

If the Good were God: Platonic Meditations on Theism

JAMES WETZEL

Villanova University
james.wetzel@villanova.edu

ABSTRACT

The usual way to relate Platonism to theism is to contrast an impersonal conception of the Good with a God of absolutely benevolent will. I call into question the usefulness of that contrast and argue for a reading of Plato that takes centrally into account Socratic service to the god. My overall aim is to suggest that a genuinely philosophical faith tends to defy the distinction between an ethics of will and an ethics of vision.

KEYWORDS: Plato; Socrates; theism; ethics; will; Murdoch; Korsgaard

Augustine assumed that Plato was a monotheist or at least that Plato's philosophy required monotheism as its working presupposition. The most apparent conclusion to draw from Plato's dialogues, however, is that he, like his teacher Socrates, believed in many gods and never singled out a particular one of them to be the sum and substance of all goodness. In the *Euthyphro*, Plato's dialogue about the proper object of piety, Socrates encounters a self-styled seer by the name of Euthyphro, who is about the odd business of prosecuting his own father for impiety. Since Socrates himself is on his way to trial, to face a charge of impiety, he is naturally anxious to profit from a supposed visionary's insight into what piety is. As all readers of the dialogue know, Euthyphro never delivers on the goods, and the dialogue founders on an unresolved choice: "For consider," says Socrates to Euthyphro, "is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy? Or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?"¹

Long after philosophers have ceased to care about gods and the way that gods may be said to love, the choice, in altered form, still beckons us. It could be put this way: do we create the values that shape and

regulate the life we call human, or do we, as human beings, come to discover these values? This is a choice, seemingly stark and inescapable, between will and vision. Most modern readers of Plato place him squarely on the visionary side of things, and that is largely the reason why Plato has become, in modern times, a distant, if sometimes fond, memory of a more innocent age in the history of philosophy. The mark of the modern in philosophy is a skeptical disposition, directed especially towards alleged revelations of what is good or right. Whenever it is possible to question and thereby to discredit knowledge of value, it is a peculiarly modern fixation to want to do so.

Harvard philosopher Christine Korsgaard situates the modern in philosophy at the end of what she calls “a *very* concise history of western metaphysics.”² I recount here a very concise synopsis of her very concise history. Western metaphysics begins with Plato, who inherits from his teacher Socrates a fundamental puzzlement about value: it is the question of how we arrive at the notion that there is an ideal way for things to be. Plato’s framing of this question is what makes him into a metaphysician. He assumes that the ideal world is identical to the real one and that a failure to perceive the convergence of reality and the ultimate good is a curable human blindness. It falls to philosophy to offer that cure. Korsgaard attributes to Plato a doctrine of the Fall, or some accounting of why anyone would have needed that cure in the first place, but she reserves for Augustine and the Christian era a new focus on human resistance to goodness, styled by Augustine and his like as defiance of the will of God. In the turn from Plato’s Form of the Good to Augustine’s God, we begin to see, claims Korsgaard, the beginnings of a revolution in the history of western metaphysics, though one that has to wait to the modern period, and more particularly to the inspiration of Immanuel Kant, for its completion. The revolution, in essence, is this: philosophers cease to think of ethics as a task of discerning what the good is and come to the unambiguous realization that values are wholly an expression of human will. “The real,” writes Korsgaard, “is no longer the good. For us, reality is something *hard*, something which resists reason and value, something which is recalcitrant to form” (Korsgaard 1996, 4). Her name for this something is *matter*. We live by her reckoning in a material world, not in a

world of ideal forms and not in a providential universe.

