

The Good is Not a Form: Metaphysical Continuity in Plato, Plotinus and Augustine

Abstract:

This paper argues for a revised understanding of Plato's metaphysics, specifically highlighting Plato's conception of *The Good*—as well as Plato's relationship with Plotinus and Augustine. Plato's so-called theory of Forms is perhaps the most famous aspect of his writings, and I argue the general, naïve understanding most people have of this theory is mistaken and misrepresentative of Plato's actual thought. This paper—after briefly noting the peculiar, and debated, translation of the *The Good* as 'the form of the good'—assesses the metaphysically significant differences between *The Good* and the Forms, and argues that *The Good* cannot be understood as falling under the category of the Forms, due to its status as 'beyond being', and its unique role in Plato's analogies. The second half of this paper briefly highlights the metaphysical frameworks of Plotinus and Augustine, in order to demonstrate that the updated view of Plato's metaphysics aligns more closely with these metaphysical frameworks. This, of course, allows us to reasonably understand Plotinus and Augustine as Platonists (as they considered themselves). Ultimately, this paper concludes that *The Good* is not to be conceived of as a Form, but as something else entirely. This conception of Platonic metaphysics allows us to trace a lineage of metaphysical hierarchy from Plato to Plotinus to Augustine. In doing so, the paper offers a richer and more coherent reading of Plato's metaphysical framework—one that better accounts for both his historical influence and the philosophical depth of his thought.

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Introduction

In this essay, I will argue that Plato's conception of *The Good* should be understood as a metaphysically distinct kind from that of Plato's Forms. I will further argue that this distinction provides a more coherent reading of Plato's metaphysics, and allows for greater continuity in the development of Platonism. Furthermore, I will argue that this updated perspective reaffirms the self-claimed statuses of both Plotinus and Augustine as Platonists. In order to best support these claims, the essay is divided into two sections as follows:

- Introduction
- **Section 1: The Status of *The Good* in Plato's Metaphysics**
 - (1.1) Understanding the Naïve View of Plato's Metaphysics.
 - (1.2) The Uniqueness of *The Good* in the Analogies of the *Republic*.
 - (1.3) Addressing a Potential Objection to §1.2.
 - (1.4) *The Good* as 'Beyond Being'.
 - (1.5) Outlining an Updated View of Plato's Metaphysics.
- **Section 2: The Updated View of *The Good* and The Development of Platonism**
 - (2.1) A Brief Overview of Plotinus's Metaphysics.
 - (2.2) A Brief Overview of Augustine's Metaphysics.
 - (2.3) Platonism's Metaphysical Development – On *the Naïve View* of Plato's Metaphysics.
 - (2.4) Platonism's Metaphysical Development – On *the Updated View* of Plato's Metaphysics.
 - (2.5) Plotinus's and Augustine's Claim to Platonism.
- Conclusion

In the first section, I will present textual evidence from Plato's own writings that support my revised interpretation of his metaphysical hierarchy. In the second section, I will demonstrate the congruence of this updated view with the metaphysical hierarchies of Plotinus and of Augustine. I will further argue that these similarities—alongside Plotinus's and Augustine's own testimony—further substantiate the need for such an updated view of Plato's metaphysical hierarchy.

Section 1: The Status of *The Good* in Plato's Metaphysics

(1.1) Understanding the Naïve View of Plato's Metaphysics

I will begin by providing a brief overview of a prevalent conception of Plato's so-called 'Theory of Forms'. A popular conception of Plato's metaphysics posits the existence of two distinct and separate 'realms'—one of Forms and one of material particulars—such that their conjunction exhausts all that *is*. A direct consequence of this characterisation of Plato's metaphysics is that *The Good* must be classified as a Form: It is certainly not a material object, and thus the dichotomy necessitates its inclusion among the Forms. This popular—'naïve', as I call it—conception of Plato's metaphysics can be schematically represented as follows:

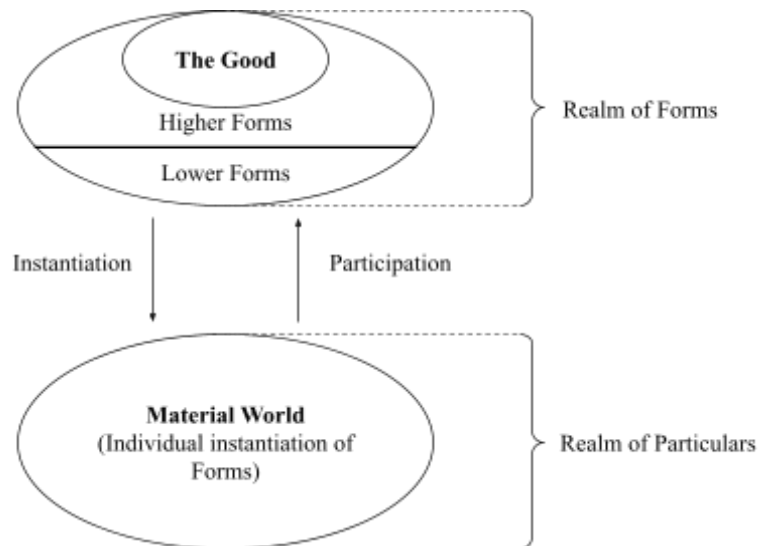


Figure 1: Naïve Platonic Hierarchy

Before critically evaluating the above framework—specifically its classification of *The Good*—I will outline *why* this interpretation has become so widespread. One primary reason arises from the translation of Plato's works, particularly the *Republic*, wherein many English translations explicitly reference "the form of the good".¹ Encountering such terminology in Plato's *Republic* naturally inclines the reader to conclude that Plato does indeed consider *The Good* to be a Form. Furthermore,

¹ This reference to "the form of the good" is consistent with many popular translations of the *Republic*. The translation from which I reference, Cooper (1997), is one such translation. The same phrasing can be found in Lee (1955) and Rowe (2012) in their translations. In each of these, such phrasing can be seen in the passages 505a, 508e, 517b, 526d–e, and 534b.

throughout Plato's writing, *The Good* is frequently mentioned alongside Forms such as 'the Beautiful itself', 'the Just itself', 'the Equal itself', &c. (Plato, *Republic*, 507b; *Phaedo*, 65d, 74a; *Parmenides*, 134b–c) At first, this linguistic association suggests that *The Good* belongs in the same metaphysical category as these Forms.

The latter claim—that *The Good* is frequently mentioned alongside examples of the Forms—will be addressed later in this essay (specifically in §1.4). However, the former claim—that English translations of Plato include direct mention of “the form of the good”—is one that I must forgo in this essay. Whilst the questions of translation and linguistic nuances no doubt bear on this issue, a full philological analysis exceeds the scope of this essay. However, it is important to note that some scholars do contest this translation. **X**, in **X**, argues that Plato does not explicitly refer to *The Good* as a Form, but rather refers to it as “*hē tou agathou idea*”, a phrase that need not entail a direct reference to the Forms. (Plato, *Republic*, 508e2–3; **X**) For the purposes of this essay, I will take this question of translation to be an open one, assuming neither that Plato referred to *The Good* with or without prefacing it ‘The Form of...’. Instead, I will investigate whether we ought to conceive of *The Good* as a Form on purely philosophical grounds.

(1.2) The Uniqueness of *The Good* in the Analogies of the *Republic*.

Taking the status of *The Good* as a Form to be an open question, I will now assess the evidence suggesting that we ought not classify it as such. A primary reason for this distinction appears in Plato's discussion of the Sun in the *Republic*, both in his analogy between the Sun and *The Good*, and in the analogy of the cave. (Plato, *Republic*, 508a–510b, 514a–517a) In the Sun Analogy, Plato delineates three distinct ‘kinds’: perceivers, material objects, and light sources. (Plato, *Republic*, 507d–e) These are the three things required for vision; the eye, the material objects that reflect light (reflectors, henceforth), and the light source.² Crucially, Plato explicitly makes this distinction in kind

² I use the term ‘reflectors’ in this section to clearly distinguish them from light sources. Here, ‘reflectors’ serves as shorthand for objects that are visible by virtue of their being illuminated, rather than by emitting light themselves.

