

The Erotic Soul and its Movement Towards the Beautiful and the Good

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Resumen: En este artículo investigo las relaciones temáticas que hay entre tres diálogos platónicos: *Lysis*, *Banquete* y *República*. En el primer diálogo estudio el carácter aporético que tiene su conclusión sobre la naturaleza radicalmente diversa que posee el fin último de «lo amigo mismo» respecto de las cosas que deseamos como medios para alcanzar ese fin. Dado este carácter aporético considero que algunas tesis centrales de *Banquete* son un intento de diluir la solución paradójica propuesta en *Lysis*. Al hilo de esta discusión enfatizo que el problema de fondo de *Banquete* es explicar cómo el alma humana puede moverse y ascender en la jerarquía de objetos bellos hasta la contemplación de la Belleza en sí. A su vez, el diálogo *República*, especialmente libros VI y VII, representa un paso más allá en la resolución del problema que plantea la capacidad de movimiento del alma por la escala del ser y de los objetos de conocimiento.

Palabras clave: Alma, erotismo, revelación, fin último, liberación, cascada del ser.

Summary: In this paper I shall analyze the relationships that there are between three platonic dialogues: *Lysis*, *Symposium* and *Republic*. In the first dialogue I study the problematic character of its conclusion according to which «friendship itself», considered as the final end of human life, has a radically diverse nature in relation to the other things that we desire as means to achieve this final end. Given the difficulties that *Lysis* poses, I believe that a number of central theses in *Symposium* can be considered as an attempt of providing a solution to them. Along this discussion I underline the idea that the main problem of *Symposium* is to explain how the human soul moves through the hierarchy of beautiful objects until the contemplation of Beautiful itself. In *Republic*, especially Books VI and VII, Plato gives us a more sophisticated but unsatisfactory theory about the soul's capacity of ascending up the scale of being and of objects of knowledge.

Key words: Soul, eroticism, revelation, final end, liberation, scale of being.

1. Introduction

The Beautiful and the Good are two of the most important topics in Plato's middle period. The *Symposium* is the dialogue which is typically associated with the Beautiful; the *Republic*, especially books VI and VII, deals with the problem of the Good. Nevertheless, some important ideas about the relationship between the soul, the Beautiful and the Good can be discovered in earlier dialogues. As I shall argue, some central theses of the *Symposium*, as well as some important philosophical problems raised in this dialogue, already appear in *Lysis*. In fact, the *Symposium* can be seen as an attempt to resolve some puzzles that worried Plato in *Lysis*. With this assertion, I do not mean that Plato did not change his ideas substantially from the early period to the middle period. In fact, it is only in the middle period that Plato directly relates the problem of the Beautiful and the Good with the «early theory of Forms». And, as it is generally recognized, Plato did not have any working

theory of Forms in the «Socratic period». From this point of view, it is clear that the rich philosophical background in the middle period in which we find Plato's thoughts about the Beautiful and the Good and the relationship of these Forms to the soul, is quite different from the background that we find in the early period. This essential change notwithstanding, I would like to emphasize that Plato kept and used some significant theses of the early period to develop his theory of the Beautiful in the *Symposium*. The relationship of these early ideas with the theory of the Good in the *Republic* is much less clear, and needs more exploration. I shall claim that we can only understand the structure of the universe that is governed by the Form of the Good if we fully understand the complicated position of the human soul in this structure. This reflection will make it clear that the soul can be identified neither with its powers nor with its objects of awareness. This being so, we are compelled to view the soul as an entity that has no adequate and clear place in the Platonic ontology as it is presented in the divided line.

2. *Lysis* and the Structure of Human Desire

I have mentioned in the introduction that it is possible to find some main theses of the *Symposium* in earlier dialogues. To argue this point I shall concentrate my attention on *Lysis*. I will do this for three different reasons. First, part of the dramatic scenario of this dialogue is a conversation between Socrates and two lovers, Hippothales and Lysis. Love, thus, becomes one of the main topics of this dialogue. Love is also the main topic that the guests in Agathon's house talk about. Second, in the dialogue *Lysis*, Plato is concerned with the problem of finding that of which we are ultimately friends, in other words, the nature of friendship itself (τὸ φίλον αὐτό). This problem is relevant because Plato thinks that this ultimate object of friendship has especial features that no other object of friendship possesses. An object of friendship, in Plato's sense, is a good that we desire on account of an evil that we want to get rid of in order to have another good. The special character of the ultimate object of friendship is something that, as I shall explain later, is also possessed by the Beautiful in the *Symposium* and the Good in the *Republic*. Third, Plato thinks that only certain kind of entities can be friends of other entities. These entities have the same properties that Love has in the *Symposium*.