Korsgaard goes on to detail the peculiar form that will must take in order to be expressive of someone's values, and here she develops Kant's insight into the legislative character of moral freedom. I am free in the Kantian sense of freedom only if I can conform my desires to a law of my own making—a law that not only obligates me to act in certain ways, but also obligates any other free being likewise situated to act in those same ways. The alternative is to be so tyrannized by my own desires that my desires fail to express who I am and so, in effect, cease to be desires that are mine. I set out this much of Korsgaard's Kantianism just to indicate that she has no fear of the usual complaint against an ethics of will: that it always ends up being an ethics of coercion. She insists, on the contrary, that her interests define an ethics of autonomy and that an ethics of autonomy is the only kind of ethics that makes modern sense.

I am not going to pursue Korsgaard's ethics much further. I happen to think that any attempt to resolve the tension between will and vision in ethics in the direction of will is bound to fail. More fundamentally, I believe that this resolution uncritically preserves a bad or at least misleading way of casting the problem. The tension between vision and will in ethics is not as stark as it seems to be, or so I will argue, and without the starkness of that tension, the modern turn in ethics away from reflection upon the religious life is no longer an obvious advance.

Much of what I have to offer in this essay is a reading of Plato that makes it hard to resolve Plato's Platonism into a purely philosophical mode of thought, if "purely philosophical" is taken to mean "not religiously invested." In this regard, I set myself against a Platonist I much admire, the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch, who spent a good bit of her career at Oxford trying to convince moral philosophers that they needed to reorient ethical reflection to a sovereign conception of the good, something like the traditional notion of God, but more impersonal. In her famous essay, "On God and Good," she defines her ideal good as "a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention."³ Her definition is her presumptive answer to the question that Socrates poses to Euthyphro: it is the holi-

ness of the holy that the gods love, and that holiness is goodness itself. Murdoch pitches her cathartic Platonism against an unholy modern fascination with sovereign conceptions of will, and she includes Kant in her indictment. “His enquiry,” she writes, “led him back again to the self, now pictured as angelic, and inside his angel-self his followers have tended to remain” (Murdoch 1998, 368).⁴

Korsgaard’s Kantianism and Murdoch’s Platonism represent the two modern ways of resolving Euthyphro’s dilemma. Korsgaard opts for will over vision, Murdoch vision over will, and both trade in the gods for free and human agents. Neither of the two encourages us to imagine that philosophical piety is itself a cross-roads. But what if the sense of holiness that they are each trying to distill is a sense that emerges only when the question of what the gods love becomes inseparable from the question of how they love what they love. Any leave-taking of the gods in ethics would first have to take in the force and significance of that conjunction.

For all the differences in their theoretical orientations, Murdoch and Korsgaard share a remarkably similar sense of ethical practice. For both the enemy in ethics is egoism, and for both, the ironic result of surrendering to that enemy is debasement of personality, dissipation of agency, and ultimately an irredeemable loss of self. The governing assumption here is that ego is not true self, but a parody of that self. Soul is the traditional name for true self, and as long as soul is not defined against body, Murdoch and Korsgaard could associate their respective interests in moral philosophy and practical reason with soulcraft. They would resist a dualism of soul and body not because they are materialists and believe that only matter exists, but because the idea of a bodily self—or a self defined solely in terms of a desire to perpetuate indefinitely one particular body—is not a coherent idea of self, and so there is, strictly speaking, no self to be pitted against soul. Egoism is self-defeating. One important implication of all this is that death is not the worst thing that can happen to a self. “Sometimes doing the wrong thing,” observes Korsgaard, “is as bad or worse than death. And for most human beings on most occasions,” she continues, “the only thing that could be as bad as death is something that for us amounts to death—not being ourselves any more” (Korsgaard 1996, 17).

