

The Sun, the Good, and the Value of Knowledge

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Introduction

The sun analogy comes at a climatic point in the *Republic*, near the end of book VI. In book V Socrates has made his radical proposal that the just city would have to be ruled by philosophers. Near the end of book VI it looks like he has given a full description of what philosophers must be like and what they must know (to 503d). But then Socrates says that they have left out the most important subject, even more important than justice: the form of the good (505a). This leads Socrates to provide his account of the good with his sun analogy, which is then followed by the divided line, and the famous allegory of the cave.

Before the sun analogy, Socrates emphasizes at some length that the form of the good is the most important thing we could know in order to live well (504e-506a). In fact, the only features of the good that he mentions before the sun analogy are ones related to living well. He then provides the sun analogy as an image to help Glaucon and Adeimantus understand Socrates' own opinions about the form of the good. This sets up a well known difficulty in understanding Socrates' account: in the sun analogy Socrates seems to portray the form of the good as only having epistemological and metaphysical roles, with no obvious relevance to how to live. The form of the good, he says, makes knowing possible and it provides things with their *being*, just as the sun makes seeing possible and provides things with their coming-to-be and growth. The ethical expectations Socrates has just emphasized at length do not seem to be met in the analogy. In fact, he doesn't even seem to *try* to meet them.

Many scholars acknowledge this difficulty. However, almost none of them think that Socrates meets the earlier expectation – he doesn't provide an account of how we should live. In fact, some scholars discuss the form of the good at length without even mentioning any expectation that it might be relevant to living well.¹ Others explicitly claim that Socrates is not trying to provide any guidance here, that he has moved beyond ethics, despite the expectations that are set

¹ White 1976, 99-103; Fine 1990, 226-229; Denyer 2007.

immediately beforehand.² Some have argued that the form of the good is, in fact, unity or rational order and so its ethical relevance is that we, and the city, should become as unitary or orderly as possible.³ But, as these scholars acknowledge, this conception of the good is not provided in the sun analogy itself. Santas is the only scholar I am aware of who thinks the sun analogy provides us with some guidance for how to live.⁴ In this paper I argue for a new interpretation of the ethical guidance provided by the sun analogy. I argue that Socrates is telling us we should pursue understanding, because understanding is the one thing we can possess that is truly good.

On this account, Socrates is not suggesting in the sun analogy that to be good we need to understand some particular subject matter and then apply this knowledge; instead, we simply need to acquire as much understanding as possible.⁵ I take this to be in keeping with the contemplative ethics that Plato develops in his so-called middle period dialogues – dialogues like the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus* – as well as later dialogues, such as the *Timaeus*. The best life is one of understanding the forms, not knowledge gained for some further practical purpose. Over the last hundred years, this contemplative ethics has been relatively deemphasized by scholars, which may be one reason that this reading of the sun analogy has been overlooked. But, recently a few scholars, such as David Sedley and Suzanne Obdrzalek, have been working on this contemplative ethics. I think that developing this ethical view is one of Plato’s central interests in the so-called middle and late period dialogues. In my own recent work, I have examined how Plato develops this sort of ethical view in the *Phaedo*.

I will argue that the sun analogy is fills out this contemplative ethics in a special way. One would like to know why the contemplative life is the best one. But Socrates thinks that in order to answer this, one would need to know what the good is, which he is adamant that he does not know. Instead, what the sun analogy provides is the outlines of what an account of the good would have to

² So Murphy 1951, 152 and 184-186; Pappas 2013, 165-169, who says “It will be hard enough to find a clear theory of reality and understanding in these pages about the Good; the connection to ethics all but disappears” (168). Annas 1981 does not think that Socrates is moving away from ethics. Instead, she thinks that Socrates is saying that ethical truths are impersonal truths that ground understanding and reality (246-7, 259-60). The sun analogy says something about the sort of truths that would guide our actions, but does not provide any content that suggests how we should live.

³ Cooper 1977, 23, says it is rational order; Brown 2009, section 2.3, says it is unity; Burnyeat 2000 seems to suggest that it is unity (74-78). He thinks that “[t]he reason why concord, attunement, and proportion are valued in Plato’s *Republic* is that they create and sustain unity” (74).

⁴ Santas 1980, 264-265, argues that we learn in the sun analogy that being good involves having features that are common to all forms, such as being unchanging. He thinks that this tells us what it would be for us to be good: to be unchanging, etc. As we will see, this is compatible with my account, but I have a more specific proposal for what the sun analogy tells us about how to live.

⁵ C.f. 436d-37e, which presents what Kamtekar 2008 calls the “principle of relatives.” There, Socrates says that understanding as such is of what is learnable as such, not of any particular subject matter. Thus, if understanding is good, it is good independent of particular subject matter

look like, if it were to explain his belief that the best life is one of contemplation. The function of the image is to provide the structure an explanation must have, if his opinions are correct.

