

## Can we see the sun?

On page 126 of the second part of his translation of the *Republic* for the Loeb edition, in note a on the phrase of the allegory of the cave describing the sight of the heavens, stars and sun by the freed prisoner (VII, 516a8-b2), Paul Shorey writes: "It is probably a mistake to look for a definite symbolism in all the details of this description. There are more stages of progress than the proportion of four things calls for. All that Plato's thought requires is the general contrast between an unreal and a real world, and the goal of the rise from one to the other in the contemplation of the sun, or the idea of good." *Though I agree with Shorey on the fact that there is unity in Plato's thought, probably even more than he ever thought, even if I don't have the same understanding of that unity as him, I hope this paper will show how wrong he was about the fact that trying to interpret all the details of the allegory of the cave would be a mistake.*

(Note: all translations of quotations of dialogues are mine.)

It is customary to interpret the various stages of the progression of the freed prisoner of the allegory of the cave introduced by Plato's Socrates at the beginning of book VII of the *Republic* in the light of the four segments identified by him in the preceding analogy of the line concluding book VI, itself understood as partitioning the whole of "being", both visible and intelligible, into distinct classes. I intend to show that a close reading of the allegory of the cave undisturbed by preconceived notions on a supposed "Theory of Forms/Ideas" held by Plato can in turn shed a surprising light on the analogy of the line and lead us to a brand new reading of the three sections of the Sun, Line and Cave,<sup>1</sup> to a new understanding of such words as *eidè*, *ideai* and *ousia* and of the role of the good (*to agathon*) in our understanding of the world around us, and ultimately of the purpose of Plato in writing his dialogues.

### **Gnôthi sauton**

The starting point of my interpretation of the allegory of the cave is the recognition that the only kind of beings which is specifically mentioned by name by Plato's Socrates at *all four stages* of the prisoner's journey is *anthrôpoi* (human beings), always in the plural, seen either directly or through images, shadows or reflections in waters or the like. In fact, *anthrôpoi* is used in the allegory to describe both the prisoners and what they see: there are four occurrences of the word *anthrôpoi* in it (*anthrôpous*, 514a3; *anthrôpôn*, 514b5; *anthrôpous*, 514b8; *anthrôpôn*, 516a7) to which I add the word *andriantas*, at 514c1, accusative plural of *andrias*, a word meaning in its primary sense "statue of man" by derivation from the root *anêr*, *andros*, "man" as opposed to "woman", whereas *anthrôpos* means "man", whether male or female, as opposed to "animal" or "god", that is, "human being".

The first occurrence, at 514a3, is used to designate the prisoners; the second occurrence, at 514b5, is used to liken the prisoners to the spectators of some sort of puppet show after Socrates has mentioned the wall behind them; the third occurrence, at 514b8, designates the men walking along the road behind the wall, bearing various artefacts, among them, *andriantas*, that rise above the wall; the fourth and last occurrence, at 516a7, designates the only specifically named sort of "things" that the freed prisoner having come out of the cave will see,

---

<sup>1</sup> Sun: the parallel between sun and good at *Republic* VI, 504e7-509c4; Line: the analogy of the line at *Republic* VI, 509c5-511e5 (end of book VI); Cave: the allegory of the cave at *Republic* VII, 514a1-517a7 (beginning of book VII), to which we may add the comments on the allegory made by Socrates in the section immediately following it (*Republic* VII, 517a8-519b7) and synthetic reformulations of both the analogy of the line and the allegory of the cave in the section on dialectics toward the end of book VII (*Republic* VII, 531c9-535a2).

## Can We See the Sun?

with proper habituation, first through their shadows, then through their images in reflections in waters, and ultimately directly.<sup>2</sup>

Based on those textual data, I suggest that the allegory is an illustration of the Delphic motto often quoted by Plato's Socrates, *gnôthi sauton*<sup>3</sup>: it stages Man as a knowing subject faced with human beings as prime objects of enquiry for him. Human beings as knowing subjects are figured by the chained prisoners (the first occurrence of *anthrôpous* at 514a3) and their initial condition is likened to that of spectators (simply called *anthrôpoi* at 514b5) of some sort of puppet show; human beings as objects of knowledge are variously pictured depending on which segment of the line the allegory deals with. Inside the cave, human *souls* are figured by

---

<sup>2</sup> The Greek phrase reads: *sunêtheias dê oimai deoit' an, ei melloi ta anô opsesthai. kai prôton men tas skias an rhaista kathorôi, kai meta touto en tois hudasi ta te tôn anthrôpôn kai ta tôn allôn eidôla, husteron de auta* ("Habituation then, I think, [is what] he would need if he wanted to see by himself the [things] up there; and at first he would more readily perceive the shadows and after that the images in the waters of the **human beings** and those of the other [things] and later [the things] themselves"; 516a5-8). The phrase mentions three stages: shadows, reflections in waters and the [things] themselves. The only specific type of [things] mentioned is *anthrôpoi* (plural) as what produces some of the reflections in waters (the plural implies that the freed prisoner is not the only *anthrôpos* out there). The fact that there are reflections of *anthrôpôn* implies that there are *anthrôpoi* as originals of those reflections, and thus, those *anthrôpoi* are capable of producing shadows as well. Everything else is implied by pronouns and left to our imagination to figure out.

But when Socrates recalls the allegory, toward the end of book VII, he goes into more details about those other things. At 532a2-5, he lists the various kinds of beings of the intelligible order that the view, used as an analog of thought, was said to turn toward successively, and the list starts with *auta ta zôia* ("the living [creatures] themselves"), to proceed with *auta ta astra* ("the stars themselves") and terminate with *auton to hêlion* ("the sun itself"). A few lines later, he says: *kai ekei pros men ta zôia te kai phuta kai to tou hêliou phôs eti adunamia blepein, pros de ta en hudasi phantasmata' êtheia kai skias tôn ontôn* ("and there, inability yet to look at the living [creatures] and plants and to the light of the sun, but habituation regarding reflections in waters and shadows of the beings"; 532b8-c2 emended by me for reasons given at the end of this note). In both cases, *anthrôpoi* are no longer explicitly mentioned, but included in the more general category *zôia* ("living [creatures]", that is, mostly "animals"), and in the second case *phuta* ("what grows, that is "plants") is specifically added to the list. *Phuton* is a word derived from the verb *phuein* ("to grow"), which is at the root of *phusis*, the word which has become "physics" in English. Somehow, it is now the whole "physical" world which is said to be offered to sight (figuring thought) outside the cave.

*(In the last quoted phrase, the received text at 532c1 reads phantasmata theia ("divine images"), a text which poses question to some scholars because of a sudden use of the adjective theia ("divine"), not used in the allegory and unexpected at that point at the turn of a phrase without due preparation or justification for such a heavily loaded word, and leads to a phrase whose construction is impossible to properly analyze from a grammatical standpoint. I submit that the text written by Plato was not phantasmata theia, but phantasmata' êtheia (the ending alpha of phantasmata being elided before the initial eta of êtheia), in which êtheia, a word not found in the dictionaries, would be either an old word no longer in use or a neologism formed by Plato, by simply removing the prefix sun- from the word sunêtheia found at 516a5, which this member of phrase is precisely recalling. From a grammatical standpoint, it solves the problems posed by the received reading, making êtheia one more substantive completing a list including lysis ("liberation"), metastrophê ("the turning around"), epanodos ("ascent"), adunamia ("inability"), to recall the key steps in the progress of the prisoner, of which (sun)êtheia is obviously one for Socrates, as evidenced by the fact that the word sunêtheia is highlighted in the phrase where it appears (quoted in full at the beginning of this note) by coming first in that phrase; and from the standpoint of textual criticism, the corruption is easy to explain when we remember that, in the time of Plato, texts were written in capital letters without spaces between words, and without signs such as punctuation, stresses, breathings or apostrophes to mark elision, so that phantasmata theia would have been written as ΦΑΝΤΑΣΜΑΤΑΘΕΙΑ and phantasmata' êtheia as ΦΑΝΤΑΣΜΑΤΗΘΕΙΑ: the only difference is the presence of either an alpha (A) or an eta (H) in 10<sup>th</sup> position between the tau (T) and the theta (Θ), so that it is easy to understand how an eta (H) with slightly oblique vertical bars might have been misread by a copyist ignoring the word êtheia and transcribed as an alpha (A). If I'm right, êtheia would not be the only neologism created by Plato in his dialogues: there are many other examples of likely neologisms in them, starting with the adjective anupotheton discussed later in this paper. And removing the prefix sun- to sunêtheia doesn't change much the meaning of the word and leads to a word easily understandable by any Greek of the time. Sunêtheia is derived from the word êthos ("custom, habit, usage") which is at the root of the English word "ethics", precisely through a form, êtheia, which, existing or not before Plato, followed a usual mode of derivation with an ending in -ia, found for instance in alêtheia ("truth") derive from alêthês ("true"). The prefix sun- ("with, together") adds the idea of things done habitually in common, leading to meanings such as "habitual intercourse, acquaintance, society, intimacy", including "intercourse" in a sexual sense, but sunêtheia has also meanings in which the idea conveyed by the prefix is almost lost, like "habit, custom, habituation", and it is in such a meaning that it is used by Socrates in the allegory, so that removing the prefix in the recall doesn't change the meaning.)*

<sup>3</sup> I prefer to translate it as "Learn to know thyself" rather than the more usual "Know thyself", to stress the progressive meaning of the verb *gignôskein* in Greek, and which I understand as meaning, at least for Plato's Socrates, "learn to know thyself not only as Socrates, or Alcibiades, or Glaucon, but also as a human being, and not a god or a wolf".

## Can We See the Sun?

the bearers (*anthrôpous*, 514b8) hidden behind the wall and walking along the road, invisible to the prisoners so long as they remain inside the cave; those bearers (some of them at least) “animate” *andriantas* going above the wall, images of men’s material bodies (hence the use of a word derived from *anèr*, *andros*, referring to man as opposed to woman, that is, as differentiated by sex); and at first, the prisoners only see, not even those three dimensional bodies, but only their two dimensional shadows on the wall before them produced by the light of the fire behind the wall; it is only when a prisoner is freed from his chains and turns around that he can see the *andriantas*. The *andriantas*, but not the bearers: nowhere does Plato suggest that the freed prisoner, in his progression toward the outside of the cave, walks past the wall and sees what is behind; he is not ascending toward the fire, but toward the opening of the cave which is said to be *makran para pan to spèlaion* (514a4-5), that is “wide alongside the whole cave”, which in effect precludes that it be behind the fire and the prisoners, adding its light to that of the fire, but rather up high on the lateral side of the cave parallel to the axis going from the fire to the wall behind the prisoners. In other words, so long as we stay within the visible realm, we cannot see the souls, but only material stuff; to see the human souls, we must be in the intelligible realm, that is, outside the cave, and those souls we can see are figured in the allegory by the *anthropous* (516a7, again a plural) outside the cave, the only specific type of “things” mentioned as offered to the sight of the prisoner there (aside from the stars, moon and sun, which Plato warns us not to rush toward too fast), first through shadows and reflection in waters, later in direct view in the light of the sun.

### **Ana ton auton logon**

We end up with four different ways of perceiving what we call *anthrôpoi*, all relating to multiple individuals of that species, as indicated by the fact that the word is always used in the plural:

- within the cave:
  1. the shadows of statues of sexually differentiated men moved by invisible *anthrôpoi*
  2. those statues (*andriantas*)
- outside the cave:
  3. shadows and reflections in waters of *anthrôpoi* present in number outside the cave
  4. those *anthrôpoi*.

Whether inside or outside the cave, the two kinds of perception associated with this location stand in a relation of image (shadow and/or reflections) to original, and the originals within the cave (*andriantai*) are three dimensional material images (statues) of the originals outside the cave.

If we now turn back to the analogy of the line, we can see that the vocabulary used by Plato’s Socrates to describe the two segments of the visible parallels closely the vocabulary found in the allegory of the cave: the first segment of the visible is made up of what Socrates calls *eikones* (“images”) and further describes as *prôton men tas skias, epeita ta en tois hudasi phantasmata kai en tois hosa pukna te kai leia kai phana sunestêken, kai pan to toiouton* (“first on the one hand the shadows, then the reflections in the waters and in the many [other things] that are dense, smooth and bright in their framing, and all that is similar”; 509e1-510a2), and those are natural, not man-made, moving images of what is described as making up the second segment of the visible: *ta te peri hêmas zôis kai pan to phuteuton kai to skeuaston holon genos* (“the living creatures around us and all that grows and the whole species of the artefacts”; 510a5-6). This description of the second segment is very close to the description of what rises above the wall within the cave: *skeuè te pantodapa [...] kai andriantas kai alla zôia lithina te kai xulina kai pantoia eirgasmèna* (“implements of every kind [...] and statues of men and other animals in stone and wood and worked out in all kinds of ways”; 514c1-515a1), and the specification of what Socrates means by *eikones* (“images”) parallels the description of what the freed prisoner sees at first outside the cave: *prôton men tas skias [...] kai meta touto*

*en tois hudasi ta te tôn anthrôpôn kai ta tôn allôn eidola* (“at first [...] the shadows and after that the images in the waters of the human beings and those of the other [things]”; 516a6-7).

What is interesting here is that the complete enumeration of the various kinds of images mentioned by Socrates with regard to the first segment of the visible is found, in the allegory, not with regard to the images within the cave, where only shadows are mentioned, but with regard to the images outside the cave, that is, within the intelligible realm. This should help us understand that the division of the segment of the intelligible is also a division according to original vs. image, a fact less clear in the way Socrates opposes the two segments of the intelligible. And it is this relation of image vs. model which constitutes the *logon* along which both segments, the segment of the visible and the segment of the intelligible, are to be further split, following Socrates’ instructions to split both *ana ton auton logon* (509d7-8), an expression which, despite the geometrical guise of the analogy, should not be understood as meaning “according to the same [numerical] ratio”, but “according to the same [logical] rationale”.

Indeed, it is obvious that the four ways of perceiving listed above as pictured by the allegory of the cave correspond to the four segments of the line, and the fact that all four deal with the same sort of beings, *anthrôpoi*, precludes the possibility that the four segments partition the whole of being. As a matter of fact, the conclusion drawn by Socrates of the analogy of the line doesn’t list categories of beings, but *pathêmata en tēi psuchēi gignomena* (“affections occurring within the soul”; 511d7-8), that is, behaviors induced within a human mind by what affects it from the outside either through the senses (visible realm) or directly through its intelligence (intelligible realm), depending on the person’s state of mind regarding those perceptions (how “real” it judges what is at the source of them).

### **Reflection and echo**

The two *pathêmata* associated with the two segments of the visible, *eikasia* (“imagination”) and *pistis* (“confidence”), are not too hard to understand and distinguish. *Eikasia*, named by a word derived from the verb *eikazein*, built on the same root as *eikôn* (“image, likeness”), is the state of mind of one who cannot make the difference between image and model, who thinks that what we see is what there is and that things are exactly as we perceive them with our senses, and above all with our sight; *pistis* on the other hand is the state of mind of one who understands that our senses give us only an “appearance (*eidos, idea*)” of what stimulates them but has “confidence” in the fact that this appearance is not too remote from what causes it and gives us a perception of it good enough for our needs in daily life. One way of arriving at this state of mind is precisely to become able to distinguish between a visible image and the visible model of that image, because it forces us to be careful about what we see, which is not always what we think it is at first glance.

To understand and distinguish the two *pathêmata* of the intelligible realm, named by Socrates at the end of the analogy of the line *dianoia* and *noēsis*, is not as easy, which is the reason why I leave them untranslated for the time being. But the example given by the allegory of the cave might help us make progress toward this understanding.

Here again a close reading of the allegory is in order. I mentioned earlier the fact that, inside the cave, that is, in the “visible” realm, Socrates mentions only one of the two kinds of images he had introduced when dealing with the first segment of the line, namely shadows, leaving aside reflections, whereas, when it comes to the outside of the cave, the “intelligible” realm, he is careful to mention both shadows and reflections in waters. But this is not quite true and, if we look closely at the allegory, we find that Socrates mentions, at the very place where we would expect to find a mention of reflections in waters and the like, that is, after the mention of shadows and before the freed prisoner turns around to see the origin of shadows, something which is a kind of “reflection”, except that it is a reflection of... sounds rather than light! It is the

*èchô* (“echo”; 515b7) of the sounds uttered by the bearers behind the wall bouncing back toward the prisoners so that they seem to come from the shadows.

The mention of sounds in an allegory that stresses the “visible” side of the world around us is most important and, as usual with Plato, very carefully introduced and worded by him. The first reference to sounds comes at 515a2-3, where some of the bearers walking along the road behind the wall, the animating souls of the bodies figured as statues rising above the wall, are said to be *phtheggomenous* (515a2), that is “uttering sounds”; the verb used by Plato, *phtheggesthai*, even though it may mean “to speak” in some contexts, refers primarily to the production of a sound, not only by human beings, but also by animals or even objects, that is, to the most physical dimension of speaking as perceived by a human being even before he understands those sounds as words. On the contrary, the prisoners, figuring human beings as knowing subjects, are said to *dialegesthai pros allèlous* (“talk to one another, discuss”; 515b4), and, as a result of this ability, to *onomazein* (“give names to”; 515b5)<sup>4</sup> the recurring things they see. The next step is the one involving *èchô*: for the prisoners to assume that the echo of utterances<sup>5</sup> by bearers coming from the wall are coming from the shadows themselves.

The reference to vocal images (echo) at that point, where we are still at the level of the first segment of the line, is meant to make us realize that words themselves, the product of the *onomazein* by the prisoners, are nothing more than vocal images of what they name, manufactured by human beings endowed with *logos* and the ability to *dialegesthai*: the *anthrôpoi* walking along the road behind the wall, pictures of human souls, bear bodies and utter sounds, but neither bodies nor sounds, are those human beings, and the shadows of their bodies or the echo of their voices even less.

Now, to understand what Plato means by shadows and reflections in waters once the prisoner has moved outside the cave, we only have to think that, in the intelligible realm, only the *logos* is at work. In other words, in order to figure out what shadows and reflections stand for, we should look in the realm of speech. In the visible realm, Plato conspicuously associates the echo with (visible) shadows as coming from the same source. So when, once outside the cave, in the intelligible realm, he mentions shadows of human beings (*anthrôpoi*), we may safely assume that he has in mind the “image” an individual gives of himself through his own words, and more generally deeds, as interpreted by others. As an example, the speeches of Socrates in the *Apology* are an intelligible “shadow” of Socrates that can be “seen” by all the jurors,<sup>6</sup> but it is not the real Socrates in that it takes a different meaning for each juror, depending on his own education and prejudices, level of understanding of the Greek language, and so on. Now, to continue with this example, *The Clouds*, Aristophanes’ comedy, or Anytos or Meletos’ speeches about Socrates, or for that matter, any rumor or hearsay than a juror may have heard from friends or fellow citizens or whomever, are intelligible “reflections” of Socrates in the mind of those who produce them, under the light of the city’s customs and habits, prejudice and the like.

### ***Horômena eidè vs. noèton eidos***

So, if neither Socrates’ own speeches and deeds heard and seen firsthand, nor the gathering of multiple data collected from various sources is the real Socrates, is it possible to know Socrates (or any other human being)? After all, Plato’s Socrates, in the allegory of the cave,

---

<sup>4</sup> My reading of the dubious text of 515b4-5 is ***ou tauta*** [contraction of *ta auta*] *hègei an ta paronta autous nomizein onomazein haper horôien* (bold letters indicate the dubious words), given by manuscript A, which I translate: « Don’t you think that, the same [things] being present to them, they would get used to giving names to those very [things] they see?»

<sup>5</sup> In this part of his description (515b7-9), Plato reverts to the verb *phtheggesthai* (“utter sounds”), as he is talking of sounds produced by human beings and other animals as objects of knowledge, which come first to other human beings, this time considered as knowing subjects, as physical phenomena.

<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, they are not, as they are Plato’s, not Socrates’ words. But they pretend to be this. So, let us say that we are talking about the actual words uttered by Socrates himself at his own trial, which we don’t know, but which jurors at the trial could hear.

## Can We See the Sun?

says that the freed prisoner outside the cave ends up, with habituation, seeing *auta* (516a8), that is, among other things, *anthrôpoi* “themselves”. Sure! But the verb used there is *kathoran*, which, even if we take the prefix *kat(a)* to imply an idea of completion, involves the act of seeing (*horan*), and thus, all we can expect from that seeing is only appearance (*eidōs/idea*), not the thing or person itself.

And does the fact that the verb is used analogically, as an image of an intellectual activity, changes anything to this? In my opinion, the answer is “no”. Plato keeps using the vocabulary of sight to talk of intellectual activity, even outside the allegory of the cave. The words he uses to describe what our minds can grasp of the intelligible realm, *eidōs* and *idea*, both derive from roots relating to sight and have as first meaning “(visual) appearance”. How could we assume that Plato, after having spent so much time, all through his dialogues, trying to make us understand that the *eidē* we see with our eyes are not the real things, but only *appearances* conditioned by the constraints and limits of our sight, would use the very same word *eidōs* to designate what would be most real for him? How can we accept that, within a few lines’ interval in the analogy of the line, he would have used the same word *eidōs* first with the qualification of *horōmenon* (“seen”:<sup>7</sup> *horōmenois eidesi*, 510d5), and then with the qualification of *noēton* (“intelligible”: *noēton to eidōs*, 511a3),<sup>8</sup> but given that same word completely opposite meanings from one occurrence to the next, at the very moment he was taking pains to qualify each one to distinguish the one from the other, thus suggesting that they are two variants of the same thing, distinguished only by the organ (eyes or brain) or faculty (sight or thought) giving us access to them? If it were not from longstanding preconceived notions about a supposed “theory of Forms/Ideas” held by Plato, no one in his right mind would accept this.

This distinction between seen (*horōmena*) and intelligible (*noēta*) *eidē* (“appearances”) is part of the explanation Socrates gives of the distinction between the two segments of the intelligible using a geometrical example. Now that we have seen, with the help of the allegory of the cave, that the division of the line is not based on the kinds of beings found in each segment but on the way we perceive them, we must abandon the idea that geometrical, and more generally speaking mathematical, constructs have a special ontological status that would make them the specific “population” of the third segment of the line.<sup>9</sup> Quite the contrary, we should draw a parallel between the geometrical constructs used as example in the analogy of the line and the *anthrôpoi* used as prime objects of knowledge in the allegory of the cave in order to figure out how they appear in each segment of the line.

To begin with, a few words on the reason for the choice of examples in each case are in order. The reason for the choice of *anthrôpoi* as the prime example of objects of knowledge in the allegory of the cave is obvious: for Plato’s Socrates, knowing ourselves both as individuals and as human beings, should be *the* affair of our whole life. But *anthrôpoi* are complex beings and people have conflicting opinions on what it means to be a human being: not all would accept that men have an immaterial “soul”, possibly immortal; people disagree on what is good for man, on what is “just”, etc. On the other hand, geometrical constructs are very simple things, with no moral or ethical implications, and geometrical *schēmata* (“figures”) are sort of embryonic versions of *eidē*, the most simple and primitive of them. Indeed, *schema* and *eidōs* have overlapping ranges of meaning, including that of “external appearance”, before *schema* takes

---

<sup>7</sup> *Horōmenois*, the qualification used by Plato here is the present participle passive of the verb *horan* (“to see”), not the verbal adjective *horaton* (“visible”), which would be the grammatical counterpart of *noēton* (“intelligible”), used later to qualify the other kind of *eidē*. This might be a subtle way for Plato to stress the fact that the appearance caught by sight is within space and time, hence a conjugated verb, whereas the appearance caught by the mind (*nous*) is somehow outside space and time, hence a substantive.