between the Sun and reflectors, while these things are in analogy with *The Good* and the Forms respectively. The Sun is unique in that it provides light, whilst the reflectors merely direct this light; we understand *The Good* and the Forms to have an analogous distinction. Further support for this distinction appears in Plato's Cave Analogy. (Plato, *Republic*, 514a-517a) Although not identical to the Sun Analogy in structure, the distinction between the fire and the puppets which cast shadows on the cave wall reinforces the central distinction in kind between light source and that upon which light is cast. (Plato, *Republic*, 514a-b) While this passage does not directly establish *The Good* as non-Form, I believe it highlights the broader Platonic *difference in kind* between the (light) source, and all else. That is, if we are to take Plato to be precise in his language it is clear that there is a distinction in kind being made here. (Plato, *Republic*, 507e1; **X**)

(1.3) Addressing a Potential Objection to §1.2.

One might object to the previous paragraph, claiming that I am manufacturing a distinction where there is none. It could be argued that Plato, in discussing the Sun, is merely drawing an analogy between the *visible* and the *intelligible*. In this sense the Sun and the reflectors are of the 'same kind', that kind being 'visible things'—as of course, the Sun is indeed visible in addition to making reflectors visible. This objection parallels the potential objection raised earlier (§1.1) that *The Good* is frequently mentioned alongside Forms, suggesting that it belongs to the same metaphysical category.³ However, this objection arises from the implicit oversimplification that an entity can be of only one kind. I am by no means claiming that *The Good* is *not intelligible*; both the Forms and *The Good* are certainly intelligible. (Plato, *Republic*, 509d) However, acknowledging their intelligibility does not preclude the existence of metaphysically distinct sub-categories within 'the intelligible'. There is some debate on another potential distinction within the intelligible—namely, that of proposed 'intermediates'—but one need not settle these debates for our purposes.⁴ Plato certainly makes a

³ This is especially noticeable in Plato's *Phaedo*. (Plato, *Phaedo*, 65d, 75d)

⁴ Traditionally, there seems to be less resistance to distinguishing between the metaphysically distinct kinds of 'Form' and 'Intermediate', as opposed to distinguishing between *The Good* and the Forms. (Aristotle, A 6, 978b; Kouremenos, pp. 13–15) These kinds are discussed despite their both being classified 'intelligible'. As

distinction in type within the category of the visible; that being the distinction between images (shadows, paintings, &c.) and reflectors (trees, boulders, &c.). It is plainly uncontroversial that Plato distinguishes between these two whilst classifying both types as ‘visible’. If this distinction is an unproblematic one, so too is the analogous distinction between *The Good* and the Forms.

(1.4) *The Good* as ‘Beyond Being’.

In the *Republic* and further in *Parmenides*, Plato characterises the Forms as ‘being itself’. (Plato, *Republic*, 532a–b; *Parmenides*, 135a–b) This becomes particularly relevant to the present topic when contrasted with Plato’s description of *The Good* as “*not being*, but superior to it in rank and power”. (Plato, *Republic*, 509b) This characterisation—of *The Good* as ‘beyond being’, and of being as the offspring of *The Good*—is striking and perhaps difficult to understand. (Plato, *Republic*, 508b–c, 508e, 509b) I will not explore in depth what Plato may mean by ‘beyond being’ in this essay, as the topic is deserving of its own discussion. However, we need not fully understand Plato’s meaning of ‘beyond being’ for the purposes of this essay. Whatever concepts Plato intends to evoke with the terms ‘being’ and ‘beyond being’ (*epekeina tēs ousias*), it seems apparent that this distinction would be metaphysical, specifically ontological. Few would deny that a distinction between *being* and *super-being* carries deep metaphysical significance, and even fewer would deny that this distinction is between metaphysical kinds at all.⁵ If we accept the Forms as the highest mode of being, whilst *The Good* is ‘beyond being’, then we must recognise this as a classification of two fundamentally different metaphysical kinds. This ascription of ‘beyond being’ is unique to *The Good* in Plato’s writings, and this highlights an interesting point about the metaphysical distinction with which I am concerned in this essay: The unique classification of *The Good* as ‘beyond being’ implies that *The Good* is in this sense distinct in kind from all else; that is, *The Good* is *sui generis*.

such, it seems we ought to afford the same courtesy to the potential for a metaphysical distinction between *The Good* and the Forms.

