

The Silence of Socrates: Dialectic and the Platonic Good¹

Depending on one's perspective, Socrates' brief words concerning the Good in *Republic* 6 have either cast a guiding light, or an ambiguous shadow over so much subsequent philosophy. For some, they offer testimony affirming the existence of objective, even eternal values: despite suffering, imperfections and much evil, ultimately being is good. But for others, such as Nietzsche, Socrates' words are a lie and represent the deception that has most crippled the Western mind. From this perspective, there are no objective values, and existence is not good except insofar as *we* make it so.

Controversies prevail also in more specialized, scholarly interpretations of the Good. What is it? Ineffable One or 'Form of Forms'? What are its relations to being, becoming, intelligibility, essence? What is its relation to the life of the state, or individuals? How does one come to know it? Much has been written about such questions, and yet, by contrast, it is striking how little Plato's Socrates himself says about the Good explicitly. The comments that he does venture are tentative and half-apologetic, more suggestive than precisely informative: the Good is cause of knowledge and being; it is 'beyond essence in honour and power'; it is the highest object of knowledge and desire; it may be likened to the sun; it is rarely known directly; it transforms lives, and should be the inspiration for the ideal life and community. Socrates is thus far from being silent about the Good. But the little that he does say only calls attention to a greater reticence about this most significant of entities. It is as if we have been led into the presence of a mystery. A veil has been lifted slightly, then dropped again. Enough is said to reveal that there *is* some great secret. Yet it remains a secret.

The following article offers a relatively new interpretation of the Good in the *Republic*—not seeking so much to articulate what the Good is precisely, as to suggest what it is not, to sketch the nature of the dialectic by which it may be known, and to examine why Plato may be right to locate the Good beyond definite conception. We will examine this interpretation in three stages: first, by recapitulating major points in Socrates' description of the Good in *Republic* 6-7; second, by arguing that the dialectical exercises of the *Parmenides* may well represent the dialectic that Socrates sketches in the Divided Line; third by examining *Republic* 8-9 as a dialectical deconstruction of particular, determinate goods; and finally, by suggesting that Socrates' unusual language and silence concerning the Good reinforce the sense that this is an entity which transcends finite thought.

A. *Republic* VI-VII: The Good, Divided Line and Dialectic

Our discussion begins with a brief paraphrase of the familiar passages of *Republic* 504a-521c, in which Socrates sketches his guardians' ideal education, and introduces the Form of the Good as the highest object of study.² Without knowledge of the Good itself, Socrates argues, all lesser goods (even the virtues) can lose their value and be perverted to evil ends (505a-b). Hence, it is imperative for the guardians to know the Good lest the ideal state degenerate (506a). Such assertions are typically Socratic, but Glaucon presses Socrates to say more. What *is* the Good—pleasure? knowledge? Impatient with refutations of others' opinions, Glaucon presses Socrates for his own positive ideas. But when, after much hesitation, Socrates yields, he stresses that this too is only an opinion: Socrates will resemble one blind man leading others (506a-d). Moreover, Socrates clothes his opinion in the guise of a simile: as the sun is the cause of light, sight, and life in the visible realm, so in the intellectual world, the Good is the cause of intelligibility, knowledge and being, though it too is higher than all these in its own firmament (*Rep.* 508b-c). Two further images—the Divided Line, and the Allegory of the Cave—develop the theme. In the

¹ William Desmond is the Hyde Fellow of Philosophy at Milltown Institute.

² *Rep.* 503e4, 504e4-5 (to\ me/giston maqh/ma). All references to Plato are from the Oxford Classical Text, ed. J. Bernet. All translations are my own.

Divided Line, the totality of being and knowledge are divided into four unequal sections: physical images are known by imaging (*eikasia*), physical objects by belief (*pistis*), mathematical concepts and propositions by understanding (*dianoia*), and the Forms by mind (*nous, noesis*). Here, the Good would seem to be placed as the final point on the line, as if this ultimate Idea were known by *nous*, yet at the very limit of existence. So too, in the Allegory of the Cave, the Good becomes the last object that may be glimpsed, the highest entity in the upper firmament, and most distant from the immediacies of sense perception in the cave below. If the analogy holds, then the Good (like Beauty in the *Symposium*) would seem to be known by an act of intellectual intuition: in its supreme act, the mind looks up, and sees. But Socrates does not fully explain what *nous* is and instead lays more stress on dialectic as the means of coming to know the Good. But what is this dialectic?

In the Divided Line, Socrates defines dialectic in relation mathematical deduction (*dianoia*). Both are ‘pure’ types of thinking that treat non-sensible entities without any reference to sense. Both involve thinking about hypotheses or given assumptions, but while the mathematician takes hypotheses (e.g. the definitions, axioms and rules of inference in any axiomatic scheme) as starting points from which to deduce consequences, Socrates’ dialectician would ask: ‘why *these* definitions and axioms in particular?’ Thus Socrates states that the dialectician treats “hypotheses not as first principles, but truly as hypotheses, as if they were steps and spring-boards.”³ So too, the dialectician proceeds upward by ‘destroying hypotheses’ (ταῖς ὑποθέσεσιν ἀφαιρούμενος, 533c8)—another dark phrase that Socrates never explicates. As a result, many readers have been perplexed as to the nature of this much-vaunted dialectic.⁴ Indeed, from a variety of angles, Socrates’ project would seem quixotic. For the empiricist, if thought is primarily the association of empirically-grounded concepts in ordered patterns, then it is impossible to think without some image, idea or ‘hypothesis’ abstracted from experience. Or, with regard to more ‘pure’ forms of reason, logical and mathematical systems begin with axioms that are contingent assumptions (and not necessarily empirical abstractions from experience). These may be the postulates of Euclid, Lobachevsky, or Riemann, for example, but what is important is that one begin *somewhere* and that one discipline all subsequent deductions by one’s first, fixed assumptions. Yet Socrates’ dialectic would question both empirical concepts and the seemingly free-floating assumptions of axiomatic systems: neither has the requisite necessity to compel the mind’s assent. But if so, then his procedure of ‘destroying hypotheses’ seems tantamount to a purgation of all thought. The dialectical ascent would be as fantastical as the self-exaltation of Baron von Münchhausen lifting himself up by his pony-tail. As Rice writes, Socrates’ dialectic would allow us ‘to hoist ourselves into the air with the help of scaffolding and then throw the scaffolding away’.⁵ But if the spring-boards and scaffolding are thrown away, upon what will one stand?

