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Is the Idea of the Good Beyond Being? Plato's "epekeina tês ousias" revisited (Republic, 6, 509b8-10)

Ferber, Rafael; Damschen, Gregor

Abstract: The article tries to prove that the famous formula "epekeina tês ousias" (R.509b8) has to be understood in the sense of being beyond being and not only in the sense of being beyond essence. We hereby make three points: first, since pure textual exegesis of 509b8–10 seems to lead to endless controversy, a formal proof for the metaontological interpretation could be helpful to settle the issue; we try to give such a proof. Second, we offer a corollary of the formal proof, showing that self-predication of the form of the Good, or of any form, is not possible, that is: no form of F has the form of F. Third, we apply Spinoza's distinction between an "ens imaginarium" and a "chimaera" to Plato's Idea of the Good.

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Is the Idea of the Good Beyond Being? Plato's *epekeina tēs ousias* Revisited (*Republic* 6,509b8–10)

RAFAEL FERBER and GREGOR DAMSCHEN

Holger Thesleff writes in his *Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model*, 'In *Republic* 5–6, we reach *hē tou agathou idea*, the *megiston mathēma* (6,505a, 6,508e, 7,517b, 7,526e, 7,534c), through preliminary illustrations of the theory of Ideas (and "Forms") and, more generally, via Plato's vision of the two levels' (1999, 60). But does Plato's Socrates not envisage via his two-level model also a third level? For according to Plato's Socrates, it is right to think that knowledge and truth, which belong to the second level, are 'goodlike' (*agathoeidē*, 6,509a3), but wrong to think that either of them is the Good, 'for the Good is yet more prized' (6,509a4–5). In fact, the Good 'is not *ousia* but even superior to *ousia*, surpassing it in rank and power' (... *ouk ousias ontos tou agathou, all' eti epekeina tēs ousias presbeia<i> kai dynamei hyperechontos*) (6,509b8–10, tr. Ferber).

I. The Problem and the Thesis

On this last sentence, barrels of ink have been spilled.¹ One of the more significant contributions especially accentuated the fact that the so-called formula *epekeina tēs ousias* has a follow-up, namely *presbeia<i> kai dynamei hyperechontos*.² Thus, the formula does not mean that the Idea of the Good is beyond being *simpliciter*, but *in the qualified sense* of a being superior to other beings—just as a king or queen is still a human being, although he or she transcends other human beings with respect to dignity and power.³ Nevertheless, the formula *epekeina tēs ousias* is preceded also by *ouk ousias ontos tou agathou*. These preceding words can

¹ Cf. the bibliographies of Lafrance 1987, and Brisson 2014, and the summary of the most significant literature from 1786–2004 in Ferber 2005, 169–74, supplemented by Ferber 2013, esp. 6 n. 1. To these bibliographies must be added Tietzel 1894, Neschke-Hentschke 2012, 1–49, esp. 23–49, and Krämer 2014.

² Baltes 1997.

³ Cf. Baltes 1997, 11; Brisson 2002, 90; for an extensive discussion of Brisson and Baltes, see Ferber 2003b, 2005. El Murr 2013a does not take into account these discussions.

have at least two interpretations: on the one hand, that the Idea of the Good is not *ousia* in the sense of not being essence, and, on the other hand, that the Idea of the Good is not *ousia* in the sense of not being at all. In the first case, the Idea of the Good would be *epekeina tēs ousias* in the sense of being beyond essence; in the second case, the Idea of the Good would be *epekeina tēs ousias* in the sense of being beyond being (*epekeina tou ontos*).⁴ The first to have interpreted it as being beyond being seems to be Plotinus,⁵ and he has many followers from Proclus to Schleiermacher *and* the Tübingen school *and* beyond;⁶ we call this interpretation the metaontological one. The other interpretation has been put forward by Matthias Baltes, who refers to the middle Platonists as his forerunners;⁷ we call this the ontological interpretation.

Here we give an argument for the metaontological interpretation. We make three points that seem new to us: first, since pure textual exegesis of 6,509b8–10 seems to lead to endless controversy, a formal proof for the metaontological interpretation could be helpful to settle the issue; we try to give such a proof. Second, we offer a corollary of the formal proof, showing that not only self-predication of the form of the Good, but of any form is not possible, that is: no form of F has the form of F. Third, we apply Spinoza's distinction between an *ens imaginarium* and a *chimaera* to Plato's Idea of the Good.