Traditionally, it is considered that the main topic of *Lysis* is friendship. But, more exactly, the theme of the dialogue is friendship itself (τὸ φίλον αὐτό). After two unsatisfactory attempts to know what friendship is, Socrates asks Menexenus whether «that which is neither good nor evil may not possibly turn out, however late, to be friendly with the good» (216c). In *Lysis* (217a) Socrates expresses the same idea when he says that «friendship can only exist between good and that which is neither evil nor good»¹. Plato calls this intermediate entity that is neither evil nor good τὰ μεταξύ.

Up to this point, Socrates establishes an important distinction that anticipates the distinction between efficient causes and final causes in Aristotle. An entity that it is neither good nor bad is friendly with the good on account of something (ἐνεκα τού) because of something (δία τί). For example, a sick person is friendly with a doctor because of the sickness in order to recover health. Generally, «that which is neither evil nor good becomes friendly with good, on account of the presence of evil» (217b).

¹ I will not capitalize the words «good» and «beautiful» when they appear in *Lysis*, since it is normal scholarly use that these words should only be capitalized when they refer to the Forms of the Good and the Beautiful respectively. Given that Plato had not yet developed his early theory of Forms in *Lysis*, it is more convenient not to capitalize these words in this context.

Socrates recognizes that the body and the soul are typically two of these intermediate entities (220c). To illustrate the principle that only entities that are neither good nor evil but are aware of the presence of evil in their being can be lovers and friends of the good, Socrates gives the example of the philosophers who are neither completely wise nor completely ignorant, but are conscious of not knowing the things that they do not know (218a-b). Thus, only philosophers can be friendly to wisdom: the gods are not friends of wisdom because they are already wise; ignorant people who possess the «evil of foolishness» (218a) are not friendly to wisdom because they are not conscious of having missed knowledge.

Socrates remarks that the intermediate entity that is neither good nor bad will only become friendly with the good if the presence of the evil in it does not occupy the whole of its being. That which has become thoroughly evil could not desire the good and become friendly with it, «for evil, we say, cannot possibly be friendly with good» (217c). Hence, the presence of evil in this intermediate being should leave it in an intermediate zone where it is neither good nor evil, but is conscious of the presence of evil. This means that the evil, which is present in the intermediate entity, should render that entity only apparently evil, but not really evil (217e). Only under this condition can an intermediate being be a friend of the good.

Taking into account all these Platonic theses, we can now delineate the general structure of volition in the following way. An entity—for example, a sick man—which is neither good nor bad but is conscious of the presence of evil in its being, is friendly with the good—the doctor—on account of an evil—the sickness—in order to obtain a further good that it does not yet have—health. According to this description, the general structure of volition requires that we want means to achieve certain ends. We want some good because of another good. The doctor is the means that the sick man desires to recover health.

The interesting conclusion that Plato draws from the example of the sick person is that the same kind of argument that has been used to explain why the sick man is friendly with the doctor can be applied to explain why he is also friendly with health. Given that this kind of explanation would end up in an infinite regress if there were not an ultimate pole of attraction of all our volitions, Socrates concludes that there has to be such an unitary and ultimate object of all desire.

Can we possibly help, then being weary of going on in this manner, and is it not necessary that we advance at once to a beginning, which will not again refer us to friend upon friend, but arrive at that to which we are in the first instance friends, and for the sake of which we say we are friends to all the rest? (219c-d).

The fact that there has to be a beginning for the sake of which we say that we are friends to all the rest of good things means at least three different things. First, it means that without this principle there could not be any volition. There has to be an ultimate pole of attraction of all our volitions. Volitions only occur when they, consciously or unconsciously, are attracted by the last object of friendship. Second, it means that there has to be a hierarchy of good things. Socrates explains this second thesis with the example of the father and the son (219d-220a). If a father thinks that his son is poisoned, then he will consider that any means to heal his son will be of high value. But the value of all these means is entirely dependent upon the value that the son has for his father. There is a hierarchy of valuable things in which the son occupies the highest position. In the same way, all the good things that we want as a means to obtain other good things are entirely dependent upon something «to which we are truly friendly» (220b). The value of this entity is such that we all want

the rest of the good things for the sake of it. Third, there has to be a good that we want by itself, and not because we want another good. «With that, then, to which we are truly friendly, we are not friendly for the sake of any other thing to which we are friendly» (220b).

The immediate problem that this argument raises is as follows: It has been established that there is only movement towards the final good in a being whose nature is neither completely good nor completely evil but it is conscious of the presence of evil within it in a way that makes him apparently evil. This claim means that if the intermediate entity, in its ascension through the hierarchy of intermediate goods, finally arrives at the point of origin of all its volitions, then evil would have disappeared. But if evil is completely absent, then the final end could not attract us towards it, as we have supposed, since only evil can be the motor that would make us desire the final good. This problem can formally be represented in this way.

