The status and power of the good in Plato’s Republic

Fiona Leigh

Department of Philosophy, University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT
What is it for a judgement, action, or character state to be itself a good thing, so genuinely worth pursuing? Readers of Plato’s Republic discover that that it is by standing in the right relation to the Form of the Good that other things are, or become, good. In her recent monograph, Plato’s Sun-Like Good, Sarah Broadie inverts the standard interpretive strategy by focusing primarily on the role of the Good in dialectic, and drawing conclusions about its metaphysical status on that basis. In this paper, I argue that the metaphysically radical features of the Good on her reading – that it is undefinable and not an object of knowledge for the guardians – are ultimately undermined by her full account of the Form, in particular of the way that it endows ‘the things known’ with their reality, as well as relating to its participants as participand. I also argue that her preferred interpretation of the guardians’ objects of knowledge in the sun-analogy as action-types is conceptually and textually problematic, and should be rejected in favour of her dispreferred - yet ultimately deeply insightful - interpretation of these objects as Forms that the Good makes known and fully real.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 21 November 2022; Revised 7 February 2023; Accepted 8 February 2023

KEYWORDS Plato; Republic; Good; dialectic; Broadie

§1. The Good in the Republic

Although he declares that the Good is the most important thing to learn (505a2), Socrates declines to investigate it directly, drawing instead on an elaborate analogy between the Good and the sun; the former relating to the intelligible realm, the latter to the visible. He asserts that the Good is the cause of knowledge and truth, and should itself be thought of as something known (508e3–4). The sun-analogy culminates in the articulation of a distinctive two-part relation between the Form of the Good and other Forms at 509b6–10:

CONTACT Fiona Leigh fiona.leigh@ucl.ac.uk University College London

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.
... in the case of things that are known, you need to say not only that their being known comes from the Good, but that their being and essence comes from it, even while the Good is not itself Being, but is even beyond Being, superior to it in dignity and power.

(509b6–10, tr. Rowe, modified)

Its connection with the guardians’ rule comes at 517b–520a: The Good is the last of the things seen, but once beheld, it is grasped as the cause of everything right and beautiful, of the sun and light, and of everything intelligible. Anyone who is to act sensibly in public or private must have seen it. The best people in Kallipolis must be compelled to study and see the Good, before commencing their rule.

The superior status of the Good invites a host of questions about the metaphysical status and epistemological role of this singular Form. Is it explanatory of the nature of, or causally responsible for the existence of, other Forms, or even all things? What is its power to make ‘the things known’ known, and under what conditions is it exercised? Some, taking Forms either as (what would later be called) universals, have suggested that the Good is responsible for the rational order that characterizes Forms and theoretical thought generally, the nature of goodness being ‘rationally satisfactory order’.¹ Others refrain from advancing a concrete conception of the Good, but (taking it as a universal, exemplar, cause, or even something fulfilling all three roles) understand it as furnishing an explanation, for the person who grasps its content, of the value of anything, why it ought to be counted as a good – the ‘highest’ good in relation to other Forms and to their participants.²

In sharp contrast, Broadie’s novel account of the Good centres on its role in dialectic, and turns on her innovative reading of the sun-analogy in Republic VI (508b–509b). Broadie’s reading is founded upon taking the analogy very seriously, and is largely unconstrained by assumptions about it qua Form. As we have seen, the analogy’s culmination asserts a two-fold relation between the Good and ‘things known’, making them both known and real (509b6–10). Broadie’s interpretation of the Good as both knowledge-maker and reality-maker delivers in each case a key feature of her radical account of the Good: it is indefinable and not a direct object of knowledge; as well as being a ‘one over many’, it is either an actualiser of Forms or a virtue-maker of moral action-types. I take them in order, before arguing that problems with Broadie’s understanding of the Good undermine her conception of it as indefinable and unknown, and as productive of virtuous action-types. I conclude by suggesting that what remains of Broadie’s interpretation of the


²For further elaboration, see Barney, “The Carpenter and the Good”, 301–3, 316–17.
Good, shorn of its metaphysically radical accretions, is a highly novel, insightful, and textually plausible account of how the deployment of this supreme Form in dialectic results in its making other Forms both known and fully actualized.