Faced perhaps by such perplexities, scholars have offered various interpretations of Socrates’ remarks, notably by drawing upon the fuller discussions of dialectic in the *Phaedo* and *Sophist*. Robinson’s study of Platonic dialectic is the most complete, and he categorizes the various attempts to explicate the dialectical ‘way up’ as the ‘intuition theory’, the ‘mathematical theories’, and the ‘synthesis-theory’.⁶ The last remains perhaps the most popular, despite Robinson’s decisive criticisms.⁷ It arises

³ *Rep.* 511b4-c2. See also *Symp* 211c for the soul’s ‘ascent’ as it treats types of beauty as so many ‘steps’ (ω(σπερ α)παναβα/σμοί) to absolute Beauty.

⁴ For Ian Mueller, Socrates’ account of dialectic is ‘opaque’ (1992, p. 186): ‘one [cannot] make ultimately satisfactory logical sense of Plato’s position here’ (190). Sayre looks to the *Sophist* for examples of the Divided Line’s dialectic (1969, p. 47), but suggests that in composing the *Republic* ‘Plato himself was not clear about what was involved in this phase of the dialectician’s procedure’ (54). Rice understands dialectic as the ‘pitting of speech against speech’ but does not know ‘exactly how dialectic operates’ (1998, p. 74).

⁵ Rice 1998, p. 80.

⁶ Robinson 1953, pp. 160-179.

⁷ ‘It would be very wide of the mark to say that the upward and downward paths mentioned in the Line were thought of by the author as consisting either essentially or mainly in synthesis and division respectively’ (1953, p. 165)

from Socrates' sometime definition of dialectic as collection (*sunagoge*) and division (*diairesis*), approximately equivalent to induction and deduction: the dialectician 'collects' similar particulars, articulates the essence or Form that unites them as a class, then proceeds to 'divide' the concept, deducing what attributes or characteristics are implied by the essence.⁸ Therefore, a dialectical 'way up' to the Good would be a progressive advance to greater generality. By collection, the dialectician articulates many Forms of particular things (e.g. horse, triangle), and ultimately uncovers a supreme Form, that unites the many lesser Forms into a single class. Moreover, this Form of Forms is termed the 'Good' because of the shared distinguishing mark of every lesser Form. For as exemplar for its particulars, each Form has the quality of a specific perfection: the idea of Horse, for instance, represents the perfect horse, and what each individual horse should be. But, in turn, as exemplar for its particular Forms, the Form of Forms becomes the exemplar of perfection itself: it imparts this distinguishing quality of superlative excellence upon each subordinate Form, thus making them ideals for their homonymous particulars. Therefore, dialectical 'collection' leads to a Form of Forms that is not simply the highest class, but is also supremely good.⁹

The interpretation is ingenious, but it is pure extrapolation from Socrates' scattered remarks: Socrates does *not* talk in this vein in the *Republic*. Moreover, dialectical 'collection' is empirically-grounded and need not treat any concepts except those abstracted from experience. As such, it belies Socrates' idealistic language, and would make the Good a high—and rather thin—abstraction rather than an idea that is intelligible *per se*. Indeed, such an empirically-oriented approach fails to appreciate Socrates' central demand that the guardians be educated to a love of Platonic Ideas—pure, non-sensuous essences, not derivative abstractions. To this end, Socrates couples dialectic not with classificatory 'collection' but with mathematical *dianoia*: the guardians will first study mathematics for ten years, and then proceed to the dialectical 'destruction' of hypotheses.

How then might one make sense of Socrates' remarks? One passage is particularly significant, first in the context of the guardians' education, and second when compared with the debate of the later *Parmenides*. The dominant goal of the guardians' education is to learn to love ideas and so to become objective, dispassionate judges. To this end, Socrates recommends abstract thinking. But the recognition of contradictions is a spur and stimulus to thought. One notes here that mathematical arguments can rely on contradiction, while classificatory thinking does not.¹⁰ Moreover, the main experience of contradiction will be through dialectic itself, exemplified by Socrates' own activity as dialectical 'gadfly' of Athens. To illustrate his point, Socrates takes a deceptively simple example (*Republic* 523a-525a). If one compares one's ring finger with one's little finger, it is long; but in comparison with the middle finger, it is short.

⁸ For passages in which dialectic is equated with collection and division, see *Phaedrus* 265c-266c and *Sophist* 253e, *Philebus* 16c-18d; cf. Robinson 1953, p. 162.

⁹ Joseph (1948) was the first major proponent of this interpretation. For later variations on the theme, see Santas 1983 and Pappas 2003, pp. 142-43. The other half of this argument concentrates on those passages that describe the dialectical 'way down' in terms of division. Here the philosopher-ruler when looking for guidance in particular judgments, simply 'looks' up to the Good—as a painter looks to his model, the Demiurge to the Forms, or perhaps a mathematician to his first principles. The ruler simply divides the concept of Good into its proper sub-classes, articulating what is implicitly contained in the concept itself. Such is the clear proposal of *Republic* 500d-501c, 540a. Yet, if a consequence resembles its ground, then one might interpret the nature of the Good in the light of its deductions: if the provisions of Socrates' ideal city are grounded in the Good, then they should reflect the Good. But if so, such determinate policies as the city's control of the arts, religion and all higher forms of expression, its caste-system, elite communism, avoidance of mercantilism, abhorrence of aggressive wars, its withdrawal from international politics, its self-sufficiency and quietism generally, would suggest that the Good counsels a certain withdrawal from temporal immediacies. If so, then the Good itself cannot be a wholly empirical good which ought to be 'maximized'. Rather, does the Good transcend the empirical altogether, and are the individual life and state ideal to the extent that they too avoid the crass worldliness of the tyrant?

¹⁰ For instance, there are "proofs by contradiction" (*modus tollens*). Also, the contradiction between what seems true to intuition (e.g. from the physical diagram), and what actually follows from given axioms, reinforces the rationalist conviction that what is truly real are ideal entities (e.g. axioms, principles) rather than any sensuous immediacy.

But how can one say that it is long *and* short, and thus predicate opposites of the same entity? Or again, a finger has several parts and is a unity: is a finger a singular or plural entity? For Socrates, such experience of seeming contradiction jolts one into asking higher, more fundamental questions:

If some contradiction is always seen to be present in a thing so that it appears to be both one and plural, then one would need a criterion to judge between them. At a loss, the soul is forced to seek by itself, and rousing itself to thought, to ask ‘What is unity itself?’ (524e2-6)

Might such experience of contradiction have a place within Socrates’ dialectical ascent to the Good? Indeed, it may be that the dialectical procedure in the *Parmenides* precisely illustrates Socrates demands for the ‘destruction of hypotheses’.

