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### A Measure of Goodness

*The capacity for knowledge is innate in each man's mind, and that the organ by which he learns is like an eye which cannot be turned from darkness to light unless the whole body is turned; in the same way the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality, and at the brightest of all realities which is what we call the good*

– Plato, *The Republic*

Conventional morality is discussed at length in Plato's *Republic* by a small, yet influential group of Athenians who mull over this topic together. Thrasymachus is one character who maintains the (now "post-modern") opinion that what matters and what is just is merely relative to historical time periods and the societal practices common to those eras. He argues that "the ruling class in any state will forcibly exact a certain type of behaviour from its subjects to suit its own interests" (336a) which will *become* the "right" behavior under any given regime. To make matters worse, the "stronger" ("stronger" in this case, meaning rulers) are only doing "what the stronger [merely] *thinks* to be in his interest" (340b) which not only means that citizens (subjects) are living at the mercy of another's interests but that those interests, *themselves*, may be amiss. Socrates believes that the answer to this problem lies within the mind, body, and soul of "philosopher kings" and that a just regime can only be achieved under the care of such individuals because they will possess the highest understanding of "the good" itself, which will become the measure by which all other political decisions are made. The three analogies that Socrates presents in *The Republic* introduce two realms of reality which give form

to “the good” and if philosophers can connect the significance of these analogies, they will be able to see the path that will guide them out of the darkness and into the light where fate awaits.

Since these philosophers are going to be the ones who will be “entrust[ed with] everything” (506a), they will have to understand the form of “the good” itself, which undergoes its own evolution throughout *The Republic* as the men struggle to define this abstract concept. After a lot of thoughtful consideration, it is concluded that “what gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the knower’s mind the power of knowing is the form of the good” (508d) which is ranked even higher than truth and knowledge because it is the *cause* of both these things. However, because their idea of “the good” does not exist in the physical world, they cannot easily remark on any characteristics specific to its concept, and instead, resolve to admire the transcendent nature of “the good” itself. They describe it as “the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality” (509b) which they believe is “superior” to such “realities” because it is not, itself, the reality, therefore, is higher in both “dignity and power” (509b). This vague definition inspires them to dig deeper into this theory which leads to a series of analogies that will explain more exactly “what gives knowledge [its] truth and the knower’s mind the power of knowing” (508d).

The first simile explains the sun’s position in relationship to the two realms of reality which gives both a direct and indirect understanding of this light source and its significance. For Socrates, these two realms can be referred to as the “visible world” and the “intelligible world” and argues that true knowledge cannot be obtained in the “visible world” because its souls receive their energy source *indirectly*. Socrates rejects the claim that educators can simply “put into the mind knowledge that was not there before” (518b) because the human mind “cannot be turned from darkness to lightness unless the whole body is turned” (518c). As a result, those

living in the “visible” realm will be unable to absorb their education in the fullest sense because their souls will not be receiving this light directly as their bodies have never been turned toward “the good” which is represented by the sun in this simile. By contrast, souls living in the “intelligible world” *will* be receiving their energy source *directly*, thus absorbing the full benefits of their education. Since these souls have direct sight of “the good”, it gives their minds “the power of knowing” (507a) which will allow them to see the truths and realities that souls in the “visible” realm cannot see.

The second analogy illustrates the different points of view within the two realms of the first analogy. Its purpose is to bring awareness to the action of perceiving itself and why access to the two realms, is dependent on one’s state of mind. Because souls in the “visible realm” are only seeing shadows, images, and physical things due to the indirect light they are receiving, they will be limited to a life of opinion because all their truths will be based upon illusions and beliefs (509c). Conversely, the souls in the “intelligible realm” will be gaining knowledge as opposed to opinion because all their truths will be understood from a point of view that gives them access to the *metaphysical* world, therefore, their minds will be able to see the *true* form of the objects they are interpreting due to the *direct* light they are receiving. Socrates strengthens this argument by breaking down the two realms into subsections and demonstrates why the various points of view from which one is positioned will determine how one’s mind will understand the information that is being gathered. Socrates believes that when truths are reached through dialectics, such souls will eventually gain access to the highest part of the intelligible realm because they “will be treat[ing] assumptions not as first principles, but as assumptions in the true sense, that is, as starting points and steps in the ascent to something which involves no assumption and is the first principle of everything” (511b). This helps to clarify the philosopher’s