Structure of volition in *Lysis*

An intermediate entity is friendly with:

- (1). the doctor (*good 1*) on account of the sickness (*evil 1*) to recover health (*good 2*).
- (2). Health (*good 2*) on account of (*evil 2*) for (*good 3*).
- (3). (*Good 3*) on account of (*evil 3*) for (*good 4*).
- ...
- (*n-1*). (*Good (n-1)*) on account of (*evil (n-1)*) for (*good n*).

In order to solve the problem of knowing how *good (n)* could attract us in the absence of a further evil, Socrates argues that the final *good (n)* is not of the same nature as the rest of intermediate goods. If it were of the same nature, then it could only be desired in virtue of a further *evil (n)*. But, in such a case, we would want the final *good (n)* on account of the presence of *evil (n)* for the sake of a further *good (n+1)*. Nevertheless, the hypothesis is that the final end is *good (n)*, but not *good (n+1)*. The progression can continue neither on the side of the evils —there is no *evil (n)*— nor on the side of the goods —there is no *good (n+1)*. But if it is not possible that *evil (n)* can be the motor for our wanting *good (n)*, then the final good could not attract us. The final *good (n)* could only attract an intermediate entity if this intermediate entity were in the presence of a further *evil (n)* that it wants to avoid. And so, the cause of all causes, the final good, could only move our will if some subsequent evil is present.

This, then, it appears, is the nature of the good. It is loved on account of evil by us who are intermediate between evil and good, but in itself, and for itself, it is of no use (220d).

As I have pointed out, Socrates solves this paradox saying that the final good is not of the same nature as the rest of good things that we love. The last good thing «bears to these things no resemblance at all» (οὐδὲν [δὲ] τούτοις ἔοικεν) (220d).

Given all these complexities, it is easy to understand why Plato thought that a diviner's foresight is necessary to deal with them (λέγω τοί νυν ἀπομαντευόμενος) (216d). In fact, the dialogue ends without a clear and convincing solution of these difficulties. For the idea that the final good does not have any kind of resemblance with the intermediate goods that play the role of means looks more like an *aporia* than as a real solution.

Before turning to the study of the *Symposium* to track these problems, I would like to deal briefly with an alternative interpretation of the means-ends analysis in *Lysis* that I have proposed. According to this other reading Plato is making the weaker claim that every chain of volitions must terminate in some, but not necessarily the same, final good.

This alternative reading has, at least, two difficulties. First, Plato's argument would have the same outcome whether or not we consider that there are multiple final ends or just only one. According to this argument, the particular final good in which each chain of volitions rested would always have the same odd nature in relation to the intermediate means that we use to achieve it. Second, Plato insists many times that the main issue of his investigation in this dialogue is friendship itself (τὸ φίλον αὐτό). I think that this expression strongly suggests that he is concerned with a single and unitary notion, but not with a multiple one. For these two reasons I do not endorse the weaker alternative interpretation.

3. *Lysis* and *Symposium*: some correlations

There are a number of important theses in *Lysis* that appear almost unchanged in the *Symposium*. In this section I will try to show which these theses are. At the same time, I will indicate the main differences between both dialogues and try to clarify the new ideas that Plato proposes in the *Symposium*. These ideas can be seen as an attempt to develop a solution to some of the theses that remained problematic or, rather, paradoxical in *Lysis*.

First, Socrates recognizes in the *Symposium* that Diotima of Mantinea has taught him everything he knows about «the philosophy of Love» (201d). This idea is closely related to the idea that Socrates expresses in *Lysis* when he says that the investigation of «that to which we are truly friendly» requires a «diviner's foresight». In the *Symposium* it is Diotima, not Socrates, who has this power of foreseeing.

Second, Socrates says in the *Symposium* that Love is neither a god nor a mortal being, but an intermediate entity, a δαίμων, halfway between gods and human beings (202d). Diotima explains to him with a myth why Love occupies this middle position in the scale of being. This myth says that Love is the offspring of Resource and Need. As such an intermediate entity, Love occupies the same position in the scale of being as the body and the soul occupied in *Lysis*.

Diotima summarizes this peculiar ontological position of Love saying that Love is «neither beautiful nor good» (201e). At the beginning, Socrates does not understand how this is possible. Curiously, in the dialogue *Lysis*, it is he who explains to Menexenus this idea with the example of the philosopher who is the only lover of wisdom. The example is relevant because Diotima uses the same one to explain to Socrates in what sense we can affirm that Love is neither beautiful nor good. Socrates thought that if Love is neither beautiful nor good, it has to be bad and ugly. Diotima then tells him that this conclusion does not follow necessarily. She says to Socrates that similarly to the way in which correct opinion is neither true knowledge nor ignorance, but something intermediate between them, Love is something intermediate between the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly (202a-b).