B. Dialectic in *Parmenides*: Mental Gymnastics and Critique of the Forms

We turn then to *Parmenides*, a difficult dialogue with two basic halves, whose interrelation and relative importance is still debated.¹¹ I suggest that the dialogue is implicitly unified by the fundamental theme of contradiction and paradox, and that these, surprisingly, form a privileged mode of access to the Forms. The theme appears at the very beginning of the narrative with the reference to Zeno having argued before the company that multiplicity cannot exist, for ‘if things are many, they must be both like and unlike’ (*Parmenides* 127e).¹² The idea resembles that of Socrates’ finger-example, but here Socrates dismisses Zeno’s arguments as no great feat, as it is easy to predicate opposites of any sense-object. For, Socrates argues, if universals (“Forms”) exist, then any sense-object can participate in opposite universals in differing degrees, and from different vantage points; that is, any object can be described as both A and not-A. But, Socrates continues, to show at a higher level that ideas or essences themselves contain inner contradictions would be an astonishing accomplishment (129d-130a).

In the face of Socrates’ challenge, Zeno retires and Parmenides himself comes to the fore, and in the second half of the dialogue (after a lengthy criticism of Socrates’ theory of Forms), he purports to meet Socrates’ call by proving opposites of ideas. That is, given an initial assumption, Parmenides would attempt to deduce consequences from it, and from its opposite (*Parmenides*, 136a-d); on each occasion, he demonstrates some contradiction or *aporia*. Thus, in the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, Parmenides assumes the existence of the One, and deduces that it cannot have any attributes whatsoever: it is neither a whole nor does it contain parts; it is without limits, extension, shape, place; it is neither in motion nor at rest; it is not like or unlike, equal or unequal to any other entity, or to itself; it does not exist in time; consequently, it does not exist at all and cannot be known or discussed. To put the argument more concisely: if the One exists, then it does not exist. In the fifth hypothesis, by contrast, Parmenides assumes the non-existence of the One, and, as before, more contradictions arise: the One is shown to move and not to move, to become unlike and not to become unlike, to come to be and not come to be, to cease to be and not cease to be (162c-163b).¹³ In this, Parmenides recommends that one can and should take a plurality of hypotheses: all experience, and all concepts are potential matter for a dialectical treatment. If so, then his procedure in general is to show that given A, then P and ~P; and given ~A, then Q and ~Q. Indeed, Parmenides twice stresses the contradictory nature of his results (160b, 166c), and the dialogue ends on a note of *aporia* and the self-entanglement of reason:

¹¹ In Palmer’s words, the second half of the dialogue is ‘without doubt the most puzzling and controversial text in the Platonic corpus’ (1999, p. 148).

¹² See Zeno, fr. 3 (preserved in Simplicius; cited Cornford, 1939, pp. 57-58) for one such argument attributed to Zeno.

¹³ For more detailed treatments of the hypotheses, see instance Ryle 1965; Owen 1986; Schofield 1977; Meinwald 1991; Dorter 1994; Gill and McCabe 1996.

Whether the One exists or not, it seems that both that One and the Others are and are not, and appear to be and do not appear to be, all sorts of things in all sorts of ways, both with respect to themselves and to one another (166c).

One wonders whether Parmenides' is indeed a fruitful approach, and whether all hypotheses, as he suggests, do actually harbour some inner contradiction. Yet, with regard to Plato's own thought, perhaps the most significant target of Parmenides' dialectic is the theory of Forms, in the first half of the dialogue. Many have been impressed by the fact that in this critique it is Plato *himself* who is so forcefully attacking his own theory. Yet, to my knowledge, few have recognized that Parmenides' criticisms are not merely cogent, but rationally *unanswerable*. Concisely, Socrates postulates for the Forms two fundamental, but mutually incompatible aspects. First, the Forms are to be principles both of being and knowledge. Particular entities with a shared characteristic will gain that commonality through relation to their Form, perhaps by 'participation' in, or 'imitation' of it. Particulars may also participate in many Forms, and hence gain individuality through their own particular 'blend' of Forms. Thus, to know the essence as well as the uniqueness of particulars, one must grasp them through the mediation of Forms: as Forms determine the being of particulars, so knowledge of particulars is possible only through knowledge of Forms. Socrates' second demand is that Forms be *absolute* entities. An absolute exists in itself and in no necessary relation to otherness.¹⁴ Thus, when Socrates describes his Forms as existing 'in themselves', as 'separate', as essences characterized *primarily* by the relation of self-identity, he essentially demands that his Forms be absolutes—self-sufficient, self-enclosed, considered simply in themselves and not in relation to otherness, including the knower. In sum, Socrates' Ideas are at once absolutes and a ground for empirical particularity: they essentially are and are not related to particularity.

Because the twin demands are contradictory, Parmenides can deliver a series of seemingly final objections to Socrates' hypothesis. First, of what particulars are there Forms, and can there be Forms of things like dirt and hair (130a-e)? Second, how can Forms, as absolute, be related to particulars? For the relation cannot be that of a whole to its parts (130e-131e), or as exemplar to its copies or likenesses (132c-133a). Indeed, Forms cannot be related to us at all, for as self-existent absolutes, they exist 'apart' and not 'in' the human mind or 'in' the particulars that constitute the objects of human knowledge. Consequently, they cannot be known by us (133a-134e). This lack of any possible relation between absolute Forms and their human knowers is the 'greatest' difficulty (133b4). The Forms cannot be known, and if so, they cannot even be said to exist, or not exist. If they exist, they may in fact not serve any explanatory purpose, for they may be as almost many forms as there are sets of particulars, or indeed, there may be an infinity of Forms. If so, it seems more convenient to say that the Forms do not exist, and dismiss Socrates' hypothesis altogether. Such a conclusion, Parmenides suggests, would be a reasonable one, and almost impossible to refute (133a8-c1, 134e9-135b2).