In the *Apology*, Socrates makes sure that his accusers know of his willingness to suffer death if his alternative is to commit what his guardian spirit—his *daimonion*—suggests to him is unjust. He likens a Socrates who would do otherwise to a soldier-citizen who would desert his post during a pitched battle, preferring his city's defeat to his own death. He draws the moral of his analogy as follows: "I should indeed have wrought a fearful thing, Gentlemen of Athens, if then, when the god stationed me, as I thought and believed, obliging me to live in the pursuit of wisdom, examining myself and others—if then, at that point through fear of death or any other thing, I left my post" (*Apology* 28e–29a; Allen 1984, 91–92). The limitation of this kind of piety, if I may for a moment affect the side of the Greeks who distrusted Socrates, is that service to the god seems defined only in terms of what it is not: it is not, for instance, service to the city, or the body politic. In that light, the analogy that Socrates holds between courage in battle and perseverance in philosophy is apt to be misleading, for it seems to mask the fact that philosophy and politics aim at very different ends. To the lover of the body politic—of the nation, the city, the tribe—there is no higher goal than the perpetuation of this body; to the philosopher, however, there are worse things to suffer than the death of one's polis. It is the job of the philosopher to help others not to confuse soul with the various forms that a body takes: political and otherwise. Socrates deems himself to be divinely commissioned to perpetuate only the philosophical life, and this life, as he construes it, is neither one of politics nor of private ambition.

The chief accuser of Socrates in the *Apology* is Meletus, who speaks on behalf of the poets, the supposed visionaries of Athenian society. Meletus has an inconsistent sense of the impiety that he hopes to pin on Socrates. He speaks of Socrates as an atheist, or one who acknowledges no god, and as a heretic, or one who acknowledges gods that are unfamiliar to the traditions of the city. It doesn't take a dialectical giant to poke holes in his indictment. When Socrates pays his respects to the god who launched him upon his philosophical vocation, he presumably refers to the god of the Delphic oracle, the Olympian who is traditionally associated with the art of prophecy. Apollo is not new to Athens by any stretch of the imagination. And a man who invokes this

god's authority and stakes his life upon it can hardly be considered an atheist. But there is a logic behind the apparent confusion of Meletus, and the real poverty of his indictment lies other than in its inconsistency.

Suppose that you lived in a society where personal ambition had come to supplant the rule of law, and a minority of powerful individuals used violence and the threat of violence to tyrannize everyone else. What would it take to transform the politics of such a society? Perhaps a start would be to remove the tyrants forcibly, either by way of internal revolution or by way of external intervention. Such a start, however, would be only a start. If the vision of the people liberated remained limited to the happiness of personal ambition, a game where someone has to lose in order for someone to win, then the forcible removal of tyrants would simply pave the way for new tyrants. A likely first transformation of this hypothetical society's political vision would be a collective move from personal egoism, where soul and body get conflated, to political egoism, where soul and body politic get conflated. In the move from personal to political egoism, individuals begin to identify their individual happiness with the prosperity of their polis, and it is this identification that gives them their sense of a higher self or soul. Political egoists can envision something worse than their own physical deaths, but nothing worse than the defeat of their collective.

Athens is fabled in the narrative of the western civilization for its democratic politics; the darker side of its story, more rarely underscored, is the imperialism that led Athens to exercise and eventually overtax its military might against its neighbors, most famously the Spartans. The Athens that condemned Socrates to death in 399 BCE was a fragile democracy, exhausted from its long years of conflict with Sparta and her allies, barely recovered from the indignities of a military coup—the reign of the so-called Thirty Tyrants, and no longer buttressed by its once heady sense of imperialistic adventurism. In the abstraction that I am calling “political egoism,” there is an essential connection between the transcendence of personal egoism within the polis and its re-emergence, on a larger scale, in the relationship of one people or polis to another. The Athenian male citizen who identifies with Athens out of political egoism is going to view the citizens of other city-states

as rivals to be exploited or conquered. Political egoism is the rule of every polis for itself; preemptive conquest is its ideal.