⁵ Here, I say ‘super-being’ as it seems more suitable for referencing *The Good* than ‘non-being’ or equivalent.

(1.5) Outlining an Updated View of Plato's Metaphysics

I will now revise Figure 1 to better align with our conclusions regarding Plato's metaphysics. In §1.2, I established *The Good* as distinct in kind from the Forms and, indeed, as *sui generis*. In §1.4, I demonstrated that *The Good* is 'beyond being' and serves as the source of being, whilst the Forms are the highest mode of being. These conclusions are best illustrated in conjunction with Plato's 'divided line', as represented below:⁶

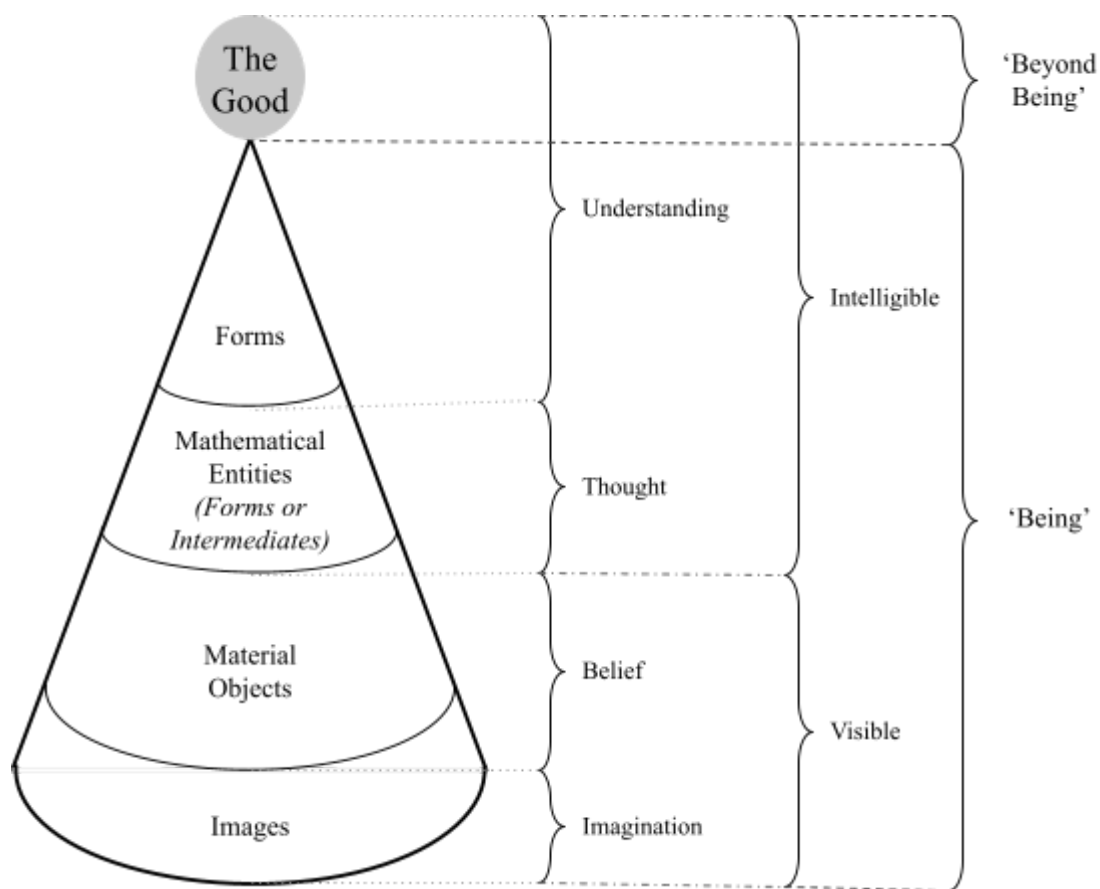


Figure 2: Revised Platonic Hierarchy

⁶ The most relevant feature of this diagram is the separation of *The Good* from the Forms and the representation of *The Good* as a source of being. All else in the diagram—such as the divisions ratioed in accordance with Plato's divided line—serve to aid the reader in understanding the context within which *The Good* is placed. Further note that, *The Good* here is represented by a circle to aid with readability and to visualise the distinction, but one can conceive of *The Good* rather as a *point*, in that it is *sui generis* and singular. Furthermore, note that Figure 2 is partially inspired by the cautionary diagram put forward by Wittgenstein in his discussions on the metaphysical self. (Wittgenstein, §5.6331)