According to these clarifications, we find in the *Symposium*, as well as in *Lysis*, the idea that the philosopher is neither wise nor totally ignorant, but looks for wisdom. More precisely, the soul of the philosopher, in so far as it is an erotic soul, loves wisdom. The intermediate nature of Love «stands midway between ignorance and wisdom» (203e-204a). When Love touches the soul, the soul turns out to be an erotic soul and becomes a lover of knowledge, the Good, and the Beautiful. Thus, in the *Symposium*, we have an ontological (albeit metaphorical) explanation of the fact that the soul of the philosopher loves wisdom. Love, as an intermediate entity, touches and possesses the soul, which is another intermediate entity.

As Socrates did in *Lysis*, Diotima also expresses the idea that neither gods nor ignorant people can be lovers of wisdom (204a). The reason for thinking in this way is the same as appears in *Lysis*.

Gods do not seek truth because they are already wise. Ignorant people do not seek truth because they believe that they possess the knowledge which in fact they do not have. The soul of the ignorant is neither beautiful nor good nor intelligent, but it is satisfied with its present state. Diotima characterizes this condition as completely «hopeless» (204a).

Third, both in *Lysis* and in the *Symposium* we find a hierarchy in the order of things. A hierarchy of good things in *Lysis*, and a hierarchy of beautiful things in the *Symposium*. Diotima affirms that there is a long journey of perfection to be traversed before the lover can contemplate the Beautiful. The lover has to be educated so that he is able to love, first, the beauty of bodies —of individual bodies and of bodies in general— then that of beautiful souls, and, later the beauty contained in the laws and institutions of the state and in the different sciences. This journey of perfection is seen as a methodical and systematic progression through the order of beautiful things.

Nevertheless, an important difference between the hierarchy of good things in *Lysis* and the hierarchy of beautiful things in the *Symposium* is that the access of the soul to beautiful things that are closer and closer to the Beautiful itself depends upon a long, step-wise education to which the lover has to attend. The idea that our soul needs education to gain access to the best and most beautiful objects cannot be found in *Lysis*. In *Lysis*, it is the existence of a final object of friendship, and the pervasive desire of getting rid of an evil what makes us desire and, if everything goes correctly, obtain new good things. Here the problem of the education of the soul does not appear. But the erotic soul in the *Symposium* can only sail in «the open sea of Beauty» (210d) if it continuously advances from step to step along the hierarchy of beautiful things thanks to a well-defined program of education. And it seems that it is not possible to skip over any of the intermediate stages if the erotic soul finally wants to reach the contemplation of the Beautiful (210e).

Fourth, both in *Lysis* and in the *Symposium* there is an ultimate stage in the hierarchy of good and beautiful things respectively. Furthermore, in both dialogues we learn that the properties of each member of the hierarchy depend upon the existence and properties of the last member that occupies the final stage of the hierarchy.

In *Lysis*, this final stage has no ontological resemblance at all with the rest of intermediate goods. Nevertheless, when Plato wrote *Lysis*, he did not have the early theory of Forms available to help attach meaning to this strong ontological distinction between the final good and the rest of intermediate goods. One of the great advances of the *Symposium* in relation to *Lysis* is that Plato explains more clearly this difference. But the conditions for this development were already given in *Lysis*. What Plato needed was the concept of Form that he uses in the *Symposium*. We could understand the difference between the final good and the rest of the intermediate goods with the help of the distinction between the Form of the Beautiful and the beautiful things that participate in it. The Form of the Beautiful has a completely different ontological status compared to beautiful things: Beauty is one forever, does not suffer changes, is always the same, exists by itself and does not need other things to exist; beautiful things, on the other hand, are many, are generated and perish, and exist —in so far as they are beautiful things— because the Beautiful exists and they participate in it. Accordingly, it would help us to think about the final good in *Lysis* as if it were also a Form. Hence, the idea that the last object of friendship has no ontological resemblance with the other goods that we desire can be interpreted as a radical difference in ontological status between both kinds of goods. However, this interpretation would lead us to abandon or, at least, to loosen the thesis that there is no resemblance between friendship itself and the other object of which we are friends, since the objects that participate in a Platonic Form *resemble* that Form. Thus, Plato, with the new ontological background that he has introduced in the *Symposium*, has gained new

conceptual tools to express his old idea that there is a characteristic ontological gap between the final end and the intermediate goods that are necessary to contemplate and possess the final end. However, he has paid a theoretical price for this clarification. There is now some resemblance between intermediate objects of desire and the ultimate object, not no resemblance as it occurs in *Lysis*. This price has important consequences for his theory of the soul in the *Symposium*.

