

THE FORM OF THE GOOD

It is obvious from these remarks that the Good is not just one Form among others. But what is the Form of the Good? Socrates says he cannot say (506e), and offers the simile of the sun instead. We know that the Good is not intelligence, truth, knowledge, or the reality of the Forms; and we know that it is the source of all these. Plato doesn't say any more, and we do not even know how the Good is the source for all of this. But we can speculate somewhat to fill out an account of what the Good is.

The Good is sometimes said to be the Form of the Forms. But in 'Plato's theory of Forms', we listed at least five characteristics of all Forms, and Goodness will not be all of these. The obvious characteristic of the Forms that is related to Goodness is perfection; Forms are purely and perfectly their own essence. By contrast, particular things fail to be completely their essence (hence their existence is inferior to the type of existence enjoyed by the Forms).

The Form of the Good and harmony

But this doesn't solve the puzzle. If the Good is just each thing exhibiting its own essence, the Good would seem to be different in each case, since it is dependent on what a thing is. However, in accordance with the rest of his theory of the Forms, Plato assumes that the Good is the same thing in every case. One suggestion is that if the Good is coherence or harmony or unity-over-difference, this would make sense of a great deal of Plato's theory of the Forms, and so it is worth taking seriously:

1. mathematics leads to knowledge of the Good as it is through mathematics that we understand the account of the one over the many;
2. the Good is superior to other Forms, not just another Form alongside others, since it is the unity or coherence of other Forms;
3. it is the Form of Forms, and other Forms owe their being to it, since they are good in being unities (of that which participates in them) and in being part of a unifying and coherent order;
4. unity and harmony play a very important role in the ethics and politics of the Republic – both the good state and the good soul are said to be harmonious.

This interpretation is also supported by a passage from the Phaedo, where Plato says 'that the truly good... binds and holds everything together' (99c).

How does this relate to the idea that the Good is each thing exhibiting its own essence? Plato repeatedly argues in the Republic that when each person plays their role in society, harmony is achieved. More generally, then, it seems he believes that when each thing exhibits its essence, harmony – the Good – is achieved.

However, Plato clearly thinks of the Good as not just a property that the Forms have, but a force from which reality emanates. If the Good is unity and harmony, it is also the first principle of everything, the standard by which everything is what it is, that has an existence and power all of its own.

The Form of the Good

This handout follows the handout on ‘Plato’s theory of Forms’. You should read that handout first.

THE SIMILE OF THE SUN AND THE FORM OF THE GOOD

Plato introduces the simile of the sun after arguing (503-4) that philosophers must be prepared to undertake the difficult task of study he describes. Their studies will not be complete until they achieve the highest form of knowledge, knowledge of the Form of the Good. It is from the Good that ‘things that are just and so on derive their usefulness and value... Is there any point in having all other forms of knowledge without that of the good, and so lacking knowledge about what is good and valuable?’ (505a-b) And so Adeimantus and Glaucon ask Socrates what the Good is, and he responds with this simile.

The simile of the sun	
The visible world	The intelligible world (the Forms)
The sun	The Form of the Good
The eye	The mind (reason)
Sight	Intelligence
To see	To know
Light	Truth
Growth	The being (reality) of the Forms

Unless there is light, our eyes cannot see, even though they have the power of sight, and objects that we can see exist and have colour and shape. It is only in the presence of light, which comes from the sun, that we can see. The sun also causes growth, and Plato says, it is a cause of sight. This last claim is difficult to understand; Plato thinks of sight as a power that the eye gets from the sun (the eye is ‘sunlike’, he says), as though eyes actually make what they see ‘visible’ in a way similar to how the sun makes things visible. However, the sun is not sight and it is not light; it is different from them, and because it is their cause, it is ‘higher’ than them.

The Form of the Good plays the same role in the intelligible world. We cannot come to know anything without the Form of the Good. Just as sun is the source of light and the source of sight – together necessary to see anything – the Form of the Good ‘gives the objects of knowledge [the Forms] their truth and the knower’s mind the power of knowing’ (508a). Both intelligence and truth have their source in the Form of the Good. And, just as the sun is cause of growth, the Form of the Good is the source of the very being of knowable objects: ‘The good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality’ (509b). And as we noted above, Plato says that everything derives its value from the Good (505b). Finally, just as the sun is not light nor sight nor growth, the Form of the Good is not intelligence nor truth nor the reality of the Forms, but ‘beyond it, and superior to it in dignity and power’ (509b).