EPISTEMIC AND DIVINE INEFFABILITY IN PLATO[1]

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Abstract: Ineffability in Plato is a conundrum. There are at least four dimensions of ineffability in Platonic texts: epistemic (divine), strategic (religious), unspeakability and incommunicability. In this paper, I deal only with the first dimension, which is strictly epistemic in kind, and defend that Plato rejects divine ineffability, namely, the belief that the knowledge of the divine in general is inaccessible to the human mind. Several crucial passages attest to this rejection unequivocally. They show that Plato attached a great philosophical relevance to what I call the equivalence-principle, namely, the interdependence or specularity between human and divine intelligence. The assertion of this principle represents the Platonic path to absolute knowledge, which I try to locate in the broader context of the history of philosophy, from early philosophers to Hegel.

Keywords: Plato, Neoplatonism, ineffability, metaphysics, theology, religion

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Epistemic and divine ineffability

Human ineffability is the belief that there are structural limitations on what the human mind can think, imagine, understand.[2] The necessary premise of human ineffability is

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[2] According to André Kukla (2005) human ineffability, or human irrepresentability, means "that there are facts which cannot be expressed in any humanly accessible language" (p. 2), or "that human minds have limitations on what they can think; and what we can't think, we can't say" (p. 52). The debate on human mind's structural limitations is crucial in contemporary philosophy of mind, at least since Thomas

epistemic boundedness, or cognitive closure: the human mind is radically unable to think of certain things. Let's say, for example, that our mind is limited in thinking of the mind-body problem, the source of consciousness, quantum physics' world, unconscious musical syntaxes, Kantian noumena, among many other examples. To avoid confusion, I will refer to this general human ineffability as *epistemic* ineffability. Now, epistemic ineffability does not exclude necessarily representability and knowability. I may learn much about quantum theory without ever experiencing and not even observing quanta (I can do the same with linguistic syntax and bats' inner life probably). This is possible because this type of knowledge allows a separation between subject and object.[3] The knower does not need to have any acquaintance or special relationship with his object in order to understand it.

Epistemic ineffability in respect to God and divine wisdom is a special case: let's call it *divine* ineffability. The supporters of this idea make more or less explicitly three fundamental claims. (1) They say that God and his wisdom are totally beyond human knowledge. (2) Being usually religious people, or even mystics, they claim that some people get acquainted with God and God's wisdom by virtue of some special illumination. (3) They say, or imply, that knowledge and experience of God are always inseparable.

As one can see, divine ineffability shares only one feature, the first, with epistemic ineffability. The first claim means that men are totally prevented from comprehending what god and divine wisdom are.[4] The second feature is *sui generis*, based perhaps on the commonsensical elitist belief that special people are less numerous than normal one. The third feature explicitly contrasts with epistemic ineffability: in divine ineffability experience is not separable from knowledge, so we may speak of knowledge "by participation", or "by

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Nagel's "What is it like to be a bat?" (Nagel 1974). Jerry Fodor spoke of "epistemic boundedness" (*The Modularity of Mind*, MIT Press, 1983), Colin McGinn of "cognitive closure" (McGinn 1989). A seminal contribution, though limited to musical ineffability, has been provided by Diana Raffmann (1993).

[3] See Jones 2016 (chapter 2). For the same distinction, see also Appleby 1980.

[4] As William Alston says, after W. T. Stace, "To say that God is ineffable is to say that no concepts apply to Him, and that he is without qualities [...] Thus to the intellect He is blank, void, nothing", quoted by Guy Bennett-Hunter (2015). Appleby (1980) calls it "the ineffability thesis", or "ineffability in principle", and declares it false.

identity", because in this case subject and object cannot be separated. We cannot know God or whatever supernatural agent without having some acquaintance with what this means, without believing that they exist, are supremely important, our soul must try to reach them, etc.[5]

Plato, the philosopher, rejects only the first feature (#1) of divine ineffability, thus rejecting epistemic boundedness.[6] According to him, both the divine and its wisdom are and must be fully thinkable (= knowable and experienceable, feature 3) because they are quintessentially rational.[7] If the human mind – in Plato's terms, human soul (ψυχή) – is perfectly equipped to know them, it is because it has a rational part that allows him to participate in the divine rationality. This, however, happens only to a few people (feature 2) who had undergone a long, difficult spiritual training (μετέχειν φατέον νοῦ [...] θεούς, ἀνθρώπων δὲ γένος βραχύ τι, Tim. 51e: we must say that the gods participate in intelligence, whereas humankind only in a small portion).[8] So, Plato shares all the features with divine ineffability except #1.

By negating #1, he establishes a specularity between god and the human soul, he establishes at least the possibility of a substantial mirroring, which allows them be in reciprocal communication and acquaintance. I call this specularity, and the belief that human beings do have access to it through philosophy, absolute knowledge (also supreme wisdom or perfect science). Specularity, however, does not imply that perfect knowledge must be perfectly propositional, say, reducible "without residue" (M. Dummett) to a verbal description. As a matter of fact, the dimension of truth in

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[5] See Jones 2016. As far as god is concerned, the unthinkability of god entails the impossibility of making experience of it. The best argument in this sense has been provided by David Cooper (1985): "it is experiential encounters with him, and not something else, which are ineffable".

[6] When I say "Plato", I mean in general "the texts of Plato" and sometimes Plato as a writer. No guessing on Plato's own states of mind (psychology) is entailed in these pages. A reconstruction of the role of Plato in the history of the idea of ineffability is still missing. Plato is scarcely mentioned in the book that Ben-Ami Scharfstein dedicated to ineffability (Scharfstein 1993), a work of remarkable transcultural and multidisciplinary erudition.

[7] As I will argue, he seems rather to accept this idea with relation to the lowest gradations of being (matter and receptacle), due to the fact that lower levels of being correspond to lower levels of rationality and rationality entails thinkability. In this case, however, it would be better to talk of epistemic ineffability.

[8] In lack of some explicit indication, translations are to be intended as mine.

Plato lies beyond verbal and communicational aspects. It rather denotes some sort of immediate noumenal apprehension or noetic intuition.[9]

Platonic rejection of divine ineffability: the equivalence-principle

I will begin by quoting some relevant passages that support my claim that Plato rejects divine ineffability #1 (hereafter simply divine ineffability). One of the most interesting is in the *Parmenides*. A section of the first part of this dialogue (130a-136e) is dedicated to the Forms and the way sensible realities participates in them. Participation turns out to be a big problem.[10] In particular, it entails the knowledge of the "science itself" (134c), that is, the supreme γένος of science that makes all the other sciences and intelligible realities thinkable to human mind.[11] Without this first science, it would be impossible for men and sensible things in general to participate in the intelligible world. So, participation is at the same time an epistemic and a religious problem: in Plato the two dimensions are always enmeshed.[12] Parmenides himself makes this connection explicit:

> 134. (d) Ἆρ᾿ οὖν οἷός τε αὖ ἔσται ὁ θεὸς τὰ παρ᾿ ἡμῖν γιγνώσκειν αὐτὴν ἐπιστήμην ἔχων; [...] Οὐκοῦν εἰ παρὰ τῷ θεῷ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀκριβεστάτη δεσποτεία καὶ αὕτη ἡ ἀκριβεστάτη ἐπιστήμη, οὔτ᾿ ἂν ἡ δεσποτεία ἡ ἐκείνων ἡμῶν ποτὲ ἂν δεσπόσειεν, οὔτ᾿ ἂν (e) ἐπιστήμη ἡμᾶς γνοίη οὐδέ τι ἄλλο τῶν παρ᾿ ἡμῖν, **ἀλλὰ ὁμοίως ἡμεῖς τε** ἐκείνων οὐκ ἄρχομεν τῇ παρ᾿ ἡμῖν ἀρχῇ οὐδὲ γιγνώσκομεν τοῦ θείου οὐδὲν τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ ἐπιστήμῃ, **ἐκεῖνοί τε αὖ κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον** οὔτε δεσπόται ἡμῶν εἰσιν οὔτε γιγνώσκουσι τὰ ἀνθρώπεια πράγματα θεοὶ ὄντες.

