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Strangers and Pilgrims

On the Role of Aporiai in Theology

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The Problem of Definition

What Glaucon is looking for is a definition of the Good by Socrates. If there is anything that Plato learned from Socrates, however, it is the problem of definition. One cannot define one's ideas much less define the Good.[7] An idea is what a number of "things" have in common that enable us to apply the same idea to all of them while simultaneously distinguishing those "things" from everything else. A definition, then, involves both sameness and difference (identity and difference). Both aspects of definition create difficulties. For example with respect to "identity," defining just what that is, that is held in common between, say, everything that we call "beautiful," is impossible. The same "thing" in one context is called "beautiful" in another context "ugly." Yet everyone "knows" what beauty is.

There is a problem with definition, however, not merely with respect to such "subjective" notions like "beauty" and "goodness." Even the ideas of the most common things of our world, though, escape definition, especially, when the criterion of difference is added on to the task of definition. What is it that all the diverse "things," which are called chairs, have in common (identity) that permit one to apply the idea chair to them all? Not all chairs have legs, arms, or backs. When we turn to the criterion of difference, the problems confronting definition become compounded. Not all things, upon which one sits, are chairs (sometimes one stands on chairs; does that make a chair a floor or a ladder?). When we wish to define, or tell someone, what a chair is, we, usually, just point to a particular chair and say, "this is what a chair is." But the particular is not the idea that is actually thought. What is thought is the universal, and, the first criterion of a definition (identity) establishes that a definition applies to the universal not the particular. The particular is only an example of the idea. As an example, a particular thing is accessible to the senses, but the idea is not accessible to the senses.

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7 See Plato, *Republic*, Book VI and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1040a5-10.

Keeping this dilemma with respect to definitions in mind helps one to understand why Socrates alienated so many people and could be accused of defaming the Gods and corrupting the youth of Athens. The "Apology" tells how Socrates examined the politicians, artisans, and poets only to discover that they did not know either what they were talking about or what they were purporting to be doing. Why? Because they couldn't give a definition of what they knew and/or did. Socrates went away convinced that he was better off than they, for he knew that he didn't know; he knew that he couldn't define the ideas upon which his knowledge and actions depend. Yet, this is not an un-knowing that can be corrected with experience or effort. This is not the not knowing of an ignorance that with enough time and with the proper instrumentation could be corrected. This unknowing has nothing to do with correctly or incorrectly knowing something. It is an inescapable and necessary unknowing at the core of human experience. One cannot define the universals upon which all understanding depends. They can only be assumed or presupposed, and no amount of time, discipline, or effort is able to overcome this unknowing.

No wonder the youth of Athens were all too eager to ridicule authority and that Socrates could be charged with attempting to make a better case for the worse. The youth delighted in their champion exposing the "ignorance" and arrogance of his opponents.

With respect to the charge that he defamed the Gods, Socrates could say, based on the issue of definitions, that, to the contrary, he believed in the Gods in a "far higher sense" than the everyday citizen.[8] This belief in the Gods is not demonstrated simply because he used an oracle from Delphi in his defense, but because he knew that, like any other idea, one cannot define God. One must necessarily presuppose the idea God just as one must presuppose any other idea. One cannot think the idea God without believing in the

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[8] Plato, *The Apology*, 35d. Schleiermacher edited and translated the works of Plato, and he wrote detailed introductions to the dialogs. Although educated in Moravian schools, he lost any chance to have a career as a Moravian pastor or teacher in 1787 after a personal religious crisis in which he came to doubt the church's teaching on the divinity of Christ and Christ's suffering substitution. Is it a mere coincidence that, following the publication of his *On Religion* in 1799 in which he questions such central church teachings as the role of miracles, the notion of individual immortality, and the personality of God, he would say in 1802 in a letter to his sister Charlotte, who had herself become a Moravian: "'I can say that, after everything, I have again become a Moravian - only of a higher order.' (*Briefe*, I, 295)" (from Hans-Joachim Birkner, "Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)" in *Theologen des Protestantismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1978), p. 10).

