How to Know the Good:
The Moral Epistemology of Plato’s *Republic*

Jyl Gentzler

1.

John Mackie famously dismissed the rational tenability of moral objectivism with two quick arguments. The second, the so-called “argument from queerness,” proceeds as follows. A commitment to moral objectivism brings with it a commitment to the existence of moral properties as “queer” as Platonic Forms that are apprehended only through occult faculties like so-called “moral intuition” (Mackie 1977, 38). Since we have no reason to believe that there is any faculty such as moral intuition that serves as a reliable Form detector, we equally have no reason to accept moral objectivism (1977, 23–24, 38–41). Recently, Julia Annas has observed that Mackie has offered us “a coarse and imperceptive interpretation of Plato,” in addition to a mistaken account of the epistemic requirements of moral objectivism (2001, 238). But one might worry that the case Annas makes for the homely nature of Platonic moral knowledge—it’s just like plumbing, only non-optional (2001, 246)—rests, as she admits, on her focus on dialogues like the *Laches*, in which the analogy between the moral virtues and crafts like flute-playing, shoe-making, and navigating is emphasized (2001, 244). Annas explicitly leaves open the question whether Mackie’s interpretation might capture Plato’s conception of moral knowledge in dialogues like the *Republic*, in which the analogy between moral and mathematical knowledge is emphasized (2001, 243). Yet it is clear from Mackie’s brief remarks about Plato that he has the *Republic* primarily in mind (Mackie 1977, 23–24).¹

The *Republic* begins familiarly enough with Socrates urging Polemarchus to regard justice as a kind of craft like medicine (332c–d). However, at least on the face of it, there is a difference between crafts like medicine and crafts like justice that might reasonably lead us to wonder whether justice is objective in the same way that medicine (or plumbing) is. In the *Republic*, Socrates maintains that crafts are defined by their distinctive final ends. The final end of medicine is the health of the body (341e), the final end of horse-breeding is the well-being of horses (342c), and, we might say, the final end of the art of plumbing is the efficient and un leaky transport of clean water and waste water
through pipes. Corresponding to these different ends are different norms of action, whose function is to guide practitioners of these crafts toward their final ends. Depending on the defining end of a particular craft, there are, objectively speaking, different ways in which one ought, and ought not, to behave. However, while the ends of crafts like medicine, horse-breeding, and plumbing are fairly easy to define, Polemarchus soon discovers that it is not at all easy to determine the proper end of the craft of justice (332c–334b). Just as difficult to determine is the role that the craft of justice might play in what Annas calls “the art [or craft] of living,” since it is not at all obvious what the proper end (or ends) of this all-inclusive craft should be. Is the good life the life of maximum pleasure, desire satisfaction, philosophical insight, or something else? In the Republic, Socrates refuses to say (506b–e). Plato was well aware that a lack of consensus about what constitutes the goodness of a good life could easily lead one to reject objectivism about value in favor of some form of subjectivism or nihilism (R. 537e–539a; Th. 151d–152e), and Mackie himself appeals to what he calls the “argument from relativity”—or, more accurately, the argument from moral disagreement—as well as his “argument from queerness” in order to deliver his one-two punch against moral objectivism (Mackie 1977, 36–38). So it is certainly possible that, in an effort to defend the objectivity of morality against such worries about the cogency of the craft analogy, Plato was ultimately led to embrace a form of moral intuitionism in the Republic. For, if he maintained that goodness was a simple indefinable property to which only a few exceptional individuals could gain access through the use of a special faculty of moral intuition, then, without resorting to moral subjectivism or nihilism, he would have an explanation of the fact that there is such widespread disagreement about the nature of goodness and the fact that even superior philosophers like Socrates failed to offer a rationally defensible account of its nature. Socrates’ unwillingness to define the Form of the good, his apparently wholesale dismissal of the role of sense-perception in gaining knowledge of it, and his description of philosophers’ apprehension of the Form of the good as a kind of mental “vision” have suggested to some that he regards the Form of the good as a non-natural indefinable property that is apprehended directly only by a kind of moral intuition.

Mackie himself attributes to Plato the following reasoning. Forms like the Form of the good are, according to Mackie, “objectively prescriptive” in a very strong sense:
knowing them or ‘seeing’ them will not merely tell men what to do but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations. ... Being acquainted with the Forms of the Good and Justice and Beauty and the rest they will, by this knowledge alone, without any further motivation, be impelled to pursue and promote these ideals. (1977, 23–24)

Since more familiar cognitive tools like sense-perception, or inductive or deductive reasoning, cannot by themselves give one access to any such objectively compelling moral “oughts,” Mackie suggests, moral objectivists like Plato must appeal to “a special sort of intuition” as the ultimate source of such practical insight (1977, 39).

It is hard to say what textual evidence Mackie had in mind when he attributed moral intuitionism to Plato, since his goals in citing Plato were primarily polemical rather than exegetical. Mackie seems to have believed that a commitment to moral objectivism necessarily commits one to a faculty of moral intuition, and so, any textual evidence that we might cite against the thesis that Plato was an intuitionist would only prove to Mackie how confused Plato really was. However, since Mackie’s challenge to moral objectivism first appeared, moral objectivists have gathered force to show us why their metaphysics does not in fact commit them to an intuitionist epistemology. So, to determine whether Plato really was committed to intuitionism in the Republic, we will have to see what he actually says.

2.

When Mackie speaks of moral intuition, he seems to have in mind a particular faculty, distinct from sense-perception, by which human beings gain direct cognitive access to objective moral properties (1977, 38–39). The phrase ‘moral intuitionism’, then, might be used to refer to a theory of belief acquisition, according to which we acquire certain moral beliefs through a faculty that we call “moral intuition.” However, the phrase ‘moral intuitionism’ also has been used to refer to a theory of epistemic justification, according to which at least some of our moral beliefs, our so-called “moral intuitions,” are foundational, that is, do not depend for their justification on their inferential relations to other beliefs. These two sorts of moral intuitionism are not mutually entailing. We can combine, for example, the view that certain beliefs are acquired non-inferentially by a faculty that we call “moral intuition” with a coherentist theory of epistemic justification according to which all beliefs are justified inferentially. Equally, one could maintain that our moral intuitions are foundational without claiming in addition that
these intuitions are acquired through a special faculty of “moral intuition.” However, if our moral intuitions are to count as foundational, then it must be possible for them to be acquired directly; for if they were necessarily inferred from other beliefs, then their epistemic status would be only as good as the beliefs from which they were inferred and so wouldn’t themselves count as epistemic foundations. For this reason, the proponent of the view that our moral intuitions are foundational and reflect insight into objective moral properties owes us some account of how this direct access to objective moral properties is possible—whether it be by sense-perception, clairvoyance, or some other faculty or capacity that we might call, for want of a better phrase, “moral intuition.” In any case, like Mackie, when I speak of moral intuitionism, I will be referring to the view that at least certain moral beliefs are acquired not by “sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these” (1977, 39), but only by some special faculty or capacity by which human beings gain direct cognitive access to objective moral properties. As Richard Price described the view in self-consciously Platonist language: “As bodily sight discovers to us visible objects; so does understanding, (the eye of the mind, and infinitely more penetrating) discover to us intelligible objects; and thus, in a like sense with bodily vision, becomes the inlet of new ideas” (1787, 38).