The Puzzle

Okay, I've said what I'm going to argue for. Now how am I going to argue for it? My reading is motivated by an underappreciated puzzle about the form of the good, one obliquely raised by Adam more than 100 years ago, but otherwise not discussed in the secondary literature. In this section I will briefly introduce the puzzle and provide an overview of how I resolve it, thereby connecting the sun analogy to Plato's contemplative ethics.

Lets start with a general overview of the sun analogy. The way it works is that Socrates first makes a number of claims about how the sun makes seeing possible, then compares this to how the form of the good makes knowing possible. We can call this the epistemic role of the sun and of the form of the good. After doing this, Socrates says that the sun provides visible things with their coming-to-be and, in an analogous way, the form of the good provides invisible things with their being. Let's call this the metaphysical role of the sun and of the form of the good.

Famously, as part of the epistemic role, Socrates says that the form of the good provides truth to the objects of understanding, thereby making them intelligible, just as the sun illuminates the objects of sight, making them visible. What Adam discusses, but almost no one else mentions, is that Socrates also claims that the form of the good provides knowers with the power to know (γινώσκω) (508e1-3). This is my key passage:

Then say that what provides truth to the things known and gives the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. Think of it as the cause of understanding and truth, and also as an object of knowledge. Hold both knowledge and truth to be beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they are. (508d-e)⁶

Note that after saying that the form of the good provides the power to know, in the next sentence he moves to talking about “understanding” (ἐπιστήμη). This makes sense, since earlier, in book V of the *Republic*, he has defined understanding as a power to know (477b, 478a).⁷ The puzzle, then, is

⁶ Τοῦτο τοίνυν τὸ τὴν ἀλήθειαν παρέχον τοῖς γινώσκομένοις καὶ τῷ γινώσκοντι τὴν δύναμιν ἀποδιδὸν τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν φάθι εἶναι· αἰτίαν δ' ἐπιστήμης οὖσαν καὶ ἀληθείας, ὡς γινώσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ, οὕτω δὲ καλῶν ἀμφοτέρων ὄντων, γνώσεώς τε καὶ ἀληθείας, ἄλλο καὶ κάλλιον ἔτι τούτων ἡγούμενος αὐτὸ ὀρθῶς ἠγήρη·

⁷ The word I translate “understand” here, ἐπιστήμη, is often translated “know.” But it is etymologically different from the word translated “know,” so I want a different translation for it. I am translating it “understanding” here to capture that in Greek it has more connotations of systematic comprehension, whereas “γινώσκω” has more connotations of directly perceiving.

why we should think that the form of the good provides us with understanding, where this should be interpreted as a certain sort of power to properly know things.

Let me pause here to make an important clarification. By “power to know” I do not think Socrates means our bare *capacity* to know something, a capacity that all people have, which can be developed into knowledge. Instead, he means the developed power that one has once someone genuinely understands something, a power to know something or other. Socrates says that in general powers are characterized what they *do* (477d), not by what they could be developed into doing. So my understanding of mathematics is, according to Socrates, a power I have to know. This seems to some people a rather unintuitive way of putting things. But Socrates is clear in his usage; he is clear that the individual crafts are powers (346a-b), and that the distinct fields of dialectic are powers (521d, 532c, 533a), as well as understanding in general (477c ff.). If someone has sight, then as long as conditions are right she can see. Similarly, if someone has the power to know, she can exercise this and so be knowing. That’s true of someone who understands mathematics, but not of someone with the mere capacity to learn mathematics.⁸

Okay, so why would Socrates think that the form of the good provides knowers with this power? We can split this into two questions. First, more generally, why would anyone think that any single thing causes two, apparently quite different, effects: objects being knowable and the power that knowers have? And second, why would this form in particular, the form of the good, provide knowers with their power?

In the next section I’ll argue that Socrates thinks that we can know things precisely because of our fundamental similarity to them. The state of knowing something and the state of being knowable are not, in fact, as different as we might think. Given this, it’s not surprising that the same form is responsible for things being knowable and our ability to know them. This explains why one single thing causes these two effects. But why think that this particular form, the form of the good, is the cause of our power to know? It is precisely here that the Sun analogy provides the explanatory framework for Plato’s contemplative ethics. The things the form of the good causes are themselves thereby good. Socrates, in saying that the form of the good is the cause of our power to know, is saying that this power is the best thing we can have and that the best life available to us is one of understanding. Thus, the guidance provided by the sun analogy is that it tells us what our end should be, what we should value and cultivate in ourselves: namely, understanding.

⁸ Footnote on Aristotle on first and second actuality...

Now that we understand the textual puzzle and my solution, let me explain the plan for the rest of the paper. In the next section I'll examine Socrates' views earlier in book VI of the *Republic*, before the sun analogy, where he requires the knower be like the known. After this, I flesh out how Socrates leads us to expect that the sun analogy will provide guidance for how to live. With this background in place, I then provide an account of our power to know within the sun analogy itself. I conclude by showing how my reading fits with what Socrates elsewhere.

