

## THE GENEROSITY OF THE GOOD\*

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**T**HIS IS NEITHER AN ELEGY NOR A EULOGY. Every time metaphysics has been declared dead, it arises phoenixlike from its own ashes. Something very much like that is now occurring in American philosophy. The signs of its resurgence are evident in the papers delivered at this conference. At its beginnings in Greece and Asia philosophy saw as its duty the obligation to respond to the difficulties of everyday life. It neither was nor was ever meant to be something that was out of reach of the common person who dealt with life's vicissitudes on an everyday level. My address is an endeavor to restore to its rightful place a way of thinking that is sorely lacking in our times. But there is a deeper source for these reflections on the generosity of the good. I wish to meditate on Socrates' still haunting declaration that the good is superior in strength and in dignity to being itself:

Therefore you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their existence and being are also due to it; although the good is not being, but something yet beyond being, superior to it in rank and power.<sup>1</sup>

These are strange, even uncanny, words for they declare a level of reality beyond that which is. Furthermore, they state quite definitively that all we know and are is due directly to this good. These days these words fall on deaf ears.

We live in an age of great deceit. The institutions that were created to safeguard the real, the true, and the intelligible have swallowed what the Buddha called the "the three poisons"—greed, hatred,

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 509b5.

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and delusion.<sup>2</sup> The political process, the churches, the universities, the institutions of commerce, and the health care industries—to name but a few—have revealed their dishonesty. If the “first philosophy” cannot address these sorry failures, then it, too, has swallowed some sort of poison

In 1781, Kant told us that we cannot know being directly but only as it appears to us.<sup>3</sup> In 1811, Hegel told us in the *Science of Logic* that being is the most empty of words.<sup>4</sup> In 1927, Heidegger told us that not only have we forgotten the meaning of being, but that we do not even know how to raise the question of the meaning of being. Heidegger’s last utterance on being was that the meaning of being is *ereignis*, an event that we must await with an open mind.<sup>5</sup> In these latter days the story of the meaning of being has shifted to France. Here Derrida declares that the meaning of being is an ineluctable *différance* that is due to our inescapable bondage to language, which in itself is structured according to differences.<sup>6</sup> The conclusion is now drawn that speaking of being is a hopeless endeavor and the effort to express “the Metaphysics of Presence” is a contradiction.

So here we are in the year 2008, unable to utter a word about being. Certain consequences follow. The following vignette captures those consequences quite nicely. In a conversation with an intelligent, young proponent of the school of deconstruction, I used the word “truth.” She immediately replied, “Oh, I never use the word truth anymore. For me things are either interesting or uninteresting.” She had no response when I asked her if Custer thought it was interesting that Crazy Horse was riding right at him with a loaded rifle.

It may not be Crazy Horse himself that rides this evening, but there is still much riding on the words of the *Republic*. Plato tells us that without goodness, nothing can be real or true or known. What could be meant by such a connection among the good, the real, and

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<sup>2</sup> See the *Canki Sutta, Majjhima*, 95 in *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikku Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), p 294–315.

<sup>4</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1969), chap. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 141–64

the intelligible? We know that Plato explores these relations by means of a web of images, allegories, and analogies. There is the Analogy of the Sun, the Simile of the Divided Line, and the Myth of the Cave. Countless commentaries have been written on these tropes (to use the current term of art). We know that Socrates refuses to give a direct answer to the question, what is the good? But we also know that he offers in its place “the Child of the good.”<sup>7</sup> We are told that what the sun does in the natural world, the good does in the world of the intelligibly real. So we ought to be able to find a correlation between the actions of the sun and the actions of the good. My remarks center on the very first words of the analogy of the Sun. My scholarship may be off but I have yet to encounter a sustained meditation on the very first words of the Analogy of the Sun. The analogy says, “the sun gives.”<sup>8</sup> One need not pray to the sun. One need not pay priests or kings to intercede with the sun. All one has to do is position one’s self so as to receive the gifts of the sun. With one stroke Plato challenges countless ages of superstition, oppression, and mystification. This is one of the most radical moments in the history of philosophy. The gods are gone and their ministers with them. Kings, warriors, the wealthy, and public opinion no longer maintain their preeminent places in the hierarchy of power. Fear is replaced by the search for knowledge, and the freedom of the human being to pursue such a quest is asserted. The form of the good is therefore a principle and not a “man,” or even anything like “a man,” and thus “the third man” argument fails to understand what form acting as a normative measure really is.<sup>9</sup>

