

**The Nature of Plato's Good Revealed:  
Platonic Theology and Its Relation to  
Christianity and Judaism**



**The Case for Distinguishing between *the Idea of the Good* and *the Good Itself***

**Journal article draft (and an open invitation to a genuine discussion of the ontological status of Plato's Good, and implications)**

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**All Stephanus numbers (such as “505a”) refer to locations in Plato's “*Republic*” (ancient Greek title: *Politeia*) unless otherwise noted**

**Part of my upcoming *Reviving the Platonic Academy* series**

**No command of ancient Greek is required to grasp the message of this paper.**

**Front page illustration: *Sunset over Ischia*, by Ivan Ivazovsky, 1873**

## **Introduction to the problem of the ontological status of the Platonic Good**

What, exactly, is the correct – or, if that should prove impossible to establish – the most *plausible* interpretation of the term ***the Idea of the Good*** (“ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα”; ἡ ἰδέα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, 505a, 508e, 517b–517c, 534c, c.f. also ἀγαθοειδής, “good-like”, 509a) – arguably one of the most important of its kind in Plato’s *Republic* (the *Politeia*)? In other words, what did Plato himself – and Socrates, I might add, if the passages in question are indeed representations of historical “Socratic” utterances – intend this term to signify?

The ordinary and established way of reading the *Politeia* is indeed to view the phrase “the Idea of the Good” as referring to *the exact same* metaphysical entity as the Good, which is sometimes called the Good *Itself*. (For mentions of the latter term, c.f. 506d–506e, for example: “**αὐτὸ** μὲν τί ποτ’ ἐστὶ **τάγαθόν** ἐάσωμεν τὸ νῦν εἶναι ...”, and 507a: “καὶ ἔκγονον **αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ** κομίσασθε”, and 507b: “καὶ αὐτὸ δὴ καλὸν καὶ **αὐτὸ ἀγαθόν**”, and 532b: “ἂν **αὐτὸ** ὃ ἔστιν **ἀγαθόν** αὐτῇ νοήσει λάβῃ”, and 534c: “οὔτε **αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθόν** φήσεις εἰδέναι τὸν οὕτως ἔχοντα οὔτε ἄλλο ἀγαθὸν οὐδέν”, and 540a: “καὶ ἰδόντας **τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτό**”. (Emphasis added)

Contrary to the dominant interpretative tradition, however, which at once seizes upon the seemingly obvious meaning of certain sentences and ignores or downplays the probable import of others, I will argue that it is in fact *necessary to distinguish* between the Good *Itself* and the *Idea* of it, and that these two terms do in fact refer to two *distinct*, albeit *intimately related* and virtually *inseparable* divine genera. Furthermore, and in conjunction with this argument, I will suggest, and attempt to prove, that the so-called Child or Offspring (506e–507a) of the Good is not *actually* Helios, the Sun of Generation (Genesis), but *the Idea of the Good*.

Outrageous as this proposal may seem to some, it is not entirely new, nor exclusively my own invention, but was orally set forth, at least partially – to my mind with *great success* – in a highly unusual series of lectures on the Platonic Tradition back in the 1990s, conducted by the American Platonist and teacher *Dr. Pierre Grimes*. More recently, in 2016, it was explored in a master’s thesis written by one *Todd Edward Clark*, the existence of which I only became aware of in December 2020.

Apart from these two instances, I do not know of any attempts to publicly defend this reading of the *Politeia* in modern times, but there are *indications* that none other than *St. Augustine of Hippo* interpreted Platonic philosophical theology in precisely this way – a discovery I will return to later on.

As for the content of the *Politeia* itself, this new or revived reading *elegantly resolves* one of the *major* issues raised by the conflation of the Idea of the Good with the Good Itself, namely the *seemingly* irresolvable conflict between various Socratic statements involving these very terms. Here I can only give a few brief examples of what I am referring to, but those who are familiar with the debate surrounding the ontological status of Plato's Good will also be acquainted with the seriousness of the problem I have in mind. (Rafael Ferber and Gregor Damschen state, for example, that "barrels of ink have been spilled" on this issue (2015, p. 197).

### **Conflating *the Idea ("Form")* of the Good with the Good *Itself* creates a contradiction**

To begin with, Socrates *explicitly states*, at the outset of the conversation (in the *Politeia*) dealing with the Good, that he will *not* speak about the Good *Itself*, which is also called the Father, but *only* of *the Child* of the Good Itself, which he also calls its Interest (506d–507a). He then, however, after a passage which, in most translations, appears to make the Offspring of the Good *Helios* (508c), goes on to say a fair amount about *the Idea* of the Good (508e). Hence, if the Idea of the Good is identical to the Good Itself, Socrates must have changed his mind, but that seems rather unlikely, considering his refusal to speak of the Good Itself *only a few paragraphs earlier*.

Then, a little later, comes the famous exchange where Socrates states that the Good is beyond Ousia or Essence (509b–509c), a term which, in the *Politeia*, is clearly used as synonymous with *Being*. Hence, if the entity here referred to as the Good is the same as the Idea of the Good, this would seem to necessitate the conclusion that the Idea of the Good is beyond Being, and therefore unknowable – for how can something which is *beyond* Being or Ousia be *knowable* – as it is *in itself*? The Knowable, in the *Politeia*, is that which is present in Higher Being (the upper section of the Noetic), and which may be seen during Noesis, and whatever lies beyond Being cannot, therefore, be *known*.