Background to the Sun Analogy

Before the sun analogy, earlier in book VI, Socrates is committed to the knower being fundamentally similar to what's known. This comes up in several passages, but I'll focus on two here, which illustrate two different ways that knower is like known.

Let me note, before we get started, that I'm going to focus on some weird things that Socrates says in the *Republic*. They have not gotten much attention. My own guess is that scholars have misunderstood the sun analogy, in part because they have not wanted to fully embrace these weird things. My goal is to look them straight in the eyes and see if we can then make sense of them.

At the end of book V, in the so-called lover of sights and sounds argument, Socrates claims that only the philosopher loves wisdom, and only the philosopher has understanding, a power to know that is set over what is (474e-480a). We will see a lot of talk of "what is." This seems to at least primarily refer to the forms, which can genuinely said to be, as opposed to ordinary sensible things, which are said to both be and not be.

Our first passage focuses on what the soul must be like *before* it learns things, that is, before it acquires understanding. It is Socrates' final description of the true philosopher, before turning to why most self-described philosophers are in fact worthless.

Will it not be a fair plea in his defense that the real lover of learning strives by nature for what is, and that he would not linger over the many things that are opined to be, but on he'd go, neither loosening nor lessening his love till he came into touch with the nature of each thing that is, using that part of his soul to which it belongs to grasp this kind of thing — it belongs to that which is akin — and through approaching it, and mixing with what really is,

he would beget reason and truth, and attain knowledge and truly live and be nourished and so cease from his birth pangs, but not before? (490a-b)⁹

The philosopher's soul possesses something that is properly suited to grasp the nature of each thing. It belongs to this part of the soul to grasp these natures since it is akin to them. This kinship allows it to properly approach the things that are. Thus, at least part of the knower's soul must be akin to what can be known in order to know it. This passage also makes clear that attaining understanding is crucial to living the best possible life. It is only once the soul acquires understanding that it truly lives, is nourished, and ceases from its wandering.

We've seen that the philosopher must be similar to the forms in order to come to know them. Socrates also is committed to the reciprocal relationship: as we come to know the forms, we become more similar to them. Here is the relevant passage:

No one whose thoughts are truly directed towards the things that are, Adeimantus, has the leisure to look down at human affairs or to be filled with envy and hatred by competing with people. Instead, as he looks at and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think that someone can consort with things that he admires without imitating them?

I do not. It's impossible.

Then the philosopher, by consorting with what is ordered and divine and despite all the slanders around that say otherwise, himself becomes as divine and ordered as a human can. (500b-d)¹⁰

⁹ Ἄρ' οὖν δὴ οὐ μετρίως ἀπολογησόμεθα ὅτι πρὸς τὸ ὄν πεφυκὼς εἴη ἀμυλλᾶσθαι ὃ γε ὄντως φιλομαθῆς, καὶ οὐκ ἐπιμένοιο ἐπὶ τοῖς δοξαζομένοις εἶναι πολλοῖς ἐκάστοις, ἀλλ' ἴοι καὶ οὐκ ἀμβλύνοιο οὐδ' ἀπολήγοιο τοῦ ξρωτος, πρὶν αὐτοῦ ὃ ἔστιν ἐκάστου τῆς φύσεως ἄψασθαι ᾧ προσήκει ψυχῆς ἐφάπτεσθαι τοῦ τοιούτου—προσῆκει δὲ συγγενεῖ—ᾧ πλησιάσας καὶ μγείς τῷ ὄντι ὄντως, γεννήσας νοῦν καὶ ἀλήθειαν, γνοίη τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ζῶη καὶ τρέφοιο καὶ οὕτω λήγοιο ὠδίνος, πρὶν δ' οὐ;

¹⁰ Οὐδὲ γάρ πον, ὦ Ἀδείμαντε, σχολὴ τῷ γε ὡς ἀληθῶς πρὸς τοῖς οὐσι τὴν διάνοιαν ἔχοντι κάτω βλέπειν εἰς ἀνθρώπων πραγματείας, καὶ μαχόμενον αὐτοῖς φθόνου τε καὶ δυσμενείας ἐμπίπλασθαι, ἀλλ' εἰς τεταγμένα ἅττα καὶ κατὰ ταῦτ' αἰεὶ ἔχοντα ὀρώντας καὶ θεωμένους οὐτ' ἀδικούντα οὐτ' ἀδικούμενα ὑπ' ἀλλήλων, κόσμῳ δὲ πάντα καὶ κατὰ λόγον ἔχοντα, ταῦτα μιμῆσθαι τε καὶ ὅτι μάλιστα ἀφομοιοῦσθαι. ἢ οἶτι τινὰ μηχανὴν εἶναι, ὅτ' τις ὀμιλεῖ ἀγάμενος, μὴ μιμῆσθαι ἐκεῖνο;

Ἄδύνατον, ἔφη.

Θεῖω δὴ καὶ κοσμίω ὃ γε φιλόσοφος ὀμιλῶν κόσμῳ τε καὶ θεῖω εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπῳ γίγνεται· διαβολὴ δ' ἐν πᾶσι πολλή.