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[9] On the important debate on non-propositional knowledge in Plato, see Gonzalez 1998.

[10] A classical study on the question is Fronterotta 2001. However, I agree with Francisco Javier Gonzalez that a theory of Forms is not available in Plato and I find compelling most of the reasons he provides to explain why such a theory is missing (Gonzalez 2003).

[11] See Migliori 1990.

[12] Many contemporary Plato's scholars think they can be separated: I disagree with them on this point. An example of epistemological interpretation is given by Fronterotta (2001).

(So, will the god, who has the science itself, be able to know things as they are among us? [...] Well then, if this most scrupulous mastery and this most scrupulous science pertains to the god, neither that mastery could rule upon us nor that science could know anything about us and about how things are about us, but just like we do not rule upon them in the way we rule ourselves and we do not know anything of the divine in our own science, so, for the same reason, they are not our masters and know nothing about human business though being gods.)

What is important to observe here is that human ignorance (separateness) from divine reality entails divine ignorance (separateness) from human reality. Ultimately, it entails a formidable risk of atheism.[13] In other words, what is said about the gods reflects immediately upon men and vice versa. One mirrors immediately the other. Between god and man, Heaven and Earth, a circularity (or specularity) appears, which implies – only *negatively* so far – a basic identity of the two terms: what is true for one becomes true for the other by the same logical necessity (κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον). This passage shows that relationship between god and man is thought of as circular and specular. Philosophical knowledge is "self-(re)cognition" and is based on the rejection of epistemic boundedness. Of course, the passage does not deny that a difference subsists between the two perspectives (divine and human), but implies that they must coincide or, so to speak, intersect *at least in one point*, otherwise atheism and irrationality would necessarily follow.

Philosophy thus emerges as the science that makes man and divinity, Earth and Heaven, fully aware of their basic identity through the "power of dialectics" (135c). Philosophy is absolute knowledge. This specularity between man and god entailed by supreme science is what I call *equivalence-principle*. It is not difficult to see how this principle is built upon a normative negation of the belief in epistemic ineffability and boundedness. Whatever the source of this principle may be, according to Plato philosophy is normatively

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[13] Elsewhere, Plato writes that religious incredulity (*apistía*) cannot prevail upon philosophical *lógos* (*Phaedo* 89b-c).

constituted upon the conscious, explicit rejection of that belief and the assertion of the equivalence-principle.

Analogously, the first deduction of the *Parmenides* (137d-142a), the first of a series of deductions that constitute the second part (and the bulk) of the work, shows that the most rigorous concept of a purely ineffable One would lead to absurd – and now we know, also *irreligious* (impious) – consequences. It appeared, by virtue of the first deduction, that the existence of the One may entail an absurd sequence of negative logical consequences that make unthinkable any positive predication of the One itself. This is the conclusion of the long argument:

> 142. (a) [...] — Οὐδ' ἄρα ὄνομα ἔστιν αὐτῷ οὐδὲ λόγος οὐδέ τις ἐπιστήμη οὐδὲ αἴσθησις οὐδὲ δόξα. — Οὐ φαίνεται. [...] — Ἦ δυνατὸν οὖν περὶ τὸ ἓν ταῦτα οὕτως ἔχειν; — Οὔκουν ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ.

> (So, there is not a name for it [the One], no discourse, no science, no perception, no opinion. — Apparently, there are not. [...] — Is it possible that things about the One stay in these terms? — By no way, it seems.)

In these passages, the hypothesis of divine ineffability is only negatively and indirectly rejected. The text does not assert that the One must be (fully) thinkable. It makes us aware of how absurd would be putting the One beyond any conceptualization. Similarly, in the *Sophist*, the Stranger says to Theaetetus:

> 238. (c) [...]Συννοεῖς οὖν ὡς οὔτε φθέγξασθαι δυνατὸν ὀρθῶς οὔτ' εἰπεῖν οὔτε διανοηθῆναι τὸ μὴ ὂν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτό, ἀλλ' ἔστιν ἀδιανόητόν τε καὶ ἄρρητον καὶ ἄφθεγκτον καὶ ἄλογον;

> (Thus, do you realize how the 'what-is-not itself' cannot be either properly pronounced or conceived by speculation, but remains unintelligible and unspeakable and unpronounceable and without discourse?)

In the *Republic* (book VI), on the contrary, Socrates states positively and repeatedly that the "Form of the Good", conceived as the supreme object to be targeted by philosophical speculation, has and must have a full-fledged

thinkability. The long passage can be summarized in the following terms. First, a long section (504c-506d) emphatically reiterates both the necessity and the actual possibility for a guardian to attain *the most complete and meticulous understanding of* the supreme knowledge, "the Form of the Good", lacking of which every possible special knowledge would fatally remain purposeless.[14] This part increases dramatically the level of expectations. Then, a second section is introduced (506d-509c) where Socrates deploys his usual understatement and speculative expectations lower abruptly: he declares himself *unable to speak* of the question *unless by means of* analogical reasoning (the simile of the Sun).[15] The relevant passage comes almost at the end of this second section:

> 508. (d) [...] Οὕτω τοίνυν καὶ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ὧδε νόει· ὅταν μὲν οὗ καταλάμπει ἀλήθειά τε καὶ τὸ ὄν, εἰς τοῦτο ἀπερείσηται, **ἐνόησέν τε καὶ ἔγνω αὐτὸ καὶ νοῦν ἔχειν φαίνεται**· [...] (e) Τοῦτο τοίνυν τὸ τὴν ἀλήθειαν παρέχον τοῖς γιγνωσκομένοις καὶ τῷ γιγνώσκοντι τὴν δύναμιν ἀποδιδὸν **τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν** φάθι εἶναι· αἰτίαν δ᾽ ἐπιστήμης οὖσαν καὶ ἀληθείας, **ὡς γιγνωσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ** [...] 509. (a) [...] οὕτω καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἀγαθοειδῆ μὲν νομίζειν ταῦτ᾽ ἀμφότερα ὀρθόν [scil. knowledge and truth], ἀγαθὸν δὲ ἡγεῖσθαι ὁπότερον αὐτῶν οὐκ ὀρθόν, ἀλλ᾽ ἔτι μειζόνως τιμητέον τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἕξιν. [...] (b) Καὶ τοῖς γιγνωσκομένοις τοίνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γιγνώσκεσθαι φάναι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναί τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ᾽ ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβείᾳ καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος.