4. The *Symposium* and the movement of the soul

Until now I have talked about some main Platonic ideas that appear both in *Lysis* and in the *Symposium*. This correlation suggests that there is a continuity in Plato's thought between the early and the middle period as well as an attempt to solve some previous riddles. Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that the theoretical background in the *Symposium* is more fruitful than that in *Lysis*. For example, the theory of Form is completely absent in *Lysis*.

In the *Symposium* Plato also develops some other ideas that already appear in *Lysis* and identifies important consequences that these have. The consequences can be classified in two different categories, although they are intimately related: psychological consequences and ontological consequences.

Plato states some facts about the human soul that are directly related to the problem of understanding the ontological relationship between Love and Beauty. One of the main psychological theses in the *Symposium* is that «people are happy when they possess the Beautiful and the Good» (202c). Yet we know that Love is the only entity that is capable of stimulating in the soul the search for the Beautiful and the Good. The soul, in so far as it has been filled with Love, recognizes that it is neither beautiful nor good. The soul also perceives that this assertion does not mean that it is ugly and bad. The erotic soul, the soul of the philosopher, is conscious of this intermediate situation and of the evil that this state necessarily contains. Being conscious of all this, the erotic soul will seek the only objects that can release it from evil. These objects are Beauty and the Good themselves. Probably this is the reason why Diotima says that «Love never longs for either the half or the whole of anything except the Good» (205e). If we follow Diotima, and conditionally equate the Good with the Beautiful (201c), we will conclude that the soul will be totally released from evil when it possesses the Beautiful and the Good themselves. Any other state in which it is not in total possession of the Beautiful and the Good will make the soul unhappy and unsatisfied. The erotic soul is essentially an unsatisfied soul, but unlike the soul of the ignorant (204a), it is conscious of having missed something that it wants to recover and possess forever. «Love longs for the Good to be his own forever» (206e). The eternal possession of the Good is the state of complete liberation from evil.

Once we have examined these psychological consequences, we are in a position to analyse the ontological consequences of the new ideas that appear in the *Symposium*. Diotima affirms that in the journey of perfection towards the Beautiful, the lover, in a very high stage of his erotic education, will concentrate his attention in the beauty that is contained in every kind of knowledge (210c-d). Nevertheless, she asserts that the knowledge of Beauty is neither philosophical discourse nor any other kind of knowledge that is different from contemplation. This contemplation is «the vision of Beauty itself» (θεωμένω αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν) (211d). But the erotic soul can only enjoy this contemplation in virtue of a final revelation. This thesis is very important because Plato seems to suggest through it that the soul does not have enough resources to reach the contemplation of the Beautiful. The only thing that the soul can do is to ascend gradually until the penultimate stage in the

hierarchy of beautiful objects. At this point, the soul «is almost within reach of the final revelation» (σχεδὸν ἄν τι ἄπτοιτο τοῦ τέλους) (211b), but it has to wait and hope that this final revelation really occurs. Nevertheless, this hope is well grounded since the soul has done everything that is necessary and within its power to experience the final contemplation of the Beautiful.

If we ask the reason why the soul does not have sufficient resources of its own to reach the contemplation of the Beautiful, a possible answer to this question would be, as I have just mentioned, that the soul has the power to ascend through all the beautiful objects that participate in the Form of the Beautiful but it has not the power of seeing Beauty itself without the aid of a revelation. And so it seems that the distinction between the beautiful objects which the soul has the power of knowing and achieving and the objects which the soul cannot know and achieve—at least properly—is the distinction between the beautiful objects that participate in Beauty and Beauty itself. In this sense, Beauty has a different nature both from the beautiful things that participate in it and *from the soul*. This thesis was also present in *Lysis*. The last object of attraction in virtue of which we are friends of all the rest of good things is different both from these good things and from the intermediate entities that desire it.

Now it is important to know whether the Beautiful is also the last pole of attraction without which the soul could not even start its step-wise journey towards it, in the same way that «that of which we are really friends» was the last good thing that attracts our volitions in *Lysis*. The answer to this question must be affirmative. The erotic soul could never start its journey towards the Beautiful if there were not beautiful objects that participate in the Form of the Beautiful. In this sense, the Form of the Beautiful is present from the beginning in the hierarchy of beautiful objects that will lead the erotic soul, when it travels in an orderly fashion through this hierarchy, to the contemplation of the Form of the Beautiful.

Nevertheless, there is a problem here. We already know that the erotic soul is neither completely beautiful nor completely ugly. If this is so, we can conclude that the soul has at least some degree of beauty. This assertion means that the erotic soul also has to participate in the Form of the Beautiful. In fact, it has to be one of the beautiful objects and therefore it must occupy some position in the hierarchy of beautiful objects. But Plato does not say if this is so. He only says that the erotic soul will fall in love with the beauties of other peoples' souls (210b) in the second stage of its path towards Beauty. Plato does not explicitly say that the erotic soul occupies a specific level in the scale of beautiful objects.