The philosopher becomes more ordered and divine because he admires and consorts with the things that are ordered and divine, and thereby imitates them. In general, one admires the things that one thinks are good. Thus, the philosopher thinks the forms are good, and so consorting with them, tries to become like them. Note that the philosopher is said to become as divine as a human can be. As we will see, this is relevant to the sun analogy. Those who have genuine understanding are fundamentally different than those without. They have something that puts them among the divine, not the merely human.

In sum, Socrates thinks that we must be similar to the objects of understanding in order to know them and that we become more similar as we improve our understanding of them. For purposes of my ultimate thesis, what is important is simply *that* he holds this view, and that he makes this clear before providing the sun analogy. But it would be unfortunate if the sun analogy relies on an idea that just is completely unintelligible to us.

So let me offer a proposal for why Socrates thinks this. This sort of view is often thought to fall under a general rubric accepted by ancient philosophers that “like knows like.” I think that there are, in fact, a number of different ideas that fall under this rubric, several of which Plato himself accepts. Let's think about two of the relevant ones here.

As we have seen, Socrates describes understanding using physical metaphors: the philosopher is easily led (*εὐάγωγον*) to what is, he touches (*ἄψασθαι*), grasps (*ἐφάπτεσθαι*), approaches (*πλησιάζας*), and mixes with it (a sexual metaphor). How can something touch, grasp, or mix with something that is invisible, unchanging, and of an entirely different sort from ordinary visible, changing things? One might reasonably think that an ordinary visible thing can't do this. Visible things can only touch other visible things. In other words, our souls must be akin to the forms so that they can be changed by the forms in such a way that we come to know them. We can think of this as similar to the sort of interaction problem that people sometimes raise for Descartes' mind-body dualism: if mind and body are completely and utterly different from one another, how can they interact? It seems like they must have something in common to do so. What's hard to understand is how two things that are utterly different can influence one another.

The suggestion is that knowing something requires interacting with it, and so quite general causal requirements on interaction are relevant for how understanding works. Aristotle defends a specific version of this idea in the *De Anima*, connected to the idea that like knows like. In *De Generatione et Corruptione* I.7 he says that there is something right about the idea that like affects like. He thinks that a hot thing does not affect specifically another hot thing, and so in one way like does

not affect like. However, a hot thing does affect something insofar as it is on the hot-cold spectrum. Heat does not directly make things smooth or rough, yellow or green – it makes them hot, from being cold. Aristotle’s idea is that in order to be affected by something, you need to be in the same genus as it. Of course, a hot thing could affect a cold thing, heating it up and thereby making it smoother. But what heat produces primarily in another thing is heat, and other effects are simply a result of that thing having been heated.

This, I think, sheds light on the idea that the soul need not actually *be* a form in order to be affected by them, but it must be of the same *sort* as the forms, it must be *akin* to them. Otherwise, it is too dissimilar from them to even be affected.

This suggests that there must be some likeness between knower and known for understanding to be possible in the first place. But, as we saw in the second passage, Socrates also thinks that as we acquire understanding we become more like the objects of our understanding. We start out akin to the forms and become more divine and more ordered as we come to know them. This also fits within the Aristotelian model I just mentioned. As heat acts on a cold thing, it heats it. As we interact with the forms, we become more like them. But note that in the passage number 3, this is explained in terms of our imitating what we consort with. I suggested that we understand this as our trying to become like what we view as good. The philosopher is not a dispassionate knower. She is a lover of wisdom, which makes her also a lover of truth, and what is (485c ff.). She loves these things because she sees them as good. And, wanting to be good herself, she imitates them, becoming like them. Recall, from passage number two, that it is only once the soul has acquired knowledge that the philosopher can “truly live and be nourished and so cease from his birth pains.” The soul’s nature is to be form-like, but it is only when it acquires knowledge that it fulfills its nature and lives the best life available to it.¹¹

I hope to have shed some light on why might Socrates thinks that we must be like what we know. I am happy to come back and discuss this further in the Q & A. For now, the important thing is simply that Socrates thinks that there is this similarity between knower and known.

The Guidance Provided by the Form of the Good

¹¹ While this explanation is not clear here in the *Republic*, it is suggested in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates says that as we spend time with the sensible things that are never the same as themselves, we never the same as ourselves, and as we spend time with the invisible things that are always the same as themselves, we become the same as ourselves. There is it not put in terms of what we admire, but rather seems to be a more basic principle about what happens when we interact with something.