Thus, reflect in the same way also about the state of the soul. When it turns to that thing from which truth and

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[14] "Questa è, in altri termini, il fondamento di ogni valore, la norma e il criterio assoluti che consentono di valutare come buone cose, condotte e idee" (Vegetti 2007: 64). According to Deirdre Carabine, the Good would be not properly known, but "glimpsed" and then unforgettably "imprinted upon the mind" (1995: 30-31).

[15] This notoriously paves the way to the exoteric interpretation, which reads this passage as an allusion to the unwritten doctrines and Plato's oral teaching. These aspects pertain to ineffability conceived of as unspeakability and incommunicability. They will be treated in another paper.

being are enlightened, it starts thinking of it and knowing it and seems having a concept of it. [...] So, recognize that the Form of the Good is what gives power to the things known and to the subject of knowledge. And think of it as the cause of truth and science, being itself an object of knowledge. [...] Therefore, it is right here to believe that both of these things [knowledge and truth] are Good-like, though is not fair to think that either of them is the Good, whereas the condition of the Good is to be held in still greater consideration. [...] So, you will say that not only their being-known comes to those who are known because of the Good, but also being and substance comes to them from the same source, even though the Good is not substance, but excels the substance in dignity and power.

Platonic mystique concerning the Good, in this passage, shows a full, transparent, positive "noetic quality".[16] Divine ineffability is excluded, although unspeakability and some degree of weak ineffability are emphasized in 506d-509c. The Good is thinkable, thus attainable to human mind, though not straightforwardly: metaphors and analogies are required to perform the task.[17] Depending on pragmatic contexts, figurative language might result certainly better than descriptive and analytic one in order to talk about divine questions. This, however, is a strategic consideration. What really matters here is that the Form of the Good has been declared as the object of a (full) knowledge by the human mind (ὡς γιγνωσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ).

The Plotinian reading will identify the Good in Rep. VI with the One of the Platonic *Parmenides*. It will transfer to the One the notion of an absolute *prius* that lies beyond intelligence and being itself.[18] That the Good is the One might

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[16] "Noetic quality" is the second feature of mystical experience according to William James. Concerning this feature, he wrote: "Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time" (James 2004, lectures XVI-XVII, Mysticism).

[17] On the limited heuristic value of metaphors in Plato, see Pender 2003, chapter 4.

[18] See Isnardi Parente 1984.

be after all not too far from what Plato had in mind by saying that the Good is the cause of both intelligence-truth and being-substance (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, etc.),[19] but the Plotinian inferences that the One-Good is beyond conceptualization, unintelligible,[20] and accessible only through negative way[21] not only lack textual support, but are explicitly and repeatedly contradicted by the texts (see at least, Rep. VI 504c-506d, 508d-e, VII 517b-c). Nonetheless, Plotinus will develop his apophatic way on the basis of this passage and, possibly, of the above-mentioned first deduction in the *Parmenides*.[22] Other important sources for him are Letters II (312e) and VII (excursus). He also thought he was rediscovering and interpreting the way that most of the pre-Platonic philosophers had followed and prepared (e.g. V, 1, 8-9).

I would like to stress again that the central question in Rep. VI is not a generic 'thinkability' of the Good, but its full, *complete* knowability. As I said, this does not necessarily mean (but does not exclude) that this knowledge must be propositional, say, reducible to a verbal description. What Plato states clearly in the first part of the long argument (504c-506d) is only the normative, nomological need that the supreme object of knowledge is knowable to mortals not

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[19] There are important testimonies in Aristotle (e.g. Met. A 9, 990b 17-22; Met. N 4, 1091b 13-14) that confirms Platonic association between the Good and the One. The causal and generative power of the Good, however, could be also interpreted as the logical *condition* – a logical *prius* – that founds the normative power of the Forms. The exceeding power of the Good, in this case, would be 'simply' reduced to its epistemological dimension, a reduction that in my opinion is always an insufficient hermeneutic criterium in the case of Plato. According to Werner Beierwaltes (1991, chapter 1), however, Neoplatonic tradition is characterized by an "intensification of the concept of unity" that is already in Plato.

[20] οὗ μὴ λόγος μεδὴ ἐπιστήμη, En. V 4, 1, 9-10.

[21] ὅταν αὐτὸν εἴπῃς ἢ ἐννοηθῇς, τὰ ἄλλα πάντα ἄφες, VI 8, 21, 26-27 (But whenever you speak or think of it, cast all else aside, leaving it alone); εἰ δὲ ἀφελὼν τὸ εἶναι λαμβάνοις, θαῦμα ἕξεις [...] φθεγξάμενος [...] τὸ ἀγαθὸν μηδὲν ἔτι προσνοεῖ [...] ἐνδεὲς ποιήσεις, III 8, 10, 31-32 and III 8, 11, 12-13 (And if you grasp it after removing Existence from it, you will be amazed [...] when you have uttered 'the Good', don't make any mental additions [...] you will make that to which you have added something deficient, transl. by Lloyd P. Gerson, George Boys Stones, et al., 2018).

[22] See En. V, 1, 8, 23-27. According to the hypothesis of Eric Dodds, which is based on a testimony of Simplicius, Plotinus found in the first three deductions of the *Parmenides* a prefiguration respectively of the One, the Intelligence and the Soul. Pythagorean Moderatus of Gades (II cent.) could have been the first (and the last, before Plotinus) to interpret the dialogue in this sense. Lloyd Gerson, however, says that the second part of the *Parmenides* could not provide the *locus classicus* for the doctrine. See Gerson 2017, chapter 16.

approximately, but *in the most exacting and perfect sense* of the term. There are several reasons why Plato should be defending such a radical position. I will mention at least three: the first is related to narrative consistency, the second to the internal logic of the argument, the third to the history of philosophy.

Firstly, the acme of the *Republic* is reached exactly in this part of the sixth book, where Socrates has made the whole viability of his paradigmatic State dependent on the knowability of the Good. If philosophers are entitled either to rule or to assist the rulers, which is the central claim of the *opus magnum*, it is exactly because for them the Good is not simply a general idea or a generic mental state (a "half-understood" notion, we could say), but a fully understood concept upon which the whole conceptual system drafted in the previous five books finds a *raison d'être*. On the contrary, the guardians-saviors would certainly not be entitled to claim the authority for their leading position and the whole project turned out to be inconsistent and meaningless. The effability (thinkability) of the Form of the Good is *at least* a straight narrative consequence of the whole previous set of arguments.

There is however a stronger conceptual reason for this rejection of ineffability. The text makes the right epistemic relation between the soul and the intelligible reality logically dependent on the perfect knowledge of the Form of the Good (through the mediation of its 'Light'). The full attainability of the intelligible things (Forms) depends on our ability to attain with our reason the same first cause of that light, namely the Good. If the Form of the Good were ineffable, our intelligence would result crippled and the same Forms would result less thinkable or unthinkable *tout court*. An ineffable "Sun", so to speak, would profuse an insufficient "Light" both on our faculty of vision and on the world of the intelligible objects. The Good must be fully thinkable to our intelligence if we aim to be the subjects of a true knowledge. Such a high standard of human knowledge is forced to recognize a substantial equivalence with god's knowledge.

