# Agathological Realism:* Searching for the Good Beyond Subjectivity and Objectivity or On the Importance of Being Platonic

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**ABSTRACT**
Pointing to a radical concept of 'self-givingness' and self-transcendence, Plato's notion of good offers a valuable means for delineating a realism which eliminates any dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, knowledge and morality, ethics and ontology. Plato's suggestions can be discovered in combining the characterization of the Demiurge given in the *Timaeus* with the analogy between the supreme Good and the sun presented in the *Republic*, as well as explicating the analogy between the Good and the sun with reference to the image of the intelligible sphere of light. The resulting notion of good could be integrated into the phenomenal dimension of our knowledge and perception, helping to illustrate the *reality* of the way that knowledge and perception transcend any separation between interiority and exteriority, self and world, individuality and community.

## 1. *Integrating the self with the world*

Any reflection concerning moral realism could be unsatisfactory if it concentrates solely on the notion either of objectivity or of transcendence. In the following discussion I will suggest the possibility of developing a moral realism which avoids such *univocal* connotation. This possibility will be indicated through focusing on one of the most essential notions in any moral discourse: on the notion of *good*. My thesis is based on two seminal passages from Plato's works – *Timaeus* 29e-30a and *Respublica* 506d6-509c. I will reflect on the possibility of configuring a notion of good which integrates in itself universality/objectivity as well as individuality/subjectivity, immanence as well as transcendence[1]. In other words,

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* The term *agathological* does here not primarily refer to the domain of ethics or practical philosophy, but rather to a thinking which, transcending any separation of practical from theoretical domains, perceives a supreme Good (*agathon*) as both ultimate origin and reason (*logos*) of its autonomous activity as well as of being in general. *Realism*, in turn, intends here simply to indicate an ontological consistency independent from the relation with a perceiving or knowing person.

1 My argument as it follows is not necessarily best understood as an attempt to give an

the intended notion of good should refer not only to a *telos* originally perceived as external, as purely objective and transcendent in relation to the knowing and acting self – that is to individual, personal consciousness, – but also to a reality which can be immediately experienced by the self as belonging to its own authentic nature as well as to its acting as a knowing person.

Concentrating on Plato and evidencing the importance of his suggestions, I will be expressing not merely archeological, but primarily heuristic concerns, attempting to indicate a perspective in which realism is capable of being genuinely *realist* not only with regard to the *world* or to the so-called moral *facts* experienced by the self, but also with reference to the *self*, that is, to the *consciousness* and *self-consciousness* experiencing itself and the world,[2] as well as to the *conscience* making moral choices in the world. This form of realism is able to counter two possible criticisms made of realism., On the one hand, realism is accused of problematically affirming the objective reality of an outer world – that is of a transcendent *being* – founding moral facts.On the other hand, realism is accused of overlooking the profound evidence concerning the *reality* and *uniqueness* of a person's inner life and self – ignoring, for instance, the epistemically unconfutable transparency of self-*consciousness*[3]. The variety of realism that I propose is able, I claim, to answer to both this critiques.

Certainly, many responses to the aforementioned reproaches can be given. They could either be oriented towards naturalistic positions willing to eliminate the self by considering it an illusion emerging from biological processes or social contexts; or they could result in the assumption of spiritual perspectives absorbing the professed autonomous reality of the self in the dazzling light of an undifferentiated Absolute or One. In both cases, however, realism would be inevitably compelled to postulate an insurmountable chasm, a *dualism* between *being* and *consciousness*, *objectivity* and *subjectivity*, *self* and *world*. I am not

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exposition of Plato's moral realism. For a valuable and stimulating exposition of this subject see Rist 2012. However, differently from Rist, I regard chronological concerns as not relevant for my considerations. According to the crucial (and reliable) testimony of Dionys. Halicarn. *de comp. verb.* 25.32-33, Plato reconsidered and revised his works throughout his life, which makes impossible any trustworthy hypothesis concerning their chronology. Additionally, in contradistinction to Rist – who does not exploit the possibility of integrating *Respublica* 506d6-509c with *Timaeus* 29e-30a (Rist 2012, 142-146) – my primary concern will consist in emphasizing the self-givingness of the Good rather then its connotation as *telos*, thus liberating Plato's moral realism from the univocal objectivistic nuance characterizing its current expositions.

2 A valuable attempt at delineating a realist approach with regard to consciousness and subjectivity can be found in Nagel 2012, although Nagel perceives his attempt as immanent to a naturalistic, while non-materialist, perspective, which differentiates his approach from that presented in the following discussion.