<sup>8</sup> I read the beginning of Socrates line at 511a3 as *touto toinun noēton men to eidōs elegon* and I translate it as “Thus I said ‘intelligible’ this appearance”.

<sup>9</sup> For ease of reference, I number the segments in the order they are introduced by Socrates: 1 and 2 are the two segments of the visible, 1 associated with *eikasia* (“imagination”) and 2 with *pistis* (“confidence”); 3 and 4 are the two segments of the intelligible, 3 associated with *dianoia* and 4 with *noēsis*.

## Can We See the Sun?

the more specialized meaning of “(geometrical) figure”. And this is the reason why, in the *Meno*, when Socrates wants to help Meno understand what he means by a common *eidōs* (72c7) to all *aretai*,<sup>10</sup> he uses the concept of *schema* as an example in a search for definition (73e3-77a5). And the reference to square (*tetragōnon*, 510d7) and diagonal (*diametron*, 510d8) in the analogy of the line is obviously meant to remind us of the experiment with Meno’s slave in the *Meno*, and more generally speaking, of the *Meno* as a whole. Indeed, the first definition of *schēma* Socrates comes up with in the above referenced section of the *Meno*, “that which always goes along with color” (*ho... chrōmati aei hepomenon*, 75b10-11), is quite relevant to our present discussion: color is indeed the *only* thing sight perceives, our eyes only record patches of colors of different hues and it is our mind, not the eyes, which associates forms (*schemata/eidē*) to those patches of colors.<sup>11</sup> What this means is that the key distinction is not between *horōmena* (“seen”) and *noēta* (“intelligible”) *eidē* (“appearances/forms/figures”), but between brute data from the senses (color in the case of sight) and the *eidē* our mind (*nous*) perceives with or without the help of such data. Our eyes don’t “see” *schemata/eidē/ideai*, only our mind does in all cases.

Back to the line and the square mentioned there. Socrates distinguishes two kinds of squares: *to tetragōnon auton* (“the square itself”) and drawings of squares. These correspond respectively to the *anthrōpoi* outside the cave and to the statues of men (*andriantai*) inside the cave. With regard to the drawings, Socrates makes it very clear that they correspond to the second segment by mentioning the fact that “of [them,] there are shadows and reflections in waters (*hōn kai skiai kai en hudasin eikones eisin*; 510e2-3)”, using almost the same words he has used to explain what goes with the first segment of the visible. But what about *to tetragōnon auton*? Socrates says that it is about it that the geometers conduct their demonstrations, not about the figures they draw and mold. But if we take a closer look at what indeed happens in the mind of a geometer, or our own, for instance when reading the section of the *Meno* reporting the experiment with the slave, we will see that things are not that simple. From an intellectual standpoint, in the abstract, we may accept the idea that “the square itself” is unique, that it has, as such, no particular position in space or dimensions, no visible properties such as color or outlined sides. But when it comes to dealing with a problem such a doubling in surface a given square, the problem posed by Plato’s Socrates to Meno’s slave, we are bound (cf. *anagkazomenēn psuchēn*, “the soul being compelled”; 511a4) to assume at least some characteristics to the squares we are dealing with: to begin with, what does it mean to double “the square itself”, which has no size? To be able to talk about doubling a square, not *the* square, we must at least assume some size for it, as does Socrates talking to the slave of a square whose sides are two feet long (*Meno* 82c5-6). So, when the Socrates of the Line says that the geometers, when talking about the figures they draw and their *horōmena eidē* (“seen appearances”), are in fact thinking, not about them, but about “the square itself and the diagonal itself” (510d7-8), we should mitigate this statement: Socrates talking to Meno’s slave knows that what he says is not true of the approximate square we must assume he has drawn on the ground at his feet, but only of an “ideal” square having four rigorously equal sides, all exactly two feet long, and four rigorously right angles, but this is not “the square itself”, but only a mental image

<sup>10</sup> The usual translation of *aretē* by “virtue” is misleading, because it gives the word too much of a moral/ethical dimension: in Greek, *aretē* can apply not only to human beings, but also to animals, tools or whatever: the *aretē* of something is what makes it best for what it is intended to do.

<sup>11</sup> Meno criticizes this definition of *schema* on the ground that it means nothing to one who doesn’t know what color is. As a result, Socrates offers a second definition of *schema* as “the limit of solid (*stereou peras*; 76a7)”, after making sure that, this time, Meno understand the words he is about to use. This second definition doesn’t involve sight and Socrates explicitly orients its understanding toward the geometrical meaning of “solid (*stereos*)” (cf. 76a1-2), but still, it is not completely free of references to the senses, as the original meaning of *stereos* is “hard”, which relates to the sense of touch. In so doing, Plato’s Socrates subtly reminds us that the sense of sight as such gives us only a two dimensional perception of the world around us and that it is the sense of touch which allows us, when we are still infants and unable to move by ourselves, to begin perceiving that it is not flat but has depth, that some patches of colors that our eyes perceive are close to us and can be touched with our hands while others cannot.

## Can We See the Sun?

of a possible instance of it endowed with specific properties imposed by the wording of the problem. And when he has to put side by side four such squares sharing a common summit and split them with diagonals running in each square between the summits adjacent to the common summit in order to exhibit a fifth square double the original square, none of these, even in thought, is “the square itself”, and they all are only mental images of it having each a size and at least a relative spatial position with regard to the others. And none of us, readers of the *Meno*, could follow and understand the demonstration without at least mentally picturing such a drawing. In other words, in such cases, we are not thinking about “the square itself”, but about images, “reflections” of it borrowing characteristics of visible drawings of squares.

Going back now to the allegory of the cave, and to the freed prisoner having just come out of the cave where he had had time to habituate his eyes to looking at the statues of men: at first, so Socrates tells us, he is not yet capable of seeing the *anthrôpoi* themselves, but only their shadows and reflections in water. So, what could he relate those new perceptions to? Not to the *anthrôpoi* themselves which he cannot see yet, but only to the statues he used to see when still inside the cave, in much the same way as he had related the statues, when turning around once unchained, to the shadows he used to see before. Same thing with the square: we cannot jump at once from visible images of drawn squares to “the square itself” without intermediate steps to habituate ourselves to getting rid of more and more properties from visible squares. And we cannot solve geometrical problems without dealing, if only mentally, with instances of those abstract constructs which are only shadows or reflections of each “whatever itself” we are talking about.

To make progress in the understanding of the division of the segment of the intelligible, let us now focus on another parallel, the parallel between what goes on outside the cave/on the segment of the intelligible and what goes on inside the cave/on the segment of the visible, remembering that Socrates has asked us to divide both segments *ana ton auton logon* (“according to the same rationale”). The first state of the prisoners inside the cave is one where they are physically unable to move their head and “compelled (*ênagkasmenoî*; 515a9)” to look forward only. For the sake of the allegory, this constraint is pictured by chains, but we know that, in the real world, those “chains” are within us, a combination of a longstanding habit of taking what our senses, and primarily sight, offer us as what there is and of our laziness when it comes to challenging those data. And indeed the form *ênagkasmemoî* is ambiguous in Greek being either a passive (“compelled”) or a middle (“compelling themselves”).

Now, when talking of the first segment of the intelligible, Socrates tells us that the geometers, while looking at their drawn images, think of a *noêton eidos* of, say, the square itself, “trying to see those \*\*\* themselves that can only be seen by thought (*zêtountes de auta ekeina idein ha ouk an allôs idoi tis è tòi dianoiai*; 510e3-511a1)”, but that they do so with “the soul compelled to use suppositions in the search for it (*hupotheseis d' anagkazomenèn psuchèn chrèsthai peri tèn zêtèsin autou*; 511a3-4)”, using the same verb, *anagkazein* in the middle or passive form, as was used about the chained prisoners at the beginning of the allegory of the cave. This suggests that there is also some form of constraint, either imposed from the outside or self-imposed, in the first kind of perception in the intelligible realm (*dianoia*).

The constraint mentioned by Socrates is the fact of using *hupotheseis* in their inquiry. A proper understanding of this constraint requires that we properly understand the word *hupothesis*, going beyond the fact that it has been transposed (rather than translated) in English into the word “hypothesis”. Indeed, if we look at the examples of *hupotheseis* Socrates gives at 510c3-5, they are “the odd and the even and the figures and three appearances of angles (*to te peritton kai to artion kai ta schêmata kai gônion tritta eidè*)”, which are not hypotheses in the modern sense of the word, but rather primitive constructs that appear in the wording of the problems. And Socrates goes on saying: “these, on the one hand, as if knowing [them], having made them *hupotheseis*, they don't think fit to render any further account of them either to themselves or to others, as [if they were] obvious to everyone, starting on the other hand from



## Can We See the Sun?

them, going from there through all the rest, they reach a conclusion consistently on what they had set in motion their inquiry about (*tauta men hōs eidotes, poiēsamenoi hupotheseis auta, oudena logon oute hautois oute allois eti axiousi peri autōn didonai hōs panti phanerōn, ek toutōn d' archomenoi ta loipa èdè diexiontes teleutōsin homologoumenōs epi touto hou an epi skepsin hormēsōsi*; 510c5-d3). Now, if we remember that the word *hupothesis* stems from the verb *hupotithenai* meaning etymologically “to put under”, we see that the main thrust of the word as used by Plato’s Socrates is not on the “hypothetical/tentative/uncertain” character of those *hupotheseis*, but rather on the firm grounding they give to the ensuing inquiry: they are the (supposedly) known data from which we can proceed further in our investigation, those that are not supposed to be questioned. In other words, they stand for the geometer as the shadows for the chained prisoner: they are what they work on, for instance to guess which one will come after which one, without questioning what might be at the origin of those shadows, having no notion that they are only shadows. Geometers understand what a square is, they are even able to give a definition of it, know that the square they are talking about is not the drawing they make of it, but they don’t question the ontological status of those squares they picture in their minds and they don’t realize that the definitions they give only replace words by other words. They use the word “square” in the wording of their problem and, as does Socrates with Meno’s slave, only make sure that their interlocutor understand the word (*Meno* 82b9-10) before proceeding toward the solution of the problem at hand.<sup>12</sup> In fact, they start with a practical problem to be solved and the words used to express the problem constitute for them the firm ground (*hupotheseis*) on which they can proceed. They don’t realize that words are only “shadows” of what they name.<sup>13</sup>

To perceive the potentially “hypothetical” (in the modern sense) character of such grounding, we may go to another part of the *Meno*, the discussion with Anytos, which will move us from geometry to inquiries about *anthrōpoi*, that is from the imagery of the Line to that of the Cave, as the dialogue deals with what constitutes Man’s “excellence (*aretè*)” and how to acquire it. Anytos’ *huptheseis* in this discussion are that he knows what a fine (*kalos kagathos*; see *Meno* 92e4) person is and what a “sophist” is, even though he never himself met one. And it is based on this “knowledge” that he proceeds to appraise Socrates and will end up accusing him in court. If nobody challenges the meaning of “square”, so that using that word as a *hypothesis* is not

---

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to notice, from this standpoint, that, in the *Meno*, Socrates has the slave find the solution of the problem of doubling the square on the drawing *before* giving him the name of the line involved: the solution is not the name *diametros* (“diagonal”; cf. *Meno* 85b4, given, so says Socrates, by *hoi sophistai* (“those wise [in such matters]”) to the line, but the line whose imperfect image can be seen and shown on the drawing, whatever its name. More, it is impossible to give the answer to the initial question (how many feet would be the sides of the square double the square whose sides are two feet long?) under the form of a number, or even a fraction, because the ratio between the side and the diagonal is square root of two, which is an irrational number (a fact known by Plato) which means that it is impossible to find a unit of measurement with which both the side and the diagonal would be an integral number of times that unit. In other words, the diagonal of a square is incommensurable with the side of that square.

<sup>13</sup> This is confirmed by the way Socrates reminds us of this discussion at the end of book VII, at 533b6-c5: “but the remaining [crafts], which we said to reach something of the being, geometry and those which come after it, we see that they dream about the being but that [it is] impossible for them to see as if in a waking state so long as, using *hupotheseis*, they leave them unmovable, unable to give a reasonable account of them. For where a starting point that one doesn’t know, a conclusion and the intermediate [steps stemming] from what one doesn’t know have been twined together, which contrivance will ever make such an agreement into a knowledge/science? (*hai de loipai, has tou ontos ti ephamen epilambanesthai, geōmetrias te kai tas tautēi hepomenas, horōmen hōs oneirōttousi men peri to on, hupar de adunaton autais idein, heōs an hupotheseis chrōmenai tautas akinētous eōsi, mè dunamenai logon didonai autōn. hōi gar archē men ho mè oide, teleutē de kai ta metaxu ex hou mè oiden sumpeplektai, tis mēchanē tēn toiautēn homologian pote epistēmēn genesthai;*)” here the *hupotheseis* used by the geometers are said to be a hindrance on the way toward the being (*to on*), that is, the fact of “being” such and such, so long as they stay *akinētous* (“unmovable”): what characterizes them is not to be tentative, but to be unquestioned, to be stated at the beginning of the geometrical problem at hand and unchallenged hereafter, even though those who state them are unable to give a reasonable account (*logon didonai*) of what they are: the geometer “knows” what a square is *from a geometrical standpoint*, he “knows” its “definition”, but that is all; he is not interested, as a geometer, by the ontological status of the square itself. Hence, says Socrates, to him “square” is a mere dream. A word...

problematic so long as we deal with problems of geometry, people don't agree on what makes a man *kalos kagathos* (literally "fine and good") and, in such a case, Anytos' *hupotheseis* become "hypotheses" in the modern sense. And the reason why they become "hypothetical" is because some words, especially in the field of ethics, don't have the same meaning for all, so that any meaning assumed for such a word becomes tentative and may be challenged.

The chains inside the cave are the power of sight; the chains outside the cave are the power of words, those words devised by the chained prisoners inside the cave after the shadows they see, which, unknown to them, are no more than images (shadows) of images (statues) of what they stand for.

### ***Man on the moon?***

In order to solve geometrical problems, we have to deal with multiple instances of concepts such as square, diagonal, angle, line and the like, even if we don't draw them as visible images and only work on mental images. When leaving the cave, the freed prisoner is faced with multiple instances of *anthrōpoi* that he only sees at first through shadows and reflections in waters and the like. So, what about "the square itself" or "*anthrōpos* itself"? In order to make progress on this issue, we may turn now toward the final stage of the progression of the freed prisoner that I have conspicuously ignored so far.

Indeed, the progression of the prisoner doesn't end with the sight of the many *anthrōpoi* themselves (*auta*) who roam around outside the cave. After that, Socrates tells us that he will contemplate what is in heaven and heaven itself, first at night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, then, during the day, at the sun and that of the sun (516a8-b2). Then Socrates adds: "In the end then, I think, the sun, [it is] not through reflections of it in waters or in foreign places, but itself according to itself in its own place [that] he might be able to see distinctly and contemplate as it is (*teleutaion dè oimai ton hêlion, ouk en hudasin oud' en allotriai hedrai phantasmata autou, all' auton kath' hauton en tēi hautou chōrai dunait' an katidein kai theasasthai hoios estin*; 516b4-7)."

The first thing that this phrase shows, through the mention of reflections in waters and other places, is that, with respect to those new kinds of beings located in heaven, there are also two kinds of sightings, the same as with *anthrōpoi*: through reflections in waters and other places on the one hand, directly on the other hand, even if reflections are only mentioned about the sun. In other words, there is no way we might think that sighting of *anthropoi* as a whole correspond to the third segment of the line (*dianoia*) and sighting of heavenly bodies as a whole to the fourth segment (*noêsis*). Both kinds of beings, terrestrial outside the cave and celestial, are subject to both kinds of perception, *dianoia* and *noêsis*. The only difference is that terrestrial beings, and especially *anthrōpoi*, have their counterpart inside the cave under the form of statues, whereas celestial beings don't. This difference suggests that what is figured in the allegory by celestial beings is what belongs only to the intelligible realm, what lies behind *eidè/ideai* that have no visible/sensible representation, such as the just, the beautiful or the good. I further suggest that it is in reference to those sorts of beings that Plato, at least in certain contexts, uses the word *idea* as opposed to *eidos*, the later having a broader usage, as we have seen earlier when talking of *horōmena* vs. *noêta eidè*.<sup>14</sup>

Now, if, as I have suggested at the beginning of this paper, Plato's Socrates, in the allegory of the cave, is primarily concerned with the ability for us, human beings, to learn to better know ourselves, both as individuals and as members of a species, *anthrōpos*, is there something in the allegory which we might understand as figuring an "idea of Man"?

Before answering this question, we should first notice that nowhere in the dialogues the words *anthrōpou idea* ("idea of Man") are to be found with the "technical" meaning we assume

---

<sup>14</sup> This use would be quite consistent with the meaning the Greek word *idea* has taken when transposed in English as *idea* or in French as *idée*. In both cases the word is reserved to mental representations.

for them here. The only place where both words are associated with one another, and only implicitly, is at *Republic* IX, 588d3-4, where Socrates, to give in words (*logôî*) an image (*eikona*) of the human soul, suggests to mold (*plasantes*) this image by assembling an *idean thèriou poikilou kai polukephalou* (“an **appearance** of a manifold and many-headed beast”) with *mian... allèn idean leontos, mian de anthrôpou* (“one other **appearance** of lion and still one of **man**”), but there, the word can be understood in a non “technical” sense, even though Socrates is indeed proposing an image, not of any individual human being (visible and intelligible), not even of any individual soul (a purely intelligible concept), but of the human soul as such, in the abstract (hence Plato’s preference for the word *idea* rather than *eidos*, if I am right in my assumptions on his use of both words). As regards the words *anthrôpou eidos*, the only place in all the dialogues where it might have the « technical » meaning we are assuming here, is *Parmenides* 130c1, where it is put by Plato not in the mouth of Socrates, but in that of Parmenides trying to figure out what Socrates accepts *eidè* of and learning that, if Socrates accepts *dikaïou ti eidos auto kath' hauto kai kalou kai agathou kai pantôn au tôn toioutôn* (“a certain *eidos* itself according to itself of the just and the beautiful and the good and all similar [beings]”), he is embarrassed (*en aporia*) as regards *anthrôpou eidos chôris hêmôn kai tôn hoïoi hêmeis esmen pantôn* (“an **eidos of man** distinct from us and all those such as we are”);<sup>15</sup> the other occurrences are at *Phaedrus* 249a8-b1, *Phaedo* 76c12 and 92b6 in the formula *en/eis anthrôpou eidos* meaning “in human shape” and applied to the embodied soul, and at *Republic* VIII, 544d6 in the plural, in the mouth of Socrates saying that there are as many *anthrôpôn eidè* as there are political constitutions (*politeiôn*), a statement in which *eidè* means “kinds”. In short, the only place where Plato’s Socrates might refer to an *anthrôpou eidos/idea* in the “technical” sense usually associated with a supposed “theory of forms/ideas” is in a question made by Parmenides to a young Socrates, who answers that he is *en aporia* (“embarrassed”) about the existence of such a thing.

A better grounding for an *anthrôpou idea* might be found in another section of the *Republic*, the discussion at the beginning of book X of the three sorts of beds (*Republic* X, 595c7-598d6), where Socrates starts the discussion on the fact that “we are used to positing a certain unique *eidos* for each of the pluralities which we give the same name to (*eidos ti hen hekaston eiôthamen tithesthai peri hekasta ta polla hois tauton onoma epipheromen*; 596a6-7)” and proceeds to mention the *idean* the bed-maker considers when manufacturing a bed (596b3-10). This should help us understand the difference Plato’s Socrates might make between *eidos* and *idea*. In the naming process, whether to create a new name or when learning to speak, what we take into consideration is mostly the external visible appearance: in the allegory of the cave, the naming process takes place among the chained prisoners, based on the shadows. This is why Socrates talks of a common *eidos*: we don’t have to fully know and understand what we name and, even if the understanding of what is common to all beings with the same name can be refined and end up in the heaven outside the cave, it starts at the level of the many shadows inside the cave and thus can involve, depending on whom we are talking about (a chained prisoner, a freed prisoner still inside the cave, a freed prisoner outside the cave only capable of looking at shadows and reflections, etc.), any level of *eidos*, visible or intelligible. But when it comes to the maker, if he is to do a good job, he cannot rely only on the external visible appearance of a bed, which would be enough for a painter, not for a manufacturer; he has to understand the purpose and function of what he is manufacturing. In this respect, the choice by Socrates of *klinè* as an example is well taken: in Greek, *klinè* (“bed, couch”) derives directly from the verb *klinein* meaning “to lie/rest [on something]”, so that it was obvious to any Greek reader of Plato’s time that a *klinè* is what one can *klinein* upon.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the *idea* of

<sup>15</sup> The suggestions of the various kinds of beings there might be *eidè* of are indeed offered by Parmenides and Socrates only answers to the successive questions to agree or disagree or state his hesitations.

<sup>16</sup> To get a feel of how careful Plato was in choosing his words and examples and how important it is to read him in the original Greek, we can spend a little more time on this example. In fact, Plato’s Socrates starts the discussion

## Can We See the Sun?

*klinè* was almost built into the name. And if Socrates uses there the word *idea* and not *eidos*, it is because we are now talking, not of any kind of *eidos*, possibly visible, but of something which is exclusively of the intelligible realm: maybe the manufacturer proper can work based solely on plans made by somebody else without understanding what he is building, but then, the real maker of the bed is the one who drew the plans, knowing what kind of bed he wanted to have built: a bed for a newborn child, a bed for a hospital, a portable bed for travelers or soldiers, a bed for a king, or whatever. None of those beds would have the same visible appearance, size, weight, would be built using the same material, and so on, though they all are *klinai* (beds) intended for someone to *klinein* (rest) on them. To design a bed, one has to look, not at shadows on the wall of the cave, not even at (multiple) beds outside the cave, but at a star in the sky, that is, at an *idea*.<sup>17</sup>

Now, if indeed the Socrates of the *Republic* agrees that there is an *idea* of such a mundane thing as “bed (*klinè*)”, he should all the more agree that there is an *idea* of “Man”. And based on what we have said about the idea of bed, we may safely admit that it is among the stars in heaven that, in the imagery of the allegory of the cave, we should look for that *idea*. But is the idea of bed, or the idea of man, a star in the sky outside the cave? Not so sure! If we look closely at the text of the allegory, Socrates says that the prisoner will in time become capable of “looking toward the light of the stars and [of the] moon (*prosblepôn to tôn astrôn te kai selênês phôs*; 516a9-b1). If Plato’s Socrates takes the trouble to specify that they look at the *light* of the stars, it is no doubt because he wants us to make a difference between the stars themselves and the light they emit, which is not the same thing as the stars that emit it. After all, in the time of Socrates and Plato, the sun and stars were considered as gods<sup>18</sup> and, no matter what notion of “gods” they had, they were making a difference between the light they could see in the sky and what was behind it, god or else, not perceptible by sight. Light is the only thing coming from the stars, whatever they might be, that our human eyes can catch and it gives us only a very partial view of what those remote stars are. And the fact that those eyes here stand for the “eyes” of the mind doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t transpose what is true of the eyes of the body to the “eyes” of the mind, especially when we see that Socrates uses the same words, *eidos* and *idea*, to refer to what our mind perceives with his “eyes”.

