

Plato as Metaethics:

Being Ruled by the Rational Part of the Soul as a “Meta Virtue”

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Introduction - What is the Necessary for Any Ethics?

What does it mean to be a good person? How does one live a good life and act virtuously? What is justice? These are among the most important questions a person can ask themselves. Yet today, many would claim that these questions are unanswerable. Either the questions have no answer, since “goodness” does not exist (moral nihilism), or the answers are taken to be different for each person (relativism). Certainly, there are still a great many people who reject either of these positions. Unfortunately, their moral theories often disagree. The result is a state of confusion quite at odds with the general consensus surrounding ethics that existed in the West in prior epochs. Given this confusion, it seems useful to examine what would be true relative to our opening questions regardless of which moral theory we end up embracing. Here, two things appear to be prerequisites for living a moral life: knowledge and freedom.

Knowledge: In order to “be good” we must be able to discover what “the Good” is.¹ “Goodness”, like “truth,” “meaning,” and “consciousness,” has proven extremely difficult to pin down decisively—to give a “philosophically adequate” account of. Yet, like those other concepts, goodness—and its inverse—presents itself ostentatiously in human experience. It is a concept we cannot seem to live our lives without. Even if the Good turns out to be a mirage, individuals’ preferences dressed in other garb, it does not seem like we can dismiss the concept out of hand. That is, if the Good exists, it seems that we should have a moral obligation to discover it. Whereas, if “good” is just another name for “I prefer,” it still seems quite important that we be able to verify this for ourselves. Further, if we are able to identify the Good, we will almost certainly need to know “how to do” various things to act on that knowledge. For instance, regardless of how good we think it might be to “tutor low income students in mathematics,” we cannot do so without knowing mathematics ourselves.

Freedom: Even if we are able to discover “the Good,” or to become relatively confident in our approximations of it, we shall still have to be free to act in accordance with our knowledge. That we can believe certain acts are good, want to engage in them, and still fail to exercise the self-discipline required

¹ Or, at the very least, we must know what goodness is in order to know whether or not we ourselves *are* good.

to do so is a ubiquitous human experience.

Hence, regardless of which ethical theory we ultimately embrace, it is the case that in order to act morally we must: “know what is good,” “know how to do what is good,” and “be able to make ourselves act in accordance with what we know.” In this paper, I will argue that Plato’s notion of “being ruled over by the rational part of the soul” is essential to these prerequisites. Although Plato does not present “the rule of the rational part of the soul,” as a “virtue,” it could rightly be considered one as a “skill or disposition required to achieve *eudaimonia* (flourishing/happiness).”² Moreover, it is a sort of “meta-virtue,” something required for the exercise of all the other virtues.¹ It is an epistemic virtue, necessary for “discovering what the Good is.” Likewise, the “rule of reason” plays a role in our ability to learn “how to do things.” This makes it relevant to our attempts to act in accordance with our knowledge of the Good. Lastly, it is also necessary for self-determination and self-government. The “rule of reason” is what ensures that our knowledge of the Good dictates our actions. For, if we are solely driven by our passions and appetites, it is hard to see how our knowledge of the Good can ever result in us becoming good.

Introducing Plato’s Tripartite Anthropology

Plato lays out his tripartite anthropology in detail in Book IV of the *Republic*. Plato introduces the concept of “parts of the soul,” through an examination of the internal conflict that can exist within a person. He begins with the example of thirst: “whatever thirsts... drives [a person] like a beast to drink.” Yet we can clearly restrain our desire to drink if we choose to. “Therefore, if something draws [a person] back when it is thirsting, [this must] be something different in it from whatever thirsts.”³

The existence of internal discord leads Plato to posit three “parts of the soul” that can be in conflict with one another. One part of the soul is *appetitive*, relating to our bodily desires (e.g. hunger, thirst, the desire for warmth, etc.). The second part is *spirited*; this part produces our emotions (e.g., anger, pride, sorrow, etc.). These are the “lower” parts of the soul.ⁱⁱ Finally, there is the *rational* part of the soul. This is the part of a person which “calculates” and is responsible for learning.⁴ It is also the

² This definition of virtue is based on *Plato’s Ethics: An Overview* from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

³ *Republic* 439B - For ease of reference, all Plato quotes are from John M. Cooper’s *Plato: Complete Works* (1997)

⁴ That the rational part of the soul is “that through which we learn” is specified later, in Book IX of the *Republic* (580D)

source of our desire to know the truth, including the truth about “what is truly good.”⁵

The parts of the soul are often in conflict, resulting in a “civil war in the soul.”⁶ As we shall discuss in detail later, only the rational part can resolve this conflict and harmonize the parts of the soul. Further, only when reason is in control is a person free, no longer ruled over by desire, instinct and circumstance, but rather acting as a unified, self-determining whole.