idea, if by belief one means assumption, in other words, the indefinability of each and every idea which requires us to employ them without truly knowing them. All ideas, whether of gravity or of a unicorn, are matters of assumption, i.e., belief. Ideas, however, are inaccessible to the senses, so that all everyday belief in the Gods' ability to act in the dimension of the senses transforms the Gods into material, limited, i.e., finite, things in contrast to the immateriality, illimitability, infinity, and incorruptibility of ideas. Such a transformation makes the Gods mere particulars rather than universals. Yet Plato, if not Socrates, pointed to a dimension even "higher" than the actual ideas of thought. This dimension Plato calls the Good or the First Principle which, for example, in the Timaeus is spoken of as God. Hence, the belief in the Gods in a "far higher sense" has at least a double meaning: a) in the sense that what is thought when one thinks of the Gods is an idea that, like every idea, is indefinable and necessarily presupposed, i.e., it is a matter of belief; and b) in the sense that the Good or First Principle of the whole is itself not an idea but higher than any essence. Hence, at the least, there may not be any substitution of what is available through the senses with what the Gods are (or God is), for any activity in the material world understood to be an activity of the Gods would be only the copy and shadow of the illimitable, divine dimension of the imperceptible that is the condition of possibility for anything to be or to act in the material world.

Hence, Plato could write: "the many that are seen are not known; the ideas that are known are not seen."[9] What one "knows" when one encounters some particular and individual thing is not the thing itself but an idea which is inaccessible to the senses. What one sees, then, is not what one knows. Yet "know" here must be placed in quotation marks, because one doesn't truly know the ideas if by knowledge is meant definition, for the ideas cannot be defined. They are, and only can be, presupposed or assumed.

Simile of the Sun

Plato, therefore, begins his discussion of the Good by talking about the "child" of the Good which is accessible to the senses. To this end, he builds an analogy (announcing a dialectical structure) upon the experience of seeing a particular object. He suggests that sight depends upon a "third thing" in addition to the eye and the object perceived. This "third thing" is light. Re-

9 Plato, *The Republic*, 507b.

move light and there is no sight. Yet the light is not the eye nor is it the object. The light is the condition of possibility for the eye to perceive the object. The origin of light in this world is the sun, which, Plato observes, is the source of all generation or life. Hence, the ultimate synthesis enabling the perception of difference (the object is perceived as an object different from other objects) is the light of the sun. From the example of the child, one is led to conclude that the Good is some "third thing" inaccessible to the senses enabling one's experience of all difference (ideas). However, Plato explicitly says that the Good is itself not an idea, as is the "sun," for the Good is above all ideas.

Simile of the Line

Glaucon asks if there is not more to be said about this analogy between the sun and the Good. Plato's response is the account of the simile of the line (paradoxically, a line that one can see is to be used to help us think what cannot be seen). He says to draw a line divided into two unequal lengths. He does not say whether the line is to be drawn horizontally or vertically; nor does he say whether the longer portion of the line is to the left, right, top or bottom. He does talk later about upper and lower portions of the line which suggests that the line is to be drawn vertically. His discussion of the one and the many, i.e., "the many (objects) are seen but not known, where the one (idea) is known but not seen,"[10] suggests that the portions of the line can be proportioned according to quantity. That would mean that one is to draw a vertical line divided into two unequal lengths with the longer portion at the bottom. These two portions represent the visible world at the bottom and the invisible world of the intellect at the top.[11] Plato then says to divide these two segments once more into two unequal lengths with the same proportionalities. That would mean that one is left with a vertical line divided into four segments with the length of each segment getting shorter as one goes up the line.