Perhaps this point has no importance at all. The erotic soul would be just another beautiful object that participates in the Form of the Beautiful. Yet it may have importance. If the erotic soul is just another beautiful object, it would have, by its own nature, a specific and fixed place in the clearly established hierarchy of beautiful objects just as any other beautiful object. If this is so, it would be difficult to understand how the erotic soul can ascend along the hierarchy of beautiful objects and, in this way, leave its place in this hierarchy as its education requires. For Plato, the erotic soul has to be capable of movement, of leaving its place in the scale of being as its education is completed. But it seems that this movement would be impossible if the erotic soul were just another fixed link in the chain of being, and were not capable of stepping out of its position from time to time. But if the soul of the philosopher could not abandon its fixed position, whatever this might be, then the power of attraction of the Beautiful would be idle, for the soul would be like a prisoner who is unable of free movement through the cascade of being. This thesis raises the problem of knowing why the participation of the erotic soul in the Beautiful does not attach it to a fixed place as occurs with the other beautiful objects. This problem is left unresolved by Plato in the *Symposium*.

However, it could be argued that the erotic soul certainly is another beautiful object, but it has faculties that allow us to know and be acquainted with objects that are more beautiful than our own soul or, at least, some parts of our soul. This solution is tempting, but it only replaces the problem with a new one. Plato does not say anything in the *Symposium* about these faculties. Besides, the capacity of some faculties of the soul of being acquainted with excellent objects, even with the Beautiful itself, also implies some movement within the soul. And so our old problem returns. This being so, we need to examine some ideas contained in the *Republic* to see if all these problems have a workable solution. As I shall argue, the myth of the cave in the *Republic* can be seen as an attempt to advance in the solution of this new riddle.

5. The Soul and the Divided Line in the *Republic*

In book VII of the *Republic*, Plato clearly illustrates the idea that the soul is capable of stepping out of its fixed position in the scale of being with the myth of the cavern. After using the image of the divided line to describe the hierarchy of objects of knowledge and its correlation with the hierarchy of the different kinds of knowledge that we can have of them, Socrates proposes another metaphor to illuminate the way in which the soul ascends from the knowledge of the images in the visible world to the knowledge of the first principle. Plato also uses this new metaphor to explain how the sun-like Good stays in the highest and last position in this difficult ascension.

The myth of the cavern is well-known. Socrates pictures the soul in its lower level of knowledge as a prisoner who lives in a cavern and can only see shadows of himself and of reproductions of different objects that a fire behind him casts on a wall. The prisoner wrongly believes that the shadows are all there is. Now the prisoner is released and able to look at these reproductions and at the fire as his eyes get gradually used to its light. After this, the soul ascends out of the cave where it once again is blinded because of the strong light coming from the sun. The soul needs familiarization with the light of the sun before being able to look at the sun directly. First it will look at the shadows of the things that are out of the cavern, then at their reflections in the water, later on, at these same things and at the sun's light, and finally at the sun itself. Similarly to the sun, the Good would be the last thing that the soul can contemplate in its ascension up to the peak of the intelligible world.

This metaphor makes it clear that the soul-prisoner has the power of movement through the hierarchy of objects of knowledge. However, the main problem with this metaphor is that it is not easy to understand how it is possible that the soul-prisoner leaves his place in the cavern. Plato only says that one of the prisoners «was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk and to lift his eyes into the light» (515c). But we do not know who or what releases the first prisoner who abandons the cavern, since it seems that prisoners cannot do it by themselves without the helping hand of the philosophers, that is, of those who have already seen the sun and are forced to come back to the black depths of the cavern to bear witness to the truth to the other prisoners. But the main problem is to know how the first philosopher starts his painful journey towards the sun, how he frees himself from the burden of his chains.

If we want to pursue further this difficulty, it is necessary to explain the way in which Socrates sees the problem of knowledge in book VI of the *Republic*, and how he associates this problem with the Form of the Good. The first thing we find in book VI is an old idea. Opinions without knowledge are «ugly things» (αἰσχρός) (506c). This time, Socrates seems to hold more radical views in relation to the epistemic quality of opinions conceived as states of knowledge for he says that «those who hold some true opinion without intelligence [do not] differ appreciably from blind men who go

the right way» (506c). States of knowledge in this sense must be completely avoided if we want to deal with the nature and properties of the Form of the Good, «the greatest thing» that the soul can learn (505a). Unfortunately, Socrates acknowledges that he is far from having adequate and secure knowledge of the nature of the Good (505e). For this reason, he sees the task of explaining to Glaucon what is the nature and properties of the Good as something that should be postponed for a better and more favorable moment.