Such an intuitionist picture of how we achieve knowledge of moral properties does not follow merely from a commitment to moral objectivism and the observation that moral properties cannot be seen, tasted, heard, smelled, or touched. Like moral properties, magnetic fields are hardly “visible” to “bodily sight.” Yet no one is tempted to attribute to physicists a special intellectual, magnetic-field-detecting faculty in order to account for the “inlet” of their ideas about magnetic fields. Instead, we are inclined to believe that physicists acquired their views about magnetic fields through a complicated process of deductive and inductive inference from empirical data. Correspondingly, certain Platonists about mathematics have argued that we can talk meaningfully about “invisible” numbers without possessing a special number-detecting faculty by which we come into direct contact with them. Is there any particular reason, then, to think that Plato was tempted toward an intuitionist picture of the ultimate source of our moral beliefs?
HOW TO KNOW THE GOOD

Such a view certainly seems to be suggested by Socrates' myth (muthos) in the Phaedrus about how human beings gain knowledge of the Forms (247e). According to this story, many thousands of years ago, our disembodied souls caught a glimpse (248a) of justice and other Forms—as they are in themselves—in a place beyond the heavens (247c). So long as they continued to “catch a sight of any true thing,” our souls remained in heaven with the gods and periodically ventured to this mysterious place beyond (248c). But when, as a result of bad luck or wrongdoing, our souls were unable to see or remember the Forms, they lost the wings that kept them aloft and they fell to earth to be incarnated in the body of a human being (248d). The philosopher who “stands outside of human concerns and draws close to the divine” (249d)—that is, to his memories of the Forms—will eventually regain his wings and return to the heavens with its periodic opportunities of visions of the Forms. Those who are not philosophers are subject to less happy fates (248e–249b). How, according to this picture, does one gain knowledge of justice? Purify one’s soul of any worldly concerns, and eventually, one’s soul will be borne aloft to the only place where the Form of justice can be seen. No role here for hypotheses, theories, or inference from information gained through sense-perception. Our access to Forms is direct when the soul is disembodied and pure.

While the account that Socrates offers in the Phaedrus of our ability to gain knowledge of justice is simply a myth, and like many myths, it may well play fast and loose with philosophical niceties (265b–c), a similar position seems to be suggested by Socrates’ more strictly philosophical remarks about the possibilities of cognitive access to the Forms in the Phaedo. Since we never see or grasp with any other bodily sense-perception the Forms of justice, beauty, or the good (Ph. 65d), knowledge of these Forms is to be achieved most purely by the man who approached each object with his thought (dianoia) alone as far as possible, neither adducing sight in his thinking, nor dragging in any other sense to accompany his reasoning; rather, using his thought alone by itself and unsullied, he would undertake the hunt for each of the things that are, each alone by itself and unsullied; he would be separated as far as possible from his eyes and ears, and virtually from his whole body, on the ground that it confuses the soul, and doesn’t allow it to gain truth and wisdom when in partnership with it. (Ph. 65e–66a)
Socrates suggests that knowledge of the Forms is to be achieved through the use of thought (dianoia), but here thought does not seem to involve the sort of inference that the physicist uses to arrive at hypotheses about theoretical entities like magnetic fields from empirical data. According to Socrates, the thought that allows us to gain knowledge of the Forms works best when we ignore empirical data altogether. Rather than providing information from which we can infer the nature of goodness, the bodily senses provide only static that interferes with the ability of our moral antenna of “dianoia” to “see” the Form of the good: “It really has been shown then that if we are ever to know anything purely (katharós ti eisesthai), we must escape from the body and observe (theaton) things in themselves with the soul by itself. … Either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so after death” (Ph. 66d–e). Such remarks suggest that, on the view that Socrates articulates in the Phaedo, gaining knowledge of goodness is not quite as straightforward as gaining knowledge of plumbing: for one thing, we don’t have to die to learn how to be a plumber. Whether, in the end, Socrates’ remarks in the Phaedo are best understood as implying a commitment to moral intuitionism, such an interpretation of his remarks cannot be dismissed as “coarse and imperceptive.”

The Republic, I will argue, is a different matter entirely. The method that Socrates both advocates and uses in the Republic as a means for gaining moral knowledge sits very uncomfortably with a commitment to moral intuitionism.

3.

“[W]hen I don’t know what justice is,” Socrates observes at the end of the first book of the Republic, “I’ll hardly know whether it is a kind of virtue or not, or whether a person who has it is happy or unhappy” (R. 354c1–3). Socrates does not propose that he commit suicide so that his soul by itself can see the Form of justice by itself; instead, in Book II, he proposes that he and his interlocutors adopt the following strategy of inquiry:

The investigation that we’re undertaking is not an easy one but requires keen eye-sight. Therefore, since we aren’t clever people, we should adopt the method of investigation that we’d use if, lacking keen eyesight, we were told to read small letters from a distance and then noticed that the same letters existed elsewhere in a larger size and on a larger surface. We’d consider it a godsend, I think, to be allowed to read the larger ones
first and then to examine the smaller ones, to see whether they really are
the same.

That’s certainly true, said Adeimantus, but how is this case similar to
our investigation of justice?

I’ll tell you. We say, don’t we, that there is the justice of an individual
man and also the justice of a whole *polis*?

Certainly.

And a *polis* is larger (meizon) than an individual man?

It is larger.

Perhaps, then, there is more justice in the larger thing, and it will be
easier to learn what it is. So, if you’re willing, let’s first find out what sort
of thing justice is in *poleis* and afterwards look for it in the individual,
observing the ways in which the smaller is similar to the larger. (368c–
369a)¹⁵

Here, Socrates suggests that, whatever else justice is, it is what is com-
mon to both just people and just states. Since, as he puts it, the *polis* is
larger than an individual person, it might be of some heuristic value to
think about the justice of the *polis* before attempting to identify the jus-
tice of the individual. This remark is surprising for two reasons.