point of view and why their education in dialectics is so critical. Prior to dialectics, philosophers must first complete an education in arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, and harmonics because the former merely results in “a greater degree of clarity than opinion” (533d) whereas the latter leads to “pure knowledge” which will “complete the course of studies” for the philosopher kings. This knowledge of “the good” will become the measure by which these rulers will decide what is best for the city and its citizens as they will have the clearest vision and understanding of what is just.

Lastly, Socrates presents the cave allegory which provides a bigger perspective for which the other two analogies can be incorporated and understood as one whole. This final allegory allows the post-modern reader to move beyond relativism because it allows one to understand the Platonic conception of education whilst challenging the very premise of historicism and the relativist arguments born from historicism. Since the philosopher kings are destined to be rulers, the cave allegory highlights the education of these philosophers and how exactly they will fit into this figuration. It is decided that the best course of action would be to “breed” certain individuals for their future roles as leaders of the community by compelling the “best minds to attain...the highest form of knowledge, and to ascend to the vision of the good”, as described in the cave allegory (519c). However, these select individuals will not be allowed to remain in this “upper” (intelligible) world because they were specifically bred for their leadership role in the cave. Instead,

each [must] descend in turn and live with [their] fellows in the cave and get used to seeing in the dark; once [they] get used to it [they] will see a thousand times better than [their fellow cave dwellers] and will distinguish the various shadows, and know what they are shadows of, because [they]

have seen the truth about things just and admirable and good. (Plato 520c)

And although these philosophers may, at first, be hesitant to lead because they have never in their entire lives, desired political power, they will realize that the demands being placed on them are an “unavoidable necessity” aimed at the good of the community (as a whole). Indeed, their unique perspective of political power (which looks down on positions of political power) will, ironically, become the very perspective that will determine their fate as “philosopher kings” because “the only [humans] to get power should be [humans] who do not love it” (521b), otherwise, “rivals quarrels” are likely to take place between opposing political leaders and parties which is not in the best interest of either the citizen or the state.

Since an exact definition of “the good” cannot easily be found in Plato’s *Republic*, readers are forced to define this concept based on what is *not* said essentially which may have been an intentional decision made by the author. For the critical reader, this possibility can lead to some thoughtful questions about both the author, Plato, and the small group of Athenians he portrays in his dialogue which are, at one point, referred to as “lawmakers” within the “just” city they build. Regrettably, however, Socrates is one character who possessed neither the disposition nor social ranking to ever become a “lawmaker” within his city of Athens during this time-period, so from my perspective this term is misinforming its audience about Socrates’ state of character as an individual as well as the level of political power he held during his lifetime (which was none). The fact that Socrates was alienated by his society for his lack of piety means that he was likely, also, not as in-tune with the social and moral conventions of the highly religious community he lived in, conventions that were probably widely understood by most others who lived there, which would have put him at a significant moral disadvantage, I would imagine. Furthermore, if he was voicing political opinions that threatened the legitimacy of state

authority and the power it held over citizens it is easy to see why his presence would have been troublesome for any ruler or citizen who was benefiting personally from state law or from political power in general.

Although it is difficult to exactly identify “the good” itself, in *The Republic*, philosophers can decipher this concept by first connecting Plato’s allegorical wisdom and then use that wisdom to help guide them out of the cave and toward the sunlight. Once they are receiving *direct* light from this energy source, their soul will finally be able to govern their reason, spirit, and appetite because they will have a clear vision of “the good”, therefore, will be able to absorb truths purely. This keen vision of the truth will become the standard by which all political decisions are made as it will be the highest and the most accurate. But most of all, they will be able to take a very precise measurement of falsehoods due to their lengthy captivity in the cave which will compel them to want to free as many other prisoners as possible having been one themselves.

Works Cited

Plato, *The Republic*, Trans. Desmond Lee. London: Penguin Group, 2007.