§2. Broadie’s knowledge-producing good

On Broadie’s interpretation, Socrates’ notoriously opaque claim that the Good makes the things known *known*, is unmysterious. To see this, let us first look at the alternative. Many readers of the *Republic*, like Broadie, identify the Form of the Good with the un-hypothetical first principle of dialectic (510b6–7; 511b6–7). Unlike Broadie, however, most readers understand the Form of the Good as itself an object of cognitive attention and contemplation for the guardian rulers of Kallipolis. Many take the content of what is understood in grasping the Form of the Good to be the nature or definition of goodness, which serves as a guide to the guardians in formulating policies and delivering judgements in their ruling of the ideal city. As the first principle of dialectic, the content of the Good serves as the first premise from which moral and political judgements can be deduced by the guardians. Broadie dubs this the “premiss” model of the Good, which she distinguishes from her own “interrogative” model (*Plato’s Sun-Like Good*, 44, 65–71).

On that model, the concept of the Good is “more like a tool than an object or focus of dialectical inquiry”. The Good

relate[s] to dialectic not as an object or topic or subject to be studied and investigated or even contemplated, but as a resource mobilized – without itself being an object of attention – in the process of exploring or contemplating something else …

(*Plato’s Sun-Like Good*, 40)

Broadie takes it that the “something else” that is explored or contemplated, and ultimately known by the guardians is a virtue Form, or another Form necessary for knowing a virtue Form (*Plato’s Sun-Like Good*, 43). So the Good enables knowledge of virtues Forms, and other central Forms, at least for the highly educated citizens of Kallipolis. During a five-year period, the guardians develop dialectic, understood as a host of skills of logical and conceptual argumentation and analysis, many of which are displayed by Socrates in the early dialogues and *Rep.* I (*Plato’s Sun-Like Good*, 45). They eventually deploy these in formulating definitions of properties, particularly virtue properties.

But now the Good itself enters their reasoning, by way of a question. Suppose they articulate a formula for some virtue – say, justice – represented as ‘EFG’, which seems ‘analytically flawless’. Those teaching them now instruct

---

3For examples of proponents of this reading see notes 2 and 3 above.
them to ask whether ‘EFG’ is good, which question directs them to investigate conditions or circumstances under which it would not be good, and so thereby to test, in a completely new and different way, whether the proposed definition is adequate. The idea is to test whether the term, ‘good’, applies to the candidate definition in a manner Broadie describes as ‘predicative’, not ‘attributive’: to test whether the property specified in the definition is a good thing (or a good) and worth going for, either in itself or for some end, as opposed to being merely a good thing of its kind (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 49–50). Broadie writes: “If on consideration the answer is negative or uncertain, they know that ‘EFG’ fails as a definition of justice. The proof is that good cannot be absent from justice, and it can be absent from EFG” (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 46). Thus, asking whether the subject of discussion is good in the predicative sense – which Broadie dubs “the G-question” – is the way in which the guardians make use of the concept of goodness without making it the object of their investigative efforts. In this process the guardians’ hypotheses are tested, some being discarded while a small number survive the test. By way of this practice, according to the interrogative model, the Form of the Good makes the other Forms known.

§3. Broadie’s reality-producing Good

The second claim in the sun-analogy’s culmination is that the Good is the reality-maker of ‘things known’: it is the cause of their being (to einai) and reality (hē ousia). Broadie’s interpretation – in fact she offers two alternative proposals – is once again strikingly novel.

One alternative begins by taking ‘things known’ at 509b to refer to virtue Forms and other Forms, and understands the natures or essences of Forms to be analogous to the ‘seeds’ of plants and animals that benefit from the sun’s rays. The guiding thought is that, just as plants and animals regularly exhibit teleologically-directed growth and development with the aid of the sun’s light, so too, through the aid of the Good, Forms are caused to become actual standards or instantiated – via the G-question in dialectic – where they would have otherwise been merely potential standards. If it is a Form’s telos to serve, actually, as a standard – or, in the language of the Phaedo, to cause other things to have the relevant property (100c) – then the Good enables the Form’s completion. The way the Good achieves this causal action via deployment of the G-question is as follows. In posing the G-question, the guardians are continually engaged in the process of devising, testing, and refining the definitions of the virtues (and other Forms). When the guardians get these definitions right, they apply them to particular, practicable cases and so they bring about the concrete manifestation of the virtues, i.e. instances of justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom in the city, and in the souls of (at least some of) its citizens. Without this
manifestation, Broadie argues, each of these ‘things known’ would not be fully actualized – and here Broadie avails herself of an Aristotelian distinction – but would remain, as a Form that is potentially the standard or cause of some number of F things, a mere potentiality that falls short of its telos in this respect (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 139–142). In this way, on the interrogative model, the Good brings about the fully realized being of the other Forms.