We have one more thing to discuss before turning to the sun analogy itself: the expectations that Socrates sets when he first mentions the form of the good (504e-506a). He leads us to expect that understanding the form of the good would not simply be relevant for living a good life, but in fact the most important thing. He says that it is in relation to the form of the good that the just things and everything else becomes useful and beneficial and that there is no advantage to any sort of possession without the good of it (505a-b). This, supposedly, is one reason he says that nobody is satisfied acquiring things that are merely believed to be good; instead, everyone wants the things that really are good and disdains mere belief in this case (505d). He says that every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake, but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is or even acquire stable beliefs about it, and so it misses the benefit even other things might give (505d-e). Socrates emphasizes at length how beneficial it would be to have knowledge of the form of the good. It would thus be surprising if what he said about the good had no bearing on what we should pursue.

There is one important sign within the sun analogy that it is supposed to be useful in figuring out how to act. Before the sun analogy Socrates says that those who think the good is knowledge can't say what it is knowledge of and that those who think the good is pleasure can't account for bad pleasures (505b-c). Clearly these people are not lost in metaphysics; they have views about the good that would point their lives in significantly different directions. Glaucon returns to these views in a passage near the end of the sun analogy. The passage starts with Socrates speaking:

[continuation of the key passage] In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sunlike, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to think of both of these [understanding and truth] as goodlike but wrong to think that either of them is the good—for the good is yet more prized.

“This is an inconceivably beautiful thing you’re talking about,” he said, “if it provides both understanding and truth and is superior to them in beauty. It certainly can’t be pleasure you are talking about.” (508e-509a)¹²

¹² ὥσπερ ἐκεῖ φῶς τε καὶ ὄψιν ἠλιοειδῆ μὲν νομίζουσιν ὀρθόν, ἥλιον δ' ἠγεῖσθαι οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἔχει, οὕτω καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἀγαθοειδῆ μὲν νομίζουσιν ταῦτ' ἀμφοτέρω ὀρθόν, ἀγαθὸν δὲ ἠγεῖσθαι ὀπότερον αὐτῶν οὐκ ὀρθόν, ἀλλ' ἔτι μαιζόνως τιμητέον τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἕξιν.

Ἀμήχανον κάλλος, ἔφη, λέγεις, εἰ ἐπιστήμην μὲν καὶ ἀλήθειαν παρέχει, αὐτὸ δ' ὑπὲρ ταῦτα κάλλει ἐστίν· οὐ γὰρ δήπου σύ γε ἡδονὴν αὐτὸ λέγεις.

Glaucon sees that Socrates' account has implications for the view the good is a type of understanding and for the view that it is a type of pleasure. It can't be understanding because it provides more than just understanding, and is superior to it. Moreover, it can't be pleasure since pleasure is clearly inadequate to provide both understanding and truth. Glaucon sees that the sun analogy is relevant to explaining what is wrong with other accounts of the good. These accounts clearly are meant to guide our actions. Socrates has not entirely pivoted to metaphysics and epistemology, abandoning ethics, as most scholars treat him as doing. This should give us some renewed hope that we can find in the sun analogy an account that provides some sort of guidance.

Powers in The Sun Analogy

Let us return to the sun analogy with this background in place.

Accounts of the epistemic role of the sun and the form of the good often focus entirely on they illuminate the objects of sight and of understanding. The sun illuminates with light. The form of the good illuminates with truth and what is (508d).¹³ Colors might be present in an object and sight might be in the eye, but without the sun we won't see. How the good performs a similar function is no doubt puzzling and worth trying to understand. But there is more puzzling than just this.

What is almost always left out is that the sun provides more than light and coming to be, and similarly the form of the good provides more than truth and being. Lets start with the sun: [read the whole thing.]

[I] Sight may be present in the eyes, and the one who has it may try to use it, and colors may be present in things, but unless a third kind of thing is present, which is naturally adapted for this very purpose, you know that sight will see nothing, and the colors will remain unseen.

What kind of thing do you mean?

I mean what you call light.

You're right.

Then it isn't an insignificant kind of link that connects the sense of sight and the power to be seen—it is a more valuable link than any other linked things have got, unless, of course, light is without value.

¹³ How it does this is beyond the scope of this paper. See Denyer 2007 and Santas 1980 for two possible accounts. See also Shields 2008.

And, of course, it's very valuable.

[II] Which of the gods in heaven would you name as the cause and controller of this, the one whose light causes our sight to see in the best way and the visible things to be seen?

The same one as you and others would name. Obviously, the answer to your question is the sun.

And isn't sight by nature related to that god in this way?

Which way?

Sight isn't the sun, neither sight itself nor that in which it comes to be, namely the eye.

No, it certainly isn't.

But it is the most sunlike of the sense organs.

Very much so.

[III] And it receives from it the power it has, just like an influx from an overflowing treasury.

Certainly.

The sun is not sight, but isn't it the cause of sight and seen by it? (507d-508b)¹⁴

Socrates starts by making the reasonable and obvious claim here that the sun is the cause of light, which is necessary for seeing. But notice that in (III) the sun is not only the cause of light, but *also* of sight. Scholars tend to treat *sight* here as a general term for the whole process of *seeing*. But I don't think that this can be right; it must be the power that we have, a power to see things. This is a weird

¹⁴ Ἐνούσης που ἐν ὄμμασιν ὄψεως καὶ ἐπιχειροῦντος τοῦ ἔχοντος χρῆσθαι αὐτῇ, παρουσίας δὲ χρώας ἐν αὐτοῖς, ἐὰν μὴ παραγένηται γένος τρίτον ἰδίᾳ ἐπ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο πεφυκός, οἴσθα ὅτι ἢ τε ὄψις οὐδὲν ὄψεται, τά τε χρώματα ἔσται ἀόρατα.