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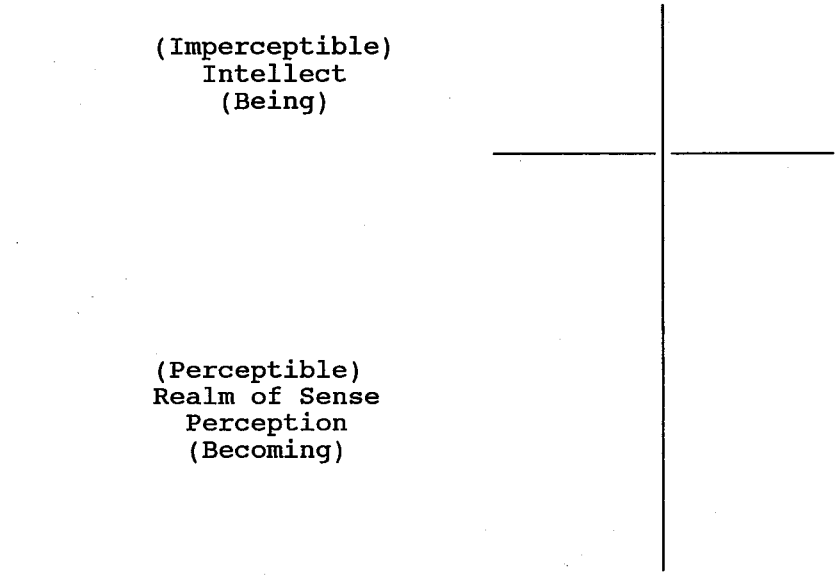
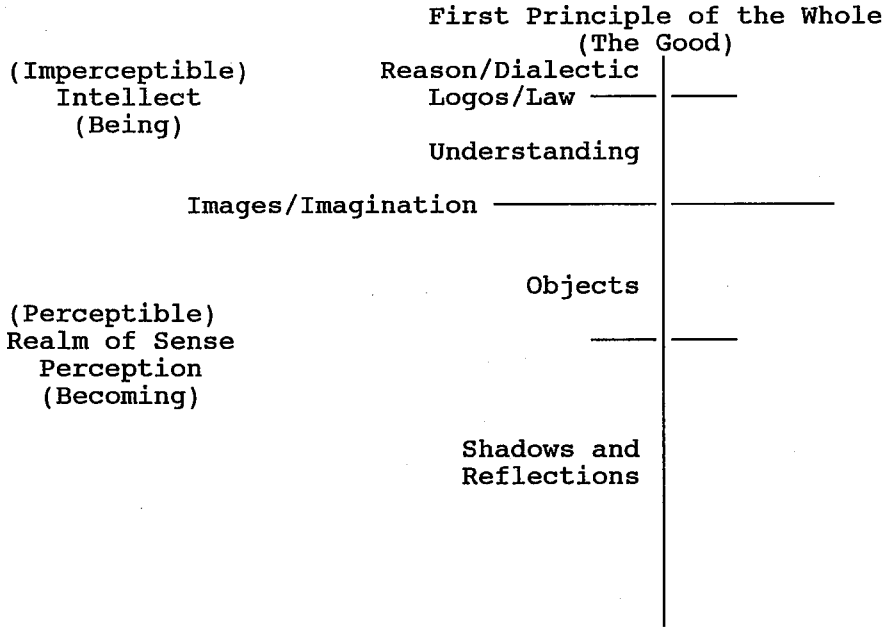
[10] Plato, *The Republic*, 507b.

[11] The following two diagrams represent the image of the line. Note that the first basic division is represented by a cross. For the similarities to the "cosmic cross" of the Christian tradition, see, for example, Gregor von Nyssa, *Die Drei Tage zwischen Tod und Auferstehung unseres Herrn Jesus Christus*, trans. by Hubertus R. Drobner (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), especially pp. 147-155.


(Imperceptible)
Intellect
(Being)
(Perceptible)
Realm of Sense
Perception
(Becoming)


First Principle of the Whole
(The Good)
(Imperceptible)
Intellect
(Being)
Reason/Dialectic
Logos/Law
Understanding
Images/Imagination
Objects
(Perceptible)
Realm of Sense
Perception
(Becoming)
Shadows and
Reflections

Plato proceeds to describe what each of these segments is meant to represent. The largest segment at the bottom of the line represents the shadows and reflections of objects which are far more in number than the objects that they are reflections of; which in turn are more numerous than universals. Any one object can cast an infinite number of shadows by simply moving the light source, causing the casting of a different shadow. In the same manner, any one object can be reflected in a mirror (or shiny metal object) by an infinite number of images as one moves the mirror ever so slightly. Shadows and reflections are in principle the most numerous type of sensed phenomena.