However, if this supposition is accepted, then a survey of other statements pertaining to the Idea of the Good soon leads to the emergence of the same kind of apparent contradiction as the one outlined above. The most startling of these propositions is probably the following, namely that “the greatest study” (or “the greatest science”) (504d–505a) is the Idea of the Good (“ἐπεὶ ὅτι γε ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα **μέγιστον μάθημα**”, 505a, emphasis added).

But there are other utterances which are almost equally striking. *In the realm of the Knowable (or the “Gnostic”)*, the “last” (τελευταῖος, final, ultimate, possibly an allusion to the Mysteries) [entity] to be seen is the Idea of the Good, says Socrates later (“ἐν τῷ **γνωστῷ** τελευταία ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα καὶ μόγις ὁρᾶσθαι”, 517b–517c). However, in the *Politeia*, Knowing is synonymous with the gaining of Objective Knowledge or Episteme, and the source of Knowledge is, as I have just said, the mental apprehension of Higher Being during Noesis, which is a suprarational, mental vision. In 517b–517c, therefore, Socrates appears to renege on his statement concerning the ontological status of the Good in 509b, and to say that it is *in* Being after all. But is it *likely* that renege is what he is actually doing?

### **The clue provided by Plato’s employment of the term *Kyria* or *Queen***

The very same passage (517b–517c) also contains another and more *indirect* sign of the correctness of distinguishing between the Idea of the Good and the Good Itself. That sign is the use of the masculine term *Kyrios* – Lord or Ruler – *and* its feminine equivalent, *Kyria* – Queen or Lady. While the former refers (where it is used) to Helios, the Lord of Generation, the latter certainly refers to the Idea of the Good. See “ἐν τε ὁρατῷ φῶς καὶ τὸν τούτου **κύριον** τεκοῦσα, ἐν τε νοητῷ **αὐτὴ κυρία** ἀλήθειαν καὶ νοῦν παρασχομένη” (517c). Now, if *the Good*, which, in the Attic Greek of the *Politeia*, is grammatically *neuter*, is *identical* to the Idea of it, which is grammatically *feminine*, then it is

*interesting*, to say the least, that Plato here *consistently* refers to the Idea of the Good using grammatically feminine words, such as ἀὐτὴ (twice) and κυρία. The sentence could be translated in this wise: “In the Realm of the Visible, She brought forth Light and its Lord [Helios], and in the Realm of the Noetic, where She Herself is Queen, She provided Truth [light-like] and Nous [sight-like].”

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To the neophyte, the above passage may seem to openly state all that the mention of Kyria and Kyrios might enable us to conjecture concerning the nature of the Good. This is not so, however, for these terms *imply*, in *both cases*, the presence of their *counterpart*, i.e. the other member of the type of “divine constellation” some have styled *a Royal Couple* or a Divine Syzygy (c.f. Jung, 2014, Chapter III, for example). In other words, where there is a Queen or “female” deity, there must also be a King or “male” deity, and vice versa – and the King *cannot*, crucially, be *subordinate to* or exist on a plane *lower than* that of his consort, not only because such an arrangement would have been unthinkable to anyone enculturated in ancient Greece, but also (arguably) because it would be contrary to the generally observable and arguably perennial order of the cosmos, which, in Platonism, is a manifestation or reflection of *eternal metaphysical realities*.

Hence, the Kyrios that is Helios *must* have a Kyria that is not greater than Himself – probably the light or “image” emanating from the Sun – and the *Kyria* that is the *Idea* or *Appearance* of the Good *must* have a *Kyrios* that is not lesser than Herself – and in the Platonic theological schema, that Kyrios can only be the Good *Itself*, which is likely identical to the One, the Supreme Deity of Platonism.

(*Note:* Here it may be necessary to point out that most of the mentions of “male” or “female” or gender in general in ancient, metaphysical or theological or theogonical

compositions should be taken as *metaphors*, and *not* as signifying that a given god or divine entity actually has a gender, in the human or worldly sense, since it is fairly well established that “maleness” was simply a way of referring to *the spiritual property of “activity”*, while “femaleness” usually signified “passivity”, in much the same manner that even numbers like two were seen as “female”, while odd numbers like three were viewed as “male”. This was not intended as a comment upon the physical natures of human males and females, but was a method for conversing about the unseen and ineffable in “worldly” and somewhat comprehensible terms. According to Proclus, this type of discourse goes back to Orpheus, the legendary poet and seer depicted on many ancient mosaics – such as the remarkable “pavement” discovered in the remains of the Woodchester Roman Villa in England.)

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What I am attempting to demonstrate here, by way of this example, is how one might, in a more extensive investigation, “latch on to” the manner in which certain noteworthy terms are employed by Plato in the *Politeia*, and in other dialogues (some of the most tantalizing are located in the *Statesman* (or *On Kingship*), the *Sophist* and the *Theaetetus*), and then utilize such observations as starting points for arguments, and for further research trajectories, culminating in conclusions which contribute to the explication of the overarching research problem.

To put it differently, I do not think we need to rely *exclusively* on what Plato *explicitly* states regarding a given topic, and I would say that it is permissible to not only engage in some actual “philosophizing” of our own, but to seek out clues *elsewhere*, so long as we stay true to the Platonic Spirit, and to the culture of ancient Hellas – and that such methods are in fact *necessary* if we are to make any further progress as regards a reconstruction of the reasonably coherent and persuasive whole that Platonic philosophy must, I would assert, have once constituted.