Before we continue, it is important to note that it is not necessary that we fully adopt Plato’s anthropology in order to see how the “rule of the rational part of the soul” is a prerequisite for ethics. It is enough to agree that Plato’s distinction gets at something profound in human psychology. Clearly, there is a phenomenological difference between our craving food or drink (appetites), being depressed or angry (passions), and wanting to know the truth (reason). Further, there are clear differences in how these affect behavior. Consider how addiction, a disorder of the appetites, manifests quite differently from bipolar or major depression, disorders of the passions, which in turn manifest quite differently from schizophrenia or dementia, disorders whose most prominent symptoms lie in how they affect reason. Plato has hit on readily apparent differences in the human mind. Yet we need not ascribe these differences to discrete “parts” of ourselves in order to see how being “led by reason,” is a prerequisite for an ethical life. For our purposes, what is important in the theory is that it allows us to highlight key elements required to live a moral life, regardless of what the moral life turns out to be.

Knowledge as a Prerequisite for Ethics I: The Rule of Reason as an Epistemic Virtue

Knowledge plays an essential role in ethics. It seems obvious that human beings often fail to act morally. Yet just as importantly, we often disagree about moral issues, or are uncertain about what we *ought* to do. As Plato puts it: “[we have] a hunch that the good is something, but [are] puzzled and cannot adequately grasp just what it is or acquire... stable belief about it.”⁷ In light of this, it seems clear that we cannot simply assume that whatever we happen to do will be good. At the very least, we cannot know if

⁵ Plato expands on this in Book VI, having Socrates point out that: “no one is satisfied to acquire things that are [merely] believed to be good. On the contrary, everyone seeks the things that *are* good. In this area, everyone disdains mere reputation.” (Republic 505d, emphasis mine)

⁶ Republic (440e)

⁷ Republic (505e-506a)

we are acting morally unless we have some knowledge of what moral action consists in. Indeed, we cannot act with any semblance of rational intent unless we have some way of deciding which acts are choiceworthy.⁸ Thus, knowledge of the Good seems to be an essential element of living a moral life, regardless of what the Good ultimately reveals itself to be.

Yet consider the sorts of answers we would get if we were to ask a random sample of people “what makes someone a good person?” or “what makes an action just or good?” Likely, we would encounter a great deal of disagreement on these issues. Some would probably even argue that these terms cannot be meaningfully defined, or that our question cannot be given anything like an “objective answer.”

Now consider what would happen if instead we asked: “what makes someone a good doctor?” “a good teacher?” or “a good scientist?” Here, we are likely to find far more agreement. In part, this has to do with *normative measure*, the standard by which some *technê* (art or skill) is judged vis-à-vis an established practice.⁹ However, the existence of normative measure is not the only factor that makes these questions easier to answer. Being a good doctor, teacher, or scientist requires *epistemic virtues*, habits or tendencies that enable us to learn and discover the truth. The doctor must *learn* what is causing an ailment and *how* it can be treated. The teacher must *understand* what they are teaching and be able to *discover why* their students fail to grasp it. For the scientist, her entire career revolves around coming to *know* the causes of various phenomena—*how* and *why* they occur.

When it comes to epistemic virtues, it seems like it is easier for people to agree. What allows someone to uncover the truth? What will be true of all “good learners?” A few things seem obvious. They must have an honest desire to know the truth. Otherwise, they will be satisfied with falsehoods whenever embracing falsehood will allow them to achieve another good that they hold in higher esteem than the truth.ⁱⁱⁱ For Plato, the person ruled over by reason loves and has an overriding passion for truth.¹⁰ Learning

⁸ We might consider here St. Thomas Aquinas’ argument in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. If we have no end in mind, no good we seek, we have no reason to do one thing as opposed to any other (*Book III, Chapter 2*).

⁹ Plato discusses normative measure in a number of dialogues, most notably in the *Statesman*. This is another area where Plato’s thought applies to “any system of ethics.” However, a detailed discussion of normative measure is outside the scope of this paper (see endnote ii for more detail on this issue).

¹⁰ Indeed, Plato often uses erotic language to describe this relationship (see 484a–485d and 490b of the *Republic*) For Plato, this sort of erotic desire is particularly powerful, often able to override the rule of reason when it is oriented towards the wrong ends (e.g. the struggle the rational part of the soul has in restraining the lower parts as they near the object of erotic desire in 253d-

also requires that we be able to step back from our current beliefs, examine them with some level of objectivity, and be willing to consider that we might be wrong. Here, the *transcendence* of rationality is key. It is reason that allows us to transcend current belief and desire, reaching out for what is truly good. As we shall see, this transcendent aspect of reason will also have serious implications for how reason relates to freedom.