3 This unconfutability is affirmed also in the context of eliminativistic positions. See the exemplary disquisition contained in Metzinger 2003 (with further bibliography).

convinced that such form of realism would be able, ultimately, to authentically harmonize with the aspirations which orient the majority of persons living at the present time. This explains my interest for realistic positions which, in the field of both metaphysics and practical philosophy, do not assume the aforesaid gap as the ultimate destiny of mankind. Among these positions Plato's perspective may be regarded as paradigmatic. It is in fact focused on a notion of good which, transcending any separation or dualism between ontology and ethics, could offer significant impulses towards a moral realism leading to the experience of reciprocal integration between being (world) and consciousness (self).

## 2. *Plato's notion of good. Good as unrestricted self-givingness and self-transcendence*

Plato delineates explicitly the nature of being good only in *Timaeus* 29e-30a[4], a passage illustrating the cause of the Demiurge's impulse to produce the physical universe. According to this passage this cause consisted in the goodness of the Demiurge, where being good is intimately connected with being *aphthonos* (*Timaeus* 29e1-2)[5]: being good involves being absolutely free from envy and, therefore, inclination to the highest form of generosity, which disposes for an unrestricted self-givingness. Unrestricted self-givingness is, more precisely, the motivation by which the Demiurge gave life and form to our cosmos: the Demiurge was willing to render everything as similar to himself as possible, that is, to render it *good* (*Timaeus* 29e2-3, 30a2). In brief, on the basis of his goodness the Demiurge was willing to unrestrictedly endow another being with the most essential quality characterizing his own nature. In summary: he was willing to originate an *image* – an *eikôn*, that is something which is similar (*eoike*) to its own origin – of himself (see *Timaeus* 92c7).

In the light of the above passage the good consists in an unconditional impulse to self-manifestation, through which the good being shapes a ground for the existence and manifestation of another good being, that is for an *image* of itself[6]. The unconditionality characterizing this impulse is demonstrated through the fact that the activity of the Demiurge is absolutely *free* and *autonomous*, therefore not determined by any factor: neither by any need or necessity, nor by

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4 I attempted a more general account of the implications contained in Plato's notion of *good* in Lavecchia 2010 and Lavecchia 2012, 12-31. The scantiness or absence of references to other interpreters of Plato in the following pages is due to the fact that the implications intended here have until now not been adequately evidenced and investigated.

5 The intimate association between being good and being *aphtonos* is very well emphasized in Milobenski 1964, 27-58, although Milobenski does not investigate the important implications that can be derived from it with regard to Plato's notion of good.

6 For the positive connotations Plato associates with the notion of *image* (*eikôn*), with special reference to his notion of good, see Lavecchia 2006, 199-202; Bontempi 2009, 210-224; Lavecchia 2010, 11-16.

any opposition to something bad, nor by a striving for self-assertion, nor by any norm or law, nor by any imperative or commandment, nor by any past experience or expectation regarding the future. In other words, the impulse we are delineating involves the unrestricted openness for the autonomy of another being. Not surprisingly, according to *Timaeus* 34b6-8, the activity of the Demiurge results in generating a cosmos characterized by complete autonomy – it needs, in fact, nothing external in order to maintain its own existence – and self-consciousness (*gnôrimon … auton hautô*). This is indeed the logical consequence of the unlimited generosity characterizing a good being: if a good being would not be inclined to endow another being with its own freedom and autonomy, as a result its manifestation would be limited by some internal or external factor, that is it would be unable to be absolutely free from envy and hence unable to be unrestricted in its generosity.

In this perspective the good implicates absolute gratuity, thus transcending any opposition between the *self* and the *other*. The good *consists* namely in its manifestative character, that is, in the most generous form of *relationality*, which involves unconditionally being open to and for the self-manifestation of another being. In sum, the good would not be the good if it did not implicate the most profound form of self-transcendence[7]: if it did not immediately transcend any opposition between identity and difference.

### 3. *The analogy between the sun and the supreme Good. The supreme Good as origin of being and consciousness*

Plato illustrates the eminently *manifestative* character of the good through the famous analogy between the sun and the origin of every being (*Respublica* 506d6-509c). This origin Plato identifies with the supreme Good.

For the following reason the sun appears as an absolutely convincing analogon of the supreme Good: in the same way that the sun is unconceivable as separated from its manifestation through light, so the supreme Good is unconceivable as separated from its manifestation through being. Consequently, in *Respublica* 508d5 the light generated by the sun is presented as analogous of *truth* (*alêtheia*) and *being*, thus evidencing the immediate unity of the Good with its manifestation, beyond any opposition between immanence and transcendence[8]. In this context we should therefore take at face value the etymology of *aletheia* – *a- privativum* plus the same root of *lanthanô* and *lêthê* –, which points at the quality of being unhidden: truth – *alêtheia* – is the unhiddenness of the Good. As a result, in

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7 With regard to self-transcendence as intrinsic characteristic in Plato's notion of good see Lavecchia 2013a.