First, it is not obvious that Socrates’ rationale for beginning his inves-
tigation into justice with an investigation of justice in the *polis* makes
any sense. Socrates suggests that it is easier to discern a property when
it is instantiated in a larger thing than in a smaller thing. However,
while this generalization might be true in the case of visible properties
like colors, it is not obvious that it would be true in the case of proper-
ties like justice. If my young daughter wants to know the nature of char-
treuse, it may be easier for her to do so if I give her a large rather than
a minute sample of the color. This difference has to do with the limits
of our eyesight: in general, it is easier to see larger things than smaller
things. But justice is not a simple, visible property like color, and so, it
is not obvious that it would be easier to discern justice in a large object
like a *polis* than in a smaller object like a person. To this extent, justice
is like health: it is not easier to determine the nature of health by first
looking at a healthy elephant and then a healthy mouse. Instead, one
attempts to determine the nature of health by first analyzing our con-
cept of health, and then attempting to determine how a property that
corresponds to this concept could be realized in a mouse or an ele-
phant.

A second and more fundamental problem with Socrates’ claim
about the heuristic value of examining justice in a *polis* before examin-
ing justice in an individual is that it is not at all clear that just people
and just *poleis* do share a common property, justice, in virtue of which they both count as just. For consider the way in which Socrates and his interlocutors talked about justice up until this point in the dialogue. In Book I, Socrates suggested, and his interlocutors seemed to agree, that “justice” was the name of a goal-oriented practice, or craft, like medicine (332d). Other things could be called just depending on their relation to this practice. People count as just if and only if they engage in this practice effectively, that is, if and only if their actions reliably conform to the norms of the practice of justice. While the various interlocutors disagreed about the distinctive goal of the practice of justice, Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus appeared to share the view that the norms of action that govern this practice are determined by the goals that individuals had when creating the *polis*. Thrasymachus maintained that rulers determine the function of the *polis*, and since they always act in their own self-interest, the function of the *polis* is to further the interests of the rulers. For this reason, they establish laws to impose their will on others, and “they call what they have made—what is to their own advantage—to be just for their subjects, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust” (338e). Glaucon and Adeimantus argued that a group of people determined the function of the *polis* when they agreed to establish a social system that would minimize the likelihood of harm that any member could suffer at the hands of the others. On their view, too, norms of just action are defined relative to their goal: a group of people decide “that it is beneficial to come to an agreement with each other neither to do injustice nor to suffer it. As a result, they begin to make laws and covenants, and what the law commands they call lawful and just” (359a). Although the question of the conditions under which a *polis* counts as just was never explicitly raised, it is natural to suppose that a *polis* counts as just if and only if a sufficient number of its members follow the norms of action that allows it, the *polis*, to perform its proper function. On this understanding of the meaning of the word ‘just’, the word is not univocal when applied to individuals and the *polis* they constitute: an individual counts as just if and only if his actions conform to the norms of the practice of justice, and a *polis* counts as just if and only if a substantial number of its members are just. Just individuals and just *poleis*, on this view, do not share a common property in virtue of which they both count as just.

The *Republic* is not the first dialogue in which Socrates makes what is sometimes called the “univocity assumption,” that all F things, no mat-
ter how they differ in other respects, count as F in virtue of sharing a common property F-ness (see Eu. 5d, 6d; M. 72c). Plato was not so naive as to believe that language is never ambiguous; in the Euthydemus, he explores the ways in which linguistic ambiguity can lead to fallacies of reasoning (Eud. 275c–276c), and in the Republic itself, Socrates warns his interlocutors not to become misled by ambiguities in language (R. 454a–c). But I do think that Plato believed that it would be a good thing—in the sense that it would prevent avoidable conceptual confusion—if our language mirrored reality without much distortion. If a and b share the same property, then if one calls a F because it possesses this property, one should also call b F in virtue of its possessing this same property; for speaking in this way reveals important similarities between a and b, namely that they both share the same property F-ness.

Already in Book I, we have evidence that Socrates believed that just polis would count as just in virtue of a property that individuals also can possess. During the course of his cross-examination of Thrasydamus, Socrates attempts to establish the value of justice even to the miscreants whom Thrasydamus admires:

Do you think that a polis, an army, pirates, thieves, or any other gang that comes together for the sake of doing something unjustly would be able to achieve it if they were unjust to each other?

No, indeed.

Injustice, Thrasydamus, causes civil war, hatred, and fighting among themselves, while justice brings harmony and friendship. ... If the effect of injustice is to produce hatred wherever it occurs, then, whenever it arises, whether among free men or slaves, won't it cause them to hate one another, engage in civil war, and prevent them from achieving any common purpose? ... Apparently, then, injustice has the power, first, to make whatever it arises in—whether it is a polis, a family, an army, or anything else—in capable of doing anything as a unit, because of the civil wars and differences it creates. ... And even in an individual [human being] it has by its nature the very same effect. ... it makes him incapable of doing anything, because he is in a state of civil war and not of one mind. (351c–352a)

Here Socrates speaks of the effects of justice and injustice on goal-directed collective entities like polis, armies, gangs of pirates and gangs of thieves. Justice is the property that makes it possible for the members of a collective to achieve their common goals; injustice makes it impossible. In this same passage, Socrates also seems to regard individual human beings as a kind of collective entity. The minds of individuals are composed of parts that can be opposed or fully in harmony, and
these parts can cooperate successfully with one another in order to achieve their common ends. If we choose to call a *polis* just in virtue of the ways in which its members interact successfully to achieve their common goals *qua* member of a *polis*, then it seems reasonable to regard individual human beings as just in virtue of the ways in which the goal-directed parts of their minds work together to achieve their common ends *qua* part of an individual’s mind. On this understanding, it would turn out that just *poleis* and just individuals do share a common property in virtue of which they both count as just.

Nonetheless, I think that it is fair to say that this way of understanding the conditions under which an individual human being is properly called just requires a revision in the way in which we use language. When Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus spoke of just individuals earlier in the dialogue, it was clear that they primarily had in mind people whose actions conformed to norms of action that, if followed, would allow for the cooperation necessary for the achievement of the goal for the sake of which *poleis* were created—whether it be the advantage of the rulers, the minimization of harm at the hands of fellow citizens, or whatnot. On this usage, no matter how much harmony and unity of mind a person possessed, if this person’s individual goals and actions were contrary to this political goal, and if she acted on these individual goals, she would not count as just.

It frequently happens in the natural sciences and philosophy that the ordinary usage of terms is revised for the sake of conceptual clarity, and if individuals can share the very property that *poleis* possess in virtue of which the latter are called just, then it does make some sense to revise our way of speaking since our present way of speaking masks important similarities and differences of property. If I am correct about Socrates’ linguistic revisionism concerning the conditions under which an individual would count as just, then we can see why it does, after all, make sense for him to begin his investigation into the nature of justice in the individual with an investigation of justice in the *polis*. For it was justice in the *polis* that Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus were talking about all along. While Socrates and his interlocutors might disagree about the exact nature of justice in the *polis*, they share enough beliefs about it that they will agree to criteria for picking out the referent of the word ‘justice’ in this context. For this reason (and not because the *polis* is bigger), political justice is easier to “discern” than justice in the individual. Only when they have examined the exact nature of this property when it is possessed by a *polis* will they be
in a position to determine whether this same property can be instantiated by individual human beings.