It is true, however, that Plato does not provide a clear indication of how this supreme knowledge may be attained. The short passage on dialectical method (511b-c) provides an

insufficient explanation, as the same Glaucon points out. The famous passage in the Seventh Letter (342a-344d) does not provide a clear solution for this conundrum, though it may well explain why a consistent theory of Forms is not available in Plato.[23] Intuition, a sudden illumination, is the only possible answer we seem to be left with. So, the knowledge of the Good in Plato has been described as an "act of rational intuition", but this really does not explain too much either.[24]

Thirdly, rejection of epistemic ineffability under the persuasion that reality is fully attainable by human intelligence is deep-rooted in Greek-Western philosophical tradition. Let's have a glance at this much broader question.

The equivalence-principle (and its nuancing) before and after Plato

What Plato says about the Good in Rep. VI is very similar to what Aristotle argues about divinity in Met. A, when he criticizes Simonides and the belief of the poets that supreme knowledge pertains exclusively to god:

> 982b. […] διὸ καὶ δικαίως ἂν **οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνη** νομίζοιτο αὐτῆς ἡ κτῆσις· πολλαχῇ γὰρ ἡ φύσις δούλη τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν, ὥστε κατὰ Σιμωνίδην "θεὸς ἂν μόνος τοῦτ᾽ ἔχοι γέρας", ἄνδρα δ᾽ οὐκ ἄξιον μὴ οὐ ζητεῖν τὴν καθ᾽ αὑτὸν ἐπιστήμην. εἰ δὴ λέγουσί τι οἱ ποιηταὶ καὶ πέφυκε φθονεῖν (983a) τὸ θεῖον, ἐπὶ τούτου συμβῆναι μάλιστα εἰκὸς καὶ δυστυχεῖς εἶναι πάντας τοὺς περιττούς. **ἀλλ᾽ οὔτε τὸ θεῖον φθονερὸν ἐνδέχεται εἶναι**, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν πολλὰ ψεύδονται ἀοιδοί, οὔτε τῆς τοιαύτης ἄλλην χρὴ νομίζειν τιμιωτέραν. **ἡ γὰρ θειοτάτη καὶ τιμιωτάτη**· τοιαύτη δὲ διχῶς ἂν εἴη μόνη· ἥν τε γὰρ μάλιστ᾽ ἂν ὁ θεὸς ἔχοι, θεία τῶν ἐπιστημῶν ἐστί, κἂν εἴ τις τῶν θείων εἴη. **μόνη δ᾽**

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[23] Gonzalez 2003.

[24] See Vegetti 2003: 65. "Rational intuition", as far as I can see, does not mean much more than a kind of noumenal apprehension, which, in Plato, seems to be epistemologically and ontologically based on the idea of a natural, substantial affinity between the rational soul and the "in se" (depending on the universal principle of the natural friendship among things that are similar). Vegetti says that Plato never provided a rigorous definition of dialectic and it remained an unfinished project (2003: p, 183).

αὕτη τούτων ἀμφοτέρων τετύχηκεν· ὅ τε γὰρ θεὸς δοκεῖ τῶν αἰτίων πᾶσιν εἶναι καὶ ἀρχή τις, καὶ τὴν τοιαύτην ἢ μόνος ἢ μάλιστ᾽ ἂν ἔχοι ὁ θεός. ἀναγκαιότεραι μὲν οὖν πᾶσαι ταύτης, ἀμείνων δ᾽ οὐδεμία. [...] ἄρχονται μὲν γάρ, ὥσπερ εἴπομεν, ἀπὸ τοῦ θαυμάζειν πάντες εἰ οὕτως ἔχει [...] δεῖ δὲ εἰς τοὐναντίον καὶ τὸ ἄμεινον κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν ἀποτελευτῆσαι [etc.].

Therefore, the acquisition of [supreme knowledge] would be rightly considered as not human, since under many respects the nature of men is servile. This is the reason why, according to Simonides, "god alone would have this gift", whereas it is not allowed to man to search for more than a science within his reach. And if the poets tell something true, namely that the divinity is really jealous, it would be plausible that this happens particularly in this case and all the people who excel would end up in disgrace. However, it turns out that the divinity cannot be envious, while poets tell many lies according to the proverb, nor is necessary to consider another science more important than this. Namely, this is the most divine and the most worthy of belief. But a science would be such only in two ways. It is divine among the sciences either in case a god possesses it to the highest degree or in case it concerns divine things. It happens that this science alone shares both features. Namely, it is clear to everybody that god is among the causes and is a principle, and that god would possess such a science either himself alone or to the highest degree. So, all the other sciences are more necessary than this, but no one is better. [...] Since, as we said, everybody begins by experiencing wonder-bewilderment about things as they are [...] but then is necessary to conclude in the opposite and better sense, according to the proverb.

The passage shows the same rejection of divine ineffability that we have seen in Plato. Philosophy appears as the only knowledge where the science possessed by god and the (human) science of divine things actually coincide (μόνη δ᾽αὕτη etc.). This affirmation entails the same kind of

specularity we have observed in Plato's *Parmenides*. Moreover, it is said that while science starts with a feeling of wonder and bewilderment, which implies ineffability and unspeakability, it must end with the reverse of that feeling, a plain certitude, which is a much better condition. From an initial state of puerile confusion, knowledge evolves up to the point where thoughts and words correspond adequately to reality. Boethius probably had this passage in mind when he wrote the verses: cedat inscitiae nubilus error / cessent profecto mira uideri" (De Cons. IV 5: but let the cloudy errors of ignorance depart, and straightway these shall seem no longer marvellous, transl. W. V. Cooper).

In its commentary on *Metaphysics*, Thomas Aquinas interprets this section by introducing attenuations that the text of the Stagirite does not allow:

> Item talem scientiam, quae est de Deo et de primis causis, aut solus Deus habet, aut si non solus, ipse tamen maxime habet. Solus quidem habet **secundum perfectam comprehensionem**. Maxime vero habet, inquantum **suo modo** etiam ab hominibus habetur, licet ab eis non ut possessio habeatur, sed sicut aliquid ab eo mutuatum.

> Likewise, this science, which is about God and first causes, either it is god alone who has it, or, if not alone, nonetheless he has it in the highest degree. He is certainly the only one who has it according to a perfect comprehension. Actually he possesses it at the highest degree, inasmuch as it is retained also by men in their own way, although it is not allowed to them to consider it as a possession, but as something borrowed from him.