Section 2: The Updated View of *The Good* and The Development of Platonism

(2.1) A Brief Overview of Plotinus's Metaphysics

I will now *briefly* outline the metaphysics of Plotinus, and that of Augustine, to better understand the development of the Platonic metaphysics outlined in the first half of this essay.⁷ Beginning with Plotinus, it is important to note that whilst there are some differences—especially terminologically—between Plotinus's metaphysics and Plato's metaphysics, Plotinus's metaphysics maintains a hierarchical structure that includes *The Good* and the Forms (and indeed the material, &c.). Although Plotinus primarily discusses 'The One', he identifies this with *The Good*. (Plotinus, VI 9.6.12–20; Kalligas, §7) In Plotinus's view, the Forms are the content of the *Nous*, or the Intellect. (Plotinus, V 9.8.1–2) 'The One' or *The Good* is distinct and 'above' *Nous*, and similarly distinct from all else. (Plotinus, III 8.9.78–80, V 3.13.1–3, V 5.13.30–36). That is to say that *The Good* or 'The One' is of a metaphysical kind of its own, *sui generis*. Plotinus's metaphysical system is intricate and somewhat mystical, and thus fully representing it in a diagram is an impossible task. Nonetheless, the diagram below should at least provide a general illustration of Plotinus's metaphysical hierarchy and its distinctions that are relevant to this essay:⁸

⁷ It is important to note here that a thorough and proper summary and understanding of the nuances of these metaphysical systems vastly eludes the scope of this essay. I am merely briefly outlining an established, standard conception of these views. I am only explicitly stating and focusing on the facets of these metaphysical systems that are directly relevant to this essay—that is, those facets that demonstrate the nature of *The Good* or of some metaphysical distinction that places a metaphysical 'kind' *sui generis* and above the Forms.

⁸ Alongside Plotinus's own writing, my construction of Figure 3 was informed by *Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume II*, specifically Emilsson's 'Neo-Platonism'. (Furley, p. 364)