How, then, can we discover the nature of justice in the polis? In Book II, Socrates suggests the following strategy: “If we could watch a polis coming to be in theory (logôi), wouldn’t we also see its justice coming to be, and its injustice as well?” (369a). This strategy makes sense if Socrates shares with Thrasymachus and Glaucon the view that the norms of political justice are defined in relation to the goals that humans have when they create a polis. Socrates agrees with Thrasymachus and Glaucon that a polis comes into existence in order to serve the self-interested purposes of its founders, but he attributes to the founders a different view about the way in which the polis serves their self-interest. According to Socrates, a polis comes into existence in order to satisfy human needs (369c). Since no one can meet all of his needs on his own, Socrates explains, it is necessary for people to get together “as partners and helpers” (369c) and create a polis. In order for a polis to satisfy the needs of its members, Socrates suggests the actions of its members must be governed by (at least) three norms: (1) each must specialize and take up a single craft that meets a human need (369d–370a, 370c), (2) each must take up the craft for which he is naturally suited (370a–c), and (3) each must contribute the fruits of his labor for the common use of all (369e). While Socrates’ just state develops in complicated ways in the next few books of the Republic, the ultimate account of political justice that Socrates discovers in Book IV is the same: a polis is just when its members conform to norms of action that allow them to cooperate successfully to perform the proper function of the polis, namely, to make its members as happy as possible into the indefinite future (419b–421b).16 What are these norms of action? In Book IV, Socrates offers the following account of political justice: “For the money-making, auxiliary, and guardian classes each to perform its proper functions in the city ... [T]hat’s justice, ... and makes the polis just” (434c). Socrates then tests such an account against our commonsense views about the ways that judges are supposed to behave (433e).

Before they can conclude that their account of justice is correct, Socrates and his interlocutors must determine whether it is equally plausible as an account of justice when it is a property of individuals:

So let’s apply what has come to light in the polis to the individual, and if it is accepted there, all will be well. But if something different is found in the individual, then we must go back and test that on the polis. And if we
do this, and compare them side by side, we might well make justice light up as if we were rubbing fire-sticks together. And, when it has come to light, we can get a secure grip on it for ourselves. (434e–435a)

To establish the plausibility of such an account of justice for the individual, Socrates must examine the nature of the human psyche, and, in particular, the varieties of motivation behind the goal-directed actions of humans. Having established that there are three and only three parts to the soul (435b–441c), Socrates concludes that the same property that they identified as justice in the polis could be instantiated in an individual human:

Moreover, Glaucon, I suppose we’ll say that a man is just in the same way as a polis.

That too is entirely necessary.
And we surely haven’t forgotten that the polis was just because each of the three classes in it was performing its proper function.
I don’t think that we could forget that.
Then we must also remember that each one of us in whom each part [of his soul] is performing its proper function will himself be just. (441d)

Such an account is then confirmed when Socrates shows how it explains our commonsense views about particular cases of just and unjust people (442d–443b).

I have labored over this familiar story about how Socrates discovers the nature of justice in the Republic not because I want to convince you of the plausibility of his conclusion or the soundness of his reasoning, but in order to remind you of the nature of his reasoning to this conclusion. How does Socrates discover justice? Not by attempting to perceive directly through the mind’s eye the Form itself by itself, but through a complicated process of inductive and deductive reasoning that is very familiar to us from our own philosophical and scientific practice. Socrates and his interlocutors first attempt to identify the occasion on which the word ‘justice’ was introduced into the language, and they all agree that it was introduced to pick out those norms of actions that are such that if the members of a polis followed those norms, the polis would perform its proper function. How does one determine the proper function of the polis? Attempt to discover the purpose for which it was created in the first place. Notice that an implication of Socrates’ view about the origins of a polis is that, as a matter of fact, there was never a point in time when humans did not exist in a polis, since all humans depend for their very existence on the cooperative exchange of goods that a polis allows. Nonetheless, Socrates’ just-so
story of the origins of a *polis* is heuristically useful since it helps Socrates’ interlocutors to focus on the question of the function of the *polis*, by asking why we would have reason to create a *polis* if it didn’t already exist. On the assumption that the purpose of the *polis* is to satisfy human needs or to make human beings as happy as possible into the indefinite future, and on additional empirical assumptions about the most efficient and effective means by which human beings can be brought to this goal, Socrates draws his conclusion about the nature of justice in the *polis*. On the basis of further assumptions about human psychology, Socrates concludes that the sources of human motivation can be divided into three basic types or classes, and so, the same property of justice that can be instantiated in the *polis* can also be instantiated in the soul. He confirms his hypothetical account of justice when he notes that it explains why the people that we regard as just behave as they do. Socrates’ hypothesis about the nature of justice is then accepted because of its coherence with his and his interlocutors’ other views, its simplicity, and its explanatory force. While Socrates concludes by the end of the *Republic* that one ought to be just and one ought to contribute to the justice of one’s *polis*, he reaches this conclusion not by directly viewing the “to-be-done-ness” of justice itself, but rather by considering at great length how, given certain complex facts about human motivation and interdependence, both sorts of justice contribute to one’s own good. However we might best describe Socrates’ process of reasoning to his conclusions about the nature and practical implications of justice, “moral intuition” is clearly inaccurate.

4.

But what about goodness? Unfortunately, in the *Republic*, Socrates doesn’t offer us any examples of his own inquiry into the nature of the good that we could compare to explicit, though cryptic, remarks about the philosophers’ grasp of the good in Books VI and VII. However, we have seen an example of his inquiry into the nature of justice, and it is just possible that, if he were inquiring into the nature of the good, he would proceed in the same way. He would begin by fixing the object of his inquiry by examining the primary function of the word ‘good’ (‘*agathos*’) in our language. At least one function that the word ‘good’ serves is to pick out a principal object of human desire. We all want what is good for us.
Nobody is satisfied to acquire things that are merely believed to be good, however, but everyone wants the things that really are good and disdains mere belief here. … Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake. It divines that the good is something but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is or acquire the sort of stable beliefs it has about other things, and so it misses the benefit, if any, that even those other things may give. (505d–e)

We speak not only of what is good for us, but in addition, we speak of what is good or bad for a variety of things. Consider, for example, Socrates’ reflections on the way that he talks and thinks about “the good” and “the bad”:

Do you talk about a certain good and bad? — I do. — And do you think about them the same way I do? — What way is that? — What destroys and harms is in all cases the bad (to men apollouon kai dauphtheiron pan to kakon einai), and what preserves and benefits is the good (to de soiizon kai opheloun to agathon)… — I do. — Do you say that there is a good and a bad for each thing? For example, ophthalmia for the eyes, sickness for the whole body, blight for grain, rot for wood, rust for bronze or iron. … — I do. — And when one of these inheres in something, doesn’t it make the thing in question defective, and in the end, doesn’t it wholly disintegrate and destroy it? — Of course. (R. 608d–609a)