## Is Platonism the true origin of the Jewish and Christian theologies?

The most *obvious* parallel to the aforementioned part of Plato's schema, in the religions being widely practiced *today*, seems to me to be the *Ein Sof* (אין סוף) and the *Ohr Ein Sof* (אור אין סוף) of Esoteric Judaism (Ein Sof – sometimes transliterated as Ain or Ayn Sof instead – effectively means that of which “nothing” can or may be said, and Ohr means light). The living theology which *actually* has the most in common with the summit of Platonic theology may well be, however, traditional *Christian* theology – but that probable commonality is frequently concealed beneath a veil of distinctively Christian terminology, and, in particular, beneath the use of metaphors having to do with sound and hearing and objects heard instead of the quintessentially Platonic metaphors of light, seeing and objects seen.

*If we return ad fontes*, however, i.e. to the canonical gospels, for example, we will soon find that all those remarkably pithy and highly peculiar descriptions of the intimate relationship between the Divine Father and the Divine Son, attributed to none other than *Jesus Christ Himself*, are rendered perfectly clear and explainable *as soon as we dare apply to them* the new or renewed understanding of Platonic theology proposed by me in the above (and more fully set forth in my master's thesis, published in 2020). As when a flash of lightening suddenly illuminates a previously gloomy landscape, and thereby renders everything in it discernable, all those formerly enigmatic sayings of Christ, the sources of innumerable and often fruitless debates over the centuries, are instantly revealed by insight to refer to a *coherent* and even *plausible* metaphysical schema. (It is curious, is it not, that the Highest Divinity of Mystical Judaism is never so much as mentioned in most Christian seminaries, even when the subject being discussed is Judaism?)

The similarities between Platonism, the *mystical core* of Judaism – whose exact age remains a matter of debate – and the theology underlying the ancient Christian creeds and



gospels are in fact so *great* that I see only three possible ways to explain them – *either* (1) the two latter religions are *derived*, at least *in part*, from Platonism, which in Europe probably began with the mystical philosophy now styled Pythagoreanism, *or* (2) there exists some now rather obscure origin *common* to all three of them, such as the theological traditions of ancient Egypt, or ancient Chaldea/Mesopotamia, or a mixture of these, *or* (3) all three, or at least Platonism and one of the others, came about as results of a proposed supernatural phenomenon sometimes styled *Parallel Revelation*. Of these explanations, the first is certainly *the simplest* (but then I do not think Ockham is deserving of much credence.)

### **An argument for differentiation based on the Platonic explication of the Sun**

An *even more indirect* – but nevertheless *compelling* – argument for the need to distinguish between the Good and the Idea of the Good, which *also* relies on statements made within the *Politeia*, could be set forth in the following manner:

The human eye is *sunlike* (ἡλιοειδής, 509a), and thus “the sun of the body”, as it were, constituting a “crossing over” from Higher to Lower Becoming, i.e. from the *initial* manifestations in Generation (γένεσις – Genesis – in the *Politeia*) of the Eternal Ideas to the flickering representations or “*shadows*” of those manifestations “inside” the bodies and the minds of those who perceive or have perceived them (I am thinking of sense impressions and the memories of such, the latter of which are *images of images of images*). This, however, implies that the Sun of Generation, Helios, is *eyelike*, and therefore constitutes a similar *crossing over* from one plane to another – and the latter is in fact also the conclusion we must draw if we accept the larger schema of Higher and Lower *Being* and Higher and Lower *Becoming* outlined in the *Politeia*.

Now let us “analogize” or “reason upwards” together: Just as the lights of our own bodies

and our own minds are our *eyes*, so the light of Higher Becoming, Helios, is the metaphorical *eye* of Zeus, the “Sky-Father”, “whose shield is storm and thunder” (as Homer hauntingly proclaims in the *Odyssey*), and who could arguably be identified as the Platonic Demiurge or Creator (a topic I will not go into here).

*What*, then, shall we say of *the most important Sun of all*, the Sun of *Higher Being*? Is it not likely that *this Sun*, too, constitutes a bridging of different planes, and forms the Eye or Light or Countenance of something – or *someone* – behind it?

We know that all of the entities in the Below (584d, 586a) are but reflections of Everlasting Patterns in the Truly Above (584d) – that metaphysical *structure* of the cosmos is the reason *why* we may *analogize* or “reason upwards” – and if we then proceed even further, into the great and dizzying heights of the Upper Section of the Realm of the Noetic, we find that the Sun of Higher Being, the Idea of the Good, *must* be the bridge between Being and Beyond-Being, and the Eye of the greater and unknowable and Most High Father, the Good or the One. For just as there is another Heaven beyond the one of everyday life, so there is also another Sun beyond the one we are familiar with, and beyond the Heaven of Heavens and the Sun of Suns, there remains the Ultimate End or Good of all, and the One Source of all oneness and wholeness on the planes below (the latter part of this statement is a paraphrase of one of Proclus’ assertions in *the Theology of Plato*).