8 Concerning this characteristic of the supreme Good see Ferrari 2001, 14-15, 18, 22-24, 26-27, 36-37; Lavecchia 2010, 43-55.

accordance with the literal meaning of *idea* – originally designating *what can be seen* (*idein*) with regard to a certain being, – in Plato's analogy of the sun we should interpret the association of the term *idea* with the supreme manifestation of the Good( for example in *Respublica* 505a2, 508e2-3, 517b8-c1) as indicating that the Good makes itself unconditionally knowable, visible, manifest through its *idea*. That is to say, the *idea tou agathou* (the Form of the Good), that is the supreme form of being, has to be intended as the unrestricted *visibility* or as the *unhiddenness* (*alêtheia*) of the Good resulting from its unconfined self-givingness[9]. The unrestrictedness of this visibility involves, in turn, the highest autonomy of being from its origin, that is: the inherence of autonomous consciousness in the highest form of being. The analogy between the Good and the sun indicates, in fact, that at its supreme level of manifestation being does not presuppose any separation from consciousness. As Socrates explains, the relation connecting the sun with sight (with the eye) and the visible beings is namely analogous to the relation connecting the Good with the highest intellect (*nous*) and the intelligible/noetic beings (*Respublica* 508b12-c2). This implicates that the Good manifests itself in its supreme form – in the form of intelligible/noetic reality – as *unity* of (we could say) *objective* being and *subjective* consciousness (intellect), in the same way as the sun manifests itself as *objective* visibility as well as *subjective* activity of perception (seeing). This corresponds entirely to the notion of being good explicated basing on the *Timaeus*: the being good of the Demiurge consists in an unrestricted self-givingness generating a being which is not only an *objective* image of the Demiurge (92c7), but also an autonomous *subjectivity*, that is a self-*consciousness* (34b7-8) capable of perceiving and knowing the origin of its generation.

4. *Explicating the unity of being and consciousness in the supreme Good: the infinite sphere of intelligible light*

On this platonic perspective, as illustrated through the analogy between the Good and the sun, the supreme Good does not generate a merely objective being: the being supremely manifesting the Good is an autonomous self, an autonomous consciousness, that is an intellect (*nous*) able to immediately perceive and manifest the intelligible, objective light of the Good. Plato does not offer any conceptual explication for this unity of being and consciousness in the supreme manifestation of the Good. However, we can attempt an explication based on some clues which he gives in connection with the analogy between the Good and the sun. The first

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9 On the appropriateness of differentiating the *idea tou agathou* (the supreme manifestation of the Good) from the Good *beyond its manifestation* (*agathon epekeina tês ousias Respublica* 509b), already considered by Schelling, see Lavecchia 2005; Lavecchia 2006, 110-118; Lavecchia 2010, 43-55.

clue consists in the fact that Plato perceives the Good as generator not only of intelligible reality, but also *of visible light* as well as *of the sun* (*Respublica* 508b12-13, 517c3-4). This implicates that we have to consider the notion of intelligible/noetic light – which permeates the analogy between the Good and the sun (*Respublica* 508d4-6) – not as a mere metaphor based on the experience of visible light, but as indicating the *true* light, that is the spiritual (intelligible/noetic) light of the highest being emanating from the Good[10]. Of this light visible light has therefore to be regarded as an authentic image. Consequently, the Good reveals itself – in accordance with its unconditional, infinite impulse to self-manifestation – as an original *center* emanating intelligible light, that is light transcending space and time.

If we now closely consider the Good as an original center of intelligible light, we will be capable of finding an explanation for the unity of being and consciousness denoting the supreme manifestation of the Good. An original center of intelligible light implicates immediate identity with an infinite sphere of light, which that center generates instantly because it transcends time and space. An original center of intelligible light *is* therefore its own instant *exteriorization* in an infinite sphere, which implicates the fact that the center does not precede the sphere or vice versa. The just indicated exteriorization, in turn, does not result in an *indefinite* sphere. In fact, if we concentrate on the *infinity* characterizing its impulse to self-manifestation, at infinity the exteriorization of the original center manifests a limit consisting in its *reversion*, that is in an *interiorization*. In other words, the instant, spherical and infinite self-manifestation (exteriorization) of the original center (of the Good) results in an immediate interiorization, which constitutes the plurality of points building the circumference of the infinite, but *definite* sphere generated by the original center. This reversion can be explained through the fact that the exteriorization, the *objectivation* of the original center (of the Good) is unrestricted and unconditional. As a consequence, it is completely undetermined by its identity, by its being exteriorization and objectivation, hence manifesting itself immediately as *unity with its opposite* – with interiorization, subjectivity and consciousness.