I turn now to what the sun actually does in this story. Indeed it gives, but its giving causes two effects: visibility and growth. Nothing could be seen without what the sun gives: Light. Nor would anything deprived of the sun’s power develop and grow into its true reality. Before turning to the correlation between the sun and the good, it is important to understand the role of poetry and myth in Plato and in philosophy in general. Plato did ban the poets from his ideal city, but he also used a prolific number of myths to convey his meaning. He was

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 2 vols., ed. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 6.506e. My translation.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.509b.

<sup>9</sup> See Plato, *The Parmenides* 131e–132b; and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.9.990b and 11.1.1059b.

anxious to have us feel the truth as a way to know the truth. Plato used many means to “get it right” and among them were stories that create exceptional feelings: the Myth of the Charioteer in the *Phaedrus*, the Great Ascent to Beauty in the *Symposium*, and the Myth of Er in the *Republic*.<sup>10</sup> In our day we often use myth as a synonym for a falsehood or a lie. But that is not at all what Plato is doing. He is seeking to draw together a number of signs so that all parts of our being—feelings, emotions, memories, and even bodily states—are fused in an act of participation. Plato was too wise to rely solely on *nous*. Poetry and story are essential dimensions of his philosophic methodology.

With this in mind we return to the sun and its relation to the good. First and foremost, like the sun, the good gives. It is unconditional generosity. There is no need to pray to it, serve it, beg it, or appease it. It simply gives of itself. Once again, we note the radical departure from customary Greek life introduced here by Plato. Supplications and sacrifices, rituals and ceremonies are no longer required. What is necessary, however, is that one positions one’s self so as to know the good. As the Analogy of the Cave puts it: one must “look in the right direction.” Here looking involves the intensive and comprehensive training (physical, mental, and emotional) that the would-be philosopher must undergo. Whereas experiencing the sun requires finding an appropriate physical location, here it is the whole human soul (rational, passionate, and appetitive) that must be “wheeled around” so as to know the good. It is described as an agony of transformation in the Analogy of the Cave. In sum, knowing the good requires a complete transformation of the human being (mind, will, and body).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Phaedrus* 246–257c; *Symposium* 201d–212c; and *Republic* 614–621.

<sup>11</sup> I am of course talking about the famous passages in the *Republic* dealing with the sun, the divided line and the cave (502d–521b). There is a great irony here for those who still fear “The Metaphysics of Presence.” In his lecture “Time and Being,” which many consider the long awaited “reversal” of *Being and Time*, Heidegger meditates on the German phrase for being, *Es Gibt* (“It gives”). I believe his refusal to look to Plato’s “Good” demonstrates the absence of ethics in what he calls his *Denkweg*. But then his contemporary followers might, could, or would call this “the presence of absence,” *n’est-ce pas*? See “Time and Being,” in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 1–24.

It is superior to being in every way, and without it there would be no cosmos at all. Again, what is first and foremost is the act of giving which is the very nature of the good. The good is the good because any good whatsoever gives. If it did not give, it would not be good. What then does the good do? It gives reality and truth and thereby gives intelligibility to objects of thought and the power of knowing to the mind. But can we go deeper into these remarkable words. I suggest that the power of the good resides in the strength of its organizing force to order things. All kinds of things—material things, ideas, feelings, and actions—in fact, to take Socrates at his word, everything that exists is good in some way. Why is organization so important? The good grants order without which nothing could either exist or be intelligible. Order in its turn grants stability by setting limits to that which exists. Value is the operative term, and relation is its agent. What the good does is create limited wholes.<sup>12</sup> In so doing the good gives determinateness to actuality and possibility, and this in its turn makes possible intelligibility. Without some semblance of order nothing could be known. It is the *Tao Te Ching* that tells us that the best (in the sense of the good) that we can do is “to know when to stop.”<sup>13</sup> One can only be as Dionysian as one is Apollonian.