The next segment in the visible world is smaller, and it represents the objects themselves. There are, obviously, less objects than there are shadows or reflections of those same objects. Plato says of these two segments of the visible world that they constitute the realm of becoming, for they are characterized by change. No matter how stable objects appear to be, they are not eternal. If not in the short run, then in the long run, they will deteriorate. These objects and shadows come into, and go out of, being which means that they are not permanent but becoming. Plato, therefore, speaks of the objects as constituting a realm of opinion or faith, because they are constantly changing, and they can be understood only by employing universals which are indefinable.

Plato uses an analogy to talk about the relationship between the invisible intellect and the visible realm of objects and shadows/reflections. This is an analogy based upon copy and original. The shadows/reflections are copies of the original objects. Similarly, the intellect contains the originals of which the objects and shadows/reflections below the objects are mere copies. These originals are the ideas (or essences/universals).

The third segment from the bottom of the line represents the lower of two segments constituting the invisible intellect. Here Plato says that the mind uses the ideas to make sense of the images in the mind of the objects and shadows/reflections of the visible world. One does not have the objects, etc., of the visible world in one's mind. One only has representations, or images, of them in the mind.[12] Plato specifically refers to angles as an example here. What one thinks in the mind, however, are not the angles one can draw in the sand. What is in the sand one cannot put directly into one's

[12] Descartes, of course, spoke of this same phenomena of the mind when he uses the piece of wax at the end of the second Meditation to demonstrate that perception is a series of mental judgments. Perception is not some direct and immediate access to objects and things as they are in themselves. Perception is a matter of mental representation.

mind. One thinks, the idea of a right, obtuse, or acute angle. Yet such angles by definition cannot truly be, for an angle is the result of the intersection of two lines. But neither the point of intersection nor lines truly are by definition, for a point with any extension is a line (by definition points have no extension; only lines have extension) and a line with any width is a plane (by definition lines have no width; only planes have length and width).[13] One must assume that one knows what these angles are, because one cannot truly define them nor can they be by definition. For this reason, i.e., that ideas or universals are incapable of definition but must necessarily be used by the intellect, Plato calls ideas/universals "hypotheses." These hypotheses are not tentative judgments to be corrected by empirical observation as one is taught to use hypothesis in the scientific method. Plato's hypotheses are necessary assumptions which enable one to make sense of one's experience of the visible world. Therefore, Plato's hypotheses (ideas) are presupposed by the hypotheses (tentative judgments) of the scientific method.

Hence, the first activity of the intellect is the use of ideas to make sense of the imagined world accessible to the senses. This activity Plato calls "understanding." Here the assumed ideas are employed for making sense of what is imaged in the mind of the "external" world. What distinguishes this activity from the realm of opinion or faith is that it is rooted in, or employs, that which is unchanging in order to make sense of the changing phantasma of images of the "external" world had in the imagination (not to be confused with fantasy which consists of purely mental constructs that in no way are concerned to image, nor are they confined to, the realm of sensed objects).

Ideas, even if they cannot be defined and, hence, even if they must necessarily be, and unavoidably are, presumed, these ideas are nevertheless the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. An idea does not increase or decrease in any way.[14] Ideas do not change. Opinions are changed. An

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13 In addition, there can be no definition of a plane, either, for, as soon as a plane has any depth, it is no longer a plane but space (by definition planes have no depth; only space has length, width, and depth).

14 Ideas are dis-covered. Even if one wishes to conclude that they are arrived at through one's experience of the "external" world, i.e., that they are ectypal rather than archetypal, this only begs the question of the permanence of ideas. Not only does the correlation between an ordered universe and ideas lead to astonishment that there can be such a correlation between material objects and a mental idea, but that correlation confirms that there is an order to objects to which they must conform. That is, objects conform to ideas, which somehow must be prior to the particularlity of objects, since all similar objects conform to the same idea. The more important point is that these "prior" ideas are inseparable from a physical world, for both actual ideas and the actual world are rooted in a dynamic of possibility which unites them in the project of life.

opinion is formed by making a judgment about the imaged world of objects. That opinion is rooted in ideas which must be employed of necessity to make sense out of the images of the imagination. The formed opinion presupposes this activity of having already made sense of the images by the application of unchanging ideas. To the extent that the opinion is concerned with transient phenomena, the opinion is itself transient. This mental activity of opinion making tends to completely ignore that it is dependent upon ideas (or assumptions) that are constant. Nevertheless, it is not as if there was no change in the intellect in contrast to the changing world of the senses. The understanding employs what is unchanging, the ideas, to make sense of what itself constitutes a constant flow of changing data - the world as it is represented to the intellect in the imagination.