In this context the points building the circumference of the intelligible sphere have to be considered as autonomous centers of intelligible consciousness manifesting the Good as the original center of intelligible consciousness, that is, as supreme intellect. Considering the strict analogy between the activity of the sun regarding sight and the activity of the Good regarding intelligible consciousness (*Respublica* 508b12-c2), the aforementioned centers of intelligible consciousness correspond to the centers of sight generated by the light of the sun, that is to the eyes. The faculty of sight and, accordingly, the essence of the eye, is characterized

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10 With regard to Plato's notion of intelligible light see Beierwaltes 1957, 37-98 for an exposition which is still unsurpassed.

by Plato this way – and this is the second clue to the explanation we are attempting – as generated through the *interiorization* of the light *exteriorized* by the sun (*Respublica* 508a9-b11). Following the analogy with the Good, this process has to be perceived as mirroring the dynamic generated by the Good through its manifestation as original center of intelligible light: it is, in fact, the visible equivalent of the intelligible manifestation originated by the Good and consisting in the polarity of intelligible subject (intellect) and intelligible objects[11]. This equivalence implicates the congruity of the explications here attempted with reference to the infinite sphere of intelligible light – notwithstanding the fact that Plato does not refer explicitly to that sphere[12] –: just as the exteriorization of the sun reverses and interiorizes itself in the faculty of sight, generating a plurality of eyes, so the exteriorization of the Good reverses and interiorizes itself instantly in a plurality of centers characterized by autonomous intelligible consciousness and perception. Further, in the same way that the sun can be perceived as generating a visible sphere of light whose circumference is constituted by the eyes, the Good can be perceived as instantly generating an infinite intelligible sphere of light whose circumference is built by autonomous centers of intelligible perception, that is, by autonomous centers of consciousness.

## 5. *The life of the intelligible sphere as supreme paradigm of morality.*

Examining the sphere of intelligible light with special regard to the dynamic connecting its components to each other, we will discover some stimulating implications to which Plato's notion of supreme Good could be pointing.

Since intelligible light transcends space and time, the components of the sphere generated by the Good cannot be considered as *separated* from each other through the presence of something residing *between* them. Therefore, in the intelligible sphere every point building the circumference is not separated from the original center, so that every point belonging to the circumference *is* center and the whole sphere is constituted *only* by the points building its circumference: the center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere[13]. However, the hereby

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11 See the strict analogy between *nous kai ta noumena* and *opsis kai ta horômena* in *Respublica* 508b12-c2.

12 This absence of explicit reference could explain why nobody has until now attempted to integrate into their explication of the analogy of the sun an interpretation of the sphere of intelligible light. In any case, the integration proposed here is legitimized by the fact that Socrates declares his having omitted many things during the explication of the analogy (*Resp.* 509c9-10). One of these many things is exactly the explanation concerning the unity of being and consciousness to which the analogy clearly points. Without reference to the sphere of intelligible light this aspect of the analogy would remain simply incomprehensible.

13 This formulation is attested in *Liber XXIV Philosophorum* II (*Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam*), which contains the first explicit reference to the

presupposed unity of the original center with every other point of the sphere is not to be intended as a static, mathematical coincidence, which would imply a spatial connotation of it. On the contrary, this unity has to be perceived as a dynamic reciprocal transparency instantly and immediately connecting each other all components of the sphere[14]. The resultant relation subsisting among those components can be imagined as *rhythm* and *harmony* deriving from an eternal (*id est,* non-spatial and non-temporal) *pulsation*, through which every component, by manifesting its self-consciousness, immediately manifests the self-conscious transparency of every other component.

Commensurate with these considerations, Plato's notion of supreme Good points to the fact that the being immediately manifesting the Good cannot be considered as an abstractly universal, impersonal reality, but should be perceived as a dynamic, harmonious *community*: as a *cosmos* of intelligible beings, in which every individual being manifests instantly *the whole* community as well as *every* other individual by transparently manifesting its own autonomous individuality and consciousness. Certainly, the 'cosmos' as I understand it here is very far from the picture currently delineated by exegetes of Plato with regard to the intelligible world, according to which picture Plato's Forms are purely abstract, universal entities not characterized by autonomous consciousness and morality[15]. This current picture is indeed problematic in twofold respect: on the one hand it does not take seriously enough the relation intimately connecting the Forms with the Good, which – being the origin of the Forms as well as the supreme Form – has unquestionably to be perceived as endowing the Forms with its own qualities, that is – with its own impulse to unconditional relationality; on the other hand it takes into little or no account the fact that in *Respublica* 500c2-5 the intelligible world is in fact characterized as the supreme paradigm of justice and *kosmos*, that is as a perfectly harmonious and ordered complex of relations, which reveals it as the supreme expression of virtue (see also *Phaedrus* 247d5-6). In addition, interpreters assuming as valid the current picture are until now incapable of satisfactorily explaining away the identification of the Demiurge with the supreme noetic (intelligible) being attested in *Timaeus* 37a1-2. If taken seriously (and why should we not take it seriously?) this identification – that is, the identification with the Form of the Good[16] – would document clearly the

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aforementioned property characterizing the infinite sphere. Concerning the history of this image see Mahnke 1937; Hedwig 1980.