Broadie’s second proposal concerning the Good as reality-maker starts with taking ‘things known’ at 509b as referring not to Forms but, in light of 505a, to different sorts of intelligibles, namely, action-types such as “returning what one owes”. This suggestion is quite complex, but for our purposes it can be summarized as proposing that the G-question, as applied to these types, aims to discern whether, e.g. some candidate just action-type, e.g. EFG, is in fact good in some particular context or situation. If it is, Broadie writes that the “excellent dialectician in a … context has identified EFG as a real or genuine facet of the great form of justice” (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 151). The connection with the Form of the Good is made by the addition of goodness to this action type in the context under examination. That is, when EFG is, in some particular situation, a good action through its ‘engagement’ with the Good it becomes what is just, in that context. On this second interpretive proposal, the Good is a reality-maker because it is only when goodness is added to EFG – on its own evaluatively neutral – that EFG is really being just or is being real justice (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 149–152).

Broadie does not ultimately decide between the two alternative interpretations of 509b she proposes, but avers a slight preference for the second because of the fit with 505a. Against this preference, I will argue below that the first proposal is far superior to the first because it, but not the alternative, fits with the immediate context of the sun-analogy, and because the second proposal is conceptually problematic. To begin with, however, I will argue that Broadie’s full account of the Good ultimately undermines her conception of it as undefinable and not an object of knowledge for the guardians.

§4. Broadie’s Good as one over many and reality-maker

The conception of the Good that Broadie argues for is not exhausted by the features of the Good that emerge from its role in the sun-analogy as knowledge-maker and reality-maker vis-à-vis ‘things known’. For, she acknowledges that the Good is understood by Socrates as, like other Forms, a ‘one’ over a ‘many’, standing in the relation of single participand to many participants whereby the Form of (some property) F is the cause of other things being F (476a5–8, 507b1–6) (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 168ff.). So, on Broadie’s account, the Good stands both in a dual causal relation to ‘things known’, making them both known and real, and in the participation relation to its
participants. In the latter case, the Good is what corresponds to the term ‘good’, used as a predicate in true statements about its participants, and is a constituent in the state of affairs corresponding to such statements. Yet, Broadie argues, it would appear that the sun-like Good cannot be what corresponds to this term, since it is interrogative in nature. However, the term that on Broadie’s view invokes the sun-like Form must, she argues, be identical to the term used correctly to assert that some particular participant is good, since question and answer must deploy the same term (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 168–9). Therefore, either there are two Forms of the Good, or a resolution must be found to the inconsistency.

Broadie rejects the idea of two such Forms in the Republic (which she credits to Proclus, speculating that he was alive, in some sense, to the interrogative conception of the Good)\(^4\) —surely rightly in the absence of textual evidence. She asserts, nonetheless, that the relation the Good bears to ‘things known’ as knowledge- and reality-maker is not that of participant to participant. She argues that since Socrates asserts the non-identity of the Good and Being, the Good cannot confer reality via a straightforward participation relation, and adds that Socrates no more says that ‘things known’ are made good by the sun-like Good than that plants and animals are made ‘sunny’ by the sun.\(^5\) So the one thing, the Good, stands in two distinct kinds of relations — to its participants as participant, and to ‘things known’ as knowledge- and reality-maker.