Launched one after another, Parmenides' criticisms effectively silence Socrates, despite his attempts to respond. And yet, paradoxically, it is this same sceptical Parmenides who also simultaneously affirms the greatest faith in the intelligibility, reality and indeed necessity of the Forms. For at various moments of the onslaught, as the young Socrates falters, unsure of himself, Parmenides encourages him to persevere with this idea, his deepest intuition. First, Parmenides implies that as a mature philosopher, when he is no longer beholden to popular opinions, he will recognize that there *are* forms for everything, even dirt and hair (130e1-4). Moreover, the Forms are necessary for philosophy, and even for all forms of communication (134e-135c). The implication seems to be that if there is philosophy and communication (and the present dialogue is proof that there is), then there are Forms, even though for the moment one

¹⁴ The term 'absolute' is, of course, not a Greek one, but it has clear conceptual parallels with the Platonic *kath' hauto*. Wolff introduced the term *an sich* (later associated with *noumena* by Kant, and with the Absolute by the Fichte, Schelling and Hegel) to parallel the Platonic κατ' αὐτό. Thus Inwood: "*an sich*...was used by Wolff for Aristotle's *kath' hauto* ('in itself'), and means '(the thing) as such, ABSOLUTELY, apart from its relation to anything else'" (1992, p. 134).

cannot clearly articulate their precise status and nature.¹⁵ Thus, in both demolishing and affirming Socrates' theory of Forms, Parmenides has essentially subjected Socrates' *hypothesis* of Forms to the kind of dialectic that he explicitly recommends in the second half of the dialogue as a propaedeutic to the knowledge of Forms. To repeat: if Forms exist, they may be infinite in number and kind, yet unknowable and not serve any explanatory purpose; indeed, it would be better to say that they do not exist. If, on the other hand, the Forms do not exist, then one cannot philosophize or even speak; and yet we are philosophizing and speaking, and hence 'using' Forms. Thus, if Forms exist, they do not exist; but their non-existence is equally unthinkable. Thus, both hypotheses of the existence or non-existence of Forms lead to antinomies.

One has, then, the strange situation of dialectic serving as propaedeutic to knowledge of the Forms, and at the same time uncovering the inner contradiction in the hypothesis of Forms. What conclusions can one draw from this? There are at least four responses.¹⁶ The first, adopted by many scholars, is that contradictions are impossible and that there are mistakes in the arguments: therefore the *Parmenides* is a series of thought-exercises, indeed a series of sophisms to be exposed by the reader. Intellectual 'gymnastics' only, Parmenides' arguments do not expound any positive content, and certainly no NeoPlatonic content: there is no doctrine of the One in the *Parmenides*.¹⁷ This may be true, and one would be hard-pressed to find any *explicit* doctrine in the dialogue. Yet 'gymnastics' are not an end in themselves and for Parmenides, again, these have a higher purpose in preparing for attempts to 'define the beautiful, the just, the good, and each of the Ideas' (135c9-d1); only by this circuitous 'wandering through all things' can one gain *nous* (136e1-3), that highest form of Platonic insight. Moreover, this criticism fails to acknowledge the real antimony that the dialectic of the Forms themselves uncovers: that antimony might encourage the interlocutors to abandon 'Platonism', but in fact Parmenides encourages Socrates not to abandon his hypothesis, because there are Forms of everything.

A second response is the Kantian view that a genuine antimony—valid arguments for both P and ~P—only uncovers an illegitimate use of reason: thus, one might conclude that one cannot reason about Forms *per se*, but only as related to empirical particulars. Again, this involves a turn away from 'Platonism' to a more Aristotelian stress on *universalia in rebus*. Third is a quasi-Hegelian response that the Forms, as known by dialectic, are entities to which the principle of non-contradiction does not apply. These *are* a unity or reconciliation of opposites. The finite thinking of *dianoia* or *Verstand* only abstracts one aspect or the other, while the task of philosophical dialectic and *Vernunft* is to recognize all aspects together at once. And yet, in the *Parmenides* at least, the principle of non-contradiction is nowhere denied. On the contrary, the uncovering of antinomies is not an end in itself, but merely gymnastic exercises for a greater insight: a paradox represents a problem, an *aporia* to be overcome.

A fourth response, I suggest, is that for Plato dialectical antinomies are to be overcome, but not by dialectic itself, or any further finite thought. Rather, Parmenides' *sic et non* illustrates Socrates' demand in the *Republic* for a dialectic that 'destroys hypotheses' and prepares for a higher insight (*nous*) beyond dialectic. Dialectic 'destroys' hypotheses in the sense of revealing their limitations and demonstrating that they are contingent assumptions. This may involve the exposure of genuine

¹⁵ Parmenides' argument in 135b5-c3 is compressed, but probably is appealing implicitly to the 'divine' quality of language (as explored in the *Cratylus* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*) that each word is inevitably a universal term.

¹⁶ For a survey of positions, see Palmer 1999, pp. 148-58; cf. Runciman, 1965, pp. 167-76. A fifth response, rarely maintained now, is that the whole is a satire of Zenonian eristic and the great metaphysical sophists of the East, for elsewhere (as *Phaedrus* 261d6-8) Socrates alludes disparagingly to Zeno who makes the 'same things seem similar and dissimilar, one and many, resting and moving'. For more, see Palmer 1999, pp. 101-102.

¹⁷ Striking the keynote here is Cornford: '[The] revelation of mystical doctrine could never have been discovered by anyone who had nothing more to go upon than the text of the dialogue itself. What Parmenides offered to Socrates was a gymnastic exercise, not the disclosure of a supreme divinity... The language throughout is as dry and prosaic as a textbook of algebra; there is little here to suggest that the One has any religious significance as there is in the other case to suggest that x, y, and z are a trinity of unknown gods' (1939, pp. 131).

antimonies and paradoxes inherent in an assumption: if so, then Plato might anticipate current debates regarding dialetheism, according to which the Law of non-contradiction is not an ultimate law of thought.¹⁸ Or, more often, a dialectical treatment will approach a concept or phenomenon from a plurality of perspectives, demonstrating that it can be thought of in a plurality of ways. This yields ‘contradictions’ not in an absolute but in a relative sense: X is P in this context, and ~P in that. If so, then Plato seems intuitively aware of the perspectival nature of many statements, and is not at all the dogmatic idealist of so many post-modern caricatures. In both cases, dialectic ‘destroys’ hypotheses by demonstrating their inadequacy, due either to genuine inconsistency or limited application. But such a procedure is not simply negative: the destruction of assumptions need not merely be eristic or nihilistic, but can be used to free thought from dogmatic adherence to habitual associations, fixed ideas and intellectual prejudices. Dialectical freedom of thought, that examines hypotheses from many perspectives, may even open the mind to an intuition of a true absolute.