14 The notion of reciprocal transparency is explicitly related to the intelligible beings in Plotinus *Enn.* V 8 (31), 4, 6-7, where it is associated with the self-transparency of intelligible light. Although Plotinus does not mention explicitly the intelligible sphere of light, the aforementioned passage can be explained entirely through reference to it.

15 On the necessity of attributing self-consciousness to the Forms see the brilliant exposition in Schwabe 2001 (with further bibliography).

16 The identification of the Demiurge with the Form of the Good – which in the perspective delineated here would imply the identification with the supreme intellect – is affirmed, for

inherence of consciousness and morality in the intelligible world, revealing the intelligible world as the highest manifestation of the identity between being, consciousness and morality implicit in Plato's notion of supreme Good and manifested by the analogy of the sun[17].

On this basis the explication of the infinite sphere offered above (§ 4.), combined with Plato's perception of the supreme Good as well as of the intelligible world, could help to delineate a coherent picture. In the resultant picture the supreme Good appears – because of its unconditional relationality – on the one side as transcending any notion of unity and plurality[18], of universality and individuality, of objectivity and subjectivity, of identity and difference, on the other side as originating a reality characterized by the most intimate unity of being and consciousness. This reality, in turn, manifests itself immediately as a cosmos, that is as a complex of harmonious, transparent relations between autonomous centers of intelligible consciousness. This spiritual cosmos is, according to Plato, supreme paradigm and source of both individual and public morality (*Respublica* 500b7-501c3).

In consonance with this background, morality results solidly anchored in the ultimate origin of being. In the supreme Good are, in fact, anchored on the same level, a configuration of being immediately manifesting morality as well as the consciousness and conscience capable of autonomously revealing that configuration. This anchorage can be vividly illustrated through the infinite sphere of intelligible light, of which the Good is the original center. The unity of being and consciousness characterizing this sphere can be perceived, in reality, as immediately manifesting morality, since that unity instantly reveals itself as a

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example, in Stumpf 1869, 232-243; Zeller 1889, 507-518; Wood 1968; Benitez 1995; Seifert 2001; Lavecchia 2005, 14-19; Lavecchia 2006, 216-222 (with further bibliography). The importance of this identification with reference to some seminal problems arising from Plato's philosophy is rightly acknowledged in Rist 2012, 232-235 and 252, although according to Rist – who does not attribute adequate significance to *Timaeus* 37a1-2 – for Plato the identity of the Demiurge with both the supreme intellect and the Form of the Good remains only conjectural.

17 The identity of Demiurge and highest intelligible being obviously involves the identity of the Demiurge with the model of his activity, that is, with the intelligible world – since the highest noetic being embraces in itself all other noetic beings (*Timaeus* 30c7-8). In turn, this implicates that the relationality peculiar of the intelligible world has to be intended as unrestricted also *ad extra*. This is not contradicted by the fact that Plato often emphasizes the transcendence of the intelligible world with regard to the visible universe, since he never characterizes this transcendence as hindering an impulse to self-givingness.

18 In this perspective the two supreme principles of being attested in the so-called *agrapha dogmata* – the One and the Indefinite Dyad – could be interpreted as explicating the fact that the Good is supreme principle both of unity and plurality, whereas the Good transcends every form of both unity – that is the One – and plurality – the Indefinite Dyad. If this interpretation is right, Plato could not be considered as progenitor of the neoplatonic *henology*, which, in turn, would in this case depend on an univocal interpretation of Plato's protology. Regarding these subjects see Lavecchia 2010; Lavecchia 2012, 23-31; Lavecchia 2013.

transparent complex of harmonious relations between autonomous centers of intelligible consciousness, whose life supremely manifests the self-givingness of the Good. In other words, an immediate and conscious relation with the Good can be perceived, in this perspective, as the substance of intelligible/noetic life. Being consciousness intrinsically manifesting intelligible life, intellect (*nous*), in its both divine and human instantiations, should therefore not be regarded as a faculty exclusively producing abstractions or formalisms. On the contrary, the authentic nature of its activity, that is, of thinking, resides, according to this perspective, in autonomously generating relations manifesting the Good through a direct insight into the Good self[19]. As a consequence, in this activity every gap separating knowledge and morality is definitely transcended, since true knowledge consists for Plato in the acquaintance with *and* in the manifestation of the Good.