Thomas manages here to make it appear that God still possesses knowledge to a *qualitatively* superior degree than man. Thus, he reintroduces a nuance of ineffability where Aristotle seemed explicitly to negate its legitimacy. While Aristotle argued for a necessary point of convergence – say, *identity* – of divine and human science (upon the premise that "god is the good"), Thomas stresses the *difference* that nonetheless persists between the two knowledges. This is not

enough to make result them incomparable, but it is certainly sufficient to reintroduce a huge epistemic gulf between them.[25]

Thomas' reading is not 'wrong', of course, at least because right or wrong does not easily apply to hermeneutics.[26] Rather, it is the reading we would expect from a pious theologian, whose main concern is obviously religious, even mystical.[27] The assertion of the equivalence-principle may sound disturbing to a religious mind. As a matter of fact, Plato, who was also a deeply religious thinker, always added in such cases some limiting euphemistic clauses (such as "for what is allowed to humans", "god willing", etc.). For the same reason, Thomas condemned philosophical pride (praesumptio) and split Truth into two parts, one thinkable to human mind, another completely inaccessible: "Sunt igitur quaedam intelligibilium divinorum quae humanae rationi sunt pervia; quaedam vero quae omnino vim humanae rationis excedunt" (So, some of the intelligible divine things are accessible to human reason, while there are others that exceed completely the strength of human reason).[28]

He illustrated this divide by means of the theory of intellectual gradation (ex intellectuum gradibus): creatures have different (separated) epistemic abilities, from that of the plainest man to that of God, according to their respective degrees of substance. The theory of *scala naturae*, which in my opinion can be traced back to Plato (Rep. VI),[29] had been exposed in detail by Augustine and Boethius. By the 13th century, it constituted part of the "common conceptual outfit" of most medieval thinkers.[30] On this basis, Thomas explicitly rejects the idea that god's essence may be understood by the

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[25] As a matter of fact, metaphysics is the science of being as being, the science of the created being. God is either excluded from metaphysics or is part of it only in a "derivative way". See e.g. Galluzzo 2013.

[26] See Heath 2002.

[27] On mysticism in Thomas (via Dionysius the Areopagite), see Blankenhorn 2015. For important sections on ineffability and negative way (via remotionis), see for instance Summa contra gentiles I, 1, 14-20, ST I, q. 12-13, Quaest. Disp. de potentia, VII, 5. Sofia Vanni Rovighi also devotes much attention to this aspect (1981, chapter III, 2).

[28] Summa contra gentiles, I, 1, 3: *Quis modus sit possibilis divinae veritatis manifestandae.*

[29] See also Vegetti (2007): "Si può dunque asserire che secondo Platone lo statuto epistemologico di un enunciato dipende dallo statuto ontologico dell'oggetto cui si riferisce; reciprocamente, l'esistenza di enunciati veri rinvia a quella di oggetti immutabili di cui essi descrivono le proprietà necessarie".

[30] See Ebbesen 2013.

intellect: "comprehendere deum impossibile est cuicumque intellectui creato" (ST I, q. 12, a. 7). To understand, *comprehendere*, means here that something is perfectly known (perfecte cognoscitur), that god is entirely seen and nothing of him remains hidden to our look (totus videtur, ut nihil eius lateat videntem), as we understand that the three angles of a triangle are equivalent to 180 degrees. This comprehension is exactly what the equivalence-principle asserts. Thomas says that this comprehension is impossible in the case of god, though he may be attained (attingere mente deum) by other means, namely, faith and revelation.

One may sympathize or not with this religious nuancing, which ultimately corresponds to what R. Otto called feeling of (religious) dependence (Abhängigkeitsgefühl).[31] It must be recognized, however, that it found a strong philosophical argument in the theory of *scala naturae*, which, as I just said, implies degrees of epistemic limitation according to different degrees of being (animals, humans, angels, etc.). Conceptually, however, the equivalence-principle, which had been recognized by Plato and Aristotle as both logically and epistemically necessary, is accepted and welcomed also by most Christian theologians. What really matters is that they too recognized at least *one point in the scale*, supreme knowledge, *where God and man are said to intersect necessarily* and mirror reciprocally. In that point at least, they become the same and equivalence principle is necessarily asserted (man is capable of divine knowledge, of knowing the ineffable god). This intersection is thought of as not only possible, but also as necessary for true knowledge and corresponding to the dignity of human intelligence. Also, for Christian theology, this intersection represents the *ubi consistam* for speculation on supreme questions (τὰ μέγιστα).

If the equivalence-principle could not trouble too much neither Neoplatonists nor Christian philosophers, from the Early Fathers to Scholastics, this occurred also for another reason. They were all deeply religious movements. Some substantial communication between human and divine

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[31] Otto 1963 (1st ed. 1917). More recently the category has been reinterpreted by Walter Burkert (1996). The notion comes from the main theological work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (*The Christian Faith*, 1830, second edition, Proposition n. 4).

knowledge must be explicitly or implicitly postulated by a religious mind as well. Religious worship itself does not allow the "total transcategoriality" of God, as John Hick and many other scholars pointed out.[32] The notion of total transcategoriality means the divinity remains beyond the range of all possible human conceptual system. For a religious a mind, however, God cannot be a totally unknown and/or irrelated entity, as it occurs, for instance, in Epicurean and Protagorean doctrines. Therefore, total transcategoriality ends up being the equivalent of an atheistic stance, even though, strictly speaking, it is not. Divinity must be at some level experienced. To say that God exists but is completely unreachable by and/or irrelated to human mind, is actually equivalent to deny any possible relationship between man and god. As Plato showed in the *Laws*, atheism means not only to deny that gods exist, but also to argue they do not care about human affairs, and one should not care about them (X, 899c-905c). Consequently, religious worship and practice entail some degree as well of substantial specularity between god and the soul. The same mystical experience entails a noetic quality, as pointed out by W. James. If so, equivalence principle is not only compatible, but even necessary to a religious mindset. Human beatitude depends on human ability to contemplate god, as Thomas noticed (ST I, q. 12, a. 1).

A typical case is the Platonic idea of human assimilation to god (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ), which is another way to express the equivalence-principle and remains a powerful religious drive in late Antique and Medieval theological speculation. Thomas said about the philosopher and first philosophy: "*beatus vir qui in sapientia morabitur* [Eccl. 14, 22]. Sublimius autem est quia per ipsum homo praecipue ad divinam similitudinem accedit, quae omnia in sapientia fecit [Ps. 103, 24]" (*Summa contra gentiles*, I, 1.2: blessed is the man that shall dwell in wisdom. The more sublime, because thereby man comes

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[32] John Hick, "Ineffability", Religious Studies 36, 2000, 35-46. Among the theologians, for instance, Paul Tillich opposed the ways of representing god in ontology (depersonalized) and in biblical religion (personalized). See P. Tillich, *Biblical religion and the search for ultimate reality*, University of Chicago Press, 1955. On this point, see also Ilkka Eljas Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents: Why We Believe in Souls, Gods, and Buddhas*, Oxford University Press, 2009, chapter 4.

closest to the likeness of God, who hath made all things in wisdom, transl. by anon.). Boethius expressed this idea in such an extreme way that he felt necessary to defend its argument from the accuse of polytheism.[33] What I want to suggest is that, beneath the sanctification of human knowledge and conduct, there is a powerful intellectual drive toward perfect intelligibility that pertains to philosophy as such.