Finally, Plato speaks of a fourth segment, the smallest on the line, which is concerned exclusively with ideas and has nothing whatsoever to do with the changing images of the "visible" world. This segment he labels "reason," and it is concerned with a dialectic of the ideas that takes one "up" to the First Principle of the whole, that is, the Good, and returns "down" to, and remains exclusively in, the unchanging dimension of ideas.

This is a curious dialectic, however. Unlike the dialectic of perception concerned with the "child" of the Good in the realm of the material world of sense perception, this dialectic in the intellect a) involves no change and b) results in a synthesis that is not another idea among the ideas. Unlike a dialog where a synthesis is accomplished by change either within the thesis or the antithesis, the dialectic of the intellect, spoken of by Plato here, "by definition" cannot involve change of either the thesis or the synthesis, because here they are universals which are unchanging. How can there be a dialectic which does not involve some transformation of the thesis and antithesis on the way to drawing a synthesis? The task is a remarkable one as Socrates' conversation partners observe.

Plato insists that there is such a dialectic, but he offers no explanation of it. Just as at other important points in the presentation of the line simile, the reader/hearer is required to work out for her/himself what Plato is suggesting. As with the other cases, however, there are many hints: a) the Good cannot be spoken of directly but only indirectly; b) the Good is not an idea or thing among other ideas or things, it is "beyond essence;" c) the Good is the First Principle of the whole; d) the parent (the Good) is analogous to the child (the Sun); e) ideas, which serve as the multiplicity or distinctions upon which the dialectic's thesis and antithesis depend, are incapable of changing; f) the dialectic spoken of here is entirely inaccessible to the senses not

employing any images as does the understanding; and g) here one is concerned exclusively with Being and not Becoming.

At least three possibilities for understanding this dialectic can be formulated on the basis of this information. The first possibility is that the synthesis spoken of here is a summation of the parts, that is, the synthesis arrived at is the whole that is achieved by adding all the ideas together into the unity of a set. The difficulties with this synthesis are at least two: first, it gives us a synthesis that is itself an idea, i.e., the idea of the sum of parts in contrast to individual parts, etc. Second, this synthesis is in no way analogous to the "child." The sun does not "unite" the eye with its object by adding them together. The sun, rather, is a "third thing."

A second possibility for understanding this dialectic of the reason depends upon the uniqueness of the present participle "Being." There is no other present participle like this one. Present participles function both nominally and verbally. The nominal meaning of Being is expressed by the term "being(s)" or things/multiplicity. It applies to objects (these different things are beings); but it equally applies to ideas (each idea is a being). Plato has suggested that the term Being most appropriately applies to ideas, since these ideas do not change where objects in the physical, perceptible world change or are becoming. However, at the end of the simile of the line there is a suggestion that there is a notion of Being that applies even to the changing dimension of Becoming. Nevertheless, it is not inappropriate to speak of ideas as beings, for there are many ideas, hence, ideas constitute many beings.

In addition to a nominal meaning, however, a present participle has equally a verbal meaning. Here is where the uniqueness of the present participle "Being" is announced. The verbal meaning of Being is the verb "to be." There is no other verb comparable to the verb "to be." Unlike any other verb, it is presupposed by all that was, is, and can be. In addition, this verb is presupposed by all other verbs. The verb "to be," then, is temporal. It unites past, present, and future as a horizon of was, is, and will be. Furthermore, the verb "to be" is not a thing, nor is it an idea, among other things or ideas; the verb "to be" does not express the eternal permanence of some actual thing in contrast to what can "pass away," because as a verb it is not a thing. The verb "to be" is that "beyond ideas" that every idea and thing that "is" must of necessity presuppose. If one could remove the "is" from some idea or thing, then that idea or thing could not "be."

