Republic, Book 6

Outline by John Protevi / Permission to reproduce granted for academic use
protevi@lsu.edu / http://www.protevi.com/john/FH/PDF/Republic6.pdf

I. The Philosopher's Body
II. The Good
III. The Analogy of the Sun and the Good
IV. The Divided Line

Book 6 has two main parts: a long discussion of the philosopher and the city; then two short "images of the Good": the analogy of the sun and the Good, and the divided line.

The first long part (484a-507b) interweaves contemporary accounts of the danger of philosophic natures being perverted by their insertion in unjust cities (usually assumed to be Alcibiades) with discussions of philosphical virtues. We'll just mention one interesting thing here, then concentrate on the two "images of the Good."

I. The Philosopher's Body

First, notice the physical, bodily description of the philosopher, as one whose "passions flow toward knowledge" 485d. The commonplace about the philosopher as one who "tries to leave the body behind to concentrate on mental things" is somewhat misleading. Plato knows perfectly well, even though he sounds like he regrets the fact at times, that while living the philosopher will always be embodied: the key is to have a certain kind of body, one whose passions and pleasures come from knowing. We can explain the philosophic attitude to the body through reference to the Greek male aristocratic disdain of the biological realm as one of unfreedom and necessity. The daily bodily needs of the citizen are to be met by the labor of others so that the citizen is free for politics, war, and for Plato highest of all, philosophy. When the system of meeting bodily needs is in place and working well, it **fades into the background**, hidden behind the important things. Similarly, when the body is fit, trained into harmony, well-fed and rested, then bodily actions and states become **transparent**, fading into a background so one can concentrate on the object. Just as you don't feel your hand while taking notes, in the same way you don't feel your well-fed and rested body while thinking. But that doesn't mean you've literally left your body, only that it's faded into the background, just as the labor of women and slaves fade into the background of the *polis*. Thus the body, and women and slaves, can never be sources of knowledge: all they can do is get in the way. Since you can live with 'em (think or act freely and clearly when they have your attention) or w/o 'em (you do have to eat, sleep, etc., everyday), the next best thing is to have them do their work and then shut up and fade away: out of sight, out of mind. Allowing this fade of the body into the background to allow thinking is the reason for Plato's emphasis on arts and PT and his worries about the poets: they might rile up the body with their saucy stories, and his insistence on political control of the economy: merchants might rile up the body with their sauces!

II. The Good

At 507d, Glaucon asks to hear more about the Good. Socrates demurs and offers him two images instead. Before we get into the details of those images, I'll brave a charge of *hubris*, rushing in where sober philosophers fear to tread, and try to define the Good for you. For Plato, the Good is the **meta-principle of systematic function enabled by proper part/whole relations.** For example, let's take two biological principles: 1) plants turn CO2 into O2; 2) animals turn O2 into CO2. Each principle explains a certain region of things.

The Good is a meta-principle: it doesn't explain things, but explains how principles explain things. More precisely, the Good explains how principles fit together, how they explain parts of a whole that when properly arranged allows a systematic functioning. In our example, it is the Good, the proper part/whole relation, that

explains the fit of the two principles of plant and animal respiration, so that this "co-operation" of plants and animals in trading oxygen and carbon dioxide allows the eco-system to funtion.

Now at each level of investigation there is a part/whole relation: animals and plants are parts of the whole of the natural system. The Good addresses the whole of all sub-wholes, the ultimate level of systematic function. Each principle is in a sense a partial story, an answer to the question: what good is it? This is called a **teleological** question, asking about the *telos* or final, complete state of perfection of a thing, the state it is in when it is helping its larger whole function. Asking "what good is something?" means "how does it help the system work, what larger whole does this part fit into?" The Good, the proper function of the whole of all wholes, is then the meta-principle that allows all the sub-answers of teleological investigation to explain parts of the world.

III. The Analogy of the Sun and the Good

You can see why Socrates didn't want to lay all that on poor Glaucon! Instead, he gives two images. The first is the analogy of the sun and the Good. As the sun is to light and the eye and the thing seen, so is the Good to truth & being and intelligence and the thing known. This analogy, deep in lots of E. Med. cultures (e.g., Egypt), lies behind our saying "I see what you're talking about," when we could also have said "I understand you." It's also why comic strips represent "insight" (itself a metaphor in this nexus) by a lightbulb. And so on ...