The previous considerations suggest that philosophers, independently of their being religious or not, tend to affirm the equivalence principle and get rid of human boundedness. Hegel recognized that a deeper logical necessity operated within philosophy under the form of a dialectic of finitude and infinitude. According to him, by saying that "Gott ist das Gute", Plato and Aristotle stated the same point, namely, that the divinity is the supreme concept for philosophy and that consequently must result fully intelligible to human reason. Philosophy affirms here its right to overcome boundaries and proceed beyond finitude. Plato's thought that God cannot be envious was for Hegel "ein großer, schöner, wahrhafter, naiver Gedanke" (elevate, beautiful, true, genuine thought). In his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*,[34] he made the following remarks about the science of God in Plato and Aristotle:

> Platons Gedanke ist weit höher als die Ansicht der meisten Neueren, welche, indem sie sagen, Gott sei ein verschlossener Gott, habe sich nicht offenbart und man wisse von Gott nicht, der Gottheit Neid zuschreiben. **Denn warum sollte er sich nicht offenbaren, wenn wir einigen Ernst machen wollten mit Gott?** [...] Wird **die Erkenntnis Gottes** uns verwehrt, so daß wir nur Endliches erkennen, das Unendliche nicht erreichen, so

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[33] [S]ed uti iustitiae adeptione iusti, sapientiae sapentes fiunt, ita diuinitatem adeptos deos fieri simili ratione necesse est. Omnis igitur beatus deus, sed natura quidem unus; participatione vero nihil prohibet esse quam plurimos (Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, III, 10: But just as men become just by acquiring the quality of justice, and wise by wisdom, so by the same reasoning, by acquiring divinity they become divine. Every happy man then is divine. But while nothing prevents as many men as possible from being divine, God is so by His nature, men become so by participation, transl. by anon.).

[34] I am quoting from an Italian-German edition of the section dedicated to Plato, ed. by Vincenzo Cicero (Hegel 1998).

wäre er neidisch, oder Gott ist dann leerer Name. [...]
Gott ist also nach Platon ohne Neid.

Plato's thought is much higher than the view of most of
the Moderns, who ascribe envy to the god, as they say
that god is a hidden god, who has not revealed himself,
and that we know nothing about god. But why should
god not reveal himself, when we want to make a serious
effort to know him? [...] If the knowledge of god would
be refused to us, and we could only know the finite and
never reach the infinite, he would be an envious god,
otherwise god is an empty name. [...] God is also in
Plato without envy.

With the reference to the Moderns (die Neueren) he
probably meant Kant and his criticism to the idea that God is
knowable. All the key moral and metaphysical ideas had been
declared by Kant as unknowable in his transcendental
dialectic. Dialectic was for Kant the "logic of the illusion"
(Logik des Scheins). Of course, he considered that this
illusion was something inevitable and those ideas still
otherwise essential, particularly in practical reason, but from
the point of view of the old metaphysical tradition his criticism
cannot sound other than as an unbearable condemnation to
silence: if metaphysics is not knowledge, its objects are not so
different from dream-like phantasies. By opposing the
superiority of the old masters to the Kantian philosophers,
Hegel showed that the joint tendency to perfect science and
rejection of ineffability was still alive in the early XIX century
and constitutes a unique, deep driving force that moves
philosophy since its very beginnings.

As a matter of fact, Plato and Aristotle were certainly
not the first thinkers to defend this point. The seeds of this
thought were sown by the early Greek philosophers, although
in their speculation the divine principle was not deemed to be
perfectly transparent to human mind and remained in a state
of peculiar opacity.[35] I cannot insist too much on this
genealogy and will provide only a few hints.

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[35] This typical ambiguity has been highlighted by Martin Heidegger in his seminal
contributions on the first philosophers (Anaximander, Parmenides, Heraclitus) and
opposed to the theory of knowledge of Plato and later metaphysicians.

Parmenides had been the first to state categorically the equivalence between being and thought (see e.g. fr. 2-6, 8, 16 DK) and Plato will refer to this idea of Parmenides in Rep. VI (477a). I called this belief 'equivalence-principle' right in his honor. According to Cassirer, this equivalence (or correspondence), which before Parmenides was only implicit, characterizes "pre-Attic" philosophy in general.[36] By means of this equation, Parmenides properly did not negate,[37] but *excluded* ineffability, left it outside the philosophical game, as the result of the way of non-being. Thus, the choice of non-being is a possibility, but is declared as unviable (ἀταρπόν = ἀτραπόν), because it leads to the ineffective negation of both knowledge and its expression (οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἐὸν – οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν – οὔτε φράσαις, fr. 2, v. 7-8). If one follows the path of non-being, apparently, there is no way to constitute knowledge. It could be said at least that thought (knowledge) becomes immanent to being (as its own logical rule), but also that between them a full identity and reversibility is established.[38]

The vision of Heraclitus is very different, of course, but his λόγος corresponds to the same idea, namely, the belief that the whole reality in its making mirrors – perhaps coincide with – one single common rule, which is immanent to all orders of things, and becomes fully intelligible and experienced only to the wise, whereas remains obscure and foreign (ξένος) to the multitude (elitism was the prevailing trend well before Plato).[39] Contrary to Parmenides, of course, he conceived reality as a perpetual change of state (a ceaseless sequence of *events*, as some contemporary physicists would say),[40] but he saw that that perennial movement was one, that it was reflected by the aware consciousness, and that it always occurred according to measure, in particular, as an invisible harmony of the opposites.[41] Specularity is here too the basic

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[36] See Laks 2018, chapter 6.

[37] From the non-being, however, is not to be excluded all dimension of thinkability: αἵπερ ὁδοὶ μοῦναι διζήσιός εἰσι νοῆσαι (v. 2), "only two ways of search are to be thought of". Is non-being a totally empty class? Is it not? Does it coincide with doxa? Does it not? To say the least, the way of non-being should be said thinkable for the simple fact that Parmenides opposes it logically to the way of being.

[38] Parmenides 2003, see commentary to fragment 16 DK, last verse.

[39] See for instance fr. 1, 2, 6, 7, 13, 22 (Diano).

[40] See Rovelli 2018, chapter 6 ("The World Is Made of Events, Not Things").

[41] See fr. 22, 26, 27, 37, 108, among others.

feature of the system: human understanding proceeds according to (divine) nature itself and the discourse is said to reflect reality as it is (κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔχει, fr. 1, Sextus).

The Heraclitean cosmos, ruled by the logos, and the Parmenidean justice (Δίκη)[42] seem to be a secularized version of the Homeric Μοῖρα, the impersonal order (Cornford) that Greek poetic tradition sometimes personified and associated with the supreme god (Zeus). Sometimes, they represented it as an impersonal necessity even stronger than the gods.[43] According to Roy Abraham Rappaport, the intuition of an all-encompassing supreme law or rule of reality is spread across a wide range of ancient cultures (his examples are Vedic R̥ta, Egyptian Ma'at, Zoroastrian Asha, and others).[44] This order, however, was generally deemed mysterious and inaccessible to human intelligence.