Τίνος δὴ λέγεις, ἔφη, τούτου;

Ὁ δὴ σὺ καλεῖς, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, φῶς.

Ἀληθῆ, ἔφη, λέγεις.

Οὐ μικρᾷ ἄρα ιδέα ἢ τοῦ ὄραν αἴσθησις καὶ ἢ τοῦ ὄρασθαι δύναμις τῶν ἄλλων συζεύξεων τιμιωτέρῳ ζυγῷ ἐζύγησαν, εἴπερ μὴ ἄτιμον τὸ φῶς.

Ἀλλὰ μήν, ἔφη, πολλοῦ γε δεῖ ἄτιμον εἶναι.

Τίνα οὖν ἔχεις αἰτιάσασθαι τῶν ἐν οὐρανῷ θεῶν τούτου κύριον, οὗ ἡμῖν τὸ φῶς ὄψιν τε ποιεῖ ὄραν ὅτι κάλλιστα καὶ τὰ ὀρώμενα ὄρασθαι;

Ὅνπερ καὶ σὺ, ἔφη, καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι· τὸν ἥλιον γὰρ δῆλον ὅτι ἐρωτᾷς.

Ἄρ' οὖν ὧδε πέφυκεν ὄψις πρὸς τοῦτον τὸν θεόν;

Πῶς;

Οὐκ ἔστιν ἥλιος ἢ ὄψις οὔτε αὐτὴ οὔτ' ἐν ᾧ ἐγγίγνεται, ὃ δὴ καλοῦμεν ὄμμα.

Οὐ γὰρ οὖν.

Ἀλλ' ἥλιοειδέστατόν γε οἶμαι τῶν περὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις ὀργάνων

Πολύ γε.

Οὐκοῦν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν ἣν ἔχει ἐκ τούτου ταμειομένην ὥσπερ ἐπίρρυτον κέκτηται;

Πάνυ μὲν οὖν.

Ἄρ' οὖν οὐ καὶ ὁ ἥλιος ὄψις μὲν οὐκ ἔστιν, αἴτιος δ' ὢν αὐτῆς ὀρατὰ ὑπ' αὐτῆς ταύτης;

view and so people have naturally avoided it. But note that at Roman numeral (I), and before this passage, Socrates is very careful to distinguish sight, the visible object, and light. Note also that Socrates says in the middle of the passage (Roman numeral II) that the sun's light causes sight *to see* in the best way (508a). At the end of the passage he makes a different claim. What he says at the very end of the passage is that the sun causes sight itself. At the end of book V, in the so-called lover of sights and sounds argument, Socrates says that sight is a power to see (477c). This, supposedly, is why in (III) Socrates first says that the sun provides the eyes with their power, and then acts as if he is not saying anything new when he says that it is the cause of sight itself.

I am not going to dispel fully the mystery of why Socrates thinks that the sun provides us with the power of sight. He may have in mind a model like the one in the *Timaeus* (45b-46a), where the eye has some fire in it, which is said to be a brother or kinsman (ἀδελφόν, 45b) of the sun. In this account fire is necessary for seeing to be possible. Timaeus' account explicitly relies on the idea that in order for seeing to take place, like must make contact with like to transmit motions from the object seen (45b-c). If Socrates is relying on this sort of physical model found in the *Timaeus*, the thought might be the sun is the cause of all fire, including the fire in our eyes that makes seeing possible.¹⁵ Another possibility relies on the idea that the sun is a god. Socrates may simply be suggesting that this god has bestowed on us a power related to his activity, namely the power of sight, much as Zeus provides humans with justice in Protagoras' myth. These two possibilities are compatible with each other: the sun god may be providing us with something akin to itself, which is also physically necessary for seeing. Either way, we can understand why sight is sunlike: either because it relies on something physically similar to the sun, or because it is a gift from the sun, related to the sun's power. I suspect that Glaucon finds it natural to think that the sun provides us with sight because he finds it natural to think that in order to interact with something, you must be like it. We must be like the light provided by the sun in order to see the objects it illuminates. In any event, what matters for our purposes is that the sun not only is the source of light, it is also the source of our power to see.