II. Three Ontological Principles

We start with an observation: If neither goodlike (*agathoeidē*) knowledge (6,508e6–509a2) nor goodlike (*agathoeidē*) truth (6,509a1–3) is *the* Good, then also *the* Good is neither goodlike (*agathoeidē*) knowledge nor goodlike (*agathoeidē*) truth. In fact, Liddell-Scott-Jones translate the adjective—probably coined by Plato—*agathoeidēs* either as ‘like good, seeming good, opposed to *agathos*’, citing *Republic* 6,509a, etc. or as ‘having the form of good’, citing Plotinus 1.7.1, Julianus Imperator, *Orationes* 4.135a; Proclus, *Elements of Theology* 25, 27;

⁴ Cf., e.g., Plot. *Enn.* 1.3.5.7, 2.4.16.25, 3.9, 3.9.1–2, 5.5.6.11, 6.2.17.22–23, 6.6.5.36, 6.7.16.22–4, 6.8.9.28.

⁵ Cf. Baltes 1997, 16: ‘Plotinus seems to be the first Platonist who declared the Idea of the Good to be *epekeina tou ontos*. In doing so he may have been influenced by tentative efforts that had started long before at raising the highest principle beyond being’.

⁶ Cf. for an enumeration Ferber 2005, 150–53.

⁷ Cf. Baltes 1997, 12–15.

Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 4; *et al.* However, Plato's Socrates seems not to intend that the adjective *agathoeidēs* means the opposite of *agathos*, but something similar to *agathos*, that is, something identical to *and* different from *agathos*. Therefore, we can translate the expression *agathoeidēs* literally as 'boniform' or 'having the form of good'.

In the following, we use the general term 'G' for this adjective. If we assume that the Form (idea) of the Good should be denoted by using a proper name such as 'g_i' (i.e. a single term), we get the proof that the Form of the Good is not itself being which has the form of good, or, abbreviated, that the Form of the Good is not being (*ouk ousias ontos tou agathou*).

We hereby use three ontological principles: first, the principle of alien causation; second, the principle of *methexis*; and third, the principle of the goodness of being.

First, the principle of alien causation means that the cause is not identical to the caused (cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* B3 999a17–19; Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.6). This principle has two halves, which are premises 1 and 2 of our formal proof. The first half says that the causing principle has priority to the caused thing: If the causing principle x causes some y, x is prior to y (premiss 1). The second half says that priority is not reflexive, which means that nothing is prior to itself (premiss 2). One could argue that the principle of alien causation is a principle in Aristotle's and Plotinus' ontology, but not in Plato's, if we take Socrates' speech about the self-movement of the soul in *Phaedrus* 245e2–3 into consideration.⁸ It is true that in *Phaedrus* 245e3 the soul is self-moved (*hyph' heautou kinoumenon*), which restricts the global validity of the principle of alien causation. However, in the analogy of the sun in *Republic* 6, Socrates, *inter alia*, explicitly avoids the self-predication of the Form of the Good because self-predication is one of the necessary conditions for the so-called 'Third Man' or here 'Third Good' and hence for the infinite regress of Forms of the Good.⁹ For only if the Form of the Good and its instances are good in the same sense of 'good' will they entail a further universal form of the Good.¹⁰ Thus, even if we take the self-movement of the soul into

⁸ For a formal reconstruction of the proof for the immortality of the soul in the *Phdr.*, see Ferber 2003a, 128–31, esp. 129.

⁹ On self-predication of forms in Plato cf. Vlastos 1954, Malcolm 1991 and—among many others—Damschen 2003, 54–59.

¹⁰ This is in principle already shown in Plot. *Enn.* 6.1.1.27; Procl., *in Prm.* 3.880.5–7. Cf. Ferber 1989 and 2015b, 66–9, and with some new considerations against Malcolm 1991, Ferber 2003a, 138–40, and 2005, 156–60.

account, for our proof it is enough to restrict the principle of alien causation to Platonic forms.