### **The Idea of the Good “is” the Sun – and the Sun “is” the Idea of the Good**

Could it be that this *loftiest* of all the ancient theologies that have come down to us is what Socrates has in mind when he urges Glaucon not to allow himself to be deceived by *a spurious account* (507a) of the Interest or Offspring of the Good? I would contend that it is perfectly possible that the passage usually seen as calling Helios the Offspring of the

Good (508b–508c) is *ambiguous*, and has *more than one* possible meaning, and that it may therefore leave room for a persuasive distinguishing between the Good and the Idea of it, and for identifying the Offspring with the Idea.

In one sense it is indeed undoubtedly correct to say that Helios *is* the Offspring, since Helios *is* the Sun – or so it *seems* – but since this statement is part of a longer analogy, which compares the relationship between the physical eye and the Sun to a greater one existing between the Eye of the Soul and the Idea of the Good, one may also say that the Idea of the Good *is* the Sun, and *vice versa*, just as one may say that a Righteous King *is* a Good Shepherd, and that a Good Shepherd *is* a Righteous King (c.f. Plato’s *Statesman*, 266d–268d, for example, and John 10:1–21).

The term “is” does not necessarily signify *literal sameness* – it may also introduce an *illustrative metaphor*. To put it another way, “is” does not always mean simply “is” – sometimes it actually means “is like” or “has *some of the character of*”, and the latter is a widely used literary device.

Now, I am aware that the word “is” does not, strictly speaking, present in the Greek sentence, but the comparison of one entity with another, necessitating the familiar English translations, is nevertheless there.

To phrase it differently: The Idea of the Good is, *in a sense*, a higher Helios, and the lower Helios is, *in a sense*, the Idea of the Good.

Moreover, in the speech quoted in the *Apology*, Socrates not only *denies* the charge of atheism, but states that he believes in ***gods of a higher or more exalted kind*** than any of those his accusers believe in (35d). What sort of gods might that be? I think we probably have the answer. They are the aspects of and emanations from the One which Christians would later come to interpret as the Holy Trinity. (Here it is important to realize that the

Greeks and several other ancient peoples included in the category of “gods” the kinds of supernatural or spiritual beings that Christianity and Judaism and Islam call “angels” – a term which originally simply meant “messengers”, which is precisely how the wisest of the Greeks viewed their lesser “gods”.)

### **According to the Stranger in Plato’s *Sophist*, Being cannot contain the One**

There are various other hints in the *Politeia* of the correctness of discriminating between *the Idea* of the Good and the Good *Itself*, but since this is intended to be a mere *overview* of the case for doing so, and not a detailed analysis and defense, I presently proceed to a different class of indications, namely such as may be discovered in *other Platonic dialogues*.

One of the most compelling of such indications exists in the core of Plato’s *Sophist*, in one of the exchanges between Theaetetus and the Stranger, a son of Parmenides, where the Stranger observes that *Being is not truly one*, since Being has *parts*, and is divisible, and that a one which is *truly one* must therefore be *other* than Being (244ff). Moreover, if we take this to mean that the One which is *truly one* is *beyond* Being, and recall that the Good *Itself* is probably identical to the One, then we have an argument for the “Beyond-Being” of the kernel (or “true self”) of the Good.

### **Iamblichus explicitly states that the First Good is beyond Being**

In addition to clues of this kind, coming from Plato himself, there are the statements concerning the Good made by other thinkers belonging to or being closely associated with what we might style *the Platonic Tradition*. Naturally, the closer these thinkers are to Plato himself in the fourth dimension known to us as Time, the more *likely* it is that

Plato's metaphysical schema resembles or is identical to theirs – or so it seems. However, we cannot therewith take it for granted that a similarity or sameness in thought *actually exists*, of course, for proximity in time does *not necessarily* equate to proximity in knowledge or inclinations, even when a connection of *a sort* is most certainly present – the amazing case of Plato versus Aristotle comes to mind here – but chronological nearness does at least suggest *the possibility* of there being a close kinship.

That is why I find the testimony of the Platonist (some would say Neo-Platonist) Iamblichus (ca. 242–ca. 325 A.D.) to be of some relevance to this inquiry of mine. Although separated in time from Plato by some 500 years, Iamblichus is nevertheless closer to him chronologically than figures like St. Augustine of Hippo and Proclus. When reading the work of his which was later titled *On the Egyptian Mysteries*, I was therefore struck with amazement when, near the beginning of Chapter I, Section V in the Thomas Taylor translation, I suddenly came across the term the Good Itself (“the good itself”), as well as a description of both it and its “accessory”, which would seem to fit exceedingly well with my interpretation of what Plato intended the term *the Good Itself* to signify. For here Iamblichus appears to be saying the following – if Mr. Taylor's rendition of the Greek into English is reasonably accurate – namely that

“There is, therefore, **the good itself** which is **beyond essence [being]**, and there is **that good which subsists according to essence**; I mean the essence which is most ancient and most honourable, and by itself incorporeal.” (Emphasis added)

Moreover, we need only read a few lines further in Thomas Taylor's translation of Iamblichus before we find an almost equally startling declaration of what one might well style the “supraessentiality” of the “cause of good”:

“In souls, however, which rule over bodies, and precede and pay attention to them, and which, prior to generation, have by themselves a perpetual

arrangement, **essential good** is not present, nor **the cause of good, which is prior to essence**; but to these a certain participation and habit, proceeding from essential good, accedes (...).” (Emphasis added)

As we can see, it is already abundantly clear – unless we prefer to be absurdly cantankerous – that the view of “the cause of good”, the First Cause, the One or the Good Itself, as “super-essential” – and therefore *necessarily* beyond Being – originates *not* with Proclus or Pseudo-Dionysius, as is often assumed nowadays, but is *already present* in Iamblichus. Hence, it was *already* a feature of Platonism in the 200s A.D.