What I mean is that this choice of vocabulary invites us to realize that “bed itself” or “man itself” or “good itself” (the stars and sun) are not the same thing respectively as “the idea of bed” or “the idea of man” or “the idea of (the) good” (the “light” those stars send to the “eyes”

---

with two types of pieces of furniture: *klinai* and *trapezai* (596b1), translated into English as “beds” and “tables”. But both Greek words are telling by their etymology, yet in different ways: we have seen that *klinè* is the substantive derived from the verb *klinein*, meaning “to lie, to rest”; *trapeza*, on the other hand, is a contraction of (*te*)*tra-pezos*, meaning “having four feet”. Thus, in one case the word refers to the *function* of what it names, in the other to its external *appearance* (*eidos*) or structure: not what its use is, but how it is built (with four legs) and, up to a certain point, what it looks like. To preserve all the subtleties of Plato’s text in English, we should deliberately mistranslate the text and, for instance, replace *klinè* by “seat” and *trapeza* by “tripod”. Now, the interesting point here is that, when it comes to choosing one or the other to proceed further with the example and talk of the role of the *idea* associated with the word, Plato selects the word whose etymology refers to function, not the one whose etymology refers to external appearance. This may have something to tell us about the difference between *eidos* and *idea*.

<sup>17</sup> It might be worth taking a minute here, on that specific example of *klinè*, to consider why the so-called “argument of the third man” doesn’t hold against such an understanding of *idea*: there is nothing in common between built beds and the *idea* of *klinè* (“bed”) so understood that would require a third sort of “bed” to account for the common name given to both. Nobody can *klinein* (“lie/rest/sleep”) on the *idea* of *klinè* (“bed”), it is not a bed, it spells what a piece of furniture ought to be to deserve the name *klinè* (“bed”). A bed being a visible thing, there are also *eidè* of beds, and indeed, there are as many *eidè* of bed as there are sorts (another possible meaning of *eidos* in Greek) of beds in the visible realm. But there is only one *idea* of bed for all those beds, in which nothing visible remains. And what is true of the *idea* of visible things that also have a visible *eidos* remains true of the *idea* of purely intelligible realities such as the just: *hè tou*.

*dikaïou idea* (“the ideal/form of the just”) is no more just than *hè klinès idea* (“the idea of bed”) is fit to sleep on.

<sup>18</sup> Socrates himself, to introduce the sun as source of light in the comparison between good and sun, at 508a4, asks Glaucon: “Which lord then, amongst the gods in heaven, do you hold responsible for this [light]? (*tina our echeis aítiasasthai tôn en ouranôi theôn toutou kurion* ;)”

## Can We See the Sun?

of our mind). Yet, both “man itself” (a star) and “the idea of man” (the light coming from that star) have an objective independent existence, as was the case with the shadows within the cave, the statues held by the bearers, the shadows and reflections of *anthrôpoi* outside the cave and those *anthrôpoi* themselves, and this independent existence doesn't depend on the way each one of us perceives it. For sure, the condition of each person's sight influences what that person can perceive of the shadows within the cave and a short-sighted or color-blind person will not perceive the same thing as a person whose sight is in perfect condition, but they are all looking to the same shadow; similarly the level of intelligence of each person determines what it can catch of the light coming from the stars outside the cave, but they all look at the same light coming from the same stars. In other words, an *eidos* (of individual instances of beings, either visible or intelligible) or *idea* (of conceptual characters of kinds of being called by the same name) is not a subjective perception within a person's brain, different for each one, but what stimulates *from the outside* either a person's eyes or its intelligence and induces in that person's “soul” one of the *pathêmata* (“affection”) that Socrates has listed at the end of the analogy of the line. Indeed the word *pathêma*, derived from the verb *paschein* (through its aorist *pathein*) meaning “to suffer”, implies the idea of something that happens to someone and that he suffers somehow passively. We have no problem admitting that the visible appearance (*eidos*) of a person or object should be the same for all and that, when it is not for someone, it means that this person's sight is defective. Plato suggests us that it is the same with our mind. The problem there is that it is much more difficult for anybody to admit he has a “defective” mind, if only because nobody is capable of saying what a “good” mind is and what it should “see”, than to admit it has a defective view, which can be corrected by glasses or cured by surgery, whereas no tools or procedures exist to correct defects of the mind, or even to identify such defects: for instance, is it a defect of the mind not to accept the idea that men have an immaterial “soul”, whatever that is, along with a material body (that is, in the imagery of the allegory, to refuse leaving the cave, even after having been freed of chains)?

In other words, what determines an *idea* as an objective reality outside our mind is the nature of the human mind at its best: it is what such a mind, owing to human nature, its intrinsic capabilities, constraints and limits, independent of further limits in any particular member of that species, can perceive of what the *idea* is the *idea* of.

Returning now to the allegory of the cave, we may go one step further by noticing that, in the same way *anthrôpoi* are the only kind of beings mentioned by name as “visible” outside the cave, the moon (*selènè*) is the only heavenly body mentioned by name among those the prisoner might see at night. This invites us to see the moon as the image in the allegory of “man itself” and its light as the image of “the idea of man”. Indeed, this is quite in line with the rest of the allegory focusing on *anthrôpoi*: the moon is the biggest and brightest celestial body visible during the night because it is the closest to the earth (a fact already known by people in the time of Plato), that is, to us. Using it as an image of “man itself” is one more way of telling us that “man itself”, in other words, what it means to be a human being, should be the primary concern of all our investigations, upon and above trying to better understand the individuals human beings that live around us (the *anthrôpoi* outside the cave) in order to make life together possible, if only because we cannot properly appraise those fellow citizens if we don't know what it means to be a human being and what makes the excellence (*aretè*) of such a creature. It is Plato's way of telling us: before trying to investigate tiny stars hard to see in the sky, investigate the moon, which is by far the brightest “star” and the easiest to see.

### ***Hè tou agathou idea***

For sure, Plato doesn't say all this, he only hints at it and lets us do most of the “decoding” of his imagery. Before the allegory of the cave, at the beginning of a section that includes the comparison of good and sun, the analogy of the line and the allegory of the cave, he announces

## Can We See the Sun?

that he will talk of “the offspring of the good itself (*ton [...] ekgonon autou tou agathou*; 507a3)”, and toward the end of the comparison between good and sun, he explains that the sun is indeed that “offspring of the good (*ton tou agathou ekgonon*; 508b12-13)” he was announcing earlier. But once the allegory is over, he only gives a short outline of the meaning of the allegory whose wording needs to be examined closely. He says: “This image then, said I, dear Glaucon, must be applied as a whole to what was said before, likening the place appearing by means of sight to the habitation of the prison, then the light of the fire within it to the power of the sun; positing then the ascent upwards and the contemplation of the [things] up there as the way up of the soul towards the intelligible place, you will not fail my expectation, since it is what you desire to hear. But a god, perhaps, knows whether it has a chance of being true. But anyway, to me, what comes to light comes to light this way: in the knowable, final, the idea of the good, and hardly seen, but once seen, it forces to conclude by reasoning that it is indeed responsible in all [things] for all that is right and beautiful, in the visible giving birth to light and its lord, in the intelligible lord itself granting truth and intelligence, so that the one intending to act in a sensible way either in private or in public matters must see it. (*tautèn toinun, èn d' egô, tèn eikona, Ô phile Glaukôn, prosapteon hapasan tois emprosthen legomenois, tèn men di' opseôs phainomenèn hedran tèi tou desmôtèriou oikèsei aphomoionta, to de tou puros en autèi phôs tèi tou hèliou dunamei: tèn de anô anabasin kai thean tôn anô tèn eis ton noèton topon tès psuchès anodon titheis ouch hamartèsèi tès g' emès elpidos, epeidè tautès epithumeis akoueîn. theos de pou oiden ei alèthès ousa tugchanei. ta d' oun emoi phainomena houtô phainetai, en tòi gnôstôï teleutaia hè tou agathou idea kai mogis horasthai, ophtheisa de sullogistea einai hôs ara pasi pantôn hautè orthôn te kai kalôn aitia, en te horatôi phôs kai ton toutou kurion tekousa, en te noètôi autè kuria alètheian kai noun paraschomenè, kai hoti dei tautèn idein ton mellonta emphronôs praxein è idiai è dèmosiai*; 517a8-c5)”

In this outline, Socrates never explicitly tells what the sun of the allegory stands for. In fact, he is unambiguous and assertive only about the interior of the cave: he associates the habitation of the cave, by then called a prison (*desmoteriou*), to the place revealed to us by sight, and the light of the fire within to the power of the sun, which implies that the fire of the allegory plays the part of the sun of the real world. But when he further associates the ascension out of the cave and contemplation of what is outside to the ascent of the soul toward the intelligible (*ton noèton topon*), he is no longer assertive and qualifies this as his *elpidos*, using a word, *elpis*, meaning “expectation, hope”, attributing it to himself (*emès*) and suggesting that this might be wrong by the negative clause *ouch hamartèsèi* (“you will not fail”) which uses the verb *hamartanein* meaning “miss the mark, fail, do wrong, err, sin”: in other words, he says that he himself hopes not to be wrong, but cannot say for sure, before suggesting that maybe (*pou*) a god (*theos*) could know (*oiden*) for sure whether this is true. Note that he doesn’t even say that *only* a god could know for sure because, not being himself a god, he cannot know for sure what gods are capable of, and the same is true of all men; besides, even the existence of god(s) is not something everybody agrees upon. The only thing he is sure of is that no human being can know this for sure, and a *fortiori*, no animal deprived of reason. But what is it exactly he is not sure about? If we think about it, it is not that the ascension out of the cave illustrates *his own* understanding of the ascent of man’s mind toward the intelligible realm, but that *his* understanding of such an ascent of the mind adequately describes what takes place in men’s minds.

His next move is even more telling: besides refusing to associate anything mentioned in the allegory as outside the cave, including the sun, with anything it could stand for, he moves from the realm of the *noèton* (“intelligible”) to the realm of the *gnôston* (“known/knowable”<sup>19</sup>), after

---

<sup>19</sup> *Gnôston* is the verbal adjective ending in *-tos* derived from the verb *gignôskein* (“to get to know”). Such adjectives may have either an active sense expressing possibility, corresponding to English words ending in *-able* or *-ible*, as is the case with *horaton*, “visible”, derived from *horan* (“to see”), or *noèton*, “thinkable/intelligible”, derived from *noein*, (“to think”), or a passive sense equivalent to a perfect passive participle, like *kruptos*, “hidden”, derived from

## Can We See the Sun?

warning us once again that he is only talking of how things (*phainomena*) appear (*phainetai*) to him (*emoi*, “to me”), using two forms of the same verb *phainesthai*, meaning “to come to light, appear, shine”, including the present participle *phainomena*, which is at the root of the English word “phenomenon” used to designate something that is perceptible by the senses. Moving from *noèton* to *gnôston* moves the focus from the “objects” of thought to the “subject” trying to get to know them. Indeed, thought, as sight, is, up to a certain point, a passive activity: we may direct our thoughts toward this or that, in the same way we can turn our eyes toward one or another object, but we start thinking as soon as we wake up, and we are not free not to think at all while awake, in the same way we are not free not to see as soon as our eyes are open; on the other hand, to learn, and, as a result, to know, depends solely on us. This distinction is made even clearer by the fact that Socrates associates to the word *noèton*, earlier in the same sentence, the word *topos* (“place, location”), as if to make this *noèton topos* (“intelligible place”), figured in the allegory by the outside of the cave, even more “objective”. What interests him when talking this way is obviously the “objects” of thought that are in this “place”, not the prisoner looking at them and capable or not to “see” them, that is, to understand them with his *nous* (“intelligence, mind”). When he switches to *gnôston*, he no longer talks of a place and he shows that his interest is now on the ascent of the prisoner, the process of getting to know what there is to be known. Besides, *gnôston* is the verbal adjective of *gignôskein*, the verb used in the Delphic inscription *gnôthi sauton* (“learn to know thyself”) which, as we said at the beginning of this paper, can be viewed as an intended background to the whole allegory of the cave. Thus, switching to *gnôston* is a way of reminding us of this task that awaits us.

We may go one step further in the understanding of what hides behind the move from *noèton* (“intelligible”) to *gnôston* (“known/knownable”). Whereas *noèton* (“intelligible”) stands in opposition to *horaton* (“visible”), *gnôston* (“known/knownable”) doesn’t. The learning process implied by the verb *gignôskein*, which leads us toward knowledge, is not limited to our wanderings outside the cave, but starts while we are still chained and looking at the shadows, capable of *dialegesthai* (“talk to one another, discuss”; 515b4), even if only about the shadows, and giving names to them (*onomazein*; 515b5). The story the allegory tells us between the lines is that there is no way we can see directly what there is to see outside the cave without going through the learning process which starts at the bottom of the cave, and that at all stages of this process, there is stuff to be “known”. The problem is not that the shadows, or the statues above the wall, or the reflections in waters outside the cave are not “knownable”, in the sense implied by the verb *gignôskein* as used in the motto *gnôthi sauton*, which doesn’t mean that there is *epistêmê* about them, but that to “know” them implies knowing them for what they are and not mistaking them for what they are not, which requires having gone further “upward” in the learning process: if you think the appearance (shadow) of the material body (statue) of Socrates is Socrates, then, you are wrong and indeed you don’t “know” what you think you know; but once you have understood that this shadow is only a shadow, and only the shadow of a statue of Socrates, then you may say about that shadow that you know, not Socrates, but the bodily appearance of Socrates, which is one very small part of what Socrates is. And once you have understood that the statue is only a statue and don’t think you know Socrates because you have dissected his dead body, or practiced surgery on his live body, then you can be said to “know” something about Socrates’ body, which still is a very limited and temporary part of what Socrates is. Indeed, the learning process which started with the *dialegesthai* between the chained prisoners trying to distinguish (*diakrinein*) between the shadows ends up in the *sullogizesthai* of the freed prisoner having at last seen the sun,<sup>20</sup> described in terms very close to

---

*kruptein* (“to hide”). In many cases, both meanings are possible. Thus *gnôston* might be translated either as “known” (passive) or as “knownable” (active, possibility).

<sup>20</sup> The verb *diakrinein* is not used by Plato in the allegory but I mention it here because it properly describes the process implied by the activity ascribed by Socrates to the chained prisoners: giving names to the shadows, which requires distinguishing between them and recognizing that some of them are indeed the same they had already

## Can We See the Sun?

those of the explanation Socrates gives of the allegory in the phrase quoted above: “and after this, he might gather by reasoning about it (the sun) that this one [is] the one providing seasons and years and presiding over all the [things] in the visible place, and, of those they themselves used to see, in a way, of all [of them], responsible (*kai meta taut' an edè sullogizoito peri autou hoti houtos ho tas te hōras parechōn kai eniautous kai panta epitropeuōn ta en tōi horōmenōi topōi, kai ekeinōn hōn spheis heōrōn tropon tina pantōn aitios*; 516b9-c2)”. Knowing *anthrōpoi* is not solely having seen them outside the cave, but having understood along the way that some of the shadows were shadows of statues that were themselves images of *anthrōpoi*, that there were also shadows and reflections of *anthrōpoi* outside the cave and that all those *anthrōpoi* were multiple instances of a same celestial body (the moon?) and could only properly be seen and understood in the light of the sun. Thus it implies in a way “knowing” shadows in the cave as shadows of statues, statues as statues of *anthrōpoi* when that is the case, shadows and reflections outside the cave as shadows and reflections of *anthrōpoi* when that is the case.

But then, Socrates sketchy explanation of the allegory quoted above makes it clear that all he says about what takes place outside the cave is tentative, not certain. In the second part of his explanation, as I said earlier, he is no longer making parallels between elements of the allegory and what they stand for in the real world, but describing *his* understanding of this learning process with no explicit references to the allegory.

It is in this context that we must understand the reference to *hè tou agathou idea* (“the idea of the good”; 517b8-c1). Socrates doesn’t say that *hè tou agathou idea* is what the sun stands for in the allegory, but only that it is the ultimate (*teleutaia*) object of our quest for knowledge and that it is “hardly seen”/“seen with great difficulty” (*mogis horasthai*). The only hint at the allegory here is in the verb *horasthai* (“to be seen”), which uses the visual analogy to deal with thought. All this is perfectly consistent with the suggestion that *hè tou agathou idea* is not the same thing as *auto to agathon* (“the good itself”) mentioned at 507a3 to introduce the sun as its offspring through the comparison of good and sun. What the good is in itself is one thing, what we can know of it with our human mind and its limits is another thing. Our minds are only sensible to the “light” of the sun and stars, which allows them only an *idea* of them, in the same way the visible light only gives us an *eidōs/idea* (“appearance”) of what it lightens and of the god Helios.

And the fact that Socrates attributes to this *idea* of the good, and not to the good itself, the property of being *aitia* (“responsible/cause”) “in all [things] for all that is right and beautiful (*orthōn te kai kalōn*)” should not disturb us. This attribution is presented, within the realm of the *gnōston*, as the result of a *sullogizesthai*,<sup>21</sup> that is, a human reasoning based on human *logos*. Socrates is not talking of “things” as they are, but heavily insists on the fact that he is only talking of what his (our) *logos* of human being allows him (us) to gather about them. And the only *gnōston* (“known/knowable”) about the good, for us, human beings, is at best its *idea*, not the good itself. This doesn’t mean the we cannot *talk* about the good itself—indeed, Socrates does so, for instance when presenting the analogy of good and sun<sup>22</sup>—but that we cannot *know* the good itself,

---

seen earlier, or are shadows of similar appearance (*eidōs*), and stresses one of the meanings of the prefix *dia-* also found in *dialegesthai*, the idea of separation, which is the opposite of the idea of gathering implied by the prefix *sun-* found in the verb *sullogizesthai*, used to describe the intellectual process taking place at the other end of the journey toward knowledge. Through the use of two verbs derived from the same root as *legein* and *logos* and opposed by their prefix at both ends of the learning process, Plato’s Socrates subtly reminds us of the way of reasoning by way of divisions (*diaireseis*) and gatherings (*sunagōgai*) he praises in the *Phaedrus* and calls *dialektikon* (*Phaedrus*, 265c5-266c9).

<sup>21</sup> *Sullogistea*, the word used by Socrates at 517c1 is the verbal adjective of obligation of the verb *sullogizesthai*, meaning “to gather by reasoning or computation”, derived from the verb *logizesthai* (“calculate” both in its mathematical and non-mathematical meanings), itself derived from *logos* in its various senses.

<sup>22</sup> More generally speaking, when using a word, we think of what we assume to be “real” behind that word, but it doesn’t mean that we *know* it as it is. In some cases, we may not even know whether it “exists”, whatever that means. When I use the name “Socrates”, I assume there is or was a real person by that name and I “know” various things about him, but that doesn’t mean that I *know* that person as it is, from the inside, so to say. In fact from this perspective, we must accept Socrates’ saying and admit that we *know* nothing, taking “know” in the strongest sense.



## Can We See the Sun?

but only what the limits of our human mind allows us to perceive of it, which is what Plato's Socrates calls its *idea*. Thus Socrates speaks properly: the known/knowable conclusions of a human reasoning can only concern the *idea* of the good, not the good itself.

But now, how an *idea*, that is, the features of an intelligible "thing" perceptible by a human mind, and not the real thing itself, could be *aitia* ("responsible/cause") for anything? To understand this, we have to keep in mind that we are reasoning with *words* and that words have their own limits and problems. In the case of *aitia*, the main problem is that the word has in Greek a much broader range of meanings than "cause", its usual translation in English, which most often implies a temporal sequence between cause and consequence where cause precedes consequence. In Greek, *aitios*, from which *aitia* derives as the feminine form used as a substantive, means "responsible", often in a judicial sense. It is well known that Aristotle has tried to categorize the various types of *aitiōn*, including among them what has come to be known as "final causes", that is, in his own words, *to telos* ("the end"), *to hou heneka* ("the in view of what"), which he associates with *tagathon* ("the good") at *Metaphysics*, A, 983a33.<sup>23</sup> Plato's Socrates himself, at *Phaedo* 96c-102a, tells us how he was deceived by Anaxagoras and what he and other philosophers offer as *aitiai*, taking at 98c-99b the example of why he is now sitting in his jail awaiting the executioner and talking with his friends rather than fleeing toward Thessaly as suggested the day before by his best friend Crito, differentiating (1) *to aitian tōi ontī* ("the real 'cause'"), which he ascribes to the fact that he deemed better for him (that is, for his *psuchē* ("soul"), whatever that means), because more just based on his understanding of what "just" means, not to try to escape from his jail, from (2) *ekeino aneu hou to aition ouk an pot' eiē aition* ("that without which the 'cause' could in no way be 'cause'"), namely the physiological explanation of how his muscles and bones allow his body to stay in a seated position and how vibrations of the air produce sound in the ears of his friends when he speaks. If we take the example of a man returning home after the flight he was supposed to take for a business trip of several days had been cancelled due to a strike of the air traffic controllers, finding his beloved wife in bed with another man and killing the man with a gun, depending on who you are and how you look at the facts, you might find many "responsible" for the death of his wife's lover: a physician writing the death certificate might ascribe responsibility for the death to massive bleeding and damage to vital organs; a police officer arriving at the scene after the husband had left might ascribe responsibility of the death to a gunshot, that is, in a sense, to the gun; a judge might later ascribe responsibility of the death to the husband; a friend of him might say that, in the end, the striking air traffic controllers were responsible for the death, because, had they not been on strike, the husband would not have returned home; a psychologist might say that love was responsible for the death, or anger (which might lead to an acquittal of the murderer in some countries). What this shows is that *aitia* is a word used by human beings to designate many different types of relations, either real or supposed, between events and/or "things", but always the result of men's reasoning and expressing men's understanding of those relations. So, here again, properly speaking, what participates in those relations is the perception we have of the events and beings involved, not those beings themselves. The real *aitia* of Socrates' staying in jail is not, properly speaking, justice, whatever that may be in itself, but Socrates' perception of the *idea* of justice and the relation he has established between it and the *idea* of the good.

Now, we have no problem understanding what *aitia* in Greek or "cause" in English means when saying that the bullet going through the heart of the lover was "cause" of his death, or that attraction from the earth is "cause" of the fall of material objects toward the ground, or that the meeting of a spermatozoid and an ovule in certain conditions is "cause" of the birth of a human being; we also understand what it means to say that love is the cause of the death of the adulterous lover, or of the birth of a baby, or that the idea of justice was cause of Socrates'

---

<sup>23</sup> See Aristotle, *Physics* II, 3, 194b23-195a2; 7, 198a14-22; *Metaphysics*, A, 983a24-35.