Furthermore, the simultaneous dialectical critique and defence of Forms in *Parmenides* suggests that knowledge of the Forms is prepared for by dialectic but is not equivalent to it. For a dialectic of the Forms ‘destroys’ them as an all-too-human hypothesis. The dialectical mind recognizes only their contradiction: the Forms are, paradoxically, both absolute and a basis for particular individuality; they exist apart as pure essences, and as potent presences, informing phenomenal experience; they persist in isolated self-relation, yet are innerly related to finite otherness; they are transcendent and immanent at once. This is a contradiction *unacceptable* to finite thought. Yet it is a description which may in fact best describe the experience of the Forms themselves. This differs from the Hegelian view, in that the dialectic description of the Absolute as a union of opposites is only a subordinate stage in enlightenment: higher again is *nous*, which is a direct, and by this argument, almost ineffable experience of the things themselves.

C. *Republic* VIII-IX and the Dialectic of Imperfect Goods

Plato’s *Parmenides* does not explicitly draw such conclusions, of course. But that this represents the general orientation of Plato himself is reinforced by the *Republic*’s various discussions of the Good and goods, especially in Books 8-9. The first discussion of value distinguishes between what is good in itself, what is good in its consequences, and what is good in both senses. Socrates claims that the highest goods will be good in the last sense, both intrinsically and instrumentally (357b4-58a3). Here, perhaps, one has a reflection of the more startling idea that the Good is an Idea—an absolute, existing in itself, and good without reference to subjectivity, and yet at the same time universally present in experience. This paradoxical duality reappears in the image of the Good as the sun: beautiful and warm in itself, yet also the cause of intellectual being and the inspiration for the good life. So too, duality of the Good surfaces in the paradoxical notion of a ‘philosopher-king’: as philosophers, the guardians contemplate the Good and live apart, shunning the cave; but as kings (and queens), they voluntarily assume the greatest burden of political labour, for the good of their fellows.¹⁹

The duality of Good and goods appears also in the most extended discussion of value, in *Republic* 8-9. Here Socrates treats four conventional concepts of the good, each of which informs a basic character-type, and a political constitution. Honour is the privileged good of the timocrat, money of the oligarch, universal subjective freedom of the democrat, self-gratification of the tyrant. Thus, the declensions of the Good are, in order, honour, money, freedom with equality, and immediate pleasure.²⁰ As Socrates

¹⁸ See, notably, Priest, Routley and Norman 1989.

¹⁹ The notion of a philosopher-king, or even of a guardian who is both violent and gentle, is presented as inherently paradoxical, and yet Socrates does affirm that there are such types who combine ‘pure’ intellectuality with practicality, and who, more concisely, are both mathematicians and soldiers (*Republic* 522ff).

²⁰ For a thoughtful summary and response to these books, see Rice, 1998, pp. 93-110: ‘The key to the ranking [i.e. of the four imperfect constitutions] is Socrates’ claim that each type of city and soul seeks to maximize some particular

develops the thought, it is clear that the hierarchy descends from the Good of the philosopher to the tyrant's goods, from the purely ideal to the material, the noetic to the sensuous, the singular to the multiple, the ontologically necessary to the contingent, the internal to the external, from the spiritually and psychically necessary to the luxurious and physically wasteful.

Here we can only focus on one aspect of these remarkable books—their quasi-dialectical treatment of these various goods. Few commentators have, to my knowledge, emphasized the duality of Socrates' treatment of each conventional good: from a conventional perspective, honour, money, freedom and pleasure are good, and indeed are often pursued as *the* good. But further consideration can expose the inadequacies and internal 'contradictions' in each. For in each case, if some determinate X is treated as *the* good and pursued as such, it generally tends to bring a host of evils in its train. Thus, with regard to tyranny, if the good is sensuous self-gratification, then what follows are the evils of an *eros tyrannos*—violence, dissipation, friendlessness, fear, and, in most cases, violent death. With regard to democracy, if the good is the freedom and equality of all pleasures, then an undisciplined dandyism is the consequence. Socrates suggests that such a life may have a superficial attraction, but is in reality a form of dissipation and loss of soul, that quickly founders on more insistent realities like suffering, death, or (in Socrates' analysis) the tyranny of sexual appetite. Concerning the oligarch, if the good is taken to be money, then a mean frugality and narrow boorishness ensue, as well as a state segregated into rich and poor. If the good is the timocrat's honour, then there follows a stern frugality, a love of glory, worship of authority, callous contempt for the lower castes, and neglect of true 'music'. Thus, in each case, the rigid adoption of a determinate X as *the* good entails undesirable consequences. Hence, X is both good and not good. Hence, X cannot be the Good, which as goodness absolute must be good both in itself and its consequences, and in no respects other to itself.

If this paraphrase of the argument in *Republic* 8-9 is quasi-algebraic, Socrates' own dialectic of conventional goods could also be described as quasi-Hegelian. Each of the four goods treated contains an inner contradiction that manifests itself, paradoxically, when that good is most fully actualized. This leads to its dissolution and engendering of another. Or, in Socrates' language, good men can father less worthy sons, and imperfect constitutions give rise to ones even worse. First, the timocrat risks his all on some great enterprise, loses, and so ruins himself and his family. In reaction, his son becomes a money-lender. Thus, ardour for glory leads to ignominious miserliness; excess of honour leads to a life that despises honour. In turn, the oligarch's single-minded pursuit of money leads to democratic profligacy, and the democratic son's squandering of his miserly father's legacy: excess of thrift brings dissipation. Here Plato's anticipation and critique of Marxist thought is remarkable: growing rich on the labour and debts of others, the oligarchs (i.e. capitalists) swell the ranks of paupers (proletariat) and drones ('reserve labour'). When these gather in festivals or on campaign, they come to recognize their numbers, strength and common interests (become self-conscious as a class) and so eventually rise up to establish a radical democracy in which money and power are to be shared in an egalitarian spirit (a communist democracy), for the non-philosophical (profane) enjoyment of all. But for Plato's Socrates, this democratic utopia—in which each may 'hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, and criticize after dinner...without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic'²¹—does not represent the end of history, human desire or dialectical development; it is not immune to critique. Rather, liberty degenerates into license, and excess of freedom becomes slavery to an *eros tyrannos*. Undisciplined and uneducated, the people clamour for a strong man and 'friend' who deceives them with promises and flattery; lack of ideal conviction is seduced by the lie that only sensual enjoyment is real. Thus, 'the final form of democracy is tyranny.' And in turn, excess of tyranny destroys even sensuous enjoyment. Not knowing his true desires, the tyrant dissipates himself in increasingly frivolous externalities. What can be good in themselves and their consequences become harmful to him: wealth becomes corrupting luxury, friends

value....As one descends the scale of cities or souls, there is a progressive relaxation of limitation, restriction, and discipline' (p. 95).