Learning and the discovery of truth is often a social endeavor. All scholars build on the work of past thinkers; arts are easier to learn when one has a teacher. We benefit from other's advice and teaching. Yet, as Plato points out in his sketch of "the tyrannical man" in Book IX of the *Republic*, a person ruled over by the "lower parts of the soul," is likely to disregard advice that they find disagreeable, since they are not motivated by a desire for truth.¹¹ Good learners can cooperate, something that generally requires not being ruled over by appetites and emotions. They take time to understand others' opinions and can consider them without undue bias.

By contrast, consider the doctor who ignores the good advice of a nurse because the nurse lacks his credentials. The doctor is allowing honor — the prerogative of the spirited part of the soul — to get in the way of discovering the truth. Likewise, consider the scientist who falsifies her data in order to support her thesis. She cares more about the honor of being *seen to be right* than actually *being right*, or perhaps she is more motivated by book sales, which allow her to satisfy her appetites, than she is in producing good scholarship. It is not enough that reason is merely engaged in learning. Engagement is certainly necessary, as the rational part of the soul is the part responsible for all learning and the employment of knowledge. Yet the rational part of the soul must also *rule over* the other parts, blocking out inclinations that would hinder the the search for truth.

Our examples have focused on examples of technê. However, the rule of reason as an epistemic virtue carries over just as clearly for *epistêmê*, theoretical knowledge.^{iv} This means that the rule of reason applies as much to "coming to know the Good" as it does for technê. Plato has many other interesting

254e of the *Phaedrus*.) The "rule of reason" orients this *eros* towards the True and the Good.
11 *Republic* (575e-576a). The "tyrannical man," encourages flattery, not sound advice.

things to say about how one comes to discover the Good, yet these lie outside the scope of our discussion. What is important here is that, regardless of how the Good is ultimately defined, it seems that any successful attempt to come to know it must involve the “rule of reason.” If we subscribe to a naturalistic moral theory grounded in biology (e.g., Samuel Harris), epistêmê is essential to defining the Good. Likewise, the “rule of reason” remains crucial under a deontological theory of morality. If we must search for rules that “all rational agents should agree to” (e.g. Kant), it seems clear that we ourselves must act like “agents led by reason” for such a search to be successful. The same holds true for utilitarian ethics (e.g., J.S. Mill). Here, one must both “learn how” to maximize pleasure and have the ability to discover that this is truly what the Good consists in.

Even for the nihilist, it seems clear that knowledge must play some role in determining “right action.” For, even if the Good reduces to mere personal preference, it is obvious that we can often make choices that are “*bad* for us”—choices that we deem to be “not good” upon reflection. To make choices that will “stand the test of time” requires the epistemic virtues and self-control associated with the “rule of the rational part of the soul” (a point we shall return to).

Knowledge as a Prerequisite for Ethics II: Reason, Technê, and “being able to do the right thing”

While we are often confused about what we ought to do in many situations, in others it seems quite obvious. For example, when we see a young child struck by a car, we are not paralyzed by uncertainty. We know we should help the child. Yet here too, even when we are motivated to do good by powerful emotions (i.e., the spirited part of the soul), reason plays a key role.¹²

How so? For us to be able to help the child effectively, we must have some *knowledge* of first aid. Reason is involved in our acquisition of this sort of “know how” (technê). More importantly, it is only reason that can be relied upon to *consistently* motivate us to acquire the skills that we need to do the good we identify. To be sure, a person might learn the skills they need to carry out moral acts based on the prerogatives of the lower parts of the soul. For example, we might learn first aid in order to get a job that

¹² It is worth noting that such strong emotions can also motivate us to engage in immoral behavior. Ultimately, reason must still be involved in judging our emotions.

pays well. Our goal here is merely to earn the money we need to fulfill our appetites. Likewise, someone might become a trauma surgeon out of their desire for honor. However, in such cases, the relationship between our acquisition of skills and our being prepared to “do what is good” is merely coincidental. A person may indeed learn the skills required to “do the right thing,” out of a sense of honor. Yet, if honor is their sole motivation, they will develop such skills *only* if doing so will bring them honor.

A similar point can be made regarding the virtues. It seems possible that we may sometimes attempt to habituate ourselves to the virtues based on the prerogatives of the lower parts of the soul. For example, we might want to become courageous in order to win honor. Yet here again, the relationship between our sense of what is “truly good” and our attempt to develop a habit of acting virtuously remains coincidental.¹³ Our appetites and passions may *sometimes* guide us towards the practice of some virtue. However, they will do so *only* when their desires are satisfied by the practice of that virtue. It is the rational part of the soul that seeks after what is “truly good,” not merely “what seems to be good” or “what others say is good.” Thus, it is this part of the soul alone that can be counted on to consistently motivate us to practice the virtues or acquire the skills we need to “do the right thing.”

