

## The Ethical Importance of the Idea of the Good in Plato's *Republic*

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### **Abstract :**

According to a long established prejudice going back to Aristotle, it is commonly held that the *Republic* makes use of two distinct conceptions of the good : a human good belonging to ethical theory and psychology, and a metaphysical, famously obscure, notion of the good-in-itself, displayed in Book VI and connected to ontology and epistemology, these two conceptions being very loosely related to one another.

The aim of this paper is to show that this way of reading *Rep VI* is deeply misleading. Rather than considering that Plato never really figures out the relation between a Socratic conception of the good and his own metaphysical elaboration of the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*, I will argue that it is the analysis of the inner structure of human desire, inherited from the Socrates of the early dialogues, that allows him to conceive the Idea of the Good as the key principle of his ontology. More precisely, I will hold that Plato explicitly connects the discovery of the particular proeminence of the Idea of the Good to the Socratic theory of human motivation, provided we cast a fresh look at some key passages of the *Republic* (e.g. VI, 504e-506b).

The first part of this paper, devoted to a brief analysis of the core elements of Socrates's indirect presentation of the Idea of the Good at *Rep VI* (506-509), will argue that one of the main purposes of the simile of the Sun is to show that the Good is the cause of the difference between reality and appearance.

Focusing on Plato's conception of the desire for the good, the second part will consider a specific passage of Book VI (505-506). In this passage, Socrates repeatedly insists that he is not saying anything new. This seems to indicate that Plato wants us to perceive a continuity between what Socrates says (and said) about the good and what he is doing in *Republic VI*. Hence the particular stand-point from which the text is written, i.e. the stand-point of an exclusively human good. Plato thus indicates that his grand conception of a cosmic Good, as developed in the following section of the *Republic* (506-509), is rooted in Socrates' intellectualist account of our universal desire for the good. How is that so ? The last part of this paper will argue that it is the specific nature of the desire for good things (as distinct from just or beautiful things) that entails a radical difference between reality and appearance which is at the heart of Plato's ontological understanding of the Idea of the Good in *Rep VI*. Thus, it is in the way the desire of each and every soul works that Plato, or so I claim, finds the universal foundation of a distinction which he needs to meet the objections of the lovers of sight.