**Update, February 2024:** As it turns out, Mr. Taylor's eloquent translation is probably not entirely accurate, as the term “itself” (Greek: “auto”) does not seem to be present in the original Greek text. This is an interesting find in itself, as it would seem to indicate that Mr. Taylor added “itself” as a permissible “comment”, because he was thinking along the exact same lines as I am doing now. Moreover, the absence of “itself” does not actually change the extraordinary nature of Iamblichus' statement, nor its value with regard to the case I am building, as the need to distinguish between two different yet very similar entities of “good” is in fact inherent in the logos (argument) expressed. This is how the new translation renders the Greek:

“Well then, **there is the good that is beyond being and there is that which exists on the level of being**. By “being” I mean the most senior, the most honoured and that which is by its own nature incorporeal, the particular feature of gods, running through all the classes which constitute them, which on the one hand preserves their proper distribution and order and does not deviate from this, while on the other hand manifesting itself the same in the same way in all of them.” (Iamblichus, 2003, I.V., emphasis added)

A look at Iamblichus' actual words confirms, by the way, the assumption which even the

English makes reasonable, namely that he is quoting the famous expression attributed to Socrates in Plato's *Politeia*, i.e. “beyond being” (“ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας”, 509b). As for the second quote, the modern translation runs thus:

“But as for souls that rule over bodies and preside over their administration, and which, before descending into generation, are established as eternal on their own, **the essence of the Good is no longer present to them, nor yet the cause of Good** [the Good Itself, beyond being], **which is prior even to its essence** [the Idea of the Good, which has a presence in the Realm of Higher Being, the Upper Section of the Realm of the Noetic, as I have styled this fourth of Plato's major “places” or “dimensions” (τόποι)], but nevertheless they do enjoy a degree of retention and possession of it.” (Iamblichus, 2003, I.V., emphasis added)

Needless to say, in a more extensive and exhaustive research project, examinations of this kind could and should be significantly expanded. I strongly suspect that one might discover and collect *numerous* mentions of the Good and its supposed characteristics in the writings of Iamblichus *alone*, and then there are all the other ancient sages and philosophers and commentators and historians – the famous ones, the lesser known ones and the almost wholly unknown ones. However, in this brief proposal, it is only possible to mention a couple of other examples, and for those, I choose two ancient sages I am already familiar with, namely St. Augustine of Hippo and Proclus.

### **St. Augustine and his equating of the Face of God with “species”**

Some might ask whether it is reasonable or even acceptable to enlist the aid of St. Augustine of Hippo in an attempt to elucidate the nature of Plato's doctrine of the Good and the One. Having studied both *Confessions* and *De Trinitate* in great detail, I would reply that it may in fact be eminently reasonable, as it will become plain to anyone who

actually reads *Confessions* that St. Augustine was converted from Monistic Materialism to Theism, and from Manichaeism to the *Privatio Boni* interpretation of Evil, by Platonic philosophy, and as there is little or nothing in the “Augustinian” anthropological and metaphysical schemas that does not have, *at the very least*, a clear conceptual *antecedent* in the works of Plato himself.

Moreover, there are actually passages in the works by St. Augustine which have a direct bearing on the issue in question, and which, to me at least, seem to fit hair-raisingly well with my interpretation – laid out in my master’s thesis (*Visions of the Suprarational*, 2020) – of what the term *Idea* meant, or *could mean*, to the ancient Hellenes. The following is the most striking of the ones I have located:

“Not therefore without cause will no one be able to see the **‘face,’ (facies)** that is, **the manifestation itself (ipsa manifestatio)** of the wisdom of God, and live. For it is **this very appearance (species)**, for the contemplation of which every one sighs who strives to love God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind (...)” (D.Tr. II.17.28) (Emphasis added)

What is it St. Augustine is doing here? First of all, he is obviously equating the term the Face of God – a highly significant theological term – with something the English translator styles “appearance”, but which in St. Augustine’s Latin is actually the term “*species*”. This “species” of God is, moreover, clearly also an entity located in the “Augustinian” Realm of *Eternity* – the Platonic Realm of (Higher) *Being*, or of *the (Upper Section of the Realm of the) Noetic* – as well as an entity which may become visible to the faculty that St. Augustine elsewhere (in his *Confessions*) calls the Eye of the Soul (*oculus animae*; c.f. Conf. VII.10.16, for example).

Why do I say that? Because it may be *contemplated*, and because contemplation, in St. Augustine, is all about *seeing* – the *mental seeing*, *the beholding of a mental vision*,



which, as I have demonstrated in my master's thesis, is substantially identical to the activity Plato knew as *Noesis*.

Now, when we add to all this the fact that “species” is actually, as the more sophisticated dictionaries (such as Lewis & Short) reveal, the closest equivalent in Latin to the Greek word “idea” – since both of them can mean *kind*, *beautiful appearance* and even *countenance* (face) – I think it becomes highly plausible, to say the least, that St. Augustine composed the above – as well as certain other passages – while having vividly in his mind the ancient Platonic concept of *the Idea* of the Good.