Socrates description of the sun is much longer than his parallel description of the form of the good. Nonetheless, as we have seen in the key passage, he makes the corresponding claim about the form of the good: just as the sun is the cause both of light and of the power to see, so the form of the good is the cause both of truth and of the power to know. When discussing the sun, Socrates

¹⁵ In fact, in the *Philebus* Socrates treats it as obviously the fire in us is completely dependent on cosmic fire (29c).

starts by saying that it provides the power to see, and then says it is the cause of sight – which is the same thing, according to the earlier lover of sights and sounds argument. The exact same thing happens in the key passage. In the first sentence Socrates says that the form of the good provides the power to know, and then in the next sentence he says that the form of the good causes understanding, using the exact same vocabulary found in the earlier lover of sights and sounds passage.

So, the form of the good causes understanding. And when we hear this, we shouldn't think of this as the mere relation of *knowing*; we should think of it, instead, as a power that we have to know things. Note that after the allegory of the cave Socrates repeats his claim that the form of the good provides both of these two things. There he says that the form of the good controls and provides truth and *nous*, which is the faculty that corresponds to the highest division in the divided line (517c) – the highest epistemic state we can be in.

Most scholars simply don't mention that the sun provides us with the power to see and that the good provides the power to know.¹⁶ Some mention that the form of the good is the cause of understanding, but then simply interpret “understanding” as the act of knowing, without arguing for this, and ignoring that he has referred to it as the “power to know.”¹⁷ Adam is the only commentator I am aware of who addresses the fact that the good provides us with the power to know.¹⁸ He thinks that references to understanding and the power to know should be taken referring to the *activity* of knowing, or the *exercise* of the faculty. He argues for this on the grounds that Socrates only makes the form of the good the cause of the existence of things at the end of the sun analogy (509b ff.). He claims that Socrates doesn't have a technical vocabulary here, and that we would be reading Aristotle back into Plato if we understand “power” here as a “faculty”, as opposed to the exercise of the faculty. But Socrates has defined a power in book V, in the lover of sights and sounds argument, when he said that understanding is a power. The way he defines a power distinguishes it from what it does (477c-d) – so he does seem to have something like a technical vocabulary. I hope this is enough to show that Adam is wrong to think that “power” here refers to exercising a faculty.¹⁹

Nonetheless, we can see why Adam would want to deny this. As standardly read, the sun analogy focuses on epistemology, telling us how the sun and the good make seeing and knowing possible, then at the end turns to metaphysics, telling us how the sun and the good makes coming to

¹⁶ E.g., White 1976, 101-103; Annas 1981, 245-7; and Denyer 2007.

¹⁷ Cross and Woollsey 1964, 231; Santas 1980, 252-3; and Pappas 2013, 167.

¹⁸ Adam 1965, 60-61.

¹⁹ For more on how Socrates defines powers, see Kamtekar 2008.

be and being possible. Why would Socrates introduce some metaphysics into the epistemological section, saying that the form of the good is responsible for our power to know? The reason is that Socrates thinks that in order to explain knowing, we need some metaphysics. People with knowledge have something that rocks don't have, that other animals don't have, and that ignorant people don't have. In order to explain knowing, we need to explain this.

Let's go back to the question I raised earlier: why would Socrates think the same thing is the cause of the objects of knowledge being knowable and of our power to know them? To answer this, let's first think about how a form causes something. A form provides an answer to a "what is it?" question, for example, what is largeness? An ordinary thing is caused to be large by the form of largeness because it meets the definition of largeness. This is what Aristotle calls formal causation. So why think that the same form is the cause of (1) the forms' being knowable and (2) of our power to know them? As we saw in the earlier parts of book VI, Socrates thinks that in order for us to grasp the forms, we must have a similar nature to them. Moreover, as we come to know them, we become more similar to them. Our similarity to the forms is captured by the fact that the same form is responsible both for the forms' being knowable and for our power to know them. When we know something, there is some feature – goodness – that we have in common with the objects of knowledge.

Why is it the form of the *good*, in particular, that is the cause of these two things? This is where the contemplative ethics comes in. Socrates thinks that understanding is the best thing we can have: it is the development of the most divine part of us, and when we have it, we become ourselves divine, ordered, measured, nourished, and happy. This is the good that we can possess. The forms themselves are divine and the philosopher's recognition of this leads to her imitating them, becoming divine like them.

The form of the good is the cause of the being of all of the things that *are*. Socrates thinks that very few things genuinely are – perhaps only the forms and the gods. The sun, by contrast, is responsible for the *coming-to-be* of all visible things. In the lover of sights and sounds argument, Socrates claims that the things that the lover of sights and sounds grasps are no more just than unjust, no more double than half, etc. (479a-c), and so among the things that are and are not, rather than the things that are. Thus, to say that our power to know is caused by the form of the good is to put it among the gods and the forms, rather than among the sensible things. This explains why earlier in book VI Socrates describes the life of a philosopher as life. The philosopher exercises a power that is directly caused to be good, just as the forms are.