And finally, we use the word ‘good’ in other contexts, namely to pick out objects that serve as paradigms of their kind (R. 472d–e, 592b): good horses, good people, good computers. If Socrates were to follow the method that he applied when he was trying to identify the nature of justice, after he had adequately explored the concept of goodness—a concept that apparently plays such important and diverse cognitive roles in our understanding of, and actions within, the world—he would then attempt to determine whether any single property could correspond to this concept. One possible hypothesis is that there is no such property: as Aristotle concluded, “the good is spoken of in many ways” (EE 1217b25–26). But, as I argue elsewhere (Gentzler 2004), a simpler and more powerful view is the hypothesis that Aristotle somewhat derivatively attributes to Plato, namely that the good is unity (to hen; EE 1218a20; see also Meta. 988a8–16, b10–15).20 If knowledge of the good were to be acquired in this way, then it would be acquired through a complicated process of deductive and inductive reasoning.

However, some scholars have argued on the basis of evidence in Books VI and VII that Socrates commits himself to the view that the Form of the good is directly intuited, and it is indisputable that Socrates’ poetic remarks about philosophers’ insight into the good
could suggest that at the final stage of their education they have a kind of mental vision (517b–c, 518b–d, 526d–e, 527d–e). Such visual language might be merely metaphorical, in no way implying that philosophers at the highest stage of their education actually come into direct cognitive contact with the good.21 Although Socrates clearly maintains that many important parallels hold between reason’s comprehension of the good and sight’s observation of the sun, he also warns us not to draw analogies where none is intended (507a). Yet some scholars have argued that a close examination of Socrates’ actual description of the method by which philosophers gain knowledge of the good—that is, dialectic—implies that such knowledge is gained directly through a sort of mental vision or intuition.

In the image of the line, Socrates contrasts the method by which mathematicians achieve insight into mathematical objects with the dialectical method by which future rulers are eventually able to achieve knowledge of the good:

In one subsection [of the line, associated with the practice of mathematics], the soul, using as images the things that were imitated before, is forced to investigate from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle (\(\sigma\alpha\kappa\kappa\varepsilon \epsilon\phi\alpha\nu\zeta \alpha\chi\varepsilon \eta\nu\zeta\)) but to a conclusion. In the other subsection [associated with the practice of dialectic], it makes its way to an unhypothetical first principle (\(\epsilon\phi\alpha\nu\zeta \alpha\chi\varepsilon \eta\nu\zeta \alpha\kappa\pi\theta\varepsilon\), proceeding from a hypothesis but without the images used in the previous subsection, using Forms themselves and taking its method through them. (510b–c)

Whereas mathematicians begin their inquiry by formulating hypotheses from which they draw conclusions, the dialectician proceeds from hypotheses used as “stepping stones” to “an unhypothetical first principle” (511b) concerning the Form of the good (508d–509b, 511b, 517b–c, 532b). Mathematicians treat their hypotheses as first principles (510c–d). The dialecticians, recognizing that they have not yet discovered the first principle, treat their hypotheses as hypotheses “in fact” (\(\tau\omicron\iota\iota\omicron \iota \omicron \omega\)) (511b).

Some scholars have suggested that the contrast that Socrates draws between the cognitive grasp of the mathematicians and the dialecticians can be maintained only if at the final stage—that is, at the stage of the apprehension of the first principle concerning the good—dialecticians discover an epistemic foundation for the rest of their beliefs. The reasoning of these scholars often proceeds as follows. First, they note, Socrates explains the limits of the method used by mathemati-
cians by claiming that the mere consistency of hypotheses and their implications is insufficient for knowledge (*epistêmê*):

> For if one does not know (*mê oida*) the first principle, and the conclusion and the intervening steps are woven together from what one does not know (*mê oida*), what device would bring it about that this sort of agreement (*homologia*) is knowledge (*epistêmê*)? (533c)

They then reflect on the ways in which dialecticians might transcend the epistemic limitations of the mathematicians, and conclude that such limitations can be overcome only through the power of intuition. Consider, for example, R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley:

> This feature of Plato’s thought [that is, his use of metaphors of sight and touch] can be exaggerated, but it seems true that in the *Republic* the hypothetical method has to be supplemented at its final stage by some sort of immediate awareness, an immediate grasping or seeing of the non-hypothetical first principle. (1964, 253).

Dialectic “has to be” supplemented in this way, because otherwise, according to Cross, Woozley, and many others, it would not lead to “the absolute certainty, the knowledge, that Plato requires in the *Republic*” (Cross and Woozley 1964, 252). On this view, when Socrates describes the first principle reached by the dialectician as “*anhupotheton*,” the ‘*an*’ in ‘*anhupotheton*’ indicates that the justification of the dialectician’s belief about it does not depend hypothetically upon its inferential relations to any other hypothesis. If indeed Socrates were committed to the view that the dialectician’s conception of the good is justified non-inferentially, then, as we saw above, he could not consistently maintain that such a conception was always a result of inferential reasoning from other beliefs; instead, it would have to be apprehended directly. Since it is clear that Plato does not believe that anyone can perceive the good through sight or any other form of sense-perception, any such direct apprehension would have to be through some non-sensible means, or what we have been calling “moral intuition.” If these scholars are correct, then, we would have a vindication of Mackie’s portrayal of Plato’s moral epistemology in the *Republic*.

Given the prevalence of a foundationalist interpretation of the *Republic*, it is surprising that the textual evidence that is cited in favor of it is so slight. It is possible that the reason that Socrates refers to the dialecticians’ apprehension of the Form of the good as a grasp of an “unhypothetical” *archê* is that he believes that they directly intuit the good. However, an alternative explanation is possible.
Throughout the dialogues, Socrates insists that beliefs that count as knowledge are true (Eu. 5b; G. 454d–e) and are consistent with the knower’s other beliefs. For when he discovers any inconsistency in his interlocutors’ beliefs, he calls into question their expertise.24 Truth and consistency of belief are not sufficient for knowledge, for one can achieve truth and consistency by having very few but accurate opinions. Yet Socrates assumes that a person who has any moral knowledge will have certain types of beliefs that stand in certain types of inferential relations to one another. In particular, he seems to assume that anyone who knows anything about a particular moral property, including whether it is instantiated in any given case, also knows, and can articulate an account of, the essential nature of that property (Eu. 5d; L. 190a–c, 191c–d, 192b; Pr. 312c; G. 474d, 503c–504a; HMa 304d–e; Lys. 223b; M. 71a–b). Such knowledge is important not because it provides an epistemic foundation for other beliefs. Indeed, Socrates assumes that the truth of accounts of moral properties is never self-evident. To know whether one should accept a given account, one must determine whether the account covers all and only the things that one believes instantiate that property (L. 192e–193c, 196d–197b), covers all and only those low-level types that one believes to be low-level types of the property (Eu. 5d–6d; L. 190e–192b; HMa. 288c–e, 291d–293c), does not cover any property that one believes is not identical to the property in question (L. 198a–e), and implies that the property has all and only the features that one believes that it has (Eu. 10b–d; L. 192c–d; HMa. 289e–291a). Socrates thus places strict constraints on the internal coherence of a knower’s beliefs. Beliefs about the essential nature of properties are especially important to knowledge, Socrates suggests, because such beliefs can provide explanations (Eu. 6d, 11a; HMa. 287c, 289d; G. 465a, 474d, 501a; M. 98a; Ph. 100a–b, 102b), and the possession of such explanations is important to knowledge because it increases the coherence of one’s belief-set.25