Second, we use a special case of the principle of *methexis* (*Symposium* 211b2, *Republic* 476d1–2, cf. *Parmenides* 132d3), namely that what is good is good by the participation of *the* Good (premiss 3).

Third, we assume that since truth has the form of good (*agathoeidē*, 6,509a3)—premiss 4—and truth and being are extensionally equivalent, that is, convertible (cf. 6,501d, 6,508d–509a; *Symposium* 212a; *Phaedo* 65e–66a, 67b; *Phaedrus* 247c–d, 248b–c)—premiss 5—being also has the form of good: if one of a group of extensionally equivalent concepts has a certain property, here ‘having the form of good’, accordingly, all of them have this property. Thus, being has the form of good. This is the principle of the goodness of (all) being.

III. The Proof

1. If x causes y , x is prior to y . (= premiss 1, first half of the principle of alien causation: priority of the causing principle)

$$\forall x \forall y (C^2xy \rightarrow P^2xy)$$

2. Nothing is prior to itself. (= premiss 2, second half of the principle of alien causation: priority is not reflexive)

$$\neg \exists x P^2xx$$

3. The Form of the Good is the cause of all beings that have the form of good. (= premiss 3, special case of the *principle of methexis*)

$$\forall x (G^1x \rightarrow C^2g_i x)$$

reductio ad impossibile:

4. The Form of the Good is itself being which has the form of good. (assumed for *reductio ad impossibile*)

$$G^1g_i$$

5. If the Form of the Good is itself being which has the form of good, then it is the cause of itself. (from 3, \rightarrow)

$$(G^1g_i \rightarrow C^2g_i g_i)$$

6. The Form of the Good is the cause of itself. (from 4, 5, by *modus ponens*)

$$C^2g_i g_i$$

7. If the Form of the Good causes itself, it is prior to itself. (from 1, \rightarrow)

$$(C^2g_i g_i \rightarrow P^2g_i g_i)$$

8. The Form of the Good is prior to itself. (from 6, 7, by *modus ponens*)
 $P^2 g_i g_i$
9. The Form of the Good is not prior to itself. (from 2, x/g_i)
 $\neg P^2 g_i g_i$
10. The Form of the Good is prior to itself and the Form of the Good is not prior to itself. (from 8, 9, by conjunction)
 $P^2 g_i g_i \wedge \neg P^2 g_i g_i$

This is a contradiction. Therefore:

11. The Form of the Good is not itself being which has the form of good.
 (by *reductio ad impossibile* of 4)
 $\neg G^1 g_i$
12. Truth has the form of good. (= premiss 4)
13. Truth and being are extensionally equivalent. (= premiss 5)
14. Being has the form of good. (from 12, 13, = the *principle of the goodness of being*)
15. (Since all being has the form of good), the Form of the Good is not being.
 (from 11, 14)
 or ... *ouk ousias ontos tou agathou all' eti epekeina tēs ousias [i.e. tou ontos] presbeia<i> kai dynamei hyperechontos.*

This proof is valid *and* sound if one assumes that all of its five premisses are true. To attack this proof the reader is invited to show that the proof is either not valid or at least one of the premisses is not true. As long as this is not done, we may add: *q.e.d.*

IV. Corollary

Interestingly, there is a corollary to steps 1 to 11 of this proof. It shows that the principle of alien causation, together with an *unrestricted* principle of *methexis* (= premiss 3*)—which is valid not only for the Idea of the Good, but for any Form of F—implies that no Form of F has the form of F. Thus, the three ontological principles are not only necessary conditions, but also sufficient for avoiding the self-predication of forms.

1. If x causes y, x is prior to y. (= premiss 1, first half of the *principle of alien causation*: priority of the causing principle)
2. Nothing is prior to itself. (= premiss 2, second half of the *principle of alien causation*: priority is not reflexive)

3. Any Form of F is the cause of all beings which have the form of F.
(= premiss 3*, unrestricted *global principle of methexis*)
- reductio ad impossibile:*
4. The Form of F is itself being which has the form of F. (assumed for *reductio ad impossibile*)
5. If the Form of F is itself being which has the form of F, then it is the cause of itself.
(from 3*, $-\forall$)
6. The Form of F is the cause of itself. (from 4, 5, by *modus ponens*)
7. If the Form of F causes itself, it is prior to itself. (from 1, $-\forall$)
8. The Form of F is prior to itself. (from 6, 7, by *modus ponens*)
9. The Form of F is not prior to itself. (from 2)
10. The Form of F is prior to itself and the Form of F is not prior to itself.
(from 8, 9, by conjunction)

This is a contradiction. Therefore:

11. The Form of F is not itself being which has the form of F.
(*reductio ad impossibile* of 4)

q.e.d.