The question of order has been a major target of deconstruction; but there are all kinds, and order need not be tyrannical. In fact it can and has been a source of generosity. An understanding of the power of the good requires a discussion of the relation between participation and order. I think of participation in terms of Whitehead’s theory of prehension.<sup>14</sup> Recall that for Whitehead every event in the universe gathers into itself those aspects of process that it can harmonize within its own identity. Earlier I said that it is best to think of the Platonic way of knowing as starting first with feeling and then proceeding toward more conceptual dimensions. In orthodox process language, initial physical prehensions have a hybrid status, for they also include rudimentary conceptual feelings. Platonic participation (*methexis*)

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<sup>12</sup> This understanding of the nature of human knowledge in its finitude is the backbone of Iris Murdoch’s *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), see esp. chap. 1, “Conceptions of Unity. Art.”

<sup>13</sup> See *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), #46: “Therefore, knowing that enough is enough is always enough.”

<sup>14</sup> See Elizabeth Kraus, *The Metaphysics of Experience* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 15–19.

means the ingathering of the world into the subjective being of the knower. We do not just “know” something through representative thinking. Rather, we become one with what we know. Put bluntly, we are what we know. This is an orthodox Platonic position. Given this theory of prehensive activity, I prefer to call participation “fusion.” I am arguing that participation is a multiform process that takes place on many different levels. Such fusion is best spoken of in terms of feeling (which feelings can reach the highest levels of knowing). Once participation is understood as a fusion of feelings, it becomes obvious that feelings stand in need of harmony. Thus the normative measure for the good is harmony, which is the weaving together of identity and difference or, if you prefer, simplicity and complexity.

Harmony is an ultimate act of generosity, for it widens identity so that difference can be incorporated within the identity of the event in process. Hence harmony is a fitting term for the form of the good when it is acting as a normative measure or standard of excellence. Harmony also provides an opportunity for intensity and depth to come into play without upsetting the balance of the good. Fusion driving toward harmony is the very definition of generosity.

If we are what we know, certain things follow. Spinoza argued the seemingly obvious fact that a whole is simple and its parts are complex.<sup>15</sup> This exactly reverses the metaphysics of Descartes, for whom the part was the key to the whole.<sup>16</sup> I hope we finally have come to realize the philosophical mischief that position has caused. Consider the contortions contained in any recent anthology on the subject called the “Philosophy of Mind.”

Simplicity exhibits unity, the vital mode of order that the good contributes to reality. That which is, if it is to be intelligible, must be determinate; it requires a fixed limit that brings about an essential order. It is this fundamental organizing power of the good that brings about a reality that is truthful and therefore intelligible. The identity of this determinate reality is a whole in the sense that it is this and not that. Even though it is a localized whole, it is still a whole and a simple determinate reality. At the same time determinate reality has con-

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<sup>15</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), “Definitions and Axioms,” 408–10.

<sup>16</sup> See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Lawrence Lafleur (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), 38–50.

nections with other realities, and these relations account for the complexity that is also built into any localized whole. Therefore, to summarize:

1. The real is intelligible because it is in its insistent instances a simple, localized whole.
2. This whole is good because it is so ordered that both simplicity and complexity are unified so as to make up the unique novel entity that is that event at that time.
3. The generosity of the good is manifested in this simple localized whole. It is destined to fade and lend both its achievements and its failures to the stubborn facts that make up reality.
4. The good makes the real intelligible because it also makes it true. By reason of its generous organizing power, the good allows, indeed promotes, variety and difference.