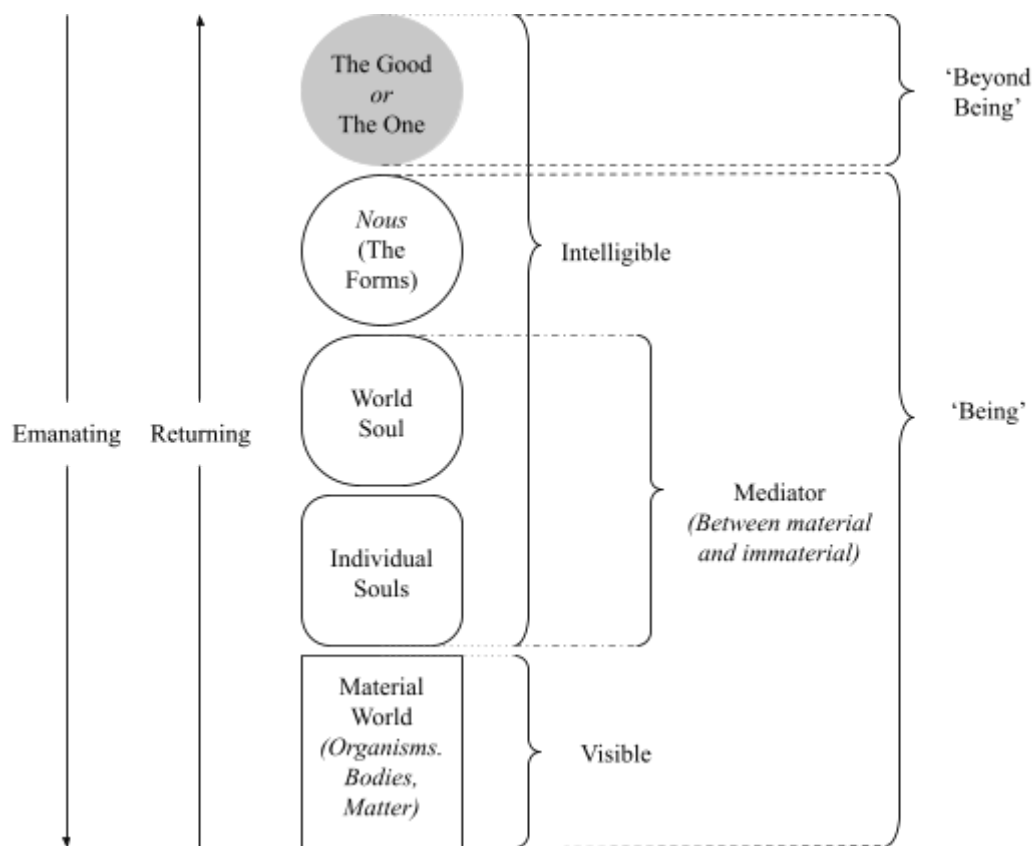


Figure 3: Plotinus's Hierarchy

(2.2) A Brief Overview of Augustine's Metaphysics.

I will now briefly outline Augustine's metaphysics, though I acknowledge that—even more so than Plato's and Plotinus's—Augustine's metaphysics is particularly resistant to visual representation. Augustine's metaphysics is profoundly shaped by his Christian commitments, adding layers of complexity to his worldview. What is particularly relevant about Augustine's metaphysics for this essay is that Augustine affirms the existence of Forms—interpreting them as being 'Ideas in the mind of God'. (Augustine, *Quaestionibus*, p. 46) Furthermore, he asserts their being a metaphysical 'kind' superior to the Forms—namely, God. That is, for Augustine, there exists something *sui generis* above the Forms. To clarify how the below diagram represents this, although the Forms reside within God's mind, they remain ontologically distinct—i.e. of a different metaphysical kind—from God insofar as

God is not merely an ‘Idea in the mind of God’. In this regard at least, for Augustine, God functions analogously to Plato’s *The Good* or Plotinus’s ‘The One’. I have attempted to visualise the necessary elements of Augustine’s metaphysical hierarchy for our discussion below:⁹

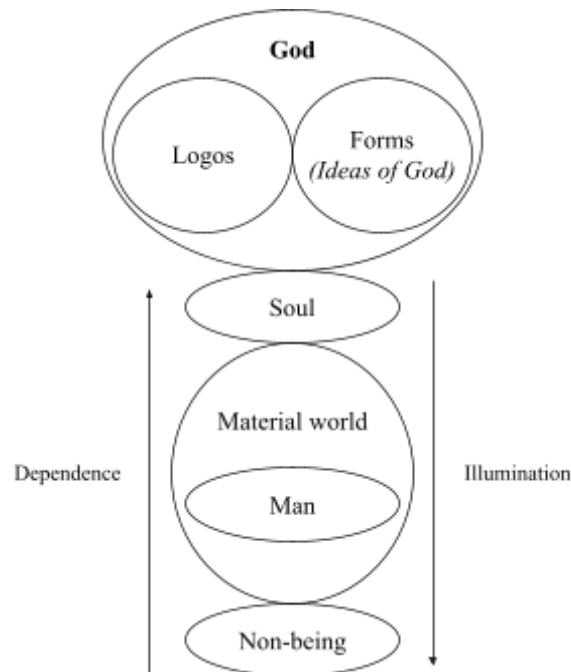


Figure 4: Augustine’s Hierarchy

(2.3) Platonism’s Metaphysical Development – On *The Naïve View of Plato’s Metaphysics*.