The Rule of Reason and Freedom I: Why Only the Rational Part of the Soul Can Unify the Person

Even if we are confident in our knowledge of the Good, there is a sense in which we must still be “free to act on that knowledge” for our knowledge to result in right action. For Plato, inner freedom — self-determination and self-governance—is paramount. Freedom is a sort of harmony in which our actions are entirely ours and our whole person is turned towards the ends we pursue. When we are internally disordered our actions are driven by desire, instinct, and circumstance. To be sure, our desires, passions, and instincts are a part of us, but they are *just* a part. To have one’s actions determined by these alone is to be determined by a mere part of oneself.¹⁴

¹³ It is also reason that distinguishes between courage and recklessness. If we are solely motivated by the approval of others, we might very well try to habituate ourselves to vice if that is what wins us approval.

¹⁴ See *Republic* 443d. Robert M. Wallace’s *Philosophical Mysticism in Plato, Hegel, and the Present*, “Chapter II: “That Which Shows God in Me, Fortifies Me,” has an excellent discussion of this sort of “inner freedom.”

Perhaps the best description of the struggle for inner freedom comes from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. In Romans 7, Paul discusses how he does not do what he wants to do, but rather does "the very thing [he] hates."¹⁵ "No longer am I the one [acting], but sin that dwells in me."¹⁶ Paul describes himself in this state as "dead in sin." This is clearly not a biological death, but rather a death of personhood and autonomy, the result of a "civil war" within his person.¹⁷ In such a state, Paul cannot abide by the "law of God," with which he "joyfully agrees" in his "inner person."¹⁸ When the higher part of the soul becomes a slave to instinct, desire and circumstance, it is no longer "we," the whole person, who acts. Here, it is worth noting a *partial* parallel with Plato. For St. Paul, it is Christ, the *Logos* (divine/universal *reason*), who is ultimately able to "resurrect" a person from this sort of death.¹⁹

For Plato, it is only the rule of the rational part of the soul that can harmonize a person and allow them to act as a unified whole, putting an end to this internal conflict. Part of this has to do with that part of the soul's role in understanding.²⁰ When we do not understand *why* we are acting, we become merely an effect of causes that lie external to our mind. Thus we are not fully self-determining, and not fully "real" as ourselves. Even if we love the Good to some extent, we do not pursue it in this disordered state.

Further, consider what we have already said about the relationship between the "rule of reason" and our ability to gain knowledge. When we do not know what is truly good we can be led into evil by ignorance. In an important sense, ignorance makes us less free. When we act in ignorance, we are not wholly self-determining. There is a truth that lies outside of us that is determining how we act. Plotinus' use of the story of Oedipus to illustrate this point is instructive here.²¹ Sophocles' Oedipus is in many ways a model of freedom. He is powerful—a king—competent, and wise. Yet he ends up doing the very thing he has been trying to avoid his entire life, killing his father, due to a truth that lies outside his understanding.²² Here, we might also consider Homer's Achilles. Achilles is considered praiseworthy

¹⁵ *Romans* 7:15 NASB

¹⁶ *Romans* 7:17 NASB

¹⁷ See: *Romans* 7:23 and *Republic* 440e; both passages use the imagery of a "war within the person."

¹⁸ *Romans* 7:22

¹⁹ Crucially, the role of Christ in conceptions of "Christian freedom" cannot be reduced to "the rule of reason." The point here is merely to highlight an interesting but partial parallel.

²⁰ See *Republic* 441a-442d

²¹ Presented in *Enneads* 6.8.1.36-38

²² I owe this example to D.C. Schindler's *Retrieving Freedom: The Christian Appropriation of Classical Tradition* (pg. 104-106,

because he *chooses* a glorious death, rather than a long but inglorious life. Such a choice requires that Achilles *know* his options. Were Achilles to simply blunder into his death, he would be much less a hero, more the pathetic victim of a fate that lied outside his understanding.^v

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato uses the analogy of a chariot attached to two horses to explain how the soul is unified by reason. One horse is difficult to control (the appetitive part of the soul). The other horse (the spirited part) is more willing to work with the charioteer (the rational part). The chariot cannot move properly if the horses pull in different directions. The charioteer must be able to direct both horses. Thus, the rational part of the soul must train the appetitive part, disciplining it until it acts in accord with the needs of the whole.²³ Likewise, while the spirited part of the soul is more the “natural ally” of the rational part, it too must be brought in line.²⁴ That is, the rational part of a person must reach downwards and shape the lower parts. For Plato, we always desire things that are in some way good. We do not consciously wish evil on ourselves. The appetites and passions, however, seek only *relative goods*. If we are led by them, we can stumble into evil through seeking a fractured part of the Good, its appearances, rather than the whole/absolute.²⁵ Reason must *train* the lower parts so that they are properly oriented towards the whole. Thus, Plato can affirm the need for the rule of reason, while still speaking of the philosophers’ eros (appetitive desire) and love (passion) for goodness and truth. Reason is what allows us to have what Harry Frankfurt terms “second-order volitions,” i.e., “the desire to have (or not have) other desires.”²⁶ However, only when reason *rules* will these conscious attempts to shape the appetites and passions be successful.