Broadie suggests that the inconsistency above concerning the term ‘good’ can be resolved by construing the two relations as indicating two roles or functions of the one Form, the Good - one proprietary to its interrogative use, the other to its declarative use. On her preferred interpretation, the G-question is asked and answered of action-types. The sun-like role or function of the Good is invoked by ‘good’ in this question, and we ought not to understand it to convey that the action-type is a participant in the Form, since “it is a genuinely open question” (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 171). When correctly answered in the affirmative, however, ‘good’, indicates that the action-type does participate in the Good — or so I take it: Broadie writes “… of course, it is still true and could never not be true that the many things that are good are good by participating in the one and only Form of the Good” (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 173).\(^6\) So, when an action-type, in some circumstance ‘engages’ (as Broadie puts it) with the Good, and becomes, e.g. just and a ‘genuine facet’ of the great Form of Justice — is made real in this sense — it

---


\(^5\)Broadie, Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 169–170, and see also n. 14.

\(^6\)Broadie also writes that the function of the action-type referred to in the true statement ‘it is good’ is to help “to constitute the facts that make the true [answer] to the [the G-question] true”, 172.
does so by participation in the Good. There are, however, two problems with this view for Broadie’s account.

One is that, as already noted, Broadie argues against the interpretation of the sun-analogy as indicating that Forms participate in the Good on the grounds that the interpretation does not reflect “the relation between sun and ordinary visible objects” (137-8), i.e. it not said in the Republic that ordinary objects of vision are ‘sunny’ or ‘sun-like’ etc. In that argument her point is not that ‘things known’ do not partake of the Good, but that their doing so is not explanatory of the Good functioning as either knowledge- or reality-maker. It turns out, however, that her own preferred explanation of how the Good functions as reality-maker is that goodness is added to action-types under certain circumstances: when action-types participate in the Good, those action types are made real in the sense of becoming genuine or real facets of the relevant virtue Form (e.g. Justice). Since this explanation does not reflect the relation between the sun and illuminated objects, it is inadequate by Broadie’s own reasoning, and is no more to be preferred than the interpretation she rejects.

The other problem stems from what is entailed by the Good occupying the role of participand, namely that the Good is responsible for its participants possessing and displaying the determinate property of being good. Now, the way in which the most prominent Form in the Republic, Justice, is responsible for its participants being just is by being (or constituting) a specific form or pattern (to eidos 434d 3, tupos 443c1), which is present in the soul or city whose parts come to conform to, or take on, that pattern (443c9-444a2, 500b-e, cf. 484c). This structural isomorphism, as Broadie puts it, between “the arrangement to be realized and the ideal model” (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 56), is the sensible manifestation in some particular case of the determinate and intelligible nature that the Form constitutes. Actions that count as just are, in turn, understood in terms of their bringing about, promoting, or maintaining this particular form or pattern (444b-e). Absent some statement or strong textual evidence to the contrary, then, it is entirely reasonable to expect that the Good, too, is an intelligible entity that constitutes a determinate nature, through conformity with which its participants come to have the property of being good. But if this is so, then the nature that it constitutes ought to be some intelligible form or pattern, difficult to discern, to be sure, but nonetheless definable. Confirmation of this expectation appears to be found at 534b-c. Having first asserted that giving an account of the being of each thing (ton logon hekastou tês ousias) is necessary to having understanding (nous) of it – the being of each thing having already been identified with intelligible, non-visible Forms (including the Good, 507b-c, 517b, 532a-b, 533b) – Socrates says that unless someone can discern an account of the Good that distinguishes it from everything else and refutes any challenge, he will not be said to know (eidenai) the Good itself or any
other good thing (534b3–c5). This, taken together with the numerous references to the guardians seeing (in the intellectual sense of ‘seeing’ that is most naturally taken as grasping or comprehending), studying, or knowing the Good (508e1–4, 517b7–c5, 518c8–d1, 519c8–d2, 526e1, 532a5–b2) or seeing the truth about ‘good things’ alongside that concerning fine and just things (520c5–6), I suggest, compels the reader to conclude, contra Broadie, that the Good is for the guardians an object of direct knowledge, consisting, primarily, of knowledge of the definition (the account of the being) of goodness.

§5. The additive notion of goodness

Let me now present reasons for rejecting Broadie’s preferred reading of ‘things known’ at 509b6 as action-types, and for embracing her dispreferred reading, where the term refers to Forms. Broadie understands the Good’s role as reality-producer as making action-types genuine facets or parts of the relevant Form. So, some action-type EFG, e.g. returning what one owes, is made good or has goodness added to it in particular situations, or under certain circumstances. Whether such states of affairs obtain is what the G-question is asking, when asked of particular action-types: when it is the case that goodness is added to returning what one owes, under certain circumstances, EFG becomes really just.