## Can We See the Sun?

staying in jail awaiting death; but we have a much harder time understanding in what sense the *idea* of the good, or for that matter the good itself, might be *aitia* of spatiotemporal phenomena involving no intervention from human beings whatsoever. For us, for an *idea* to be *aitia* of anything involves a *nous*, a mind of sorts in which this *idea* may induce behavior, and we are more and more reluctant to assume a mind at the origin of the material world. And we have even greater difficulties to understand what *aitia* might mean in relations between intelligible “beings” outside space and time, if only because we have a hard time in the first place to imagine what kind of “existence” such “beings” might have. And the same was already true in the time of Plato, even though they had a much more limited knowledge of physical causes.

But then, let us take an example which is at the heart of the analogies used here by Plato’s Socrates, the example of light. We say that light is the cause of vision (not the sun itself, but the light it emits) and we can explain it by sophisticated models involving particles called photons and electromagnetic waves (whatever that is), references to wavelengths to which cells in our retina are sensible and react by sending signals to the brain, etc. (the fact that Plato didn’t know of all this has no bearing on what I want to say), but we tend to forget that “light” and “vision” are words that have meaning only for us, animals endowed with eyes and brains working as described. There is no such thing as “light” outside the minds of human beings (or other creatures having similar features that we may not know). This doesn’t mean that there is nothing in our universe behind what we *model* as photons and electromagnetic waves, but what that might be, we don’t “know”, and to call this “light” is an anthropocentric way of talking.<sup>24</sup> Even without “knowledge” of photons and waves, Plato was capable of grasping this, because the way one models light is irrelevant to that conclusion.

The question that immediately comes to mind at that point is: “Could it be the same about ‘good’?” Before tackling this question as part of a deeper analysis of the comparison between sun and good, we will turn back to the allegory of the cave to see what else it can tell us about *ideai* in general and the *idea* of the good in particular.

We have seen that, in the allegory, *ideai* are pictured as celestial bodies in heaven. When talking about them, Socrates says that, at some point in time the freed prisoner will become capable of contemplating “*ta en tōi ouranōi kai auton ton ouranon* (the [stars] in the heavens and heaven itself; 516a8-9)”. If he is explicitly mentioning his ability to see both the stars individually and heaven as a whole, it is probably to invite us to realize that stars look all almost the same to most of us<sup>25</sup> and are all but tiny spots in the sky that don’t individually make sense but can only be recognized by their position within the overall pattern of the heavens as a whole. It is us, human beings, who group clusters of stars according to visible patterns we call “constellations” and give weird names to, such as “Big Dipper” or “Orion”, but those “constellations” don’t actually exist as such<sup>26</sup> in the heavens, and the stars themselves are not tiny spots of light. In the same way, causal relations, whatever type of *aitiai* we have in mind, are

---

<sup>24</sup> With our modern way of understanding light, this is even more obvious: we give the name “light” to a specific *subset* of wavelengths of electromagnetic waves, the one which activates the cells of our retina; but we now know that there are electromagnetic waves of all sorts of wavelength, both below and above the “visible” spectrum: radio waves, microwaves, infrared radiation, below visible light, ultraviolet radiation, X-rays and gamma rays above.

<sup>25</sup> We may remember here what I said earlier about “the square itself”: if we want to go all the way in abstraction, assume it with no dimensions, no size, no visible features such as color or drawn sides, no spatial position, outside space and time, there is nothing left for us to think about! We can only understand it through words by comparison with other such constructs in the “constellation” of geometrical figures: it has angles, as opposed to a circle which doesn’t; it has four sides as opposed to a triangle which has three or a hexagon which has six; it has straight angles as opposed to a lozenge, it has equal sides as opposed to a rectangle; etc.

<sup>26</sup> “As such”, that is as a group of stars having between them special relations other than displaying, when seen by human eyes from the earth, a specific pattern, not always obvious to all. It doesn’t mean that a constellation is a product of mere imagination, it has an objective reality in that it can be seen by any human being looking at it with the help of a map of the sky and/or somebody else, but it tells us very little about those stars: only that, when seen from the earth, they draw that pattern.

## Can We See the Sun?

only tools we, human beings, use to make sense of what we perceive around us and of the relations between visible beings, events and ideas.

In other words, as soon as Socrates has moved from the realm of the *noèton* (“intelligible”) to the realm of the *gnôston* (“known/knowable”), he can only be talking about the way things *appear* to our eyes (and more generally senses) and minds, not about what they are in themselves, that is, he can only talk about *eidè* and *ideai*. *Noèton* (“intelligible”), which must be understood in opposition to *horaton* (“visible”), even though both words imply features of human beings, mind (*nous*) and eyes, can be understood as relating to two kinds of beings, those that can be seen and those that cannot, so that they can be used in contexts where the stress is no longer on the fact that they are qualified by reference to a feature of human beings, but on which feature they are fitted to, eyes or mind. Thus it is possible to talk of the good itself as being “intelligible” to mean that we can grasp something of it through our mind, something which is at best the *idea* of it, and most of the time a deficient grasp of that *idea*. This is no longer possible when talking about *gnôston* (“known/knowable”), which doesn’t refer to a specific organ (eyes or mind) of human beings, but to their ability to capture something of what is around them by a combination of eyes and mind, to learn and get to know this. Thus, *gnôston* can only refer to the “appearance (*eidòs/idea*)” those “things” display for us.

### **Can we see the sun?**

Now, there is something else that should strike us in the above quoted explanation given by Socrates of the allegory: he says that the idea of the good can hardly be seen/seen with difficulty (*mogis horasthai*; 517c1),<sup>27</sup> whereas in the allegory, talking about the sun, he concludes the progress of the freed prisoner by saying: “In the end then, I think, the sun, [it is] not through reflections of it in waters or in foreign places, but itself according to itself in its own place [that] he might be able to see distinctly and contemplate as it is (*teleutaion dè oimai ton hêlion, ouk en hudasin oud' en allotriai hedrai phantasmata autou, all' auton kath' hauton en têtai hautou chôrai dunait' an katidein kai theasthai hoios estin*; 516b4-7).” For sure, this comes at the end of a strenuous progression from the bottom of the cave up to the outside and a long habituation once there to be able to see all there is to see including the sun, but the very wording of this member of phrase, its solemnity and redundancy, in obvious opposition with the brevity of the explanation (two words stressing the difficulty), makes it suspicious. The two verbs he uses, *kathoran* (at the aorist infinitive *katidein*) and *theasthai* (at the aorist infinitive *theasthai*) are not the most appropriate to describe the sight of the sun: the initial meaning of *kathoran* is “to look from above” and even if we take the prefix *kata* in the possible sense of “completely” and understand *kathoran* as meaning “to see in utmost details/to see distinctly”, neither meaning fit the way we can look at the sun; and the same is true of *theasthai*, which means “to contemplate, to view like a spectator at the theater”.<sup>28</sup> And the accumulation of redundant words to insist on the fact that he sees it as it is, *auton kath' hauton en têtai hautou chôrai... hoios estin* (“itself according to itself in its own place... as it is”) suggests quite the contrary of what *mogis* implies in the explanation of the allegory. As a matter of fact, we might think, based on the explanation, that Plato’s Socrates had chosen the sun to represent the good in the allegory precisely because it is hard and painful to look at the sun otherwise than very shortly or through clouds or when it is rising or setting over the horizon and no longer displaying the full power of its light. Indeed, Socrates was perfectly aware of the fact that looking at the sun is dangerous for the eyes, even during an eclipse, and says so at *Phaedo* 99d4-e1. He even somehow hints at this when describing the behavior of the freed prisoner inside the cave, in so describing its last step: *ei pros auto to phôs anagkazoi auton blepein, algein te*

<sup>27</sup> The first meaning of *mogis* is “with toil and pain”, hence “hardly, scarcely”. The stress is on the idea of something painful.

<sup>28</sup> “Theater” comes from the Greek word *theatron*, itself derived from the verb *theasthai*.

*an ta ommata kai pheugein apostrophomenon pros ekeina ha dunatai kathoran* (“[don’t you think that] if he were forced to look toward the light itself, his eyes would feel pain and flee away turning back toward those [things] that he is capable of seeing distinctly”; 515e1-3).<sup>29</sup>

If we add to all this the fact that Socrates introduces this whole sentence with an *oimai* meaning “I guess/I think/I suppose” and uses the optative form *dunait’ an* (“he might be able to”) which gives the sentence an hypothetical twist, we are bound to conclude that this description of the prisoner’s last step is ironical and constitutes sort of a test of the attention of his interlocutors (and, for Plato, of us, readers). Whatever the sun stands for in the allegory, the good itself or only the idea of the good, we must accept that we can hardly see it, and only with great difficulty and not “as it is”.

Now, the insistence on those “as it is”, “in its own place”, “itself according to itself” suggests that the sun stands for the good itself, notwithstanding the fact that, in the explanation, Socrates refers only to *hè tou agathou idea* (“the idea of the sun”), for reasons that have been given earlier, but without saying that this is what the sun stands for.

But we shouldn’t be too disappointed by this reading of the ultimate step of the ascent of the freed prisoner, because there is something much more important for us that the allegory might help us understand. What good would it be for us in our quest for better getting to know ourselves, which should be *the* affair of our life, to see the sun itself, even if we didn’t ruin our eyes in doing so?! What is important for us in a source of light is not the source itself, but what the light it emits allows us to see. What is important for us with the sun is not to see it as it is, a bright spot of light whose outline we cannot even determine when we briefly look at it, but, once our eyes are able to tolerate its light in plain daylight, the *anthrôpoi* it allows us to see more clearly than at night in the dim light of the moon (the *idea* of Man?). What good would it be for us to “see” the good itself, whatever that might be, when the only thing we should care for is the good *for us*, human beings? Here lies the main reason why Plato’s Socrates always sidetracks the discussion when asked to talk about the good itself and why Plato didn’t write a dialogue about the good itself, but only one, the *Philebus*, about the good *for man*.

## A mind for good

Such a sidetracking is precisely what happens at *Republic VI*, 506b2-507a5,<sup>30</sup> where Socrates is asked by Adeimantus and Glaucon to present his own understanding of the good (*to agathon*) and offers in place to talk about *ton tokon te kai ekgonon autou tou agathou* (“the product and offspring of the good itself”; 507a2), proceeding with a discussion of sight and the role which the sun as prime source of light plays in it, which ends in a comparison between sun and good introducing the analogy of the line and the allegory of the cave.

The problem with that comparison between sun and good is that no one, to my knowledge, has ever gone far enough in exploiting it. For commentators, it is little more than a nice poetic

---

<sup>29</sup> Notice that Socrates doesn’t say that the prisoner would be forced to look “at the fire”, but “toward the light”, so that we don’t even know whether he is talking of the light coming from the fire or of the light coming from the outside of the cave through the opening on the side toward which the prisoner will soon be dragged. Neither does he say that the prisoner will get used to it and eventually be able to contemplate the fire itself. The next step is the dragging outside of the cave.

<sup>30</sup> In the middle of this section, at 506d2, Glaucon bursts into the discussion and takes the place of his brother Adeimantus as interlocutor of Socrates. This change of interlocutor at the time Socrates renounces to talk about the good itself marks the exact middle of what he has introduced as the “third wave” (*Republic V*, 471c4-VII, 541b5), in which he introduces and develops the principle of the “philosopher-king”. It marks the culminating point of an ascent toward the good through the investigation of what a true philosopher should be before a “return to the cave” developing the educational program that might be used to raise such philosophers in the real world, introduced by the comparison of sun and good, the analogy of the line and the allegory of the cave. This refusal to proceed further toward the good itself on the part of Socrates, is consistent with what I said earlier of the ironic twist in the description of the last step of the freed prisoner in the allegory of the cave: if, regarding his young interlocutors, he most likely deems they have not had enough of an habituation outside the cave to even glimpse at the sun (cf. 533a1), he is probably not ironic about himself when saying that he doesn’t *know* what the good itself is.

## Can We See the Sun?

image to be reused in the allegory of the cave, and they rush toward the highly metaphysical conclusions Socrates draws from it about the good beyond *ousia*<sup>31</sup> without properly understanding either the comparison or those conclusions. I might say that, like Adeimantus and Glaucon, they are eager to turn their eyes toward the sun rather than proceeding as suggested by Socrates and, in so doing, ruin their eyes.

Indeed, the comparison must be pushed all the way through and seen, not as a simple “image”, but as a true “parallel”. As a matter of fact, it doesn’t end with Socrates’ statement that the good is beyond *ousia*, as can be seen in the transition that follows with the analogy of the line. At 509d1-3, Socrates says: “Conceive then, said I, as we were saying, these to be two, and to reign, the one over the intelligible<sup>32</sup> race and place, the other on the other hand over the visible (*noèson toinun, èn d’ egô, hôsper legomen, duo autô einai, kai basileuein to men noètou genous te kai topou, to d’ au horatou*)” just before suggesting to take a line and to split it in two segments in order to illustrate what he just said. Indeed, Socrates’ next statement starting at 509d6, considered as the start of the analogy of the line, begins with the words *hôsper toinun*, meaning “just as if, then, [taking a line...]”, showing that they are the continuation of his previous statement. What is an “image” in the above quoted statement is the use of the analogy with a kingdom introduced by the verb *basileuein*, derived from the word *basileus* meaning “king”,<sup>33</sup> not the parallel between the good and the sun, which must be taken literally. What that means is that the two initial segments of the line are, the one, the intelligible (*noèton*), the kingdom/realm of the good, the other, the visible (*horaton*), the kingdom/realm of the sun (as the provider of light). What Plato’s Socrates is trying to make us understand is that, in the same way our eyes have been designed to catch the light and make us able to see, our *nous* (“intelligence”) has been designed to figure out what is good *for us* and make us able to reach that good. To better make the point, Plato didn’t hesitate to use, in a phrase which draws a parallel between sun, sight and light on the one hand, good, knowledge and truth on the other hand (508e1-509a5), rare words that are most likely neologisms forged by him: *hèlioeidè* (“formed after the sun”; 509a1) about sight (the product of the eyes) and light and *agathoeidè* (“formed after the good”; 509a3) about knowledge (the product of the mind) and truth, both formed along the same pattern, with a suffix *-eidè*, derived from *eidōs* and meaning “akin to/looking like”, appended to *hèlios* (“sun”) in one case, to *agathos* (“good”) in the other. Socrates had introduced the word *hèlioeidès* at 508d3 about the eyes. Reusing it in a parallel between sight and knowledge invites us to understand that the *nous* (“intelligence”) too, seat of knowledge, is *agathoeidès* in the same way the eyes are *hèlioeidè*, that is, that it stands in the same relation to the good as the eyes to the sun (and light in general). In other words, the good is to the mind

---

<sup>31</sup> I prefer to leave this word untranslated at this point for reasons that will soon become clear. The usual translation by “being” is completely misleading and reveals a total misunderstanding of one of the key points Plato is trying to make through his dialogues.

<sup>32</sup> This is the first occurrence in the *Republic*, and probably in all the dialogues, of the word *noèton*. It comes in a phrase which starts with the word *noèson*, aorist imperative active of the verb *noein* (“to think, to conceive in one’s mind”), of which *noèton* is the verbal adjective. In order to help Glaucon understand this new word naming what sets the mind (*nous*) to work, Socrates asks him to make use of his *nous* using a word which is as close to *noèton* as possible without being the same word. There are 27 occurrences of *noèton* in the dialogues, 14 of them in the *Republic*, all in books VI (8 from here to the end of the analogy of the line) and VII (6). The other occurrences are in *Phaedo* (3), *Sophist* (1), *Timaeus* (8) and *Laws* (1).

<sup>33</sup> The words *genos* (“race”) and *topos* (“place”), explicitly used about the intelligible and implicitly about the visible are called by the image of a kingdom: what defines a kingdom is its geographical boundaries, the “place (*topos*)” it occupies on earth, and its population, the people the king reigns over. The Greek word *genos* conveys this idea of individuals belonging to a same “family”, in the case of a kingdom, the “family” of the subjects of the king. Note that Plato has been careful to construct his phrase in such a way as to make those two words explicit for the most abstract of the two “kingdoms”, that of the intelligible, for which they are more problematic, and only implicit for the “kingdom” of the visible, where they are easier to accept. To be more specific, *topos* (“place”) goes along well with the visible, and not at all with the intelligible, while *genos*, a word sharing certain meanings with *eidōs*, goes along well with the intelligible when understood with one of those meanings (“kind, species, class”), and less with the visible. Nevertheless, Plato has associated both to both realms.

## Can We See the Sun?

what light is to the eyes. As I said, it is not a simple image, but a true parallel, to be taken seriously, including in what it says about man's organs and faculties (eyes and mind).

Whereas animals have an instinct that guides them toward the proper food for them, the proper behaviors for them in the face of danger, the appropriate sexual partners for them, etc., human beings have a much more sophisticated "tool" for the same purpose, their intelligence (*nous*), not limited to physical needs, but inducing its own needs to reach its goal, learning and knowledge.

But, in much the same way the instinct of animals is not infallible and may fool them in the face of unusual situations, human intelligence is not infallible and, being a much more sophisticated tool, leaving room for free will, may run into much more trouble than animal instinct. But, in all cases, any human being acts based on what *he* thinks is best *for him* at that time. This is the properly understood meaning of the so-called Socratic "paradox" that nobody does willingly evil, where "evil" is a poor rendering of *kaka* ("bad [things/actions/...]" ) giving the saying an exclusively moral twist: not that it would be sufficient to teach somebody what is "evil" in a moral sense, like killing his neighbor or stealing, to prevent him from doing it, but that no one will ever willingly do something *he* deems at the time, deep inside, worse *for him* than other courses of action.<sup>34</sup> When a tyrant orders the killing of his opponents, he may perfectly well know that this is wrong in some (moral) sense, and in any event most likely knows that it is bad *for them*, but, if he does it, it is because he thinks that it is better *for him* to have them dead than alive. The problem is that, in much the same way our sight might fool us in dim light into making wrong guesses about what we hardly see, our intelligence may fool us about what is *really* best for us in any given situation, due to the lack of appropriate knowledge and foreseeing of the consequences of our behavior. This is the reason why investigating the *idea* of the good should be our main concern, as seeking sufficient light is our main concern in order to see and not to bump into everything around us as soon as we move. And because this *idea* is hard to grasp, it might be the affair of a whole life.

That we all know this, even if we don't formulate it in so many words, is what Socrates means at *Republic* VI, 505d5-506a2, in the prelude to the comparison between sun and good, when he says that it is obvious to all that, "regarding just and beautiful [things/behaviors/possessions/words/...],<sup>35</sup> many would choose what seems so even if it isn't, to nevertheless do and possess those and have such a reputation, but good [things/possessions], nobody would ever be satisfied with acquiring those which *seem* so, but they seek those which [really] *are*,

---

<sup>34</sup> If we look at the way that so-called paradox is stated in the *Laws*, things are even clearer. At *Laws* IX, 860d1-2, the Athenian says: *hoi kakoi pantes eis panta eisin akontes kakoi* ("the bad [guys] always, in all [things], are involuntarily bad"). He is not talking about *doing* (morally) evil things, but about *being* bad, which is a completely different thing. To make the point, let us assume that you are a kitchen knife and have your say about what kind of kitchen knife you will be, would you want to be a terrible knife with a poor blade, unable to even cut half-melted butter, or a good knife with a sharp blade for perfect cuts? Or if you were a racehorse and had your say on what kind of racehorse you would become, would you want to become a looser, a horse finishing always last in races, or a winner? No human being wants to become what *he* thinks, deep inside, is a bad man. When Meno, after the battle of Cunaxa, decides, rather than trying to lead his soldiers back to Larissa even though he doesn't know the road from Cunaxa to Larissa (about the historical Meno, as known to us through Xenophon's *Anabasis*, see note 73 below; about the "road to Larissa", see *Meno* 97a9-b8), to betray his fellow generals and join the Persians, he doesn't do it to become a bad guy, but because he (wrongly) thinks that this is at that time the best way for him to save his life and possibly become rich and powerful again, all things that he deems "good" *for him*. The only reason why one becomes bad is because he has a wrong understanding of what a good human being is. Hence the importance of getting to know what it means to be a human being and what makes a human being truly "good".

<sup>35</sup> In the Greek, Socrates uses only adjectives neutral plural (*dikaia kai kala*) without further precisions on what might be so qualified. It is only the verbs he uses later in the sentence that help us imagine the many kinds of "things" he might have in mind: *prattein kai kektesthai kai dokein* ("act and possess and be reputed"). When it comes to *agatha* ("good", here also a neutral plural), only one verb is used, *ktasthai*, infinitive present middle, meaning "acquire for oneself" (whereas, about *dikaia kai kala*, he had used the form *kektesthai*, infinitive perfect middle of the same verb, meaning "having acquired for oneself", that is "possess"). This makes it clear that what he has in mind in the second part of the phrase, dealing with *agatha* (neutral plural), is not moral "good", but whatever could be qualified as "good", and is the acquisition *by oneself for one's own use* of those good whatever.

and everybody holds semblance of no value in such cases (*dikaia men kai kala polloi an helointo ta dokounta, kan ei mè eiè, homôs tauta prattein kai kektèsthai kai dokein, agatha de oudeni eti arkei ta dokounta ktasthai, alla ta onta zètousin, tèn de doxan entautha èdè pas atimazei; 505d5-9*), and proceeds further by describing the good as “that which every soul pursues and in view of which it does all it does, divining by instinct that it is something, yet puzzled and unable to grasp adequately just what it is and to reach stable belief about it as about other things (*ho dè diòkei men hapasa psuchè kai toutou heneka panta prattei, apoman-teuomenè ti einai, aporoussa de kai ouk echousa labein hikanôs ti pot' estin oude pistei chrèsasthai monimôi hoiai kai peri talla; 505d11-e3*).” In other words, many people would satisfy themselves with merely looking just to others, even if that is not the case, so long as it allows them to be well considered and honored by their neighbors, to hold situations of power and wealth, or to wear clothes they find beautiful only because it's the fashion of the day, even if they are not, but nobody would want to buy a used car to go to work that only looks good, but they know doesn't work and cannot be fixed. And at the same time, most people realize that they don't have a clear and stable understanding of what is truly “good” to them.

This is what makes the good the *archèn anupotheton* (510b7) mentioned by Socrates in the analogy of the line to distinguish the two segments of the intelligible. To grasp this, we must properly understand those two words, *archè* and *anupothetos*, without being disturbed by the mathematical guise given his analogy by Plato's Socrates. *Archè* is a substantive derived from the verb *archein*, whose first meaning is “to come first, to walk ahead, to guide”, hence “to lead, to govern”. Thus, the word *archè* may mean either “principle” or “sovereignty, dominion, magistracy”. But a weird thing happened to this word: from the initial meaning of “the one coming first” in a sense relating to spatial position, that is walking ahead of the others and guiding them, leading to the meaning of “first in dignity”, that is the one first in the chain of command, it has come to mean “first” without qualification and eventually, especially in physics, “first in time”, “beginning”, “principle” as an origin (in time) of everything else; in other words, starting as “the one ahead”, that we are looking at and following, walking in the direction he shows us, it ends as “the one behind”, most remote from us in time, from which we descend. And in a context such as that of the analogy, where Socrates takes his examples in the realm of geometry, the temptation is great to give the word the meaning it has in physics as “first principle”.<sup>36</sup> In fact, we have the same type of problem with *archè* as the one I mentioned earlier about *aitia*, and indeed, Aristotle, in the above mentioned text of the *Physics*, cites, among the various possible meanings of *aitia*, *hè archè tès metabolès hè prôtè è tès èremèseôs* (“the first principle of change or rest”; *Physics* II, 3, 194b29-30), adding to *archè* the qualification *protè* (“first”) to make sure he is properly understood, thus implicitly showing that *archè* doesn't always mean “**first** principle”. In the case of Plato's Socrates, in line with his preference for final causes, I prefer to understand *archè* as meaning “leading principle”, that is, what we are looking at to serve as a principle of our behavior, what we are keeping an eye on to drive us in life, that is, not something which is *within time* prior to us, which might be the *generating cause in the past* of all there is, but something which is outside space and time and gives meaning to our whole life, which we are striving to reach in moving *forward* in life. And this is precisely the role he assigns to the good in the above quoted phrases when he defines it as “that which every soul pursues and in view of which it does all it does”.