²¹ *The German Ideology*.

become a source of jealousy and distrust, power abused becomes a cause of hatred. Thus, 'due to having power, the tyrant must be and become more envious, more untrusting, more unjust, more friendless, more impious—a vessel and nurse of all evil; and so due to all this, he must be most unhappy himself, and makes those near him unhappy also' (580a1-7). As agent of the Good, the philosopher-ruler radiates peace and intelligence on his associates, but the tyrant only fills them with his own rancour and confusion.

Whether or not one accepts the details of Socrates' psychologizing, it is clear that he both praises and criticizes the four conventional goods, in a way that is analogous at least to Parmenides' dialectical 'destruction' of opposing hypotheses. Honour, money, freedom, pleasure are both good and not good—and hence not *the* Good. It is significant that this quasi-dialectical treatment of determinate goods appears immediately after Socrates' discussion of the Good, the Divided Line, Cave and guardians' education. Socrates purports to list the essential constitutions existing in Greece; his list of goods is comprehensive in its range from sensual to intellectual. Hence, he invites the inductive generalization that not only is the Good not any one of the four conventional goods: more, the Good should not be sought in *any* conventional ideal. More, the idea of the Good cannot be encapsulated in any *determinate* concept, like pleasure or honour.

Indeed, if the Good were taken as a determinate concept or proposition, then it would become one particular hypothesis among many rivals. Hence from one perspective, and in some relations, it would appear good, but from other perspectives, and in other relations, it would appear not so. Implicated in the totality of finite relations, the Good would appear as good and not good, and so would cease to be truly itself. Aristotle, for example, seems to make this mistake when he asks how the Platonic Good might serve the carpenter at his bench. Because it would seem to benefit the worker less than a hammer, Aristotle dismisses the Platonic Good as irrelevant and pursues the more conventional association of the good with individual happiness. In contrast, Plato does not associate the Good even with happiness: it is an end of which one should become worthy, and in comparison with it one's own subjective happiness is only a paltry thing. This criticism of Aristotle's criticism can be generalized: if the Good were the Form of Forms, harmonious totality,²² or even a determinate ethical concept like *eudaimonia*, *apatheia*, willlessness, or Kant's 'good will', then sceptical questions quickly follow. How, for instance, can a Form of Forms, or any coldly abstract principle, be supremely *good*? Is a good will truly good 'without qualification', as Kant claims?²³

Here Socrates' silence—that is, his refusal to name the Good determinately—shows a deep wisdom. For even more than Hegel, Plato recognizes the destructive force of dialectic, and the fact that its free thinking need not lead necessarily on to a final resolution of doubt. Rather, dialectics is uneasily related to sophistry, scepticism and even despair. Like the sophist, the dialectician exposes inner inadequacies in any hypothesis. Pleasure, money, honor, virtue, human love, the categorical imperative, knowledge, technology, power—all are imperfect, are not *the* Good. What then is the good, and is there a final good? Too often the expected answer is 'No'. Breaking their chains, some prisoners look around to see only 'darkness visible'; others, maddened by sudden freedom, rush out of the cave and are blinded by 'excess of light'. This is the folly of Icarus or Phaethon who overestimate their powers and fly too close to the sun, to their ruin. That is, dialectical 'wings' are a dangerous possession, and contributed to the ruin of an Alcibiades, Charmides, Critias, Callicles, and others, who like Hobbes scorn the very notion of a

²² This is the conclusion of Lodge's exhaustive study of the 'twenty-odd candidates for the position of highest good' (1928, p.4) in the Platonic corpus: the highest good is 'to apply, always and everywhere, the ideal form of goodness, i.e. so to arrange the empirical elements of every concrete situation that they cease to conflict and thus to destroy one another's potential value, and begin to work together and thus to become true elements of that ideal situation in which all positive values are fused together into a single harmonious systematic totality.... [a] harmonious actualization of all positive values' (pp. 471-72). The conclusion is quasi-Aristotelian and Hegelian, and not Platonic, in its implication that the Good is intelligible in relation to the empirical. What is absolute about Lodge's Good?

²³ *Metaphysic of Morals*, First Section.

summum bonum.²⁴ Too quickly to ask the Socratic question ‘What is the Good?’ is implicitly to objectify the Good as a determinate object of thought. Then the Good, placed alongside other objects, becomes darkened by the shifting light of different perspectives, and is seen now as good, now as not good—and hence not the Good. Thus, all ideals seem to be deconstructed, and life has no *final* end. One thinks here of the bitterness of many satirists as they meditate upon the various goods of life, and find them wanting. Juvenal in his Tenth Satire surveys human aspirations and mocks them bitterly. The author of *Ecclesiastes* surveys his world and can see ‘nothing good under the sun’, but everywhere only death and monuments to vanity. Plato too might have been far more bitter in the survey of *Republic* 8-9. What is pleasure? A fleeting titillation of nerves. What is freedom? The ability to waste time. What is money? A means to pleasure and time-wasting. What is honour and the desire to be praised? Vanity of vanities. For the satirist and sceptic, who scorns the Good while still subconsciously craving it, all becomes vanity as he condemns even imperfect goods simply because they are imperfect.

But Plato does not lose perspective or forget the relative value of finite goods.²⁵ This is not due to an act of sheer will but rather from the professed intuition that there *is* a Good beyond sensation, finite conception, and dialectic; a Good that may be known by a mind dialectically purified for the reception of a higher realization; in short, a Good that is a first cause and yet at the same time ‘beyond *ousia*’ (509b9). These celebrated sentences are bafflingly concise, and one wonders why Socrates here becomes so uncharacteristically laconic, particularly given Glaucon’s importunate requests. Our suggestion so far has been that dialectic—such as Parmenides’ dialectic of the One, or the dialectic of conventional goods in *Republic* 8-9—points to intuitions or experiences that a dialectical treatment would only falsify; in Iris Murdoch’s phrase, the Good is non-conceptualizable and represents a form of non-discursive knowledge; the Good is not a concept, proposition, theory, or doctrine. The Ideas can only be ‘seen’ after much intellectual training, and any subsequent descriptions will necessarily falsify their transcendent nature. Thus, Socrates’ own description of the Good is paradoxical, if the Good is indeed essentially the cause of knowledge and being in the intelligible realm, and yet ‘beyond essence’. So too the Good is good absolutely, and therefore both in itself and in its consequences.²⁶ Transcendent and immanent—the Good transcends the normal categories of non-contradiction; the ‘law’ of non-contradiction does not quite apply to it; finite conceptions do not encapsulate it. If so, then one might better appreciate the superlative language in which Socrates wraps the Good. He says little determinate, and yet what he does say is shot through with the highest ardour. I will focus on two significant and revealing moments of Socrates’ language—his use of the term *epekeina*, and his image of the Sun.