This interpretation, however, gets the order of explanation the wrong way around. Consider first that if the addition of goodness makes or causes EFG to be (say) just, then at least part of the explanation of EFG’s being just is that it is good – one of the just-makers of EFG is, on this view, it is being good. But since being just is merely one of a plurality of ways of being good (and not the other way around), it is not the case that something (action-type, soul, city) is just because it is good, but it is, rather, good because it is just (and it is just by standing in the right relation to Justice). Indeed, reflection on particular cases establishes that while being good (or the addition of goodness) is necessary for an action-type being, under some circumstances, just, it is not sufficient. For, it is possible for one and the same action-type to be good in different situations, but just in only one of them. Imagine for instance that Charlotte has made a large apple and blackberry crumble, and offers half to her neighbour. Imagine further that she picked the blackberries from the neighbour’s bush close to their shared fence, and thinks it only fair to share. In this situation, the action-type of sharing food is both just and good. Alternatively, imagine a different situation in which Charlotte decides that it would be piggy to eat the whole crumble herself, so offers half to her neighbour (who, let us further imagine, is not starving or impoverished). In this situation, the action-type is both temperate and good, but not just. So the addition of goodness cannot be that in virtue of which the action-type is
or becomes just (or, indeed, temperate). But if having goodness added to this action-type is not a sufficient condition for it being a genuine facet of Justice, the addition of goodness cannot be a sufficient condition for any action-type being a genuine facet of any of the virtue Forms. It follows that the Good cannot be the reality-maker of action-types in the way that Broadie describes, which in turn casts doubt on her preferred reading of ‘things known’ at 509b6 as action-types.

Further doubt about this reading arises from the immediate context. The sun-analogy is preceded by Socrates’ introduction at 507b of two realms, the visible and the intelligible, each populated by distinct kinds of entity, the many beautiful, good, etc. things belonging to the visible realm, and the Forms Beauty, Goodness, etc. belonging to the intelligible realm. After discussing light, sight, and sun in the visible realm, Socrates then asserts that “What the Good is in the intelligible realm, relative to understanding and the intelligible things, this (i.e. the sun) is in the visible realm, in relation to sight and visible things” (508b13–c2). It is most natural to take ‘intelligible things’ (ta nooumena) here to refer to the Forms. The soul is then described as focusing on its objects and, when they are illuminated by truth and being, as having knowledge of them (508d). That upon which the soul focuses must be intelligible things, and again, since the only intelligible things under discussion are Forms, it is most natural to take the objects of knowledge to be Forms. So, when Socrates says that the Good makes things known at 509b6–7, it is most natural to take ‘things known’ (ta gignôskomena) as Forms, in line with Broadie’s first but less preferred interpretation. By contrast it is very difficult to see how Plato could have intended the reader to understand ‘action-types’ as the objects of knowledge in the culmination of the sun-analogy. So, although Broadie acknowledges that her dispreferred interpretation fits better with the sun-analogy (Plato’s Sun-Like Good, 153), we ought to draw the stronger conclusion that her preferred interpretation is unsupported by the text, and ought to be rejected.

§6. Conclusion

I have argued against the more metaphysically radical aspects of Broadie’s interpretation of the Good in the Republic, in particular against its not being definable or an object of knowledge for the guardians, in favour of the traditional understanding of it (as definable and known by the guardians). I have also argued against her preferred view that what the Good makes known and real are action-types, in favour of her alternative interpretation of the objects of knowledge as Forms. Nonetheless, the innovative and insightful core of Broadie’s reading remains – the twin proposal that we understand the Good qua knowledge-maker to be central to the dialectical investigations of the guardians, by way of their asking the G-question, and
qua reality-maker to be responsible, ultimately, for the creation of virtuous policies, cities, souls, and actions as a result of the guardians implementing the knowledge of Forms they acquire through asking and answering the G-question in dialectic.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Alex Long, Joachim Aufderheide, Ursula Coope, an anonymous reviewer, and the editors of the journal for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Bibliography**