Now, what does he mean by qualifying this *archè* of *anupothetos*. Here again, etymology is in order. *Anupothetos* is built by adding a privative alpha to the verbal adjective ending in “-tos”<sup>37</sup> derived from the verb *hupotithènai* (“to put under”), itself made up of the prefix *hupo* (“under”) added to the verb *tithènai* (“to put”). The verbal adjective *hupothetos* exists in ancient Greek, though maybe not in Plato's time, in the medical vocabulary and means “suppository”, that is, something that is “put under”. *Hupothetos* and *hypothesis* are both derived from the

<sup>36</sup> So Shorey, Grube & Reeve, Reeve: “*a first principle*”; Bloom: “*a beginning*” (with a note saying that “[it] can also be rendered by ‘starting-point’, ‘principle’ or ‘cause’”).

<sup>37</sup> On the general meaning of such verbal adjectives, see note 19 page 13 above.

same verb, and I have mentioned earlier the problems posed by the transposition of the Greek word *hupothesis* in English.<sup>38</sup> We have seen that, in the context of the analogy of the line at least, Plato's Socrates, when using the word *hupothesis*, is not putting the stress on the "hypothetical/uncertain" character of what he is talking about, but rather on the firm grounding it gives to the ensuing reasoning, at least for those who hold it. Now, there are other possible derivations from *huptithênai*, such as *hupotheteos*, the verbal adjective of obligation ending in *-teos*, meaning "that must be put as a *hupothesis*", "that must be assumed", which is used by Plato at *Timaeus* 61d3 with the meaning "it must be assumed"; another derivation, found only in Greek much later than Plato, is *hupothetikos*, meaning "hypothetical" (its mere transcription in English) or "suggestive". Such a derivation using the suffix *-ikos*, suggesting the ability to do something, is common in ancient Greek and is found in such a word as *dialektikos*, meaning "able to *dialegesthai*", that is "to engage in dialogue/discussion", "skilled in discussions", to take as an example a word known and used by Plato, which he might even have created. If I insist on those various derivations, it is because, when faced with the word *anupotheton*, which is most likely a neologism Plato forged for the occasion, most translators translate as if the word were *anupothetikon* and had to do with the hypothetical or non-hypothetical character of the *archè*, that is, with its greater or lesser certainty.<sup>39</sup> But Plato was very careful in his choice of words, and, especially if, as is likely, he had to forge a new word here to say what he wanted to say, if what he had wanted to say was "not having the character of a hypothesis", he was perfectly capable of picking or creating the word *anupothetikos*. So, if we forget about *hupotheseis* and try to understand the word that was written by Plato, the appropriate translation is "not put under", so that the question which immediately comes to mind is "put under *what?*" The answer to this question is given in advance by Socrates' lines I translated above: when he says that many people might be satisfied to only look just, without actually being so, he implies that those people don't seek justice *for itself*, but as a step toward something else; and that something else is, directly or indirectly, what is sought *for itself*, which is recognized by the fact that, when it comes to it, people are no longer satisfied with mere appearance, but want the real thing. And this is precisely the good, understood as what one thinks good for himself. In other words, the good is a leading principle that is not "put under" something else in the sense that it is not for us a "ground" on which we might find support to reach higher,<sup>40</sup> as is the case for instance for (apparent) justice, used as a path toward wealth or power for those who think wealth or power good for them, but a goal that we value *for itself*, a resting place after which there is nothing more. Plato's Socrates is not here in the spatiotemporal perspective of physicists looking "*backward*" toward a first principle of the universe, but in the ethical perspective of a person trying to find direction for his/her life and looking *forward* in order to better live the rest of his/her life according to values (physical and moral) that, as such, are outside space and time. And thus, there is no way we can understand him if we keep the physicists' model and understanding of those words in mind. If we want to translate into English the words *archèn anupotheton*, we have to explicit what is implied in those two words: for instance "a leading principle that doesn't serve as a ground to reach higher".

<sup>38</sup> See page 8 above.

<sup>39</sup> Jowett: "a principle **that is above hypotheses**"; Shorey: "a beginning or principle **that transcends assumption**"; Bloom: "a beginning that is **free from hypotheses**"; Grube & Reeve: "a first principle **that is not a hypothesis**"; Reeve: "an **unhypothetical** first principle."

<sup>40</sup> The image of "ascent" toward the *archè anupothetos* is not only used in the allegory of the cave to describe the progression of the freed prisoner toward the sun, it is also suggested by the vocabulary of the analogy of the line, if only by the verb *katabainein* ("to come down") used at 511b8, in the reformulation of the description of the process involved in the second segment of the intelligible, to explain what takes place after reaching that *archè*. It was also present in the negative form in the reformulation relative to the first segment of the intelligible, with the words *ou dunamenèn tôn hupotheseôn anôterô ekbainein* ("not capable of walking out **higher** than the hypotheses"; 511a5-6) used about the soul involved in such a process. This image of an ascent invites us to understand *hupothesis* in its etymological sense of "something put **under**" to serve as a step in the building of a "stairway" leading us closer to the *archè*.



## ***Dianoia vs. noësis***

Having better understood the meaning of the words *archè anupothetos* and what they refer to, the good as the “sun”/“light” of the mind, we must now consider what it means for the distinction between the two segments of the intelligible in the analogy of the line, as Plato’s Socrates makes it clear in its two successive descriptions of them that the key difference between *dianoia* and *noësis* is the fact that the later seeks this *archèn anupotheton* and works from there while the former doesn’t and satisfies itself with *hupotheseis* (“grounds”) taken anywhere.

Regarding this, the first thing I have to say is that in this case, unlike what was the case for *anupotheton*, the words themselves and their etymology won’t be of much help. Plato’s Socrates makes this perfectly clear by changing them when reminding his interlocutors of the division of the line toward the end of book VII, at 533e7-534a8, after an exchange with Glaucon about the appropriateness of the word *epistèmai* (“sciences”) to name geometry and similar fields of study and its possible replacement by *dianoiai*, concluding that it is not the name that matters but the understanding of what it stands for:<sup>41</sup> There indeed, if he keeps *dianoia* at the same place, he replaces *noësis* by *epistèmè* and uses *noësis* to designate the two processes associated with the segment of the intelligible as a whole, that is, both *dianoia* and *epistèmè*. The fact is, both words, unlike *anupotheton*, are of common use, especially *dianoia*,<sup>42</sup> and both are derived from the word *nous* (“mind”, “intelligence”). *Noësis* designates the activity of the *nous*, and *dianoia* the activity of the *nous* moving through (*dia*) thoughts. And because they are of common use, they end up having a broad range of meanings and may not evoke the same things for different people.

So we should not start from our prior understanding of the word to try and understand what Socrates is saying, but start from his explanations to understand, not the word, but what he is talking about, no matter what word he uses to name it. This is one reason why it should not be a problem to leave the two words untranslated in the ensuing analysis. Translating them would imply a choice and that choice, whatever it would be, would only make things harder and further obscure the issue.

When we compare the explanations Socrates gives of the two mental processes he will end up calling *dianoia* and *noësis*, especially in the synthetic explanation he gives first in one sentence at 510b4-9, we easily see that the differences revolve around two points: the search for

---

<sup>41</sup> This conclusion is drawn at 533d7-e6. The text of this section, including its distribution between Socrates and Glaucon, is disputed and some scholars think that part of it is a late interpolation of stoic inspiration. Without going into all the details of my argumentation, let it suffice here to say that I read the following text:

**Socrates**—...esti d', hōs emoi dokei, ou peri onomatōs amphisbētēs, hois tosoutōn peri skepsis hosōn hēmin prokeitai...

**Glaucon**—Ou gar oun, ephē, all' ho an monon deloi pros tēn hexin saphēneiai legein en psuchēi

**Socrates**—Areskei oun, èn d' egō...

Which I translate:

**Socrates**—...but it is, as it seems to me, not a dispute about the name, on [concepts] so broad as those about which an investigation lies before us...

**Glaucon**—certainly not indeed, said he, but to say with clarity what could only be made visible within the soul owing to its state/condition/habit.

**Socrates**—It suffice then, said I...

In other words, I see Glaucon interrupting Socrates and ending his sentence, like a good student eager to show his teacher he has well understood the lesson, remembering what Socrates had said in the analogy of the line, when introducing the word *dianoia*, about such things as the square itself: “that one could see by no other means than *dianoia* (*ouk an allōs idoi tis è tēi dianoiai*; 511a1).” As for those who find stoic connotations to the word *hexin*, suffice it to remind them that Glaucon himself has already used it at 511d4, toward the end of the analogy of the line, in his reformulation of what he had understood of Socrates’ explanations.

<sup>42</sup> *Dianoia* occurs 150 times in the dialogues. *Noësis* is much less frequent, with only 23 occurrences in the dialogues, 15 of which in the *Republic*: this one in book VI and the 14 others in book VII.

an *archên anupotheton*, central in *noësis* and absent in *dianoia*, which I have already mentioned, and the use of *eikones* (“images”), present in *dianoia* and not in *noësis*.<sup>43</sup> Now, based on what we have seen of the good as playing the part of the light of the sun for the mind and being the *archên anupotheton* mentioned here by Socrates, it is easy to reformulate the difference between *dianoia* and *noësis*, or, if you prefer to forget about names, between the two ways of making use of our intelligence Socrates has in mind: one looks at whatever it considers in the “light” of the good, while the other doesn’t and uses whatever “light” it might find, such as the dim light of a few “stars/*ideaî*” that might happen to be available to it in the night it is roaming through. And, as we already know from our analysis of the allegory of the cave and the fact that *anthrôpoi* are present at all stages of the progression, both inside and outside the cave, under various guises, this distinction has nothing to do with the type of beings under consideration. It doesn’t oppose, for instance, scientific investigations to more abstract topics in the fields of ethics or politics, but two different “lights” shed on the same topics, two different ways of looking at them.

But it obviously doesn’t mean either that *noësis* implies that we establish a direct immediate link between what we are investigating and the idea of the good. The best example to understand this is given by Socrates himself, without explicitly saying so, through what he does in book VII of the *Republic* after completing the explanation of the allegory of the cave, when designing a program of education for the future “philosopher-kings”. This program includes, among other, arithmetic, geometry, “astronomy” to end up in “dialectics” and is at the same time a program of selection along the way, meaning that most students enrolled in it might never reach its end (at the age of fifty! Cf. 540a4-5). For those who attend it, it is only *dianoia*, but it has been devised by persons who had the good of the citizens in mind as the goal of the education of future political leaders, and thus it is apt to lead to *noësis* at least those who have the potentiality to complete it. And those who do might eventually understand what the relation was between the arithmetic and geometry they were taught at the beginning of their education and the idea of the good they have eventually grasped by now. They might understand why developing their capability of abstraction through numbers and figures was a necessary step toward more abstract concepts leading to the idea of the good. Thus geometry practiced for the sake of it, for the pleasure of finding new theorems, by one who doesn’t care to *tôn hupotheseôn anôterô ekbainein* (“walk out higher than the hypotheses”; 511a5-6), that is, stays on the “grounds” (*hupotheseis*) provided him by his geometrical concepts, point, line, square, circle, triangle, diagonal, etc., is no more than *dianoia*, whereas when it is practiced, probably with the exact same methods of reasoning, as a step toward abstraction, through a program of studies devised by one who knows where he is heading, it may not yet be *noësis*, but it is a path toward it, the ascending path toward the outside of the cave and the habituation needed once there to support the bright light of the sun at noon.<sup>44</sup>

Let us take another example in the area of *anthrôpoi*, again using the case of Socrates. When Anytos meets Socrates, at least in the meeting imagined by Plato in the *Meno*, he comes with strong ideas about sophists, even though he has never met one, and deep suspicion that Socrates is one of them, probably due to his knowledge of Aristophanes’ play, *The Clouds*, picturing Socrates as a sophist, and, as I said earlier, he works on the *hypothesis* that sophists are a plague for the city. And he doesn’t even want to have Socrates challenge his convictions because he fears he might lose ground in the discussion with him, having heard, among other

---

<sup>43</sup> The explanations given subsequently by Socrates show that *eidè* don’t play a discriminating role here, as they are used in both processes, including *horomena eidè* (“visible appearances”) in *dianoia*. The only difference between both on this respect is that *noësis* uses *only eidè*. I will come back to this later, as it relates closely to the use of *eikones*.

<sup>44</sup> This is precisely what Socrates tells Glaucon after completing the description of the preliminary program of education including arithmetic, geometry and the like, in order to introduce dialectics, in section 531c9-535a2, at the end of book VII, when he talks about students able to find what is common between those matters (*tên allêlôn koinônina kai suggeneian*; 531d1-2) and by what they are related to one another (*hêi estin allêlois oikeia*; 531d2-3) and says that, for those who can’t do that, those studies have been worthless (*anonêta*; 531d4)

## Can We See the Sun?

in Aristophanes' play, that sophists are skilled in discussions and able to confuse interlocutors into taking the unjust for the just and vice-versa. So, he stands firm on his grounds (*hypothesis*) and interprets all he hears from Socrates as confirmations that he indeed is a sophist. Based on this, through a *dianoia* conducted on the pale reflection of the idea of justice and the good in the mirror of the city, hardly lighting the night he is in and shading a misleading light on Socrates reflection on that same mirror, he will end up bringing him to court and having him condemned to death.

On the other hand, when Plato writes the *Crito*, he is not interested in the question whether the historical Socrates should escape to avoid an unjust death, because the actual Socrates has long been dead by then. He is not interested either in the question whether the historical Socrates *should have* escaped, which is a moot question as concerns Socrates years after his death. What he wants his readers to think about is the *general* issue posed by that case: what would it mean for a city ruled by laws if any citizen decided to ignore the law when it becomes detrimental to him, examined in a case where the problem is pushed to its limits where accepting the undeserved verdict of the law means death? If the condition for the best possible life for the citizens of any city implies that they accept limits to their freedom imposed by laws which are the mark of men's reason in organizing their life in society as "social reasonable animals" within "cities", can they reasonably accept to be personally judges of when the laws apply to them and when not? Plato there is not dealing with individual cases, as Anytos was doing, but with types/kinds (one possible sense of *eidos* in Greek) of situations, and is doing so, not with concern for the past, but in view of the future where similar cases might occur again, not necessarily as dramatic as the case of Socrates (indeed the problem is the same, though with less dramatic consequences, when one decides to speed up beyond speed limits on a highway, or to cheat on his tax return). This, in my opinion, is what Plato's Socrates means when he says that, in the second segment of the intelligible, after having reached the *archè anupotheton*, one "taking hold anew of all that holds to it, thus moves down toward a conclusion, accessorially making use of absolutely nothing sensible, but with *eidesi* themselves, through them toward them, and concludes with *eidè*<sup>45</sup> (*palin au echomenos tôn ekeinès echomenôn, houtôs epi teleutèn katabainèi, aisthètôi pantapasin oudeni proschrômenos, all' eidesin autois di' autôn eis auta, kai teleutai eis eidè*; 511b7-c2)": using the case of Socrates as a *hypothesis* (cf. 510b7, 511b5) and the dialogue as a guide toward the principle in play, the good, not of the city, which is a purely temporal construct of men, but of the citizens' *souls*, that is, of human beings bound to live in society, the reader is invited by Plato to move on his own toward *noësis* in his own thoughts by deriving the *general* rules that apply to the *kind* of cases similar to the one which provided the ground for the inquiry, the case of Socrates used only as a springboard to raise toward the principle involved in it regarding the good for human beings and in return deduce what it means *to us* for the present and future.

But then, what about the second discriminating feature, relating to images? In the member of phrase just quoted, and in the whole phrase it is a part of, there is no reference to *eikones*

---

<sup>45</sup> If I leave the various forms of the word *eidos* untranslated here, it is because no English word covers the full range of meanings of that Greek word and that translating it, especially as "Forms" (with a capital "F") after centuries of "Platonism", makes it harder to understand what Plato had in mind. We must keep in mind that a few lines earlier, in dealing with the first segment of the intelligible, Plato's Socrates as used successively the expressions *horômenois* ("visible") *eidesi* (510d5) and *noëton* ("intelligible") *eidos* (511a3). Later in the *Republic*, at the beginning of book X, introducing the discussion on the three sorts of beds, Socrates says: "Indeed, we are in the habit, methinks, of positing some unique *eidos* for each of the pluralities we give the same name to (*eidos gar pou ti hen hekaston eiôthamen tithesthai peri hekasta ta polla hois tauton onoma epipheromen*; 596a6-7)." In other words, an *eidos* is what lies behind a common name. But we must remember that, in ancient Greek at the time of Plato, the distinction between names and adjectives was not clearly perceived and that it was usual to use adjectives, even certain forms of verbs or propositions as substantives by adding the definite article in front of them, as for instance *to agathon* ("the good") or *ta dikaia* ("the just things/behaviors/attitudes/..."), to only mention expressions we have already encountered earlier in this paper.

## Can We See the Sun?

(“images”), only to the fact of using nothing “sensible (*aisthêtôi*)” and to the exclusive use of *eidè*. How does that relate to images?

When describing the process associated with *dianoia*, Socrates gives us from the start a clear indication of what he has in mind when talking of *eikones* (“images”): at the beginning of his explanation of the two segments of the intelligible, he mentions *tois tote mimêtheisin hôs eikosin chrômenè psuchè* (“the soul making use as images of those [things] formerly being imitated”; 510b7), in other words, what serves as “images” in the first segment of the intelligible is what was an original for images (shadows and reflections) in the realm of the visible. And to make sure that we don’t miss the point, when he later goes into more details and deals with geometers drawing figures, he adds, talking about those figures: *hôn kai skiai kai en hudasin eikones eisin* (“of which there are shadows and reflections in waters”; 510e2-3), a property of geometrical figures that is not the first that comes to mind, even if, at the time, lines drawn in the sand or on wax tablets could indeed produce shadows. The reason for that weird precision is that it refers with the same words to the explanation he had given earlier (509e1-510a3) of what he meant by *eikones* when assigning those to the first segment of the visible, using precisely those two examples, shadows and reflections. What it means to us is that it is the whole visible world in its materiality which is now considered as *eikones* when moving in the intelligible realm. Using the imagery of the allegory of the cave, it means that *dianoia* still deals with the statues within the cave even when using words to reason on them. But after closely reading the allegory of the cave along the lines presented in this paper, we should now know that the problem is not, for instance, to deal with men (plural) rather than with some *idea* of Man (singular) supposed to be hidden behind the word *anthrôpos*, but to only be able to relate the shadows and reflections in waters of *anthrôpoi*, the only things that a freed prisoner still at the stage of *dianoia* is so far able to see outside the cave, to the *andriantai* above the wall within the cave rather than to the *anthrôpoi* outside the cave, that he is not yet able to see. In other words, in *dianoia*, even if we start having a faint notion that men are more than their bodies, we have a hard time thinking about them without dragging along their bodies, their visible appearance, in our thoughts about them, like the geometer thinking about the square itself, but dragging along the images of squares he has drawn in the sand or on wax.

Now, when Socrates moves to *noësis*, in his synthetic presentation, he describes it as being the one in which the soul is “proceeding up to a leading principle that doesn’t serve as a ground to reach higher, from a supporting ground and without the images around that, making its way with the *eidesi* themselves through them (*ep’ archèn anupotheton ex hupotheseôs iousa kai aneu tôn peri ekeino eikonôn, autois eidesi di’ autôn tèn methodon poioumenè*; 510b6-9).” It is not clear in the Greek what the pronoun *ekeino* in *peri ekeino* (“about that”), neutral singular, refers to. Both *archè* (“leading principle”) and *hupothesis* (“supporting ground”) are feminine in Greek, and there is no neutral singular noun in what precedes. Most translators see the words *peri ekeino* referring globally to the process described in the first part of Socrates phrase, that is, *dianoia*, in which the material beings of the visible world are said to be used as images of abstract realities. If that were the case, the images that would not be used in *noësis* would be the visible beings of the spatiotemporal world. But we have seen earlier<sup>46</sup> that the *logon* (“rationale”) presiding to the division between *dianoia* and *noësis* should involve something which, in *dianoia*, is image of something whose original is in *noësis*, in the same way the division between *eikasia* and *pistis* involves in *eikasia* images (shadows and reflections) of what *pistis* works on: the material things of the visible realm. And “objects” of the intelligible realm (*noëta*), as originals of which objects of the sensible/visible realm (*horata*) are images, are not for the exclusive use of either *dianoia* or *noësis*. In fact, both deal with them. So, we need to find

---

<sup>46</sup> See page 3 the section called “*Ana ton auton logon.*”

something else that might be used as original in *noësis* whose images would be used in *dianoia*. The insistence of Socrates on *eidè*<sup>47</sup> in his descriptions of the second segment of the intelligible, that of *noësis*, suggests that they are the originals whose “images” are used in *dianoia*. But we must also remember that, being now in the intelligible realm, the “images” of those *eidè* in the first segment (*dianoia*) must also be intelligible. Thus, the images we should be wary of in *noësis* are not so much the visible beings behind the words we use as... the words themselves, which were introduced in the allegory of the cave as echoes, that is, *reflections* of sounds, precisely to make us understand that they too are images.<sup>48</sup> When Socrates says that, in *noësis*, we should proceed “with *eidesi* themselves, through them toward them, and concludes with *eidè* (*eidesin autois di' autôn eis auta, kai teleutai eis eidè*; 511b7-c2)”, without qualifying those *eidè* only a few lines after having successively talked about *horômenoîs* (“visible”) *eidesi* (510d5) and *noëton* (“intelligible”) *eidōs* (511a3), we should understand that the opposition he has in mind is not between exclusively intelligible *eidè* that would be the real “beings”, the “beings themselves” of which we are talking as opposed to their material “copies” in space and time, but the *eidè*, of whatever might be under examination and the words used to talk about them. In book X of the *Republic*, introducing the discussion on the three sorts of beds, Socrates says: “Indeed, we are in the habit, methinks, of positing some unique *eidōs* for each of the pluralities we give the same name to (*eidōs gar pou ti hen hekaston eiôthamen tithesthai peri hekasta ta polla hois tauton onoma epipheromen*; 596a6-7).” In other words, an *eidōs* is what lies behind a common name. The problem is that the same name can end up pointing at several sorts (one possible meaning of *eidōs*) of things (think of *eidōs* itself, for instance, which may mean “appearance”, “shape”, “figure”, “form”, “class”, “kind”, “sort”, “species”, etc., all concepts that have fuzzy boundaries) and multiple words may be used to talk about the same things (for instance *schêma*, *eidōs* and *idea*, which have overlapping ranges of meaning around the concept of “visible appearance”). In other words, most often, we are not in the situation of the geometer putting as *hupothesis* “square”, which most people understand the same specific way as himself and without ambiguity. Yet, most people conduct discussions as if the words they use had a clear meaning and the same for all. And even if they go one step further, all they are able to do is, as the geometer, to give a definition of the words they use with a few other words. *Noësis* implies that we understand that words are only images and that we think and reason about the *eidè* behind the names rather than staying at the level of the names themselves. But we can only think and reason with words, as Socrates says in the *Theaetetus* in defining thinking (*to dianoeisthai*)<sup>49</sup> as “a speech that the soul itself conducts to its end with itself about whatever it might submit to investigation (*logon hon autè pros autèn hè psuchè diexerchetai peri hôn an skopèi*; *Theaetetus* 189e6-7)”, agreeing with the Stranger from Elea of the *Sophist* when he tells Theaetetus that “*dianoia* and speech are the same: only the inner dialogue of the soul with itself without production of sound, this itself has been given by us the name ‘*dianoia*’ (*dianoia men kai logos tauton: plèn ho men entos tès psuchès pros hautèn dialogos aneu phônès gignomenos tout' auto hêmîn epôno-*

<sup>47</sup> Here again, where I want to show that what Plato had in mind with *eidōs* is not what most people think, I leave this word untranslated, for the same reasons as those stated in note 45 above.