I will leave it to historians of ancient Greece to determine the actual degree of intimacy between Athenian democracy and imperialism. For my purposes, it is enough to note that Plato's character Meletus, who represents the Athens who feared and hated Socrates, seems to be a political egoist. Of course it makes no difference to Meletus whether Socrates is an atheist or a heretic. If Socrates does not endorse the civic theology of Athens, or some notion of powerful gods who favor the City's interests, he will seem to the likes of a Meletus to be reverting to personal egoism and therefore failing as a citizen. To a political egoist, the essence of impiety is not disbelief or wrong belief but a privatization of belief. In that regard, Socrates clearly didn't do much to help his case when he invoked the authority of his *daimonion*, his guardian spirit, at his trial. To the political egoists in the jury, his *daimonion* would seem a dangerously private source of religious authority.

Despite the rich anecdote that Socrates recounts about his experience with the Delphic Oracle and his subsequent service to the god, the *Apology* tells us relatively little about the substance of Socrates' theological convictions. Plato gives us there a Socrates who believes in the existence of gods and purports to serve one god in particular, but we don't know what kind of being Socrates takes a god to be. All we know is that a majority of the citizens in Athens come to be convinced that the Socratic notion of what a god is must be dangerously different from what their notion is. In other dialogues, notably the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, Socrates does appear to have clear and definitive theological convictions, and most students of Plato—both ancient and modern—have tended to assume that these convictions must have been Plato's as well, if not Plato's alone, and put by him into the mouth of his departed teacher. In books II and III of the *Republic*, Plato depicts Socrates as wanting to discredit the educational value of stories that make gods out to be lusty and competitive beings who vie with one another and with mortals for sex, power, and glory. Those who listen to Homer and the other great poets of Greek society would hear stories like that, and this worries Socrates. We know from the conversation he reports having had with the priestess Diotima, a shadowy

figure in the *Symposium*, what Socrates himself is apt to teach about the gods: that they are perfect beings, content and complete in their beauty and goodness, and beyond all prospect of loss. Such beings would be constitutionally incapable of competitiveness and envy, in that they lack the motive that is essential to all competitive beings: the desire to be the one and only.

For most of the years I have been reading Plato, I have passed over his critique of Olympian fundamentalism with something of a yawn. I took it to be self-evident that abstractly perfect beings would be better representatives of hypothetical divinity than the colorful characters who populate the Greek myths, and that the Greeks who read their myths as history were, to put it charitably, naïve. More recently I have come to believe that my own presumption of philosophical sophistication here—which betrays a very conventional intellectual prejudice against anthropomorphic theology—is itself naïve. It is in fact not self-evident at all that perfect-being theology is always educationally or even intellectually superior to anthropomorphic alternatives. Consider that what's behind Plato's strictures against, so to speak, the use of Homer in the classroom is a worry about too uncritical a reliance on mimetic or imitative strategies of education. One plausible way to make citizens into better citizens is to offer them exemplars of the most desirable behavior, heroes for them to emulate. Mimetic strategies of education dramatize the ethical life and reward aspiring actors—or citizens in the making—for playing their parts well. The surface problem with using Homer or the Greek tragedians for dramatizing the ethical life is that the dramatization will be inconsistent. Homeric or tragic heroes seek to be like gods who are driven by conflicting forces. The gods don't get along with one another, and at times they seem not even to get along with themselves. Perfect-being theology seeks to remedy the problem by cleaning up the way the gods are represented: perfect gods will inspire perfect heroes, and perfect heroes will inspire model citizens.

A little reflection, however, will betray the limits of this solution. You can train people from an early age to act in ways that are deemed by the community at large to be noble and generous and self-disregarding, but you cannot expect that all the teachers of the people will have themselves learned about what is noble and generous and self-disregarding

through imitation. At some point someone in the polis must have simply seen and recognized goodness for what it is and been transformed by the recognition. The poor soul in Plato's cave analogy who is forcibly dragged from the familiarity of a shadow world of values and into a harsh and unfamiliar light is perhaps Plato's representation of just such a person: this is not someone who sees because of having suffered but someone who has not let his suffering eclipse his desire to see. Maybe Socrates is this kind of person, but bear in mind that it is Socrates who reminds us in book X of the *Republic*, the book on the nature of mimesis, that the best kind of life is both hard to imitate and hard to recognize when imitated. The characters in the Platonic dialogues who look to Socrates to mimic their connection to the good come off either as faintly ridiculous (if they are young and naïve) or as dangerously needy (if they are young and clever). Plato's Socrates appears to be a different kind of hero. You do not become a better person by imitating how he acts; you become a better person by coming to love what he loves, and that is not a matter of imitation.