We might also consider that only the rational part of a person is capable of ranking and ordering

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23 See *Phaedrus* 253d-254e for the image of the charioteer disciplining the “bad horse,” (the appetites). We could also consider here the philosopher’s desire to “free” himself from the demands of the body in the *Phaedo* (64d-65a).

24 *Republic* 441a points to the spirited part of the soul as the ally of the rational part. It is worth noting that here Plato speaks of “nurturing” the spirited part of the soul (441e-442a) rather than “disciplining” it. By contrast, when it comes to the appetites, the *Phaedrus* has reason pulling on the bit of the black horse (the appetites) until “blood comes from its mouth,” (*Phaedrus* 254e).

25 As D.C. Schindler points out in his *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic*, the absolute includes both reality *and* appearances. Thus, appearances are still part of the Good, but just a mere part.

26 Harry G. Frankfurt. *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*. The Journal of Philosophy. Vol. 68. (1971) pg. 5-20.

the passions and appetites, and only it is suited to determining the means through which they might be satisfied. A person's thirst tells her nothing about how to pursue her anger. Her sorrow cannot tell her whether or not she should give in to her desire for sleep. Only reason has the calculating power to judge between desires and to determine which is most worthy of satisfaction.

More importantly, it is the rational part of the soul's desire for what is "truly good" that allows this rank ordering to be oriented towards any higher good, or for there to be any "second-order" desires. The rational part of the soul is not a mere servant of the lower parts here, as Hume would have it. It does not simply seek to find the best way to satisfy the appetites and passions. It has its own desire as well, the desire for truth. This desire includes theoretical reason, which is oriented towards truth about "what is", but also practical reason (the truth about what is truly good). This in turn is what gives the rational part of the soul proper *authority* to rule. It alone can look past current beliefs and desires, to what is "truly good." Reason is transcendent in this way. It allows us to go beyond what we currently are. When we strive to discover something we do not already know, or when we try to figure out if what appears good to us is truly good, we are moving beyond our current limitations.

Contemporary accounts of freedom often focus on metaphysical issues regarding determinism and our ability to "act otherwise." A discussion of these considerations is outside the scope of this paper. Here it is enough to note that Plato's vision of reflexive, "inner" freedom seems consistent with many compatibilist and libertarian theories of free will. Moreover, even the fatalist must acknowledge that there is a phenomenological difference between voluntary and involuntary action, as well as a difference between acting with a unified sense of purpose and being conflicted about how one acts. Plato's "rule of the rational part of the soul," seems like something that must be achieved to ensure moral action with any regularity. This is true even if a person's actions, and their ability to establish the "rule of reason," are "fated to occur."

To be self-determining simply means that one's actions are determined by what lies internal to oneself. That is, how we act is (to varying degrees) determined by what we think and who we are. This

does not require any violation of determinism *per se*.²⁷ Of course, no person is ever entirely self-determining. We do not create ourselves *ex nihilo*, nor can we live without continual access to things that lie outside of us. But it seems that our acts, particularly those acts that have moral weight, can be more or less determined by our consideration of them, and our rational evaluation of the Good.^{vi}

The Rule of Reason and Freedom II: Wrong Action and “Acting Out of Ignorance”

So far, we have kept knowledge of the Good and the ability to act on that knowledge separate in our analysis. However, in many places, particularly the *Protagoras*, Plato seems to suggest that a person only ever acts wrongly out of ignorance. How do we square this with the idea that reason must lead the soul so that we are “free to do” what we know is good? How might we explain the many examples Plato gives where people seem to be doing what they know is wrong?

This apparent incongruity is explained by the very high standard Plato sets for “knowledge” of the Good (as opposed to mere “opinion”). For Plato, it is not possible to come to *know* the Good until the “whole soul” is turned towards it.²⁸ The person who is still beset by a “civil war” inside the soul cannot have grasped the Good, since knowing the Good presupposes the harmonizing rule of reason. If knowledge of the Good requires that we have *already* harmonized ourselves, then it cannot be the case that we truly know the Good if we are still acting incontinently.

I will not argue that this lens of looking at things always makes more sense than Aristotle’s four part typology of vice, incontinence, continence, and virtue.²⁹ In many ways, Aristotle’s analysis makes it easier to see how reason is able to discipline the lower parts of the soul through habituating a person to the virtues (a move that seems analogous to the chaireter of reason training the horses in the *Phaedrus*). However, Plato’s reasons for believing that people do not knowingly choose evil help explain why it is that the rational part of the soul must have authority. It is only when reason’s rule is secure, and cannot be “overruled,” that we will act correctly in all cases, and it is only in this state that it seems

²⁷ We might consider here that Leibniz develops the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the idea that everything happens for some reason, as part of an *explanation* of free will, not a denial of it.