<sup>48</sup> See above page 4 the section called “Reflection and echo.” This way of understanding Socrates’ phrase implies that we understand the *ekeino* in *aneu tôn peri ekeino eikonôn* as referring, not to the process describing *dianoia* and the images involved there, that is, the material things of the visible realm, but to what the *hupothesis* mentioned just before is about, and “the images around that (*tôn peri ekeino eikonôn*)” as the words used to state the *hupothesis*. When the geometer says “Let us suppose (an English word derived from *supponere*, the exact Latin equivalent of *hupothitenai*) a square with sides two feet long...”, he uses the word “square”, but he has no idea what that word really stands for and doesn’t think of it as an “image” of he couldn’t say what; for him, if there is an “image”, it’s the drawing of the square he might trace on the sand or elsewhere.

<sup>49</sup> *Dianoeisthai* is the verb from which *dianoia* derives. To talk of *to dianoeisthai*, that is, to use the infinitive of the verb preceded by the article, as opposed to *dianoia*, is to put the stress on the fact that thinking is an activity which takes place in time, not a mere abstraction.

*masthè, dianoia; Sophist 263e3-5*)." Strictly speaking, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* was defining *to dianoieisthai* ("the act of thinking") and the Stranger is there defining what he names *dianoia*. Do they use *dianoia* and *dianoieisthai* in the same sense as the Socrates of the *Republic*? And if so, does that mean that only *dianoia* uses words, not *noësis*? Besides, we have seen earlier that, when reminding his audience of the division of the line at 533e7-534a8 toward the end of book VII, Socrates replaces *noësis* by *epistêmè* and uses *noësis* to include both *dianoia* and *epistêmè*. So, how to make sense of all this? It turns out that this is the perfect example to make us understand what it means to deal with *eidè* rather than with words. Let us take the word *dianoia* and the definition given by the Stranger: the ensuing sentence of the Stranger in the *Sophist* reads: "but the flow coming from it [the soul] through the mouth with a noise has been called 'logos (speech)' (*to de g' ap' ekeinès rheuma dia tou stomatos ion meta phthoggou keklètai logos; Sophist 263e7-8*)." It is clear that the Stranger is there defining *dianoia* in opposition to *logos* (another word with a multiplicity of meanings), opposing an inner silent activity of the mind to an outer audible activity producing meaningful sounds, whereas Socrates, in the analogy of the line, is opposing *dianoia* as a form of reasoning, either silent or audible, which uses words without thinking of them as mere images, to *noësis/epistêmè* as a mental state involving the *eidè* behind the words. In other words, those words don't come with their own predefined meaning, but make sense by the context in which they are employed and the other words they are related to, in the same way the stars in the sky all look alike so long as you look at them one at a time, and don't "make sense" until you group them in constellations. Concerning *dianoia*, this shows that, in some contexts, it may refer to the activity of the mind (*nous*) without distinction, and in others, it may become specialized for a certain type of mental activity. And the same is true of *noësis*.

### ***To dialegesthai***

This is key to understanding dialectics, or rather *to dialegesthai*, the activity of the mind which is the goal of the educational process of the philosopher and should lead to *noësis/epistêmè*. Let us take a look at the way Socrates introduces it toward the end of book VII, as the ultimate step in the formation of philosophers: "Therefore, said I, Glaucon, is not now this the tune itself that the *dialegesthai* brings to completion, the one that, though it being intelligible, might mimic the power of sight, that we described as attempting to look at first at the living [beings] themselves, then at the stars themselves and indeed in the end at the sun itself?<sup>50</sup> And thus, each time someone, with the *dialegesthai* attempts, without all the sensations, through the *logos*, to rush toward what each [something] itself is, and doesn't withdraw before he might have grasped by *noësis* itself what 'good' itself is, he arrives at the goal itself of the intelligible as the other than at that of the visible. (*oukoun, eipon, Ô Glaukôn, houtos èdè autos estin ho nomos hon to dialegesthai perainei; hon kai onta noèton mimoit' an hê tès opseôs dunamis, hèn elegomen pros auta èdè ta zôia epicheirein apoblepein kai pros auta ta astra te kai teleutaion dè pros auton ton hêlion. houtô kai hotan tis tôi dialegesthai epicheirèi aneu pasôn tôn aisthèseôn dia tou logou ep' auto ho estin hekaston horman, kai mè apostèi prin an auto ho estin agathon autèi noèsei labèi, ep' autôi gignetai tôi tou noètou telei, hōsper ekeinos tote epi tôi tou horatou.; 532a1-b2*)." What Socrates describes here are the successive steps of *noësis* taking place outside the cave, as is made evident by the use of the word *noësis* itself and by the multiplicity of *auta* ("themselves"), *auto/auton* ("itself"), referring to those found in the allegory of the cave each time the prisoner moves from shadows and reflections in waters to what they are images of, that is, from *dianoia* to *noësis* in the symbolism of the allegory: ***auta ta zôia*** ("the living [beings] themselves") echoes ***husteron de auta*** ("and later [the things]

---

<sup>50</sup> This member of phrase is a brief reminder of the allegory of the cave, but there, Socrates seems to have reversed the way the analogy works: he is talking of sight mimicking thought. In fact he is simply talking as the one who devised the allegory of the cave and tells us that, in it, he used sight to mimic thought.

themselves”; 516a8), where *auta* refers to *hoi anthrōpoi* (“human beings”) and *ta alla* (“the other [things]”) of which are first seen shadows and reflections in waters mentioned in the same phrase; *auton ton hēlion* (“the sun itself”) echoes (with less emphasis) “the sun [...] itself according to itself in its own place [...] as it is (*ton hēlion* [...] *auton kath' hauton en tēi hautou chōrai* [...] *hoios estin*; 516b4-7)”, seen too first through reflections in waters; and in between the mention of *astra* echoes that of 516b1 in the allegory. This shows clearly that dialectical knowledge is not limited to abstract ideas outside space and time, but is at first possible about *ta zōia* (all the living creatures), and, we might say, that this is even a prerequisite for the knowledge of a higher type of beings, if we recognize that the process described by Socrates here and in the allegory is a sequential process taking place within time in which shortcuts are not possible, at least for one who has not yet gone at least once all the way through. It also makes it clear that this process is conducted *dia tou logou*, an expression which requires investigations, because its proper understanding is key to understanding what that which we have come to call “dialectics” means to Plato.

At first glance, *dia tou logou* looks like an explanation by etymology of *dialegesthai*. Indeed, *logos* is the substantive derived from the verb *legein* (“to say/speak”), of which *legesthai* is the middle. But things are not that simple since the prefix/preposition *dia* has several meanings stemming in various directions from the original meaning “through”: the stress may move on the fact of going all the way through, leading to an idea of duration or of completion, or of being in the middle of what one goes through, or of having reached what is at the end or even beyond, either in space or in time, and it may also mean “by means of” or “because of”. As a prefix in composition, from the idea of “in between”, it may import the idea of “between one another” or “one with another”, and this is the sense found in the usual meaning of *dialegesthai*, which is “to talk with one another, to discuss”, or else, using the English word derived from the same root, “to dialogue”. *Dialogos* (“dialogue”) is indeed the substantive of action associated with that verb. But *dia* in *dia tou logou* doesn't have that meaning of “one with another”, so that to say that *dialegesthai* is done *dia tou logou* is not a mere tautology by etymology. And the *dia* in *dia tou logou* may indeed be understood in several ways, and, in my opinion, Plato didn't want his readers to choose between those different possible meanings, quite the contrary; he wanted them to understand, especially in the context of the process he was describing, that *dia tou logou*, had to be taken as meaning at the same time “by means of *logos*” and “all the way through *logos*” in an attempt to go “beyond *logos*”, “beyond the words themselves” to grasp what we could grasp of *auto ho estin hekaston*, that is, “what each [x] itself is”, no matter the name you give it, whatever x stands for, either a living being, an abstract concept or you name it. And he wanted furthermore that we import all those nuances of meaning in the *dia* of *dialegesthai*, that we don't limit its meaning to the usual “discuss” or “dialogue”, but that we understand it as describing the activity of going *dia tou logou*, through *logos* by means of *logos* toward what is beyond *logos*, what he calls *eidē/ideai* in certain contexts and which words illustrate as vocal “images”, not always of good quality.

And what is true of *dia* having several nuances of meaning is true as well of *logos*. It refers both to the ways we express our meaningful thoughts, that is, word, speech, saying, statement, language, etc., and the “reason” within us which gives meaning to those words. In the end, *logos* is what distinguishes human beings (*anthrōpoi*) from all other animals: not simply emitting modulated sounds,<sup>51</sup> but pronouncing meaningful speeches. And this too, Plato wants his readers to keep in mind when hearing the words *dialegesthai* or *dialektikos*,<sup>52</sup> referring to an activity practiced *dia tou logou*.

---

<sup>51</sup> Which would be *phteggesthai*, see the section named “Reflection and echo” on page 4.

<sup>52</sup> The adjective *dialektikos* is used by Socrates a few lines before those quoted above, at 531d9, to suggest that those that are merely skilled in geometry and the other disciplines included in the program of education described so far cannot be said to be *dialektikoi*.

## Can We See the Sun?

Thus, if the *logos* is what makes human beings human, and if, on the other hand, human beings are animals bound to live in groups, in other words “social animals”, as Plato’s Socrates suggests in describing the birth of “cities (*poleis*)” in book II of the *Republic*,<sup>53</sup> then, the verb *dialegesthai* summarizes by itself the most characteristic activity of *anthrōpoi*: to make use of their *logos* in social life. And if that is the case, the proper conduct of this activity is the way of being a “good” human being. And if, as I concluded earlier based on a correct reading of the analogy between sun and good,<sup>54</sup> our mind is designed to allow us to understand what is good for us as our eyes are designed to catch light and see, then, a good use of the *dialegesthai* can only be one striving to grasp whatever it can form the *idea* of the good and to understand the world around in its light. In the allegory of the cave, the chained prisoners are said to have the power to *dialegesthai*<sup>55</sup> right from the start, which leads them to give names (*onomazein*; 515b5)<sup>56</sup> to what they see. But it is at the time a very embryonic capability: Plato’s Socrates adds to the verb *dialegesthai* the words *pros allēlous* (“with one another”), which are redundant with the *dia* of *dialegesthai* in its usual sense, to show us that, there, he takes the word in this common sense, and he makes no reference to the *logos*, but only to the activity of “giving names”. In other words, the *ability* to *dialegesthai* is common to all *anthrōpoi*, but the use they make of it is not the same for all. And, as the comments of Socrates on dialectics we are examining make clear, the whole learning process illustrated by the allegory of the cave is meant to make us able to use it properly so as to become *dialektikoi* (“skilled in the art of *to dialegesthai*”).

In this perspective, *hè dialektikè* (“dialectics”; 534e3)<sup>57</sup> is not a specific technique, or even a specific field of study with specific methods, such as the method of divisions used in the *Sophist*, for instance; it is the proper way to reach *noēsis/epistēmè* without being fooled by words and under the light of the leading principle found in the *idea* of the good, which requires as one of its key ingredients to investigate this *idea*. And one of the best ways not to be fooled

---

<sup>53</sup> See *Rep.* II, 369b5, sq. In Plato’s time, the city-state (*polis*) was, at least in Greece, the basic unit of “political” organization. This is why, even today, many words associated with the social organization of men stem from the root *polis* through their models in Greek: politics, politician, etc. The Greek title of the dialogue we call *Republic* is *Politeia*. *Republic* derives from its translation in Latin by Cicero under the name *Respublica*, which doesn’t keep all the range of meanings of the Greek *politeia*. And *Republic* in English, which has become nothing more than the name of a special type of social organization, is even worse. *Politeia* in Greek derives from the word *politēs* meaning inhabitant of the *polis*, that is, “citizen” (a word derived from *civis*, the Latin equivalent of *politēs*), itself derived from *polis*. *Politeia* has a wide range of meanings revolving around the notion of *politēs*. It includes the fact of being a *politēs*, the rights and/or duties of a *politēs*, the normal way of life and/or behavior of a *politēs*, the set of all the citizens, the organization of the life of *politai* within the *polis*, the constitution and legal provisions organizing that life, whatever the form of government involved, and, in some contexts, a democratic form of government. And Plato had all those meanings in mind when calling his dialogue *Politeia*, both the meanings relative to individual citizens and those involving the social organization of their lives, *except* probably the last one (the specific form of a democratic form of government), which is unfortunately the only one preserved in *Republic*. This misleading translation puts the stress on the purely political/social dimension of the dialogue at the expense of its individual/ethical dimension. But all Plato is trying to make us understand in this dialogue is that men are by nature “political” animals, on top of being “logical” (that is, endowed with *logos*) animals, and that there is no way they can lead a “good” life as human beings if they lose sight of that fact: justice, as described by Plato’s Socrates in the *Republic*, which can be viewed as the “idea(l)” of Man in this life, is the inner harmony of a tripartite soul whose unity is not given in advance as the foundation for social harmony within the city, where, in both case, each “part” (of the soul/of the city) does its own job to the best of its ability and doesn’t mess around with the job of others (parts of the soul/citizens).

<sup>54</sup> See above page 20 the section titled “A mind for good”.

<sup>55</sup> *Ei oun dialegesthai hoioi t’ eien pros allēlous* (« so, if they were capable of *dialegesthai* one with another...; 515b4).

<sup>56</sup> See note 4 page 5 for my reading of that dubious text.

<sup>57</sup> A rare expression in Plato’s dialogues, who much prefers to talk of *to dialegesthai*, that is, a *process* rather than a science or technique. The only other occurrence of *hè dialektikè* is at *Republic* VII, 536d6, a couple of pages after this one. The expression *hè dialektikè technè* (“the art of dialectics”) is found only once, at *Phaedrus* 276e5-6 (*tè dialektikèi technèi*), and the expression *hè dialektikè epistēmè* (“the science of dialectics”) is found only once too, at *Sophist* 253d2-3 (*tès dialektikès epistēmès*). *Dialektikos* is originally an adjective, which Plato uses to qualify either individuals (its most frequent use among the 19 occurrences found in the dialogues, 8 of which in the *Republic* alone), or activities, or various things such as a journey (*poreia*; *Rep.* VII, 532b4, immediately after the phrase being commented, in reference to the “journey” outside the cave toward the sun), a pursuit (*methodos*; *Rep.* VII, 533c7, a few lines later, again to characterize the same journey described in terms more reminiscent of the analogy of the line), the nature (*phusis*) of certain individuals who can thus be said *dialektikoi* (*Rep.* VII, 537c6)



## Can We See the Sun?

by words is to remain flexible in their use, to avoid “technical” vocabulary with which we no longer question the meaning of “technical” words supposed defined once for all like mathematical concepts, and thus to be wary of “definitions” in which a word is supposed to be defined by a few other words, often as problematic as the word they purport to define.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, to avoid getting fooled by one’s own mind, the best thing to do is to submit one’s own opinions to cross examination in discussions, provided interlocutors are also sincerely willing to exchange points of view with the intention of making progress toward truth, not of holding to their *hupotheseis* in all circumstances, or of wining the debate at all costs.

If Plato was not much interested in Aristotle’s logic, it is not because he was careless in conducting demonstrations or had no faith in a rigorous approach to reasoning, or because he hadn’t had a chance to hear of it before his death, but because logic focuses on the rules for deducing conclusions from hypotheses and requires, to work, strict definitions of words, which Plato knew is impossible in most cases, and specially in those cases which should be of most concern to us, ethical problems involving the good. Besides, he knew that it is not logic which proves that a conclusion is right, but the truth of the conclusion which proves that the chain of deduction was properly conducted. And the truth of the conclusion is either already in us in some way or should be proven by experimentation, as is the case in modern science. The way the Stranger from Elea proves that it is possible to say something that is not (the case, that is, something wrong), is not by a long logical deduction, but by a call to a very simple example: “Theaetetus sits”, “Theaetetus, with whom I’m now dialoguing, flies” (*Sophist* 263a). Anybody who knows that Theaetetus is the name of a character in Plato’s dialogue supposed to be a human being in conversation with the person saying those words knows that at least the second proposition cannot be true, because a human being cannot fly (in the time of Plato, there were no planes or other flying devices).<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> In this respect, the so-called “aporetic” dialogues are by no means failures in the eyes of Plato, quite the contrary, as they don’t purport, as most people think after Aristotle, to seek a “definition” of the thing under examination, but to show how absurd and futile it would be to try to enclose such complex notions inside a few words that require themselves examination to be properly understood. A good example of this is the *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates seeks to understand what “pious (*osios*)” means with the help of a man supposed to be wise in religious matters. At some point in time in the dialogue, Socrates brings Euthyphro very close to a “definition” of piety that would be “justice in our relations with gods”. Unfortunately, Euthyphro formulates it using the word *therapeia* (“service, care”; *Euthyphro* 12e6-7), which he is subsequently unable, despite Socrates efforts, to replace by a more appropriate term, which Socrates wants him to find by himself. Socrates doesn’t do it for him, because he knows (and want his readers to understand) that such a definition would be of no use, especially to Euthyphro, if he is unable to find it by himself using the words in the sense he gives them, and both “justice” and “gods” are problematic terms: indeed, trying to have Adeimantus and Glaucon (and us) understand what “justice” means for Plato’s Socrates takes the whole *Republic*, and most readers of it still misunderstand it, and regarding “gods”, not everybody accept their existence and those who do don’t agree on what they might be. Euthyphro, a character most likely created by Plato, whose name means “straight mind” in a sense suggesting “rigid mind”, thinks he knows what gods are and expect from men, what piety means, what justice means, based on the meaning the city gives to those words, but he is unable to explain that (to *logon didonai*, “give reason”, of his *hupotheseis*, his “creed”) in a discussion (*dialegesthai*) in much the same way geometers are unable to give reason of the square or the circle aside from their commonly agreed “definition.” Yet, he is prosecuting his own father in the name of those principles in a far-fetched affair of murder he deems him responsible for. The dialogue with Euthyphro helps us better understand the breadth of problems involved behind the word “piety”, and thus have a better grasp of the “limits” between that concept (not word) and neighboring *eidē* and of the problems of boundaries between them, but those who miss a concluding definition show they have not understood Plato’s objectives in writing the dialogue, and giving them a definition would thus be of no use to them (note that, if I use the vocabulary of limits and boundaries here, it is because the Greek word translated by “definition” is *horismos*, derived from a verb, *horizein*, meaning “to set boundaries, to delimit”, at the root of the English word “horizon”, which designate the limits of sight).

<sup>59</sup> It is the purpose of the *Parmenides* to show us where pure logic may lead when used on abstract concepts with no care for common sense, and it is not by mere chance that the pale interlocutor of Parmenides in the “tedious game” which occupies the greatest part of the dialogue is named Aristotle. Sure! This Aristotle is not *the* Aristotle student of Plato, but another historical character who ended up one of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens, also known to us through Xenophon’s list of them in his *Hellenica* (II, 3, 2). But I am convinced that Plato chose him to play that role to teach a lesson to the Aristotle who studied and taught at the Academy until Plato’s death: the logic of Parmenides is perfect from beginning to end and Aristotle can only answer yes or no, yet Parmenides successively demonstrates, with the same logical rigor, everything and its contrary, and the reason for this is that he never defines

## Get rich!

As stated by Socrates, the goal of *to dialegesthai* is to grasp *to logon hekastou tès ousias* (534b3-4), “the *logos* of the *ousia* of each [x]”.<sup>60</sup> As can be seen from my non-translation of these words, each one of them poses problems. To begin with the easiest one, *hekastou*, neutral genitive singular of the word *hekastos* meaning “each one” or “everyone”, the problem it poses is that it doesn’t say “each one *what?*” Socrates has in mind. Without further precisions and based on what he says in the previous lines, starting with the sentence quoted at the beginning of the section titled “*To dialegesthai*” page 30, it probably refers to almost anything, including both living creatures (*ta zôia*; 532a3) and abstract *ideai* mentioned with the imagery of the allegory of the cave as stars and sun in the quoted line, that is anything of both the visible realm considered under its intelligible aspect (*noèton eidos*) and purely intelligible concepts with no visible counterpart. Regarding *logos*, we have already seen all the many meanings that this word may take. In this context, it may mean account, definition, reason or even saying or speech, implying the idea of being able to give a meaningful and true speech on the subject at hand. And probably none of these meanings should be excluded if dialectics is what I said earlier. The important thing is not to come up with a dictionary style “definition”, but to be able to use the *logos* under any form to express as much of the truth about what is under consideration as is possible and to defend it in discussion if needed, without being fooled by words.

But the most problematic word here is *ousia*. This word reminds us of the famous statement of Socrates concluding the comparison between sun and good. After saying about the sun: “The sun, I suppose, you will declare [it] to provide to the [things] seen not only the power to be seen, but also generation/becoming and growth and nourishment, though not being itself generation/becoming (*ton hêlion tois horômenois ou monon oimai tèn tou horasthai dunamin parechein phêseis, alla kai tèn genesin kai auxên kai trophên, ou genesin auton onta*; 509b2-4)”, he adds about the good: “And accordingly, for the [things] known, [you must] declare not only the fact of being known to be by [them] under [the action of] the good, but also the fact of being and the *ousia* to be by them as well under it[s action], of the good not being *ousia*, but still beyond *ousia*, prevailing by seniority/dignity and power (*kai tois gignôskomenois toinun mê monon to gignôskesthai phanai hupo tou agathou pareinai, alla kai to einai te kai tèn ousian hup' ekeinou autois proseinai, ouk ousias ontos tou agathou, all' eti epekeina tès ousias presbeiai kai dunamei huperechontos*; 509b6-10).”<sup>61</sup>

It is almost universally accepted after Aristotle, who makes great use of this word, that *ousia*

---

what he means by “is (*estî*)” and indeed implicitly assumes different meanings in different demonstrations. The implied message of Plato to his colleague Aristotle is: “My dear Aristotle, if you continue to have such faith in your logic, you will end up a tyrant of thought, as your homonym in the dialogue ended up a tyrant of Athens” (the fact that the Aristotle of the dialogue would become one of the Thirty Tyrants is the *only* information given by Plato about him, cf. *Parmenides* 127d2-3).