Notice here the way the sun is the largely invisible source of light. We can only catch glimpses of the sun, risking blindness if we look too long. Nevertheless, the sun allows not only our sight, but also the "generation, increase and nurture" of living things, even though it is not the very process of generation and increase (509b). In other words, the sun is the **condition** of living things. Realizing this is using the sun as a **principle** to explain living things.

Similarly, the Good is the largely invisible source of understanding. It is the meta-principle that is the condition of partial explanatory principles. Since we are ourselves only parts of the whole system, we can only catch glimpses of the Good, but we must assume it is there in order for our sub-explanations, our partial stories explaining parts of the world, to work. In other words, we must **assume** the world makes sense in a systematic unity in order: 1) for us to bother to investigate parts; 2) to provide the systematic horizon that guarantees the convergence of all our stories as stories about one world, about a uni-verse which will ultimately explain and justify our political systems.

All this is strange enough, but Socrates really gets a rise out of Glaucon when he tells him at 509b that "the Good is not being but superior to and beyond being in dignity and power." This **transcendence** or beyondness of being by the Good corresponds to the sun's being the condition of generation, but not generation itself. The Good then is the condition of being, but it itself is not a thing. What does this mean? Being for the Greeks means being limited, finding its place in the system, so that it shows itself as it truly is, at one with itself, in a singular look. So the Good is the guarantee of individual things having being, that is, being limited and stable. But since it guarantees being by assigning places in the system, it is not a being, it has no place in the system, nor is it even the system itself. Rather, it is the proper functioning of the system. Another way to say this: the Good is neither a part, nor even the whole, but the proper part/whole relation.

Now since we can only see or know stable existing things, things whose stability and knowability are guaranteed by the Good, we can only catch glimpses of the Good itself. We can only know it through its effects, the partial understandings of the system of which we are capable. Thus Socrates could only offer images of the Good to Glaucon. This image-offerings, these supplements, only fire Glaucon up more. So Socrates offers another image, that of the **divided line**.

IV. The Divided Line

The divided line (509d-511e) has four parts, divided into two main sections. It concerns both mental activities and their objects. The two main sections are opinion ("the visible") at the bottom and knowledge at the top. From the bottom, the four parts are imagination and belief (together they make up the realm of opinion), and thought and understanding (together they make up the realm of knowledge).

To each type of mental acitivity corresponds its object. In the bottom section, that of the visible of which we have opinions, imagination aims at images, while belief aims at bodies. These bodies serve as the originals of those images. In the top section, things become more complicated. After a huge chunk of seeming gobbedly-gook (read out "As follows: .... through them"), all poor Glaucon can say at 510b is: "I don't yet fully understand what you mean." Can I get a witness? (Here Glaucon is sort of a chorus.)

Let's slow down and follow Socrates' explanation in the next few paragraphs (510c-11b). In the first half of the top section, that of "thought" or *dianoia*, the objects aimed at are mathematical objects. These use bodies as "images": the mathematical circle, the concept of circle, is only imaged by the chalk circle on the blackboard. This investigation of mathematical concepts relies on unprovable assumptions or axioms. These are simply assumed (*hypothesis* = "placed under") and used to arrive at an answer. Strictly speaking, this is science done *more geometrico*, in the geometrical method, with axioms, propositions, and deductions. This model of what a finished science would look like, based on Euclid's geometry, was the standard all sciences aimed at until recently. In a more extended sense, this is how any science operates, in that it has certain assumptions, its "paradigm," its rules of evidence and procedure, that it doesn't question in the process of generating answers. It's only in "scientific revolutions" that these basic assumptions are questioned and revised.

The last section of the line is the highest. If the third was science, the fourth is philosophy. Here philosophy or "dialectic" uses the hypotheses used as unquestioned assumptions or "first principles" by science as "stepping stones" to reach the "unhypothetical first principle of everything," that is, the Good. Having reached the Good as meta-principle of systematic function based on proper part/whole relations, philosophy can then "reverse itself" and come down the line to reach a conclusion not in terms of visible things (= mixed looks, forms appearing mixed up with actions and bodies) but in terms only of forms, that is, singular looks. In other words, the Good, as ultimate first principle, is unseeable and unprovable, but allows for the systematic fit of sub-principles, the forms that serve as partial principles explaining parts of the whole. The Good allows the forms to take their proper places as parts of the whole, partial stories fit together to tell the story of the whole.

Whew! No wonder Glaucon was mystified or that Aristophanes could caricature Socrates as a double-talking charlatan! Nevertheless, if you take it slowly and work through the text, you could come to the point where you could produce a decent recap like Glaucon provides at 511cd.