²⁸ *Republic* (518c-518d)

²⁹ See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII

possible to dedicate our “whole person” to the knowledge of the Good.³⁰

The Rule of Reason and Freedom III: The Authority of the Reason and the Nihilist Challenge

So far, we have discussed how “the rule of the rational part of the soul,” will be essential for pursuing a moral life regardless of which theory of morality we ultimately end up embracing. However, moral nihilism, the denial that the Good exists, seems to offer up a unique challenge here. As we have seen earlier, the “rule of reason” is still relevant for the moral nihilist in at least some limited way. The epistemic virtues associated with the rule of rationality will be required to properly determine that nihilism *truly* is the case. “But,” the nihilist might reply, “if nihilism is true does this really matter? Sure, I might not be epistemically justified in claiming that notions of ‘goodness’ simply reduce to personal preference. However, if nihilism is true, I am under no obligation to prove to myself or to others that nihilism is true. Attempts to suppress my appetites and emotions are just wasted effort.”

How might we respond to this challenge? First, we might point out that no one *wants* to believe falsehoods. Nor do they want to do things that they would consider bad or evil if given proper information. That is, it seems implausible that the nihilist would *want* to be ignorant of the Good *if* it truly exists. To be sure, it is often the case that we are unhappy about what we discover to be true. In some cases, we might even prefer *not* to be informed about the details of certain events. However, it does not seem plausible that a person would prefer to be deluded when it comes to the fundamental nature of the world and their relation to it. For example, if Aristotle is correct, and there is a purpose to human life, a purpose that can effectively guide us in living a happy and fulfilling life, who would *not* want to know this truth? Thus, the rule of reason is still something the nihilist must pursue. First, because if there is a Good to know, they shall want to know it. Second, because even if there is no Good, they will want to be confident in their knowledge of this fact. And indeed, many moral nihilists and relativists put a great deal of effort into gathering evidence for their claims and trying to convince others of the truth those claims.³¹

Further, even if the nihilists’ position has some truth to it, it still seems that the rule of reason will

30 Additionally, as Robert M. Wallace points out in his *Philosophical Mysticism in Plato, Hegel, and the Present*, this view can also help us overcome alienation. Rather than seeing the person who does evil as someone who “gets one over on us,” we come to see them as someone who is to be pitied—a person who is ill and in need of healing.

31 A fact that leads to incoherence, as we shall see.

be essential to living a “good life.” For even if “this is good,” turns out to be a synonym for “I prefer,” it is clear that we do not always know “what is good for us.” Consider here the heroin addict whose life has been ruined by his addiction. At some point in his life, he “preferred” to use heroin. Yet, even if the Good is entirely subjective, there is an obvious sense in which embracing this preference was not “good for him.” Clitophon’s suggestion in Book I of the *Republic*, that the good for an individual is merely what they *currently believe* to be to their advantage leads to incoherence.³² Under such a view, we can never be wrong about what is good for us. Thus, the heroin addict’s use of heroin *was* good for him when he first used the drug, yet that same event became bad once he began to regret it. If this is the case, it seems impossible for there to be any value in introspection or doing philosophy. We can never err vis-à-vis our choices so long as we choose whatever we currently prefer. This seems to explain why Thracymachus, rejects Clitophon’s suggestion out of hand. Thracymachus is a sophist, someone who teaches reasoning and rhetoric. If people can *never* be wrong about practical reasoning, his trade is useless.³³

Those who claim that “this is good” is equivalent with “I prefer,” would like to have it that “the Good,” the object of “practical reason,” does not exist. Yet, by and large, they also want to maintain that truth, the object of “theoretical reason,” *does* exist. The problem here is that it is not possible to completely relativize practical reason and keep theoretical reasoning *relevant*. Plato points this out in section 160-162 of the *Theatetus*. There, he takes on the teachings of the sophist Protagoras. Protagoras claims that whatever each man believes is “true for that man.” Here, Protagoras is relativizing theoretical reason. However, it is not hard to see how Socrates’ arguments in the *Theatetus* against this position extend to the case where only practical reasoning is relativized. There is no point in making claims about practical reason if it is impossible for anyone to ever be wrong about such claims.

If the Good is totally relative, then there is no reason for anyone to prefer truth over falsity. That is, if the Good is just “what we prefer,” then we should only embrace truth when we currently prefer it. If

³² *Republic* (340b)

³³ I owe this insight re Thrasymachus to David Roochnik’s *Plato’s Republic* lecture series for The Teaching Company (“Lecture III: Socrates versus Thrasymachus”). Plato makes a similar point re Protagoras at 161e of the *Theatetus*.

we do not like the nihilists' conclusions, it is "good" for us to simply deny them, regardless of their truth. The total relativization of practical reason gives us no reason to pursue theoretical reasoning, or even to debate our opponents in good faith.