<sup>60</sup> Jowett: “a conception of the essence of each thing”; Shorey: “an account of the essence of each thing”; Bloom: “the reason for the being of each thing”; Grube & Reeve, Reeve: “an account of the being of each thing”;

<sup>61</sup> Hereafter the translation of this last phrase in the various editions of the *Republic* I have consulted:

Jowett: “In like manner the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power.”

Shorey: “In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.”

Bloom: “Therefore, say that not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also existence and being are in them besides as a result of it, although the good isn’t being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power.”

Grube & Reeve: “Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power.”

Reeve: “Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their existence and being are also due to it; although the good is not being, but something yet beyond being, superior to it in rank and power.”

## Can We See the Sun?

means “being” or “essence” and, in that sense, is almost interchangeable with *to on* (literally: “the being”) and expressions like *to ti esti* (literally: “the what it is”), hence the difficulty of translating such expressions as the one found here, *to einai te kai tèn ousian*, which Grube & Reeve find redundant and merely translate as “their being”.

I suggest to forget about Aristotle and rather to return to the original meaning of *ousia*. The word is a substantive derived from the feminine form *ousa* of the present participle of the verb *einai* (“to be”). But, before being used in a “metaphysical” sense, the word existed with the very mundane meaning of “that which is one’s own, one’s substance, property, estate, wealth”, probably in the view that you are what you own, be it land, flocks, money or whatever. And the word still had that sense in Plato’s time, and is used in that sense in his dialogues, including the *Republic*. Indeed, the first occurrences of *ousia* in the *Republic* are found in the introductory dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus and refer to Cephalus’ wealth. The word is used first by Socrates at 329e4, to suggest that the attitude of Cephalus in the face of old age might have a lot to do with his *pollen ousian* (“abundant wealth”); at 330b4, Cephalus uses the word when explaining the origin of his *ousian*; and at 330d2-3, Socrates asks him: *ti megiston oiei agathon apolelaukenai tou pollèn ousian kektèsthai*; (“what greatest good do you think you have enjoyed from possessing a great wealth?”) It is Cephalus’ answer to this question which triggers the whole ensuing discussion about justice, introduced by him through its opposite, injustice: wealth avoids to have to commit injustice against men (in business transactions) and against gods (by having means to offer them abundant gifts). The sense in which *ousia* is used in this question of Socrates is unambiguous in the context, but, in light of the ensuing dialogue, it may be read at another level: it suggests a link between *ousia* and our good, indeed our *megiston agathon* (“greatest good”) and the question can be reversed and read as: which kind of *ousia* might lead us toward our greatest good? And the whole *Republic* might in fact be read as an answer to this question: the *ousia* which allows men to reach their greatest good is justice as understood by Plato’s Socrates, inner harmony of a tripartite soul whose unity is not given in advance as the foundation for social harmony within the city.

What this suggests is that there is no watertight bulkhead between the common meaning of *ousia* and its “metaphysical” meaning, quite the contrary: what the common meaning of *ousia* imports in its more abstract use aside from the mere notion of “being” induced by its etymology is the notion of “value”, but, and that’s how the word becomes more abstract, not necessarily of *material* value, of material *goods*, but of anything that might indeed *truly* be good, and thus *valuable*, for us.

In this perspective, *to on* and *ousia* are no longer synonyms, at least in certain contexts such as the *Republic*,<sup>62</sup> but on the contrary, occupy the two extreme ends of a scale of “being”. At one end, *to on* is the mere fact of “being” and means nothing by itself as can be seen by the definition of it Plato puts in the mouth of the Stranger from Elea in the *Sophist*: *legô dê to kai hopoianoun tina kektèmenon dunamin eit’ eis to poiein heteron hotioun pepukos eit’ eis to pathein kai smikrotaton hupo tou phaulotatou, kan ei monon eis hapax, pan touto ontôs einai: tithemai gar horon horizein ta onta hês estin ouk allo ti plèn dunamis*. (“I say then that what possesses any power whatsoever either to act on whatever other creature or to be affected the least by the slightest [creature], even if only once, all this [I say] to really be; for I establish as a definition to define the beings, that it is nothing else but power”; *Sophist* 247d8-e4.) This is one of the very few formal definitions found in all the dialogues and Plato has the Stranger

---

<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the dialogue in which are found the greatest number of occurrences of *ousia* is the *Parmenides*. There are 59 occurrences of *ousia* in this dialogues out of 257 occurrences in all in the genuine dialogues (including 39 in the *Republic*), 59 in its usual meaning (including 17 in the *Republic*) and 198 in its metaphysical meaning (including 22 in the *Republic*). All occurrences in the *Parmenides* are with its metaphysical meaning, but *not* in the meaning I’m explaining here. *Ousia* doesn’t appear in what is left of Parmenides’ writing and it is not sure the word was part of his vocabulary to talk about being. Anyway, nowhere in the dialogue does Plato’s Parmenides define what he means by *ousia*, any more than he defines the other terms he uses. The meaning(s) Plato has him give to the word is (are) probably closer to that of Aristotle than to the meaning in which Plato’s Socrates uses it in the *Republic*.

## Can We See the Sun?

insist on the fact that he is indeed establishing a definition (*horos*) to define (*horizein*) the beings (*ta onta*, neutral plural). But there is a good deal of irony there, when we take note of the fact that the original meaning of *horos* is “boundary, limit” and that the “definition” given by the Stranger, when properly understood, puts no limits at all to what is meant by “being” (*on*). Indeed, the “definition” says that whatever can in the slightest way and if only once act or be acted upon “is”. Thus, as to be thought is to be acted upon, the wildest mental image that goes through my mind only once and disappear forever “is”, is that wild thought. To say that beings (*onta*) are “nothing else but power (*ouk allo ti plên dunamis*)”, where *dunamis* must be understood as “potentiality” rather than “strength” or “might”, is to suggest that “to be” means nothing by itself and is only calling for a “what”. In other words, there is no “existential” meaning to the verb *einai* (“to be”) used absolutely because, as long as you don’t say what kind of “existence” you are assuming, material existence within space and time, existence as a living creature, existence with consciousness of it, “abstract” existence outside space and time, or else, to say of something it “exists” means nothing. And the worse there is that each one has an implied sense of “exist” when using such language, not necessarily the same for all, and, precisely because it remains implicit, all sorts of misunderstandings can ensue. The *Parmenides* is the perfect example of this. Plato is not, as is sometimes stated, the first to have clearly distinguished the existential sense of *einai* (“to be”) from its role as copula, but on the contrary the one who attempted to put an end to attempts to give an existential meaning to that verb by showing the kinds of absurdities it leads to. “Being” is the least meaningful of all predicates because it applies to absolutely *everything* we might think of or talk about.

At the other end of the scale is *ousia*, which is not “essence”<sup>63</sup> in the sense of what remains after a process of distillation to keep only the most “essential” parts of what is under investigation, but on the contrary the “wealth” of “good” that is associated with it. If indeed the good is to the mind what light is to the eyes, if our intelligence is designed to discover the good in all things, then, it becomes obvious that the truth about anything is the amount of *true* good it may hold. The *ousia* of anything, be it an individual creature within space and time or an abstract concept outside space and time, is the “wealth” (the usual sense of *ousia*) of good it holds. The *ousia* of Socrates is not the mere fact of being a member of the species *anthrôpoi*, but the sum total of all the good things he did all through his life which contributed to make him “the best, in other words, the wisest and most just (*aristou kai allôs phronimôtatou kai dikaiotatou; Phaedo* 118a17, the very last words of the dialogue)” of all the men Plato had come to know. The *ousia* or Man is not what is common to all individuals of the species *anthrôpoi*, which amounts to almost nothing if we take into account all the possible disabilities of mind and body that may happen in individuals of that species, leaving us with no more than a tiny bright spot in the heaven of ideas, but the sum total of all the good things that have happened in the past, happen in the present time and may happen in the future to men and women over the full span of time. The word has not lost its original meaning, what changes is only the nature of what constitutes an “estate”: from material and visible, they become intelligible and measured in the light of the idea of the good.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> “Essence” is the transposition in English of a Latin word, “essentia”, forged, according to Seneca (cf. *Letter LVII to Lucilius*), by Cicero precisely to translate the Greek word *ousia* used by Plato in such contexts. To forge this word, Cicero started from the infinitive *esse*, the Latin equivalent of *einai*, rather than from the present participle *ens*, *entis* (from which derives the English word “entity” through the late Latin word *entitas*), which would have been the equivalent of *ousa*, the root of *ousia*. A similar attempt in English might lead to the word “beingness”. But the problem with all those attempts to imitate the construction of *ousia* in another language to forge a new word serving as translation is that they don’t import in the other language the usual meaning *ousia* had in Greek before being used in a more abstract sense. The result is that there remains only the relation to “being” in the absolute sense, the “ontological” dimension of the word, which is precisely what Plato was trying to get rid of in choosing that word in Greek!

<sup>64</sup> Playing with the meaning of the word in English, we might say that we are invited to understand that *real* estate is not what we are used to associate with that word and that the most “real” estate we should be focusing on is not what we think it is. Along those lines, it is weird that the English word which is closest to *ousia* by having both meanings, “substance”, has been almost universally rejected by modern translators of Plato as a translation of

## Can We See the Sun?

At this point, it becomes obvious why the good is not *ousia* but still beyond *ousia*: being the criterion against which everything else is to be evaluated, it cannot be evaluated by reference to itself. It is not an *ousia* among others, it is what determines how much *ousia* anything else holds. In other words, it is indeed what brings *ousia* to all things that are known to us, but not in the sense of an efficient cause within space and time. And if it is also said to bring *to einai* (“the fact of being”) along with *ousia* to everything which is known, it is because to be *good* is to *be* something: when light lightens something, it simultaneously makes that something visible to our eyes, that is, makes it *be* visible, “exist” *for our eyes*, and makes it possible for our eyes to catch the specific (visible) *eidos* of that something; similarly, when the good lightens something for our mind, it simultaneously makes that something intelligible to our mind, that is, makes it *be* intelligible, “exist” *for our mind*, and makes it possible for our mind to catch the specific *ousia* of that something.<sup>65</sup> This is all Plato’s Socrates is saying in the above quoted lines.

And in either case, what our eyes or mind catch of that something is not the thing itself, but an *eidos* (“appearance”) owing to the nature of our eyes or mind and their capabilities and limits when stimulated by either light or good. This *eidos* is not the same in each case, visible in one case, intelligible in the other, but in both cases, it is only an *eidos*, not the “thing” itself. The rigor with which Plato conducts the parallel to its end makes it obvious that he couldn’t have missed that point and assumed that intelligible *eidè* were the most real things there are, the “x” themselves.

What Plato was trying to do through his dialogues, and especially through the pages of the *Republic* we have been focusing on in this paper, the Sun, Line and Cave and the pages on dialectics at the end of book VII, was to try to move philosophy from an ontology (talking about *to on*) to an agathology<sup>66</sup> (talking about the good, *to agathon*), that is, from questions about our origins (What are we? Where do we come from?) toward questions about our future (What is good *for us*? What should we do to be happy?), having understood that knowing our origins won’t help us reach happiness. He is neither on the side of the “born from the earth (*tous gègeneis*, *Sophist* 248c1-2)” nor on the side of the “friends of *eidè* (*tous tôn eidôn philous*, *Sophist* 248a4-5)” in the fight of giants (*gigantomachia*, *Sophist* 246a4<sup>67</sup>) which the Stranger from Elea pictures in the *Sophist*, because both sides are fighting about the same questions of “existence/being”, using words such as *einai*, *on*, *ousia*, *eidos*, as more or less interchangeable and without defining them, or at least without agreeing on a common definition, while he wants us to move away from such questions to turn our minds toward the *idea* of the good, the only *archè*, understood as “leading principle” rather than “origin”,<sup>68</sup> able to help us live a “good” life and be truly happy, which is the goal of all men.

Thus, the question “does the good exist?” is somehow meaningless to him. What has meaning to him is that the good is “that which every soul pursues and in view of which it does all it does, divining by instinct that it is something, yet puzzled and unable to grasp adequately just

---

*ousia*. And it is probably precisely because it might have imported in English the ambiguity of the Greek word and moved the focus away from ontology in its metaphysical use (translators want to show they have understood the text they translate, and thus tend to avoid ambiguity), whereas Plato was consciously playing with the ambiguity of the word *ousia* and using it to try and make his point. Even Bloom, who has a rule of always translating the same Greek word by the same English word whenever possible, translates *ousia* in its usual sense by “wealth” and *ousia* in its metaphysical sense as “being”. This being said, it is true that the image underlying “substance” in English is not exactly the same as the image underlying *ousia* in Greek: *ousia* suggest that you are what you own, “substance” suggests that you stand on top of the wealth you have accumulated like Scrooge McDuck on top of his pile of gold (“sub-stance” etymologically means “what stands under”).

<sup>65</sup> This parallel shows how *ousia* can become almost synonym of *eidos/idea*.

<sup>66</sup> This possible neologism is formed after *agathos* (“good”) in the same manner as “ontology” is formed after *on*, *ontos* (“being”).

<sup>67</sup> This allusion to a *gigantomachia* (“fight of giants”), which is a likely allusion to verses 617-735 of Hesiod *Theogony* relating the fight of the Titans (*titanomachia*), might be a subtle way for Plato to suggest what I said earlier in plain terms: that fighting on “being” is looking backward toward the origins and the *muthologiai* such as Hesiod’s *Theogony* purporting to tell us where our Universe and us, as part of it, come from.

<sup>68</sup> On the various meanings of *archè*, see page 22 above.

## Can We See the Sun?

what it is and to reach stable belief about it as about other things (*ho dè diōkei men hapasa psuchè kai toutou heneka panta prattei, apomanteuomenè ti einai, aporousa de kai ouk echousa labein hikanôs ti pot' estin oude pistei chrèsasthai monimôi hoiai kai peri talla*; 505d11-e3).” Everybody knows that the good, not “exists”, but “is **something** (*ti einai*)” and the only question worth investigating is *what* it is. But, in all this, Plato’s Socrates is not meaning by *to agathon* some transcendent moral “Good” with a capital “G”, far remote from us in a heaven of pure ideas, but more concretely, at least as a starting point, all the little or great things of our life, both material and intellectual, that are “good” *to us*, and again, not in general, but individually, that is, *ta agatha* rather than *to agathon*. Rather than asking ourselves whether *the* good exists and seeking to see the good itself right from the start, the starting point of our investigation should be: “am I free to decide myself what is good *for me*? Is it because I think something is good *for me* to do at the time I do it that it will indeed be good for me, *from my own standpoint about what is good*, not only when I do it but also in all its consequences, foreseen and unforeseen?” And we all know that the answer to this question is “No.” We all know that we do at times things that we think good *for us* at the time we do them which end up having consequences that *we* (not others) don’t find good *for us* when they happen. And there, the question is not whether those consequences might not be good *for others* or might not seem good *to others*, but whether, when they occur, *we* find them not good *for us*, and this whether we are right or wrong about “good”. What that means is that our understanding of “good” doesn’t necessarily makes things that we do good *for us* according to *our own understanding* of “good”. I may find good for me to drink whisky and bad to be quadriplegic, but if, after having drunk whisky at a party because I thought it good for me, I have a car accident while driving back home that leaves me quadriplegic, I will be forced to admit that drinking whisky knowing that I had to drive back home was not good for me after all. What that shows is not that the good “exists” (it “is” at least the thought present in my mind when I use the word “good”), but that “good” is not necessarily what I think it is in each case, and thus that I better spend time trying to better get to know what could be *truly* good for me, “good” not only when I do it, but also in its consequences.<sup>69</sup>

And this is not an egoistic point of view because, as the *Republic* tries to make us understand, if human beings are bound by nature to live in groups and have a social life, doing what is good *for me*, both when I do it and in its consequences *for me*, implies taking into account up to a certain point the good of my fellow-citizens to avoid pushing them toward doing things that would turn out to be bad *for me* based on my own understanding of “good” (and “bad”).

Now, in much the same way recognizing whether the guy in front of me is Socrates or Glaucon doesn’t require that I look at the sun, but only that I get enough light on him, to try to recognize what is good *for me* doesn’t require that I look at the good itself, at the sun of the allegory of the cave, but that I consider the various aspects of the problem posed to me to decide on a course of action *in the light of the good*. And in order to do that efficiently, I may want to anticipate the kinds (*eidè*) of problems I might run into in the future in the light of past experience, if any is available. And this is the sort of thing Socrates does in the *Philebus* to devise *principles* of a good life *for human beings* based on what he could grasp of the *idea* of the good.

This is as much an anthropocentric way of thinking about the good as is our way of defining light,<sup>70</sup> but it is the only one available to us and meaningful for us. But then, it requires that we look at ourselves *in context*, and this context is not limited to social life in the city, but in fact includes the whole universe we are a part of. Looking at the Cosmos, that is, at the order (*kosmos* in Greek) of the universe in order to understand in what respect this *kosmos* is good for us as it is, may give us a model after which to build our own *kosmos* of human beings, that is, the city we are bound to live in, of which we are supposed to be the *demiourgoi*, at least

---

<sup>69</sup> This question is in the background of the *Protagoras*, and also of the “defense of Protagoras” that Socrates develops in the middle of the *Theaetetus*, through the question of the man-measure.

<sup>70</sup> See page17 above.

## Can We See the Sun?

those having the required skills. This is the reason why Plato wrote the *Timaeus* as a prelude to the *Laws* as part of his “return to the cave”.<sup>71</sup>

Trying to look at the idea of the good directly, and possibly exclusively is not what is expected from us. To put it in the imagery of the allegory of the cave, in order to know ourselves and the other *anthrōpoi* outside the cave, and all there is around us, so as to organize our life for the best of all the citizens, each one according to its own potentialities, which are different in each one of us, we must accustom, habituate, our eyes to the light of the sun and look around us at all it lightens, rather than at the sun itself at the risk of ruining our eyes, trying to figure out what makes this “light” one and the same, that is, what is common between all the “good” things that we find good which justifies that we call them all “good”, but without getting lost in abstraction and never losing sight of the concrete world around us we have to live in and order/organize for our common good. We must always keep in mind that, if the idea of the good is indeed the ultimate goal of dialectics, the unifying principle of all there is, its path, as we have seen above in the section named “*To dialegesthai*”, moves through all there is, living creatures (*ta zōia*) as well as abstract ideas (stars of the allegory) and that there is *noēsis/epistēmē* of all this for us to seek.

### **The road to Larissa**

To further convince us that what Plato’s Socrates variously calls *noēsis* or *epistēmē* (“knowledge”, “science”) is possible about “things” in the world of becoming, we should remember that, when Socrates, in the *Meno*, wants to explain the difference between *epistēmē* and

---

<sup>71</sup> The *Timaeus* is the first part of an announced trilogy (cf. *Timaeus* 27a2-b6 and *Critias* 108a5-6) that was supposed to include the *Timaeus*, the *Critias* and a third dialogue probably called *Hermocrates*. Yet, all that is available to us is the *Timaeus* and an apparently unfinished *Critias*. I contend that what we have is what Plato had planned and written, that the *Critias* is *deliberately* interrupted where it ends, and that the *Laws* is the intended third part of that trilogy. The meaning of all this is as follows: after having offered in the *Timaeus* a *mythical* (cf. *Timaeus* 29d2) explanation of the order (*kosmos*) of the universe considered under the light of the good (cf. *Timaeus* 29a-30b), the next order of business for Plato is to examine which use future leaders might make of such a “myth” to organize the social life of the citizens in the city they have to lead. Two ways of using myths are available: one is to use them to enslave citizens for the benefit of a few “smart” men who know that those myths are only myths (cf. *Critias* 107a7-b4), and in some cases are the hidden authors of those myths (cf. *Timaeus* 21c, sq., where Critias gives the perfect recipe on how to manufacture a myth, in his case the myth of Atlantis); the other is for those in charge to use a myth such as Timaeus’ myth as a model and attempt to imitate as best they can the *demiourgos* staged in it to become themselves *demiourgoi* of the city they are in charge of. Thus the deliberately unfinished *Critias*, named after a parent of Plato who ended up one of the leaders of the Thirty Tyrants and is listed among the Sophists, and whose name derives from the Greek word *krisis*, meaning “selection, choice, test, trial, judgment”, is the test of the student/reader at the end of the educational program started with the *Alcibiades* (who might well be the missing fourth alluded to at the beginning of the *Timaeus*; cf. *Timaeus* 17a1-5) and developed throughout the dialogues. Indeed, the *Critias* suddenly ends at the very moment “Zeus, the god of gods who reigns through laws (*theos de ho theōn Zeus en nomois basileuōn*; *Critias* 117b7-8)” is about to talk at the assembly of the Olympian gods he has convened to try to clean up the mess men have created in Atlantis (the last word of the dialogue is *eipen*, “said”, whose subject is Zeus, described as quoted above). The *krisis* (“test, selection”) of the readers is to separate those who, after reading the dialogues, still accept to hear till the end the myth Critias is obviously manufacturing before our eyes, in which Atlantis is a hardly veiled mix of Persia and Sicily, still agree with Critias that Solon would have been a better man by writing such a myth rather than drawing laws for Athens (cf. *Timaeus* 21c4-d3), still think that the Olympian gods intervene in human affairs as Homer taught them, and thus miss the end of the *Critias* and the completion of the story of Atlantis, from those who understand what Critias is after, who agree with Plato that enough is enough and that it’s time to move to the real job would-be philosopher kings have been raised to cope with, drawing laws for their city. Thus, after Critias’ tale has been put to a halt, it is not Hermocrates, a Syracusan general allied with Sparta against Athens and in no small part responsible from the failure of the Sicilian expedition planned by Alcibiades, which turned out to be the beginning of the end and the first step toward defeat for Athens in the Peloponnesian War, whose name means “having the power of Hermes”, that is, of the messenger of Gods toward men, who is fit for that next step. Rather, Plato summons a new cast of characters, three old men, one from Athens, one from Sparta and one from Crete, that we see in the *Laws* meeting in Crete and ascending together Mount Ida to reach the cave of Zeus where, according to tradition, Zeus was born and where Minos, the first king of Crete, presented as the son of Zeus and the first king to set laws for his people, was supposed to come every seven years to ask Zeus his father for laws for his kingdom; but there, rather than climbing to ask Zeus laws for a new colony the Cretan is mandated to establish and rule, they devise those laws while ascending, such a staging being Plato’s way of suggesting that, in so doing, they come as close to gods as is possible for human beings.