Although Plato was clearly alive to the dangers that bad examples posed to education by example, he was more concerned, I think, to expose the confusion between education and acculturation. Meletus is right to suspect that Socrates does not share the conventional piety of the city, but not because Socrates is some wild-eyed iconoclast in search of new gods. Piety that is philosophical cannot be conventional, for conventions are conveyed by habit and philosophy is a self-reflective art. Piety that is other than philosophical is a veiled form of egoism. It is not surprising that Meletus cannot give the right name to the way that Socrates worships. Meletus has no conception of what it would mean to serve gods bigger than his city's ambitions for self-promotion.

If you stick your nose into a culture that has sanctified some form of political egoism, the egoism of the tribe, you are likely to see semblances of courage and self-restraint, but little that resembles justice, and you won't get even a whiff of wisdom. Socrates makes himself unpopular in Athens by pressing his fellow citizens—the politicians, the entertainers, the technicians—for the whole of wisdom, or some accounting of the good of goods. They offer him the sort of accounts

that one might expect from politicians, entertainers, and technicians who presume to know what the whole of wisdom is, and he leaves them resisting the knowledge of their own ignorance.

Philosophy is risky as a vocation, and Plato tries to take some measure of that risk in the philosophical dramas we call his dialogues. The risk to Socrates in the *Apology* is partly to his own life, as he is on trial for a capital offense, but more fundamentally it is to his sense of his life's worth, his commitment to philosophy. One striking aspect of the Platonic dialogues is Plato's willingness to dramatize the failure of Socrates to convert the hearts of those who are overtly hostile to the philosophical life or even to move very much the hearts of those who profess an interest. From a philosophical point of view, the apology of Socrates before the Athenian assembly seems to fail; he does not dissuade the city he loves from unjustly condemning him. Socrates believes that it is injustice, and not the physical separation of the soul from the body, that is truly harmful to the soul, and yet he lacks the words to prevent many of his peers from acting wrongly and inflicting the harm of injustice upon themselves. If his commitment to philosophy is to be other than an exotic form a personal egotism, a private quest for wisdom, he has to care about this lack. Plato does depict him as caring. When Socrates reappears in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue that recounts his execution-day discussion with a small group of his more devoted students, we are met at first with a Socrates who is uncharacteristically unsure of himself. He wonders whether he had understood the god correctly. Perhaps he should have been devoting his life to a more popular form of art, such as the setting of Aesop's fables to verse—the ancient equivalent of composing nursery rhymes. He pulls himself together as his friends and followers engage him in a reflection on the soul's immortality, and by the dialogue's end, he departs his mortal life with some assurance that he leaves behind a few people who have yet to despair of philosophy's promise.

But the cautiously hopeful ending of the *Phaedo* does nothing to diminish the sense I have from many of the dialogues, the *Phaedo* included, that philosophical faith is a rare and fragile beauty. I use the word "faith" deliberately here, and for now I take knowledge or illumination to be faith's contrast. The students of philosophy who visit

Socrates on the day of his death want his final words to them to conquer their own respective fears of death. He cannot do as they want, however, in that fear of death is conquered only in the knowledge of what is supremely alive, some vision of soul; words can redirect the attention, but they cannot be its object. All so-called arguments for the immortality of the soul, as most every reader of the *Phaedo* comes to recognize, are bound to be inconclusive. If some of the characters in the *Phaedo* manage not to be discouraged by this inconclusiveness and the lack of vision it exposes, it is because they have let their love of Socrates make up for some of what their vision lacks. Modern readers of the dialogue, or the least the ones who wish to live a philosophical life, will have to find their own analogue to this love.