"But," the moral nihilist might complain, "there is *pragmatic* value in paying attention to truth. For example, it is true that smoking causes lung disease. If we do not want to suffer the subjective ills of lung disease, we should stop smoking."³⁴ Consider though that the appeal to "pragmatism" here amounts to defaulting on the claim that the Good is simply "what we prefer." If "what is good" is merely "what we prefer," and we do not prefer to stop smoking, then quitting smoking simply cannot be "good for us." To be coherent, the appeal to pragmatism must rely on the fact that there is some "truth of the matter" about what is good for us that lies outside the sphere of our preferences. At the very least, what is "good for us" must also be tied to the truth about what we will prefer in the future. However, it seems obvious that many facts relevant to what we "will prefer" lie outside our subjective preferences. For example, that lung disease causes pain and that smoking causes lung disease are facts that do not relate to any one person's preferences. They will be true regardless of what we prefer, and yet it seems essential that many practical judgements are grounded in these sorts of facts.

If what is good for us is related to some truth about what we will prefer in the future, then it seems important that we have the epistemic virtues need to uncover this truth. Additionally, we will need the self-control required to subordinate current desires to our judgement about what will really be best for us. Both of these abilities tie back to the virtue of "being ruled over by the rational part of the soul."

It is also worth noting the considerable focus many subjectivists still place on freedom. Yet, as we have seen, the "rule of reason" seems essential to self-determination.^{vii} Thus, due to its relation to gaining knowledge and freedom, the rule of the rational part of the soul remains essential across all of the dominant theories in ethics.

³⁴ "Pragmatism" is often invoked as a solution to more extreme forms of moral or epistemic relativism. However, if there is no standard for evaluating truth that lies outside of our preferences or current beliefs, then our "practical" judgements face the same problems as our theoretical ones. Reason has ceased to be transcendent in such a view; it can no longer reach beyond current belief because there is nothing to reach for outside of belief.

- i We could consider here Alasdair MacIntyre's attempt to define what will be true of the human good for *all* contexts: "the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is" (*After Virtue*, pg. 231) Here, the "rule of the rational part of the soul," seems like a prime candidate for such virtues.
- ii Plato expands on why these two parts of the soul should be seen as "lower" in the *Timaeus*. There, Plato calls the rational part of the soul the "most sovereign part of the soul... God's gift to us." This part of the soul is "higher" (and thus the other parts "lower") because it is the part of us that is divine, the part which can raise "us up away from the earth and toward what is akin to us in heaven." (*Timaeus* 90a). A similar distinction is employed in the *Laws*, where reason is described as a "golden" and "sacred" cord among the many cords that pull and animate the body. (*Laws* 644c-645d)
- iii **Note for expansion:** in a longer version of this paper that includes an exploration of normative measure it would be worth bringing in Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of goods which are internal to social practices and those which are external to them (pg. 198-201 of *After Virtue*). Rachel Barney's "Plato on Normative Measurement," in *Plato's Statesman: A Philosophical Discussion* also has valuable insights on this topic.

Normative measure is filtered through social practices. It is socially established, even if the measure in question relates to non-social phenomena. For example, what constitutes being "a good chess player," is established by a social practice. However, this does not preclude it being an "objective fact" that "Garry Kasparov is a better chess player than me." Many debates in modern ethics make the mistake of thinking that, if some standard is "socially constructed," it is thus arbitrary and impossible to measure objectively. Yet this leads to the absurdity that "there is no objective way to say that Kasparov is a better chess player than a kindergartener."

Further, our social practices do not spring from the aether uncaused. They relate to human nature and "how the world is," prior to the formation of the practice. The evolution of practices is dictated by things other than social practices themselves. So, while it seems impossible to reduce many ethical issues to what lies wholly outside *any* practice, this does not show that morality must be fully "subjective." Rather, it simply shows that the human good is bound up in practices and normative measure.

Practices relate to internal and external goods, and are situated within the pursuit of the higher human good. Without referencing the "human good," it is impossible to explain how or why practices evolve. Practices make determining "goodness" difficult. As Plato points out, normative measure is difficult to quantize such that "what is good" can be plotted on a number line. It is not always the case that we can define a normative measure in terms of "more of X" is better or "any variance from Y is worse." However, this simply means that careful reasoning is required to analyze these issues, not that all moral issues filtered through practices are ultimately arbitrary.

This means that we should be cautious about trying to "mathematize" the human good. Moreover, even if we attempt to do so for illustrative purposes, knowing that our model will be incomplete, it is clear that such a model will have to be an n-dimensional object, rather than a one dimensional line. Such a shape is unlikely to be equilateral, with a clear center point or "golden mean." Rather, "being in the right spot" on one dimension might entail that we are in a "bad spot" on some other dimension. However, this does not make the human good impossible to achieve. It seems that the "shape" of the human good would be subject to change as normative measure changes through historical processes, and that individuals and societies might be able to affect these changes. The "shape" of the human good would not be wholly determined by "social practices," either, since these themselves are determined in part by human nature and "the way the world is," without reference to human practices.