Should it be necessary to further drive the point home, I would add that St. Augustine also states that “(...) the Son alone is understood to be **the Word (...)**, **the Son alone is the Image of the Father (...)**.” (D.Tr. VI.2.3) (Emphasis added)

This certainly *implies* that while the Son, who, as we recall, is also called “species” (since the Word of God is stated by St. Augustine to be the Wisdom of God), is the only “showing”, the only *visible aspect*, of the Father – *the first emanation*, as some would style it – the Father *Himself* is *invisible* – invisible *even* to the Eye of the Soul, that is – and therefore *unknowable*, for the Knowable is, conversely, defined by both St. Augustine and Plato as that which may be *spiritually seen or contemplated*.

But *where* is it we have seen this theology – or at least one closely resembling it – *before*? Again, we have seen it in Plato's *Politeia*, in the aforementioned Socratic declarations on the Father and the Interest, the Good Itself and the Good visible in Higher Being, and the “Queen” (possibly “Sophia”) requiring the presence of a “King”.

## **The implications of St. Augustine’s admission that Christianity is largely Platonic**

As if that was not enough, there is also another, albeit more roundabout way to identify support in St. Augustine for there being a difference between the Idea of the Good and the Good Itself. For of all the surprising and revealing statements so candidly committed to writing by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, the following (found in Book VII) is surely one of the most noteworthy and far-reaching, namely the one where St. Augustine plainly says that he found almost all of *the otherworldly or metaphysical part* of Christian theology in “certain books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin” (VII.8.12).

Well, if *that* is the case, then how can we make *the implications* of that declaration fit together with what we know, or think we know, about *Platonic* theology?

First of all, if we accept that St. Augustine, as many modern researchers claim, was primarily influenced by what they like to style *Neo-Platonic* theology, then we find, on closer inspection, that it is well-nigh impossible to make sense of the declaration by St. Augustine just mentioned (for a perfect example of an academic work saturated with claims to the effect that St. Augustine's “Platonism” is “*Neo-Platonic*” – a view partly refuted by my 2020 master's thesis, c.f. Kooy, 2007).

How so? Because the prevailing interpretation of so-called Neo-Platonic theology is that the first two emanations or “gods”, originating in the One, are Intellect and World Soul (c.f. Harrington, 2019, p. 64, for example) – and because a theology of that kind does not square well with the Christian hypostases of Christ the Son – the Eternal Word – and the Holy Ghost. The reason for this is that Intellect or Nous is clearly *much more* akin to the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit than to that of the Eternal Word, for while both Nous and the Holy Ghost are associated with Divine Knowledge, but not (to any great degree) with a particular *form*, the Eternal Word, as described by St. Augustine and others, is likened to an Appearance, a Face and an Image – and even the Gospels themselves

portray the Word as *solar* and *sun-like*. (Matthew 5:45; Matthew 17:2; Matthew 26:75) (The rooster is, for obvious reasons, an ancient symbol of the Sun, and also recalls the death of Socrates.)

Hence, if we survey the hegemonic description of Neo-Platonic metaphysics, we cannot find an appropriate place for the Son – and the Noetic Sun has to be the Good, which cannot, then, being the Sun, be super-essential (unless we take that term to mean nothing more than the Summit of Being).

The same is the result, however, if we conflate the Idea of the Good with the Good Itself, since this entails *a leap* directly from Plato's Father to the *provided* entities of Truth and Nous. Moreover, this conflation necessitates the conclusion that the Sun – i.e. the True, Noetic Sun – is identical to the Father. Hence, if we go down that road, we once again find ourselves in a position where it is impossible to make sense of St. Augustine's testimony, which is unequivocal.

The solution to this seeming conundrum appears to me obvious. If we accept the interpretation of Platonic theology I have detailed in my master's thesis (2020), then the enigma is instantly resolved. The Father, the Good *Itself*, corresponds to St. Augustine's Father (even though St. Augustine does not describe Him as super-essential), while *the Idea* of the Good, *the Sun* that is *also*, oddly enough, *the Son*, corresponds to the Eternal Word, the Face and Image and Wisdom and Son of God – and the Vision or Realized Nous that arises when the Eye of the Soul is purified and turned towards that Sun corresponds to the "Augustinian" Divine Gift that is the Holy Spirit.

### **Proclus and his theological exegesis of the Platonic dialogues**

Moving on to Proclus, I think that no one willing to make an effort to view him

*disinterestedly* can deny that we have in him a rare and towering intellect, arguably the last great light of the ancient Platonic Tradition (unless we view it as having been continued, to some extent, by the famous Christian Mystics of the Medieval, as I am certainly inclined to do), who *knew Greek*, was *intimately familiar* with Plato's entire body of work, and who was in fact *head of the Platonic Academy* in Athens for nearly 50 years.

For all these reasons, I think we should pay much closer attention to what Proclus has to say than is customarily done, not only because it is perfectly possible that he is able to provide us with a good indication of *how* Plato thought, but because Proclus represents *the culmination* of a thousand years of Platonic "philosophizing" – and we should not forget that if we accept the basic premises of that tradition, the philosophizing in question was most vehemently *not* a game of speculation, in the modern sense of that term, nor an attempt to erect an impressive justification for some worldly and non-philosophical activity, but *a truly scientific* exercising of the human capacity *to know*, and to gain *Episteme* (True Knowledge) or "*Gnosis*".