True knowledge resides, from Plato's point of view, beyond the polarity of theory/contemplation and practice/application[20], in the same way that the life of the intelligible sphere resides beyond the polarity of *self* and *other*. In other words, true knowledge is an *activity* imagining and generating new instantiations of the transparent, eternal *rhythm and harmony* constituting the life of the intelligible sphere[21], in which every center of consciousness generates itself through being unrestrictedly open to and for the transparency of and communion with every other center of consciousness. In the aforementioned, eminently moral activity consists the genuine nature of *thinking*, which, according to the dynamic which characterizes the intelligible sphere, originally manifests itself as production of the *sphericity*, that is of the unconditional relationality building that sphere. On Plato's perspective human persons are capable of generating autonomously and intentionally that – both intellectual and moral – activity if they connect themselves consciously with the authentic essence of their being. The unshakeable confidence in this potentiality explains why Plato perceives authentic morality as presupposing a constant orientation towards the activity of intellect, through which that essence manifests itself in the supreme form. This orientation, in turn, does not implicate the abstract intellectualism often attributed to Plato's or Socrates' ethics. It points, conversely, to the self-givingness which led Socrates to sacrifice his life because of encouraging his fellow citizens to become persons autonomously, that is: *consciously* manifesting the Good[22].

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19 Plato evidences the intrinsic relation with the Good as characterizing the nature of intellect, for example, in *Phaedo* 97c5-6, 98a7-b3, 99a7-b2 and c1-6; *Respublica* 508b12-c2; *Philebus* 67a10-12.

20 For an exemplary take on this aspect of Plato's philosophy see Festugière 1950, 373-447 and Krämer 1959.

21 Not surprisingly, in *Leges* 689d *sophia* is strictly connected with the concept of *symphônia*, indicating the harmonious integration of many voices. For a general exposition concerning Plato's notion of *sophia*, with particular attention to its relation with the supreme Good, see Lavecchia 2009.

22 Concerning Socrates' self-givingness, that is – the absence of envy, see the significant

## 6. *Manifesting the good as experience of genuine freedom: harmonizing individuality and community*

In consonance with our previous considerations Plato's notion of good cannot be intended as primarily referring to the concept of end or goal (*telos*), which solely implicates a reference to a being or a state/condition external to the person striving for attaining the good. In Plato's perspective *good* indicates, rather, primarily the fundamental, constitutional attitude of a self capable of consciously actualizing the most generous relation with regard to another self or to a plurality of selves, enabling another self or a plurality of selves to manifest unconditionally and autonomously their genuine nature. Of course Plato intends the good *also* as telos, as some seminal passages in his dialogues clearly indicate[23]. However, this *telos* does not consist in a merely passive state of contemplation related to some irrevocably transcendent *object*. On the contrary, the philosophical itinerary proposed by Plato culminates in a productive *union* with the supreme reality, which results in *activity* autonomously generating new instantiations of morality and knowledge (*Symposiun* 212a3-5 and *Respublica* 490b1-7).

The radical transcendence of the supreme Good with regard to every form of being, evoked in *Respublica* 509b8-10 – the Good is *epekeina tês ousias* – does not contradict this perspective just delineated. Conversely, if the Good did not transcend every form of being then it would follow that the self-givingness of the Good would be determined and limited by the coincidence with a form of being. This coincidence, in fact, would make it impossible for the Good to endow another being with real autonomy, which implicates real *alterity*, that is independent ontological substantiality on the side of the being originated by the Good. In sum, transcendence results in this context as prerequisite of freedom, both for the Good and for its manifestation. On this basis the manifestation of the Good cannot be intended as *reflection* or *reproduction* of some identity, but reveals itself as generation of *new* forms of autonomy, that is as *creativity*[24]. And this pertains not only to the supreme manifestation of the Good self, but also to the activity of every self-intending to manifest the Good. In order to realize its intention, that is, in order to directly experience and reveal the Good, that self has to transcend every form of being, becoming thus capable of manifesting a *really* new form of being, not deducible from other forms of being. The self-willing to manifest the Good has, in other words, to re-generate in a new form the unrestricted freedom of

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passages in *Euthyphro* 3d6-8 and *Apologia* 33a6-b3.

23 See, for instance, the explicit assertions in *Gorgias* 499e7-500a1 and *Respublica* 505d11-e1.

24 For an attempt at illuminating Plato's notion of good in reference to the notion of *creativity* see Lavecchia 2012a.

the Good[25]. Nevertheless, the thus attained freedom has nothing to do with arbitrariness, but consists in infinite openness to the most generous relation with regard to and for the autonomy of other beings or selves. This freedom implicates, in sum, primarily freedom from one's own self. This freedom is the most radical form of self-transcendence. It cannot therefore be intended as unilateral subjectivity; on the contrary, this form of freedom is unconditionally receptive to the most transparent manifestation of *alterity*. In fact, it gives to another self, to other persons, and, in general, to other beings – as already mentioned – the possibility of entirely revealing their genuine nature.