Philosophy begins by retaining this mythical intuition but modifies it in a crucial sense, that is, by adding the implicit or explicit belief in its full intelligibility, in its transparency to human mind. This belief is reflected in the notions of λόγος, δίκη and ἀρχή (or ἀρχαί), as they are used by the Presocractics (Pre-Attic philosophy, according to Cassirer, "early thinkers", as more properly suggested by Laks-Most). Starting from this point, reality appears as inherently rational (it follows a general rule that is transparent to human intelligence) and the equivalence-principle starts functioning, at least implicitly. Anaximander's fragment (1 DK) is probably the earliest philosophical testimony of this kind. Later, Plato will turn ancient Moira into mathematical necessity, thus making of the supreme and obscure impersonal power of Fate an order whose rationality can be – and should be – transparent to any (God-like) human mind.[45]

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[42] The Parmenidean notion of Dike, says Giovanni Reale in his commentary to the Poem, expresses a *new form of normativity*, "[basata] sulla capacità di autofondazione razionale della norma, sul logos e sul ragionamento" (Parmenides 2003: 190).
[43] Cornford 2004.
[44] Rappaport 2002, Chapter 11 (Truth and order): "Following ancient Greek usage I take the term 'Logos' to refer to an all-encompassing rational order uniting nature, society, individual humans".
[45] Laws VII, 818. (a) [...] τὸ δὲ ἀναγκαῖον αὐτῶν [mathematics] οὐχ οἷόν τε ἀποβάλλειν, (b) ἀλλ᾽ ἔοικεν ὁ τὸν θεὸν πρῶτον παροιμιασάμενος εἰς ταῦτα ἀποβλέψας εἰπεῖν ὡς οὐδὲ θεὸς ἀνάγκη μή ποτε φανῇ μαχόμενος, ὅσαι θεῖαί γε,

The Western philosophical enterprise would be something very difficult to recognize without the equivalence-principle. Perhaps, there would not have been any philosophy at all. Philosophy is built upon the belief in a specular correspondence between reality and thought. This specularity excludes divine ineffability, negates it nomologically, and challenges the very same notion of (human) epistemic boundedness. Plato made no exception. Of course, philosophers are not always so radical in advocating the principle, at least not explicitly. They often nuance it discursively and strategically, as the same Plato does many times, but these attenuations are exogenous: they mostly derive from religious or commonsensical concerns.

An ambiguous Platonic passage

There are passages, in Plato, that seem to contradict the equivalence-principle and assert divine ineffability. Perhaps, one of the most ambiguous is the following, from the *Phaedrus*:

> 246. (c) [...] ζῷον τὸ σύμπαν ἐκλήθη, ψυχὴ καὶ σῶμα παγέν, θνητόν τ' ἔσχεν ἐπωνυμίαν· ἀθάνατον δὲ οὐδ' ἐξ ἑνὸς λόγου λελογισμένου, ἀλλὰ πλάττομεν οὔτε ἰδόντες οὔτε ἱκανῶς νοήσαντες (d) θεόν, ἀθάνατόν τι ζῷον, ἔχον μὲν ψυχήν, ἔχον δὲ σῶμα, τὸν ἀεὶ δὲ χρόνον ταῦτα συμπεφυκότα. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν δή, ὅπῃ τῷ θεῷ φίλον, ταύτῃ ἐχέτω τε καὶ λεγέσθω·

> The whole was called the living, soul and body coalesced, and had the name of mortal. The immortal, however, is not by virtue of one rational argument, but we imagine the god without seeing and without thinking suitably, as a living immortal, which have a soul, which have a body, which have them connected by

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οἶμαι, τῶν γε ἀναγκῶν εἰσίν [...] (The necessity of mathematics cannot be rejected, and this apparently was meant by that saying about the god, "not even a god would appear as fighting against necessity", namely, all the necessities that are divine). The proverb is attested in Simonides (Ἀνάγκᾳ δὲ οὐδὲ θεοί φασι μάχονται). And the Athenian continues: (b) [...] Δοκῶ μέν, ἃς μή τις πράξας μηδὲ αὖ μαθὼν τὸ (c) παράπαν οὐκ ἂν ποτε γένοιτο ἀνθρώποις θεὸς οὐδὲ δαίμων οὐδὲ ἥρως οἷος δυνατὸς ἀνθρώπων ἐπιμέλειαν σὺν σπουδῇ ποιεῖσθαι (I believe that no one who did not learn and practice them thoroughly, being he a god, a daemon or a hero for men, could be able to take care seriously of human beings). Mathematics is said θεία τέχνη in Laws V 747b.

nature forever in time. But let be this and let speak of it the way it may please the gods.

It is hard to be sure about the exact meaning of this passage. At least, two readings are possible. On the one hand, Socrates may defend the idea that men are epistemically bounded, *prevented* from thinking of divinity as it is and *forced* to represent it through imagination, say, in 'creatural terms'.[46] The expression οὐδ᾽ ἐξ ἑνὸς λόγου λελογισμένου ("not by virtue of one rational argument" or "articulated reason") would denote a radical state of cognitive closure.

On the other hand, however, Socrates may also be saying that divinity is unthinkable *if* people keep conceiving it as their natural intelligence and commonsense dictate, namely, as inseparably composed of soul and body. This would leave open the way to a more suitable – even to a perfectly adequate – way to conceive divinity, this time beyond the limitations of the commonsensical mind. The expression οὐδ᾽ ἐξ ἑνὸς λόγου λελογισμένου would imply that the access to divine attributes is only attainable by true philosophical reasoning (vs. commonsensical wisdom). This interpretation is for me more plausible, being less contradictory with the strong rejection of epistemic ineffability implied by the equivalence-principle.

It should be mentioned, however, that Hegel read the passage in a third way. He saw in it a remarkable anticipation of his own philosophical way, which is constantly engaged in presenting thought as a spiritual evolution that overcomes abstract separations like subject vs. object, rationality vs. reality:

> Seele und Leib sind beides Abstrakta; das Leben aber ist die Einheit von beiden, und Gott ist es als Wesen der Vorstellung ausgesprochen; seine Natur ist dies, Seele und Leib ungetrennt in einem zu haben; dies aber ist die Vernunft [...]. Dies ist eine große Definition von Gott, eine große Idee, die übrigens nichts anderes als die Definition neuerer Zeit ist: die Identität der Objektivität und Subjektivität, Untrennbarkeit des Ideellen und Reellen, der Seele und des Leibes. Das

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[46] This will become a *topos* in later theological speculation, from the early Fathers to Thomas. See, Thomas, ST, I, q. 13, a. 1-6, 12.

Sterbliche, Endliche ist von Platon richtig als das bestimmt, dessen Existenz, Realität nicht absolut adäquat ist der Idee oder bestimmter der Subjektivität.

(Soul and body are both abstract entities, while life is the union of both, and God is enunciated as the essence of the representation. Having a soul and a body inseparably united belongs to his nature. This is, however, the reason [...]. This is a great definition of God, a great idea, which by the way is nothing but the definition of the modern time: the identity of objectivity and subjectivity, the non-separation of what is ideal and what is real, of soul and body. The mortal, the finite, is conveniently determined by Plato as that, whose existence, whose reality, is absolutely inadequate to the idea, or, more exactly, to the subjectivity.)

Hegel's interpretation is of the utmost interest, as always. It stresses once again the normative need of an absolute system of truth and once again uses the old masters to stigmatize the unfitness of modern philosophical approaches. Hegel, however, often tends to force the letter and may lead us astray. As I noticed, here Plato is probably expressing right the opposite idea, namely, his commitment to the belief in metaphysical dualism and the absolute transcendence of divine rationality. If thinking is conditioned by human *imaginative* power, then an adequate intelligence of divinity becomes impossible: this is in my opinion what Socrates says in the passage. It sounds like the opposite of what Hegel had in mind.