While Plato only wets our appetite, as it were, with snippets and pieces of what must once have been a much larger and more structured whole (a view vigorously defended by the late Prof. Konrad Gaiser of the Tübingen "Plato-School") – since, for example, the path to full "philosopher-hood" and its corollary, True Inner Kingship, outlined in the *Politeia*, is several *decades* long – Proclus actually teaches us the "Platonic" way of thinking, and, to be more specific, the Platonic (or rather *late* Platonic) method of theologizing.

Here I can only quote a few short paragraphs from the works of Proclus, but I think they are sufficient to show that he actually dealt with the very issue I am proposing to investigate. The first of the quotes I have in mind is rendered by Thomas Taylor in the following manner:

“Nor in short, is it possible for evil which is perfectly destitute of all good to have a subsistence. For evil itself is even beyond that which in no respect whatever has an existence, just as **the good itself is beyond that which is perfectly being**. Nor is the evil which is in partial natures left in a disordered state, but even this is made subservient to good purposes by the Gods, and on this account justice purifies souls from depravity.” (*Theol.Pl.* Bk. I, Ch. XVII) (Emphasis added)

Considering what has already been said, a comment is hardly necessary for the purposes of this presentation. Proclus explicitly states that he views the Platonic entity that is the Good Itself as residing beyond the realm of Being. Hence, I move on to my next example:

“But in the *Republic*, arranging the sun analogous to the good, and sensible light, to the light proceeding from the good to the intelligible, and calling the light which is present to the intelligible from the good, truth, connecting likewise intellect and the intelligible with each other, he evidently collects together these two series, I mean the Apolloniactal and the solar. For each of these is analogous to the good. **But sensible light, and intellectual truth, are analogous to superessential light. And these three lights are successive to each other, viz. the divine, the intellectual, and sensible light; the last indeed pervading to sensibles from the visible sun; but the second extending from Apollo to intellectuals; and the first, from the good to intelligibles.**” (*Theol.Pl.* Bk. IV, Ch. XI) (Emphasis added)

In this third and final quote from Proclus, we see that Helios is viewed as *good-like*, that the intellectual Sun is called Apollo, and that Apollo is not identical to the good, which is said to emit “superessential light”. It may not be possible to make every facet of this “Proclean” elucidation of Plato fit my own interpretation, but it seems to make the Good Itself super-essential, and to give Apollo a role similar to that which I, following Plato, I

hope, have assigned to the Idea of the Good. (C.f. James Adam's commentary on 508b, for example)

### **Linguistic and etymological arguments for differentiation**

The last argument for distinguishing between the Good Itself and the Idea that I will present here is based on a rediscovery of or renewed emphasis on *the actual range of meaning* the term idea had in ancient Greek, as well as a study of its etymology and origin.

To begin with *the spectrum of signification*, there is an *intimate connection* between the Attic Greek nouns εἶδος (eidos) and ἰδέα (idea) and the verbs from which they are derived (such as ἰδεῖν and εἶδον, to see). This connection, which is readily apparent in the entries of the more sophisticated dictionaries (such as LSJ), but which is rarely, to my knowledge, taken into consideration when Plato's so-called "Theory of Forms" is discussed, namely that *the fundamental meaning* of these nouns is intertwined with *the activity of seeing*, and with *that which is being seen*, may provide us with some extremely important and wonderfully clarifying clues regarding the nature of the famous Platonic entities called "forms" or "ideas", and may even tell us a great deal of the Platonic metaphysical schema as a whole.

How so? Well, if the term *idea*, so frequently employed by Plato in his *Republic*, as well as its "cousins", should be taken to mean something which is *seen*, or *an object of sight*, or, more specifically, and as the dictionaries do indicate, *a beautiful appearance* or *countenance* (face), then that becomes yet another argument, and a strong one, for *distinguishing* between the *Idea* of the Good and the *Good Itself*. One of the reasons for this is that if the Idea of the Good can be an object of sight, then it can hardly be identical to the Good Itself, which is said to be beyond Being and Ousia.

\*

This insight, which I personally find amazing inspirational, is in one sense very simple, and anything but difficult to come to, yet it was only after several years of Platonic studies, and the reading of various etymological dictionaries, that I finally arrived at it, and began to appreciate its significance.

Some of the credit for this insight should, however, go to the American Platonist and teacher and Buddhist Dr. Pierre Grimes, as it was he who first alerted me to the fact that the term idea could be signifying something akin to visibility or “being-seen-ness”.

The *seeing* in question is *not*, moreover, an ordinary kind of seeing, but a *spiritual* kind of seeing, which Plato sometimes calls *Noesis* (νόησις), and which St. Augustine of Hippo tends to style *Contemplation* – and this explanation of what it means to fully apprehend the Platonic Ideas, as well as *the implications* of it, fit effortlessly into the extensively articulated Platonic concept of *the Eye of the Soul*.

I suspect that this profoundly spiritual and contemplative and mystical sense of “idea” may have been just as prominent as the more mundane and subjective and restricted one when Plato composed his dialogues, and that we may, by dwelling intently on this possibility, recover one of the crucial aspects of authentic Platonic philosophy, and of Hellenic culture in general, for that matter, namely the prominent place given to the conviction that a *direct, mental* connection to the (Truly) Above (ἄνω), to the Divine realms beyond this world of flux, is both *possible* and *necessary*.