My argument is best understood by defining each mode of concrete reality as an *expression*. To grasp this, we need to focus on semiotic participation. I adopt Peirce's view of signs; that is to say, all signs refer to a world beyond the domain of the sign itself. Semiotics is triadic: it includes an object, an object signified, and an interpretant. This is the precise opposite of the dyadic semiotics deployed by deconstruction. There is a real "external" world that is signified and we are not trapped in an unrelenting maze of signs that only lead to more signs. A poised, balanced human being gifted with a measure of common sense would say, "There is a real world out there."

Semiotics is the controlled inquiry into the meaning of expressions. The sun and the good are analogues because each is an expression. To express is to be: this phrase is a synonym for process thought's actual occasions as well as Peirce's signs. One cannot live an abstraction. We live in an everyday world within which philosophy has the endless everyday task of discerning the better from the worse by reason of the form of the good, which remains indeterminate but still higher than being. Peirce's semiotics is logically precise, but at the same time it is concretely attuned to this ordinary human world.<sup>17</sup> "Firstness" is the "iconic" expression of spontaneity emerging out the chaotic creativity resident at the base of the real. An icon is not quali-

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<sup>17</sup> See Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Categories Defended," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 160–7.

fied to endure for long. It is immediately challenged by secondness, which demands that firstness “indicate” its causal significance. Secondness identifies an index that can lead a controlled inquiry into the value of an icon. There is great turbulence between an icon and an index in the struggle to get things right. This battle revolves about the causal propensities of a situation. When icons win, we have the world of advertising that we presently inhabit. In this world the human being assigns values to the world we inhabit. Hopefully, an intelligent and informed citizen of the present age eventually learns to deal cautiously with the relation between advertising and reality. On the other hand, a successful index expresses what the world has to say about the iconic expressions of firstness. When we reach thirdness we experience a sign (or symbol) that results in a realm of communal expression—the general meanings that form the supportive base of a community’s values.<sup>18</sup> Through its iconic presence spontaneity has expressed itself in the world of human experience. By reason of the power of indexical truth, secondness shapes firstness into a form of intelligibility that promises truthful outcomes for human experience. In reaching the symbolic stage of thirdness an entire community agrees to share in the results of this labor. This development is made possible by the generosity of the good that allows creative novelty to emerge and then shapes it through indexical references. The process of communication reaches its fruition when the goodness of realized experience actively sinks its roots deep into the community’s way of life.<sup>19</sup>

None of this action could take place without the support of the good which provides unity (iconic firstness), aim (indexical secondness), and wholeness (symbolic generality). As Plato maintained, it is the form of the good providing normative measures for different structures of value that secures a reality that has its modes of truth as well as its levels of intelligibility. Therefore, to speak of the generosity of the good is to lay out the ways in which the good binds together

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<sup>18</sup> See David Weissman, *Styles of Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) for a persuasive account of the significant differences between interpretation and inquiry as used in contemporary philosophic discourse.

<sup>19</sup> Consider the example of a wedding ring. When purchased, it sparkles with fresh possibilities (firstness); when worn through a lifetime, it shows the effects of causality (secondness); when recognized by a community of interpreters, its meaning is established (thirdness).



through a fusion of semiotic participation all three moments of this conference's theme: the good, the real, and the intelligible.<sup>20</sup> Communication takes many forms and shapes itself through physical, emotional, conceptual, and symbolic vectors. Whatever the specific route used, the concept of prehension remains the underlying process whereby novel but real, true, and intelligible processes emerge from the welter of events that make up the universe.

