logos* in question, which the well-trained souls will recognize as their own, will include the whole range of moral teaching.

⁴ M. F. Burnyeat, "Plato on Why Mathematics is Good for the Soul," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 103 (2000).

But we may also see in this future *logos* a proleptic reference to the mathematical harmonics of Book VII. Since they have been trained in the sensible images of musical concord, they will recognize these purely numerical harmonies as in some way familiar from childhood.

To understand this connection between music and mathematics in Plato's thought we must take account of the tradition of Pythagorean harmonics known to us from the fragments of Philolaus and Archytas. It is precisely in this connection that Plato cites the Pythagoreans for the view that astronomy and harmonics are sister sciences (VII,530d). This turns out to be a quotation from Archytas (fr.1); it is in fact the only explicit reference to the Pythagoreans in all of Plato's work.⁵ What is typical of the Pythagorean musical tradition is its insistence on the numerical structure of the concords, and the analysis of the basic scale (*harmonia*) into the ratios 2:1, 3:2 and 4:3. These are the so-called musical numbers. A more complex version of these ratios is used in the construction of the world soul in Plato's *Timaeus*. Plato's construction is so technical that no one can understand this section of the *Timaeus* without a considerable grasp of Pythagorean harmonics. (Incidentally, Aristotle's claim that Plato's philosophy is essentially derived from the Pythagoreans, which seems baseless in reference to the doctrine of Forms, is fully justified in connection with numerical harmonics.)

We see, then, that harmonics comes as the last mathematical science in Book VII because it is the fullest realization of the proportional principle of concord and attunement, the mathematical image of the Good. So in the *Timaeus* the goodness of the demiurge is expressed by his ordering the world soul according to number and articulating the world body according to geometric proportion, elementary triangles and regular solids. Different branches of mathematics provide different versions of rational order. We may still ask, of course, why are all these orders good? Perhaps there is no general answer. But Burnyeat suggests that "the reason why concord, attunement, and proportion are valued in Plato's *Republic* is that they create and sustain unity."⁶ After all, the Neoplatonists knew what they were doing when they identified the One and the Good. Perhaps we may best understand the goodness of each example of mathematical structure in Plato as a particular expression of unity in plurality.

On the basis of this information from the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* we may draw two general conclusions. First, that the truest images of the Good are formal structures best illustrated from mathematics. (The normative status of such abstract structures is reflected in the formal definition of Justice as a unified whole of ordered parts.) And second, from the importance of music in moral training and the place of harmonics in higher education, we can see that there is no sharp distinction for Plato between the moral and the esthetic, between the good and the beautiful, the *agathon* and the *kalon*.

⁵ Plato does once refer to Pythagoras himself, as an educational leader and the founder of a distinguished way of life (*Rep.* X, 600b).

⁶ Burnyeat (2000) 74.

4. These two conclusions can be confirmed and refined by evidence from the *Philebus*. But the argument of the *Philebus* is complex and calls for careful interpretation.

At first sight, the *Philebus* refers so frequently to "the good" (*t'agathon*) that we might be tempted to suppose that in this late work Plato was finally prepared to give us that account of the Good itself, or the Form of the Good, that he so emphatically *refused* to provide in *Republic* VI. However, if we approach the *Philebus* with this expectation, we will soon be disappointed. For Socrates makes clear from the very beginning of the dialogue that the subject to be debated is not the good as such, or the good in general, but a more narrowly delimited topic: the good for human beings, or a good human life. The dialogue opens with a contest between pleasure and knowledge, and what is at stake is specified as follows: "what is the state or disposition of the soul that can make a life happy for all human beings" (11d4). Thus the official concern of the *Philebus* is identical with that of Aristotle's *Ethics*, the nature of the good life for human beings. And what we actually find in the text of the *Philebus* is not a general study of what we might call value theory (for lack of a better word) but rather an essay in moral psychology, with a detailed analysis of different types of pleasure.

That, however, is not the whole story. There is also a cosmic and even a metaphysical dimension to Plato's discussion of the good in the *Philebus*. First of all, the good life is defined neither by pleasure nor by knowledge but by a mixture of the two. And the notion of mixture is immediately analyzed at a very general level as the product of two Pythagorean principles, the Limit and the Unlimited. At this cosmological level, the good life belongs to a third item, the principle of Mixture itself, the logical space in which the principles of Limit and Unlimited are blended. Furthermore, this cosmological framework is completed by a fourth principle, the cause responsible for the mixture, which is identified as Reason or *nous*.