The present participle "Being" enables a manner of speaking about a dialectic of the reason that involves no change, provides a synthesis that is higher than all essence, and is analogous to the sun as the "third thing" that

enables not merely perception and generation or life as does the sun but everything that "is." The First Principle of the whole or the Good is both "the light of the mind" and the condition of possibility for the entire line. In other words, the Good as "is-ness" is what enables us to distinguish in the mind between universals that are illimitable. Take away "is" from a universal, and we can't begin to think it. But the Good is, also, the "is" for all that "is" (including what was and will be) encompassing not only the mental but the physical world of sense perception, as well. Yet one cannot see or speak directly of it, for one can only see or speak directly of that which can be distinguished from something else. The Good or First Principle of the whole is thought here as the no-thing of "is-ness." As such, "it" can only be "seen" and addressed indirectly by means of dialectic, analogy, and, foremost, metaphor which are the ways in which what is definite points beyond itself, because "is-ness" is not an "it" that can be "seen" or distinguished from other things.

Nevertheless, a third possibility for speaking of the dialectic of the reason focuses on "possibility" rather than merely the verb "to be" in order to avoid any confusion about the copula as some kind of unifying sub-stance, existence, or the actual in a locative sense.[15] This understanding of reason's dialectic observes that the dialectic is built upon what actually can be distinguished from something else (even if they cannot be separated from one another), i.e., at least two ideas actually thought. Yet the greater synthesis in which the actual ideas are embedded is seen to be the no-thingness of possibility. What unites not only the ideas but the entire line in a synthetic whole, then, is possibility, which is not an idea (for it is no one thing). Possibility is imperceptible, constitutes a unity among all that is actual, and is a "third thing" analogous to the sun. Possibility is a more adequate way of thinking the "is" that is always and already "not yet" enabling all actuality. In short, the advantage of thinking the synthesis of Plato's dialectic in terms of possibility is that it includes an open-ended "not yet." What actually "is" is com-

[15] If the Good or First Principle of the Whole is thought in terms of possibility, then the one-ness of the Whole is not some kind of unitary identity or substance in the sense of some "intropathic fusion" before the subject and object (see Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 246) that one could somehow in meditation experience directly. It is appropriate to speak of possibility as "one," but not in the sense of universal univocity. This is because possibility is always tied to a particular situation. The actual circumstances of a particular situation reign in the possibilities of that situation even as those possibilities are by no means grasped in some conscious way in their entirety. Hence, while possibility "is" shared by all that is and could be, the possibility of any one thing "is not" the same as the possibility for something else.

plete; what is possible is yet to be actualized. At the same time, the possible unites as "no-thingness" all actuality both of spirit and matter in a dynamic process of revealing and concealing, negativity and positivity, despair and hope.

What must be clearly underscored, however, is that this aporia of spirit and matter prohibits along with all other aporiai the employing of any metaphysical foundationalism either of the empirical or of the Logos to explain away the aporia by reducing the aporia down to one side or the other. This is no dualism. It is a dynamic dialectical tension that cannot be explained either spiritually or materially, for this tension is rooted in Being, temporality or possibility, which can neither be explained nor grasped. Being is possibility, i.e., nothingness, that enables all being(s).

Human experience consists of the interrelationship of two dimensions of experience related to one another as an aporia. These two dimensions are the visible and the invisible. Experience as we know it is impossible without both dimensions, but neither dimension can account for the other. Universals are indefinable and we can only speculate about how particulars "participate" in these universals,[16] i.e., how is it that the particular is related to the universal? On the other hand, any material explanation we might give for consciousness is a mental model, i.e., as an immaterial model, it seeks to be a physical "explanation" for consciousness but constructed *within* the immaterial dimension of experience, i.e., consciousness. Furthermore, both dimensions are rooted in the aporia of actuality and possibility, i.e., that all actuality both of consciousness and of the physical is rooted in the nothingness of possibility with no two circumstances sharing exactly the same possibilities.