In the Phaedo, Socrates describes a hypothetical method for achieving such coherence, a method that proceeds in several stages. The first stage corresponds to the method of inquiry that Socrates attributes to the mathematicians in the Republic:

But, anyhow, this was how I proceeded: hypothesizing on each occasion the account (logos) I judge strongest (erômenēstaton), I set down as true whatever seems to me to harmonize (sōmphainein) with it, both about a cause and about everything else; and whatever does not, I posit as not true. (100a)
But such a practice, Socrates suggests in the *Phaedo* as well as the *Republic*, is not sufficient for acquiring knowledge, because, in order to count as knowledge, the hypotheses that one sets down must themselves be justified by appeal to other beliefs:

the initial hypotheses, even if they’re plausible to you, should still be examined more clearly; if you analyze them adequately (*hikanós*), you will, I believe, follow the account (*logô(i)*)) as far as a person can follow it up; and if you get that clear, you’ll seek nothing further. (107b)

How far must one follow the account? According to Socrates, one should stop only when one has reached “something adequate” (*ti hikanon*)—namely, a first principle, or *archê*:

when you had to give an account of the same hypothesis itself, you would give it in the same way, once again hypothesizing another hypothesis, whichever should seem best of those above, until you came to something adequate (*ti hikanon*); but you wouldn’t jumble things as the contradic-tion-mongers do, by discussing the first principle (*archês*) and its result (*hormêmenon*) at the same time, if, that is, you wanted to discover any of the things that are. (101d–e)

One might reasonably suspect that, on Socrates’ view, a hypothesis serves as an *archê*, and hence as something adequate, only if it serves as an epistemic foundation for the justification of one’s other hypotheses. However, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates suggests that his own failure to achieve “something adequate” was due to his failure to discover an ultimate explanation. His efforts constituted only a “second best” (*deuteros plous*) because he was unable to discover a single cause that would provide the basis for a complete and fundamental explanation of all generation and destruction (97c, 99c–d). A hypothesis that would count as something adequate (*ti hikanon*), then, would be a hypothesis that serves as an *archê* in the sense of providing the basis for a complete and fundamental *explanation* of that of which it is an *archê*.

It is in this sense that the dialectician’s grasp of the Form of the good in the *Republic* also serves as an *archê*. For, according to Socrates, the Form of the good is “the cause of all that is correct and fine in everything (*pasì pantôn hautê orthôn te kai kalôn aitia*)” (517c) and provides the essence (*ousia*) of everything that can be known (509b; see also 516b–c). However, in contrast to his terminology in the *Phaedo*, Socrates does not describe the dialectician’s *archê* as a hypothesis, but instead as *anhupotheton*. And, as we have seen, many scholars have assumed that its unhypothetical status in the *Republic* is due to the fact that the dialectician’s grasp of the nature of the good does not depend
hypothetically on his grasp of any other fact: its nature is intuited directly. Yet this inference is too quick. To describe a proposition as a mere hypothesis is simply to suggest that one lacks sufficient justification to commit oneself fully to its truth; instead one accepts it provisionally to see where it might lead (M. 86e–87c). To pursue the “unhypothetical” archê, then, would be to pursue a conception of the archê for which one has sufficient justification for full acceptance. Such justification might be achieved by discovering a self-evident or indubitable proposition about the nature of the archê. But equally, if Socrates held the conception of epistemic justification that he appears to hold in other dialogues, such justification would be achieved by discovering a fundamental explanatory principle that maximizes the coherence of one’s belief-set. On such a view, the dialectician’s insight into the good counts as a grasp of an unhypothetical archê, because simply in virtue of its status as an archê, it contributes maximally to the coherence of the dialectician’s belief-set and thereby to the sort of justification that one must have in order for any of one’s views to count as unhypothetical.

Thus far, I have argued that there is no compelling evidence that Socrates believes that the dialectician’s grasp of the Form of the good serves as an epistemic foundation. The standard argument that infers Plato’s intuitionism from his foundationalism thus fails: Plato’s commitment to foundationalism in the Republic is not at all obvious and there is much independent evidence from other dialogues that Plato favored a coherentist conception of epistemic justification. Of course, an argument may fail even if its conclusion is true. What rules out an intuitionist interpretation of Plato’s conception of moral belief acquisition, I think, is the difficulty of reconciling such a picture of the sources of the dialecticians’ insight into the nature of the good with Socrates’ description of the forty-nine prior years of education that he insists is necessary (533a) to prepare philosophers for acquiring knowledge of the good.

According to Socrates, to achieve knowledge of the good, the education of future rulers must begin early in their lives. From birth, they must be exposed only to instances and images of beauty, virtue, and goodness in their stories, music, clothing, architecture, and furniture (R. 386b–401a). Not only must those who can gain knowledge of the good “have their soul turned around” by the study of mathematics, so that they are willing to recognize the existence of non-sensible properties (511b); in addition, the dialecticians use the hypotheses of the
mathematicians as “stepping stones” for their own insight into the nature of the good (511b). In addition to learning mathematics, those who are to gain knowledge of the good must learn geometry (both plane and solid), ideal astronomy (or the study of bodies in motion), and ideal harmonics (or the study of the mathematical ratios that are responsible for consonance and dissonance). After having demonstrated an ability to achieve a “unified vision” of these abstract disciplines (537c), at the age of thirty, the future rulers will be exposed to dialectical argument for five years (537d). Such dialectical “testing” will not yet lead them as far as knowledge of the good. Before they can achieve this goal, they must have adequate “experience” (empeiria) and testing (539e) in the form of fifteen years of active political service that includes leading wars and occupying other “offices suitable for young people” (539d–e). Only when, at the age of fifty, they have “survived the tests and been successful both in practical matters (en ergois) and in the sciences (epistêmais)’’ will dialectic take them as far as knowledge of the good (540a). If knowledge of the good were simply a matter of mental vision or intuition, what’s taking so long? And why is all of this higher mathematics, dialectic, and public service really necessary?