D. Socrates’ language of the Good— ‘Beyond Essence’ and Sunlike

The culminating phrase of Socrates’ speech on the Good is that it is ε)πε/keina th=j ou)σι/aj (509b9). There is a long-standing debate as to whether *ousia* here means ‘being’ or ‘essence’, though recent work has shown that Plato’s intended meaning was most likely ‘essence’.²⁷ If so, then the Good is indeed an Idea that is not an idea, i.e. not a determinate concept like ‘threeness’ or even ‘justice’. Furthermore, controversy over the noun has probably distracted attention from the preposition before it, and (to my knowledge), there has been nothing significant written concerning the preposition ε)πε/keina.

²⁴ See *Phaedrus* 248b1-5 for the image of certain souls’ broken wings: they lose faith and settle for a merely sensuous life.

²⁵ Pace the view that Plato was Puritanical and world-denying. Rice for instance, follows Miguel de Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life*, to conclude that Plato was “in rebellion against finitude.” (1998, p. 90) But how many are not somehow in rebellion against finitude?

²⁶ See the opening exchange between Glaucon and Socrates, where Socrates responds to Glaucon’s three-fold distinction by placing justice among the highest goods—good in itself and its consequences (*Rep.* 357b4-358a3).

²⁷ I here follow Baltes’ comprehensive treatment of the phrase: Plotinus was the first (after Moderatus) who understood *ousia* as ‘being’, but before him, Platonists were unanimous in construing the word as ‘essence’. Baltes himself translates the phrase as ‘beyond any particular essence’ (1997, p.12).

And yet it is a very unusual and emphatic word. It does not occur before Herodotus, and, in extant literature of the fifth and fourth centuries, is used little more than thirty times.²⁸ In three authors—Thucydides, Xenophon and the Hippocratic writers—*epekeina* seems to be a rather ‘dry and prosaic’ preposition for spatial distance: thus, Thucydides uses it to refer to the *far* side of the cape of Cynossema.²⁹ But in most contexts, the word brings connotations of the great, impressive, or exotic. Thus Isocrates uses the word to evoke a sense of the grandeur of the past, and all that it contains: four times he prefers variations of the phrase *oi(e)pe/keina xro/nou* (‘the beyond times’) to the more colloquial *to\ pri/n* or *o(pro/teroj xro/noj*, as if the former were more appropriate for the subject-matter at hand—those magnificent heroes who won glory at Troy,³⁰ or the sublimity of history itself, with its vast stretches of time and tremendous vicissitudes of fortune.³¹ Other writers too use the preposition for the distant and exotic. Democritus is reputed to have heard of a species of fox found in the *furthest* reaches of Libya, where lives a race of men called ‘Fleas’.³² The historian Ctesias brings reports of a snake whose head is white with a white ‘beyond’ that of milk and snow.³³ Such fragments belong to the genre of travel-literature and Ionic *i(stori/a*, with its report of curiosities and foreign ‘wonders’, and indeed the word seems to find one of its two main home in such contexts.³⁴ Such comparisons are highly significant, as

²⁸ Or, more precisely, 31 times, according to a Thesaurus Linguae Graecae search of literature in the fifth century (17 times) and fourth century (14 times): one time for Thucydides, Herodotus, Democritus, Thrasyllus, Callisthenes, Epicurus and Eudoxus; twice for Plato, Hippocrates, Ctesias, Theophrastus, Ephorus; three times in Xenophon; four times in Isocrates; and seven times in Aristotle. All of these usages are temporal or spatial, except for those of Plato and that ascribed to Aristotle in his lost book ‘On Prayer’, where he describes God either as *nous* or as something beyond *nous* (Simplicius, *In Caelo* 7.485.19-22: *oÀti o(qeov\ hÅ nou=j e)stin hÅ kaii e)pe/keina/ ti tou= nou=*). By comparison, the word is used 11, 6, 36, 61, 149, 122, 299, 373, 82 times in the centuries between 300 B.C. and 600 A.D., respectively. The list of authors’ names suggests that it occurs primarily in historico-geographical and philosophical works, but it remains a relatively unusual word, and the influence of Plato must account for many instances (254 in Proclus, for example). Through this later tradition, Plato might even be seen as a forerunner of negative theology, as when Gregory Nazianzen in his ‘Hymn to God’ can only describe the divine as ‘beyond everything’ (59.707): *w)= pa/ntwn e)pe/keina, tiç ga\r qe/mij aÅllo se me/lpein;*
²⁹ 8.104.5 (*ta\ e)n t%½ e)pe/keina au)tu*).

³⁰ As in *Evagoras* 6: ‘now who would not despair, when he sees how celebrated in songs and tragedies are those men who (fought) at Troy, and those who were born in those times’ (*tou\ e)pe/keina genome/nouj u(mnoume/nouj kaii trag%doume/nouj*).

³¹ As in *Helen* 67-68 (vicissitudes of history, and the ascendancy of the barbarians after the Trojan war, back *then*); *Archidamus* 41 (Sparta *never* invaded in all its long history); and *Panathenaicus* 98 where Athens never acted unjustly ‘in the countless years of former times’, or literally ‘in the numberless times *then*’ (*e)n toi\j e)pe/keina xro/noij toi\j a)nariqmh/toij*).

³² Fr. 7a: *Dhmo/kritoj de\ i,storei\ w”j kaii au)to/pthj tou= zw\ iou gegonwÜj tau=ta: "o(basiliçskoj o(kina/dhj ... eu(riçsketai de\ e)n toi\j e)pe/keina to/poi\j th=j Libu/hj th=j kata\ Kurh/nhn, oÀpou kaii to\ tw½n a)nqrw\ pwn tw½n kaloume/nwn Yu//lwn ge/noj."*

³³ Ctesias, fr. 2 (in Aelian, *de Natura Animalium* 4.36): ‘Not white so much, but, as it were, with a white beyond snow and milk’ (*leukh\n de\ ou)x w”j ei’pei\n eÅpoj a)lla\ kaii xio/noj e)pe/keina kaii ga/laktoj ple/on leukh/n*).