Hegelian rejection of metaphysical dualism is hardly compatible with Plato's mental horizon, although Platonic texts are undoubtedly pervaded by powerful drives toward mediation (the overcoming of dualistic limitations). Despite this, Platonic mediation never goes so far as to get rid of his dualistic belief. The equivalence-principle assumes in Hegel a speculative form that simply does not match with Plato religious mentality (Hegel recognized the influence of religious representation in Plato but considered this aspect as philosophically irrelevant both to modern mentality and to the same interpretation of Plato). The outcome would not be so different if we compared Hegel's system with early Christian

and Neoplatonic philosophies, despite the German philosopher considered those later approaches much closer to his own system.

Other notoriously crucial Platonic passages concerning ineffability cannot be discussed here. In general, however, they do not contradict the equivalence principle, which remains absolutely necessary to Plato's philosophical discourse. They rather pertain to different types of ineffability, which I call *strategic* ineffability (Apol. 23a-b; Crat. 400d-e, Phaedr. 246b, 247b-c, 248a-b; Phil. 64c-65a), *unspeakability* and *incommunicability* (Phaedo 107a-b; Phaedr. 276c-d, 277e; Laws XII 968d-e; Letter VII 341c-d [cf. Simp. 210e ss] and excursus).

Epistemic ineffability in Plato: the χῶρα

Epistemic ineffability, in Plato, seems to be accepted and justified in one case, that of the χῶρα, the primordial space or receptacle, an amorphous field of reality whose function only consists in receiving passively the stamp of matter and allowing its transformation by an intelligent, active principle (the Demiurge). According to the *Timaeus*, the χῶρα represents the physical condition of matter. However, being matter always formed, it seems conceptually necessary for the receptacle not to possess any form at all and be an entirely amorphous passive entity. The condition of matter, by consequence, can be represented only in negative terms. It cannot be identified with anyone of the first elements,

> 51. (a) [...] ἀλλ᾽ ἀνόρατον **εἶδός τι** καὶ ἄμορφον, πανδεχές, μεταλαμβάνον (b) δὲ **ἀπορώτατά πη τοῦ νοητοῦ** καὶ δυσαλωτότατον αὐτὸ λέγοντες οὐ ψευσόμεθα.
>
> (but by saying that [the receptacle] is amorphous in kind, ready to receive all form and somehow participating in what is intelligible in the most problematic way and in the most difficult to grasp, by saying this we would not tell lies.)

In this case, the situation appears as perfectly opposed to that of supreme knowledge. If the Form of the Good must

be fully intelligible, the receptacle, which is right the opposite principle to Forms, must end up unthinkable. What is epistemically ineffable in particular is the way the receptacle participates in the intelligible. Its relationship with the intelligible is necessary, but extremely problematic to understand: the intelligible realm need the χῶρα to shape reality, but at the same the χῶρα cannot receive any intelligible predication. The χῶρα is what cannot be conceptualized, a privative condition that nonetheless is postulated by Plato to make his system consistent. The difficulty and negativity that surrounds the notion is stressed by metaphors (σεισμός) and prefixes, e.g. privative (α-) and pejorative (δυς-). Timaeus says that talking about χῶρα is like dreaming, arguments become spurious and unreliable:

> 52. (a) [...] τρίτον δὲ αὖ γένος ὂν τὸ τῆς χώρας ἀεί, [...] (b) [...] αὐτὸ δὲ μετ᾽ ἀναισθησίας **ἁπτὸν λογισμῷ τινι νόθῳ**, **μόγις πιστόν**, πρὸς ὃ δὴ καὶ ὀνειροπολοῦμεν βλέποντες καί φαμεν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναί που τὸ ὂν ἅπαν ἔν τινι τόπῳ καὶ κατέχον χώραν τινά [...]

> [it must be admitted] a third kind, that of the receptacle [...] which has to be conceived without perception and by a sort of spurious discourse, hardly trustful at all, since by looking at it we are almost dreaming and say that everything that finds itself in a place must also occupy a certain space.

Beyond the receptacle, physical beings in general is thought in terms of ontological degradation. Matter retains in Plato a paradoxical status, which makes bodies appear as suspended between being and not being (figuratively: light and darkness, wakefulness and dream). The degradation of being is normally associated with a respective degradation of knowledge. In the *Timaeus* the degrees – or kinds (γένη) of reality – are three: intelligible, sensible, receptacle (48e-48a, 51d-52b). In the famous simile of the line (*Rep.* VI 511d), four states (παθήματα) of knowledge are mentioned, which correspond to four different degrees of truth and being. Reality and intelligibility, in their full sense, are possible only at the upper level of the scale, but to reach that level a specific method is required (dialectics, persuasion, conversion), which

is tough and only possible for a few people. In a Platonic system, so to speak, epistemic *ineffability increases as you descend along lower strata of thought-reality*. The full effability of the Good requires the ineffability of the Receptacle, and vice versa.

Neoplatonic tradition, mainly with Plotinus and Damascius, will introduce a radical change in this scheme, by referring epistemic ineffability not only to the bottom of the system, but also to the top. Damascius in particular argued that nothingness (namely, what is epistemically ineffable to human mind) can be said in two ways, one according to the best (κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον), another to the worst (κατὰ τὸ χεῖρον). With the first term, he refers to the supreme unknowable principle beyond the principle itself, the One, whereas with the second term, he means the Platonic χῶρα, conceived of as the ineffable anti-principle without which matter and reality at large would be simply incomprehensible (De pr. I, 6, 4-5, Westerink).

On the one hand, Damascius probably succeeds in demonstrating his point, namely that one cannot affirm the existence of the divine ἀρχή, the One, without at the same time pointing at the need to transcend it and allude to another, absolute ineffable "X" beyond it. The best contemporary metaphysical tradition still makes use of his argument and opposes it to anti-metaphysical thought.[47] On the other hand, however, his argument remains intrinsically paradoxical (Damascius called it περιτροπὴ τῶν λόγων), leading to an ultimate unconceivable silence (σιγὴ ἀμήχανος), and is perhaps so inherently contradictory to be logically impossible (De Pr. I, 15, 18-22, Westerink). To follow this line of the argument, philosophy should perhaps leave the lead to prophetical and poetical thought.

Conclusion

Let's sum up what has been said so far. I argued that in philosophy at large there is a strong drive to the idea of a perfect, supreme knowledge, which is based on the belief in a

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[47] See, for instance, Cacciari 1990.

fundamental unity, or specularity, between thought and reality (equivalence-principle). This drive is incompatible with both the idea of divine ineffability and its fundamental premise, epistemic boundedness. In Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysical approaches, as well as in later Neoplatonic and Christian developments, the same commitment in supreme science is reasserted and described in terms of a necessary point of intersection between divine and human knowledge. In Plato, there is no conceptual space for divine ineffability, whereas epistemic ineffability seems to play a role only at the bottom level of the system, the χῶρα. Hegel's interpretation of these passages mostly supports our interpretation, while the attenuations of the equivalence-principle, which we find in Plato (as well as in philosophical traditions before and after him), seem dictated by strategic concerns, in particular religious and commonsensical.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

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