Up to this point, Socrates depicts and casts light upon the nature and properties of the Form of the Good with other two well-known metaphors: the metaphor of the sun and of the divided line. It is important to bear in mind some aspects of these metaphors to deal more properly afterwards with the problem of whether the soul can ascend to the knowledge or contemplation of the Good.

As Mitchell Miller has pointed out, I think correctly, the Form of the Good has two different roles in the metaphor of the sun: epistemic and ontic causal roles (Miller 1985, 175)². In the same way that both vision —the faculty of seeing visible objects— and the things that can be seen —the objects of this faculty— need the sun's light so that vision can see its objects and the visible objects can be seen, so the faculty of reason and its objects need the Form of the Good so that reason can know its objects. The Form of the Good provides the objects of knowledge with truth and being (ἡ ἀλήθεια τε καὶ τὸ ὄν) (508d). Truth here is not «a property of the relation of the intellect and its object but, rather, ... the precondition for such a relation; like light «in the visible», truth is what first lets the object-to-be present itself to, and so become object for, the intellect. It is as source for this precondition, in turn, that the Good plays an epistemic causal role» (Miller 1985, 175). But the Good also has an ontological causal role in the intelligible world that is similar to the role that the sun plays in the visible world. Just as the sun «provides for [the] generation and growth and nurture» (509b) of the visible things that live on the Earth, the Good provides the objects of knowledge with existence and essence (τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν) (509b). This is the ontic causal role of the Good.

Having described the existence of the Good as the sun of the intelligible order, Socrates describes now the four kinds of knowledge that the soul can have and their corresponding objects. The objects of knowledge can be first divided into two asymmetric portions: the intelligible order of objects and the visible order of objects. Each of these unequal parts is divided again into two other unequal parts. Thus, we have four unequal, although proportional, parts in the realm of objects of knowledge. The criteria for all these divisions is the degree of clearness and obscurity that the soul experiences when considering these different objects.

The lower domain of objects of knowledge in the visible world is constituted by images and imitations of animals, plants and artificial objects. To the images belongs that kind of knowledge that constitutes picture thinking (εἰκασία).

To the upper level of objects in the visible world pertain those things that are causes and models of the images in the lower level. To this second realm corresponds that type of knowledge that Socrates calls belief (πίστις).

The lower domain of objects in the intelligible order is formed by the objects of geometry. The proper method of investigation at this level is the method of assumptions. This method consists of supposing certain principles as if they were completely true for everybody, and inferring from these principles other truths. But the geometer does not only use hypotheses; he also uses tangible figures to progress in his geometrical investigations. For example, he can draw a triangle in a piece of paper

2 Miller, Mitchell. «Platonic Provocations: Reflections on the Soul and The Good in the *Republic*», in Dominic J. O'Meara ed. *Platonic Investigations*, V 13. Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1985, pp. 163-193.

to help himself with the geometrical demonstrations he wants to make. Nevertheless, his proper object of study is not the physical figure of the triangle he has drawn, but the triangle itself. When the soul uses assumptions, whose truth it takes for granted, as well as tangible figures to progress in its investigations, then it has knowledge of the assumptions and of the truths that it draws from these assumptions with the help of tangible figures. Plato calls the kind of knowledge that we can obtain through the method of assumptions *διάνοια*.

The highest object of knowledge is the very first principle of knowledge (*ἀρχή*). The soul can only deal with this object if it uses the power of dialectics. Dialectics obliges the soul to treat the assumptions of the previous level of knowledge as if they were hypotheses. Dialectics also forbids the soul to make use of tangible objects in its investigations. Under these conditions the soul will look for «the starting point of all» (511b). Once the soul has found this ultimate foundation of everything —of any kind of knowledge and of any kind of being— then it will understand the hypotheses of the previous level of knowledge in relation to this first principle, and will proceed step by step from Ideas to Ideas, without relying on tangible figures anymore. Only then will the soul be capable of having full knowledge of the truth of these hypotheses. Such knowledge will be intellection (*νοήσις*).

Once we have set these fundamental Platonic theses, it is time to ask the original question. How is it possible that the soul leaves its place in the cave and climbs until the contemplation of the Good? As I have suggested before Plato does not give any clear answer to the problem of knowing how the first philosopher can free himself from his chains. However, according to the image of the cave, once the soul has been liberated by the philosopher who has already contemplated the Good, then the soul is able of seeing the Form of the Good, although the Good is «the last thing to be seen and hardly seen» (517b). Therefore, we have in the *Republic* a very different picture of the relationship between the soul and the Good than we had between the soul and the Beautiful in the *Symposium*. In the *Republic* it seems that the soul has means to reach the contemplation of the Form of the Good. Here a «final revelation» is not necessary, although, I insist, Plato speaks in a way that strongly suggests that the prisoner is forced and guided by someone from step to step until the contemplation of the Good. Rather, in the *Republic* a process of habituation is required (516a), but not a revelation.