- iv **Notes for expansion:** There was not space here for a consideration of whether knowledge of the Good might be best considered more as a sort of *gnosis* or *sophia*. Chapter V of D.C. Schindler's *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* makes a convincing argument that the discursive reasoning associated with epistêmê must always relate to *relative* good. That is, the highest knowledge of the Good must necessarily be something like Aristotle's *adiareta* (discussed in *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 10), a holistic grasp of non-composite things. This type of

knowledge is not propositional; it has ignorance, rather than falsity as its opposite. Plato does not use the various Greek words for “knowledge” in a systematic way. However, it would be worth exploring how his conception of “knowing the Good” fits into Aristotle’s typology of knowledge. Pulling out this distinction could help explain why Plato seems to argue that people only ever do evil out of ignorance (a topic considered later in this paper).

- v **Notes for expansion:** The example of Achilles might be expanded upon with reference to Aristotle’s discussion of voluntary action in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- vi **Notes for expansion:** Of course, some forms of fatalism would deny that even this sort of self-determination is coherent. Such arguments tend to run through reductionism and smallism (i.e. the claim that all facts about large things are reducible to facts about smaller parts). The argument tends to run like this: minds are solely the result of brain activity. Brain activity is solely the result of the actions of atoms. Atoms lack intentionality, purposes, freedom, and phenomenological experiences. Therefore, all of these must be in some way illusory. A discussion of this argument fell outside the scope of this paper. Here it is enough to note that:

A. There is no *prima facie* reason to assume that smallism is true. “Bigism,” where parts are only describable in terms of the whole of which they are a part, seems just as supportable as a presupposition.

B. The empirical evidence for reductionism is not particularly strong. Chemistry is not an immature discipline. Yet, despite a century of efforts, the basics of molecular structure have yet to be reduced to physics. Further, contemporary physics often tends to hold that particles (parts) are less fundamental than the universal fields from which they emerge. That is, the part(icle)s can only be defined in terms of the whole, which is more ontologically basic. As the Italian physicist G.M. D’Ariano puts it, “particles” are like the shadows on the walls of Plato’s cave; fields and relational information hold a higher ontological ground. (Giacomo Mauro D’Ariano. *It From Bit or Bit From It?* “Chapter III: It From Qubit.” Springer Frontiers. (2015) pg. 28-29). It might not be possible to decisively disprove smallism, but neither does it seem warranted to assume that it is true until proven otherwise.

C. Reductionism entails epiphenomenalism, the idea that our experiences and sensation of choosing different actions never plays *any* role in how we act. This entails that we cannot eat sweets or have sex because these are pleasurable. Our actions must be wholly explained in terms of our smaller physical constituents. This presents many epistemic problems. If this is the case, then our experience of things can never be something that is selected for by natural selection, and so there is no reason for us to expect that our experiences will have any meaningful relationship to “how the world is.” If how the world appears to us can never play a causal role in how we act, it is irrelevant for natural selection. Further, whether something seems rational or true to us can never affect how we act either, and a correct sense of reason cannot be something selected for by natural selection. Yet this seems to undermine the credence we should have in the very arguments that lead us towards epiphenomenalism in the first place.

- vii **Notes for expansion:** Indeed, often attacks on systems of “objective morality” focus on the fact that they in some way make us “less free” by constraining our actions to only what is said to be good. Nietzsche in particular seems concerned that old ideas and dogmas will limit the freedom of a higher sort of man (e.g., Book V of *The Gay Science*). Yet recall the example of Achilles brought up earlier. Achilles can only be heroic because he knows what his choices entail. Simply blundering through one’s life in ignorance does not appear to entail any meaningful sort of freedom. So here, the rule of reason still seems essential. (Here, it might also be helpful look at Plato’s argument for why some pleasures are better than others in the *Philebus* (14b -17a and 31b-35d))

Modern thought tends to focus on freedom largely in terms of potentiality: freedom as the ability to “do anything.” The classical tradition, which has Plato as its cornerstone, tends to look at freedom more in terms of actuality. Yes, potentiality is there, but the perfection of freedom involves doing what is “truly best.” If a person does “what is worse,” it is clear that they are in some way constrained, either in terms of their powers to choose, or in terms of being constrained by ignorance of what is truly best. Yet if coming to know what is truly best is essential to freedom, then it seems that the rule of reason will in some way be essential as well. (Here, D.C. Schindler’s *Freedom from Reality*)

The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty and Retrieving Freedom: The Christian Appropriation of Classical Tradition will be excellent resources).

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