As for the implications of the etymology, I would introduce these by relating one of the circumstances which led me to take notice of this issue, namely my first-hand knowledge of Norwegian, the native language of my mother. For in Norwegian, there are still a number of archaic terms which are closely related to the ancient Greek ones mentioned

above, and which tend to describe mental phenomena having to do with knowledge rather than such as deal with the merely physical or imaginary. One of the most obvious of these terms is the verb “å vite”, to know. In Danish, this verb is spelled with a “d”, making the kinship between “vite”/”vide” and “idein” even more obvious.

Then there is the noun “vit” (alternative form “vett” and “vidd”), consciousness or reason (“vid” in Danish), as well as the verb “å veide”, which now means to hunt, but which originally, I suspect, must have meant something like “to spot” or “to identify”.

As the student of Indo-European languages will already know, the great similarity in both spelling and meaning between these Norwegian terms and the Greek ones discussed earlier is due to them having a common origin, exemplified by the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European verb \*weyd. In Greek, the initial consonant, the v, had already disappeared thousands of years ago, it seems, while in Norwegian, it has for some reason been preserved. The latter is also true of Sanskrit, which has the noun “vidya”, knowledge, and of Latin, where we find the verb “videre”, to see.

The implications of what I have now set forth should be obvious – namely that it is exceedingly likely that the scale and the depth of what Plato intended to convey by his employment of the term *idea* is *not* adequately captured by the modern English term of the same spelling – since *idea*, in contemporary usage, is not very closely associated with the concept of seeing at all.

But if that should indeed be the case, then Plato’s purpose is even less adequately captured by the term *form*, since the ordinary reader of today is completely unfamiliar with the history of the Latin *forma*.



## **On the End**

But *why* go through all this trouble to recover an understanding of the exact nature of an ancient and presently “lifeless” theology, or to correct modern misrepresentations of it? *To what end?*

I am of the conviction that there is *an evident, profound and escalating spiritual crisis* in the world (experienced or foreseen by a number of accomplished minds in Europe as early as circa *150 years ago*) which *has* to be addressed if we are to have a future of any worth, and that laying the foundations for a revival of *not only* the knowledge of but also *the practice* of authentic, ancient Platonism – in which *the highest kind* of Knowledge can *only* be gained by way of *Practice* – might be the best way for us to mitigate this crisis.

This is so because that which we now call “Platonism” constitutes the essence and apex of *our spiritual heritage*, and because a true revival would *reconnect* us with that precious inheritance of ours, the individual claiming of which we *endlessly yearn for* – mostly, I would venture to assert, without our knowing it.

It is, moreover, as St. Augustine put it, the Christianity that always existed (Retract., I.XIII.3). Christianity may have been deprived of much of its assumed, scriptural foundation due to *the inescapable conclusions* reached by Higher Criticism and by systematic archeology, but it may *still* be possible *to save all the loftier and more valuable parts* of the Christian Tradition – arguably the spiritual lifeblood of Europe and its splendid art and architecture for a thousand years or more – by, *at long last*, fully acknowledging and freely celebrating *the foremost actual foundation of that tradition* – the ancient mystical philosophy now styled *Platonism*.

I would like to further emphasize, however, in case I have not made it sufficiently clear

already, that I am *not* simply advocating “a return to the sources” – what I envision is also a great stripping away of misconceptions and distortions, in order to reveal once more that which for so long has been obscured, as well as the viewing of Platonism in an entirely new light, by way of what one might style “an interdisciplinary approach” (to admit a common cliché), and the careful incorporation into the study of Platonism of numerous groundbreaking discoveries (most of them made over the course of the last two hundred years or so) in the fields of history, archeology, Egyptology, linguistics, psychology, physics, et cetera.

Put even more succinctly, what I am proposing would constitute nothing less than the “Reincarnation” of the Purified Soul of Platonism into *the present day and age*.

If this sounds a little too ambitious or unrealistic or overwhelming, I would reply that our present spiritual malaise (which I have been thinking about in one way or another since I was about 17 or 18 years old) has reached such vast and intimidating depths that the necessary remedy can *only* come out of the kind of “magnificence of mind” which Plato himself (by way of Socrates) enumerates as one of the foremost attributes characterizing the truly philosophic nature, and that I would like to make whatever contribution I can to the bringing about of a new and *real* Renaissance, in which *the Good*, and *not* the imperfect (477e), is finally made *the measure* (504c) *of all things*.

#### **Addendum – St. Augustine and the extraordinary statement in his *Retractions***

“Further, I [Aurelius Augustinus] said this [in *De Uera Religione*]: 'This is the Christian religion in our time; the safest and surest salvation is to know it and follow it;' this was said in accordance with the name, not in accordance with the truth of which this is the name. For the truth itself, which is now named the Christian religion, existed and was not missing among the ancients from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came 'in

the flesh,' from whom the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian. For since the apostles had begun to preach him, after his resurrection and ascension into heaven, and many believed, the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch, just as it is written. On that account I said: 'This is the Christian religion in our time,' not because it did not exist in former times, but because it got this name in later times.” (St. Augustine of Hippo, 1946, pp. 87–88)

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