To the same source of freedom refers the passage of the *Politicus* (294a6-b6) evidencing the superiority over any norm or law with regard to the person who has achieved true knowledge. This superiority, in fact, does not implicate any sort of anomic attitude, but the capacity of actively generating harmonious relations with the world and with other persons, drawing the substance of those relations from the supreme source of any law and rule as well as of any being, that is from the supreme Good. The passage from the *Politicus* points, accordingly, to an eminently situational ethics, which, basing on a direct experience of the supreme Good, considers as prime concern the individuality of the context in which the good has to be manifested[26]. However, this does not involve striving for anarchy, since Plato's ethics lives in intimate relation with an ontology which, originated in the experience of the supreme Good, gives autonomy and individuality a preeminently relational, that is *moral,* connotation. In the light of this ontology autonomy and individuality actually manifest themselves authentically through showing the same self-givingness characterizing the Good, that is the reality which, on Plato's account, ultimately originates their very being. On this basis Plato's ethics can be perceived as *per se* harmonizing free individuality and community: if free individuality actualizes itself through manifestation of self-givingness, in consequence its nature reveals itself as intrinsically generating *communion*, that is as intrinsically creating harmony within a community.

The point of view just characterized implicates that the good cannot be manifested exclusively *based on the past*, ie. through exclusive instantiation of exterior or interior norms deduced from past experiences. This form of proceeding would bias the encounter with the individuality of persons as well as with the specificity of situations. Conversely, in this perspective the good can become most originally manifest *starting from the future which can be initiated* through unprejudiced and competent observation of the present: through *creative formativity*[27], not through the monarchy of formalized procedures. The contrary

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25 From this point of view it becomes comprehensible why Plato portrays the authentic philosopher as manifesting the highest form of freedom (*Theaetetus* 172d3-176a1).

26 In contrast, no norm or law is capable of mirroring that individuality, since it is always based on generalizations (see 294a10-c6), that is on abstractions.

27 On the possibility of connecting Luigi Pareyson's concept of *formatività* (Pareyson 1988) to

would implicate here both annihilating any form of true knowledge and making life unlivable, as the brilliant depiction of degenerate normativity in *Politicus* 294d4-297b4, 297e8-299e effectively emphasizes. Authentic manifestation of the good, that is, genuine morality and virtue, involves, in other words, the willingness to bring a *new birth* into the world (*Symposium* 212a2-5), in the same way that, as indicated by Socrates' acting as midwife, a new birth is presupposed in order to attain true knowledge (*Theaetetus* 149a-151d3)[28]. In this context Socrates' midwifery reveals itself as exemplary with regard to the achievement not only of epistemic truth, but also of *moral* truth. This is not surprising, since every act of true knowledge consists, from Plato's viewpoint, in a direct or indirect relation with the supreme Good – with the origin of every truth (*Respublica* 508e1-4) – thus manifesting itself as eminently moral act.

In consonance with this perspective, both epistemic and moral acts have ultimately to be based on unrestricted *confidence* in the individuality of the acting person(s) as well as of their context.[29] This is the same unconditional confidence required by the event of a birth, where, notwithstanding her expertise, the midwife is never able to *deduce* from past experience the singularity and uniqueness either of the *new*born, of the mother, and of the actual situation concomitant with the birth. In accordance with Plato's notion of supreme Good, this confidence appears as the ultimate ground of genuinely *good* choices. In other words, the supreme Good can never be authentically manifested on the basis of fear with respect to *personal* autonomy and responsibility, delegating freedom and responsibility to formal or bureaucratic procedures. Manifesting the supreme Good presupposes, on the contrary, the courage of *imagining* genuinely unrestricted, *creative* freedom: the courage of realizing that very unconditional generosity through which the Good originally gave birth to beings intrinsically endowed with autonomous consciousness and personal responsibility.

## 7. *Agathological realism*

The implications contained in Plato's notion of supreme Good could enable a configuration of a realism capable of transcending any sterile opposition not only between subjectivity and objectivity, but also between ontology and ethics. In accordance with these implications, moral and ontological reality cannot, in fact, be separated, since in the light of the Good the original nature of being manifests itself as autonomous consciousness characterized by acting through unrestricted self-givingness, that is, by acting in an eminently moral form. As a consequence,

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Plato's notion of the good, see Lavecchia 2012a.
28 For a valuable introduction to the context presenting the characterization of Socrates' midwifery see Sedley 2004.
29 Stimulating considerations on Plato's notion of confidence can be found in Bontempi 2013.

ontology does not prevail over ethics or vice versa: both are anchored on the same level in the unconditional relationality of the Good. In sum, the here emphasized unity of ontology and ethics, of being and morality, neither involves a predetermination of being through an univocally prescriptive morality nor implies an original delimitation of morality through an univocally objective being. In the light of the Good *both* being and morality are intrinsic manifestations of a consciousness which, because of its unrestricted self-givingness, generates the highest form of freedom and creativity, concomitantly generating the most harmonious form of relation and communion. On this perspective thinking is originally the activity which, on the one side, manifests, and on the other side perceives the generativeness just indicated as well as the relations and the harmonious order produced by it. In other words, thinking transcends the Kantian distinction between *practical* and *pure* (*theoretical*) *reason*[30]. Being anchored in the Good, conceptual activity reveals itself therefore as both *productive imagination* and *active contemplation* of good relations: it concretely perceives the reality as well as the ultimate origin of those relations, at the same time being immediately capable of generating new instantiations of that reality[31].