This difference between the *Symposium* and the *Republic* is very important. If the Good is something that the soul can obtain because it is within its powers, although with difficulty and some help, then human happiness can be fully achieved if we understand that human happiness is the possession of the Good forever. Therefore, the picture of the *Republic* about the powers of the human soul and about the degree of happiness that it can obtain is slightly more optimistic than it is in the *Symposium*.

Even more important than this difference is the fact that in the *Republic* Plato seems to consider that the ascension through the different and unequal parts of the divided line is the only way of being closer to the light of the Good. The liberation of the human soul depends entirely of its capacity to ascend along the four different regions of knowledge and objects of knowledge. In the region of intellection (*νοήσις*) the soul will be almost in the presence of the Good. Thus, unlike in the *Symposium*, the *Republic* pictures a much more intellectual progression towards the final ends of human existence.

Nevertheless, with these reflections, we still do not know what the position of the soul is among the objects that there are. It seems that the soul does not fit into any of the four categories of objects in the divided line. It is not a shadow. It is not the cause and model of any shadow. Only bodies can be such a cause. It is not an hypothesis. And it is not the first principle of knowledge. Given that the

Good gives the existence and the essence to all these kinds of objects, and given also that the soul is not any of these objects, then the soul has to be outside the influence of the Good. Hence, the Form of the Good would have neither epistemic nor ontic causal roles in relation to the existence and essence of the soul. Therefore, the nature of the soul is highly problematical if we take into account only the ontology of the divided line, for we do not know in which portion we should place the soul. What Plato says about the metaphor of the sun-Good does not provide much help for dealing with this problem. But if the metaphor of the divided line fails when we want to explain the nature and position of the soul in the scale of being, then the sun-Good metaphor also fails, since the divided line makes more explicit what is contained in this last metaphor.

However, one could reply that the divided line is an image of the powers of the soul and of the objects of its awareness. But the soul itself is neither one of its powers nor an object of awareness. This being so, it makes no sense to ask about the place of the soul along the divided line.

The problem with this answer is that we need to make more explicit the relationship between the soul and its powers. If it is a part-whole relation, as it certainly is, then the soul has at least as many parts as the divided line. Now we have two choices. According to the first one, the soul, as a whole, is not something different from the sum of its parts. In such a case, the soul would not be simple. But this thesis would be at odds with another fundamental Platonic theses in the middle period. In *Phaedo* (78b-81b), Plato has argued that the soul probably is simple and eternal, since it has a nature that is more similar than that of the body to the simple, unchanging and eternal nature of the Forms. It is true that this thesis seems to forget that in book IV of the *Republic* Plato has argued that the soul is complex. But such an objection forgets at the same time that Plato has suggested later on that the fragmentation of the soul that he proposes in book IV is the result of considering the present appearance of the soul, as it is attached to the body, not his original nature (611 c-d). The soul in its truest nature «is the kind of thing that teems with infinite diversity and unlikeness and contradiction in and with itself» (611 a).

The second choice is this. The soul, as a whole, is something ontologically different from its parts. The problem with this answer is that the soul, being different from its parts, might be outside the divided line, even though these parts had fixed places in it. In such a case, the Ego, as Husserl has said in the *Cartesianische Meditationen* (Husserl 1963, 64-65)³, would not be part of the world⁴. Its true home would be in a τόπος ὑπὲρ τὸν οὐρανόν, and its existence in a body would be completely adventitious. But this second possibility has the same problem that Husserl had to face, namely, that of making intelligible how the soul is related to its worldly parts.

If all these difficulties are real, then we would have reached the same conclusion that we drew before when we analyzed the *Symposium*. The soul is not just one more part in the hierarchy of the good and beautiful things. It is not part of the hierarchy of the things that are under the influence of the Good, and it is not part of the beautiful things that partake in Beauty in the sense that the soul cannot occupy a fixed position in the scale of beautiful things. But both theses seem to present some important problems for Plato's general ontology. The intermediate and moving nature of the soul, as it has been characterized in *Lysis*, is a real puzzle in the Platonic universe. Nevertheless, Plato always has the last word, for only «God knows whether it is true» what he says about the erotic soul, the Beautiful and the Good (θεός δέ πον οἶδεν, εἰ ἀληθῆς οὐσα τυγχάνει) (517b).

3 Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesianische Meditationen und parischer Vorträge*. Ed. Stepanh Strasser. Husserliana I. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963.

4 By «world» I understand here the realm of all there is, including mathematical objects.