Given the active role of prehensive communication, Plato's doctrine of the dimensions of the human soul takes on additional significance. First of all, it must be acknowledged that the three springs of action within the Platonic soul are more likely than not to be at war with each other. In fact, these "rival springs of action"<sup>21</sup> quickly turn into factions when they come to dominate political life. Democracy aligns itself with *epithumia* and its multiform objects of desire. Living a life ruled by a ceaselessly changing array of desires eventually destroys the power of reason and a courageous spirit. Inevitably, it turns the soul away from perspectives which may offer a flash of insight into a good way to be. The word itself, *epithumia*, is concretely descriptive of this fundamental loss of orientation. The Greek particle *epi* denotes a place where spirit or courage (*thumos*) comes to rest and settles down. There are several problems with such a lifestyle (to use the current lingo). *Thumos* (courage, spirit, vitality, liveliness) is a process and not a substance. When it is fixated on particular desires, *thumos* loses its capacity to act. Our culture is largely built on the ways through which powerful media persuade human souls that this is not only a good way to live but even the only way to live.

What then of *logistikos*, Plato's preeminent psychic power? What chance does it really stand when confronted with the distorted meanings associated with *thumos* and *epithumia*? It is significant that in the previously discussed passages dealing with the good, Plato uses the word *logistikos* and not *nous* or any of the other terms we have come to associate with the art of dialectics. I take this to mean that Plato is trying to do what I believe is the chief task of every philosopher: to assist human beings in their search for a good way to live. To reason about the good is to struggle to identify and make practical use of good norms and standards that are relevant to our time and place.

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<sup>20</sup> "The Good, the Real and the Intelligible," the 2008 meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America held at Portland, Maine, 7–9 March 2008.

<sup>21</sup> A. E. Taylor, *Plato* (New York: The Dial Press, 1927), 282.

There remains the model of harmony as the primary tool to carry out the philosopher's task. Done well, it brings together identity and difference by enlarging our perspective on what is possible. The great traditions of Asian thought and culture also endorse balance and equilibrium as the road to the good. Comparative philosophy now becomes an essential part of the study of metaphysics. We can learn from the East. The generosity of the good has a planetary reach. The creation of harmony is a task of composition. Good order is the ground of good composition for it widens our vision and makes novelty possible. This address has had an underlying assumption. My study of Plato and Whitehead (and the work of others here in this room) has convinced me that the teaching of philosophy ought to begin and end with a single question: "What is a good way for [you fill in the blank] to be?" Chasing after ideal essences has not detected any lasting findings. Linguistic analysis in either the Anglo-American or the Continental traditions appears to have run out of steam. So far pragmatism has been unable to distinguish consequences that hold steady as the winds of change shift.

Nevertheless, we do retain certain powers. The first is the continuing generosity of the good which even today does not withhold its power to gather into a unity the real and the intelligible. And in the end we also have the power of the art of composition. I conclude by quoting Whitehead: "apart from composition, there is no meaning, that is to say, there is nothing."<sup>22</sup> Composition requires integration. Recent years have witnessed a remarkable growth in the use of what is called "mindfulness" in psychotherapy. The term, of course, is taken from the Buddha (and often rather shamelessly without attribution). This is no great concern. I am sure the Buddha does not mind that we are becoming more mindful about mindfulness. This mindfulness is not at all like the dichotomy introduced by the Cartesian separation of the human mind from the human body. What is involved is the integration of mind and body. Mindfulness is an action that is utterly different from representational thinking. When practiced well, body is saturated with mind, and mind is absorbed throughout body. Mindfulness is the living out of Plato's eros in its drive toward the good.

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<sup>22</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, "The Analysis of Meaning," in *Science and Philosophy* (Patterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1964), 137.

It is immediately evident that there are countless connections here between Western and Asian disciplines such as yoga, tai chi, and any human activity that requires agile skills. A concrete way is opened for real somatic work in comparative philosophy. I think of Plato's gymnastic curriculum. I think of Aristotle's detailed instruction on how to hit the mean in order to live a good life. I think of Wang Yang-ming's insistence on the unity of action and knowledge. I think of John Dewey's dogged efforts to bring together doing and knowing. And I say philosophy has a very usable past, a pressing task in the present age, and a future brimming with good ways to be.

But it is best to stop here. The generosity of the good has brought us to a point where prospects for metaphysics in an age that disputes its value can be glimpsed, and that is a good way for philosophy to be.

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