Richard Robinson suggests that the mathematical “stepping stones” merely provide mental exercises to strengthen the mind to apprehend the good, and do not provide in any way the basis for any sort of inference concerning its existence and nature:

The prisoner released from the Cave goes through a series of objects graduated in brightness before he can look at the sun, which is the brightest of all. … The prisoner by this process gradually strengthens his eyes.

(1953, 173–74)

However, as Myles Burnyeat has pointed out, such a “mental disciplining” model of the value of mathematics fails to explain why Socrates required the particular quantity of mathematical training (a great deal) and the particular quality of mathematical training (only these disciplines, and not others with which Plato was familiar) for his future rulers. If the value of mathematics is just a matter of mental disciplining, it seems, just a few years of geometry would surely suffice. Further, the “mental disciplining” model does not explain why public service is required before knowledge of the good is possible. An alternative account of how Socrates thinks that we can gain knowledge of the good is thus required.

According to Burnyeat, we simply cannot understand why Socrates included the particular mathematical disciplines that he did, and no
others, in his future rulers’ curriculum, unless we take seriously the secondary evidence that at the time that Plato wrote the *Republic*, he identified the good with unity (*to hen*). All of these disciplines, in contrast to other mathematical disciplines with which Plato was familiar, focus on the nature of unity (2000, 1–81). If Burnyeat is correct, as I believe that he is, then the mathematical education of the future rulers provides them, not with mental exercises, but with information from which they will eventually be able to infer the nature of goodness. I would suggest further that the fifteen years of public service that future rulers must perform before they can know the good is not merely a publicly necessary, but intellectually barren, break from their studies, but instead is a necessary “testing” to reveal to them the importance of unity to the soul and the *polis*. And finally, I would suggest, the twenty years of “soul-saturation” with models of virtuous behavior with which their education begins is not only morally, but also cognitively, important for anyone who is to acquire knowledge of the good. For, as Socrates says, such an education makes it possible for the future rulers “to welcome” (402a) the correct account of the good when they discover it. When they have followed their early education with thirty years of higher mathematics, dialectic, and public service, they will see for the first time the point of the behavior that they were encouraged to emulate, since they will understand how such admirable actions tend to contribute to the unity both of the *polis* and of the souls of its inhabitants. All of the forty-nine years of education that Socrates describes at length are required for the philosophers to reach the stage at which fruitful dialectic is even possible, that is, the stage at which they possess a sufficient number of concepts and beliefs that are mostly, but not necessarily completely, adequate to their objects. They acquire knowledge of the good, then, not through some special faculty of moral intuition, but rather by discovering a hypothesis of its nature that is simple, explanatorily powerful, and coherent with their most considered views that are acquired over a lifetime of practical experience and mathematics.

5.

Moral objectivists have been tempted toward intuitionism because it has seemed difficult otherwise to explain how we could infer our views about the nature of goodness from information gained from sciences like mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics, or even from biology, sociology, or psychology. After all, as many still maintain, it
seems impossible to infer an “ought” from an “is.” Indeed, as we have seen, Mackie himself suggests that it is the very queerness of objective moral properties as magical motivators that makes it impossible for them to be apprehended by any faculty other than a mysterious faculty of intuition (1977, 38–42), and many contemporary intuitionists have been led toward their intuitionism from a commitment to objectivism about moral properties combined with their view that goodness is inherently reason giving in a way that non-normative properties are not (Dancy 1991, 415–17). If the realm of values is indeed *sui generis*, then no matter how many other sorts of facts one has apprehended, one will not be able to comprehend the nature of the good unless one apprehends it directly. However, if Plato is right to suggest that all human beings are naturally motivated to pursue the good (505e), as I think that he is, then he need not attribute to the good itself any magical powers in order to account for its normative force for human beings. And if Plato is right to suggest that the good is unity, as I think that he is (Gentzler 2004), then the good is not *sui generis*, and our knowledge of it, like our knowledge of other non-sensible properties, is acquired through the process of forming hypotheses and analyzing their implications.

*Amherst College*

References


HOW TO KNOW THE GOOD


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Notes

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1 In fact, Mackie is not idiosyncratic in attributing moral intuitionism to Plato. In contemporary literature, intuitionism is often referred to as “Platonic ethical intuitionism” (see, for example, Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton 1992, 187). Further, as we’ll see below, many careful Plato scholars have suggested that in the *Republic*, Plato is committed to the view that the Form of the good is apprehended or intuited directly.

2 I thus cannot agree with Annas that the ancients, and Plato in particular, “do not worry about moral knowledge within assumptions that make it problematic how there can be any such thing. For it is a kind of practical knowledge—like expertise, in fact, a kind of practical knowledge that we are already familiar with and good at identifying” (2001, 246–47). In the *Apology*, Socrates reports that, while he met a lot of craftsmen who had reputations for knowledge, and in fact possessed it (22d), those who had a reputation for being wise about “the most important things” (22e)—that is, how to live one’s life—turned out, upon examination not to have wisdom (21e–22e). One possible explanation of this disparity is, as Annas suggests, that moral knowledge is harder than other craft knowledge (2001, 249), but another explanation that
Plato worries will be attractive to someone who has been exposed to a small bit of philosophy is that moral knowledge is not possible because “the fine is no more fine than shameful, and the same with the just, the good, and the things [the philosophical novice] honored most” (R. 538d–e).

3 See, for example, Cross and Woozley 1964, 252–53; Hare 1965, 23–24, 35; Robinson 1953, 172–77, 253; Ross 1951, 67; Vlastos 1985, 13–15; and White 1976, 99–100.

4 See, for example, Brink 1989 and Sayre-McCord 1996.

5 I am assuming that, at least for the most part, we can get a sense of Plato’s views by paying special attention to the words of Socrates in the dialogues. (For a defense of this view, see Kraut 1992a.) However, in the end, I am not deeply wedded to this view. Those who are suspicious of our ability to attribute any positive philosophical doctrine to Plato on the basis of what the character Socrates says in the Republic can regard the doctrines that I attribute to him simply as doctrines to which the character Socrates appears committed.

6 For this terminology, see, for example, Sinott-Armstrong 1996, 25–26, and Brink 1989, 107–10. There is a third use of the phrase ‘moral intuitionism’ to refer to a kind of moral theory, according to which there is an irreducible plurality of moral principles that are in some sense intuitively known. For a discussion of this use of the phrase, see Audi 1996, 101–36, and Rawls 1971, 34–40. Since this seems not to be the sort of moral intuitionism that Mackie has in mind, I will ignore this sort of moral intuitionism in this essay.