In accordance with these considerations, conceptual and moral realism[32] could persuasively attain a common foundation based on the important suggestions derivable from Plato's notion of supreme Good. This common foundation of conceptual and moral reality could give a solution to the many *aporias* resulting

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30 Obviously, distinction does not mean opposition or dualism, as Kant's constant attempt to achieve a synthesis between these two dimensions of reason demonstrates. In the light of the foregoing discussion concerning the unity of being and consciousness in the Good, an unprejudiced investigation of Kant's so-called *Opus Postumum* could be extraordinarily stimulating and illuminating. Dieter Henrich's masterly considerations regarding Kant's concept of ethical autonomy (Henrich 2001, 6-42) properly affirms the impossibility of returning, after Kant, to an interpretation of morality univocally based on the concept of *telos-entelecheia*. This interpretation would namely incorrectly bypass Kant's intense consideration of the fact that only a *real presence* of the good *in* the morally acting consciousness/self (*bonitas solae voluntatis*) on the one hand, and only the possibility of founding the relation with the good *in* that consciousness/self on the other hand, is capable of authentically grounding ethical autonomy (Henrich 2001, 40-41). According to Henrich, this connects Kant with perspectives peculiar of Plato's philosophy (Henrich 2001, 41-42). This is in general true, if we only except the fact that Kant always – including his latest elaborations – formulates his concept of authentic moral action by ultimately recurring to the notion of law (*Gesetz*). In Plato's agathological perspective, on the contrary, the primary concern of supremely moral action does not reside in the possibility of its being *universalized*, but in its impulse to creatively configuring relations which are able to manifest the *singularity* of every situation.

31 Consequently, this perspective has to be differentiated from Kenneth Gergen's social constructivism as well as from the resulting concept of *relational being*. According to Gergen the self is, in fact, a whole that is equal to the sum of the relations in which it is embedded (Gergen 2009, 55), not a creator of authentically *new* relations.

32 A recent valuable attempt at grounding a conceptual realism can be found in Mulder 2014.

from the separation between theoretical and practical philosophy as well as between ontology and ethics. Plato's notion of supreme Good, in fact, transcends that separation, since it grounds both knowledge/perception and morality in the very same gesture of self-givingness. To this assertion could be certainly objected through many more or less stringent arguments. Nevertheless, no objection is capable of obliterating the phenomenal experience we can observe in association with our activity of perceiving and knowing: on the one hand we would perceive and know no really *other* being if we would not generate an unlimited space of manifestation for its reality, that is if we would not be unconditionally open for its *birth* in our perception and knowledge; on the other hand no perception or knowledge would be possible if being would not be in a certain way unconditionally open for the *birth* of our perception and knowledge. This points to a *real* reciprocal self-givingness connecting ourselves with the world or with other selves. Without that self-givingness I would remain confined in my interiority, and the world in its exteriority[33]: were myself as well as every other being incapable of manifesting a certain level of self-givingness, no form of *real* perception or knowledge would be possible. On this perspective, that is, on a platonic perspective, authentic morality reveals itself as the most conscious and active form of perception and knowledge, of which every other form of perception and knowledge can be considered a more or less authentic image. This does not imply a subordination of morality to knowledge, since in this same perspective true perception and knowledge, in turn, can be actualized solely because of the *moral* constitution peculiar of being. Summing up: in this agathological perspective morality and knowledge reciprocally generate their reality, thus instantiating that creative unity of interiority and exteriority, of being and consciousness, of individuality and community, of freedom and responsibility, which is immediately implied in the ultimate origin of every reality, that is in the supreme Good. Accordingly, neither morality nor knowledge could be authentically founded on the basis of a realism univocally concentrating either on moral or on conceptual realities. This would indicate the necessity of an *agathological* realism, willing to consider the *reality* of the good as *the* primary concern of philosophy, on which the possibility of a both moral and conceptual realism does depend. As the foregoing discussion hopefully indicated, this willingness, in turn, would imply the courage of thinking and experiencing the good as originally transcending many reapresentations we currently associate with it. Plato's notion of supreme Good may give us valuable help on the way of attaining that courage: the courage leading Socrates to sacrifice his life for helping others to generate authentic knowledge and morality.

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33 For an introduction to the concept of perception and knowledge as transcending the opposition of exteriority and interiority see Scheurle 2013.

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