³⁴ The earliest instance is in Herodotus 3.115, when he discusses the marvelous rumours of the Eridanus river with its amber, of the fabled Tin Islands and a sea ‘beyond’ Europe (*qa/lassa ...ta\ e)pe/keina th=j Eu)rw\ phj*). Among later examples, Ephorus (fr. 158.1-10) lists all that one might encounter when traveling north from the Black Sea—Scythians, Carpathians, a tract of desert, beyond (*u(pe/r*) which live the ‘Man-Eaters’, and then *beyond* them again (*e)pe/keina de\ pa/lin*), more desert. Arrian often uses the word in a prosaic sense to refer to what lies on the other side of a mountain or river (*Anabasis*, 1.3.6, 4.3.6, 5.5.3, 5.8.4, 5.24.8 etc.); but in one passage, Alexander longs to march *beyond* even the limits of Dionysus’ campaigns (5.2.1, *au)to\j ... e)pe/keina <aÅn> e)lqein Dionu/sou*). Plutarch alludes to this whole genre at the beginning of his *Parallel Lives*. In *Theseus* 1.1-4, he notes with a smile how the geographers fill the edges of their maps with wild deserts, Scythian ice, impassable seas and other marvels; similarly, what is ‘beyond’ factual history (*ta\ e)pe/keina*) becomes a source of wonder, myth and poetry.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave describes a journey, as if into a strange and marvelous land: in that place, beyond the limits of sense, the soul will see wonders; those imprisoned in their parochial consciousness at home, with its many 'idols', may not believe such reports, even though they are true. With all his linguistic finesse, then, it would seem that Plato deliberately chose this word to invest the Good with an aura of distance and almost inapproachable greatness. If it is true that Plato tends to 'cap a superlative by a further degree of completeness, a climax beyond the climax',³⁵ then Plato may deliberately use transcendent language to describe an ideal that *is* transcendent: in itself it cannot be described determinately without falsification; it can only be pointed to, or experienced in itself. When the word occurs again, in *Republic* 9—and it appears only twice in the whole Platonic corpus—it describes how the tyrant crosses over into an 'excess' of illegitimate pleasures.³⁶ Here too the phrasing is highly unusual, and suggests a deliberate contrast of opposites: the tyrant dissipates himself in an excess of very definite thrills, while the philosopher loses his individuality in a different way, yet in the process gains a deeper sense of self.

Thus, the connotations of the preposition *epekeina* make Socrates' relative silence a pregnant one. Like a traveller changed by what he has seen, the Platonic Socrates refrains from talking too much for fear of being misunderstood or mocked; and in fact, Glaucon and the others do laugh ironically at Socrates' burst of enthusiasm (509c). In a similar way, Socrates' comparison of the Good with the sun serves as a means of pointing to that which, paradoxically, is both here and there, both transcendent and immanent. For, according to everyday notions at least, the sun is superlatively bright and hot in itself, yet at the same time it overflows itself, shines, and sheds its brilliance and heat on the lower world, with undiminishing and infinite largesse. Hence, it is the cause of sight and life, while itself remaining higher than both. Similarly, the Good is an absolute, good in all ways—both in itself, and in its consequences, as cause of all lesser goodness. Thus, the Good is the 'sun' of the intellectual realm, causing and illuminating the manifold perfection of the Forms. The light of the Good filters down to the non-ideal also, if indeed the cave is, as Socrates says, 'open to light along its entire width' (514a3-5). Light from the upper world ripples down into the cave, adding a vague glow to flickering chiaroscuro, vaguely troubling the prisoners with indeterminate feelings of something at once both intimate and radically other. Therefore the Good becomes 'that which every soul pursues and for its sake does all that it does, with an intuition of its reality, but yet baffled and unable to apprehend its nature adequately, or to attain to any stable belief about it as about other things'.³⁷ The supreme Good resembles light: omnipresent yet not tangible as other entities; visible yet not seen in the same way as more solid objects; the condition of all determinate seeing and yet itself not tangible or determinate. So too, according to everyday intuitions, light is not felt as a ray travelling at high velocity, but rather as a simple, bright presence that fills space instantaneously. To such sensuous instinct, light does not take time to travel from its source to a place, but rather seems to be here *and* there, at once. Thus, it provides a perfect illustration of Socrates' seemingly paradoxical notions concerning the Good: the Good is a Form that is known through and after a long dialectical training, but is not itself an object of dialectic; a Form that is both immanent cause of finite determination, and a self-subsistent absolute whose fullness can only be experienced, not said. One cannot truly describe the sun to cave-dwellers; so too, to think or name the Good as a determinate entity would only falsify it. Therefore Socrates' own unusual and poetic language speaks of a deeper silence, and he silences Glaucon with uncharacteristic imperative when Glaucon would name the Good as pleasure. '*Euphemei*,' Socrates tells Glaucon, 'maintain *euphemia*' or that holy silence by which worshippers would not speak during ceremonies, for fear of offending the divine with words of ill-omen.³⁸

³⁵ So the anti-metaphysical Shorey, in his Loeb edition of *Republic* Vol. II, ad 508e (p.104 n. c).

³⁶ *Rep.* 587b-c (tw½zn no/qwn [h(donw½zn] ei'j to\ e)pe/keina u(perba\j o(tu/ranno\j, fugwÜn no/mon te kai\ lo/gon).

³⁷ *Rep.* 505e-506a.

³⁸ *Rep.* 509a6-10.

Perhaps silence then is more eloquent than words in this situation. And yet, negative dialectic, the 'destruction of hypotheses', and a language of riddling transcendence are not in fact merely negative. Caricatures of Plato as a life-denying dogmatist overlook the rich nuance of his writing, his dialectical openness to possibility, his wealth of thought and observation. Given these, then perhaps his central suggestion concerning the Good should not be so quickly dismissed as a 'lie' or mistake. Many philosophers of the modern period have advocated an essentially negative stance towards reality: Descartes' project of mastering nature, Bacon's cultivation of knowledge as power, Nietzsche's Will-to-power, Schopenhauer's will-lessness, Kant's retreat from a blank mechanistic cosmos to an inner Kingdom of Ends, the angst-ridden freedom of existentialists, or even Kierkegaard's bitter leap of faith are all essentially negative orientations towards natural existence. In comparison with these, Plato's quiet confidence in an eternal goodness—both radically beyond experience, and yet, paradoxically, intimately present in it—is a suggestion that we should not forget.