In Iris Murdoch's Platonism, the real object of philosophical love is not a person or a thing but the good that is necessarily beyond representation. She is prepared to call this good God, but only on the proviso that God not be understood in personal terms or as any kind of agent of purpose. The recognition that "All is vanity" is, in her words, "the beginning and end of ethics" (Murdoch 1998, 358). Her understanding of God is far enough from the more traditional notion of a creator who gives order and purpose to creation that she is quite prepared to concede that she has given up on God. "We are," she writes, "what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance. This is to say," she goes on to explain, "that there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense" (Murdoch 1998, 365).

I recall Murdoch to your attention for two reasons principally. First, she has been illustrating a peculiarly modern theological turn: belief in sin, disbelief in grace. Murdoch is ready to presuppose the ethical disfigurement of the human psyche, or the universal human disposition to confuse ego with soul, but she is loathe to credit the redemptive side of the religious mythology: the part that invokes divine aid and intervention. Second, because she herself represents this theological turn as an exclusively philosophical maneuver and does so at least partly under Plato's authority, she reinforces the prejudice, common among philosophers, that more modern and more philosophical readings of Plato will down-play all talk of gods in the dialogues. I have

been giving you a reading of Plato, the *Apology* especially, that does not down-play philosophy's connection to religious service—service to the god, as Socrates puts it. I now want to consider more carefully whether this service to the god is finally, upon analysis, a way to keep a god from becoming the love-object of philosophy. Socrates does not, after all, equate Apollo or any of the Olympians with wisdom. Wisdom is what a god has, not what some god is. The possibility may still exist, however, that Plato himself is not ultimately opposed to the deification of wisdom.

First let's pause to consider the virtues of what I have been calling "Olympian fundamentalism." Suppose that you live in a culture that venerates Homer as an educator, that you yourself take his epic works, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as your Bible, with some Hesiod thrown in for good measure, and that you tend to revere your Bible more than you struggle to interpret its narrative possibilities. What sort of theology are you likely to think of as biblical? I suspect that you wouldn't be able to help but notice that your gods are a factious and spirited lot of beings whose desires for sex and conquest can be sources of heavenly as well as earthly chaos. One of those gods, the Olympian Zeus, will seem to you mostly more clever and powerful than the other gods of his generation; Zeus imposes his own order of patriarchal law upon Olympian diversity and then shapes the interactions of gods with mortals to suit his own, often inscrutable, ends. You wouldn't have to be a terribly astute reader, however, to notice that Zeus's power is limited by the very forces he hopes to control. The desires of both gods and mortals for an ever greater share of love and beauty, desires that are mythically associated with the goddess Aphrodite and her son Eros, make for a less-than-secure Olympian order and in fact ensure its mortality.

The theology I have just sketched, which pits the patriarchal law of Zeus against the chaotic but also generative powers of Aphrodite, is a particularly good theology for you to take to heart, if you happen to be a political egoist. Your temptation as a political egoist will be to strive for the unqualified dominance of your tribe's way of life over whatever is felt to rival it, but your theology will remind you that unqualified dominance escapes the rule of even the most powerful of gods and so is not a human possibility. If you were a deep reader of your myths,

you would realize that a unified, undisturbed, eternal rule of a willful god or coalition of gods would not even be an ideal possibility. If Zeus were to be able to regulate the lives of gods and mortals perfectly, so as to rule out both good and bad surprises, he will have deprived all beings, himself included, of visions of the beautiful. It does Zeus no good to, in effect, kill off Aphrodite, for then he rules over a stagnant and lifeless world and becomes a parody of his brother Hades. But if you were able to think about Zeus this way, you wouldn't be much of a political egoist.