7 See, for example, BonJour 1985, 117–25, and Lycan 1988, 165–70, who endorse this sort of view with regard to perceptual beliefs.


9 This is what Roger Crisp aptly calls the “radar view” of intuitionism: “As bats have radar, so we have our special moral faculty” (2002, 57). As Audi has argued with reference to the case of W. D. Ross, and as Crisp has argued with reference to the case of Henry Sidgwick, some of the most famous “moral intuitionists” were not committed to moral intuitionism so understood (Audi 1996, 102–8; Crisp 2002, 56–75).

10 See Putnam 1971.

11 Though I cannot argue for this claim here, on my view the Forms simply are moral and mathematical properties like equality, justice, and goodness (Ph. 75c–d). For a defense of this view, see Fine 1993 and Penner 1987. Some scholars have suggested that Forms are both properties and particulars (Gallop 1975, 95–97; Bostock 1986, 200–201; and Malcolm 1991). Others deny that Forms are properties (for example, Santas 2001, 182).

12 For helpful discussion of the role of myth in Plato, see Annas 1982, McCabe 1992, and Morgan 2000. Moreover, if taken literally, this account of how to attain knowledge of goodness is completely implausible. When Henny Penny asked Chicken Little how she knew that the sky was falling, Chicken Little replied in language very reminiscent of moral intuitionists, “I saw it with my eyes, … I heard it with my ears. And a piece of it fell on my poor little head” (Chicken Little, 1958). As any student of Chicken Little can tell you, direct contact with an object does not, by itself, give you insight into its nature.

13 Translations of the Phaedo are based on Gallop 1975.
14 As a matter of fact, I believe that moral intuitionism is in tension with the hypothetical method of inquiry that Socrates advocates and applies in the Phaedo, a method that I describe briefly below and in more detail in Gentzler 1991, 265–76. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for this claim.

15 Translations of the Republic are based on Grube and Reeve 1992.


17 Francisco Gonzalez has argued that Plato believes that our knowledge of justice is non-propositional, and hence must have been gained through acquaintance. Gonzalez attempts to establish this thesis by demonstrating that Plato does not really believe that justice is definable. Instead, on Gonzalez’s view, the accounts of justice in the individual and justice in the polis that we find in Book IV are the basis for an account of “how justice is qualified” rather than of an account of “what it really is” (1998, 277). Gonzalez’s first argument for his view rests on his observation that Socrates never defines the Form of justice itself, but only justice in the polis and justice in the individual (1998, 277–78). However, Socrates is quite explicit that the Form of justice is simply what the just polis and just individual have in common in virtue of which they both count as just: “then a just man won’t differ at all from a just polis in respect to the Form of justice (to tês dikaiosunês eidos); rather he’ll be like the polis’ (R. 435b; see also 368c–369a and 435a–434e, quoted above). From Socrates’ accounts of justice in the individual and justice in the polis, it is easy to derive his account of justice itself.

Gonzalez’s second argument appeals to a distinction that Socrates draws when he is defining courage in Book IV. His account, Socrates explains, is of civic (politikê) courage rather than of courage tout court (430c). Since Socrates’ treatment of justice is similar to his treatment of courage, Gonzalez reasons, we should conclude that Socrates does not regard his definitions of justice in the polis and justice in the individual as revealing a definition of justice itself. Indeed, Gonzalez adds in his third argument, Socrates himself refers to his accounts of the virtues in Book IV as “only a sketch or outline (hupergraphê, 504d6–7)” (1998, 279). Yet, it seems to me that to call a definition a mere sketch or an outline is to suggest not that the object of the definition is indefinable, but that the details of the sketchy account need to be filled in before it is fully adequate. The account of courage that Socrates offers in Book IV is inadequate because it covers only the sort of courage that is important to the polis, namely, to retain “correct and law-inculcated belief about what is to be feared” (430b); it does not cover beliefs about what is to be feared that are not within the scope of the law, nor does it adequately distinguish between beliefs that are the result of education and other correct beliefs that one might find in animals or slaves (430b), beings who, on Socrates and Glaucon’s view, clearly could not exhibit genuine courage (cf. La. 96c–197c and Pr. 350b–c). What is missing from the account of all of the virtues, Socrates suggests in Book VI (504a–505b), is an account of the nature of goodness in terms of which all of the virtues are implicitly defined. Whether goodness itself is definable is a question that I take up in the following section.

18 This conception of the nature of Socrates’ defense of justice, that is, of his
views about why we ought to be just and contribute to a just *polis*, is defended at length in Gentzler, in preparation. For opposing interpretations of the nature of Socrates’ defense of justice, see Kraut 1992b, 311–37 and White 2002, 189–214. Though White attributes to Plato an intuitionistic moral epistemology (1976, 99–100), his argument for attributing this moral epistemology to Plato does not depend in any way on his opposing interpretation of Socrates’ defense of justice.

19 See also *Eud.* 278c–279a and *Symp.* 204c–205a.

20 Of course, not everyone accepts Aristotle’s testimony on this matter. See, for example, Cherniss 1945. For extended and convincing arguments for attributing this conception of the good to Plato, see Gaiser 1980, 5–37, and Burnyeat 2000, 1–81.

21 See also Hare 1965, 23–24, 35; Robinson 1953, 172–77, 253; Ross 1951, 67; Vlastos 1985, 13–15; and White 1976, 99–100.

22 See above, page 473.

23 The connection between expertise and consistency is stated most explicitly at *HMi.* 376c.


25 For a defense of this understanding of the limits of Socrates’ application of the method of hypothesis, see Vlastos 1969, 291–325; Murphy 1935, 40–47; Robinson 1953, 143; Rose 1966, 464–73; and Tait 1986, 19–34.

26 Though he does not use the language of “explanatory coherence,” a similar account of what it means to be “unhypothetical” is suggested by Adam 1963, 67, 176.

27 At 533c7, Socrates speaks of the hypotheses that the dialectician uses as being “destroyed” when he proceeds to the *arché*, a remark that might appear to be in tension with his earlier remark that the hypotheses serve as “stepping stones” toward the dialecticians’ insight into the good (511b6). However, there is a simple explanation. Once the dialecticians’ stepping stones are explained by his conception of the Form of the good, they no longer count as mere hypotheses. They, too, are unhypothetical.

28 For a defense of this interpretation of these disciplines, see Burnyeat 2000, 47–53, 56–63.

29 It is because Socrates had not received such an education, I would suggest, that he regarded his own conception of the good as a mere belief rather than as knowledge (506b–c). And it was because he regarded his conception of the good as a mere belief, and not because he believed that it was fundamentally inarticulable, that he was not willing to share his account of it with his interlocutors.

30 While G.E. Moore’s “open question” argument for this conclusion has been generally regarded as resting on problematic semantics, the force of the general intuition seems nonetheless strong because of the action-guiding nature of values (Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton 1992, 15–16).