Of course, in some way forms cause all features of things, including sensible features. Thus, the form of the good causes all goodness, including good banana bread and good shoes. Given this, what is special about the form of the good causing our power to know? There are two things that are special. First, to say that understanding is directly caused by the form of the good is to put it among the things that are simply good, rather than both good and bad. It is in a very different category from the sensible things. Our understanding is the best part of us, the part that is divine, just like the forms and the gods. Second, while all sensible good things have the characteristic of being good, their existence, such as it is, comes from the sun. By contrast, the very existence of the power to know is caused by the good, not merely its characteristic of being good. These, supposedly, are the reasons why Socrates says that understanding has the special status of “goodlike,” just as sight is “sunlike.”

All of this is at a very high level of abstraction. I have said a lot, but I haven’t yet said what the features are that make something *good*. What is the characteristic that understanding and the forms have in common that make each of them good? What I want to suggest is that *Socrates isn’t telling us because he doesn’t know what the good is*. Socrates is clear that he provides the sun analogy because he thinks he does not have knowledge, and cannot even provide the sort of arguments he provided earlier in giving his account of justice. Of course, he has reasons for his views, but he thinks these reasons fall far short from providing knowledge. A number of things motivate Socrates to use images and myths, rather than strict argumentation. We are getting one such case here. Socrates is using the image to say what the good would have to look like *if* his opinions about it are right: it would have to be structurally similar to the sun. If Socrates’ opinion is right that understanding is fundamentally good, then an account of the form of the good would need to explain not only why it’s good, but also why its objects are good, since we must be akin to something in order to understand it.

People who think the good is knowledge were not completely off the mark. Their mistake is in thinking that the good is specifically knowledge, as opposed to something much more general that happens to manifest itself in us as knowledge, but manifests itself in the forms as being, truth, and intelligibility. That thing, whatever it is, is the good. While it is wrong to think that the good is understanding, it is right to think that understanding is important *for us*, since it is our way of being good.

We can combine the account I have offered with other scholars’ specific accounts of what the good turns out to be. When combined with my account, theirs would explain what is special

about understanding. Thus, if the form of the good is unity, rational order, or harmony, then our power to know is particularly unified, rationally ordered, or harmonious, which is why we can grasp the things that are truly unified, ordered, or harmonious. If Santas is right and being good is having the features possessed by all forms, such as being eternal and the same as itself, then the power to know has the same features as the forms, which is why it can grasp them. It might be that Socrates had a definite idea of what the good turns out to be, but thought it was itself a shameful opinion, not something he knew. Alternatively, it might be that he was deeply conflicted or unsure about what the good is.

While my view is compatible with these accounts, it suggests a different ethical goal than they do on their own. If we simply know that the good is rational order, then it might seem that we should simply make our soul rationally ordered. Whereas what I want to suggest is that understanding is the one thing we get from the form of the good, it is the one genuine and unqualified embodiment of goodness available to us, and so it is what we should pursue.

Conclusion

After the sun analogy, Socrates provides the images of the divided line and cave. These raise plenty of their own interpretive difficulties, which I can't address here. But I want to note that in both of those images Socrates focuses not just on the nature of sensible and invisible things, but also on the powers that we have for grasping these things. The divided line is presented as a direct continuation of the sun (509d). In it Socrates says that we have four different powers, corresponding to four different sorts of reality. After the cave, Socrates discusses the power our soul must have to engage in its educational program. On other readings of the sun analogy, these discussions of cognitive powers come out of the blue. Socrates is asked about the form of the good; he provides an account in the sun analogy and then starts bringing up these cognitive powers in the later images. If I'm right, those cognitive powers are crucial to the sun analogy. Once we understand the importance of them from the sun analogy, it makes sense that Socrates would give a more fine-grained account in the divided line and then discuss how we acquire understanding in the cave and then in the rest of book VII.

Book VI of the *Republic* isn't the only place where Socrates emphasizes that understanding is the best state we can be in and that we can know the forms because we are akin to them. He continues to suggest that wisdom is a virtue of the divine part of us in books VII (518e) and IX (589d, 590d), and X (611e, quoted below). He returns to these claims most emphatically near the

end of book X, when he discusses the nature of the soul after his immortality argument and before reinstating the reputation for justice. There Socrates says that his claims so far about the soul are true of it in its current condition, but to discover its true nature they have to look at it when it engages in philosophy. Then he emphasizes that the soul of the philosopher is akin with what is divine, immortal, and always is, and that this is why it longs to grasp what-always-is because of its (611e).

Other middle and late dialogues also emphasize that the best life is one of understanding, and that we can have this because of our kinship with the forms. In the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus* Socrates says that we, or a part of us, is akin to the divine (79d, 246d-e), and that this kinship allows us to have knowledge, which nourishes us and allows us to live the best possible life. In the *Timaeus* Socrates says that a part of our souls is the same, and it is this part that grasps the things that are the same, the objects of understanding (37a-c). He says that grasping truth allows the philosopher to become as divine as possible and supremely happy (90b-c). Thus, the ideas that the sun analogy sets out to explain are not idiosyncratic to the *Republic*. Instead, the analogy shows us the structure an explanation would need to have, if it were to account for one of Plato's most frequently defended views: that the life of understanding is the best one for us.

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