

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

PLATO'S IDEA OF THE GOOD

THOUGH, according to Plato, the Good is of all topics the one most important to man, though he refers to the Good as often as to the other metaphysical factors, at no point in his writings does he come to grips with the Good, as a topic to be discussed exhaustively. The reason is probably his distrust of the written word and even of concepts. We can safely trust the legend that Plato lectured on the Good to his disciples in the Academy. Unlike the public which has access only to books, Plato's pupils had a personal and a friendly relation with the master, and had gone through the intellectual discipline indispensable to philosophy. To these disciples he could trust himself to discourse concerning the Good. Furthermore, we must take into account Plato's preference for speech as against books. Speech is superior to the written word because it is alive. Speech is conversation and dialectic; it is question and answer, adapting the idea to the particular question; speech is adequate to the mobility of thought. But, to the misfortune of posterity, it remains a fact that living things die; only lifeless things like books survive. And so we are forced to confine ourselves to Plato's scattered references to the Good in his writings, especially in their relatively more concentrated form in the *Republic* VI and VII, the *Philebus*, and the *Timaeus*. But even in these dialogues the references to the Good amount to no more than hints.

In the beginning, it is important to make clear what we are talking about. In discussing the Good, we are not talking of moral virtue; the Good is value in general, of which moral virtue is only a particular instance. We are dealing with the theory of value, not with ethics. The Good is "greater than justice and the other virtues" (*Rep.* 504d). Ethics is not an ultimate science; it deals with specific values, and makes hypotheses about them. These need to