Assuming that Olympian fundamentalism has the modest virtue I am attributing to it—some ability, that is, to set an imaginative limit to egoistic fantasies about power—it is all the more remarkable that Plato's Socrates would have offered to his fellow Athenians a theology of perfectly compatible beings, all of whom love the same good. Plato must have assumed that the political egoism of his potential readers would not be native to their souls, but would instead represent a partially remembered knowledge of the good, taken prematurely by them to be complete; otherwise his dialogues offer no hope of an expanded political vision, and Plato risks corrupting his readers in the way that many Athenians thought Socrates was corrupting their city. The doctrine of a mysterious good, known only to someone intimately familiar with divine psychology, supports theocracy or rule by a tyrannous priesthood. I say "tyrannous" because here the power of the priesthood rests on priests claiming an exclusive knowledge of what the gods want and on everyone else buying into their claim. Being subject to wisdom that is alien to your knowledge is the classically Greek conception of being tyrannized. The Athenians who fear Socrates fear that he either possesses such an alien wisdom or that he is able to convince others, especially young, ambitious men, that he does. Readers who distrust Plato generally distrust what they read as his priestly devotion to a single, unifying Form of the Good, vision of which is given only to the rarest of philosophers.

Murdoch tries to disencumber her Platonism from its traditional burden of suspicion by being prepared to insist on the difference between loving the one good and loving the one God, but more fundamentally by distancing philosophical love of the one good from claims to special

or privileged information. If the love-object of philosophy really is, in her language, “a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention,” then either this object altogether falls outside the categories of knowledge, and no one can ever be said to know what the good is, or the knowledge is so highly idiosyncratic and personal that it fails to suggest possibilities for the common good. Neither possibility gives much aid or comfort to theocratic ambitions.

Still it seems odd for Murdoch to claim that an object that is both transcendent and non-representable is also necessarily real and an object of attention. Objects that offer themselves to human attention can hardly be said to transcend human attention, and her designation of one singular object of attention as “necessarily real” sounds very much like an attempt at representation. But I don’t think that Murdoch is really being inconsistent. I take her description of the good, or her impersonal god, to be an educational directive and not some report of an extraordinary, apparently mystical, discovery. Let it be stipulated that there is a good beyond all corruption and that this good is eternally other to any good that any one of us seems to possess or is able to manipulate to serve private or political ends. The force of this stipulation is to depersonalize goodness and direct the ethical life away from ego-interests. The actual object of attention here is the ugly partiality and imperfection of ego-interests; the beauty of goodness itself is assumed to be beyond representation. It is, in fact, the stipulation of the good’s transcendence that makes sustained attention to the partiality of ego-interests possible.

I have already alluded to Murdoch’s sense of her own distance from a traditional theism. It should be clearer now why she wants to keep her distance. Personified notions of the good, such as that of an exalted father or a beloved son, cater to the ego’s need to be singled out and adored. Let’s say that I resolve to debase myself in order to serve a being I consider uniquely worthy of adoration; I am not psychologically too far from turning my debasement into a uniquely worthy and meritorious kind of service—a form of indirect, yet potent, ego-gratification. The psychological irony I am referring to here is, I suspect, familiar to most anyone who has reflected on the virtue of humility. It may seem obvious at first that the depersonalization of God into the good would

circumvent the irony and help humility's cause. We do not expect, after all, to be praised or rewarded by an impersonal object of attention. Seen from a different angle, however, service to an impersonal good hands the work of ego-reform over to the ego. I work at seeking the good, but since I cannot expect the good to aid me in my work, it is easy enough for me to slip into the idea that my seeking is the real good. The best part about the impersonal good will then be its absence.