If we are to assume the Platonic metaphysics outlined in Figure 1, and compare it to that of Plato’s successors as represented in Figure 3 and Figure 4, we must conclude the following: A distinction between the Forms and some greater metaphysical kind is apparent in the the works of Plotinus and of Augustine, and not present in Plato’s own metaphysics. Therefore, at some point *after* Plato’s writing, someone other than Plato—perhaps Aristotle, perhaps a so-called ‘Middle Platonist’, or perhaps even Plotinus—discovered and developed the notion of a metaphysical kind that is superior to and ‘above’ the Forms. This means that such a doctrine would indeed be Neoplatonist—or Middle Platonist, or more specifically post-Platonist—*rather than* Platonist. That is to say, if we accept the image outlined in Figure 1, we can conclude that Plotinus was a Neoplatonist *and not* a Platonist, and Augustine was

⁹ Figure 4 is further informed by Augustine’s *Letters*. (Augustine, *Letters*, 18.2)

a Neoplatonically influenced Christian, *and not* a Platonist—at least regarding their metaphysical beliefs.¹⁰ The characteristics of Forms are central to Platonic metaphysics, and indeed there is nothing more *important* in the Platonist project than *The Good* and its nature. Thus, if we take Figure 1 to be accurate, then this supposed dissonance between Plato, and Plotinus and Augustine, is a significant reason to think that both Plotinus and Augustine are not Platonists in this regard, but something else.

(2.4) Platonism's Metaphysical Development – On *The Updated View* of Plato's Metaphysics.

If we take Figure 2 to be more accurate than Figure 1 in its representation of the Plato's metaphysical hierarchy, and thus compare Figure 2 to Plato's successors in Figure 3 and Figure 4, we must draw the following conclusions: It seems that both Augustine and Plotinus—insofar as they conceive of the Forms and of *The Good*—are indeed 'Platonists'. This is, of course, not to say that they held no views that Plato himself did not hold, nor is it to say that they had no new or novel ideas at all; rather—on this characterisation—we can say that regarding a central and vastly important Platonic notion, Augustine and Plotinus do indeed schematically align their views with Plato's. This understanding characterises the development of Platonic philosophy as a continuous development of Plato's own metaphysical propositions. Thus, on this reading, it is far more plausible to refer to Augustine and Plotinus as 'Platonists', rather than being *merely* something else.

(2.5) Plotinus's and Augustine's Claim to Platonism.

Plotinus and Augustine both regarded themselves, in some sense, as exegetes of Plato, though this was more explicitly the case for Plotinus. Plotinus saw himself little more than an interpreter of Plato, systematising and clarifying Platonic thought. (Gatti, pp. 17, 27) Augustine's engagement with Platonism, by contrast, was openly complex and mediated.¹¹ This was largely due to Augustine's

¹⁰ Here, 'Neoplatonism' denotes a separate (though related) philosophical school of thought from 'Platonism' rather than just considering it to reference Platonism during a certain historical period.

¹¹ This is apparent throughout Augustine's writings. (Augustine, *Letters*, 12.15; *Confessions*, p. 22; *True Religion*, pp.3–5)

additional commitment to Christianity. Whilst Augustine did incorporate a range of ‘non-Platonic’ ideas—particularly that which came from revelation—his own account makes it clear that Platonism, and indeed Plato, was a significant influence on his worldview.¹² (Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 130) Both Plotinus and Augustine hold some variation of the separation of *The Good* from the Forms, as seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4; Both Augustine and Plotinus do not seem to regard this as a particularly novel or unique invention; Thus, the testimonies of both Plotinus and Augustine seem to substantiate the claim that Figure 2 is more accurate than Figure 1 in representing Plato’s metaphysical hierarchy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as I take the translatory question regarding *The Good* to be *at least* ambiguous—that is, not unambiguously ‘the form of the good’—we ought not think of *The Good* as a Form. Plato’s analogies in *The Republic* suggest that *The Good* is metaphysically distinct from the Forms, indeed that *The Good* has a unique ontological status. Recognising this distinction not only aligns more closely with Plato’s own writing, but also demonstrates stronger continuity between Plato’s thought, and that of his successors, a continuity that is in line with the testimony of Plotinus and Augustine themselves. The naïve conception of Plato’s metaphysics, despite its popularity, seems to misrepresent Plato’s own thought; additionally, the naïve conception relegates the distinction of *The Good* from the Forms to some invention of someone other than Plato. Ultimately, this essay concludes that evidence from within Plato’s writings, and from analysis of the Platonic tradition that follows, show that we should characterise Plato as holding *The Good* as metaphysically distinct from the Forms.

¹² In this case ‘non-Platonic’ ideas are those which were not specifically outlined by Plato, but they may well still be claims that are consistent with Platonism.

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