V. Final Considerations

We have a criticism which dates back to Aristotle that it is not humanly possible to realize or to possess the Idea of the Good (*ouk an eiē prakton oude ktēton anthrōpō<i>*, *Nicomachean Ethics* A4 1096b34). This criticism has been repeated by Karl Popper and others who speak of ‘the emptiness of the Platonic Idea or Form of the Good’.¹¹ If the Idea of the Good is *epekeina tēs ousias* in the sense of being beyond the being (*epekeina tou ontos*), then the Platonic Form of the Good is not only empty, but it also implies a logical contradiction and is therefore a logically impossible concept, like a square circle. If the Idea of the Good is ‘the brightest thing that is’ (*tou ontos to phanotaton*, 7,518c9), ‘the happiest of the things that are’ (*to eudaimonestaton tou ontos*) (7,526e3–4) and ‘the best of the things that are’ (*to ariston en tois ousi*) (7,532c5–6, tr. Grube-Reeve), it is not *epekeina tēs ousias* in the sense of *epekeina tou ontos*.¹²

¹¹ Cross and Woosley 1964, 260; Popper 1966, 146 n. 32.

¹² Cf. for this contradiction also Ferber 1989, 194–7, Ferber 2003b, 133–40 and 2005, esp. 162–7.

For logically impossible concepts such as a square circle, as distinct from fictional concepts such as a golden mountain, we have a neglected but useful special expression emphasized by Spinoza: we could say that the Idea of the Good is like a square circle: not even an *ens fictum* or *imaginarium*, but a *chimaera* that is an *ens verbale*. An *ens verbale* is something one cannot imagine but only formulate.¹³

Now the Platonic Socrates says: ‘Without having had a vision of this Form no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters of state’ (7,517c4–5, tr. Cornford). But then the question remains: How is it possible to have a vision of a *chimaera* to act with wisdom either in one’s own life or in matters of state? How is it possible to act under the Idea of the Good—to vary the Kantian formulation that we act ‘under the idea of freedom’¹⁴—if the Good is a *chimaera*? In fact Plato lets Glaucon reply: ‘Here Glaucon in great amusement [*mala geloiōs*] said: “Apollo, what marvellous hyperbole!”’ (6,509c1–2, tr. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy). Whatever may be meant by Glaucon’s ‘great amusement’, Plato seems serious, but not completely serious, about the ‘hyperbolic’ status of the Good.¹⁵ To return to Plato’s two-level model, we may say: Plato seems serious about a third level, but not so serious, as were Plotinus and others, when Plato *via* his brother Glaucon is making fun of the assumed surpassing status of the third level. Is this one of the reasons why Plato in his written work did not return to the hyperbolic status of the Good but has lowered the standard by introducing in the *Politicus* ‘the appropriate’ (*to metrion*) and ‘all that which has its seat in the middle between two extremes’ (284e) which the statesman has to see to act with wisdom instead of the ‘exact itself’ (*auto t’ akribes*, 284d2 tr. Ferber), which is probably *the Good*?¹⁶

University of Lucerne

¹³ *Metaphysical Thoughts* 1.3.4: ‘Chimaeras properly called verbal beings: First, it should be noted that we may properly call a Chimaera a verbal being [*ens verbale*] because it is neither in the intellect nor in the imagination. For it cannot be expressed except in words. E.g., we can, indeed, express a square Circle in words, but we cannot imagine it in any way, much less understand it. So a Chimaera is nothing but a word, and impossibility cannot be numbered among the affections of being, for it is only a negation’ (tr. Curley).

¹⁴ *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA 448.

¹⁵ See Ferber, 2005, 160–62, and now the contribution by A. Gabrièle Wersinger-Taylor in this volume for more on the passage.

¹⁶ Cf. Ferber, 1995, 69 n. 27.

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