It seems to me that if the main question in ethics is, How are ego-interests to be kept at bay?, then the choice between fidelity to a sublimely impersonal good and submission to a sovereignly divine will isn't finally much of a choice. The options are equally good and equally bad at answering the question. It is nevertheless a peculiarly modern fascination to be fascinated with this kind of choice and to pit an ethics of vision against an ethics of will. Part of what drives this fascination is a failure, or perhaps a refusal, to recognize that the ethical difference between vision and will can't really a difference between vision and will. If we find ourselves having to choose between seeing the good and willing it, we are left, in effect, with a choice between paralysis and blindness. My own inclination, when faced with this crossroads, is not to choose a direction, but to turn around and retrace my steps. How far would I have to go back before the stark choice between vision and will would begin to seem other than inevitable? The longstanding preoccupation I have had with history of philosophy has been sustained by my hope that there is such a point, a period in time, to be recollected, and that its recollection might ease the iron grip on the mind of some modern dichotomies: particularly the ones that have made modernity such an impoverished time for thinking philosophically about religion.

I have returned to Plato, as I have many times before, hoping to remember something different about the difference between vision and will, something different about the crossroads between the good and God. It may seem to you that I have gone too far back, that I should have stopped with someone like Augustine, for whom Plato's Good is God's idea—an idea that incarnates perfectly in Christ and so confirms humanity as a human ideal. I have in fact pondered Augustine's Christian Platonism a great deal, and I have come to two fundamental conclusions about it, both quite controversial: one is that his Christianity

is unintelligible apart from his Platonism, and the other is that his Platonism is less a doctrine than an expression of philosophical piety. So while I tend to think that Augustine was wrong to think that Plato was a monotheist, I nevertheless believe that Augustine's theistic Plato is better than the modern alternative.

Iris Murdoch has been my representative modern Platonist. She takes as Plato's cardinal virtue what many others have considered his worst vice: his near obsession with visual metaphors for ethical transformation. To become better is for Plato always to see more fully, more soulfully; to grow worse is to become narrow-sighted, dazzled, or blind. I happen to share Murdoch's enthusiasm for the visual register of ethics, but not her sense of how this register is to be delimited. In Plato you won't find a contrast between vision and will; instead you will be invited into the drama that a difference in ambition makes: there is, ideally, the education that seeks the good in beauty and looks to the redemption of pleasure, and there is, alternatively, the use of visions of ugliness to curb intemperate and undisciplined human desire.

What if the will is not, after all, an autonomous realm of the psyche, overlooked by Plato and discovered by modern moralists, but a strategy of human betterment that privileges negative self-imagining? Offer people the prospect of a self that repels them, and the assumption is that they will strive to become something else. The problem with this unrelenting war against the ego is that the war heroes, the pure altruists, who live to make an offering of self, can make it only to the war criminals, the pure egoists, who would be corrupted by the offering. In between fall the rest of us, who must find some utilitarian bromide for dulling the pain of this contradiction.

I am fairly certain that shame, suffering, and want will continue to be fixtures along the route to human self-knowledge and wisdom, but I am equally skeptical of a wisdom that would give us confident use of these devices in the cause of education or redemption. In Plato's cave analogy, the necessity that forces a soul's ascent to better light differs in kind from the necessity that compels a soul to bring a torch of philosophical desire into the underworld of human politics and personal ambition. The latter necessity, if I understand it at all, has something to do with the need to spare others or perhaps a forgotten part of one-

self from a painful education, or put more positively, the necessity is a reminder that some kinds of desire have to be drawn out rather than forced—a question of beauty. We can speak of this drawing out either as the seduction of goodness or as the work of God. These ways of speaking make different kinds of sense, good and bad, depending on what kind of necessity is most driving our sense of ethical urgency. But if we take a page out of Plato, we will always try to keep in mind that no one ever leaves a cave of ignorance friendless.

Notes

1. *Euthyphro* 10a. The translation is Allen 1984, 50.
2. This is the preface to her Tanner Lectures, published as Korsgaard 1996. The volume includes responses from G.A. Cohen, Raymond Geuss, Thomas Nagel, and Bernard Williams.
3. Her essay can be found reprinted in Murdoch 1998. For her definition of the sovereign good, see page 344.
4. From her essay “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts”, also reprinted in Murdoch 1998.

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