The four cosmic principles of the *Philebus* do not appear in this form in any other Platonic work. Nevertheless, certain parallels suggest that a correspondence of some sort is implied with the scheme of the *Timaeus*, so that Limit corresponds to the Forms, the Unlimited corresponds to the Receptacle, the Mixture to the world of Becoming, and the cosmic Reason to the demiurge. This mapping is far from being self-explanatory, but a correspondence of this type must be intended unless the cosmological theories of these two late dialogues are to be seen as totally incompatible.

In an anthropocentric perspective, the principle of Reason (*nous*) is the preferred term for Socrates' candidate for the human good. But of course *nous* is also Anaxagoras' name for the cosmic principle which organizes the world order; hence the parallel here with the demiurge of the *Timaeus*. The cosmic role that *nous* plays in the *Philebus* made it possible for later Platonists to identify *nous* and the Good. For example Numenius, the major predecessor of Plotinus, posits as the highest of his three gods a divine principle characterized both as *nous* and as the Good itself.⁷

⁷ See my *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans* (Hackett Publishing 2000) 128.

The position of the *Philebus* is, however, less straight-forward. *Nous* comes only third in the final ranking of goods at the end of the dialogue. (This subordinate place of *nous* should correspond to the subordination of the demiurge to the Forms in the *Timaeus*; and compare *Phaedrus* 249c6: "[The Forms] by connection with which a god is divine".) The Good itself does not appear in the *Philebus*. At best we arrive "on the threshold of the good" (64c1), and we must be satisfied if we can locate its dwelling place (*oikēsis* 61a9). All that the discussion here attempts to achieve, by studying the finest mixtures, is to learn "what is the nature of the good in man and in the All, and to guess at the form itself" (*tên idean autēn... manteuteon*, 64a). In terms of the fourfold scheme, the good appears more than once, first as instances of mixture (in the happy life and in the world order) and again as Reason, the good-making cause of the mixture. And the final ranking, where measure appears twice at the head of the list, makes clear that the positive principle of Limit must also be seen as good-making, since it is expressed in numerical measures. Thus three out of the four cosmic principles of the *Philebus* represent the good. (The Unlimited is the only exception; it corresponds to the neutral or negative role played by the Receptacle as *anankē* in the *Timaeus*.)

What have we learned here about the Good itself? At the conclusion of the dialogue Socrates says that "if we cannot catch the good with one form (*idea*) alone, we will chase it with three, with Beauty, Symmetry, and Truth" (65a). By *symmetria* here Socrates means something like due proportion or commensurability. "Taking these three as one, he continues, we may rightly hold this responsible for what is in the mixture, and it is because this is good that the mixture is good". Thus we have two distinct causal principles for the good mixture: Reason (*nous*) was invoked earlier as the agent cause of mixture, while the trinity of Beauty-Symmetry-Truth is here introduced as the formal cause, the good-making principle in virtue of which the mixture becomes good. But just when we think we have understood this duality of causal principles, Plato bewilders us further in the final ranking of goods as ingredients in the mixture, where measure and symmetry appear twice (in the first two places), and reason and knowledge also appear twice, so that even the purest pleasures are ranked only in fifth place.

I will not attempt here to untie all the knots in this very convoluted account of the good, but I think we may risk a few general conclusions. First of all, the two explanatory principles, Reason as agent cause and Symmetry or Measure as formal principle, can also be seen as related to one another as cause and effect, but only if this is understood as an analytical relation in which the effect is logically prior to the cause. By this I mean that it is the notion of Symmetry as rational order that gives content to the notion of *nous* as rational agent. In the *Gorgias* rationality was defined in terms of the subordination of action as means to the good as end. I suggest that a similar order is reflected here in the subordination of Reason to Symmetry in the final ranking. The notion of reason is understood here as it were operationally, in the instrument by which it operates (namely Limit. or numerical measure) and in the result obtained, in the Beauty, Symmetry and Truth of the mixture. The same notion of rational structure is illustrated at the beginning of the

dialogue in the account of dialectic as an analysis of unity and plurality in the system of phonemes organized in the alphabet, in the musical rhythms identified in the system of metres, and in the musical consonances articulated in numerical ratios. In these anthropocentric examples, as in the larger cosmic parallel, Reason operates by imposing Limit on the Unlimited, order on the unordered. Hence mathematical structures function twice in such a diachronic analysis, once as the principle of measure employed to impose order on the Unlimited, and again as the Symmetry or proportionality produced in the resulting mixtures. (Perhaps that is why measure must appear twice in the final ranking.) The principle of Reason is conceived here as a demiurgic power that is able both to apprehend formal structures and to impose them on the phenomena described as Unlimited. And the conceptual subordination of reason to such formal structures, corresponding in the *Timaeus* to the dependence of the demiurge on the paradigmatic Forms, is indicated in the *Philebus* by the subordination of *nous* to the principles of measure and symmetry in the final ranking.