## Can We See the Sun?

mere (true) opinion (*doxa*), he doesn't take an example among abstract ideas, but among very mundane things in our visible world, the road to Larissa, comparing, from the standpoint of the practical result when intending to lead travelers there, one who knows that road to one who, without knowing it, might nonetheless lead them to that city. In other words, mere experience shows us that there can be "knowledge" within the realm of becoming, of very practical things such as the road from one city to another. And it does so in situations where it is easy for all to distinguish between the "good" guide and the "bad" one (in the end, we are or we are not in Larissa), and where it is easy not to be fooled by words: most travelers at the end of the trip wouldn't be satisfied by the guide simply telling them: "Here we are in Larissa" but would have an easy way to check the truth of that statement by asking people around.<sup>72</sup> Yet, at the same time, Socrates' example shows that, from the standpoint of the mere result, knowledge is not a prerequisite. Transposed to the problem of finding our way in life to lead a "good" life as human beings where and when we happened to be born, which should be our main concern, it tells us that, hopefully for us, *epistèmè* about it is not a prerequisite. In this perspective, the choice of the example of the road to Larissa by Plato's Socrates in a discussion with Meno is most interesting and we must be sure that Plato didn't chose it at random. But to see this requires knowing who the historical Meno was, which was probably the case for most readers of the dialogue in the time of Plato, and having heard of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, which, today, is our main source about the historical Meno.<sup>73</sup> Finding the road back from Cunaxa to Larissa would have been the "good" thing to do for Meno and it would probably have saved his life. And this was possible, as Xenophon proved by leading the Greek soldiers back to Athens. Thus, "the road to Larissa" used as an example by Plato's Socrates in the *Meno*, can be read at two levels: at the literal level, it is the way of reaching that city, which happens to be the city where Meno was residing at the time, from another place, and most likely, when Meno was talking to Socrates in Athens, he knew the road to return home at Larissa, but at a more abstract level, in the specific case of Meno, "the road to Larissa", for a reader of Plato's dialogue, written long after Meno had died in Persia and Xenophon had "published" the *Anabasis*, can be understood as a short for "the road that Meno should have taken had he been a *good* general caring for the Thessalian soldiers under his command in Persia".

Now, if it is possible to know such a thing as the road to Larissa, is it also possible, even if it is not a prerequisite for reaching the goal of happiness, to know for sure and in advance the road toward our own true good?<sup>74</sup> The answer of Plato's Socrates to this question is hinted at in the way he comments the part of the allegory of the cave taking place outside the cave in section 517a8-c5 quoted above, presenting it as his own beliefs, not as facts, when saying that it is hard to see the *idea* of the good, "but once seen, it forces to conclude by reasoning that it

---

<sup>72</sup> As we have seen earlier, looking at things under the light of the good (here recognizing that the guide did a "good" job as guide by leading us where we wanted to go) and not being fooled by images, that is, in the intelligible realm, by words, are the two discriminating criteria of *noësis* as discussed in the analogy of the line.

<sup>73</sup> Meno, in his early twenties, was named by Aristippus of Larissa (after having seduced him) general in charge of the Thessalian soldiers participating, along with soldiers from Athens (including Xenophon) and other Greek cities, in the expedition mounted by Cyrus the Younger, son of Darius, king of Persia, at the time satrap of Ionia, in Asia Minor, to try to regain the throne of his father from his brother Artaxerxes; the expedition moved several thousand miles east toward the capital Persepolis and met the army of Artaxerxes at Cunaxa (401 B.C.) The Greek soldiers won the battle, but unfortunately, Cyrus the Younger was killed in battle, so that the victory was of no use and the Greek soldiers were stranded thousands of miles away from home in a hostile country they didn't know. In trying to negotiate with Tissaphernes, the general of Artaxerxes, most of the Greek generals were killed, but Meno, alone was spared, which led Xenophon to think that he had passed to the enemy and betrayed the Greeks. Anyway, Meno was later jailed and died within the year. In the meantime, Xenophon, who was not one of the generals of the expedition, was elected general of the surviving Greek soldiers after the generals had been killed, and he managed to bring them back home through what became known as the retreat of the Ten-Thousand (in reference to the approximate number of surviving soldiers). Thus, Larissa was the city from which Meno had departed and where he should have returned with the soldiers under his command.

<sup>74</sup> The image of the road through life is used by Socrates at the beginning of the *Republic* in his conversation with Cephalus, in his answer to Cephalus' greeting which starts that conversation (cf. *Republic* I, 328d7-e7).



## Can We See the Sun?

is indeed responsible in all [things] for all that is right and beautiful, in the visible giving birth to light and its lord, in the intelligible lord itself granting truth and intelligence, so that the one intending to act in a sensible way either in private or in public matters must see it". Not only it is hard to reach that goal, but each one has to see it *by himself*, because, in the end, everybody acts based on what *he himself* finds good *for himself* deep inside, not based on what others might tell him on the good and the bad. Others can help you find the way, but they cannot see the idea of the good for you. Besides, the "knowledge" one can get on this is beyond words and thus, cannot be bindingly demonstrated with words. This is what the *Phaedo* is supposed to help us understand. In this dialogue, staged the very day of his death, Socrates has no *binding* "demonstration" of the immortality of something that might be called *psuchè* ("soul"). Indeed, if he had one, as he had one of the fact that the square double a given square is the square built on the diagonal of the original square, he wouldn't have to offer us six or seven different attempted "demonstrations", none of them completely convincing, as he well knows and says. And indeed, once he is finished with all those unconvincing attempts, just before drinking the hemlock, he tells his friends that he has taken the "beautiful risk" (*kalos kindunos*; *Phaedo* 114d6) of "betting" his life on an understanding of justice and the good for human beings that he is unable to bindingly prove true in the way he is able to bindingly prove true a theorem of geometry. But earlier, at the very center of the dialogue, he has warned us against misology, that is, the attitude consisting, once one has realized that human reason is unable to give us absolutely certain knowledge of the only things that should count for us in order to live a "good" life as human beings (is man more than his material body? what happens to him at death? how and where can he reach true happiness? etc.), to despair of reason (*logos*) and stop using it, whereas it is *the* thing that makes us different from other animals and truly "human". It is not because we won't be able to see the sun itself that we should stay put in the cave within our chains. Xenophon didn't know the road to Larissa or Athens and yet, he managed to return home. Ulysses didn't have a map to return home from Troy to the island of Ithaca and the rough world of the sea kept disturbing his plans, and yet he managed to reach Ithaca. The cycle of Plato's dialogues<sup>75</sup> is a new Odyssey where Socrates takes the place of

---

<sup>75</sup> My hypotheses about the dialogues are at odds with the almost universally accepted hypotheses today: assuming that the dialogues are for the most part independent works written over a long period of time (about fifty years) between the death of Socrates and Plato's own death, that they bear witness of an evolution in Plato's thinking and that they can be divided in three main periods, with slightly different grouping from scholar to scholar: early dialogues, dialogues of maturity and late dialogues. My own working hypotheses are that Plato wrote, probably late in life and possibly without making them available outside the Academy in his lifetime, a single highly structured work made up of 28 dialogues arranged in seven tetralogies (not those of Thrasylus, though), each tetralogy being made up of an introductory dialogue and a trilogy (presented with the name of the introductory dialogue followed by a slash followed by the associates trilogy, the tetralogies are, in that order, T1: *Alcibiades/Lysis-Laches-Charmides*; T2: *Protagoras/Greater Hippias-Lesser Hippias-Gorgias*; T3: *Meno/Euthyphro-Apology-Crito*; T4: *Symposium/Phaedrus-Republic-Phaedo*; T5: *Cratylus/Ion-Euthydemus-Menexenus*; T6: *Parmenides/Theaetetus-Sophist-Statesman*; T7: *Philebus/Timaeus-Critias-Laws*); that this work in 28 volumes is intended to accompany future philosopher kings in their education and doesn't bear the mark of Plato's own evolution *while writing it* but adapts, for pedagogical purposes, to the progression of the readers/students, possibly anticipated by Plato after his own *earlier* evolution, but also after his teaching experience at the Academy; that it is quite possible that Plato didn't write those 28 volumes in the order they are intended to be read, but that he worked on several of them in parallel and possibly revised some after having made progress on others, especially if he didn't make them available outside the Academy during his lifetime, but that, in the end, the order of writing is irrelevant as soon as there is an order of reading defined from the start; that those dialogues were not meant to be read once in order and then put aside, but that Plato expected his readers to come back to them again and again in order to find in those which were part of early stages of the cycle things that they couldn't see the first time around, or even the second time around, that he had "hidden" there and that could be uncovered only by more advanced readers. A more detailed presentation of this structure, showing how the trilogies are structured according to the three parts of the soul and the progress through the tetralogies uses the divisions of the line on either side of a central tetralogy dealing with the soul and between an introductory tetralogy setting the stage and a concluding tetralogy staging the return to the cave, is available at my website *Plato and his dialogues* (<http://plato-dialogues.org>) in English and in French (my native language). The list of the tetralogies given above shows that it is quite consistent with the "chronology" commonly accepted for the dialogues in the "evolutionary" approach, which should be no surprise if indeed Plato used his own *earlier* "evolution" as a guide in structuring his work.

Ulysses and the Islands of the Blessed,<sup>76</sup> “home” of true philosophers, takes the place of Ithaca.<sup>77</sup> But his Ulysses knows that the “home” he is heading for cannot be reached in this life because the trip toward it is the whole life and thus, it is only when it has ended that it is possible to see where it led.<sup>78</sup>

It is because Plato knew those limits of the human mind, knew that neither him nor anybody else could ever be able to offer binding demonstrations about the most vital questions in life concerning our true good, that he chose to write, not doctrinal treatises providing *his* answers, but *dialogues* meant to elicit from the reader thoughts going in the right direction and at least unravelling the shortcomings of the available answers provided by other thinkers and paving the way toward more promising avenues.

### **Afterword**

So far, I have only used the dialogues. Before ending this paper, I would like to add a few words to show that this proposed interpretation of Plato’s thought finds support in the so-called “philosophical digression” of the *VIIth Letter*, which I hold to be genuine (probably the only genuine letter among the thirteen letters grouped under Plato’s name) and indeed makes that digression much more consistent with the dialogues so understood.

This philosophical digression has to be understood in light of its context: Plato is writing to politically active friends of his friend Dion, brother-in-law of Dionysius the Elder, Tyrant of Syracuse, who, after the death of Dionysius the Elder, had tried to convince Plato to attempt a philosophical education of his son Dionysius the Younger. It didn’t work and lately, Dion tried to upset Dionysius but was assassinated, and his parents and political friends have asked Plato advice on what to do next. In his answer, Plato recalls his experience with Dionysius the Younger and how, after only one philosophical discussion with him, Dionysius had published a writing in which he presented what they had discussed then as his own ideas. Plato goes on to explain, in what constitutes that so-called philosophical digression (342a7-344d2), how hard knowledge is to acquire and why putting in writing such knowledge is bound to fail.

But the explanations on knowledge (*epistēmē*) he gives are intended for non-philosophers, not for students at the Academy, and take place in the context of an already long letter, not a treatise or a dialogue. And thus, he doesn’t go into much details and only tries to make those explanations as simple and comprehensible as possible for non-specialists.

He starts by distinguishing three things that are not the [thing] itself (*auto*) which “must be assumed to be knowable and truly being (*tithenai dei ho dē gnōston te kai alēthōs estin on*; 342b1)” but must be grasped in their differences in order to reach knowledge (*epistēmē*) about anything: the name (*onoma*), the definition/description/discussion (*logos*) and the image (*eidōlon*). He then proceeds with an elementary example, taken from geometry, as might be expected, the circle (*kuklos*): *kuklos* (“circle”) is a name; the *logos* he gives about that, stressing that it is a mere assembly of names and verbs, is “that where the distance from the limits to the

---

<sup>76</sup> The Islands of the Blessed (*makarōn nēsoi*) are presented as the otherworldly “home” of the souls having lived a “good” life in various traditions (cf. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 171; Pindar, *Olympics*, II, 75-86) that Plato reuses in the final myth of the *Gorgias* (523b1). They are alluded to in several other dialogues (*Symposium* 179e2, 180b5; *Phaedo* 115d4; *Menexenus* 235c4) and at the end of Socrates’ explanation of the allegory of the cave, at 519c5, where Socrates criticizes those who, having ascended toward the sun outside the cave, don’t want to return to the cave and want to live a life exclusively dedicated to learning till death (*en paideia diatribēin dia telous*, to spend/waste their time in study till the end; 519c1-2), “thinking they have migrated still alive in the Islands of the Blessed (*hēgoumenoi en makarōn nēsois zōntes eti apōikisthai*; 519c5-6)”

<sup>77</sup> Plato didn’t write a new Iliad because, to him, contrary to most of his contemporaries, Achilles was the worst example to be given to men: a king who brings hell on his people and most of his allies because of a personal story of women which sends him sulking in his tent while at war. But his “Achilles” can be seen through the dialogues: it’s Alcibiades, with whom the cycle begins, in the dialogue bearing his name and setting the stage: what does it require to become a good political leader?

<sup>78</sup> This is one of the reasons why Plato took Socrates, and not himself, as a guide through the dialogues: he was dead and thus, it was possible to appraise his *whole* life. Hence the importance of staging his death in dialogues.

## Can We See the Sun?

center is always equal”, and he is careful to associate this *logos* with three different names, *stroggulon* (“round”), *peripheres* (“circumference”) and *kukos* (“circle”), to better point at the variability of naming; then come drawings and moldings of material circles that can be made and erased or destroyed without *auto ho kuklos* (“the circle itself”) being the least affected. About those, there may occur knowledge (*epistêmè*), true intelligence (*nous alèthès*) and opinion (*doxa*), but he doesn’t relate each one of these with one of the three items listed earlier, which is obviously impossible, if only because name, a mere tool of language, cannot be related specifically to one or the other. Rather, he proceeds by saying that, taken together, they form a single whole, which is not in sounds (of words) or in figures (*schemata*) of bodies (what is seen through the eyes) but in the souls (*ouk en phônais oud’ en sômatôn schêmasin all’ en psuchais enon*: 342c5-6), and thus differs both from the circle itself (*auto to kuklos*) and from the three previously listed items, name, *logos* and image; and he adds that intelligence (*nous*) is closest to the [“thing”] itself in kinship and similarity (*suggeneiai kai homoiotêti*), which is his manner to say, without using rare and somehow “technical” word such as *noèton* and *noèsis*, that it is what grasps the *nous* which is most important, and that, depending on the individual, it may range from mere *doxa* (opinion) all the way to *epistêmè* (knowledge), both expressed through words.

He then says that the same analysis applies “similarly to straight and round figures and colors, to good and beautiful and just, and to all bodies manufactured and naturally produced, to fire, water and all similar [things], and to all living [creatures] and to dispositions in the souls and to all actions and affections (*peri te eutheos hama kai peripherous schêmatos kai chroas, peri te agathou kai kalou kai dikaiou, kai peri sômatos hapantos skeuastou te kai kata phusin gegonotos, puros hudatos te kai tôn toioutôn pantôn, kai zôiou sumpantos peri kai en psuchais êthous, kai peri poiêmata kai pathêmata sumpanta*; 342d3-8).” This list is most interesting because it shows that, for Plato, *epistêmè* (“knowledge”) is possible about almost everything, including individual creatures of the material world, and even actions and affections, which should not be a surprise for us now that we have realized that individual human beings (*an-thrôpoi*) are found at all stages of the freed prisoner progression from the bottom of the cave up to the sun outside, that is in all four segments of the line, but which disturbs those who think that, for Plato, knowledge is possible only about eternal abstract *eidè* (“Forms”) which are for them the same thing as the *x* themselves. As a matter of fact, Plato doesn’t mention *eidè* at all in the *VIIth Letter*. For the “friends of ‘Forms’” I just mentioned, it is no problem as, for them, the *eidos* (“Form” in their understanding of Plato) of *x* is the same thing as the *x* itself (*auto to x*); the only problem for those who admit that Plato is the author of the letter is that, here, he seems to admit *eidè* of things that don’t fit with the way they think Plato understands *eidos* in its “technical” sense. But if we understand *eidos* the way I suggest to understand it, that is, as “appearance”, whether visible or intelligible, we can understand that, in the same way Plato doesn’t want to use the words *noèton* and *noèsis* in the context of the letter, he doesn’t want either to go into the subtleties of *noèta eidè*. In fact, he is simplifying the analysis conducted in the *Republic* and illustrated by the analogy of the line: he limits his analysis to *logos* on the one hand, based on names (*onoma*), on the side of what he calls *noèton* (“intelligible”) in the *Republic*, and *eidôlon* (“image”) on the other hand, on the side of what he calls *horaton* (“visible”) or *horômenon* (“seen”) in the *Republic*, both distinct from the *x* themselves (*auta*). And rather than calling the *noèton* by that name, he simply explains that what we grasp through pure *nous* (“intelligence”) is the closest to the *x* themselves, but, when expressed with words, may range from mere opinion to knowledge, both more remote from the *x* themselves, “due to the weakness of speeches (*dia to tôn logôn asthenes*; 343a1)”. And he insists on the fact that no perfect knowledge of the *x* themselves is possible without grasping in one way or another all four as distinct: name, speech/definition (*logos*), image, plus knowledge as distinct from both the first three *and* the *x* themselves. Now, Plato leaves it to his readers to transpose the example he gives with the circle to all other items of the above list, which is not obvious when it comes to figuring out, for instance, what is the *eidolon* (“image”) of “good (*agathon*)” or of a

## Can We See the Sun?

disposition of the soul (*èthos*), or of an action (*poièma*) or affection (*pathèma*), all items included in the list. But he insists on the fact that all four, name, *logos*, image (*eidôlon*) and knowledge (*epistèmè*) must be distinguished *in all cases* by stating this *after* the above list.

Plato then proceeds to point at the weaknesses of images, names and *logoi*. All circles resulting from human activity, by drawing or with a lathe for instance, unlike the circle itself, are full of what's contrary to circle, the straight (in other words, they are never perfect circles); names are arbitrary and could be changed without impact on what they name (as is the case with translations); and the *logos*, being made up of names and verbs, that is of words, is no better. Besides, all of them, and knowledge as well, tell us *how* things are (*to poion ti*, 342e3, 343b8), not *what* they are (*to on*, 343a1, 343b8; *to ti*, 343c1), whether through words (*logôî*) or through activities (*kat' erga*), and speeches as well as simple displays (showing visible things by simply pointing at them) are easy to refute by sensible impressions (*aisthêsesin*), which leads in most cases to perplexity (*aporia*) and obscurity (*asapheia*). To reach knowledge requires both a good nature in the soul working on subjects of good nature and a lot of hard work, and most people don't have such a good nature and/or have no interest in the "good" subjects, namely what is called customs/manners (*ta legomena èthè*, 343e4), no inclination toward just (*dikaia*) and otherwise fair (*kala*) behaviors, no care for "the truth about excellence to the limits of the possible and badness (*alètheian aretès eis to dunaton oude kakias*; 344a8-b1)". Indeed, we should learn at the same time both the true and the false about *ousia* as a whole (*hama gar auta anagkè manthanein kai to pseudos hama kai alèthes tès holès ousias*; 344b1-2). And in the end, "each one of them being painfully rubbed against the others, names and definitions (*logoi*), visions and perceptions, cross-examining them in kindly cross-examinations using questions and answers devoid of jealousy/envy, wisdom (*phronêsis*) and intelligence (*nous*) suddenly shines about each one, stretching as much as possible toward human capacity (*mogis de tribomena pros allèla autôn hekasta, onomata kai logoi opseis te kai aisthêseis, en eumenesin elegchois elegchomena kai aneu phthonôn erôtêsesin kai apokrisésin chrômenôn, exelampse phronêsis peri hekaston kai nous, sunteinôn hoti malist' eis dunamin anthrôpinèn*; 344b3-c1)".

There is nothing in here that goes against all I said in this paper. The last quoted words refer to the need for wisdom and intelligence to adapt to human capacity, not to the limits of this or that person, but to the power *and limits* of human nature (*anthrôpinè dunamis*). Earlier, Plato had mentioned the weakness of words (*to tôn logôn asthenes*). In all this section, he insists on the fact that what we should care for has to do with ethics (*èthè*) and excellence (*aretè*), with what is just and fine (*kalon* as the sensible "image" of *agathon*, good). The mention of *ousia* at 344b2 may be understood at two levels, as was the case with the question of Socrates to Cephalus about the greatest good he attributes to his great *ousia* ("wealth"): in a purely "metaphysical sense", *hè holè ousia*, about which it is necessary for us to learn both the true and the false, may be understood as "the whole of being", but coming at the end of a discussion on ethics, excellence and badness as the appropriate subjects of inquiry on which we should learn both true and wrong, it may also be understood "wealth as a whole", "wealth in all its aspects", with the implied suggestion that wealth in its most usual meaning should not be limited to material wealth, and maybe shouldn't even take into account material wealth.<sup>79</sup> From beginning to end, Plato insists on the fact that true knowledge and intelligence is a very rare achievement given only to a lucky few after much effort and pain: contemplating the sun itself in its own place is not given to all, and even for those who reach that stage, the view has to adapt to human capacity (*anthrôpinè dunamis*). And human nature doesn't allow looking at the sun more than very briefly when it shines or in specific conditions where it no longer shines and thus is no longer fully itself.

---

<sup>79</sup> To decide which one was the meaning intended by Plato would require that we know whether the "metaphysical" meaning of the word was common enough in the circles the letter was addressed to at the time Plato wrote his letter for him not to consider it as a "technical" word, as seems to be the case with *noèton*, *noêsis* and *eidôs*.

## Can We See the Sun?

In conclusion, knowledge for Plato is not limited to knowledge of abstract ideas and, according to him, our prime concern should be to learn to better know ourselves (*gnôthi sauton*). We don't become most excellent, godlike human beings, by fleeing outside the cave of men to ruin our eyes in contemplating the sun, forgetting our fellow human beings deep inside the cave, but by climbing toward the cave of Zeus while drawing laws to bring order to the city we are a citizen of and allow as many of our fellow citizens as possible to be as happy as possible within the limits set by their own common (*anthrôpoi*) and individual (Socrate, Plato, you or me) nature and by the universe and the city they happen to live in. But, in so doing, we must never forget the power *and limits* of human *logos* (reason expressed through words). This is what the journey through Plato's dialogues is supposed to make us understand by helping us to climb as close to the sun as allowed by human nature and ours. No answers in them, no "theories" (of Forms, of reminiscence or you name it), only a guide to accompany us in that trip that we have to make by ourselves and remind us that we must eventually return to the cave.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> I want to thank the French Plato scholar Monique Dixsaut for being the involuntary spark which triggered the reading of the allegory of the cave which is at the origin of this paper. In a lecture she gave on the French radio "France Culture" on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012, titled "*Aux urnes philosophes!*", part 4/4: "*Le philosophe-roi selon Platon*", which I heard not at the time of broadcast but later on the Internet (<http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-les-nouveaux-chemins-de-la-connaissance-aux-urnes-philosophes-44-le-philosophe-roi-selon-pl>), summarizing the allegory of the cave and mentioning the men behind the wall bearing artefacts, she said parenthetically: "*c'est d'ailleurs le seul moment où il est question d'hommes dans le récit de la caverne* (by the way, it's the only place where men are mentioned in the story of the cave)." Having translated years earlier the allegory of the cave for my website on Plato, I was pretty sure that this was not the case. So, I went back to the Greek text and had confirmation that she was wrong. It turns out that, when I heard this, I was in the process of reworking my translation of the analogy of the line (also made for the first time years earlier) and what had not struck me at the time of my first translation of the allegory of the cave (made before the translation of the analogy of the line), the implications of the presence of men outside the cave for the reading of the analogy suddenly burst into my mind and led me to a new understanding of the analogy and, in return, to a better understanding of the allegory too, along the lines presented in this paper.