In what sense does this discussion in the *Philebus* bring us to the threshold of the Good and locate its dwelling place? I suggest that the Form of the Good is reflected at least twice here: first in the principle of Limit which (on my reading) corresponds in the cosmological scheme to the role played by the Forms in the *Timaeus*; and again in the trinity of Beauty-Symmetry-Truth invoked towards the end to capture the elusive "form itself". (65a) The dwelling place of the Good, then, is located in measure and symmetry or proportion. This can be seen once again in the final ranking at 66ab, where *to metrion* occupies first place and *to symmetron* comes in second.

Despite, then, the continuing discretion of the *Philebus* concerning the Good itself, this dialogue tells us a great deal more about the Form of Good than we can learn from the comparison to the sun in *Republic* VI-VII. First of all, the appearance of Beauty (*to kallos*) in the trinity of forms used to capture the Good confirms the convergence between goodness and beauty that I have argued for on other grounds, and notably on the basis of the parallel between the ascent passages of the *Symposium* and the *Republic*. (So at 64e the *dunamis* of good is said to have escaped into the nature of the *kalon*.) In the second place, the role of Limit, measure, symmetry and proportion confirms our conclusion from the curriculum of the *Republic*, that formal structures of a mathematical type provide us with the clearest picture of Plato's ultimate conception of the good. So in the famous lecture on the Good, the audience was said to be disappointed when Plato talked only about mathematics, number and unity.

On the other hand, this highly abstract conception of goodness should not distract our attention from the specific insight of the *Philebus* as a dialogue about the *human* good, the good for creatures like ourselves, who must organize a measured blend of knowledge and pleasure in our own lives. Thus, after all the metaphysical and cosmic explorations of the *Republic* and the *Philebus*, this dialogue returns us deliberately to the pragmatic perspective of the *Gorgias*, and

once more pleasure figures as a contender for the goal of life. But now the discussion moves beyond the positions of Callicles and Philebus, where pleasure is conceived as an end in itself, to reinterpret pleasure selectively as a necessary ingredient in a life dominated by the Socratic pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

Thus far my sympathetic reconstruction of Plato's view of the good as presented in three major dialogues. Let me conclude with a critical comment. Despite very great admiration for Plato's metaphysical and cosmic vision, and for his persistent commitment to, and refinement of, the Socratic moral position, I think a modern reader must find something lacking in a theory of the good which is so fundamentally aesthetic in conception. Both the convergence in Plato's thought between the good and the beautiful, and the paradigmatic role of mathematical proportion and musical harmony for an understanding of justice and the good – all this points to a normative ideal of abstract order and rational symmetry. What I find lacking in such a classical ideal is any basic moral concern for human personality, any fundamental respect for human beings as such. This is where the modern notion of the moral points to something that is generally lacking, or systematically underemphasized, in the ancient conception of the ethical. The virtues of altruism have no doubt been exaggerated, but some principled concern for the welfare of others has, in my view, become a basic element in western moral consciousness. This is the fundamental Judeo-Christian contribution to our tradition, whether expressed in the Biblical command to love thy neighbor or in the Kantian imperative to treat persons as ends also and not merely as means. The absence of this generalized concern for human dignity should, I think, be recognized as a limitation in the Platonic conception of the good, though not a limitation that is specifically Platonic. Aristotle's moral theory, which is much less aesthetically oriented than Plato's, is no less deficient in this regard, as we can see from his defence of slavery. I conclude by asking whether there is any pagan equivalent to the Scriptural notion of respect for all human beings as creatures made in the divine image. I leave it to other scholars to say how far the Stoics, for example, succeeded in articulating such a moral view, independently from the Biblical tradition. The Stoics certainly had the metaphysical resources to justify such a view, in their conception of a rational community linking human beings to the reason in the universe, but I am not sure how clearly they drew the relevant moral consequences.